

**MAKING HOME IN LITTLE SYRIA: GENDERED GEOGRAPHIES OF REFUGEE  
PLACEMAKING**

by

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## Abstract

Refugee resettlement is described by the UNHCR as a ‘durable solution’ to the problem of human displacement. Resettlement is also preferred by refugee-receiving states, such as Canada, who prefer resettlement to unwanted migrant/refugee arrivals at the border. Yet, while often framed as a *solution*, critical scholarship increasingly recognizes the complexity of resettlement as it is *experienced by refugees*.

This dissertation picks up on this theme to understand how one group of refugee women make sense of being resettled. The central question guiding this work is: How have refugee mothers created their worlds and made meaning for themselves? This dissertation draws on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian refugee families living in a spatially concentrated community in an economically marginalized and socially stigmatized neighbourhood in one Canadian city.

In taking an ethnographically informed, geographically specific approach to understanding refugee resettlement, this dissertation makes the following three arguments:

First, processes of refugee resettlement and ‘integration’ need to be geographically informed and take seriously the relations that exist between migrants and non-migrants. I argue that in attending to what Miraftab (2016) calls a “relational sense of place,” we deepen our conceptual understandings of integration to include relations and encounters that are not visible through other methods. This includes understanding the decision-making processes, priorities and agency that refugees bring to where they choose to live.

Second, by centering the experiences of refugee women, this research explores the powerful ways migrants make meaning and build lives for themselves and their families even in the wake of violence and dislocation. Syrian refugee mothers find comfort and continuity in their role as mothers and caregivers, while also struggling under the double burden of providing care to

relatives overseas and learning how to navigate the work of mothering, as racialized minorities, in Canada.

Finally, from the perspective of refugee mothers, resettlement is best understood as a strategy, rather than a solution (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). While human security is largely assured through resettlement, the radical disjunctures caused by ongoing restrictions on mobility and the dramatic reorganization of family life opens up new forms of precarity and displacement.

## Lay Summary

In 2015-2016, the Canadian government resettled 40,000 refugees from Syria to communities across Canada. This dissertation explores what that experience was like for one group of Syrian refugee families living in a spatially concentrated housing complex in a marginalized neighbourhood in Calgary. By focusing on the relationships among Syrian mothers, this dissertation argues that it is important to explore resettlement from the perspectives of refugees themselves. It is also critical to explore the specific *places* where refugees make their homes and (re)build their lives. In so doing, we see the complex relationships, decision-making processes, and priorities that guide choices for refugee families in Canada. By focusing primarily on mothers, this dissertation argues that resettlement is best viewed as a strategy that refugee families used to improve the lives of their families, but that resettlement also opens up challenges for mothers raising children in a profoundly new and unfamiliar context.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original intellectual project of the author, Bronwyn Bragg. The fieldwork reported throughout the dissertation was covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) Certificate number H17-00233.

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## Glossary

AISH	Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
BREB	Behavioural Research Ethics Board
BRZ	Business Revitalization Zone
BVOR	Blended Visa Office-Referred
CAQ	Coalition Avenir Québec
CCB	Canada Child Benefit
CCIS	Calgary Catholic Immigration Society
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmark
CLIP	Calgary Local Immigration Partnership
COPD	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
CIES	Calgary Immigrant Educational Society
CRA	Canada Revenue Agency
CRC	Community Resource Centre
EPO	Emergency Protective Order
ESL	English as a Second Language
GAR	Government Assisted Refugee
GFL	Greater Forest Lawn
IABRZ	International Avenue Business Revitalization Zone
IADI	International Avenue Design Initiative
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
IRPA	Immigration and Refugee Protection Act
LCR	Refugees landed in Canada
LEAD	Literacy, English and Academic Development
LINC	Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada
LICO-AT	Low-income cut-off, after tax
LIM-AT	Low-income measure, after tax
LIP	Local Immigration Partnership
NOC	National Occupational Classification
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PSR	Privately Sponsored Refugees
RAP	Refugee Assistance Program
SPO	Service Provider Organization
SRRI	Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative
SRSG	Syrian Refugee Support Group
SSHRC	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
UNHCR	United Nation High Commission on Refugees

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*Migration can be triggered by the angle of sunlight, indicating a change in season, temperature, plant life, and food supply. Female monarchs lay eggs along the route. Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, more than the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.*

*What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?*

*That time at the Chinese butcher, you pointed to the roasted pig hanging from its hook. “The ribs are just like a person’s after they are burned.” You let out a clipped chuckle, then paused, took out your pocketbook, your face pinched, and recounted our money.*

*What is a country but a life sentence?*

*Ocean Vuong, On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous, p. 9*



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 #WelcomeRefugees: Operation Syrian Refugees**

In 2015, the newly elected Liberal government launched the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI) with the promise of resettling 25,000 Syrian refugees before the close of the year. This became colloquially known as the #WelcomeRefugees initiative and was promoted by the government, and adopted by many Canadian citizens, as a national project to welcome and support thousands of Syrian refugees arriving in a few short months.

The SRRI received enormous media coverage and engaged an unprecedented number of ‘regular’ Canadians – as volunteers, donors and private sponsors. This citizen engagement took shape in a variety of ways in cities and towns across Canada. In Calgary, Alberta, a city that resettled approximately 2000 Syrian refugees between November 2015 and February 2016, as in other cities, many Calgarians became personally involved in the resettlement initiative – donating money, time, household necessities, even offering free housing and giving away mini-vans. One form of citizen engagement took the form of bicycles. A local woman, captivated by the stories of the refugee families, took it upon herself to collect and fix up bicycles for each Syrian child who arrived in Calgary. Given the youthful composition of the Syrian cohort, this was no small task.

The story of the Bike Lady followed the Syrian refugees as they began their lives in Calgary. Many Calgarians were proud of this story: it communicated an image of a generous and welcoming community. For others in Calgary, it was an example of the special treatment afforded a group of refugees who were deemed exceptional. I attended a community potluck hosted by Filipino friends, many of whom had come to Canada as Temporary Foreign Workers, and they questioned why they and their friends struggled for years to gain legal status in Canada while Justin Trudeau met Syrian families at the airport with winter coats (Canadian Press, 2015). Others I spoke to noted that Eritrean refugees arriving at the same time as the Syrians received nowhere near the same level of support or interest, and, unlike the Syrians, they were burdened with repaying the cost of their travel to Canada.

For the Syrian families themselves, less is known about how they understood this warm Canadian welcome, their stories and experiences represented largely through celebratory accounts in the media (White, 2016; Babin, 2016). For the children who received the bikes, we might imagine that a new bike brought with it all the joy that bicycles bring children, especially as Calgary's long winter melted into spring and they were able to make use of them during the city's warmer months. Yet the joy that comes with a new bike quickly collided with Canadian expectations for how these bikes should be properly used and enjoyed.

These distinct expectations were brought into sharp relief in the neighbourhood where I conducted my fieldwork for this dissertation. The large number of refugees arriving in a short period of time put pressure on settlement agencies to find affordable, adequate housing for the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) families that arrived between November 2015 and February 2016. Despite efforts to disperse the newly arrived Syrian community across the city, housing availability and affordability meant that the majority of Syrian GARs ended up living in East Calgary – and in particular, a collection of neighbourhoods known as Greater Forest Lawn. Forest Lawn is a stigmatized and economically marginalized neighbourhood described by the United Way of Calgary as a 'tipping point' neighbourhood (United Way, 2015). This refers to the high levels of need for United Way funded programs and supports and the presence of food, income and housing insecurity (United Way, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Within Greater Forest Lawn, approximately 35 families ended up living in a housing development composed of adjacent townhouses that came to be known by some as 'Little Syria.' It is also known by neighbourhood locals as the 'chicken coops' because of the composition of the homes in close proximity to one another.

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<sup>1</sup> In a 2015 report describing the socio-economic conditions of Greater Forest Lawn, the United Way identifies several variables that lead to its description of a tipping point neighbourhood. These include: 22 percent of people living below the poverty line (LICO); Nearly twice the level of crime per resident as Calgary, and more than double the percentages of crime in theft, violence, social disorder, and assault; 36 percent of families led by lone parents; Higher rates of maternal prenatal smoking, teenage births (15-19), overall mortality and mental and behavioural disorders due to psychoactive substance use, relative to Calgary or Alberta; Twice the number of children experiencing difficulty or great difficulty related to early childhood development (United Way, 2015).

According to the Canadian government's own data, the Syrian Government Assisted Refugee population arriving in 2015-2016 was characterized by large, youthful families. The average family size of a GAR family arriving in 2015-2016 was six, meaning approximately four children to a family. In Little Syria, the estimated number of children was probably close to or over 100. And thanks to the generosity of the Bike Lady, each child was equipped with their own bike. With the arrival of spring, and the disappearance of the snow, these children took to the streets on their newly procured bicycles. They often did so without helmets, in large groups, and absent the supervision of parents.

Legions of unsupervised children zooming around the residential streets of the neighbourhood quickly resulted in neighbour complaints, calls to police liaison officers, concerns over child welfare and an all-round public outcry. In the case of Little Syria, children on bikes brought to light the differences in cultural understandings – Canadian and Syrian – of how public space ought to be used, about what constitutes appropriate levels of parental supervision and child independence and about different ideas of safety and danger. As one service provider working for a local settlement agency recalled, they were called by the Property Management company in Forest Lawn to come “orient these families” and tell them “control your children!”

## **1.2 Dissertation themes**

The story of ‘out of control’ refugee children on bikes zooming around a neighbourhood perceived by many as dangerous and undesirable contains within it the themes and questions at the heart of this dissertation. Between the spring of 2017 and fall of 2018, I conducted 18 months of ethnographic research with Syrian refugee families living in ‘Little Syria.’ This included formal and informal interviews with Syrian women and significant time observing, socializing and ‘hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998) in the community. I also conducted stakeholder interviews with settlement workers, neighbourhood stakeholders and others connected with the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI) in Calgary.

I was seeking to understand how Syrian women were making sense of their experience of refuge and resettlement. I wanted to understand what it means to be ‘resettled’ – effectively transplanted from one geography to another – and what it means to build a home, and raise a family, under radically new circumstances. I also wanted to understand how these processes were shaped by the very specific local geography of a stigmatized, low-income, ‘tipping point’ neighbourhood, such as Forest Lawn.

There is a robust literature on refugees in Canada, and indeed, there is a burgeoning field of publication on Syrian refugees who were resettled as part of the SRRI in 2015-2016 (Hamilton, Walton-Roberts & Veronis, 2020; Canadian Ethnic Studies, special issue 2018; Canadian Geographer, special issue, 2019). Much of the existing work on refugees from Syria in Canada relies on interviews with refugees and service providers. While I also conducted interviews, taking an ethnographic approach that included observation and informal interactions allowed for a longer and deeper engagement with refugees living in a specific place.

In conducting ethnographic research, I seek to connect questions of global migration to highly local contexts of settlement and ‘integration.’ This work brings questions of migration governance, humanitarianism and national immigration policy into conversations about local contexts in cities and neighbourhoods. Following other scholars who have argued for both urban geographers and migration scholars to engage more directly with each other’s work, I aim here to tie questions of refugee resettlement to the local context in which refugees live (Darling, 2017; Çağlar & Glick Schler, 2018).

It is often said that while decisions about immigration policy are made at the national level, these processes play out locally – in cities, neighbourhoods and communities. In order to grapple with the translation of those policies to individuals, families and communities, we need methodological approaches that open up space to deeply understand how those who are the subject of policy decisions live under their auspices, how they construct their lives and make meaning out of their circumstances. This is what ethnography offers.

Further, much of the scholarship on refugees in Canada tends to focus on the question of ‘integration’ and refugee ‘outcomes.’ This scholarship largely focuses on the attainment of what Ager and Strang (2008) describe as the ‘markers and means’ of integration – housing, employment, education and health. Often data on immigrant and refugee integration centers on large-scale quantitative data sets that track cohorts of immigrants and refugees over time. While this work has much to offer, especially in terms of crafting policy and understanding the ‘big picture,’ it is unsatisfactory in terms of understanding how *refugees themselves* understand their own journeys of displacement, refuge, and resettlement. Recent scholarship from the US and Australia suggests that teleological narratives of resettlement do not fully capture what it means to be a resettled refugee (Tang, 2015; Lê Espiritu, 2014; Ramsay, 2017). There is a need to more deeply explore questions of integration and social belonging from the perspectives of refugees themselves, as well as how these are shaped by local and national geographies. This is a central goal of this dissertation.

Finally, as with all studies of forcibly displaced people, this work circles around questions of what it means to belong – to a family, a faith or cultural community, a neighbourhood, a city, a country. Where does one find affective attachment and connection, especially in the context of violent displacement and forced relocation? For resettled refugees, often imagined as exceptionally lucky, how do they contend with the great ‘gift’ of resettlement and Canadian ‘generosity’? By exploring these questions from the ground up, I explore what resettled refugees can tell us about the fault lines, exclusions and contradictions of Canadian reception and the blind spots that exist in our own stories of immigrant inclusion – and social inclusion more broadly.

When integration and inclusion is measured in largely econocentric terms, we might ask what ‘unit’ of society it is that refugees are ‘integrating’ into? And who else gets left behind? In urban contexts increasingly characterized by income polarity, housing unaffordability and spatial exclusion, how do refugees fit into the equation? This dissertation does not – and cannot – fully address this question but it begins to unpack the relationship between poverty, inequality,

vulnerability and refugee life, arguing that greater attention needs to be paid to these intersecting, pernicious, variables.

### 1.3 Research context and field site

Little Syria is a name used by some to describe a collection of townhomes run by a property management company in the south-east Calgary community of Forest Lawn (see Figure 1.1). Forest Lawn is imagined as a highly ethnoculturally and racially diverse neighbourhood, partially promoted by the designation of its main commercial street as ‘International Avenue’ (a reference to the large number of immigrant-run businesses on the avenue). Forest Lawn is also a stigmatized community that is imagined as suffering from higher levels of crime, violence and social disorder (Peterson, 2013; Ghitter & Smart, 2009). In the Calgary imaginary, neighbourhoods *east* of Deerfoot Trail, are widely perceived to be less-desirable places to live – they are more affordable, but also stigmatized as racialized, impoverished and crime-ridden.



**Figure 1.1: Townhomes in ‘Little Syria’**

Calgary is a mid-sized city in the Canadian prairies. With a population of 1.3 million, it is the largest city in the province of Alberta. Calgary is widely known as an oil and gas town, and is home to the head offices of multinational oil and gas companies such as Shell Canada, Husky, British Petroleum and Imperial Oil. Miller and Smart describe Calgary as having a “prototypical boom region economy” (2012, p. 51) – subject to the vagaries of the global energy market. Alberta has enjoyed incredible prosperity due largely to its position as a resource rich oil and gas extracting province; but has also suffered periods of uneven investment as the market has slowed down or crashed (Miller, 2006). Albertans have generally enjoyed higher salaries and lower taxes than Canadians in other provinces. Calgarians in particular had the highest per capita incomes in the country in 2018 (City of Calgary, 2018). With a large rural population, and its dependency on industries such as resource extraction and agriculture, Alberta has traditionally been a stronghold for conservative politics.

Due in large part to its strong economy, Alberta has become an important destination for immigrant and refugee settlement: The percentage of new immigrants living in Alberta rose from 6.9 percent in 2001 to 17.1 percent in 2016. Of those, many chose to live in Calgary. Approximately 30 percent of the city’s 1.3 million residents are first-generation immigrants, representing approximately 5.4 percent of immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). 14 percent of the total immigrant population in Calgary entered Canada as refugees (Statistics Canada, 2016).

Despite these numbers, Alberta in general, and Calgary in particular, are not often imagined as places where immigrants live. This is reflected in much of the research on immigrants and refugees to Canada which tends to focus on Canada’s primary immigrant and refugee destinations, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. While this focus is logical given the high numbers of refugees in these cities, researchers tend to overlook the significance of mid-size and emerging immigration and refugee destinations in the literature (for some exceptions see: Abu-Laban, Derwing, Krahn, Mulder & Wilkinson, 1999; Derwing & Mulder, 2003; Esses, Burstein,

Ravanera, Hallman, & Medianu, 2013; Agrawal, 2019; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Burke Wood, McGrath & Young, 2011).

During the SRRI, Calgary resettled 926 Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), 989 Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and 117 Blended Visa Office-Referred refugees (BVOR) for a total of 2032 Syrian refugees (IRCC, 2017).

Literature on refugees in Alberta finds that while refugees tend to have stronger economic outcomes than refugees in other Canadian cities (Hiebert, 2017), they also face challenges vis-à-vis housing and employment. Esses et al. (2013) found that 60.6 percent of refugees in Alberta are concentrated in jobs classified as low skilled (NOC code D). In Calgary, as in most other Canadian cities, refugees report housing challenges around overcrowding, discrimination based on race and immigration status, and a lack of affordability (Francis, 2010; D’Addario, Hiebert, & Sherrell, 2009; Sherrell, 2010; Carter & Osborne, 2009; Pruegger & Tanasescu, 2007).

Calgary is a highly polarized city and this polarization is reflected spatially. Townshend, Miller and Evans (2018) found that, compared with six other Canadian CMAs Calgary had “the most striking increase in polarization” from 1980-2010 (p. 4). The authors note the “remarkable growth” in the share of census tracts classified as low or very low income from 11 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 2006 (p. 4). It is also the case that poverty in Calgary is racialized and intersects with immigration status: According to analysis of the 2016 census, half of those living in low income in the Calgary CMA self-identified as immigrants (Eremenko, 2018).

The intersection of poverty, immigration status, race and the ways these variables are spatialized is something I explore in this dissertation. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how trajectories of immigrant and refugee settlement are shaped by the very specific geographies in which they take place. As the epigraph that opens this dissertation notes, “Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division.” There is not *one* story of refugee resettlement in Canada. Indeed, I share with others who have argued that migration scholars need to shift our vantage point from the scale of the nation-state to other scales, often unattended by



our focus on national borders and border crossers. This includes taking seriously the city as a key site of immigration policy making and implementation, but also other scales such as the neighbourhood and the household (Darling, 2017; Vaiou, 2013).

My research is grounded geographically in a specific neighbourhood and in particular, a low-income, marginalized neighbourhood. By focusing my attention on this place, there is a risk of reproducing the neighbourhood as a container for social life, or worse, entrenching negative stereotypes about the community (Wacquant, 2002). While Little Syria is situated in East Calgary – a fact that is relevant to my project – my work takes a multi-scalar approach to thinking about and understanding the neighbourhood. Multi-scalar analysis refers to the notion that geographic scales are not simply nested categories, with the nation-state ‘above’ the city, but rather scales are understood as “relational, socially constructed and constituted by various intersecting trajectories of institutionalized networks of power” (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2016, p. 19). Empirically this requires attending to the ways that different places are mutually constituted by intersecting processes: local, national and supranational.

Indeed, while my focus is on one neighbourhood within a city, the neighbourhood provides a lens through which we can see the city and understand its inequities, fault lines and disjunctures. As a project focused on how refugees understand their own experience of resettlement, I chose to stay methodologically and empirically focused in a field study that included primarily the household and the collection of households that compose a four-block area within the wider neighbourhood. This is in part because, for the women I met through this research, the neighbourhood was constituted as a meaningful ‘place’ (Vaiou, 2013). The neighbourhood is a scale that was visible and accessible to them, and where day to day life is lived.

Forest Lawn is an interesting and important context for this work, because of its history of refugee resettlement and also because of its position in relation to the wider city, but it is only one point of intersection within a wider network of ‘global’ and ‘local’ circuits of power that shape everyday life for refugee women. I attend to these wider intersections in this work.

## 1.4 Key questions and arguments

As a spatially grounded, ethnographically informed account of refugee life, this dissertation sits at the intersection of three inter-related theoretical discussions.

The first relates to the intersection of migration studies and urban studies and the question of how *place* shapes processes of migrant incorporation. Thematically I explore questions related to **integration** and the **uneven geography of cities**. I am interested in what humanitarianism looks like in contexts shaped by multiple, intersecting forms of vulnerability, such as Forest Lawn.

The second is scholarly discussions on refugee-ness and resettlement as a policy solution. Resettled refugees are among the smallest categories of displaced people in the world – only one percent of refugees are selected for resettlement (UNHCR, 2019a). As such, it is often uncritically understood as a “durable solution” to the problem of human displacement. Drawing on scholars who seek to **disrupt the language of ‘solutions’** (Hyndman & Giles, 2017; Besteman, 2016; Tang, 2015; Lê Espiritu, 2014), I explore what resettlement looks and feels like from the perspective of resettled refugees.

Finally, as a study of refugee women, centering on questions of gender and social reproduction, this work engages in the questions of feminist geography, exploring **transnational households**, the meaning making processes of **refugee women**, and the **social and cultural contexts of social reproduction** (care work, emotional labour and parenting) in the context of migration.

This dissertation seeks to address the following three sets of questions:

1. How are processes of migration and settlement influenced by the local geographies in which they take place? What difference does place make? What does a spatial lens offer our understanding of refugee ‘integration’?
2. What does resettlement look like from the perspective of refugees? What new forms of sociality and belonging, as well as precarity and displacement does resettlement open up?

3. How do Syrian refugees navigate life in a radically new geography? How have they created their worlds and made meaning for themselves in a new context? How are these processes inflected by gender and race?

My argument for this thesis is correspondingly threefold:

1. Spatially grounded and ethnographically informed accounts are critical for deepening our understanding of refugee resettlement and ‘integration.’ Current definitions of immigrant and refugee integration largely fail to account for the role that specific geographies play in relation to refugee life. I argue that in attending to what Miraftab (2016) calls a “relational sense of place,” we deepen our conceptual understandings of integration to include relations and encounters that are not visible through other research methods.
2. From the perspective of refugee mothers, resettlement is understood as the least bad option out of a series of bad options that were available to them. Resettlement to Canada was a choice made largely out of concern for their children and their future. Life in resettlement is marked by anxiety over the safety and wellbeing of their children as they renegotiate social reproduction in a radically new context. While their human security is largely assured in Canada, the radical disjunctures caused by ongoing restrictions on their mobility and the dramatic reorganization of family life opens up new forms of displacement and precarity. Understanding resettlement as a strategy instead of as a solution (Hyndman & Giles, 2017), provides a more nuanced and critical understanding of the journeys of refugees in Canada and opens up new ways of theorizing displacement and refugee ‘integration.’
3. If we understand resettlement as a form of ‘humanitarian governance’ (Garnier, Jubilut, & Sandvik 2018), where both care and control characterize the lives of refugee families, we see the shape that this governance takes in the lives of refugee families. For Syrian refugee families, social reproduction is reorganized through migration. Syrian women

assume a double burden of providing care and maintaining relationships with family members elsewhere, while also struggling to raise their children in Canada. They do this while facing additional scrutiny as potentially deviant mothers, who fail to adhere to normative scripts around what it means to be a ‘good mother’ in Canada. Navigating these governance structures constitutes a complex form of emotional labour for refugee mothers.

## **1.5 Chapter outline**

In order to address these questions, the dissertation proceeds as follows:

The following chapter (Chapter 2), provides a broad overview of the institutional and policy contexts that shaped the arrival of 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada in 100 days through the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI). In this chapter I discuss the conflict in Syria that led to one of the largest refugee movements in modern times. I also discuss the global, national (Canadian) and local governance models for refugees.

Chapter 3 reviews the key conceptual themes underpinning the arguments that follow. This includes problematizing the notion of integration, discussing the key debates in relation to refugee resettlement and exploring the central debates in feminist geography relevant to this work, including around the concepts of social reproduction, transnational families and the racial and cultural inequities within the Canadian nation-state.

Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive discussion of my methodological approach, using feminist ethnography and detailing how I undertook research in Little Syria – including the challenges and limitations of this approach. Beyond an explanatory account of methodology, I also discuss why ethnographic methods are important for research with refugee populations and what they offer in terms of addressing how policy is lived and experienced by marginalized groups.

The chapters that follow (5-8) each take up a critical issue related to refugee resettlement using a spatial and gendered lens.

Chapter 5, *Placing refugees*, provides a careful exploration of the histories and geographies of Forest Lawn – the East Calgary neighbourhood where Little Syria is located. This chapter provides an important backdrop for the chapters that follow, situating the context of multiple precarities and displacements that form the reception community for this newly arrived refugee community.

Between chapters 5 and 6, I present an ‘ethnographic interlude,’ which offers three accounts of family life in Little Syria. I include these to give readers a more complex and ‘unfiltered’ view of life in the community; and to provide insight into the kinds of conversations I had with participants. These accounts foreground the three chapters that follow which focus specifically on life in Little Syria.

Chapter 6, *Destination Little Syria*, examines the housing trajectories of Syrian refugees in East Calgary by unpacking the emergence of Little Syria and the ideas that inform *where* refugees *should* live, in contrast to the economic realities of housing in a highly polarized city. A central theme of this chapter is the contrasting meanings that Syrians attribute to where they live versus the wider conceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ neighbourhood or ‘appropriate’ housing. I argue that refugees exercise a form of constrained agency with respect to their housing decisions – agency that is often challenged by those around them including service providers and sponsors. Yet this agency also takes shape in a housing market characterized by a scarcity of affordable housing for low-income residents.

Chapter 7, *Geographic considerations on the question of integration*, seeks to add a spatial and gendered lens to the question of refugee integration. I draw on the disconnections and (fragile) connections that shape refugee life in Little Syria. I challenge conventional Canadian ideals of integration as a ‘two-way’ process that demands that both newcomers and Canadians adapt and make efforts at inclusion/being included. I suggest instead that burden of integration is placed largely on the shoulders of newcomers, in this case a refugee population that is othered as Muslim, Arabic-speaking and poor.

Finally, chapter 8, “*Control your children*” *Social reproduction and the political work of parenting*, explores the question of refugee resettlement from the vantage point of the household, a scale that is often overlooked in the research on resettlement. Here I explore the work that Syrian mothers do to remain connected to their family in other places; as well as the challenges they face reconstituting family life in Canada. I argue that learning how to parent in a way that evades scrutiny and policing from the Canadian state constitutes a form of labour for refugee mothers; who face significant scrutiny as minoritized (poor, Muslim, refugee) parents.

Chapters 5-8 each engage with the core questions of this dissertation – what difference does place make in refugee settlement? How is resettlement understood by refugee women? What do spatial and gendered perspectives offer for thinking about the (fraught) concept of refugee integration? And how is difference constituted through policy, geography, gender and generation?

## Chapter 2: Institutional and policy responses to refugees

### 2.1 Introduction

Discussions on institutional responses to refugees rely on problematic closures with respect to both language and geography. Linguistically there are significant pitfalls and shortcomings in terms of the language used to designate and describe those who leave their homes to protect their human security. Variously called refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, border crossers, irregular migrants, illegal migrants, bogus refugees and humanitarian migrants, these labels can have profound and enduring effects, as well as shape the political and administrative decisions that impact those to whom the label is ascribed (Hyndman and Giles, 2011; McNevin, 2013; Darling, 2017; Ehrkamp, 2017)

In terms of geography, discussions of refugees focused on institutional responses (i.e. the UNHCR, the Canadian government), reify the nation-state as the most significant ‘unit’ of analysis with respect to refugee life (Gill, 2010). This reaffirms the centrality of the Westphalian nation-state as the standard bearer of rights for refugees, which, as numerous critical scholars have pointed out, reaffirms the very regime that causes refugee displacement and exclusion in the first instance (Ehrkamp, 2017; Gill, 2010; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020). Gill writes:

[Not] only is the category of refugee contingent upon the idea of nation-state sovereignty, but the legitimacy of the worldwide system of nation states is itself bolstered by the simultaneous objectification and abjection of those unfortunate enough not to belong to a nation-state community...What better way to recommend the worldwide system of nation-states than through the abjection of those outside it? (Gill 2010, p. 626)

Indeed, my own work seeks to explicitly de-centre the nation-state and explore the everyday, variegated, complex nature of refugee life beyond the nation-state, at other scales such as the city, the neighbourhood and the household. I do this through a methodological approach that centers Syrian women and their everyday life. And yet, we cannot overlook the roles that the global refugee system and the Canadian nation-state play in creating the conditions of possibility for refugee protection (or abjection). Indeed, for refugees such as the Syrians - designated as

refugees by the UNHCR and selected for resettlement to Canada – the UNHCR and the nation-state loom large.

Both refugee-migrants and those who study them remain confined within the labels and categorizations that currently govern the lives of some nearly 26 million people who are designated ‘refugees’ by the UNHCR. The nation-state has “yet to be deconstructed out of existence” (Philo, 2014, p. 754 in Darling, 2017, p. 179). It is possible, I believe, to both acknowledge and seek to understand the normative systems and structures that delimit the lives of displaced people, while also working to expand the spaces of inclusion and belonging for those who are displaced.

This chapter sets the context for the work that follows. I begin by discussing the conflict in Syria that has led to one of the largest refugee movements in modern history. I then move to a discussion of the institutional responses to refugees at the international, national (Canadian) and local scale. The aim of this chapter is to situate the people at the centre of this study in the broader multi-scalar networks and geographies that surround them.

## **2.2 The Syrian conflict**

Syria’s complex history and geopolitics cannot be adequately addressed in the short summary offered here. Several important books have been written in recent years that trace the intersecting and complex routes of the war in Syria and its origin story from popular revolution to the present-day chaos (Dagher, 2019; Abouzeid, 2018; al-Haj Saleh, 2017; Di Giovanni, 2016; Yazbek, 2012; Borri, 2016). These books highlight the overwhelming complexity of the nine-year conflict and its multiple actors and geographies, as well as laying out the inevitable contestations over the ‘truth’ of the war. I provide a brief overview of the recent history and conflict, noting that this is a necessarily partial account that seeks only to lay a foundation for understanding how Syria came to be one of the world’s largest sources of refugees.

In January 2014, two years before the arrival of nearly 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada, the United Nations announced that they had stopped counting the number of people killed in the war



in Syria. According to a UN spokesperson, it had become too difficult to verify the numbers they were receiving from activists and NGOs on the ground in Syria (Ohlheiser, 2014). The last UN reported number was 130,000, a number that has mounted inexorably since 2014 – currently estimated to be between 400,000 and 500,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The decision to stop counting civilian deaths belies a central feature of the ongoing war in Syria – extraordinary levels of human suffering through death, injury and displacement, overshadowed by a collective, global failure to address the suffering.

Sharing borders with Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and Iraq, Syria's geography situates it at the intersection of many of the world's significant geopolitical struggles. This geography has meant that, from the early days of the revolution, there was significant external interest in what was happening in Syria, resulting in intervention from a range of outside actors (including Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah, Turkey, Qatar, Israel, the United States and Russia). Over time, the unwillingness of these external actors to cede to the other significantly elevated stakes of the conflict. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's early decision to use force against protestors and brutally put down the nascent revolution, made it difficult (and deadly) for those involved to coalesce into a cohesive 'opposition' that could be supported by those who hoped the revolution would succeed (such as France and the United States). This ultimately led to the fracturing of those opposed to the regime into a number of ad hoc rebel groups vying for funding from external actors. As the war progressed, the Syrian population became caught in a geopolitical struggle of international proportions that far exceed their 'national' interest.

The current President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad took power when his father, Hafez al-Assad died in 2000 (Hafez had ruled Syria since 1971). The senior Assad oversaw the creation of the current Syrian state which included an extensive and ruthless surveillance and police apparatus, the

*mukhabarat*, and the violent and swift crushing of any hint of opposition to his regime (Dagher, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

Following the death of Bashar's older brother in a car accident in 1994, Bashar was recalled to Syria from his studies in London. He was groomed for leadership until his father's death in 2000, at which time he became President of Syria. Bashar and his London-born, Western educated, wife Asma were touted as reformers – youthful and forward-looking leaders bringing Western sensibilities to the despotic regimes in the Middle East. Bashar's ascent to power was viewed as positive by Syria's former colonial overseer, France, as well as by the Bush administration in the United States. Syrians, too, were cautiously optimistic that the junior Assad would bring greater openness to country, end the State of Emergency and dismantle the brutal police state (Dagher, 2019).

Yet for Syrians, a decade under Bashar had not brought the reforms promised. Indeed, Bashar had continued in his father's footsteps: entrenching the surveillance and police apparatus, detaining, torturing and imprisoning those suspected of opposing his rule, and overseeing an economic system based on cronyism and perceived loyalty to the ruling family (Dagher 2019). Major industries in Syria were controlled by a handful of super-wealthy families close to the Assads. Poverty was rampant, especially among rural farmers who were hard hit by years of drought starting in 2006 – according to the UN this pushed some 2-3 million Syrians into extreme poverty and prompted a large scale rural to urban migration (Polk, 2013). Corruption was rampant, the bureaucracy impenetrable, and bribes a fact of everyday life. This was further compounded by an oppressive surveillance state that monitored all aspects of life and assiduously reported up the chain of command.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in 1980, Hafez ordered a brutal massacre of the largely civilian population in the city of Hama, purportedly in the name of ridding the town of terrorists including the Muslim Brotherhood who had some support in the area, an unknown number of people were murdered in their homes and then the city was leveled with bulldozers. The death toll of the Hama massacre was between 10,000 and 30,000 people (Lefèvre, 2013).

In the spring of 2011, the world became captivated by Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt. Bashar laughed off the possibility of a similar uprising in Syria, saying: “Syria is different. In Syria it will not happen.” (Borri, 2016 p. 59).

Despite Bashar’s claims, in March 2011, peaceful protests against the regime began in cities across Syria, including the impoverished city of Daraa in Syria’s rural southwest, bordering Jordan. These protests were triggered by the arrest and torture of teenage boys in Daraa for writing anti-regime graffiti on a wall (Dagher, 2019). The response to the protests there would provide the regime playbook for the response to the Syrian revolution in the years that followed. Protesters were shot and killed by live ammunition fired by the Syrian army, security forces stormed a protest encampment at a mosque in Daraa killing 37 people, and as people continued to gather and protest, the regime stepped up the violence leading to further fatalities.

On Friday, April 22, 2011 – a day of massive protest across Syria – 100 protesters were killed in Daraa. Three days later, the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, led by Bashar’s youngest brother, Maher al-Assad, rolled into Daraa launching an eleven-day siege that included 6000 troops, tanks and helicopters, resulting in nearly 250 deaths (including children) and 1000 arrests. Soldiers who defected, unwilling to kill civilians, were executed on the spot (Dagher 2019; Yazbek, 2015). Using a line that would become familiar in the next nine years of war, the regime declared that it was pursuing “terrorist organizations” and had conducted an operation to protect civilians from these terrorists.

This pattern of popular, peaceful protest continued through 2011 despite increasing violence and terror by the Assad regime and its loyalists. During the initial months of the Syrian revolution, the international community condemned the Syrian regime. US President Barack Obama stated that “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside” (Wilson & Warrick, 2011).

This statement offered hope to desperate Syrians on the ground (Abouzeid, 2018). Yet the international community was reluctant to become actively involved in the conflict. Bashar seized on this reluctance, granting amnesty to hundreds of known Al-Qaeda members in Syria's prisons (Abouzeid, 2018; Dagher, 2019). Understanding Western anxieties about Muslim extremism, Assad continued to speak of the revolution in terms of terrorism and used increasingly sectarian language to dismiss the (largely secular) demands of his population (al-Haj Saleh, 2017).

Regional actors were less reticent than the United States and Europe about becoming involved in the conflict: Assad leaned on allies, Iran and Hezbollah to shore up his military support. Qatar and Saudi Arabia began offering financial support and weapons to various rebel groups opposing the regime. As the regime killed, detained, tortured and caused the disappearance of members of the moderate protest movement and continued to meet the protests with violence, the revolution became more violent with rebel groups taking up arms in order to defend themselves against the regime's brutal security forces. Over the years, these groups became more militant and, often, Islamist<sup>3</sup>, thanks to the mobilization of Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch (the Al Nusra front) and funding from the Saudis and Qataris (Abouzeid, 2018). This mobilization ultimately led to the rise of the so-called Islamic State in northern Syria and Iraq, who became notorious for their brutality and violence under the banner of radical Islam.

From the early days of the revolution, Syrian activists were hopeful that the West – the US and Europe – would support their revolution. As the years ground on, the death toll mounted, the atrocities continued, it became increasingly clear that 'the international community' had abandoned the Syrian protestors to Assad and his regime. This was perhaps most evident when regime forces dropped Sarin gas on residents of Ghouta – a suburb of Damascus – in August 2013, killing an unknown number of citizens (Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 800

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<sup>3</sup> The terms 'Islamist,' 'radical Islam, and 'Islamic extremism' are deeply complex and political terms that each engender important and complicated discussions about the relationship between armed conflict and radical interpretations of Islam. I am aware of the controversies surrounding these, and other terms, and only invoke them as a way of highlighting the complexity of the issues under discussion. For a further discussion see: Hoewe & Bowe, 2018

people were killed in the attacks) (HRW, 2013). This was a clear violation of what Obama had called his “red line” – the use of chemical weapons against civilians – and yet a Resolution for the Use of Military Force by the US and allies (including France) was averted at the last minute. This was viewed by both the regime and Syrian citizens as a license by the international community for further, indiscriminate violence by the regime against the population.

The failure of Europe and the United States to intervene in Syria left the country open to Russia’s involvement. Russia was allied with the Assad regime since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 – providing arms and vetoing calls at the UN Security Council for Assad to resign. Since 2015, the Russians have been actively supporting the Assad regime through direct military involvement. This support continues to this day.

Since 2014, Syria has been the main country of origin for refugees: 13 million Syrians have been displaced since 2012, 6.7 million are refugees, while another 6.3 million have been internally displaced within Syria (UNHCR, 2019b). While Syrian refugees have found their way to countries around the world, including in Europe and North America, the vast majority of Syrian refugees remain in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, many in refugee camps (UNHCR, 2019). The refugees who came to Canada through the SRRI had spent, in most cases, years living in camps outside Syria prior to being resettled.

The scale of the conflict is difficult to fathom, yet the images of Syria splash across newspapers, iPads, Facebook and Twitter, are circulated and recirculated, producing a view of Syrians as enduring victims of a tragedy without end: bodies shrouded in white for burial in Douma, a tiny shell-shocked boy covered in dust and blood in Aleppo, Alessio Romenzi’s harrowing photos of grief and death in besieged Homs in 2012, videos of beheadings in the desert at the hands of Daesh, and perhaps, most fatefully, a picture of a three year old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, dead on a beach in Turkey.

Even today, February 2020, a month shy of the nine-year anniversary of Syria’s first citizen protests, images of lines of desperate people with shopping bags, wearing sandals, carrying

babies, walking for hours through frozen mud attempting to escape yet more bombardment from the sky in Idlib, on the Turkish border, flood the media. The war in Syria has returned to the front page of the *New York Times*, yet for those who watch this round of civilian terror, they have little confidence that anything will be different this time around. Babies freeze to death, children with grim faces walk for hours to nowhere, hospitals are bombed, the border is closed, the war goes on.

Migration studies broadly, and studies of resettled refugees in particular, tend to suffer from a focus on the arrival of immigrants/refugees into the nation-state which implicitly reinforces a notion that migrants are outside the national order of things (Korteweg, 2017; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003). A focus on refugee ‘integration’ tends to overshadow the contexts that produced the refugees we are so interested in studying (Lê Espiritu, 2014). Further, and as I discuss later in this dissertation, concern over trauma – and the risks of re-traumatizing refugee participants – limits careful examination of the relationship between refugees and the places they come from. There is a compounding pressure on researchers to carefully avoid potentially traumatizing conversations with refugees, while at the same time, a scholarly emphasis on integration means we often fail to account for the relationships between refugees, the places they come from, and the conflict that produced the refugee movement. As Espiritu and Duong write, “[the] hyperfocus on suffering, and the outpouring of outrage and concern over dead and injured refugees, has become a substitute for serious analysis of the geopolitical conditions that produced their displacement in the first instance” (2018, p. 587).

This oversight produces significant gaps in our research narratives which fail to attend to the relationships between refugees and their other places. A wide range of ‘pre-arrival’ factors shape the interactions that refugee women have in Canada: growing up in a surveillance state informs how Syrians understand and interact with ‘standard’ research protocols (questions, consent forms etc.). The relationship between citizens and the state in Syria, shaped by cronyism, corruption and bribery, informs how Syrian refugees imagine the relationship between the Canadian state and their own position in it. The failure of the international community to meaningfully respond to Assad’s violence and support the revolution, informs a perception by some that they have been

abandoned and that the world is fine to let Syrians die. Years in refugee camps or living as refugees in countries of first asylum informed the difficult decisions families made to be resettled to Canada; as well as their relationship to (Canadian) state institutions, service providers and volunteers. The nature and scale of violence in Syria means that everyone I encountered through my research had family members impacted by the conflict, including family members who had been killed or who had disappeared in Syria, family living in conflict zones, family displaced to other places in Syria, family trying to cross the border but unable, and family in refugee camps unable to access decent healthcare.

This context provides a critical backdrop for understanding how Syrian refugees experience resettlement and how they are constructing their lives in Canada. I was not able to conduct multi-sited research: research in Syria is impossible given the ongoing conflict and enormous security risks. And my focus is not aimed at providing a detailed ethnographic account of ‘life in Syria’ or ‘Syrian culture.’ That said, too often these factors are ignored or overlooked in how we understand and describe processes of integration and settlement. As I describe in Chapter 4, situating Syrian refugees in relation to the ongoing conflict in Syria, as well as the asylum contexts produced by this conflict, is critically important to understanding how this group of refugees understands its own migration trajectories.

## **2.3 Institutional responses to refugees: Global, national, local**

## **2.4 Global refugee governance**

The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are approximately 25.9 million refugees worldwide, which comprise part of the 70.8 million global population of people who have been displaced due to conflict and/or persecution (UNHCR, 2019b). According to the UNHCR, 67 percent of all refugees come from five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. The mass displacement of populations fleeing war, persecution, instability, violence and economic austerity is an unfortunately quotidian feature of our contemporary geopolitical context.

Alongside repatriation and integration in countries of first asylum, resettlement is considered a durable solution to the problem of human displacement (Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik, 2018).

Refugees who are selected for resettlement are an exceptional group for a number of reasons. First, numerically, resettled refugees represent one of the smallest groups of refugees globally: less than one percent of UNHCR designated refugees are admitted for resettlement (UNHCR, 2019a). Second, geographically, the majority of the world's refugees are located in the global south, with very few ever making their way to wealthy countries in the global north. The majority of refugees worldwide remain in refugee camps in countries proximate to their own. Consider the top four refugee receiving countries in the world today: Turkey, Pakistan, Uganda and Sudan (UNHCR, 2019b).

International law concerning refugees initially emerged in Europe following the refugee crisis at the end of the Second World War. This included the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and was expanded under the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1969 Organization for African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. With its historical and geographic roots in Europe, the initial Convention has been critiqued for its failure to address the contemporary geopolitical contexts of refugees (Hyndman, 2000; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020)

Refugee law enforces the UN Declaration for Human Rights which states that a person has “the right to leave” his/her country and “the right to asylum” (Hyndman, 2000, p. 4). While signatories of these international conventions are required to *process* the asylum claims of those who arrive at their borders, they are not required to *grant* asylum to refugees. The principle of *non-refoulement* – protection from forced return to violence at home - is a core tenet of refugee protection. Yet practices of ‘*neo-refoulement*’ (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008), geographically based strategies of preventing asylum by restricting access to territories, characterize the contemporary landscape for refugee protection. This has led to increasingly securitized borders and sharp mobility restrictions on would-be asylum seekers (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020; Mountz, 2010).



Critical scholarship suggests that manifestations of state power over borders are complex, multifaceted and geographically unbounded (Mountz, 2010; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013). The border between nation-states has “thickened” (Mezzadra & Nielson, 2013). Similarly, Guiraudon & Lahav (2000) describe the “exteriorisation of state control.” They present a series of “remote control strategies” that states employ to contain asylum seekers. This includes state movements upward, downward and outward. Upward refers to regional networks of information-sharing and security (for example the Europe Union and the North American Peace and Prosperity Agreement), police cooperation, visa regimes and refugee repatriation schemes. Downward refers to the downloading of asylum regulation and costs onto regional or municipal levels of government, which includes municipal authorities checking the legal status of migrants, providing or limiting access to services and sharing information about immigration status across local organizations. By outward the authors refer to the shift of migration control to private sector actors and the regulation of non-state actors including private transportation companies and carrier fines (in Gill 2009, p. 218). These complex strategies mean that “governments give up some of their authority only to increase their capacity to control movement...[which] reveal[s] astonishing adaptiveness of states” (Guiraudon & Lahav 2007, p. 15).

Vicki Squire (2009) argues that there is a ‘restrictive impulse’ at the heart of contemporary projects of sovereignty with immigration control being a key feature of the modern state. This is an attempt by the state to create order and maintain boundaries in a context of globalization where the nation-state is being reconfigured. Squire challenges but builds on Saskia Sassen’s earlier argument that the nation-state is becoming less relevant in an era of increasing economic globalization and free trade (1996). While Sassen’s claim about the deteriorating role of the nation-state in migration control has been amply disproven, her focus on globalization and supra-national institutions is significant. Squire picks up on this and argues that rather than becoming less important, the nation-state now leverages immigration control as a key feature of its sovereign power. For Squire and other critical scholars the (fraudulent, bogus, criminal) asylum seeker is a powerful figure in emerging discourses of border security and sovereign power (Guiraudon & Lahav 2000, Mountz 2010, Bigo 2002): “The widespread perception of asylum

claimants as fake and criminal enables ever stronger measures of exclusion in the form of interdiction, detention and deportation” (Mountz 2010, p. 96).

Hyndman and Giles point out that the asylum seeker who travels – often through illicit or unauthorized channels – to seek personal security, is treated as a threat, while those who remain (often for years) in refugee camps to be resettled are treated as ‘genuine refugees.’ They point to comments made by Canadian Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Jason Kenney in 2009:

It’s a question of a compassionate allocation of resources away from massive legal costs and social support for de facto immigrants who are gaming our system and abusing our generosity to additional resources for real victims of persecution abroad, most of whom are living in untenable situations in UN refugee camps. (Hyndman & Giles 2011, p. 368)

As the authors point out, the Minister makes a distinction between ‘real victims’ abroad and ‘de facto immigrants...gaming our system and abusing our generosity.’ This distinction between ‘genuine’ refugees and ‘de facto immigrants’ shores up the power of the nation-state to make discretionary decisions over refugee resettlement. Resettlement, then, can be understood, on one level, as a strategy exercised by nation-states to exert and maintain control over their borders.

Significantly, resettlement is not mandated in the Refugee Convention. Scholars note that the willingness of states to participate in large-scale resettlement initiatives has shifted over time in accordance with international geopolitical contexts and national economic and political concerns (Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik, 2018; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020). The United States has historically offered the largest number of resettlement spots (though this has declined sharply since 2016). Canada and Australia follow, with just over ten percent, each, of the global total for resettlement - though this expanded significantly in the context of the Syrian crisis and resettlement (Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik, 2018, p. 11). Scandinavian countries, Norway and Sweden, have offered sustained resettlement programs, and other countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom and Finland, expanded resettlement opportunities following the wars in Iraq and Syria (Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik, 2018, p. 11). In 2018, 27 countries around the world accepted approximately 56,000 refugees for resettlement, including the United States (17,100)

Canada (7,700), the United Kingdom (5,700), France (5,100), and Sweden (4,900) (UNHCR, 2018).

In the 1990s, “the political valence of the ‘refugee’ was transformed from ‘strategic and valuable’ in a Cold War context to ‘costly and avoidable.’” (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020, p. 67). This is evident in the numbers: one in twenty refugees identified by UNHCR were resettled in 1979, while only one in four hundred were resettled in 1993 (Fredriksson & Mougne, 1994, p. 5 in Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik, 2018, p. 8).

Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik write:

The lack of a binding legal framework means that the implementation of refugee resettlement requires considerable political resources and near-constant mobilization of international and domestic advocates to *persuade* decision-makers to deploy the instrument, and *negotiations* are often required to settle the size and nature of resettlement contingents. (Garnier, Jubilut & Sandvik, 2018, p. 6, emphasis in original)

As the authors note, the lack of a legally binding framework mandating resettlement leaves resettlement fully at the discretion of the national governments and their (often skeptical) citizenry. Discretionary power of refugee resettlement takes shape in a current geopolitical context shaped by the 2008 global financial crisis (and ensuing austerity agendas), a fear of Islamic fundamentalism, the purported ‘failure’ of multiculturalism (Wessendorf & Vertovec, 2010), and the rise of populism and far-right political movements.

It was this context that several million refugees from Syria faced in 2015 as they journeyed by boat to Europe. This became known as the ‘European refugee crisis’ reflecting a crisis of unwanted refugee arrivals on European shores, rather than the crisis facing the human security of refugee-migrants displaced from conflict zones in Syria and elsewhere (Carastathis, Kouri-Towe, Mahrouse, & Whitley, 2018). Countries across Europe were divided on how best to respond to this influx of unexpected, and mostly unwanted, migration. Some, like Hungary closed their borders, reflecting an increasingly common xenophobic and nationalist posture. Others, like Germany, provisionally welcomed migrants from Syria, while attempting to quell national

anxieties about security, terrorism and the burden of migrants on the welfare state.<sup>4</sup> To some degree, geography isolated developed nations outside the EU, such as Canada, from this particular flow of refugees. Yet the political rhetoric and discourse that surrounds refugees seems to travel more easily across borders than do refugees themselves. Debates over migrant/refugee admissions have featured prominently in the federal elections of the United States (2016) and Canada (2015), albeit in different directions.

## **2.5 Canada's immigration landscape**

Refugee policy in Canada is shaped by the nation's geography: northern and surrounded on three sides by cold ocean. This geography allows for a highly discretionary process of immigrant and refugee admissions based on the difficulty many refugees face trying to reach Canada. In 2018, two years after the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, several thousand refugee-migrants started crossing the Canada-US border.<sup>5</sup> These 'irregular migrants' caused a highly publicized crisis at the Canadian border and fierce debates between provinces and the federal government over "who should pay" for these unwanted arrivals (Zilio, 2018). This incident well reflects the significance of resettlement as a strategy of nation-states to control refugee admissions in an orderly and managed fashion, without chaos at the border and the appearance of disorder.

Indeed, it is the perceived orderliness of the Canadian immigration system (insulated as it is by geography) which has in part been credited for the relatively high level of support for immigration and multiculturalism on the part of the Canadian public. International surveys

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<sup>4</sup> Germany was lauded internationally for their decision to welcome approximately a million Syrian migrants. These migrants were provisionally accepted into Germany where they entered Germany's refugee determination system. This system determined who had a legitimate refugee claim and therefore eligible to stay in Germany. Those who failed this determination were removed from Germany.

<sup>5</sup> Many of these border crossers were Haitians who had been living in the US and who feared deportation by US President Donald Trump (Keller, 2018)

suggest that Canadians hold more positive views of immigration and immigrants compared with citizens of countries in Europe (Hiebert, 2016; Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2018).<sup>6</sup>

Scholars attribute this to a range of factors, including a robust immigrant ‘integration’ infrastructure, and the fact that immigration has often been tied to the economic needs of the country (Hiebert, 2016). Humanitarian and refugee admissions are part of Canada’s landscape, but they form a significantly smaller number than those admitted as economic immigrants. The largely discretionary nature of Canada’s refugee system – through resettlement – arguably helps maintain public support for the system. In general, there is higher public support for economic immigration over refugee admissions, as evidenced by the public response to the ‘irregular arrivals’ either by boat (Mountz, 2010) or by asylum seekers crossing into Canada in the winter of 2018 (Zilio, 2018).

Canada’s immigration system can be characterized as ‘managed migration.’ Kofman argues that “managerial [migration] regimes” aim to

derive the greatest benefit from economic globalisation by selecting migrants on the basis of their utility to the economy and to apply, as far as possible, the same economic and political calculus and rationality to all forms of migration, including those derived from normative principles (family migration, asylum and refugees) (Kofman, 2005, p. 455)

Kofman suggests that managerial systems for migration are a response to the increase in securitized borders, economic austerity and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Kofman, 2005). Managerial regimes of migration reinforce the civil stratification between those with citizenship rights and those without (asylum seekers, ‘illegal’ migrants, guest/temporary foreign workers etc.), which has led to a “more contractual model of citizenship with an emphasis on obligations” (2005, p. 455). Writing in 2005, Kofman’s analysis of the conditions associated with managed migration, an emphasis on security, economic austerity, and anti-immigrant sentiment, remains pertinent in the present context.

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<sup>6</sup> There is also evidence that public support for immigration in Canada is fragile and susceptible to the same anti-immigrant rhetoric and politics that have emerged in other contexts (Angus Reid, 2018; Ipsos Public Affairs, 2019).

With its emphasis on economic immigration and an orderly system for refugee reception, Canada embodies this managerial approach to immigration. This is not to say that every immigrant and refugee admitted to Canada is selected based on their human capital, rather that economic and human capital logics tend to pervade much (though not all) of immigration and refugee policy making.

While these systems did not emerge in Canada under the ruling Conservative government (2006-2015), that government can be credited with a radical restructuring of Canadian immigration policy (Alboim & Cohl, 2012). Changes implemented under the Conservatives included a move to a more aggressive ‘managed migration’ regime with an explicitly instrumental focus (Kofman, 2005). During this period, the government restructured Canada’s economic immigration program to target highly skilled workers for immigration to Canada alongside more aggressive language requirements, deepened its emphasis on human capital (skills, training, work experience), prioritized younger applicants, and also created an ‘Express Entry’ system which more fully engaged the private sector in immigrant selection. The restructuring of the economic immigration program was also attended by the increase in the number of temporary foreign workers in Canada (the number of Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada tripled between 2000 and 2011) – many of these workers had few pathways to permanent residence (Alboim & Cohl, 2012).

The Conservative government also oversaw the expansion of Canada’s deportation regime (De Genova, 2010): The Conservatives passed the *Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act (Bill C-31)* and the *Balanced Refugee Reform Act* in 2012 which “radically altered the landscape for refugee claimants” in Canada (Alboim & Cohl, 2012, p. 30). Changes to policy included the mandatory detention of ‘irregular arrivals’ who come in groups (e.g., claimants who arrive by boat), shorter timelines to make a refugee claim, the designation of ‘safe countries,’ limiting access to health care and work permits for claimants and a longer period for accessing permanent residence (ibid, p. 32).

*The SRRI and the Liberal government*

The federal Liberal's commitment to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees before the end of 2015 echoed earlier Canadian initiatives to resettle large numbers of refugees in a short period of time, most notably 60,000 'boat people' from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1980. In the decades since the arrival of this cohort, refugees have accounted for between approximately 10-30 percent of Canada's overall immigrant and refugee admissions (Statistics Canada, 2017). Notably, the number of refugees declined under the Conservative government between 2006 and 2015 (refugees during this period ranged between nine and 12 percent of total immigrant admissions).

The Canadian state differentiates between 'refugee claimants' (asylum seekers, who are officially called 'Landed-in-Canada Refugees,' since they came to Canada of their own volition and arrived before they were designated as refugees) and refugees selected for resettlement. There are three types of resettled refugees: those who are selected and nominated by the UNHCR for resettlement (a process that must be approved by IRCC), and are supported by the national government (Government Assisted Refugees, or GARs); Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs)<sup>7</sup>; and Blended Visa Office-Referred refugees (BVORs). GARs receive 12 months of financial support from the federal government. PSRs receive 12 months of financial support from a group of private sponsors (Sponsorship Agreement Holders or Groups of Five). BVORs receive six months of financial support from the government and six months from a group of private sponsors. All resettled refugees are eligible for federally funded settlement programs both during and beyond their first year in Canada (including English or French language instruction). Of the 39,650 Syrians resettled between November 2015 and December 2016, 35 percent were privately sponsored, 55 percent were GARs and the 10 percent were BVORs (IRCC 2019b).

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<sup>7</sup> Canada's private sponsorship program is one of the only programs in the world that offers opportunities for private citizens to be directly involved in refugee resettlement. Private sponsorship has been largely overlooked on the scholarship of refugee resettlement in Canada. Recent scholarship on the Syrian Initiative by Macklin et al. (2018) has explored the composition and motivations of private sponsors, arguing it is a form of citizenship practice by particular groups of Canadians.

During the 2015 national election, the Liberal's campaign promise to resettle Syrian refugees contrasted sharply with the (then-ruling) Conservative's more culturally charged campaign, which centered on creating a 'Barbaric Cultural Practices' tip line and discussions over 'Canadian values' in relation to Muslim women's dress (Walton-Roberts, Veronis, Wayland, Dam & Cullen, 2019). It was also significant that the number of Syrians the Liberals proposed to resettle – 25,000 – was more than twice the number of refugees settled under the Conservative government during the previous year. The Liberal promise came after the widely circulated photo of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy, who drowned with members of his family trying to reach safety in Europe. The photo provoked a widespread public outcry both in Canada, and around the world, and provided the political capital necessary to make refugee resettlement a potent wedge issue in the 2015 Canadian election.

The Liberal election victory was marketed as a 'return' to Canadian values of liberal multiculturalism and humanitarianism, embodied in Justin Trudeau's statement to the UN regarding refugee resettlement: "We are Canadian. We are here to help." (Maclean's 2016 in Macklin et al. 2018, p. 38). This comment referenced Canada's history of refugee resettlement from the Boat People in the 1980s to Kosovars in the 1990s to Syrians in the present day.

## **2.6 Local governance and refugee arrivals**

In Canada, with the exception of Quebec which has jurisdiction over immigration into the province, the majority of immigration and refugee policy decisions are made at the Federal level.<sup>8</sup> Cities have no jurisdictional control over immigration policy, though it is in cities that the majority of migrants and refugees to Canada settle. This means that decisions made at the federal level vis-à-vis immigration often take shape in and impact urban contexts (Walton Roberts, Veronis, Wayland, Dam & Cullen, 2019; Andrew, 2012). It is also the case that provinces fund healthcare, education, and social assistance – services that refugees and migrants access.

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<sup>8</sup> One exception to Federal decision making of immigration policy is the Provincial Nominee Programs which grant provinces a capped number of immigrant admissions annually (for example, in 2018, 62,427 people or 19.4% of Permanent Residents were admitted through the Provincial Nominee Programs (IRCC, 2020).



Walton Roberts et al. (2019) writing about Syrian resettlement notes three trends in Canadian immigration policy relevant to understanding the local implications of the SRRI: localization, multisectoral engagement around immigration settlement, and settlement to non-gateway cities (Walton Roberts et al. 2019, p. 350).

The degree to which cities have assumed greater responsibility over issues related to immigrant settlement is debatable, and, perhaps more importantly, geographically-specific. For example, Walton Roberts et al. (2019), focus much of their discussion on the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) models. These are federally funded local roundtables that bring multiple stakeholders together to discuss issues of immigration. While the LIP model has been successful in cities in Ontario, its success in other jurisdictions is less well understood (or studied). It is also the case that while the LIPs are based locally, they remain dependent on federal funds. Nevertheless, cities remain important places for refugee settlement, regardless of how much responsibility the local government actually assumes (Darling, 2017; Bauder, 2016).

Another trend in Canadian immigration policy is the increase in multisectoral collaboration by actors who have typically not been engaged in immigrant selection and settlement (including employers, postsecondary institutions, civil society organizations and private entities). Local Immigration Partnerships are a good example of this multisectoral engagement (Walton Roberts et al. 2019). The Syrian Resettlement also saw extraordinary levels of mobilization by citizen and voluntary groups (discussed further below); the corporate sector, through corporate donations including market housing, technology and financial contributions; and post-secondary engagement through volunteerism and private sponsorship.

Finally, there has also been a shift in settlement patterns away from Canada's large gateway cities (Toronto and Vancouver) toward smaller centres and non-traditional immigrant settlement contexts (Walton Roberts et al. 2019, p. 350). Alberta received the most Syrian refugees outside of Ontario and Quebec, a fact that reflects the shift in Canadian settlement geography (Agrawal, 2019). This was largely due to the significant number of Privately Sponsored Syrian Refugees

who arrived in Alberta, driven primarily by a strong civil society response in the province (approximately half of the 2000 Syrians that arrived in Alberta between 2015-2016 were privately sponsored (IRCC, 2017)).

The added cost to local social services, multisectoral engagement and a shift toward non-traditional settlement locations aptly describes Calgary's reception context.

## **2.7 The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative**

The SRRI was a massive government undertaking that brought 25,000 refugees to Canada in 100 days (and a further 15,000 before the close of 2016). The government used the *Emergency Management Act* to deliver on its promise and large numbers of refugees started to arrive in cities and communities within weeks. The effort required that the Canadian government work closely with international organizations, including the UNHCR and countries of first asylum (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey) as well as with local, provincial and territorial governments within Canada. Syrian refugees arrived in more than 300 communities across the country, from some of Canada's smallest rural communities to Canada's largest cities.

Canada's immigrant settlement sector was a critical stakeholder in the SRRI. The current federally funded system has its roots in the formalization of a new settlement system and bureaucracy that took place in the 1970s (Vineberg, 2012). During this period, the federal government established contractual relationships with local organizations to provide a range of settlement supports to immigrants, including language training and employment preparation. While this model has shifted and adapted alongside changing immigration patterns, political and economic conditions and priorities, the model remains fundamentally unchanged, with the Federal Government contracting local agencies to provide services to immigrants and refugees. In 2017-2018, the Canadian federal government invested \$778 million in settlement services across the country, outside the Province of Quebec (Treasury Board, 2019). These included services focused on language training, community support, information and orientation related to employment and programs for children and youth (IRCC, 2019a).

During the SRRI, coordination and organization of the local response to the arriving refugees was led by local settlement agencies, specifically ‘Refugee Assistance Program’ (RAP) providers that were awarded contracts by Ottawa. In Calgary, the local RAP provider is the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) – Calgary’s largest settlement organization with deep roots in the community and a charismatic, media savvy, Executive Director.

While CCIS played a central role in the SRRI in Calgary, other stakeholders were also actively engaged in the effort. This included a group that sprang up to respond to the perceived needs of Syrian refugees called the ‘Syrian Refugee Support Group’ (SRSG). This was an informal group of volunteers led by two community organizers and activists. A number of private sponsors also became involved in the SRSG, in an effort to share information and gather resources for the refugee families they were supporting.

The City of Calgary also sought to influence and shape the reception of refugees – both through formal participation at a roundtable organized to coordinate multiple stakeholders in the resettlement initiative (including the provincial government, Alberta Health Services, local housing providers, other settlement agencies and so on) as well as through the Mayor’s Office where Mayor Naheed Nenshi took public and visible roles in the welcome effort.

The #WelcomeRefugees message enjoyed political support across the three orders of government (municipal, provincial and federal) with the Mayor, Alberta’s first New Democrat Premier, Rachel Notley, and Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau aligned on this message. This was arguably a rare coalescence around a progressive message in a province not known for its progressive politics.

While the public posture in Calgary, as in most reception communities across the country, embodied the #WelcomeRefugees spirit, this spirit quickly collided with social and economic realities on the ground. Perhaps most significantly this included the discrepancy between the funding refugees receive from the Federal government and the actual cost of living in Canada’s increasingly expensive and income polarized cities. While less of a barrier than in Canada’s

more costly cities (Toronto and Vancouver), the volume of refugees arriving in a short period of time created challenges around housing (Rose & Charette, 2017; Oudshroon, Benbow & Meyer 2019, further discussed in Chapter 6). Similarly, the youthful composition of this refugee cohort (50 percent of the Syrian cohort were under the age of 18 at the time of arrival (IRCC, 2019b)), put enormous pressure on local schools. This was compounded in Calgary, where the settlement geography was concentrated in one quadrant of the city, placing a strain on schools already grappling with underfunding and low investments in infrastructure (McIntosh, 2016).

In the five years since the arrival of the first refugee families under the SRRI, a small body of scholarship has emerged related to the arrival and early integration of this refugee cohort in Canada (see Canadian Ethnic Studies special issue, 2018; Canadian Geographer special issue, 2019; Hamilton, Veronis & Walton Roberts, 2020; IRCC Syrian Outcomes Report, 2019b). Much of the academic literature stems from research that was supported by a dedicated funding stream established by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) in partnership with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). This ‘Targeted Research’ call for proposals provided funds for 27 projects across Canada on Syrian refugees. Much of this research was undertaken within the first year to 18 months of arrival and focuses on a range of issues related to the settlement needs and experiences of this cohort including: housing (Charette and Rose 2017; Oudshroon, Benbow & Meyer 2019); private sponsorship (Agrawal 2019; Macklin et al. 2018); Local Immigration Partnerships (Walton Roberts et al. 2018); youth (Veronis, Tabler & Ahmed, 2018; Hadfield, Ostrowski & Ungar, 2017; Guo, Maitra, & Guo, 2019); social connections (Hanley et al. 2018) and mothering (Milkie, Maghbouleh & Peng 2018). Similarly, IRCC has released several reports on the outcomes of Syrian refugees during their initial years of settlement (cf. IRCC, 2019b).

This research provides important context for my work and is cited throughout the chapters that follow. In particular, Milkie, Maghbouleh and Peng’s (2018) research on refugee mothering provides critical insight into my discussion on mothering practices in Chapter 8. Their research team conducted 50 interviews with Syrian refugee mothers in the Toronto area. Unlike much of the other SSHRC-funded targeted research on Syrians, many of their interviews were conducted

in the homes of refugee women (rather than in a settlement agency), which leads to a more nuanced and carefully constructed account of gendered subjectivity in relation to migration (Milkie, Maghbouleh & Peng, 2018; Maghbouleh, Omar, Milkie & Peng, 2019). Many of their findings regarding the dislocation of family life in resettlement and the challenges this poses to mothering practices echoes what I found in Calgary.

This dissertation seeks to build on this work and contribute to the emerging body of scholarship on Syrian refugee integration and resettlement in Canada. However, I am also interested in thinking about what a geographic lens, and research methodologies that are spatially grounded and ethnographically informed, offers to our thinking about integration and resettlement. In this way, I seek to understand how these processes are shaped by the micro-geographies in which they are located: This is what I hope my project achieves.

## **2.8 Summing up**

In offering a theoretical tool for understanding the relationship between the ‘global’ and the ‘local,’ feminist geographer Cindi Katz articulated the idea of a ‘countertopography’ (2001). Topography, writes Katz, is “a detailed examination of some part of the material world, defined at any scale from the body to the global, in order to understand its salient features and their mutual and broader relationships” (p. 1228). As Katz, and other scholars, have noted, the global and the local are not separate entities, but rather mutually constituted: everyday life in diverse ‘local’ places is shot through by distinctly ‘global’ processes.

As I discuss further in the chapters that follow, this dissertation explores the material and everyday contours of some fairly weighty theoretical concepts – ‘integration,’ ‘belonging,’ ‘humanitarianism’ and so on. I am curious about how these concepts take shape and manifest in particular places through the lived experiences of people, as well as how these processes are shaped by gender and the work of mothering.

Yet, as Katz reminds us, the ‘local’ that we seek is inevitably defined, constructed, shaped by, and intersected with, processes that are profoundly ‘global’ (and national). This is patently

obvious when working with international refugees. In the case of the Syrians I encountered, they were often multiply displaced, first within Syria, then to a country where they claimed asylum, and then, several years later, ‘resettled’ to Canada. Some of them had also relocated during their short time in Canada (from Vancouver to Calgary, for example). In order to better understand the contours of life in Canada, we need to unpack the purportedly ‘global’ processes and institutional arrangements that have shaped their lives up to this point.

This chapter, then, has provided an important context for the work that follows. It began by discussing the conflict in Syria that produced the mass displacement of Syrians from their country. This account was by no means exhaustive, but it sought to lay out a foundation for understanding the relationship between the Syrians who now reside in Little Syria, and the geopolitical conflict that ‘produced’ their displacement (Lê Espiritu, 2014).

From there, I moved to a discussion of the institutional landscape that surrounds people who are designated as refugees. Here I touch on the problematic closures and difficulties that stem from state-centered discussions of displacement, as well as the profound consequences of state identifications. Understanding the UN Convention on Refugees – its possibilities as well as its limitations – offers a critical foundation for understanding the context around refugee resettlement globally, as well as nationally. The discussion then moved to an account of Canada’s immigration and refugee policies and how those play out at national and local scales. I concluded by briefly highlighting some of the emerging literature on Syrian refugees in Canada, and what I hope my own project contributes to this body of work.

In the next chapter, I take up the theoretical and conceptual approaches that have shaped how I think about refugee resettlement, the question of integration and the intersections of gender and migration. These two chapters – this one and the next – provide the institutional and theoretical grounding for the empirical work that follows in Chapters 5-8.

## Chapter 3: Conceptual framework/literature review

In this chapter, I present the key theoretical concepts that frame the dissertation. I begin by discussing the ideological stakes in the literature as they relate to the issue of resettlement, with a particular focus on the relationship between humanitarianism and refugee resettlement in Canada. In the second section, I present the central debates related to the fraught concept of ‘integration.’ In this section I explore specifically how integration has been considered spatially and how it is related to the uneven settlement geography of cities. The final section addresses questions related to feminist geography, with a focus on transnational households and the incorporation of Muslim women into the Canadian nation-state.

### 3.1 Rescaling resettlement

#### *The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI) and Canadian humanitarianism*

If asked about the decision to resettle Syrian refugees in Canada, many Canadians would probably point to the photograph of the lifeless body of a little boy on a Turkish beach that made headlines internationally in September 2015. As noted in the previous chapter, Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old Syrian child who drowned in the Mediterranean when the boat he and his family were traveling on sank. They were among thousands of refugees fleeing Syria and making the perilous crossing to Europe. Alan had an aunt in Vancouver who had been trying desperately to get his family resettled in Canada but faced numerous roadblocks. Unable to reach Canada through licit means, the family decided to make the journey by boat to Europe. Alan became a symbol for the global failure to address the Syrian refugee crisis. The tie to Canada through Alan’s aunt also served to galvanize Canadians. Refugee resettlement became a significant issue in the 2015 election and helped bring the Liberal government to power.

In grappling with the ‘why’ of refugee resettlement (Why Syrians? Why now?), I find Saskia Bonjour’s research on Dutch immigration policies to be insightful (2011). Bonjour is interested

in problematizing the notion that most immigration is ‘unwanted’ by liberal democracies.<sup>9</sup> Bonjour argues that to understand the complexity of immigration policy at a domestic level, one has to attend the ways in which public sentiment and values come to bear on policy makers. Contra other scholars who argue that public sentiment is generally opposed to immigration, Bonjour suggests that at different moments, and in different contexts, societies can actually be quite sympathetic to immigrants and favour less restrictive immigration policies.

For Bonjour, “policy makers’ moral perspectives, and the policy preferences that result from them, more often than not reflect values that are widely adhered to in...society” (2011, p. 110). More research and analysis is needed to understand the complex intersections of public values, national identity and policy making that led to the Syrian refugee resettlement initiative. Yet Bonjour’s emphasis on ‘moral perspectives’ and ‘values’ has resonance when reflecting on the complexity of factors that led to the Canadian government’s decision to resettle 40,000 predominantly Muslim refugees from Syria in communities across Canada, especially in the wake of the restrictive migration policies that characterized the preceding Conservative government.

The public embrace of the SRRI and the outpouring of support these refugees received can be linked to a distinctly Canadian perspective, held by many, of Canada as an open, inclusive, multicultural country. This is what Katherine Ewing describes as a “national imaginary”

...a system of cultural representations that makes the contours of the nation-state emotionally plausible, in part differentiating the nation-state from others on the basis of distinctive national cultural forms and ‘a strong sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – a sense of exclusive belonging.’ (Ewing, 2008, p. 2)

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<sup>9</sup> Bonjour is critiquing the concept of the “control gap” – the theory that there is a gap between the goals of immigration policies and the outcomes (theorized by Cornelius, Martin and Hollifield 1994). This was debated by immigration scholars in the 1990s who suggested various reasons why ‘liberal states accept unwanted immigration’ (Joppke, 1998). See also Freeman, 2004; Sassen, 1996; and Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000.



National imaginaries help explain and give context to national policy decisions and programs – including immigrant and refugee policies. Dauvergne argues that humanitarianism, codified in the immigration laws of liberal states, serves as a boundary marker for liberal democracies. She suggests that because refugee law does not explicitly require liberal states to accept refugees (it prescribes only how they are to be treated once they have arrived), refugee law remains largely discretionary and contingent. As a ‘poor stand-in for justice’ humanitarianism allows states to make highly discretionary decisions about who can be granted refuge and under what conditions.

This discretion works to shore up the boundaries – territorial and imaginary – of the nation-state:

refugees are persecuted or left to suffer by their own nation. Their nation itself has treated them in such a way that our nation feels compelled to allow them haven. We condemn the behaviour of the other nation in a gesture signifying that our standards are better. (p. 118)

Despite coming at the issue of humanitarianism from the perspective of a legal scholar, Dauvergne believes that humanitarianism serves purposes through the law that also *exceed* the law. Specifically, she argues that humanitarianism, codified in refugee law, is a signifier of national identity and a boundary marker for liberal democracies such as Canada and Australia.

Humanitarianism is a key feature of liberal democracies – in philosophical debates over closed versus open borders, even those liberal theorists who argue for closed borders and strict immigration policies agree that liberal nations should accept a small number of refugees based on humanitarian need. Dauvergne refers to this as a ‘humanitarian consensus’. This consensus certainly informs and shores up Canadian values and the national imaginary, ‘confirming and reifying the nation as good, prosperous, and generous.’ (Dauvergne, 2005, p. 4).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dauvergne’s discussion on humanitarianism and national identity sidesteps difficult policy questions around refugee admissions. Indeed as a critical and theoretical text, Dauvergne is less interested in the proscriptive *how* of refugee policy and more curious about the relationship between identity, values, history and the imagined boundaries of the nation-state/national community. While this is a possible limitation of her work, I still find value in examining the relationship between values, imagination and the policy decisions that intersect with these values in discussing refugee admissions and integration.

This imaginary shaped both the public pressure on government to resettle Syrians as well as the reception contexts in which refugees arrived and their initial relationships with Canadians. The public pressure in favour of Syrian resettlement can be tied to strong emotional response many Canadians felt in response to the photo of Alan Kurdi.

This dynamic is captured in research by Macklin and colleagues (2018) on the demographic composition and motivations of private sponsors who became involved in the SRRI. Macklin et al. describe private sponsorship as a form of active (Canadian) citizenship, tied strongly to ideas of what it means to be a good Canadian, including humanitarian actions, welcoming the stranger and acts of hospitality.<sup>11</sup> Humanitarianism as identity thus lives in both the ‘private’ acts of individuals in relation to refugees and in the public policy decisions around refugee admissions.

It is significant to note, however, as Macklin and her colleagues do, that this strong attachment to the idea of Canada as a generous and hospitable country for refugees is characteristic not of *all* Canadians but rather it reflects the values of those who participated directly in refugee resettlement as private sponsors. The authors note that private sponsors who participated in their study share demographic characteristics – many were highly educated, older women of European ancestry with incomes higher than the Canadian median (Macklin, Barber, Goldring, Hyndman, Korteweg, Labman, & Zyfi, 2018, p. 45).<sup>12</sup> It is also notable that the majority of private sponsors who participated in this study identified as politically centrist or left, with 53 percent voting for the Liberal Party and only 6 percent voting Conservative (Macklin et al., 2018, p. 45). In other words, it is important to acknowledge the contested terrain of ‘national imaginaries’ and the way competing discourses of what it means to be Canadian play out in different ways.

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<sup>11</sup> Macklin et al. (2018) conducted a survey of private sponsors with 530 responses. They found that motivations for sponsorship included: “a spiritual commitment to ‘welcome the stranger’...hospitality is filtered through an ethic of humanitarianism, international solidarity, or a belief that it instantiates Canadian identity, which may in turn be connected to personal, familial or national narratives of migration history” (p. 53).

<sup>12</sup> The authors note that these demographic characteristics represent the 530 people who responded to the survey and cannot necessarily be generalized to the private sponsorship ‘community.’ That being said, these characteristics largely resonate with my encounters with Private Sponsors through my research as well – many of whom were older white women with university education and relatively high incomes.

### *The ideological stakes of resettlement*

Recognizing that refugee resettlement is a discretionary policy (that there is no legal obligation for Canada to accept resettled refugees) and, relatedly, that public support for refugees is contingent, heightens the stakes for policy, academic and theoretical discussions about refugee resettlement. Debates about immigration and refugees are polarized (Angus Reid, 2018; Ipsos Public Affairs, 2018). Considerable segments of the Canadian public (along with citizens in countries across Europe, the United States and Australia) are skeptical about large influxes of refugees. Data from 2019 indicate that 37 percent of Canadians surveyed agree with the statement, “most people claiming to be refugees are not really refugees” (CIC, 2019). While not as politically potent as in Europe and the United States, Canada has its share of vocal minorities who are openly hostile to outsiders (immigrants and refugees) and espouse xenophobic views (see: Curtis, 2019; Yogaretnam 2018). Public anxieties over refugees shape wider conversations about resettlement and lead many to believe that those who support refugees must maintain a positive attitude about the successes of resettlement.

This point is not an academic abstraction: I have spent the last four years thinking about, working with and researching issues related to refugees in Calgary, Alberta. During this time, the Calgary economy has contracted due to the global decline in energy prices. In a city and province whose economy is dependent on the oil and gas industry, and where many residents have generally enjoyed high incomes and low taxes, the economic downturn has come as a shock and has shaped a more reactionary and divisive politics. While many Calgarians continue to enjoy a very high standard of living relative to other parts of the country, the feeling of grievance is real.

For many, the struggles of ‘ordinary Albertans’ should come before the concerns facing ‘others’ – both immigrants and refugees. This sentiment was summed up in remarks made by United Conservative Party leader Jason Kenney during his leadership campaign victory speech, “We understand that in order to be a compassionate, caring province, we must be prosperous first” (Macleans, 2017). This sentiment reflects the contingency of public generosity and the limits of

humanitarian giving. While this comment was not about refugees directly, it reflects a wider public attitude that I often encounter when discussing issues related to refugee resettlement: ‘How can we extend benefits and support to people from another country, when people right here at home are struggling?’

In my own interactions, I have often had to remind people that resettled refugees do not receive *more* income-support than other low-income Canadians, that they receive *the same* health benefits, that they are *not* prioritized for public housing and so on. In this argument, I find myself rushing to point out that the refugees I met are working hard to learn English and find employment. I point to examples of refugee ‘success stories’ such as the Syrian refugee Abdulfatah Sabouni in Calgary who started Aleppo Soaps and Tareq Hadhad who opened a chocolate factory in Nova Scotia. Effectively, I reproduce the narratives about refugees that I hope will build support for further opportunities for refugee resettlement.

While these success stories are real, it is also the case that resettlement is a highly complex phenomenon that is difficult to conceptualize. The following section identifies some of the significant stakes of this debate.

### *Seeing like a state*

From the perspective of government officials who oversaw the SRRI, this initiative is largely viewed as a success (IRCC, 2019b; Kiziltan, 2020). The SRRI took place during a period of heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy – the UK vote for Brexit in June of 2016 and the election of Donald Trump in the United States in November of the same year. Both these campaigns were characterized by anti-immigrant rhetoric and an emphasis on a ‘return’ to prioritizing the rights of citizens over outsiders. Similarly, and as discussed in the previous chapter, the highly visible arrival of boats full of refugee-migrants on European shores resulted in a range of responses – many of them hostile to the arrivals. In this context, Trudeau’s election victory – which included a prominent promise to resettle 25,000 Syrians – offered a sense that Canada’s response was an important and significant humanitarian gesture. This was especially true in the context of a geopolitics that felt increasingly exclusionary toward displaced people.

The Canadian government took a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to the resettlement initiative – this meant engaging a wide range of government departments and multisector actors in the work of selecting, relocating, housing, furnishing, funding and supporting refugees (Kiziltan, 2020). The short time frame, the mobilization of enormous resources, and the sheer scope of logistics required for the resettlement initiative offer an impressive example of what a state apparatus can do in order to address human suffering and displacement when its resources – both human and material – are marshalled for the laudable goal of ‘welcoming Syrian refugees.’

This is, therefore, the first significant point to make: Resettlement takes place in a wider context shaped largely by skepticism about refugees and where there is no legal obligation to extend resettlement opportunities. In this context, then, it is important to acknowledge the significant public and political accomplishment that is the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative. Despite the very real limitations and exclusions of the existing Refugee Convention and Protocol, the global refugee system managed by the UNHCR, and Canadian refugee policy, scholars and activists interested in refugee-migrant protection, benefit from acknowledging the very real policy and program opportunity structures available in our current system. We can (and must) continue to push for more inclusive systems and policies, but we need to also work within the structures currently available to refugees. Both things can be true at the same time.

### *Expectations upon arrival*

The second point has to do with the arrival contexts of (resettled) refugees. Some observers of the SRRI have noted that much of the policy energy and resources went into the front end of the resettlement effort – this involved focusing on getting refugees to Canada and then resettling them to specific locations (cities and towns across Canada). This meant that fewer resources went into considerations around the long-term integration of these refugees (Ditchburn, 2016). This is likely because Canada has an established integration infrastructure and it was felt that these refugees, like other refugees, would access the services and supports available to all immigrants and refugees to Canada. This turned out to be problematic for a number of reasons - which I describe in this dissertation. Essentially, the volume of refugees entering the system at

the same time highlighted the existing vulnerabilities and fault lines in Canada's settlement and integration infrastructure; including pressures on housing, schools and settlement services such as language training.

Broadly speaking, the challenge of resettlement is directly related to a widespread, normative belief that refugees should not receive more support than the most economically disadvantaged members of a society. This is a view held even by most liberal and progressive advocates for refugees. While this is politically and theoretically logical, what it means in practice, is that (many) resettled refugees end up living in poverty and in contexts shaped by poverty.

Writing about the resettlement of Somali Bantu refugees to an economically depressed town in Maine, Catherine Bestemen (2016) describes the challenges facing resettled refugees:

far more challenging and surprising than learning about technology and transport was the structure of education and the growing realization that they would be living in poverty in the land of opportunity. Cultural orientation classes in the camps had stressed that living in the US meant having a job and the opportunity to attend school, but had failed to clarify that barriers to both would be very high, that the kinds of jobs available to [them] would not cover their living expenses, that education would not be accessible to everyone, and that the expectation of a job took priority over the opportunity for education. (p. 106)

As I describe in Chapter 6, the dynamic that Bestemen describes here is similar to that encountered by many resettled refugees in Canada, including the Syrians. While Canada has a large settlement and integration infrastructure – including free language instruction for newcomers – there continue to be gaps in the system to move refugees out of contexts of poverty.

While not *all* refugees who arrive in Canada are poor (there are significant variations in the class backgrounds of those in the Syrian cohort, for example), those who are poor face barriers to achieving economic independence in Canada. Certainly, the refugees that I encountered through this research came from working class backgrounds in Syria, many had low levels of literacy in their first language and had not completed high school, and many lived in relative poverty in Syria before being displaced. The limited financial resources they had when they left Syria had

long been exhausted securing a degree of safety in asylum contexts in relative proximity to the Syrian border.

In Canada, resettled refugees receive a full year of government support which is roughly comparable with provincial social assistance rates. They also receive additional funding upon arrival for furniture, clothing and other basic needs. After the first year of funding comes to an end, refugees – like all ‘newcomers’ – can continue to access a range of settlement programming, including, crucially, language training. In this way, relative to other countries, Canada is viewed as having a robust settlement and integration infrastructure that is often attributed to the positive outcomes among Canada’s refugee populations (Bloemraad, 2006).

Despite this level of support, there is a strong emphasis on refugees attaining financial self-sufficiency within one year of arrival. After their first year in Canada, Federal support for Government Assisted Refugees comes to an end (similarly, those supported by Private Sponsors also receive one year of financial support). While this means that, in theory, refugees should be gainfully employed and economically independent, in practice this means that many Syrian refugees moved from the Federal Refugee Assistance Program to the Provincial welfare system (Alberta Works, in Alberta).

Since the 2001 implementation of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), Canadian resettlement policy has emphasized vulnerability as a key factor in selection of resettled refugees. This means that those who enter Canada as resettled refugees have been selected *because* of their heightened levels of vulnerability (this might include factors such as single-parent households, chronic health issues or disabilities). These same individuals are then expected to quickly find employment and become economically self-sufficient in a relatively short period of time. That those who must present themselves as highly vulnerable in order to be eligible for resettlement, must at the next moment prove to be economically independent and productive residents who make no demands on their host communities, is a paradoxical dynamic of the Canadian resettlement landscape.

### *Strategies over solutions*

The third conceptual point about resettlement concerns the language of solutions. Resettlement is described by the UNHCR as a ‘durable’ solution to the problem of mass displacement. Yet, when we turn our attention to the perspectives of those who are resettled, we see that the language of solutions is inadequate to the scale of tragedy and dislocation they have endured. It is more appropriate, as Hyndman and Giles suggest, to consider resettlement as a ‘strategy’ rather than a solution (Hyndman and Giles, 2017, p. 97). This involves ‘re-scaling’ our discussions of resettlement from the perspective of ‘the state’ to the scale of individual refugee-migrants (Hyndman and Reynolds, 2020, p. 69).

Ramsay (2017) conducted research on refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) resettled to Australia. The focus of her work is how refugees themselves understand displacement and resettlement. Ramsay writes that for the refugees she encountered, “new previously unimaginable experiences of displacement are made possible” in resettlement (p. 10). These are what she describes as the “violences” of resettlement (p. 1) which include the profound experience of dislocation, isolation, exclusion and racism that (some) refugees experience through resettlement. Ramsay suggests that scholars need to disentangle displacement from statelessness and consider other forms of displacement and refuge – beyond one centered on the power of the nation-state.

Attending to the disconnections between formal citizenship and social belonging, refuge and resettlement, and displacement and placemaking can only be done by attending to the perspectives and lived experience of refugees themselves. This is what Hyndman and Giles (2017) describe as “rescaling” our studies of displacement and border crossing from the view of the nation-state to the individuals who experience displacement and its purported ‘solutions.’ This allows for a more finely tuned and complex understanding of refugee and resettlement policies.

The gift of resettlement offered by the Canadian nation-state to refugees is attended by expectations and obligations on the part of refugees. Mimi Nguyen (2012), citing Derrida, writes



that the gift “incriminates an economy of exchange and obligation between giver and recipient.” (p. 4). In the Canadian context, the gift of resettlement from the nation-state comes with the obligation on the part of the newcomer to ‘integrate’ into Canadian society. This expectation of integration is informed by structures of race and coloniality and haunted by a particular version of liberal personhood that become the responsibility of ‘outsiders’ to adopt (Joppke, 2004, 2007; Triadafilopoulos, 2011; Korteweg, 2017).

The burdens and obligations that resettlement places on refugees, have led Garnier, Sandvik and Jubilut (2018) to describe resettlement as a form of humanitarian governance. This refers to the fact that resettled refugees are offered a form of care (protection from the Canadian nation-state) but must also accept a degree of control and governance over their lives by the Canadian state. In her ethnography, *Buddha is Hiding*, Aiwha Ong found a similar dynamic of care and control in the lives of Cambodian refugees living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ong uses a Foucauldian analysis to reflect on how refugee identity is produced through interactions with state-funded agencies (2003). In my work, I found examples of humanitarian governance that informed everything from housing decisions, to parenting practices and pathways towards the labour market. Tacit and explicit forms of governance shape the lives of citizens, non-citizens and refugees alike, yet for those entering Canada as ‘newcomers’ they are required to absorb and participate in new, often unfamiliar, regimes of care and control.

In this sense, the fact of *being a refugee* and the work that this label produces, does not end upon resettlement; rather the forms of governance that surround the refugee shift from one apparatus to another (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). In the case of refugees from Syria, governance shifted from the UNHCR and the regimes of protection offered in the countries of first asylum (Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon) to the designation of ‘resettled Syrian refugee’ in Canada. In Canada, they also encountered the multiple forms of the Canadian ‘state’ through its complex manifestations across three levels of government (Federal, Provincial and Municipal) as well as through the ‘shadow state’ (Wolch, 1990) in the form settlement providers, private sponsors, volunteers, social workers, healthcare providers and so on.

Eric Tang, drawing on his research with Cambodian refugees living in poverty in the Bronx, uses the term “refugee temporality” to describe “the refugees’ knowledge that, with each crossing, resettlement and displacement, an old and familiar form of power is being reinscribed” (2015, p. 21). For Tang, taking stock of the decades of protracted poverty, exclusion, and violence that has shaped the lives of generations of Cambodian refugees resettled to the US, the ‘promise’ of resettlement is never achieved. Rather, refugees face persistent instability characterized by poor housing conditions, unending poverty, a punishing welfare regime and a justice system that criminalizes those who are racialized and impoverished: “the cycles of uprooting, displacement and captivity that defines the refugee experience persists long after resettlement” (2015, p. 4-5).

Through my research I found that refugees themselves conceived of Canada’s ‘gift’ to them largely in terms of protecting their human security, as well as their future opportunities (in the form of educational opportunities for their children). While many involved in the resettlement initiative on the Canadian side, viewed resettlement as the greatest of gifts, to the adult refugees who had made the decision to come to Canada, it was viewed largely in terms of the things that were lost, rather than the things they had gained. The losses were so tangible, the gains so ephemeral. They had lost their home, their country, their family, their livelihoods, their sense of normalcy, the familiarity of home, custom, culture, routine.

The view of resettlement as being largely about physical safety was always brought into sharp relief in the context of illness or tragedy. One day Ousa’s little girl was running while carrying a glass of water, she fell, the glass shattered and a piece lodged itself in her eye. Ousa and her husband rushed her to hospital. The doctors managed to save her eye, but she was partially blinded. Ousa tells me, “We came here to be safe, but we are not safe, this is the worst thing.” When a nine-year-old Syrian girl committed suicide after being bullied at school, the community of Syrian women was devastated, Haya, the woman who assisted me with this research, summed up these feelings: “Why did we come here if our children are not safe?”

For the Syrians I encountered through this research, resettlement opened up new forms of insecurity, precarity and loss. In the words of Hala, one of the women interviewed for this project, “Our bodies are safe here, but emotionally, we are not safe.”

This is not to say that the Syrians I encountered felt they made the wrong choice in choosing to be resettled (and recall, it was a choice, according to the UN, only one out of every three households contacted about resettlement to Canada elected to come (Williams, 2016)). Rather, to emphasize that the promise of resettlement is fundamentally about offering safety through geography. It makes no promises with respect to the personal and ontological forms of security that might attend it. This echoes scholarship that emphasizes the ontological security of refugee-migrants, beyond that offered by the nation-state: “to place an emphasis...on ontological security that reframes the scales and ways security is practised renders visible finer local and urban sites at which protection is being forged in new ways” (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020, p. 69).

This complexity is important to identify, name and explore because it shifts our analytic focus toward the people at the center of our humanitarian and refugee policy frameworks. ‘Syrian refugees’ is a label that does significant work and produces an undifferentiated group of people as enduring victims of a brutal war (Lê Espiritu & Duong, 2018). In the Canadian context, the label is also tied to the Trudeau government and its policies towards refugees.<sup>13</sup> My work attempts to explore the life-worlds of these people who are, yes, ‘Syrian refugees’ but who are also people, “neither damaged victims nor model minorities” (Lê Espiritu, 2014, p. 12).

In this section I have presented the significant debates around the concept of refugee resettlement: I have tried to emphasize the multi-valent and complex nature of this policy tool – its possibilities but also its limitations. I move from the theoretical and state-centered understandings of resettlement to the individual/personal perspectives on resettlement,

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<sup>13</sup> Since I began my research on the Syrian resettlement initiative, I have had a Google news alert set up that notifies me on a daily basis of the articles printed having to do with “Syrian refugees.” It is a regular occurrence that articles about Prime Minister Trudeau are included in the list. These articles often have nothing to do with the refugees themselves; instead they serve to reference Trudeau’s relationship to humanitarianism, multiculturalism and/or refugee policy.

emphasizing the need to avoid the language of solutions. This emphasis on complexity and grounding theoretical discussions to specific people in specific places continues in the next section where I discuss the concept of integration.

### **3.2 Grounding integration**

‘Integration’ continues to be a contested term in the literature – Ager and Strang (2008) refer to it as a “chaotic” concept: ‘a word used by many but understood differently by most.’ (Robinson 1998 in Ager & Strang 2008, p. 167). Castles, De Haas and Miller write, “there is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration. The concept continues to be controversial and hotly debated” (2001, p. 12).

Scholarship on ‘integration’ in Canada continues to be remarkably place-*less* – focused as it is on markers of integration: language, employment, housing and health (Ager and Strang, 2008). Very little research has attended to the specific places where those markers are achieved (or not).

One of the most cited refugee integration frameworks is an ‘operational definition’ proposed by Ager and Strang in 2008. This framework draws on findings from a mixed-methods research with refugees in the UK. This model is useful because while it includes the ‘markers and means’ of integration – employment, housing, education and health – it also draws attention to the ‘connective tissue’ that promotes (or inhibits) integration. This includes a focus on the social connections that undergird processes of integration. The authors write that, “local respondents commonly identified social connection to be for them the defining feature of an integrated community” (2008, p. 177). Drawing on existing theories of social capital (Putnam, 1993; Granovetter, 1973), Ager and Strang suggest that two aspects of social connection are relevant here: social bonds and social bridges.

By social bonds the authors are referring to connections within one’s group (most significantly family ties and relationships with ‘like ethnic groups’). Social bridges refer to social connections with those outside one’s group. This includes interactions in the wider community through participation ‘sports, college classes, religious worship, community groups and political activity’

(p. 180). Both bridging and bonding social capital are key components for reflecting on the processes of integration beyond typical econocentric models that focus exclusively on, for example, labour market attachment.

Despite the generative aspects of the bonding/bridging model of social integration offered by Ager and Strang, recent scholarship has critiqued the normative aspects of this paradigm, suggesting that it reinforces problematic assumptions about the purported benefits of one ‘kind’ of social relation over another. Wessendorf and Phillimore (2018), for example, argue that this model overlooks the contexts of superdiversity that most migrants are integrating into: “the settlement of migrants into superdiverse contexts highlights unresolved criticisms over integration which asked what ‘unit’ migrants were supposed to integrate into” (p. 124).

The implicit assumption underpinning the social bonds/bridges paradigm is that groups can be neatly divided into those within ‘one’s group’ and those ‘outside’ when, in fact, the contexts in which migrants settle are deeply variegated according to a wide range of variables including class, gender, language, ethnicity, ‘race,’ country of origin, educational and employment histories, immigration status and so on. This is what Vertovec famously described as “superdiversity” (2007) – a concept that is arguably more, not less, relevant in today’s immigration and settlement context. What does integration, then, look like in superdiverse contexts?

This question of ‘what unit’ migrants integrate into has a long history in the scholarship on migration and immigrant incorporation. In the United States, discussions over different modes of ‘immigrant incorporation’ explored the political and cultural contexts that shape individual experiences of immigrant incorporation. Portes and Zhou, for example, articulated the concept of “segmented assimilation” which argued that immigrant groups will experience downward or upward social mobility depending on which group they assimilate with (1993).

In contrast to discussions of assimilation, scholars in the 2000s argued for a conceptualization of migrant incorporation that takes into account the multiple connections and ‘social fields’ of

immigrants – this fell under the designation of transnationalism. Transnationalism became a novel way of thinking about the multiplicity and interconnections that shape migrant life (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Glick Schiller, 1999; Levitt, 2001).

What these paradigms – social integration, assimilation, and transnationalism – often overlook is the specificity of particular places and the way social geographies inform processes of settlement and integration. Critiques in this field suggest that urban geographers have often overlooked how processes of migration, forced migration, and immigrant inclusion, are constitutive of urban spaces. Concomitantly, migration scholars often overlook the role of ‘local’ places – cities, neighbourhoods, homes – in processes of migration and settlement. It is often the nation-state which is the privileged scale of analysis (Darling, 2017, Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018). This is true of both scholarship related to border-crossing and immigration policy, but also true of studies of immigrant incorporation and refugee resettlement, which tend to draw on national level data to assess immigrant and refugee ‘outcomes.’

For example, the OECD and European Commission published a report comparing the integration outcomes of immigrants across all EU and OECD countries drawing together a series of harmonized integration indicators (OECD/EU, 2015). These efforts are hampered by stark differences in immigrant populations between countries, the distinct policy and economic contexts of receiving countries and the lack of shared indicators for measuring integration among countries. Even studies that attempt more modest comparisons, for example Koopmans’ (2013) effort to study multiculturalism policies in Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States, are limited by a lack of shared indicators, differences in immigrant populations (both within Europe and more broadly, between EU and ‘new world’ countries) and difficulty capturing the complexity and specificity of integration experiences using quantitative measures.

These challenges reflect the complexity of ‘measuring’ integration using distinct methodological approaches. Different tools produce different kinds of ‘data’ which in turn drive different forms of analysis. My own work, as I elaborate in the following chapter, takes a grounded and ethnographic approach to exploring the concept of ‘integration’ and what it means to those who

are often the target of integration efforts. This distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches to ‘measuring’ integration is summed up by Brunner, Hyndman and Mountz (2014) who suggest that while some of the barriers facing refugees in terms of securing housing and employment are well documented, “far less is known about the social life of refugees because such relations are difficult to quantify” (p. 84).

There is a small but burgeoning field of research that seeks to move from a focus on incorporation into the nation-state to other ways of thinking about attachment and belonging (Brettel, 2005; Boccagni, 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017; Jaworsky, Levitt, Cadge, & Hejtmanek, 2012; Miraftab, 2016; Schmalzbauer, 2014). Scholarship in this area argues for the need to attend “the materiality and sociability” of local places and how migrants make meaning out of those places (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017, p. 115). In her study of racialized and migrant workers in a meat processing plant in small-town Illinois, Miraftab explores the local and transnational practices of workers from Togo, Mexico and African Americans from Detroit. Miraftab takes a relational approach to the question of ‘integration,’ instead focusing on what she describes as placemaking - “everyday actions and practices that take place not only locally but also transnationally and are critically influenced by the materiality of the place in which they occur” (Miraftab, 2016, p. 28).

Wessendorf and Phillimore, in their critique of normative social integration paradigms argue for a focus on the spatial, temporal, and relational aspects of migrant incorporation. Drawing on the concept of “embeddedness” (Ryan & Mullholland, 2015) they suggest there is a need for greater focus on “the socio-economic, cultural and physical particularities of local areas in which [migrants] live and work” (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019, p. 127). Similarly, in their recent work connecting immigration to city-making, Çağlar and Glick Schiller argue for a study of “emplacement” which they define as “the relationship between the continuing restructuring of place within multiscalar networks of power, and a person’s efforts, within the barriers and opportunities that contingencies of local place-making offer” (2018, p. 20-21).

An emphasis on the spatial and relational aspects of integration aligns with critical refugee scholars' focus on the "routine, intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested" (Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015, p. 2 in Lê Espiritu & Duong 2018) as well as feminist geographers more generally who have argued for feminist epistemologies that attend to social reproduction, home-making (Boccagni, 2016), and the intimate geographies of everyday life.

### *Displacements and the uneven geography of cities*

Approaching the question of 'integration' from a spatially grounded and ethnographically informed perspective allows for a more expansive (re)thinking of the term to consider forms of displacement and placemaking that are not generally included in studies of im/migrant and refugee integration and, in particular, exploring the relationship between refugees and the urban contexts in which they come to live.

Because of the profoundly spatial dimensions of refugee resettlement, decisions made at one scale (in the case of Syrians in Canada – decisions made at the Federal level) play out and take shape at the scale of the city, town or neighbourhood. It is increasingly the case that complex and intertwining forms of displacement are concentrated in specific neighbourhoods in cities characterized by growing income inequality, underinvestment in social supports and a polarized housing market. This description characterizes the neighbourhoods of 'Greater Forest Lawn' – where a significant number of Syrian families landed in 2015 – and where refugees, alongside other economically marginalized individuals and families, can find relatively affordable housing compared to the rest of the city. Broadly, scholarship on refugee (and immigrant) integration in Canada has failed to attend to the contexts of poverty that shape the reception of refugees and immigrants.

In the case of my research, Government Assisted Syrian refugee families, many of them quite large, were overwhelmingly concentrated on the east side of Calgary where housing is more affordable but also – relatedly – where there are large concentrations of people experiencing



economic insecurity. As I discuss further in Chapter 5, Forest Lawn is a neighbourhood characterized both by superdiversity and by high levels of precarity and displacement.

Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2018) argue that the concept of displacement provides a lens through which to explore the multiple forms of precarity that exist in the contemporary city:

Displacement includes not only a range of mobilities including border-crossing migration but also the increasing precarity of those considered locals who experience various forms of dispossession: unemployment, part-time employment, early involuntary retirement, lower wage rates, forced relocation, loss of social status, mortgage foreclosure and downward social mobility. (Çağlar & Glick Schiller 2018, 19)

In Chapter 5, I explore the multiple, intersecting forms of displacement that characterize life in Forest Lawn. I do this by examining both the census data that points to high levels of economic marginalization relative to the rest of the city, as well as through case studies of individuals who live in Forest Lawn and who access social support in the neighbourhood. These case studies reveal the complicated intersections of multiple forms of displacement that shape the lives of neighbourhood residents. These are distinct from the forms of precarity that shape the lives of Syrian families, but are shaped by similar processes of poverty, racialization and (to some degree) spatial entrapment. Writing about Somali refugees living in poverty in Maine, Catherine Bestemen reminds us that, “the hostile treatment of refugees reveals much about the hostile treatment of others...who struggle with idealized requirements for self-sufficiency and identities marked by cultural or racial difference” (2016, p. 198).

Current scholarship on ‘the urban’ also reminds us of the importance of paying attention to the way cities are marked by inequality, exclusion and difference (Roy, 2017; Derickson, 2015; Peake & Reiker, 2013): “Difference is an essential dimension of how urbanization happens materially and otherwise” (Derickson, 2015, p. 651). Cities are both spaces of possibility and constraint, organized around complex structures of difference and solidarity.

For refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, cities are contradictory places, at once enabling and constraining the possibilities for placemaking and forging connections. Scholars have noted that

social citizenship has been disaggregated from forms of legal citizenship (Benhabib, 2004). This means that cities are often places where ‘illegalized’ migrant populations face enormous barriers to (legal) protection, but may also find access to labour markets, social networks and emergent forms for substantive citizenship (Benhabib, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017). As noted in the previous chapter, immigration control has also devolved in complex ways into the city, as legal status becomes a critical marker for access to services and support (De Genova, 2002; 2015; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy, 2018; Lebuhn, 2013).

It is this context that Suzanne Hall (2014) has described as a “brutal migration milieu” where places are not only characterized by superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), but by great inequities in legal status and substantive rights between different groups (both within and between migrant and non-migrant communities). This raises important questions about what humanitarianism looks like within this ‘brutal migration milieu.’ Catherine Besteman asks:

Does humanitarianism only “work” when it is carried out far away, on anonymous people who can easily be portrayed as helpless, docile and grateful? When the objects of humanitarianism show up next door and begin receiving public assistance, driving cars, expressing opinions, and agitating for their rights, humanitarianism is confronted with its internal nativism and racism, especially in a context of economic insecurity and neoliberal rhetoric. (p. 199)

The limits of humanitarianism are brought into sharp relief in relation to hyper-local contexts and geographies: it is one thing when the relationship between ‘Canadian society’ and a Syrian refugee family is reproduced as the relationship between a (white, upper middle class, liberal) Private Sponsor and the family; and quite another when that relationship is with neighbours who have experienced their own refugee or migration trajectories or who have been displaced through processes of economic restructuring, colonial dispossession, gentrification and so on. As I discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6, these relations are complex and multivalent, but they do shape the processes of ‘integration’ that Syrian families experience in Calgary.

### 3.3 Gendered geographies of placemaking

In this final section, I turn to a discussion of the intersection of gender, race and refugee resettlement. Specifically, I discuss how a ‘feminist refugee epistemology’ (Espiritu and Duong, 2018) informs the analysis of this project. I also address the way gender reshapes processes of migration through the reorganization of family life in resettlement. I conclude with a discussion of how Muslim families, with Muslim women at their centre, are constituted vis-à-vis the Canadian nation-state.

Taking seriously the claim that studies of resettlement should be “rescaled...as a purview of the person who begins life in a new place, not as a state outcome or goal” (Hyndman and Giles 2017, in Hyndman, 2019, p. 7) is fundamentally a feminist approach – grounded in attending the concrete, specific, situatedness of everyday life. Feminist scholars remind us that it matters where one chooses to theorize from (Pratt, 2013; Ong 2006). This is what Haraway described as writing against ‘objective’ science and “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (1988, p. 581). Feminist, postcolonial and other critical scholars have long acknowledged the way knowledge is constructed, relational and always partial. As Cindi Katz writes: “Even in a universe decentered and in flux, we are situated and bear responsibility for interrogating our positionings.” (1992, p. 504)

#### *Feminist refugee epistemology*

A central goal of my work is to draw attention to the specific places where Syrian women and their families make their lives. My work is informed by Lê Espiritu and Duong’s helpful concept of feminist refugee epistemology (2018). Feminist refugee epistemology (FRE) draws awareness to the “intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested” (p. 588). These sites are places of “improvised, fluid and alternative, homemaking, healing and survival strategies” (p. 588). The authors draw on Massey (2005) and Lefebvre (1992) to encourage attention to the spatial and material dimensions of refugee existence that counteracts a “hyperfocus on suffering.” (p. 588). I take this as both a methodological and analytic imperative – to carefully explore the material, personal, practices of placemaking that is the work of refugee women in exile.

The authors write:

The public preoccupation with refugee deaths...precludes thoughtful discussion about refugee life, not only in terms of their livelihood, which once again emphasizes the refugees' neediness, but even more so in terms of their lived lives – how they have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves? (Lê Espiritu & Duong, 2018, p. 597).

This, then, is a key question at the heart of this dissertation: **How they have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves?**

Feminist refugee epistemology draws on Cindi Katz's idea of feminist countertopographies which argues for a feminist politics that "maintains distinctness of place while recognizing it is connected analytically to other places." (Katz, 2001, p. 1232). That is to say, recognizing the way purportedly 'global' processes touch down and impact particular places in ways that are distinct but also shared across geographies. The idea of a feminist countertopography as research method is vitally important to questions of global migration which for too long failed to attend to the gendered and gendering aspects of migration processes. As numerous feminist scholars have pointed out, processes of migration have "contradictory and complex" effects on gender relations (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003; Parreñas, 2001; Silvey, 2006; Safri & Graham, 2010).

Peake and Rieker state that women increasingly navigate between "extremes of forced stasis and hyper-mobility" (Peake & Rieker, 2013, p. 12). This statement well reflects the experience of the Syrian refugee women I encountered, who, even after resettlement, experience sharp curtailments on their mobility, both personally and with respect to their families. It is through research on the daily lives, activities and concerns of refugee women, grounded in a material and spatially focused context, that we may begin to unpack the way these processes reproduce and contest the broader narratives and regimes that govern refugee life – across multiple scales.

### *Transnational households and social reproduction*

Turning analytic attention to personal and household dimensions of migration does not mean ignoring the global and transnational ties that inform and shape the lives of migrant women in a particular place. A robust scholarship on globalization reminds us that the 'global' and the 'local'

are not distinct scales of analysis but rather they are mutually constituted and imbricated the one with the other (Miraftab, 2016; Tsing, 2005; Hart 2006; Burawoy, Blum, George, Gille & Thayer, 2000). This is what Miraftab, drawing on Massey, describes as the “permeability of place” (2016, p. 13): where local places ‘here’ are constituted by local places ‘there.’

The ties that connect migrant and refugee women to other places are often familial and deeply implicated in the work of social reproduction. This has led to extensive theorization on transnational families and the “care chains” (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Pratt, 2012) that connect women across the globe in uneven circuits of care. Much of the research on care chains and transnational families centers on migrant women who travel from the global south to the global north to provide child care to wealthy families, often leaving their own children in the care of family members ‘back home.’ (Parreñas, 2001; Pratt, 2012)

While the refugee women I encountered often (though not always) had their children with them when they came to Canada – indeed women and children were prioritized for resettlement over single men – they remained embedded in family relationships with parents and siblings that they left behind in refugee and asylum contexts in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, as well as with family who remained in Syria. As I describe in the final chapter, these connections to family elsewhere profoundly shaped the lives and households of refugee families in Canada.

In her study of migrant women in Greece, Vaiou writes that the extremes of stasis and mobility described by Peake and Rieker (2013),

have to do with the ways in which gender institutes restrictions on mobility but also with border practices and migration policies at national and supra-national scales which set the limits to transnationalism and affect everyday practices as well as the diverse ways in which migrant groups live and perhaps defy such limits. (Vaiou, 2013, p. 56)

Syrian refugee women in Canada experience sharp restrictions on their mobility – both a time limit preventing them from returning to their countries of first asylum, as well as on meaningful pathways to family reunification in Canada – a door that is effectively closed to low-income families. As Malkie, Maghbouleh and Peng describe, in their study of Syrian refugee mothers,

these ‘extended’ family formations that are seen as less important by the Canadian state are viewed by Syrian mothers as “the disintegration of the structure and relationships that held what they may have believed as the ideal family form” (2018, p. 23).

This disintegration provokes a crisis of social reproduction for refugee families in Canada as familiar care relations are dissolved and household labour is reorganized. This reorganization happens along new lines of gender and generation. The crisis of social reproduction takes place in specific ways within Syrian households, but it is also not unique to refugee families.

Immigrant/migrant/refugee families in Canada must all contend with sharp limits on family reunification and its implications on gendered labour within the household (Bragg & Wong, 2015). This presents a double burden for these families who not only have to find new ways of raising a family in Canada, without kin networks on which many used to depend, but they must also provide long-distance care to relations back home. The responsibility of care does not end with migration.

These families, many of whom have low incomes, contend with this renegotiation in the context of limited public resources and support. Despite being the recipients of the sizeable Canadian Child Benefit (CCB), refugee families must still contend with the high cost of living in Calgary. Despite having the highest incomes in the country, social assistance rates in the Province of Alberta remain comparable with those in other provinces (Maytree Foundation, 2019).<sup>14</sup> As access to public space, public services and public support shrinks, families must make up the difference. In practice this translates to increased school fees, including fees for the school bus, shorter school hours (half day kindergarten is the norm in Alberta), privatized, unaffordable and inaccessible childcare, shrinking investments in playgrounds, public parks, a shift to charitable funding for vital public services such as the library, increased user fees for public recreation and arts facilities, cuts to public transit and increased user fees for transit, and little to no investment

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<sup>14</sup> According to data from 2018, single people ‘considered employable’ in Alberta received among the lowest welfare rates in the country (ahead of only New Brunswick and Nova Scotia). Families (defined as a couple with two children) fare better with the rates being roughly comparable with other provinces – though Alberta trailed Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Saskatchewan (Maytree Foundation, 2019).

in social housing leading to increased demand for scarce resources. All of these are amply evident in Forest Lawn where this research took place.

### *Muslim women and the Canadian nation-state*

Minority families – refugees, poor, Indigenous, and racialized – face specific pressure with respect to social reproduction and performing care in the current moment (Kershaw, 2010; Creese, 2011; Ong, 2003). Scholarship documents the shift in discourse, from the 1970s to the present, from attention to the structural problems of poverty to an individual/family-level focus on ‘poor parenting’ (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013, p. 5). Attention has shifted from a societal focus on structural issues, such as economic marginalization and racism, to a focus on bad parents. Poor, racialized, and immigrant families bear the burden of this shift as they face greater scrutiny, governance and regulation. The final chapter of this dissertation is an in-depth examination of the specific scrutiny that Syrian families – as Muslims – face vis-à-vis the Canadian nation state. I conclude with a brief review of the literature that informs this discussion.

A robust critical scholarship by transnational feminist and postcolonial scholars demonstrates the way access to substantive forms of citizenship in the Canadian nation-state are variegated by race, class, gender and immigration status (Li, 2003; Thobani, 2007; Abu-Laban, 1998). Scholarship in this area points to the ways in which Canadian immigration policy – historically and in the present – helps construct and reinforce national imaginaries shaped by race, class and gendered identities (Chan, 2005; Winter, 2014; Harder, 2010; Razack, 2007). These constructions are not fixed or uncontested, but rather shift and change alongside political, economic and social conditions.

For example, Wendy Chan (2005) argues that Canadian immigration policy and governance is a moral project that takes shape through gendered and racial understandings of ‘desirability.’ Chan brings a Foucauldian understanding of governmentality in conversation with the concept of ‘moral regulation’ to examine the ways in which governmentality enforces certain moral orders leading to exclusionary migration policies and an expansion of border securities and

technologies. Chan writes: “an overarching feature of immigration policies in Canada, both historically and at present, is to build a nation of people who fulfill the highest moral standards” (2005:160).

Gender and racial hierarchies organize who is considered morally suitable for belonging in the nation. Despite a shift away from Eurocentric immigration in the 1970s, feminist scholars have pointed to the way that certain categories of immigrants are deemed ‘dependent’ and non-contributing (refugees and family class immigrants) (Thobani, 2007; Razack, 2000; Abu-Laban, 1998). Suitability and belonging shift with time and politics reflecting a complex intersection of race, class and gendered forms of belonging. This complexity is particularly resonant in Canada, which is characterized by narratives of multiculturalism, high levels of support for immigration and relatively diverse political representation. Despite this complexity, ample scholarship still reflects the reality of race and gender biases inherent within both the Canadian immigration system and the nation-state more broadly (Block & Galabuzi, 2011).

Racial and gender hierarchies organized the reception of Syrian refugees in Canada. Indeed, it was families – women and children – who were prioritized for resettlement by the Canadian government. These families were positioned as both highly vulnerable and most in need of saving but also as an inherent challenge for processes of integration because of multiple and intersecting manifestations of vulnerability including: their large size (resulting from decisions around family planning), the fact they were observant Muslims, low levels of literacy and English-language proficiency, and many had physical disabilities or chronic health issues. Like many im/migrant and refugee families, they were immediately scrutinized for their parenting practices and how they disciplined their children (Creese, 2011; Ong, 2003).<sup>15</sup>

Lila Abu-Lughod, arguably one of the most important thinkers on the topic of Muslim women

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<sup>15</sup> Just months after their arrival early reports from the settlement sector indicated that the gender relations, parenting styles and generational dynamics of Syrian families differed widely from the Canadian ‘norm.’ This included differing perceptions around sexual education and family planning and parenting approaches at odds with the Canadian legal code (Buchanan-Parker, 2016; Mahmoodi, 2016).



and their relationship to liberal projects of democracy, writes: “When you save someone, you imply you are saving her *from* something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?” (in Nguyen 2012, p. 15). In her article ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (1988). Gayitri Chakrobarty Spivak explores the specific relationship between Orientalist discourses and subaltern women. Spivak articulates the relationship between the Western imperial project and the undeveloped ‘barbaric’ East as one grounded in ‘White men saving brown women from brown men.’ This notion has been extended and developed by scholars including Chandra Mohanty (1984) and Uma Narayan (1997) who describe the construction of ‘Third World Women’ and the space they inhabit in Western imagination – both discursive and material.

Both Abu-Lughod and Spivak are referencing the historical legacies of Orientalist discourses that continue to shape the relationship between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’ – this is a relationship vested in unequal power relations between the two, where the West claims its moral and cultural superiority: “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for the West” (Said, 1978, p. 21). The point is not that these relations are unchanged over time, but that the discursive constructions of ‘the East’ as barbaric, savage, backward and ostensibly voiceless continue to haunt how those from ‘the East’ are imagined and constructed when they arrive in ‘the West.’ This is amply visible in (ongoing) discussions about Muslim women and the hijab and niqab – which continue to be topics of public policy and scrutiny in Canada.<sup>16</sup> It is also the case that these relations take shape in different ways and at different points, and in directions that are not always expected.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, in 2018, the right-leaning *Coalition Avenir Quebec* (CAQ) won a majority in the Quebec legislature. CAQ ran a culturally charged election campaign and has passed a controversial ‘secularism’ bill preventing public servants from wearing religious dress in the workplace. This includes prohibiting school teachers who are Muslim from wearing the hijab, police officers who are Sikh from wearing a turban and so on.

Presumptions of (western) superiority characterize the relationship between Syrian refugee women in this study and the Canadian institutions they encounter. Consider this comment from a service provider – himself a Syrian refugee who worked in a high school with teachers to support their work with refugee students:

[Teachers] keep asking them [Syrian girls] all the time, “Are you oppressed at home? Did you put that [hijab] on your head like willingly? Did you choose? Do they beat you? Are they going to get you married to your cousin? Etc.

These (Orientalist) ideas that shape how (some) teachers interact with their Muslim refugee students reflects a broader discursive trend around Muslim integration and belonging in the western liberal democracies.<sup>17</sup> Much of this scrutiny surrounds Muslim families who are viewed as problematic with respect to im/migrant and refugee integration. A long history of Muslim exclusion intersects with problematic narratives about patriarchal gender norms ‘at odds’ with liberal democratic values – such as gender equality and individual liberty (Triadafilopolous, 2011; Kofman, 2005; Joppke, 2007; Hagelund, 2008; Grillo, 2008; Balibar, 2004). In countries across the Western world the immigrant family has become “a key site of conflict” in debates about integration, multiculturalism and ethnic relations (Hagelund, 2008, p. 71).

Debates in this area center on the nature of the liberal state (and liberalism) within the context of exclusionary policies and xenophobic discourses on the failure of immigrants to integrate. Writing in 1999, Alund described this as ‘culturalisation:’ “a cultural-related disguise of social inequality and discrimination.” In this formulation, the economic and structural forms of discrimination facing immigrants are buried beneath discourses of cultural difference and the failure to integrate. She writes, “the dominant ideological trend has been towards culturalising

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<sup>17</sup> It is also likely the case that many teachers are more sensitive and compassionate about the complexity of experiences of young Syrian women in schools. One teacher, for example, noted that her Syrian student was interested in the piano in the classroom and was trying to teach himself piano using Youtube videos, she brought a small keyboard for the student to take home with him to practice. I commented on the keyboard during one of my visits to the student’s home and he recounted the story of how he got it. Despite this, research shows Syrian refugee students faced significant barriers to inclusion in Calgary schools (Guo, Maitra, & Guo, 2019).

‘problematic immigrants’ rather than problematizing the structural restraints imposed on them” (p. 148).

Alexandra Dobrowolsky notes that women in Canada are simultaneously ‘invisibilized’ and ‘instrumentalized’ in current discourses on citizenship (2008). This refers to the lack of substantive social policy addressing the social and economic issues facing women (invisibilization) while simultaneously women, especially migrant women, have become “hyper visible, purposefully positioned in the public eye” (p. 466). Arat-Koc (2012) extends this assertion to argue that gender inequality is treated as a problem solved for white women while gender inequality persists as a ‘cultural’ problem for racialized women.

The ‘hyper visibility’ of Muslim women shapes the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugee families, as I discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation, including added scrutiny over parenting practices, family planning decisions and concern over the safety and wellbeing of Muslim girls. This scrutiny shapes the moral regulation of refugee families which in turns, impacts processes of belonging and affective connection.

### **3.4 Summing up**

This chapter has laid out the key conceptual themes that underpin the analysis that follows: Resettlement, integration and how these concepts intersect with gender and family life.

The stakes related to resettlement that I lay out in the first section of this chapter underlie both my analysis as well as the methodological decisions I made. Primarily, I am interested in understanding what it means to be resettled from the perspective of those who experience it. Resettlement is an important, if limited, strategy to address the global situation of refugees. Yet it remains a “form of displacement, albeit a privileged one” (Hyndman and Giles, 2017, p. 97). To understand resettlement’s possibilities – as well as its limitations – we need to shift our analysis to those who are resettled. This means seeking to understand how refugee women make meaning and build their lives in resettlement – this is the focus of my work.

Similarly, questions of ‘integration’ need to be understood from the ground up. As with resettlement, we need to include the contextual, situated, daily lives of those who are meant to ‘integrate’ or ‘be integrated in our discussions of integration. This includes fine grained accounts of the specific geographies and places where refugees build their lives. In Chapter 5 I explore the arrival context for many Syrian refugees in Calgary through a close analysis of one neighbourhood. Chapter 6 seeks to understand how ‘Little Syria’ came to exist in this landscape and what it means to those who live there. Chapter 7 takes up this question of ‘integration’ and explores the complex dynamics and relations that exist in Little Syria. Each of these chapters is mindful of the realities of superdiversity as well as the uneven – at times inequitable – shapes that displacement can take. What does integration look like in superdiverse contexts? How does this intersect with contexts of poverty and other forms of precarity and displacement? How do ‘newcomers’ navigate these landscapes? What forms of solidarities emerge? Where are the fault lines?

Finally, gender is a central consideration for my work. This is in part because I chose to spend time primarily with women, whose lives are shaped by work conventionally understood as ‘gendered’ (mothering, caring, nurturing). Yet, we know that all lives are gendered. My work, therefore, is interested in how gender is a constitutive aspect of placemaking and migration. While gender shapes how I understand processes of ‘settlement’ (including decisions around housing, for example, which I explore in Chapter 6), and ‘integration’ (something I address in Chapter 7), it is the final chapter of this dissertation that deals most directly with the question of gender. In Chapter 8, I explore the work of mothering and the transnational ties that structure family life for refugees from Syria. I explore the governance structures that shape the relationship between these families and ‘Canadian society’ through state and non-state actors including the police and the immigrant serving sector. Throughout this chapter, I consider the way Syrian mothers – who are labeled poor, refugee and Muslim – face particular challenges renegotiating their responsibilities as mothers in Canada.

## Chapter 4: Methods and Setting

### 4.1 Introduction

For decades, ethnographers have concerned themselves with the questions of power and representation in research. These concerns are central to research across differences of language and culture, but also where there are great imbalances of power. Power imbalances characterize research with refugee populations who are generally understood to be vulnerable. Sherene Razack writes: “There is usually a very significant difference between the refugee storyteller and the listener. That difference is one of enormous power...Further, power relations in the refugee context come dressed up as compassion.” (1996, p. 171)

Qualitative researchers, especially those borrowing from an anthropological tradition, have a complicated history in relation to the politics of representation, to colonial and neocolonial projects of empire and ‘science’ and to racist and imperialist constructions of ‘the other.’ Worse, as Razack points out, much of this research is done in the name of dubious humanitarian logics aimed at ‘helping’ the benighted population under examination.

In light of these histories and traditions, what role does ethnographic research play in the contemporary context of globalization, mass migration, growing refugee populations, large humanitarian schemes and sophisticated theoretical discussions about identity, representation and power?

This question is at the core of this chapter, which explores the relationship between ethnographic methods and research with resettled refugees. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research with resettled Syrian refugee families living in a spatially concentrated community in Canada, I argue that despite the challenges of representation and the limits of ethnographic reflexivity, ethnography provides a critical framework for moving from generalized understandings of ‘refugees’ to the specific contexts, geographies, and realities of refugee life. Moving from the general to the specific is an urgent task in a global context characterized by mass movements of

migrants and refugees and the collapsing of the particular experiences of individual refugees into grand narratives that represent refugees according to diverse political agendas (humanitarian, xenophobic etc.).

After briefly contextualizing the ethics of research with refugees, the chapter proceeds in three parts. In part 1 I describe my entry into the field and the challenges I faced conducting cross-cultural research. Part 2 picks up on this discussion to more carefully situate myself in relation to those who participated in this research, discussing the epistemologies that guided how I think about the ethics of cross-cultural research. The final section, part 3, provides a deeper exploration of the question animating this chapter – namely what ethnographic research offers migration research and research on resettled refugees.

## **4.2 The ethics of refugee research**

The refugee – as idea or abstraction – figures prominently as a site of intense political theorization and debate. For example, Giorgio Agamben’s much cited work on the ‘state of exception’ describes the role that the refugee plays in both challenging and legitimizing state sovereignty (Agamben, 2000). Agamben’s work draws on Hannah Arendt’s famous discussion of the stateless as a person without the right to bear rights: “the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institutions willing to guarantee them” (Arendt, 1951, p. 291). As discussed in the previous chapter, resettlement is presented as a ‘durable solution’ to the problem of statelessness that Arendt identifies: Stateless refugees are brought under the protection of the destination state.

Other scholars examine the role that humanitarian interventions – such as Canada’s Syrian Initiative or the United States’ resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees following the Vietnam War – play in shoring up national imaginaries and foreign policy agendas (Lê Espiritu, 2014; Tang, 2018; Dauvergne, 2005). This scholarship is theoretically interesting and has been critical for framing contemporary understandings of refugee rights, humanitarian law and theories of citizenship. Yet, theoretical representations of refugees take us some distance from

understanding the way refugee status shapes individual subjectivity and the everyday life of displaced people. The figure of the refugee in political theory and scholarship differs from the public representations of refugees in international media and humanitarian circles, yet both create a distance between the *specific* experiences of those subjected to the brutal circumstances that create displacement and a generalized, abstracted understanding of ‘the refugee.’

Following other scholarship on the relationship of ethnography to research on migrants and refugees, I suggest that ethnographic tools provide a way of reclaiming these specific, particular and individualized accounts of refugee life. Liisa Malkki’s research on Hutu refugees from Burundi living in Tanzania explores the distinct meanings of the term “refugee” from the perspectives of refugees, humanitarian workers and the international community. For the Hutus the concept of refugee is a political and historical condition that they mobilize for a sense of collective identity. For the second two groups, the figure of the refugee is shaped by normative understandings of what a refugee *should* be – “exemplary victims” (p.384). Malkki explores the visual representations that accompany refugees – these images tend to erase the individual, particular, specific histories of people and instead they are transformed through images into “anonymous bodies” (389). Through humanitarian logics and media representations, refugees become what Malkki describes as ‘speechless emissaries’ - “in universalizing particular displaced people into ‘refugees’ -- in abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts - humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees” (378).

While Malkki’s work is not new, drawn from fieldwork in the 1980s, and published in 1996, my experience is that the normative logics she describes continue to shape how refugees are understood in the contemporary moment. The specific political, historical and cultural contexts of Syrian refugee families are obscured by the “depoliticized...ahistorical, universal humanitarian subject” of the refugee (Malkki, 1996, p. 378). A central challenge for researchers interested in studying refugees is to consider what methodological approaches best allow for refugees to tell their own stories; this is an issue I unpack further below.

### **4.3 Context**

The 40,000 Syrian refugees who arrived between 2015 and 2017 dispersed to cities and communities across the country. Alberta resettled approximately 7,400 Syrian refugees, many of whom settled in Calgary and Edmonton (Drolet & Moorthi, 2017). As noted in Chapter 2, the rapid arrival of refugees, coupled with large family sizes and limited financial resources for housing, meant that many Syrian families ended up living in Calgary's more affordable neighbourhoods on the east side of the city (City of Calgary, 2016). In particular, a significant number of refugee families secured housing in a housing complex in the east Calgary neighbourhood of Forest Lawn. The housing complex came to be seen – by Syrian families - as a highly desirable place because of the affordability of the properties, the style of home (three-bedroom townhomes as opposed to apartments) and the presence of other Syrian families. This area became known to residents and service providers as 'Little Syria.' It is difficult to get an accurate number of how many Syrians live in 'Little Syria' at any one time, but at the time of my research it was estimated that between 35 and 40 Syrian families were living in the complex.

### **4.4 Entering the field**

The first six months of my data collection involved a series of scattered and (what felt like) disconnected forays into the emerging Syrian community in Calgary. This took place between January and July 2017. It was during this period that I collected most of my informal interviews. I spoke with anyone who would meet with me to talk about Syrian refugees in Calgary. I interviewed settlement workers, community advocates, volunteers, language instructors, and other stakeholders who had been very involved in the resettlement initiative (city employees, school board representatives etc.). I also conducted informal interviews with a handful of resettled Syrian refugees. These refugees were connected to the broader settlement sector or volunteer community, they were fluent in English, and came from educated and professional backgrounds in Syria (these factors meant they differed considerably from the Syrians I would end up working with in my research). During this stage of the research, I also spent some time with the Syrian Refugee Support Group (SRSG) at their warehouse space in south Calgary.



The SRSG was an informal group of volunteers mobilized by two charismatic and media savvy leaders, Saima and Sam<sup>18</sup>. Sam is a Syrian-Canadian who has been in Canada for over 20 years. Saima is a local peace activist and community organizer, also originally an immigrant from Bangladesh. They led an incredible movement of local volunteers eager to help Syrian refugees as they arrived in Canada. Their Facebook page had thousands of followers and became a network through which they connected hundreds of volunteers across the city with Syrian families as they arrived. In early 2017, approximately one year after the arrival of most of the Syrians, the SRSG opened a warehouse in donated space in south Calgary. This became the physical site for people to drop off donations or come and volunteer, and where Syrian families could come and connect with one another and collect donations. The SRSG credited itself with being able to offer a flexible, rapid response that was capable of addressing the needs of refugee families with immediacy. This was in contrast to the “fat cat” bureaucracy of the formal settlement agencies that had to deal with the requirements of the Federal Government and work through established protocols (Interview with SRSG).

For example, the RAP provider, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS), responsible for the resettlement of all Government Assisted Refugees to Calgary, was overwhelmed by the number of requests by volunteers to assist these newcomer families. Because they required things like police background checks, it often took time to place a volunteer with a newcomer family. As a grassroots and community-based network, the SRSG was not constrained by the same bureaucratic requirements as the formal settlement agencies: When volunteers expressed a desire to help, they would be dispatched immediately to a refugee family in need. While CCIS and the other settlement agencies did not have the capacity to receive donated goods, the SRSG was able to use Facebook as a means of connecting donated items to refugee families. SRSG was also not tied to the conventional working practices of the settlement agency – they could be available 24/7, with a group of Arabic speaking volunteers to assist with translation. In this role, they were able to go directly to refugee homes, provide immediate support, assist with paperwork, medical appointments and other issues as they came up.

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<sup>18</sup> Last names not included to protect privacy

My interactions with the SRSG were limited. I originally saw them as a promising connection to support my research. I met with Saima and Sam and visited them at the warehouse. When we connected, their immediate need was to complete paperwork to become a registered Society in Alberta so that they would have bureaucratic legitimacy and could eventually become a registered charity. I offered to assist with the paperwork as a good faith effort and to build trust. During this time I observed that there were many other people interested in connecting with the Syrian population approaching the SRSG. As I worked on the paperwork for SRSG, I continued to interview and speak with settlement workers from the formal settlement agencies. Several of them raised concerns about some of the working practices of the SRSG – for example, posting photos of refugee families on social media (with or without permission from the families themselves) and receiving and disbursing donations that weren't in good condition or worse, were unsafe, such as expired car seats, vehicles in need of major repair, and furniture with bed bugs.

It was hard to gauge whether these criticisms were grounded in fact, or whether they were driven by the same competition over clients that led the SRSG to disparage the work of the formal settlement agencies. Either way, I realized with time that some of the same problems that existed with the settlement agencies existed in the informal sector and I opted to step away from the SRSG as a point of contact for my research. Though Sam remained a valuable contact and did provide my point of entry into the community in the fall of 2017.

During this period, I was also engaged in an Arabic-English language exchange with one Syrian family. I was spending time with a private sponsor/community volunteer, going with her as she visited the many families she was supporting. I was collecting informal interviews with those who worked with refugees and I was trying to figure out the best way to connect directly with families and really 'start' my research and data collection. It is only with hindsight that I am able to see that this initial six-month period was crucial for understanding how to best begin my formal data collection.

While I attempted to remain open and flexible to the possibilities that research offered as they emerged, I remained committed to several methodological priorities.

First, I did not want to conduct my research in partnership with a formal settlement agency (and later expanded this to include the informal settlement sector, such as the Syrian Refugee Support Group).

Second, I wanted to conduct interviews in refugee homes, with a focus on hearing from refugee women.

Third, I was interested in a particular place ('Little Syria' in Forest Lawn) so I wanted to spend time in that geographical location and connect with Syrian residents living there.

My methodological commitments were intrinsically tied to my theoretical and analytical interests – namely the way that geography, specifically local, urban geography, shapes processes of settlement and 'integration.' And second, the way these processes are gendered and experienced at the scale of the household.

Much of the research on refugees, especially recently resettled refugees in Canada, takes place in close connection with the formal settlement sector. Settlement agencies can serve as important access points for researchers to connect with refugees and immigrants. If the agency is supportive of the research, they might provide space in the agency to conduct the research and even offer the support of their interpreters on staff. Settlement agencies are large employers of immigrants to Canada, and their staff often have considerable cultural and linguistic expertise. They are also skilled at working with refugee populations and addressing the unique needs and challenges facing refugees. For example, if during a research interview the participant becomes distressed, the researcher can refer the participant to support available on site, at the settlement agency.

For all these reasons, partnering with a settlement agency is a popular and logical approach for those interested in researching newcomer populations. This was also the suggestion of the Ethics Board (BREB) at UBC who were not enthusiastic about my plan of conducting research without a formal partner: “The researcher notes that recruitment will occur through personal networks and the voluntary nature of the research will be emphasized. It would be more appropriate and less coercive to use the agencies that will be studied as intermediaries in the recruitment.”

Yet my desire to not partner with an agency came from several factors.

First, prior to starting my PhD, I had spent five years working in various capacities in and near the formal immigrant-serving sector. While I admired the work of these agencies, I was also aware of their limitations. I knew, for example, that many newcomers sought much of the ‘settlement support’ from members of their own cultural or faith communities, and not the formal sector. I knew this to be especially true for immigrant and refugee women, whose multiple family and caregiving responsibilities (both in Canada and in maintaining ties to family members ‘back home’) often prevented them from accessing formal services. A key area of focus for my research was on the nature of ‘settlement support’ that refugee women access. I knew that if I worked through an agency I would only see the limited population of those who access services. Also contrary to the opinion of the BREB, I felt that working with a settlement agency to access their clients for research would not be less coercive than working through personal networks. For those who do access these services, they often come to depend on settlement workers to access critical benefits, including government funding, it seemed to me participants may feel more pressure to participate if asked by their settlement worker than by someone else outside of the formal service sector.

Second, my experience that many newcomers do not access formal settlement services is supported by research on the immigrant-serving sector in Canada. As recently as 2017, research on the use of settlement services found that nearly 47 percent of newcomers to Calgary had never accessed formal settlement services (Calgary Local Immigration Partnership [CLIP], 2017). This echoes earlier studies which found that roughly 53 percent of newcomers never access services

(Esses, Burstein, Ravanera, Hallman, & Medianu, 2013). While Government Assisted Refugees are among the higher users of these services, this number drops considerably following their first year in Canada (Esses et al., 2013). This research provides important insights into the challenges of formal service delivery and explains some of the barriers that newcomers face in Canada. It also has important policy implications, as hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on settlement programs. For those that are committed to ensuring successful outcomes for newcomers to Canada, including refugees, it seems critical that we interrogate and understand the limits of this sector. One way of doing this is to spend time with those who are not participating in formal settlement programming.

Finally, as a geographer, I was interested in the intersection of space, place and settlement. Critics have noted that researchers who study urban spaces and the city often pay scant attention to processes of migration and settlement. Concomitantly, those in migration studies have a limited interest in geography, especially at geographic scales beyond the nation-state (such as the city, neighbourhood or household). As a geographer interested in migration, or a migration scholar interested in geography, it was important to keep these two variables in constant conversation with one another. To do this, it meant being present in the neighborhood where these processes of settlement were taking place. Had I located myself in a settlement agency, I would likely have not been able to capture the way place manifested itself in the lives of these refugee families.

The decision to not work through either the formal or informal settlement sector meant that I had to find ways of connecting with refugee families outside of these established networks. My original plan was to meet with one or two families living in Little Syria that I had met through my various connections in the community, to share information about my project through my Arabic speaking interpreter, and to have them follow up with me to set up an interview. I had created a recruitment poster that explained, in plain language, my research project and the kinds of questions I would be asking. I brought this with me when I visited the initial family. I followed the ethical protocol that the BREB had set out, and left the flier and explained my

research. I asked the family to get in touch if they were interested in being involved in the project.

Two days later, I received a call. The call was not from the family, but rather from Sam. Immediately after I had left the house, the family had called Sam to figure out what exactly I was about and what this strange flier meant. Sam spoke to me for over an hour, simultaneously scolding and encouraging me. He explained that there was very little context for university-based research in Syria and my project would be met with confusion, and likely fear, on the part of most refugees. He said that paperwork and official documents such as recruitment and consent forms were confusing and unsettling for the community. He pointed out that prior to the war, Syrians had been living in a police state, with a strong security presence all around them. They associated people asking them questions with the *mukhabarat* (the Syrian state secret police). He also emphasized that asking questions about gender, would be a concern for men in the family who might think I was trying to pressure their wives into adopting a western lifestyle. He explained all this to me in the very direct way that I have since come to expect from some Syrian men. Despite his concerns, he felt my research was very important and he didn't want me to give up. He felt it was important to document what was happening to the Syrian community in Calgary, and especially the social dynamics in Little Syria. While my ego was bruised and I felt very discouraged, he encouraged me to think more about my research and get back to him to let him know how he could help.

This prompted me to take some time away from my research and to think about what it is that I was doing and how I could best approach the work. I felt trapped between the external requirements imposed by the BREB and what I knew in my gut to be the best way to connect with community and conduct research. At some level I had always known that a formal recruitment poster would never work to attract participants, yet I had felt bound by the exigencies of the bureaucratic process. After a period of reflection, I realized that if I wanted to do my research and connect meaningfully to the community I wanted to study, I had to get over my fear of failing the bureaucracy and of 'doing it wrong' and leverage my experience in participatory research and community building. This meant meeting my research participants

exactly where they were at, and working within the constraints of community, not the constraints of the university. I knew that if I was reflexive and constantly attuned to my research process, I would be engaged in a form of ethical research practice.

With this renewed commitment, I reached out to Sam to share with him my new strategy, get his advice and see if he could assist me in connecting to the community. I told him I wanted to hire a Syrian woman, living in Little Syria, to act as a community connector to help me reach women living in the neighbourhood. Once I had hired this person, the three of us could meet to figure out the best protocol going forward. Sam agreed this would be a better approach and said he would speak to people in the neighbourhood to see who might be a good fit. Three weeks later, I met Sam at the home of Haya, the woman who would become my community connector, research assistant, language interpreter, 'key informant' and, eventually, a friend. Sam told me before we met that he had asked a number of families in Little Syria who they trusted and respected in the neighbourhood, all of the families he asked told him that Haya and her husband, Akram, were the people the Syrians trusted the most.

The following section is an excerpt from my fieldnotes from that meeting:

*Sam started by introducing and then saying, "I'm just going to sit here and Bronwyn will explain what she's doing."*

*I began by introducing myself, Sam interrupted to see if the English was being understood.*

*It was – Haya is level 5. She has a warm face and laughs easily.*

*The house seemed really clean.*

*Her husband was less warm and I wasn't clear on his English level.*

*I explained that I was from Calgary, that I grew up here, that I have always worked with immigrants and refugees and I want to study the neighbourhood and Syria-town.*

*I tried to explain that I want to understand how it is going for Syrians in this neighbourhood and understand if people like to live here or not and what they like about it. Haya seemed to really understand what I was explaining – I kept pausing to ask if she had questions.*

*We went through some of the questions:*

*What do you like about the neighbourhood? She responded: My kids have friends, my husband and I have friends*

*Haya goes to English at Columbia College, he goes to CIES on 17<sup>th</sup> avenue, the kids are in schools nearby. She is happy that her son with Down's Syndrome gets to go to school because back home there isn't school for kids with disabilities*

*I asked if there was anything she didn't like about the neighbourhood and she said no  
Sometimes they go to a park nearby*

*I told her there were three things I needed help with:*

- 1. Help with the research and getting introduced to families in the neighbourhood*
- 2. Help understanding the language and what is being said*
- 3. Help with understanding Syrian culture and understanding what is not being said*

*She seemed to understand all this.*

*Sam interjected at this point and talked about how in Syrian culture no one asks these questions unless they are the secret police (Mukhabarat) and they're coming to arrest you. Research and university is not part of the culture in Syria.*

*He pointed out that it was important that Haya have a 'pitch' to explain to the people in the neighbourhood who I was and what I was up to. This part of the conversation was in English.*

*Sam asked Haya if she thought people would not trust me coming and asking these kinds of questions. He pointed out that "Haya and Akram are the kind of people who understand this kind of thing" but other Syrians might not understand or be so trusting. They will think you are from the government (I took this to be a bad thing).*

*Haya said she didn't think it would be a problem – then there was a big back-and-forth in Arabic that I didn't understand (obviously) and a lot of laughter.*

*I asked Sam – what is the best way to present this research so people understand? He said that he has been telling people that it is very important to record this story for future*



*generations, that this kind of research is important for the community so we can learn from this experience.*

*I pointed out that I also want to do this work because I want to help service providers do better work and the city and government improve services to refugees.*

*We all agreed it was better to have no paper, nothing to sign, no notebook or anything to take notes. Haya pointed out that maybe if you take out your notebook people will get nervous. Sam made an exaggerated show of his heart pounding out of his chest and*

*pointed to his arm in a way that suggested a polygraph. I said, “I don’t want people to think that I’m police!” Everyone laughed. I felt then that we were off on the right foot.*

*Haya asked if there would be cards for families – I didn’t understand what she was asking at first but then she said “for groceries” and I understood she was talking about gift cards for participants. I said yes. Sam asked if she thought that would be a good idea. She said yes, people will be more willing to talk; he seemed doubtful. I said it was more or less standard procedure for research. Once the business part was settled, Haya said, “tea” (really that signaled that the business part was over) and she and Akram went to make tea while Sam and I talked.*

Following this conversation, Haya and I began meeting weekly on Saturday afternoons to conduct interviews. On Fridays, she would call women in the neighbourhood that she knew and ask if she could come over the next day with me. I would arrive on Saturday and together we would walk (or sometimes drive) to the home of a Syrian family living in Little Syria. I would rarely have any context about who we would be interviewing on a given day; rather, we would show up and I would meet the woman and her children. With a few exceptions, there were no men present during our interviews. Often the woman’s husband would be there when Haya and I arrived, we would be introduced and he would put on his jacket and leave. Other times, a husband would arrive back at the house toward the end of the interview, he would come in and say hello, and then disappear upstairs. I asked Haya about the disappearing men a few weeks into our interviews and she explained that it was customary for women to visit together without husbands. Had Haya’s husband or my husband accompanied us, the men would have stayed for the visit. This was confirmed when, on one occasion (our last interview), the husband stayed for

the duration of the interview. When Haya's husband, Akram, came to pick us up, he made fun of the husband who had stayed for the interview, teasing "Did you stay and talk gossip with the women the whole time?" It is also possible that had I come alone, without Haya that the men may have stayed to participate. Haya's presence signaled that this was a friendly visit between neighbours.

### *Interviews*

We conducted interviews with thirteen women living in Little Syria and then conducted follow up interviews with six of those women. All the interviews with the exception of three took place with the participant speaking in Arabic and Haya translating. Three women felt comfortable enough in English to respond to my questions in English (with occasional translation assistance from Haya). With the exception of the interview I referenced above, the interviews were exclusively with the women in the home. All the participants except one were married, with children, and lived with their husbands. One participant was a widow. Every interview was dominated by the presence of children. The average number of children in each household was between four and five (this matches the government of Canada data on Syrian GARs to Canada). One woman had seven children and one had two at the time of the interview (though she was pregnant with her third).

The presence of children added a layer of complexity and (joyful) chaos to our interviews. Children were often present in the room for the duration of the interview. Older children, especially girls, would often sit beside their mother and occasionally answer my questions for them (in English). These older daughters would also bring coffee, tea, fruit and cookies from the kitchen. They would pick up after the younger children or resolve minor disputes between younger siblings. Babies and toddlers were often in their mother's laps or beside them on the couch or floor. Children between the ages of three and ten would play video games on tablets or watch cartoons on Youtube. Sometimes groups of them would go play loud games upstairs while we continued the interview in the living room. Approaches to parenting differed from household to household: some children sat quietly and needed little attention, while in other houses the children ran in and out of the room, making demands for food or dispute resolution. Some

children wanted to perform songs or dances for me and show off their artwork and awards from school. Other children just watched me carefully from across the room. Some mothers were unperturbed by their boisterous children while others were apologetic and made efforts to prevent them from interrupting.

The interview would begin with me introducing myself, explaining that I was a university student interested in Little Syria and hearing from Syrian women about their experiences in Canada. I told them I would ask them questions about their life in Canada and if there were questions they did not want to answer they did not have to answer. I would always ask if they had any questions for me. Haya would translate this to the participant and ask for their consent. In all cases, the women granted verbal consent and would often respond, “I will answer all your questions.” The interviews proceeded in Arabic (generally), and I would ask a series of questions (summarized in the appendix). I did not bring any paper with me to the interview. This meant I did not follow a formal interview script, nor did I get written consent, nor did I take written notes during the interview. While I have considerable experience conducting qualitative interviews, there were numerous factors that made this interview process especially challenging.

First, the interviews took place through translation, so I had to rely entirely on Haya to communicate the participants’ responses. Second, I could only take notes immediately following the interview, so it was quite possible to forget nuances and details from the interview. Third, the presence of children added a layer of distraction to the interview that added to the complexity of what I was trying to remember. Finally, our interviews would usually take about an hour, but we would often stay in the participants’ home for two to three hours, drinking coffee and socializing. It was during the socializing period that the participants would often ask me questions about my own life and about things they found confusing or concerning about life in Canada. This meant that when I finally got home from the interview, I would have hours of fieldnotes to try and remember and document. On several occasions Haya invited me for a meal at her house after the interview, I greatly benefited from these interactions as Haya often added detail and context that I had missed from the interview, though this meal often further delayed writing my fieldnotes.

### *Observation and key informants*

In addition to conducting interviews with Syrian women in Little Syria, I also spent quite a bit of time observing life in the community – both in Little Syria specifically, and in the wider neighbourhood of Forest Lawn.

In Little Syria, I spent time with two families out of the thirteen that I interviewed. One was the family of my community connector, Haya, and the other was another interview participant, Hala. Hala was one of the three women who felt confident responding to my interview questions in English. She is an extroverted person who has lots of friends in Little Syria. During our post-interview visit, we talked about a number of issues and I left her my contact information telling her I would be happy to visit her again if she would like. She contacted me several days later and I started visiting her on regular basis. Hala and Haya became key informants, answering my unending questions and helping explain context and details that I inevitably missed.

Life in Little Syria is bifurcated. In the winter, families are contained within their homes, and socialization between neighbours happens occasionally or out of necessity. The children are generally kept inside unless the weather is a bit warmer, but because they require parental supervision, and the mothers are disinclined to stand outside in subzero temperatures, children spend most of the long winter inside. In the summer, the community is transformed. With the warmer weather, families set up chairs and small tables outside, women and men gather separately in small groups, and the children take over the public space at the centre of the housing complex. I spent considerable time in Little Syria in both the summer and the winter and noticed the stark contrast in how public space was used and transformed. In the winter months my observation took place within the homes of my research participants. While I had originally planned to accompany participants to various appointments, shopping, school etc. it became clear that between the childcare demands of my participants, and the fact that many of them remained very close to their home, accompanying them would not be possible. Instead I had many opportunities for rich observation inside people's homes. For the Syrian women I interviewed, much of their lives centered on the home; this yielded important insights for my research.

### *Forest Lawn*

In addition to observation and interviews with families in Little Syria, I was eager to understand some of the broader dynamics of neighbourhood life in Forest Lawn. I took three approaches to grounding myself in the life of the neighbourhood. First, I partnered with a Community Resource Centre that works with residents in east Calgary and is housed on the geographic edge of Forest Lawn. Community Resource Centres exist in each quadrant of Calgary and provide a range of services and supports to residents in the community. Primarily, they provide ‘basic needs’ support to residents living in poverty. This includes referrals to the food bank, assistance with paperwork to receive government benefits, referrals to furniture banks, basic legal assistance and so on. Sunrise Community Link Resource Centre (hereafter Sunrise), the organization that I partnered with, also runs a series of workshops, programs, community development events, and opportunities for residents to connect with one another. While struggling to meet basic needs is a huge part of what brings people to their door, they make an effort to find ways of connecting with those who access their services through things like Indigenous Sharing Circles, a knitting group, volunteer opportunities, free yoga classes and so on.

As part of my research for this project, I worked closely with Sunrise to understand the work they do in the community and gather insight into some of the population dynamics in the neighbourhood. As part of this work, Sunrise allowed me to observe their ‘Community Advocates’ meeting with clients and their follow-up in trying to address the concerns and issues they brought forward. In exchange for the opportunity to spend time and learn from their work, I provided some basic research support to the organization. I facilitated Sunrise’s strategic planning workshop in November 2017, helped redesign their client intake form and assisted with the compilation of their annual ‘count.’

In addition to my more structured role with Sunrise, I also attended a number of neighbourhood/community events. These included monthly conversation circles for residents of the ‘Greater Forest Lawn’ community, free lunches held at the Alex Community Food Centre, Pay It Forward Events hosted by Sunrise and their community partners, quarterly service

provider meetings hosted by the City of Calgary, and other events in the neighbourhood. My goal in attending these public events was to get a clearer picture of some of the other residents in Forest Lawn, as well as to understand the landscape of social service organizations available in the neighbourhood. According to the United Way, Forest Lawn is home to the greatest concentration of social service organizations in the city of Calgary (United Way of Calgary, 2015). This includes afterschool programs for children, language and outreach programs for immigrants, poverty reduction and basic needs services for people living in poverty, food security programs, street-outreach programs for homeless or street involved residents, addiction recovery programs, and Indigenous-specific programming through services such as the Aboriginal Friendship Centre.

Because I was interested in understanding how place shapes processes of settlement and integration for refugees, it was important to understand the neighbourhood geographies of Forest Lawn. There are many ways of imagining, understanding and describing a neighbourhood. One way of apprehending it is to explore the intersecting threads of displacement that are constituted within a particular place – which is how I chose to approach part of this work.

### *Limitations*

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation I identify the limitations of the text. I seek here to foreground some of these challenges. Beyond the major difficulties of representation (to which I devote the next section of this chapter), two additional methodological issues that are worth dwelling on.

The first is the arguably small ‘sample size’ that forms the basis of my analysis. The second has to do with the reliance on memory and my decision to not take fieldnotes or record my conversations with participants. These two challenges are distinct from one another, but related.

Regarding sample size: my research is informed by a long history of ethnographic research which seeks to understand the *processes* and *meanings* that individuals attach to their lived experience (Herbert, 2000). Despite the benefits of deep engagement with a small group of

people, ethnography is often critiqued by researchers outside the ethnographic tradition who suggest that small samples cannot be used to make generalizable claims.

The goal of this project is not to speak about the experience of *all* Syrian refugees in Canada (a group that is highly diverse and is no doubt having multiple experiences of resettlement), but rather to explore what this specific group might tell us about the wider systems and structures that inform the lives of refugee mothers. In this sense, I borrow from Burawoy's extended case study method that suggests that we use ethnographic fieldwork to 'make theory accountable' to what we observe through our research (Dwyer & Limb, 2001, p. 11; Burawoy, 1998). I proceed, therefore, by seeking to understand the relationship between refugee women living in a specific place to conceptual frameworks around (refugee) integration, humanitarianism and parenting (to name a few). This is what Geertz described as cultivating "exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters" (1973, p. 21, in Herbert, 2000, p. 2).

Regarding note taking and relying on memory: Based on discussions with Haya, my community connector and research assistant, I opted to not take notes or record my interactions with participants in the community. While I did conduct interviews, I also spent significant time in the neighbourhood, with women and their families – at the playground, in the public green space at the centre of Little Syria, and in their homes, sharing meals, coffee and conversation. Taking notes during these informal interactions would have been out-of-place and inappropriate.<sup>19</sup> During the interviews, however, it would have been beneficial to record these conversations, as relying on translation, and then memory, means that the data presented herein is heavily mediated from its original source. I fully acknowledge and recognize this as a limitation of the material I present.

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<sup>19</sup> Many ethnographers choose to avoid note taking and recording during fieldwork for a range of reasons. For example, Annette Watson, a geographer who works with rural and Indigenous communities who are suspicious of visitors who have typically been oppressive, writes up her fieldnotes in private: "[Watson] is sensitive to the ways that writing in public may be construed as treating tribal peoples as objects of knowledge, or as 'problems' to be 'fixed'" (Watson & Till, 2010, p. 129). Because the majority of the women I met had limited literacy, even in Arabic, I was sensitive to the power dynamics of writing in English in front of them. Logistically it would have also been challenging as I often had one (or more) small children sitting on or near me during conversations with participants.

That being said, both qualitative and quantitative research methods are limited in what they are able to capture and the ‘truth claims’ that stem from them. All research requires both methodological and interpretative choices that shape the final product. In my case, it is likely I could have conducted recorded interviews with Syrian refugee women attending language classes or settlement programming. These interviews and transcripts would be less subject to critiques of validity – relying on recording rather than memory – yet they would also be partial.

Partial both because interviews (whether recorded or not) are a relational encounter between a participant and researcher, shaped by subjective understandings of what the encounter means. In this sense, all methodologies rely upon interpretation, but ethnographers are particularly overt about these processes (Herbert, 2000). I have sought through this work to be transparent about my relationship to the material I present; both here in this (lengthy!) methods chapter, but also throughout the dissertation, where I seek to identify who is speaking, when translation takes place, and (where relevant) my feelings in relation to the conversation taking place.

#### **4.5 Situating the researcher**

There were many moments during my research where I felt strongly that I was not the right person to do this research. Despite years of experience working with immigrants to Canada, I had never worked directly with a population that had arrived so recently. In my first encounters with refugee families, the language barrier overwhelmed me. It is no surprise that some of the first words I learned in Arabic were “*shouaya shouaya*” which means “slowly slowly” – as in, “Slow down! You’re speaking too quickly!” My concerns about not speaking Arabic were echoed by the BREB that told me that for research with this population, “Arabic seems like an essential skill.”

My concerns over language went beyond the issue of mutual comprehension. For decades, feminist researchers – anthropologists, sociologists, geographers – have concerned themselves with the questions of power and representation in research. These concerns are central to research across language and culture, but also where there are great imbalances of power, such as



research between an English-speaking, Canadian-born researcher and Arabic-speaking, recently arrived refugees to Canada.

Given all the epistemological challenges of research and the very real concerns about representation and power, is research across language and culture barriers, with ‘vulnerable’ groups even worth the effort? Or is it too risky? Too problematic? Too fraught?

Feminist geographer Jennifer Hyndman grappled with similar questions conducting research with Somali refugees living in a refugee camp in Kenya (Hyndman, 2000). She highlights several key challenges conducting research with refugees. First, a research interview tends to reproduce the same institutional logics as the humanitarian systems that organize and govern refugees. Interviews are a tool of UNHCR officials to assess the ‘validity’ of one’s refugee claim, and for many, a research interview may feel the same as an interrogation by a humanitarian agency. Second, research across language differences requires translation. Translation is an imperfect and contested process (Minh-ha, 1989). Translation is also heavily informed by unequal relations of power – the person whose words are translated must rely on both the translator and the person hearing the translation to accurately represent what is said. There were many (many) moments in my research where my anxieties over what I was missing because of my lack of Arabic almost prompted me to give up entirely – what was the point? I was missing so much. Lisa Malkki famously wrote about how refugees become constructed as “speechless emissaries”; translation risks reproducing this speechlessness.

In light of all these challenges, there were many moments where I considered whether I was the right person to be conducting this research. I felt the research would be better if done by an Arabic speaker or a Syrian.

### *Insider/Outsider*

While I shared a similar age and gender identity as my research participants, our life experiences differed considerably. This was reflected in a conversation I had with my Syrian research assistant a few weeks after meeting, we realized we were born a year apart. I had assumed that

she was several years older than me. She had four children, her oldest was 12 and she just *seemed* older. On her side, she found it incredible that I, a 33-year-old married woman, did not have any children. While my life had been a journey of personal and professional development, graduate school, travel and now I was settled down living near my family in Calgary, the last ten years of her life had been a tumultuous journey of dislocation, relocation and struggle. She was now raising a family in a corner of the earth she had never dreamed she would visit, let alone make a life in. Her extended family was scattered across Turkey, France and Syria. Haya is also a devout Sunni Muslim. She assumed, as happened a lot, that I was Christian. Over time she came to realize that I was actually not religious at all, which was perhaps more strange than if I had been Christian. Thus, we both struggled to locate each other in relation to one another.

My position as a researcher, especially as an English speaking, white woman of a certain age, meant that I followed in the footsteps of journalists, armies of volunteers, sponsors and other helpers who intersected with Syrian families in their resettlement to Canada. It was in this way that I was received by the families I interviewed – as both another curious Canadian and as a potential helper. Could I make a quick phone call for them? Could I read this document from the school? The teacher wants to move my son to regular class – should he move or stay in LEAD? How much does university cost in Canada? The pharmacist gave me this long thing to read along with my prescription, what does it say? Are there drugs at the schools? Why is the waitlist for Calgary Housing so long? My LINC teacher says I have to move to level 5, but I don't feel ready, why can't I re-do level 4?

Feminist researchers have pointed to the need for researchers to 'situate' both themselves and their participants in relation to the research. It is generally considered easier to position ourselves and reflect on our own relationship to the work and to those who participate in our studies. Yet, Gillian Rose points out there are limits to our own reflexivity: "the search for positionality through reflexivity is bound to fail...reflexivity may be less a process of self-discovery than of self-construction" (1997, p. 313). For Rose, following Foucault and Butler, our identities do not preexist our performance of them, in this sense, the messiness of the research encounter cannot

be fully apprehended. How can we really know or understand our relationship to our participants?

Similarly, Mona Domosh, following Joan Scott, asks that we do the same for our participants. That is, centre the agency and independence of research participants:

We need to scrutinize the personal knowledges of our subjects just as we do our own: Under what conditions are these truths constructed? For what reasons? Who benefits? How can these inquiries lead to a more socially just world? By affording to our interviewees the same subjectivity that we allow ourselves, we create a more fully reciprocal research relationship. (Domosh, 2003, p. 110)

To me this offers a pragmatic path out of the loop of representation angst that plagues research across difference, or as Trin T. Minh-ha writes, “between the twin chasms of naval gazing and naval erasing the ground is narrow and slippery” (1989).

Research on sameness and difference, insider and outsider roles in qualitative research points to the advantages and disadvantages of both positions in the research process. For example, Sandra Bucerius (2013) argues for the role of “trusted outsider” pointing out that outsiders can ask questions that would be inappropriate for insiders to ask.

I would also add that despite my reservations and challenges with my own work, I believe fundamentally in the possibilities and solidarities within feminist research. This is not to downplay the fundamental challenges and occasional minefields that exist in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic research, but it is to tentatively put forward a case for research that explores and unpacks these differences in ways that are ethical and empathetic. I believe this to be an especially urgent task as it relates to research on immigrant/refugee/migrant populations resettled or relocated (through choice and circumstance) to new countries.

My research process is informed by feminist ethnography (Stacey, 1988; Abu Lughod, 1990; Craven & Davis, 2013). Feminist ethnography, by providing a fine-grained analysis of everyday life, “privileges particularity and the importance of individual experience, situated within uneven

systems of power” (Craven & Davis, 2013, p. 18). Craven and Davis argue that feminist ethnography is an especially important research method for understanding how policies impact individual lives in ways that might be otherwise difficult to observe. The authors put forward a compelling case for feminist activist ethnography in our current political moment, despite the many challenges around power and representation that inevitably attend research about marginalized or vulnerable populations.

Attending to the contradictions and tensions within feminist research methods, including ethnography, involves acknowledging that the ‘good intentions’ of researchers are rarely adequate in the outcome of research endeavours. Ethically collected ethnographic accounts of women in welfare may be used to inform welfare restructuring efforts (Craven & Davis, 2013). Similarly, work with refugees risk reproducing narratives of vulnerability or dependency that often dominate the public discourse. Scott Lauria Morgenson reminds us that simply using feminist methods does not ensure a feminist outcome. Feminist researchers must be mindful, he writes, “not to mistake feminist commitments as sufficient to protect their work from acting against the interests of their subjects” (Morgensen, 2013, p. 75).

I am cautious about describing my work in terms that suggest my research will change the lives of those with whom I worked. Indeed, I am sensitive to K. Visweswaren’s skepticism about the “university rescue mission in search of the voiceless.” (1994: 69). I do not presume to “give voice” to the refugee women who participated in my study. Indeed, one of the challenges of research with Syrian refugees is the overwhelming public interest – and then public fatigue – about this refugee population. Across multiple scales, global, national and local, Syrian refugees have come to represent and signify processes of displacement, a migration catastrophe, Canadian humanitarianism and benevolence and the challenges of ‘integration.’ These discourses have come to inform how ‘we’ think and know this refugee population, and yet the specificity of their experiences is often obscured by these larger narratives.

Methodologically my work tries to address this specificity through ethnographic research with Syrian families living in a very particular place: four-square blocks in the east Calgary

neighbourhood of Forest Lawn. It also does this by paying careful attention to the place itself, as much as to the people living in it. I have done this through fieldwork in the neighbourhood and attempting to keep the complexity and contours of a place at the centre of this analysis. This work, then, is the story of Syrian refugee women resettled to Canada, but it also the story of the neighbourhood where these women live.

Scott Lauria Morgensen cautions against the desire for ‘intimacy’ between researcher and research in feminist projects. In the past, feminist work has been considered a success if this intimacy is produced. A desire for intimacy stems from the idea of transcendent category – ‘women’ – and the falsely universalizing tendency within this category and within the social movements that emerged around it. Work both within social movements – to critique the normative assumptions of white women who often dominated these movements – as well as scholarship by anti-racist, transnational and gender non-conforming feminists have articulated a different vision for feminist research and praxis: these feminisms “have organized less around shared identity and more around a principle of alliance across sustained difference...” (Morgensen, 2013, p. 74).

It is here that I hope my research sits. Not by claiming a false unity or solidarity with the women who participated in this research, but by providing a careful account of the way these lives are shaped by the broader systems and structures that surround them. I do believe in the importance of specificity and particularity – of exploring how individual and family lives are made and remade in the context of global processes (of displacement, migration and resettlement) and national policies and systems that aim to ‘settle’ refugees. I also believe in attending to the inequities that these processes and policies produce. This is why attending to the local context where resettlement takes place is a critical goal of my research and central to my methodological approach.

## **4.6 Constructing refugee vulnerability and the promise of ethnographic research with refugees**

In the following section I discuss the value of ethnographic methods for studies of resettled refugees. I draw on two examples from my own work of the way ethnographic methods provided insights that other approaches might have missed. My overarching argument is that ethnography – by grounding itself in the everyday and particular contexts of refugees – helps move accounts of refugees from the general to the specific. This is not just methodologically significant, but also has political and epistemological ramifications for how refugees are understood, as well as the systems that seek to manage or ‘help’ refugee families in their settlement.

### *1. Locating vulnerability*

This chapter opens with a quote from Sherene Razack’s article, *The perils of storytelling for refugee women*, in which she describes the problematic power differentials that shape research with refugee women. Razack’s work has been instructive for my own thinking about how to approach research across language, culture and power differentials. Ethical research across difference involves sensitivity to questions of power and representation, while also not reducing research subjects to agency-less victims.

In this section, I discuss the gaps between institutionally perceived forms of vulnerability and the actual vulnerabilities that shape life for refugee women. I argue that vulnerability and risk needs to be understood as contextual and contingent, rather than inherent. That is: refugee women may be made vulnerable by certain institutions and situations, but they are not inherently vulnerable. This may seem like an obvious point to feminist, qualitative researchers familiar with working with refugee or refugee-like populations, yet I quickly came to see how this reality is overlooked by the institutional arrangements that govern refugee life. This was made most clear to me through my encounters with the Research Ethics Board at my university.

As Razack notes, there are risks attached to research with refugee women. However, the risks Razack identifies are far removed from those identified by the Ethics Review Board at my

university. In a critique of Internal Review Boards (IRBs) at universities, Elizabeth Chin writes:

Fine-grained work with the homeless, battered women, transgender youth, and drug users often face challenges from IRBs that, primed as they are to protect institutional interests, find it difficult to imagine how the research can be undertaken in ways that render the institution damage-proof (2013, p. 190).

To that list of ‘vulnerable’ populations, I would add refugees. As Chin rightly identifies, research with these populations raises red flags for institutions ‘primed to protect institutional interests.’ This was evident in my own journey to receive ethics approval and, I believe, reflects not just the governance and scrutiny over certain kinds of research, but the way in which refugees are constructed as inherently vulnerable, lacking agency and therefore a ‘high risk’ research proposition.

I was aware that my research project involved a degree of risk due to the nature of the research I was proposing. This included language differences (I have limited Arabic, many of my participants have limited English), literacy barriers making long written consent and recruitment forms problematic and possible mental health issues stemming from trauma. I also wanted to conduct research in the homes of refugees, and not in settlement offices or at a partner agency, which brought other risk factors into play.

In my ethics application I explained how I planned to mitigate possible risk: I planned to hire an Arabic interpreter to accompany me for all my interactions with refugee families, including the consent process and interview. I explained that the goals of my research were to build an understanding of the settlement experiences of refugee families (that is, their lives in Canada), and not rehashing their experiences in Syria during the war or their flight from Syria. I cited literature and research around using verbal consent instead of written consent to avoid embarrassment and concerns over literacy. In sum, I felt that I had understood and described the possible risks associated with my research and had addressed those concerns as well as I could.

Guiding my ethics application, were two general principles grounded in both my lived experience (working with refugees) and in decades of academic research centering the agency of

refugees at the core of this work. Scholarship in this area tells us that despite the experiences and traumas that refugees may have experienced, they continue to be agentic individuals capable of making informed decisions about if and how they participate in research. Second, my experience working with the Syrian population specifically, and migrant/refugee/immigrant communities more generally, confirmed what the academic research described: That refugees are skillful at accessing the supports and resources needed for their settlement journey – this despite the seemingly overwhelming structural barriers facing resettled refugees in Canada.

In Canada, university research ethics boards are guided by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). This lengthy document spells out the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, including as they relate to risk and research with ‘vulnerable’ populations. The TCPS2 is clear that for research to be considered high risk, “the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research” must be “greater than those encountered by participants in those aspects of their everyday life that relate to the research” (TCPS2 2.8). What was evident to me, was that my research, while focused on a purportedly vulnerable population, did not imply a greater risk than “those encountered by participants in those aspects of their everyday life that relate to the research.”

Despite my convictions, the Ethics Board at my university disagreed with my assessment that my research was ‘low risk.’ The Board wrote

It appears that the population sampled (i.e. Syrian refugees) is highly vulnerable and this study involves high risk. Please reconsider your response and provide more detail on the risks and vulnerabilities of each group of participants involved in this study.

In identifying resettled Syrian refugee families as ‘highly vulnerable’ and my proposed research as ‘high risk,’ the Ethics Board reinforced the normative assumption that refugees are passive victims, ‘speechless emissaries’ as Malkki described them, who would likely be revictimized through research. This echoes Yen Le Lê Espiritu’s claim that much scholarship on refugee life



often “[ignores] the refugees’ rich and complicated lived worlds, the ways in which they labour to have resilient, productive and even heroic lives in displacement.” (2014, p. 12).

Discussions of refugee integration tend to focus narrowly on conventional ‘benchmarks’ such as language acquisition and employment. Large-scale quantitative analyses drives how we measure refugee outcomes one, five, ten and twenty years after arrival. Little explored is the way refugee lives are shaped by the structural systems in which these ‘outcomes’ are achieved.

Similarly, the Ethics Board reflected little interest in situating the research I was proposing within the current social, political and economic realities of resettled Syrian families. The refugees with whom I was working had been in Canada for two to three years by the time I encountered many of them. And they had been outside of Syria for another three to four years prior to that. Their concerns were less about their human security, and more about the business of ‘settling’ in a strange, new, country. From the moment they made the decision to come to Canada, their lives were governed by Canadian systems. First the humanitarian regime in their country of first asylum, then the Canadian refugee resettlement system, which continued for their first year in Canada either in the form of RAP providers or through their Sponsorship Agreement Holder. As that first year of formal support ended, these families continued to be regulated and managed by the provincial welfare system (Alberta Works), the immigrant serving sector, LINC classes, volunteers, sponsors, and the ‘mainstream services’ (Canadian schools, medical systems, police and social workers) that govern and regulate Canadian society.

The concerns of the Ethics Board ignored the profound ways in which the everyday lives of these families are already caught up in English-speaking Canadian-thinking systems – these were not always apparent, visible or understood by refugee families and often these systems failed these families. Research provides one small way of documenting the perspectives and experiences of those who use these systems. Below I highlight an example of what I observed in my early months of fieldwork that confirmed this disconnect between the *perceived* vulnerability attributed to these families by my institution, and the everyday, real life challenges they faced navigating Canadian systems and services.

*Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork*

Canadian society is driven by paperwork: Schools send documents home with children; Government agencies mail important tax and immigration information; Social services require reams of paper to register a child with a disability in a program; Medical services require that scads of forms be completed with personal information, family history and requisite identification; Provincial Welfare requires pages and pages of documents accounting for income, proof of registration in school, proof that your children are, in fact, your children and on and on and on it goes. All this paperwork can overwhelm even those that are familiar and well versed in Canadian bureaucracy. The majority of participants in my research spoke limited English and had limited literacy in either English or Arabic. The sheer volume and constancy of paper that required information, signatures, and personal details quickly became overwhelming. It was difficult for families to differentiate between official documents that required attention and those that simply provided information. While English speaking volunteers and sponsors were around in the early months to help, many of these volunteers and sponsors disappeared as the months and years wore on. Yet the paperwork did not stop coming.

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes describes this situation in detail:

*It was a warm day in July of 2017 and I had been sent to the house of a Syrian family living in a basement apartment not far from my own home. The apartment was on a leafy residential street, it was a fourplex with two apartments up and two apartments in the basement. The family was moving to another apartment in a different neighbourhood. I had not met them before, but I had met one of the women who had helped sponsor them to come to Canada through her church. It was this sponsor who had sent me to visit the family.*

*When I arrived at the apartment, much of the space was full of moving boxes. I greeted the father (Wahid) and mother (Amena) and their five children. The two oldest children were in their early teens, a daughter (Maria) and son (Yousef). There were three other children, two boys ages seven and five and the baby, a fat, happy creature named Ahmed who crawled around and shoved toys in his mouth. When I arrived I spoke to Wahid. The women, Amena and Maria,*

*disappeared into the kitchen. While Wahid seemed to understand much of what I was saying (in English), he asked his son, Yousef, to translate. Yousef's English was stronger than his father's and he seemed more confident speaking to me. I was ushered into the basement living room crowded with couches and boxes and asked to sit on one of the couches. Wahid sat on the couch adjacent to me with his son, the younger boys crowded in around me, and the baby was at my feet. Amena and Maria returned from the kitchen with a tray of tiny coffees, one glass of water, and a plate of cookies. I offered up one of my only Arabic words, "Shukran" (thank you). Wahid asked, 'You speak Arabic?' I laughed, and shook my head ruefully, "I wish! But no." Wahid smiled. He handed me a large file full of papers and Yousef explained that they needed to call CRA and IRCC to change their address. Wahid added, also Shaw, Enmax and Telus (internet, utilities and phone). Inside the file were all the documents related to the family's life in Canada: their immigration papers, financial documents, lease, health care information, tax returns, Enmax bills, phone bills and so on.*

*I looked at the pile of documents and then up at the family, Amena and Maria had settled on the couch across from me. I smiled weakly, "Ok, let's give this a try." I got out my cell phone and started making calls. [I will spare the reader from the tedious details of the hours that followed, except to highlight some of the major obstacles I faced trying to help with what seemed like a relatively simple, if tedious, bureaucratic task.]*

*First, the adults, Wahid and Amena, were the people in the household most likely to understand the various security questions and requests for information needed to access the government systems needed to change an address. For example, "Can I see your 2016 Notice of Assessment?" So while the parents understood what a Notice of Assessment was – a document from the Canada Revenue Agency with your tax information on it – they didn't necessarily have the English language skills to understand my request. The teenagers, Yousef and Maria were more comfortable with English and understood the words I was saying but didn't know what a Notice of Assessment looked like. So we were trapped in a loop of translation and incomprehension and figuring out together what we were looking for.*

*Second, calling any government agency, but especially the Canada Revenue Agency, requires passing through a wall of security questions in order to speak to a human and make a simple request. These security questions are in place to protect the client from fraud and obviously exist for important reasons. Yet, they make accessing a real person on the other end of the phone almost impossible for people with an English language barrier or their proxy (in this case me) who likely doesn't know the answers to the security responses. As soon as the CRA representative asking the questions determined that I was not the client – Wahid - but that I was calling on his behalf, he abruptly ended the call informing me that he either had to speak to Wahid (which Wahid refused on account of his English) or hang up the call. Calls to both Immigration and the Canada Revenue Agency failed on this account. CRA and other government agencies have workarounds for these kinds of challenges, where people who might have barriers to calling government (language or otherwise) can designate an official representative to call for them and speak on their behalf. This Syrian family had such a representative, Sheila [their sponsor], but she was no longer there to offer support.*

*This led to the third major problem: After giving up on CRA and Immigration, I attempted to change addresses with their utility, phone and internet providers. This proved similarly impossible because the accounts had been set up by Sheila, and so all the information for the account was in her name. Because I was neither Sheila nor the person living at the address on file, I had no ability to change to the address for Wahid and his family. The only success we had was with the utility provider as they had low security barriers and it was simply a change of address from one property to another (so all the other account information could remain the same).*

*This all took about two and half hours, sitting on the couch, in a warm basement, on a hot day in July, with the entire family watching me. I would try and make small talk as I sat listening to interminable hold music on the phone. For this family, their entire income was dependent on the various government agencies that surrounded them knowing their current mailing address. Their move was scheduled for the next day and time was very tight.*

*After I struck out over the phone, I determined that the best way to convey a change of address would be to do so in writing. I took the relevant information and returned home to write several change of address requests to Immigration and CRA. I told the family I would return the next day to get their signatures and then we could send the requests by express mail to Ottawa. When I returned the next day they were finishing up the move and I quickly got the signatures I needed, they thanked me, and I left.*

This example reflects the bureaucratic constraints shaping the everyday life of Syrian families living in Canada. It reflects the ways in which current government (and other) systems are poorly designed for individuals with language or literacy barriers. It also reveals gaps between refugee families and the systems and services that are supposed to be there to assist families in these situations. Bourgois and Schonberg describe ethnography as an “artisanal practice that involves interpretive and political choices” (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009, p. 13). There is no roadmap for ethnographic research; instead the researcher must rely on her own intuition, sense making, and politics as she finds her way into and through the field. As I was navigating my entrance into ‘the field’ and encountered challenges like the one just described, there was little instruction on how to approach these situations.

The ethical parameters identified by the University Ethics Board were absurd in the face of the realities families were facing. The Ethics Board insisted on the need for the researcher (me) to speak competent Arabic in order to conduct ethnographic research, describing it as ‘an essential skill.’ While there were *many* moments throughout my research that I regretted my limited Arabic; and shared with the BREB a belief that this research would have been better completed by a fluent Arabic speaker, the idea that first-language fluency is *essential* is deeply problematic. This claim ignores both the realities of Canadian-Syrian interactions as they were actually taking place in Canadian society as well as the possibilities of cross-cultural/cross-linguistic solidarities that can emerge, albeit tentatively, through research.

## *2. Implications of constructed refugee vulnerability*

In treating resettled refugees as “highly vulnerable” and the research as “high risk,” the Ethics Board reflected a normative understanding of refugees as speechless humanitarian subjects (Malkki, 1996). Much of the literature on Ethics Boards and risk points to the way Ethics Boards are more about managing risk to the institution rather than risk to participants (see the Chin quote above). Yet the concerns of the Ethics Board were not inconsequential. Indeed, they reflected broader institutional understandings about refugees, their vulnerability and their ability to consent to research.

It impacted my own methodological approach in ways I was not even aware of until much later in my research process. For example, I structured my research around the *settlement* experiences of refugee families. I committed to the Ethics Board that my questions would focus solely on the experiences of families since their arrival in Canada. I would not focus on their experiences in Syria during the war or as refugees in countries of first asylum. There is abundant research to support this strategy (Mollica, 2008; Tang, 2015), yet it became clear to me after my first round of interviews, that by studiously avoiding asking about anything to do with the war or their lives in Syria, I was reducing the cumulative life experiences of my research participants to the designation of “resettled refugee.” Because of the ongoing, pernicious and worsening context of the war in Syria (dragging into its ninth year as I write this in 2020), it was and is an ongoing preoccupation of the Syrian refugee families in Canada.

While I was blithely going through my interviews asking about life in Canada, I was reproducing the same dynamics that had shaped interactions between Syrian refugees and many Canadians since their arrival – focusing on life here in Canada, treating their arrival in the place where *I* lived as the most significant event in their life, addressing immediate settlement needs, and discussing the future. It was only about eight months into my research that I realized how out of touch my interests were with those of my research participants. When I finally, cautiously, asked my Syrian research assistant and translator about my suspicions that I was missing something by not asking about Syria – she laughed and told me that in the interview we had just completed, she and the participant had spent a good part of our time together talking about the war back home, the various family members in captivity in Syria, the mounting cost of living back home,

their concerns for family members, and the prospects of anti-regime forces in Syria who continued to hold out against Assad's army (all of this took place in Arabic while I spoke to the teenage son in English). Thus, while I was carefully *not* talking about the war, this was an all-consuming, preoccupying topic of conversation for the majority of my research participants.

Ironically, by avoiding the subject of the war, Syria or the refugee experiences of my participants, I was missing a key factor in their settlement experiences in Canada (the purported aim of my research). That is, as soon as I opened the door on this area of inquiry, and started asking participants in general terms how the conflict back home was affecting their life in Canada, I came to see the profound ways in which their lives were tied to family and community well beyond the geographic confines of their current neighbourhood, city or country. The ongoing situation in Syria – which they were able to monitor through Facebook and daily conversations with family members in Syria – was the all-consuming preoccupation for my research participants, shaping how they experienced their 'settlement' in Canada.

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes reflects this dynamic well:

*I ask about the situation in Syria – Assad's attacks outside of Damascus have been making the news again. H. tells me, "our heads are here but our hearts are there." She has friends on Facebook and she talks to them sometimes; there are bombs falling and the children ask [her friend] 'Mom, mom, save me!' and what can she do? No one can leave Syria anymore. America, Russia, Lebanon, Iran – they are all allowing this to happen. N.'s husband A. was so upset after watching Facebook. There was a man standing in front of his car and he was so angry he wanted it to run him down. He didn't. H. tells me, "I don't go on Facebook because it is too upsetting. I have four kids. I need to keep going." What about the kids, do they also talk about Syria? J. [H.'s oldest daughter] was talking to her uncle on the phone in Syria. They are in the north, near Raqqa and her uncle asked if she could come visit but it is impossible. Are they safe? No. The bombing isn't there but Assad is trying to recruit fighters because he doesn't have anyone left to fight for him. They are all dead, also Daesh, also [another Islamist group in the area]...so his kids are not safe. Why does the world let this happen? H. asks me, because we are Muslim? I shrug – I don't know what to say. H.'s husband was sending \$400/month to his mother in Syria.*

*They fight about this. Now he sends 'his money' and she keeps hers. What if the [Canadian] government cuts them off or takes away the child benefit?*

Here again, Lê Espiritu's comment about the "problem of the refugee" located within the body and mind of the refugee and not within the brutal geopolitical conditions that create their displacement is relevant. By attempting to sidestep the war and its ongoing impacts, I was falling into the trap of what Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) have referred to as methodological nationalism – choosing to ignore the way refugee life is untethered geographically from the scales of analysis with which researchers are consumed – the nation-state, the city, the neighbourhood. Speaking about the war meant acknowledging the way the war continued to shape the present and the everyday, rather than treating it as a past event, a thing from *before*. Indeed, there was a harm in not speaking about the war and its ongoing effects, the harm of reducing specific individuals, histories and experiences to the generalized identity of 'resettled refugee.'

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously described ethnographic research as 'deep hanging out' (1998). This aptly describes the approach I took to this project: spending time in Little Syria with women and their families – sharing food, sipping coffee, visiting the playground, watching children play soccer and ride bikes, filling out forms and reading documents, assisting with the preparation of meals, and holding new babies. The goal of my approach was to challenge the methodological blinders that generally guide research on refugee settlement in Canada, which tends to rely on data derived from partnerships between researchers and immigrant serving organizations. For example, two recent studies on Syrian refugee integration in Alberta draw on data derived from refugees who were connected to local Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) providers across the province (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Agrawal, 2018). This creates a sample bias with those who use services overrepresented in our data on settlement and integration.

In taking a geographically situated and ethnographically informed approach to data collection, I was able to connect with refugee families who were not looped into the formal settlement sector.



This allowed for three specific insights: First, it allowed me to disrupt normative understandings of refugees as inherently vulnerable. Second, it opened up a space to challenge methodological nationalism – which positions refugees as ‘outside’ of the national order of things – and consider how ongoing conflict and geopolitical realities (beyond the Canadian border) impact processes of ‘settlement’ and integration. And finally, it offered a means through which to explore informal and less visible forms of support (beyond those offered through formal settlement services). Each of these insights are further developed in the chapters that follow.

## Chapter 5: Placing Refugees – Forest Lawn

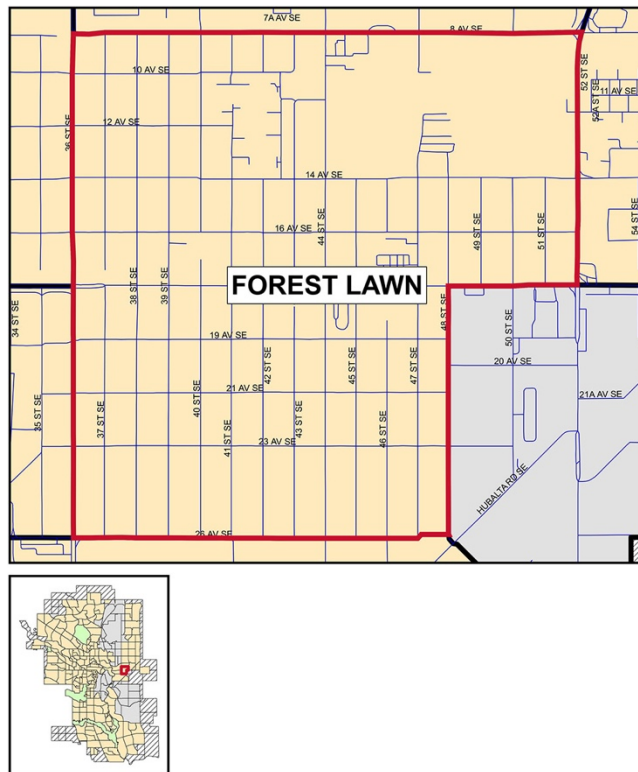
### 5.1 Introduction

With the arrival of 2000 Syrian refugees in Calgary in 2015-2016, finding appropriate, affordable housing for these families proved to be a major challenge for refugee resettlement agencies and the other stakeholders. This problem was shared by other municipalities across the country, especially in Canada's most costly cities (Toronto and Vancouver), but it was also a challenge in Calgary. While Syrian refugee families were dispersed across the city – including in some of the city's most remote suburbs – the maps compiled by the City of Calgary shortly after the resettlement initiative was complete (in the spring of 2016), indicated that the overwhelming majority of Syrians ended up in the east Calgary neighbourhoods of Greater Forest Lawn, and the neighbouring areas.

Forest Lawn (Figure 5.1) is one of six east Calgary neighbourhoods under the banner of 'Greater Forest Lawn' (GFL). GFL is a quasi-administrative label that designates these neighbourhoods as having unique social and economic challenges. The United Way of Calgary and Area describe GFL as a "tipping point neighbourhood" which refers to neighbourhoods with an "accumulation of poverty and other social issues" (United Way of Calgary and Area 2015, p. 1). Under the banner of GFL these seven neighbourhoods have been prioritized for services and social investment leading this area to have the highest concentration of social service organizations in the city (United Way of Calgary and Area, 2015). In part because of the 'accumulation of poverty and other social issues,' Forest Lawn suffers from stigma and the widespread public perception that it is a 'bad neighbourhood' (Peterson, 2013).

The reality of refugee resettlement is that housing decisions are constrained by a number of variables including housing availability and cost, reluctance to rent to refugees, large family size, and the limited resources resettled refugees receive for housing (Rose & Charette, 2017). This means that refugee families end up concentrated in more affordable areas of cities. In Calgary, this meant that Syrian refugee families ended up living in East Calgary, with a particular micro-

concentration of approximately 35 families in the four-square blocks that became known as ‘Little Syria.’



**Figure 5.1 – Forest Lawn in Calgary (Source: City of Calgary, 2016)**

This chapter takes seriously the claim that migration scholars need to more carefully examine the spatial dimensions of processes of migration, settlement and ‘integration.’ By carefully attending to Forest Lawn as a *place* - with histories and imaginaries of its own – this chapter explores the context of Forest Lawn as a site of refugee reception. What does it mean for refugees to build their lives in contexts characterized by superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), multiple trajectories of displacement and entrenched economic marginalization?

In order to address this question, this chapter begins with a brief overview of the literature on the relationship between superdiversity, geography and displacement. It then moves to a historical and socio-demographic account of Forest Lawn as a highly stigmatized and marginalized neighbourhood, using archival and census data. The chapter concludes with two portraits of

Forest Lawn residents drawn from fieldwork at the East Calgary Community Resource Centre, an organization that works with people living in poverty. These portraits are included to reveal the complex trajectories of displacement and structural violence that inflect the lives of those living in poverty in Calgary. While they take us some distance from thinking about refugee resettlement, they are included because they illustrate the social nature of the neighbourhood and therefore help us gain insight into the ‘integration’ process. In effect, the residents of Forest Lawn represent Canadian society to Syrian newcomers, who rebuild their lives in this particular context, alongside their neighbours.

Too often research on refugee resettlement is ‘placeless’ and accounts of refugee outcomes ignore the contexts in which those outcomes are achieved (or not). By diving deeply into the local specificities of a place, including the people who already live there, this chapter seeks to overcome the ‘placeless-ness’ of refugee studies and argues for a more complex, and relational, understanding of resettlement. This is especially important in contexts marked by generations of poverty and social exclusion – such as Forest Lawn.

## **5.2 Placing refugees**

Historically, scholars interested in issues of migration have tended to overlook scales of analysis beyond the nation-state, including the city. Concomitantly, urban geographers have tended not to focus on processes of migration and asylum. Jonathan Darling suggests that by focusing on the urban, migration scholars can “critically [challenge] a nation-state-centric account of asylum and refugee geographies” (Darling 2017, p. 1). More recently, migration scholars have become more attuned to spatial processes and the realization that processes of migrant ‘integration’ are shaped by the place in which these processes are situated (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018; Miraftab, 2016).

Glick Schiller and Çağlar refer to this as a ‘spatial turn’ in migration studies and the “belated realization by migration scholars that ‘geography matters fundamentally’ and that attention must be paid to different conditions, different scales and urban spaces” (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016, p. 3). Following geographers who have theorized scale, there has been a recent turn toward

multi-scalar analysis of spatial processes as they relate to migration (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2010). Multi-scalar analysis refers to the notion that geographic scales are not simply nested categories, with the nation-state ‘above’ the city, but rather scales are understood as “relational, socially constructed and constituted by various intersecting trajectories of institutionalized networks of power” (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016, p. 3). Empirically this requires attending to the ways that different places are mutually constituted by intersecting processes, both local and transnational. This leads Darling to argue that “the task that emerges from discussions of urban forced migration is to examine the city as a situated and contested interlocutor for state discourses and practices” (2017, p. 15).

A focus on the spatial and relational dimensions of migration – for example, processes of refugee incorporation into a specific city – differs from traditional analyses of migrant ‘integration.’ These have been critiqued for a latent ‘ethnicism’ which tends to treat ethnic groups as self-contained entities. This has led to a critique of the ‘ethnic lens’ in migration studies. A critique of the ethnic lens follows from a critique of methodological nationalism in the social sciences (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Methodological nationalism emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the intersection of political nationalism and burgeoning social sciences. It refers to the idea in social science study that the nation-state is a self-contained, uncontested unit of analysis – a container for social and historical processes. Methodological nationalism tends to treat migration, then, as a disruption to these stable, homogenous entities (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Similarly, the ethnic lens, by reifying migrant communities as self-contained units of analysis, tends to overlook the interconnections between migrants and other people and places. To address this oversight, Nina Glick Schiller and colleagues suggest that the field of analysis should move from the migrant ‘community’ to individual migrants, the networks they form, and the social fields created by their networks (Glick Schiller, Çağlar & Gulbrandsen, 2006, p. 614).

A growing body of scholarship has emerged in response to the critique of the ethnic lens of studies. This literature explores the relationships between people (both migrants and non-migrants) living in particular places. Broadly speaking, this work explores the *relations* between individuals and groups living in a specific place, rather than the group itself (Berg & Sigona,

2013). Much of this research draws on the concept of “superdiversity” (Vertovec, 2007) to explore the way the multiplication of diverse life experiences takes shape in particular spaces – housing estates (Gidley, 2013), neighbourhoods (Hall, 2015; Wessendorf, 2013) and cities (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018). With a focus on relations instead of on pre-defined and bounded migrant or ethnic groups, this work attends to how differently positioned people ‘encounter’ one another in super-diverse contexts.

For example, Wessendorf examines the emergences of ‘commonplace diversity’ between residents in the super-diverse neighbourhood of Hackney in London (2013).

‘Commonplace diversity’ refers to various forms of diversity (ethnic, religious, and linguistic) being experienced as a normal, and not particularly special, part of everyday social life.

Wessendorf argues that while commonplace diversity may not lead to greater intercultural understanding or translate into private relations, the absence of these encounters can be problematic and may reinforce prejudice between groups (p. 410). Wessendorf’s work finds resonance with a robust body of scholarship on the way difference is experienced in hyper-local contexts. This has been variously described as “everyday multiculturalism” (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), “banal intercultural interaction” (Sandercock, 2003) and “prosaic multiculturalism” (Amin, 2002). While analytically distinct, each of these concepts explores the role the quotidian interactions across difference play in super-diverse contexts. These studies help push migration scholars to think beyond accounts of migration that are contingent on a specific migrant/ethnic group, and instead reflect on the interconnections between individuals who live in proximity to one another.

Methodologically, studies of diversity pose a challenge for researchers. Gidley articulates this challenge in his study of a super-diverse housing estate in South London (2013): “super-diversity exposes the limits of ethnography. As parallel perspectives, often utterly incommensurate, multiply, how can we see from all these vantage points?” In places that are characterized by high levels of diversity – linguistic, cultural, migration status, gender, class, etc. – it is methodologically impossible to capture the full range of connections, interconnections and disruptions. Researchers often lack the linguistic capacity to conduct research in multiple

languages. Differently positioned groups within a particular place may be more or less difficult to access. Spatially, attending to the multiple, intersecting processes that shape a particular place – city or neighbourhood – is similarly challenging, as a myriad of processes from global political economy to national policy to processes of urban renewal often all play out simultaneously.

Despite these challenges, efforts to situate migrants spatially and attend to local processes remain important. Arguably, it is an even more urgent task in the context of what Suzanne Hall has described as a ‘brutal migration milieu’ where places are not only characterized by super-diversity, but by great inequities in legal status and substantive rights between different groups (both within and between migrant and non-migrant communities). Like Hall, other scholars point to the way difference is mobilized in the contemporary context to incite conflict and distrust between marginalized groups (Amin, 2012): “The urban cartography of intensified vulnerabilities, risks and insecurities pins some people in place, forcing them to confront the increasingly complex questions of living with difference” (Gidley, 2013, p. 367).

Ash Amin’s *Land of Strangers* (2012) argues that it is precisely along these lines of ‘diversity’ and difference that hostility towards those perceived as strangers is mobilized – leading to the prevailing xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes shaping politics across contemporary Europe. Amin is skeptical of sociological accounts extolling the benefits of cross-cultural encounter in super-diverse societies. He writes. “Everyday encounters of difference...are always mediated by conflicting vernaculars – one at ease with difference and the other fretful, ready to pounce on the stranger...A politics of interpersonal contact should be treated as an experiment without guarantees” (2012, p. 5-7).

While acknowledging the exclusionary aspects of contemporary manifestations of difference, Çağlar and Glick Schiller are more optimistic about the possibility for the emergence solidarities and connections between differently positioned individuals who share geography (2018). Based on fieldwork in different cities in the Turkey, Europe and the United States, they suggest that,

sociabilities often develop in situations in which those who come together have unequal access to resources including information, skills and institutional networks. Yet social bonds,

social cohesion...emerges from a perhaps limited but potent shared set of experiences, emotions and aspirations including a desire for human relationships (2018, p. 13-14)

Attending to both the fragile solidarities between displaced people (migrant and non-migrant) as well as the tensions and fractures that emerge when people live together, provides a lens through which to understand and critique global capitalism and its uneven impacts. Rather than seeing migrants as inherently 'outside' the social order and in need of incorporation or integration, they can be understood as impacted by the same processes of accumulation by dispossession that affect so many – both those categorized as local and those perceived as foreign.

### **5.3 Forest Lawn – histories and presents**

Today the neighbourhood of Forest Lawn is located six kilometers east of downtown Calgary, across Deerfoot Trail (a multi-lane highway that divides east and west Calgary) (see Figure 5.1). It is bordered on the east by 52 street east, on the west by 36 street east, on the north by Memorial Drive and in the south by 26<sup>th</sup> avenue. 17<sup>th</sup> avenue southeast – “International Avenue” - bisects the neighbourhood and is the commercial core of the community. Forest Lawn is part of a wider network of neighbourhoods known as the Greater Forest Lawn Area (GFLA). This area includes six neighbourhoods adjacent to Forest Lawn.<sup>20</sup>

Forest Lawn began as a small community east of Calgary with few residents. In 1901, real estate agents from the United States purchased the land adjacent to Forest Lawn with the aim of redeveloping the area into a residential community with tree-lined streets and a community lake (Peterson, 2013).

However, having been unable to sell the lots (due to inflated prices and lack of public transportation), the real-estate agents conjured up a scam to sell the lots by laying railroad lines from Forest Lawn to Calgary, promising street car development...The proposed streetcar development actually spawned industrial development in the area although the streetcar system was never built. (Peterson 2013, p. 9).

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<sup>20</sup> Greater Forest Lawn (GFL) includes the neighbourhoods of Albert Park, Radisson Heights, Southview, Dover, Forest Lawn/Forest Heights, Penbrooke Meadows, Erin Woods. Approximately 50,000 people live in GFL (United Way of Calgary and Area, 2015).



In 1912, the area was subdivided into the unincorporated hamlets of Albert Park, Forest Lawn and Hubalta. These were under the administrative auspices of Shepherd Municipality No. 220. The majority of these communities were subdivided into economic farming units. According to the Town's archives:

The communities suffered during the Great Depression, and by the early 1930s the Municipality could no longer meet the demand for relief. The City of Calgary would not extend its help, so the Provincial Government withdrew the hamlets from the Municipal District and created two villages out of them - the Village of Forest Lawn and the Village of Albert Park. (Archives Society of Alberta, ND).

Forest Lawn remained as an independent village until it was annexed by the City of Calgary in 1961. At the time it had a population of 13,000 (Peterson, p. 6). Since annexation the neighbourhoods of GFL have “suffered continual divestment, at least until recently. Subsequently [Forest Lawn has] endured brutal and unfounded stigmatization.” (Peterson, 2013, p. 6).

According to the archival record, “during the Depression, many people moved to the area to avoid higher taxation and costs of living in Calgary.” (Archives Society of Alberta, ND). This phenomenon of relocation to Forest Lawn has been ongoing since its inception. We see from the archival record that Forest Lawn has long been a place where people are drawn because of the lower cost of living, a process that continues to this day.

#### **5.4 Built form and redevelopment**

Because of its history as a stand-alone municipality until annexation by Calgary in 1961, the neighbourhood of Forest Lawn contains many of the amenities and services one would find in a small town. There are several schools including an elementary, junior and senior high. There is a library, a hockey arena and a fitness centre/pool. There is a community centre and a health centre. Running through the neighbourhood is 17<sup>th</sup> avenue SE: the commercial core of the neighbourhood. Along with fast food restaurants, banks and large chain retailers such as No Frills, Sobeys, A&W and Kentucky Fried Chicken, there is a high concentration of small

businesses run by immigrants and immigrant families. The cultural diversity of these businesses has led to the branding of 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE as ‘International Avenue’ (see Figure 5.2).

In his research on gentrification in Greater Forest Lawn, Kyle Peterson discusses the way the ‘cultural authenticity’ is used to market the neighbourhood to residents from other parts of the City as well as internationally to real estate investors (Peterson, 2013). The close proximity to downtown and views of the Rocky Mountains make GFL a prime target for gentrification strategies. These have been underway for several decades, driven primarily by the International Avenue Business Revitalization Zone (IABRZ). Peterson describes how business-led redevelopment efforts have promoted a particular vision for Greater Forest Lawn that prioritizes the perspectives of middle class homeowners, a select group of businesses and property owners in the area, and the vision of the BRZ’s longtime Executive Director: “The combination of the strategic and politically-active IABRZ and poor public engagement strategies allowed a pro-gentrification agenda to guide the democratic process.” (Peterson, 2013, p. 368).

The success of these efforts by the BRZ were visible during my fieldwork: 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE was under major construction with temporary signage and street light signals causing chaos for drivers on the avenue. The situation was more precarious for pedestrians as sidewalks were closed, dug up, relocated and makeshift pedestrian walkways put in place. The #1 bus which is the primary transit link from downtown to Forest Lawn continued to run along 17<sup>th</sup> avenue but bus users took their lives in their hands waiting at stops haphazardly placed along the side of the busy thoroughfare that is 17<sup>th</sup> avenue. Despite the major upheaval caused by the construction, the BRZ and the City Councilor for the area speak only in positive terms about the development.<sup>21</sup> When the construction ends, a dedicated rapid bus lane will connect Forest Lawn to downtown

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<sup>21</sup> The Councilor for Ward 9, Gian Carlo Carra reflected on what a dedicated transit line will bring to Forest Lawn: “It really is an International Avenue and it’s an international set of communities. And its main street should be a great street...We envisioned a multimodal, multiway boulevard anchored by transit, putting the forest back in Forest Lawn, wide sidewalks... You had a relatively short corridor that had great bones, and that had great population. And the idea was that if you ran great transit out along there, you would solve the original sin that had plagued the town of Forest Lawn: that it was completely disconnected.” (Klazzus, 2018).

Calgary, providing what many believe is much needed transit infrastructure after decades of neglect.



**Figure 5.2: 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE – Marketed as “international avenue” for the number of immigrant-run businesses**

A central tension for residents and social service providers who work in Forest Lawn surrounds this redevelopment. While many are happy to see the investment in the much-needed infrastructure, safety concerns regarding construction and the long-term impacts of this transformation on already precarious communities are a concern. For those who work with marginalized residents in the area, there is little faith that the business-led efforts are more than a thinly disguised attempt to “push the poor [residents] out.” (Interview with community advocate in Peterson 2013 p. 332). Peterson concludes that these processes of gentrification do not bode well for the many renters and low-income residents who call Forest Lawn home:

Given that 1) the themes for redevelopment are not reflective of the day-to-day realities of the GFLA, and 2) the residents who will be most affected by redevelopment were largely

absent from the planning process, gentrification is a very real possibility...Presently, there is little to no provincial policy that will provide for protections against displacement, nor is there any preventative social policy (Peterson 2013, p. 368)

Thus, while my dissertation research took place at a time when Forest Lawn continued to be a destination for low-income migrant and non-migrant communities, it is possible, perhaps likely, that the same conditions that existed when Syrian families arrived in 2015 will not be in place in the years to come, leading to further displacement of those who, in many ways, are already multiply displaced.

## 5.5 Precarity and displacement

Table 5.1 is based on data compiled from the 2016 census and focuses on the three census tracts in Forest Lawn. While these data provide an incomplete account of the neighbourhood given non-response rates and the difficulty of ‘counting’ marginalized populations, they align with what service providers and community advocates in the neighbourhood identify as the demographics of the community.

<b>Table 5.1: Census profile of Calgary and Forest Lawn, 2016 (percent)</b>		
	<b>Calgary</b>	<b>Forest Lawn</b>
Population 2015 ( <i>N</i> )	1,392,609	14,243
Nonimmigrants	67.7%	64.6%
Immigrants	29.1%	32.8%
<b>Immigrants' arrival period</b>		
Before 1981	5.1%	4.4%
1981 to 1990	3.0%	3.1%
1991 to 2000	5.0%	4.9%
2001 to 2010	9.6%	10.0%
2001 to 2005	4.3%	3.9%
2006 to 2010	5.3%	6.1%
2011 to 2016	6.8%	10.3%
<b>Population group</b>		
Total visible minority population	33.7%	40.8%

**Table 5.1: Census profile of Calgary and Forest Lawn, 2016 (percent)**

	<b>Calgary</b>	<b>Forest Lawn</b>
South Asian	8.9%	2.1%
Chinese	6.5%	2.9%
Black	3.9%	8.2%
Filipino	5.1%	11.2%
Latin American	2.0%	2.4%
Arab	1.9%	5.1%
Southeast Asian	1.7%	6.9%
West Asian	0.9%	0.8%
Korean	0.8%	0.1%
Japanese	0.4%	0.0%
Visible minority; n.i.e.	0.3%	0.0%
Multiple visible minorities	1.1%	1.2%
Not a visible minority	66.3%	59.1%
Aboriginal	3.0%	7.8%
<b>Education level</b>		
No certificate	8.1%	25.6%
High school	22.3%	30.4%
Postsecondary certificate; diploma or degree	69.6%	43.9%
University degree	38.3%	12.9%
<b>Labour market participation</b>		
Participation rate	73.3%	65.8%
Employment rate	66.5%	57.3%
Unemployment rate	9.3%	13.1%
<b>Housing</b>		
Private dwellings (N)	519695	5115
Owned	73.0%	47.8%
Pay 30%+ of income for housing	21.9%	29.5%
Crowded	2.4%	4.5%
Median household income (\$)	99,583	61,647
Nonofficial home language	16.0%	22.4%

<b>Table 5.1: Census profile of Calgary and Forest Lawn, 2016 (percent)</b>		
	<b>Calgary</b>	<b>Forest Lawn</b>
<b>Composition of individual income</b>		
Market sources	94.7%	84%
Government transfers	5.3%	16%
Median income (aged 15+) \$	43,974	29,650
Low income (after-tax) %	8.1%	18.7%
<b>Admission category and applicant type for the immigrant population (1980 and 2016)</b>		
Economic immigrants	56.4%	36.8%
Principal applicants	39.6%	39.4%
Secondary applicants	60.4%	61.0%
Immigrants sponsored by family	28.7%	34.5%
Refugees	14.1%	28.3%
Other immigrants	0.8%	0.3%
Sources: Calculations based on 2016 Statistics Canada census tract profiles, total population		

Poverty is a concern for many Forest Lawn residents. This is reflected by the percentage of individuals identified in the census as living below the Low-income Cut Off After Tax (LICO-AT): 17.6 percent in Forest Lawn compared with 8.1 percent in the rest of Calgary. The unemployment rate is also 4 percent higher in Forest Lawn than in the rest of the city. Similarly, high school completion for adult residents – a factor contributing to employment prospects and income – is significantly lower in Forest Lawn compared to the rest of Calgary (25.6 percent of Forest Lawn residents have not completed high school compared with 8.1 percent in rest of Calgary).

Interestingly, despite its branding as an ‘international’ neighbourhood, the census data suggests that Forest Lawn does not have significantly more immigrants than the rest of the city. According to census data, roughly a similar number of immigrants live in Forest Lawn as in the rest of Calgary (Forest Lawn: 32.8 percent, City of Calgary: 29.4 percent). That said, the number of *refugees* in Forest Lawn is nearly double that of the city of Calgary. This is supported by interviews with neighbourhood stakeholders and service providers who report a large visible

presence of Vietnamese, Sudanese and Somali residents (and most recently, Syrians); as well as the ubiquity of Vietnamese businesses and landlords in the area. Forest Lawn also has a higher ratio of new immigrants compared with the city: 10.3 percent of immigrants in Forest Lawn arrived between 2011 and 2016, compared with 6.8 percent in the rest of the city. Not visible in the census but evident through conversations with some service providers as well as migrant-rights advocates are the presence of migrants with precarious immigration status or no legal status in Canada.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to international migrants and refugees, Forest Lawn is home to a considerable number of Indigenous residents. According to the census data, the number of Indigenous residents in Forest Lawn (labeled ‘Aboriginal’ in the census) is more than double the rest of the city (7.8 percent compared with 3.0 percent). As one of the service providers interviewed for this study pointed out, Indigenous populations are drawn to Forest Lawn for many of the same reasons as refugees: Family or social connections, affordability and access to services. They also face many of the same barriers that refugee families face: Precarious employment, systemic poverty, racialization in the housing and labour market, and generational trauma. While there are significant and important differences between refugee and Indigenous populations that should not be glossed over, we see that there are shared experiences forged through common experiences of displacement and efforts at place-making in a space marked by precarity and displacement.<sup>23</sup> The point here is to emphasize that there are multiple, complex and intersecting forms of precarity present in Forest Lawn.

Another relevant characteristic of the neighbourhood is the presence of low-income people who have been displaced through processes of gentrification in other areas of the city. The neighbourhoods on the eastern edge of downtown have gone through rapid gentrification and

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<sup>22</sup> This includes Filipino migrants who entered Canada as Temporary Foreign Workers and summarily lost their legal status in 2014 with a change in Federal policy (Tungohan, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> For example, in a study of low income neighbourhoods and housing in Winnipeg, Carter and Osborne (2009) found that while both refugees and urban Indigenous residents faced housing insecurity, landlords preferred renting to refugees over Indigenous residents, in part because new refugees often have a guaranteed source of income from the Government.

urban renewal which has made housing unaffordable and pushed out low-income residents (Peterson, 2013). A telling quote from the International Avenue Design Initiative<sup>24</sup> reflects this situation: “The gentrification of Calgary’s inner-core has directly created an influx of the displaced – the low income and socially challenged – further saturating the area’s already disproportionate share, entrenching stigmatization, and ending hopes for a meaningful revitalization.” (IADI, 2005, p. 27, in Peterson 2013, p. 371)

The presence of a ‘disproportionate share’ of the city’s ‘low income and socially challenged’ has led to a concentration of social service providers and agencies in Greater Forest Lawn: The United Way indicates that GFL has the highest concentration of “programmatic investments” in Calgary (United Way, 2015, p. 1). This includes the presence of a City of Calgary ‘hub’ at the Bob Bahan Arena, including a City of Calgary Community Social Worker dedicated to the area. Most of the immigrant-serving agencies have a presence in the neighbourhood either as in-school support or through neighbourhood-based offices. The Alex Community Food Centre runs a number of community-based programs around food security as well as providing free meals several times a week. Hope Mission and East Side Victory Church are both faith-based organizations that do outreach with low-income and/or street involved residents. The Boys and Girls Club, Women in Need Society and many other organizations dot the neighbourhood. There are quarterly service provider meetings convened by City of Calgary Social Workers to share information and discuss issues in the neighbourhood.

The concentration of service providing organizations contributes to the production the neighbourhood as a ‘vulnerable’ community. Yet these services also play a critical role insulating residents against the most violent extremes of economic restructuring and a city that is increasingly costly and hostile to poverty. These services do little to address the root causes that lead to systemic forms of marginalization and discrimination but do provide a form of reprieve for those who are able to access them. In some cases, the services may provide a bridge to more

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<sup>24</sup> The International Avenue Design Initiative (IADI) was an urban development initiative led by the International Avenue Business Revitalization Zone – an organization that represents some business on 17th Avenue SE (known as ‘International Avenue’)



sustainable livelihoods or an opportunity that was previously foreclosed, such as adult literacy programs. This tension is discussed in detail in the final section of this chapter.

## **5.6 Portraits of neighbourhood life**

The following section dives deeper into the aforementioned socio-demographic data to explore the way these structural conditions are experienced at the community level. I do so by presenting two case studies drawn from participant observation with community advocates at the Community Resource Centre (CRC) in Forest Lawn. These case studies are composite accounts of clients who access basic needs supports from the CRC. These accounts are drawn from fieldwork at the CRC that took place between January and April 2018. During this time, I sat with Community Advocates (formal job title) and observed their interactions with clients. I also supported CRC staff with compiling their annual intake data. This involved transferring the hardcopy client intake forms to the online database. Assisting with the data compilation added context to the firsthand accounts I was hearing through my observation with the Advocates.



**Figure 5.3: Sunrise Community Link Resource Centre**

Community Resource Centres exist in each quadrant of Calgary and provide a range of services and supports to residents. Primarily, they provide ‘basic needs’ support to those living in poverty. This includes referrals to the food bank, assistance with paperwork to receive government benefits, referrals to furniture banks, tax clinics, basic legal assistance and so on. CRCs also run a series of workshops, programs, community development events, and opportunities for residents to connect with one another. While basic needs are a huge part of what brings people to their door, they make an effort to find ways of connecting with those who access their services through things like Indigenous Sharing Circles, a knitting group, volunteer opportunities, free yoga classes and so on.

The CRC for east Calgary is located in a strip mall at the back of a large parking lot off 17<sup>th</sup> avenue SE. The CRC office is adjacent to the major ‘anchor’ tenant in the strip mall, Rexall Pharmacy. It shares the strip with a Brazilian Bar and an African grocery store. They are open to the public Monday-Wednesday 10-2, Thursday 5-9 and Friday 10-1 and 2-4. The space itself is small. When you walk in the front door there is small office on the left shared by the Executive Director and Administrative Assistant. There is a hallway that is blocked by a small gate. This leads to the offices of the Community Advocates and prevents clients from simply walking in and out of the Advocates’ offices.

Directly in front of the door is the reception desk behind glass. There are chairs along the wall in the reception area for clients to sit while they wait to meet with an Advocate. There is also a computer station with a single computer connected to the Internet and to a printer behind the reception desk. Clients can use the computer to check email, print resumes, search for apartments or other activities. The computer activity is loosely monitored by the receptionist. Adjacent to the computer is a boardroom, the door of which is usually closed. The boardroom also serves as a community space where the knitting group meets on Thursday night and where the CRC runs its various workshops. The boardroom has two doors, one from the reception area and one leading to the back of the centre connecting to the various staff offices. There are three formal offices in the back area of varying sizes as well as converted storage area that has two desks for staff. There is a small kitchen where foodbank hampers are kept.

The CRC employs approximately ten people. Most of the Community Advocates have completed a degree in social work or related training. On any given shift two to three Advocates will be available to see clients.<sup>25</sup> I observed the Advocates who worked on-site in the Forest

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<sup>25</sup> The term “client” is a specific term that refers to individuals and families who are eligible for the CRC’s services and who have completed the intake form. When I began my observation, the CRC was not accepting new clients due to the volume of existing clients and the limited capacity of their small staff. They started receiving new clients in the spring of 2018, but they monitor the workload of Advocates to see if they have to stop receiving new clients. During the period when they were not accepting new clients it was common for several people to drop by when it was open to inquire about accessing services. If these people lived in the designated geographic area that the CRC serves, they would be referred to a “mobile community advocate.” Anyone residing outside the quadrant boundaries would be referred to the CRC in their geographic area.

Lawn office during the drop-in periods for client visits. In a three-hour period, it was common for Advocates to see between four and five clients depending on the type of support a client needed and the length of time spent with each client.

Conversations with staff indicate that the Census Data fairly accurately reflects the community that the CRC serves. This is corroborated by the data they collect from clients annually, as well as from the personal accounts of staff who work in the community.

## **5.7 Two portraits of life in Forest Lawn**

The following section presents two ‘portraits’ of life in Forest Lawn. These are composite accounts derived from observation-based fieldwork at the CRC in 2018.

### *Portrait #1 - Sam and Carol*

*Next client is Sam. He has a walker. He’s older, with a beard and lots of tattoos on his arms. He’s very friendly with Adam and they seem to have a good rapport. He needs Adam to help him fill out his AISH forms. He and Adam filled them out together before and faxed them to the Government but when he called the Government they didn’t have the forms on file. He has COPD, arthritis, and chronic back pain. The medication he takes for his COPD affects his vision; he has trouble walking because of chronic pain and his need for oxygen. Very quickly into the conversation with Adam he says he needs help with the forms because he can’t read. Sam says that his wife is at the bank getting bank statements. Sam has a stack of forms in an envelope, he pulls all the forms out and Adam sifts through them. He settles in to start filling out “Part A” of the AISH forms, telling Sam that his doctor will have to fill out Part B. He’ll also have to send copies of his IDs and Alberta Works statements. Adam takes him through each question on the multi-page form and fills it out. I am struck by how patient Adam is, because he has all of Sam’s information in the folder beside him and it would be much quicker to just fill out the form himself but he includes Sam in each question. Later Adam says this is because he doesn’t feel like he has the authority to just fill out the form, like a lawyer or a trustee. The form*

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*is long and it takes probably 30 minutes to complete. There are multiple sections where Sam has to give consent to share information across government agencies. Adam reads the long legalese paragraphs out loud to Sam and then Sam signs the document in multiple locations.*

*Sam's wife Carol shows up about half-way through the meeting. She and Sam have a friendly squabbling banter typical of "an old married couple" – they've been married for 38 years. She also has a walker and a bright red Stampeders scarf and gloves (she tells me she is a big Stamps fan and has a white horse signed by all the Stamps as well as a picture of them with the Grey Cup). They really need the AISH money because they have a roommate in the basement who has started drinking and has gone "mental" – they had to call the ambulance on him. He's not paying rent or electricity which helped them with their food bills. They owe the landlord money. Their rent is \$1100 and the welfare check is \$1000. Carol says that they live on "crack alley" in "the hood." She says that there are always "drunk natives" outside fighting over turf in the alley.*

*Sam also wants the Fair Calgary forms filled out so he can get a low-income bus pass. Carol has one and a rec pass – "all I wanted for Christmas was for someone to put \$20 on my rec pass and no one did; next time Alberta Works comes in I'll do that first, the landlord can wait." She wants to go to the rec centre so she can sit in the hot tub. She shows me her glasses from the dollar store (\$1) and says they work great. She can't get glasses covered through AB works because she's got an Indian status card but "Indian Affairs" won't cover her glasses.*

*Carol also tells me about how last night she took the bus to co-op to get a loaf of bread because she thought she had \$2 left on her Co-Op card, but then she got to the till and gave the cashier the card and it was a gift card for Superstore – not Co-Op so she couldn't use it there. She shows me the \$50 gift card to Superstore/No Frills. She got it because she went to No Frills and they wanted her to leave her purse behind the till. She said no because no one would watch it and "we live in the hood." She said they followed her around the store while she shopped and then told her not to come back. She called head office when she got home and they sent her a gift card of \$50 for the 'inconvenience'.*

*Once all the forms are done, they also ask for a food hamper. They really need protein – “even some hotdogs” says Sam. Adam is able to get them a food hamper. They can only take a few bags today but CRC will put aside the rest and they can pick it up over the course of the week.*

*The AISH forms ask about previous employment and level of education. Sam only got to grade 1. He said he was poisoned in grade 1 and missed most of the year. When he went back he got a lot of beatings. “So what year was your last year of school?” asks Adam, and after discussion they settle on 1970. Adam asks if he’s had any luck with literacy programs. Sam says he went “to the college downtown” and the guy just talked at him for three days. It was too much so he didn’t go back. Adam suggests CanLearn. He says it’s a good program and they work with you individually wherever you’re at in your reading. But Sam says, ‘it’s the transportation.’ Adam agrees it’s a bit complicated. At another point in the conversation Sam says, “I’m just stupid” and Adam says, “no! It’s never too late to learn!”*

*Carol asks if they have cat food – Adam says they do. She’s happy to hear that – her cat has been eating dog food and “pretty soon she’ll be barking.” Then she says that they had an old dog, 17 years old, the dog collapsed while they were walking one day. She called the SPCA to see what was going on. They came and took the dog away and when she called to check on her dog they told her they had put him down because he was badly neglected. She said she told them, “I treated that dog better than my husband.” She and Sam were indignant at the suggestion he was mistreated. They said they took him everywhere in the neighbourhood – even to the doctor, “they’re Muslims and they think dogs are the devil and even they let him come in.” Now she has to go to court about the dog.*

#### *Portrait #2 - Henri*

*The next client who comes in is a large black man with a beard, wearing sweatpants and a beat up leather jacket. His name is Henri. He and Adam speak French to each other. I confirm I can understand so they proceed in French. I learn that this is the Basic Needs client Adam had been speaking about. He sustained a workplace injury that prevents him from working; he applied for*

*AISH but his initial application was denied. He is now working with his doctor to get the correct information to the government and secure the funds he needs. In the meantime, his financial situation is in crisis and he is behind on his bills. He has requested \$600 from the CRC to cover a late Enmax Bill.*

*Henri has come in with all his documents required to complete the application. This includes his lease (proving how much rent he pays), his Enmax bills, his ID; his wife has recently got a job so she had to email proof of employment (Adam will call her employer tomorrow to get a verbal confirmation that she is employed). Then Adam takes Henri through a budget where he has to account for all the money they spend in the month. Adam tells me later the budget is a necessary part of the application because to access the basic needs fund the CRC has to prove that the client is 'sustainable.' This is because the funding is not meant to be a 'band-aid' – it's meant for clients who only need it in emergency situations but are otherwise financial sustainable. In this case Adam feels really confident that this is a good use of the fund – they just need this cheque to pay for their Enmax bill (about \$600) and that will take the pressure off.*

*Adam and Henri go through the budget – rent, heating, phone bills, gas for the car, food. The grocery bill is the most costly because of the kids. He explains he has five kids under 13 and two of them just eat and eat and eat. He thinks they spend about \$1000/month on groceries. Adam says that's not bad. He heard recently that the average in Canada was \$200/person/month. The man explains that he grew up in Angola where they ate a lot of meat (from hunting) and there was a corn-based dish that they would eat and it would fill them up. The kids don't like that food and instead want to eat food from here – fries and cereal and that kind of thing. It gets expensive. He explains that the Food Bank food only covers them for about two weeks. It helps but it's not enough.*

*Adam asks about costs of activities for the kids. Henri explains they have cut everything since he stopped working. Before they were in dance and activities but now they are in nothing because of the cost. Adam tells him about the Fair Entry program and that they would probably qualify*

*now. Henri explains that they tried to get it before but couldn't because their income was too high.*

*Adam asks about other payments – like child support and credit cards. Henri says he has three credit cards that he's backed up on. He says it is his last priority because his first priority is feeding the kids: "I don't even think about it" (the decision between feeding kids and paying credit cards). He estimates his minimum payments are about \$400/month but he's not paying close to that.*

*He is a Christian and he makes an offering when he can, about \$50/month. It's supposed to be 10 percent of your income but he has no income now so ...*

*His wife just got a job which is a relief. She's going to be making \$15/hour and working full time estimated to make about \$2400/month. Their other income is the Child Tax Benefit for which they get about \$1000/month.*

*Adam completes the budget and goes over it with the client. He points out that the expenses are slightly more than the income but that overall it is very close and if they save a little here and there (on groceries and whatnot) then they are pretty close. Adam explains this means he feels confident giving the money to the client.*

*Adam steps out to photocopy documents and Henri and I speak. He is from Montreal but originally from Angola. He and his wife have been in Calgary since 2014. They have five kids between the ages of one and 13. He thinks Calgary is a better place to raise kids than Montreal. He came out here for work. He had a job driving a truck in Drayton Valley. He tells me that he had an accident driving and he suffered bad burns on his back and broke his spine. Now he can't drive anymore. It is very difficult now because he is in pain and on a lot of medication and he can't work.*



*When Adam comes back we talk a bit more. Henri explains how he feels upset because he wants to provide for his kids. Before they had everything they needed, lots of activities, they went on vacation, but now they can't do anything like that. He says the kids know what is going on. They ask why he is not going to work: "You can't explain things to kids because they don't understand but they know things are different."*

*He wants to provide for his kids because he feels that is his job and now he can't do that. It is very hard. He explains he knew the work he was doing was dangerous and risky and the conditions were very poor. He said you knew what time you started but you never knew what time you were going to finish so you could work long, long hours. Very little sleep, he says. But it was worth the sacrifice for the kids. He said he was paid on the 1st and the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. On the first he would get about \$1500 but on the 15<sup>th</sup> it would be based on how many hours you worked and you could get sometimes as much as \$4000. He seems regretful saying that he knew it was a risk but it allowed for a good life so he thought it was worth it but now here he is and he can't work. He is emotional sharing this with Adam. Adam thanks him for sharing that – saying he appreciates that he feels safe to share that information with Adam. The man tells Adam that it feels good to talk, that this is the first time he's left the house today and it's good to be able to share with someone.*

## **5.8 Discussion**

These two accounts reflect the complexity of precarity and displacement that inflect the lives of Forest Lawn residents. They also reveal the conditions of austerity and under-investment that shape the work of service providers working in community. On the surface, these accounts have little to do with refugee resettlement. CRCs are not designated as 'immigrant serving agencies' nor are they charged with refugee resettlement. Indeed, the clients described above are not refugees. In this way, a Community Resource Centre, providing basic needs supports, appears as an unlikely venue to conduct research about Syrian refugee resettlement. I would argue, however, that these accounts provide a window in the hyper-local context in which refugee families are settling. They add depth to our understanding of the geography of settlement and of where these new families live. In highlighting the stories of other residents who live side-by-side

with newly resettled Syrians, I hope to demonstrate the multiple strands of precarity and displacement that thread their way through the everyday life of residents. I do this not to suggest these families are somehow ‘out of place’ in Forest Lawn, but rather that the vulnerability of refugee families exists alongside other forms of structural oppression and the predations of poverty and violence.

These case studies highlight the way forms of structural violence shape everyday life in the community. In the first, we see the intersection of colonial forms of displacement through residential schools and the ongoing gaps in services for Indigenous residents. Illiteracy stemming from traumatic school experiences led to years of difficult manual labour resulting in poor health outcomes for the client. Accessing government assistance is itself a barrier because of incomprehensible and lengthy forms. While social assistance is available, it is insufficient to cover life’s basic needs: food, clothing and shelter. Despite these barriers, we see also the resilience and humour of residents, who are sophisticated in accessing the few supports available to people living in chronic poverty.

The second case reveals the particular struggles of racialized immigrants in Canada. Alberta was the primary destination for secondary intra-Canadian migration for years: The number of immigrants in Calgary rose from 20.9 percent in 2001 to 29.1 percent in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Immigrants to Canada moved from other provinces to Alberta in search of well-paying employment in the oil and gas economy. These jobs came with a high price as they often took place in difficult and dangerous conditions, with little regard for worker safety. In this case, we see the tremendous cost of this, literally backbreaking, employment. Here again, while a limited amount of social assistance is available, accessing this support is difficult. Beyond the financial toll, we see the profound emotional cost of losing one’s employment, health and ability to provide for a family. Accessing a relatively small sum of money (\$600 for an overdue heating bill) requires that the family ‘prove’ they are financially ‘sustainable.’ They must also hand over all their personal and financial information in order to be eligible for the funds, which, in the end are actually sent directly to the energy company and not the client. In this case, we see the rapport between the service provider and the client and the way these interactions – despite

taking place in a context of surveillance, diminished privacy and austerity – do offer opportunities for connections. These interactions do little to undermine a charitable model that treats ‘clients’ as inherently untrustworthy and undeserving, as opposed to citizens with fundamental rights. Despite this, client feedback to CRC indicates they feel treated with dignity and respect in their interactions with staff, and this was something I observed throughout my fieldwork.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter lays the foundation for the chapters that follow. It does so by discussing the social geography of the neighbourhood where Little Syria came to exist. I argue, following other scholars (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2018), that processes of refugee resettlement and ‘integration’ need to be geographically informed and take seriously the relations that exist between migrants and non-migrants. Most studies on refugee outcomes tend to be quantitative and derived from statistical datasets. While these studies can offer important insights into how refugee cohorts fare over time, they do little to explain the intimate and everyday experiences of refugee families, as well as how place intersects with these outcomes.

By attending to the specific geographies of settlement – the *where* – we might better understand the complex trajectories of refugee life in Canada. This chapter argues that Little Syria emerged in a context characterized by disinvestment, stigma and marginalization: Syrian refugees follow in the footsteps of other displaced populations including Vietnamese, Somali and Sudanese refugees, as well as Indigenous populations moving from the reserve to the city. As one of the few affordable neighbourhoods in the city, it offered one of the only available places to resettle large numbers of refugee families, but also came to reinforce the urban imaginary that Forest Lawn is a site of displacement and violence. This dynamic is unpacked in the chapters that follow.

## **Ethnographic Interlude: Portraits of life in Little Syria**

This chapter marks a juncture between the first and second parts of this dissertation. In the preceding chapters, I have laid out the institutional landscape around refugee resettlement (Chapter 2); I then discussed the conceptual underpinnings for the dissertation (Chapter 3); followed by my methodological approach (Chapter 4). The last chapter lays out the specific geography of Forest Lawn where many refugees from Syria ended up securing housing in 2015-16.

The remaining three chapters of this dissertation focus more closely on the lives of women from Syria who were resettled to Canada with their families during this period. These chapters are drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with these women in 2017-2018. Before I begin this analysis, I present here a few portraits of life in Little Syria. I do this to foreground the women who generously gave their time to participate in this research and present a somewhat ‘unencumbered’ perspective of their lives. These passages also offer insight into some of my own methodological decision making and interactions with Haya, who facilitated this research as a community connector and also as an interpreter.

I present three accounts here, of three women and their families in Little Syria. These are three women among approximately 15 families that I grew to know fairly well through my research, and I draw on some of the details of these accounts in the following three chapters.

### *Amena:*

When I arrive in Little Syria I see that there are three men, including Haya’s husband, sitting outside their house with a table set up and three chairs around it. They are drinking yerba mate, they all say good morning. Haya and her eldest daughter, Njoud, and I walk three doors down to meet Amena and her family. She greets us with her children. The house was full of kids when we arrive. Her five children, plus one little girl visiting and Njoud. No husband (later I find out he is picking up furniture on kijiji). When we arrive I introduce myself and Amena says, “My name is Amena” in very clear English. We sit in the living room on two couches, the children sit on the other couch, playing with markers and colouring and one child with a phone.

Amena is 28 years old and has five children; she is pregnant with her sixth and due in October. She and her family arrived in Canada as Government Assisted Refugees in December 2015. After two weeks at the hotel they moved into the house that they are in now.

She likes where they live because it is close to the children's schools, her school and her husband's school. The older children in grades five, three and kindergarten. They go to the elementary school down the street, the younger children (3-year-old boy, and 1-year-old daughter) go to daycare at CIES where their parents go to LINC classes. Amena goes to part-time English. She is in Level 1-2; her husband is in level 4. Amena started English when she arrived in Canada but only did four months because she was pregnant, then she had her baby, and then she went back to school, but is home again during her current pregnancy. Learning English is hard she says.

Her family is from Damascus. They were in Lebanon for two years before coming to Canada. They decided to come to Canada for their children. Her mother in Syria didn't want her to go, saying, 'maybe Allah will stop your plane.' But her father told her to go – that there was no future there. The kids are all doing well in school here in Canada (later they will show me all their awards for leadership, most improved, learning, etc). Her sister in Lebanon has seven children. The rest of the family is in Lebanon (sister) and Syria (everybody else). They speak by Whatsapp every few days.

Amena knows her neighbours on both sides. They are both Canadian (white). On the one side the neighbours apologized to them because they have three kids, her husband told them, don't worry, we have five [we all laughed at this story].

The hardest thing here is that there is no one to help with her kids. Before she could leave her kids with family (mother or sister) and go and have time for herself, here she has no one she can leave them with. She did not work outside the home back in Syria. Her husband worked as a farmer.

Her husband wants to work as a painter in Canada. She wants to run a daycare or work as a cook. She says she loves to cook and she loves children. She and Haya spend a lot of time laughing about how much she loves kids. She tells Haya her teachers at school tell her, “no more children” but she wants more children. Even when she is 35 or 40 she will want more kids because her kids will be grown up by then. She is also learning to drive and working on getting her class five driver’s license. Her husband can drive and they have a car that fits all the kids.

I asked if she liked living with lots of people from Syria. Haya translated the question and Amena did a bit of a headshake, ‘yes-no-sort-of’ response and laughed. She talked about when she first moved in, they didn’t know anyone and then one day she saw Haya and another Syrian woman and then she opened her door and let her kids go outside and play. Haya explained that when she first saw Amena she said ‘*As-Salaam-Alaikum*’ and they sat together and talked.

I asked about religion, she said her husband takes the four kids to the mosque on Fridays. She stays home with the baby. She has been to the mosque once. I ask if she has experienced any difficulties being Muslim in Canada, she says no and that everyone here is free to do what they want, to dress how they want and to live how they want. They have no trouble.

I ask, besides not having family around to help with children, what are some of the big differences between here and home. She tells me that before the new neighbours moved in, there were a couple next door that smoked hashish/shisha (pot – we discuss) all the time and one day the woman came outside and lay down almost naked in front of their window. The two older children were looking at her and she was just in her bra and underwear. This was disturbing. She tells Haya that she has heard that at school there are people who will try and give these drugs to your children. We talk about that. I say that Canadian parents also worry about this kind of thing. But that there are teachers and police at school to help.

*Qamar:*

The weather is warm again. Deep freeze and then thaw. Haya and I pick our way across the icy sidewalks to another house across the field. Haya insists on wearing tiny keds sneakers, I keep telling her she needs to wear boots. Especially now that she's pregnant she needs to be extra careful on the ice. She just laughs at me.

I ask who we are visiting today. She tells me it is an older family with teenage kids, no small children.

A young man greets us at the door. We enter and are greeted by a slightly older woman (I'm guessing in her forties). She introduces herself. We go into the living room and a young teenage boy is there sitting on the couch. He is very friendly and introduces himself as Joram. His older brother comes back downstairs (he is the one who opened the door). He apologizes for not being fully dressed before and introduces himself as Hasan and shakes my hand. Later a teenage girl comes down, her name is Eunice.

We sit and talk. The two boys sit beside each other on one couch. Haya and Qamar sit across from them on the opposite couch. I sit between them on a third couch and Eunice across from me on the far couch.

I learn that Hasan is in grade 12 at Forest Lawn High School. He is twenty years old. There is another sister who I don't meet who is 18 and in Grade 11 at Forest Lawn. Then there is Eunice in Grade 10 (16 years) and Joram (14 years) at Ernest Morrow. Joram and Hasan were both in LEAD classes but are now in regular class. Eunice is still in LEAD.

Throughout the conversation I try to direct my questions toward Qamar, but her children jump in and answer for her. She is very sweet and seems less assertive than her children, or less confident. Occasionally she will look right at me and answer my questions fully in Arabic perhaps thinking I can understand. She is apparently in level 4 LINC but her writing and reading is stronger than her speaking she says. After her children answer the first couple questions almost in unison, I joke to her that I can see why she is reluctant to speak English – "Your children can

speak for you!” Everyone laughs. She says her husband speaks and the kids speak so she doesn’t need to. She and her husband both go to CIES for English but she is on a self-appointed ‘winter break’ – too cold to go to school, so she is taking a few months off.

The kids all walk to school. They have a car they say but none of them drive.

They are from Homs, but moved to Damascus when the war started, and then to Jordan. They were in Jordan for nearly two years before coming to Canada. It was very difficult in Jordan. They lived in a refugee camp with 22,000 other Syrian refugees. There was only one place to buy groceries, people would line up all day, it was very hot, the water was far away, the school was far away and there was no school for kids older than 15. Hasan says he was out of school for six years. They arrived in Canada on January 19, 2016, first to Montreal then on to Calgary where they ended up in the resettlement centre and then at this house.

They like living in Syria-town (as Hasan calls it) because they have many Syrian friends. On one side of their house is Fatemeh (a single mother and also a refugee from Syria) and on the other side is a very nice Canadian though she has a large dog that scares Qamar (there is a lot of laughter at this point).

I ask about the decision to come to Canada and Joram volunteers that this was a very hard day. His mother was scared of coming here because it was too different and she was afraid the children would lose their language and religion, that there wouldn’t be mosques. She says they knew nothing about Canada before coming. Hasan says he knew that it was across the world, that people spoke English and the name of the capital city. But they had no idea what to expect. Joram says his father made the decision to come but it was very hard. But he says that there were bad things every day in Jordan and in Syria.

There is small keyboard on a table next to Joram and Haya asks about it. It is Joram’s; he says his teacher gave it to him after she found he was practicing the piano in her classroom a lot at school. He teaches himself on Youtube. The kids tell me they all have interests. Eunice likes



painting and art, Joram plays the piano, the other sister likes to cook. I ask Hasan and he says he's good at video games and laughs, he says he goes outside a lot and likes the outdoors.

I ask about problems in the neighbourhood and they say they have had none. They like the neighbours. They laugh when I ask if Syrians come to visit and say, "all the time!" Joram volunteers that sometimes there are people who are drinking and they say bad or racist things. I ask, "do you know someone this has happened to?" and all the kids say "yes, it's happened to us." Joram says one time a drunk man at Marlborough station bumped into him, Joram said sorry even though it was the man who pushed into him. The man yelled at him and said a racist word (Joram didn't say what it was). Eunice said one time her sister was at Marlborough mall with friends and a man yelled at them. I ask if she was wearing a hijab and she says "yes." But she adds they called security and they helped.

I ask what they think about the fact that there are Syrians living all over the city and they are living with lots of Syrians right here – is that good? They think that yes it is. Joram tells a story of a family being at home at night and someone coming and knocking on the door. They were afraid to open the door because it was night and the person might be a thief or bad person so they called a neighbour who could see from their house to verify that the person couldn't be identified, and they called the police and the police came. They also said in the summer their dad helped fix bikes and Joram is 'famous' for being able to fix phones and computers. There is a lot of support, I say, yes they say.

They have a family friend from CCIS named Hank. Hank is Dutch Canadian with adult children. He lives outside Calgary a little bit. He and his wife came to visit for the first year. They are still friends (though maybe they don't come so often). I ask where they can get support if they need it and they say Hank but generally they are ok on their own now. I say maybe you help other families out? And Hasan gives an emphatic yes. They help a lot with phone calls and translation, because that is still the biggest need. They also volunteer with SRSG – in the warehouse (Hasan) and at the Turkish Festival (Eunice).

I ask about their hopes/plans for the future. Qamar says she hopes to learn English. Hasan says he wants to be 100 percent in English and then get a job. What kind of job? Any job (I say, you don't have to know. At 20 I didn't know). Joram wants to go to university and to be a detective (I know it's a bit silly, he says). Eunice would like to be an artist. The other sister might want to be a lawyer. But it's a lot of work, says Hasan, like ten years.

Qamar's husband is a plumber. He worked across the Middle East going away for two years at a time to Algeria, UAE and other countries. He would like to be a plumber in Canada but according to Hasan it is very hard here to get a license and get the right courses. He is in English now, level 5, and he wants to go to Columbia College or Bow Valley College. We talk about how there is a waiting list for Columbia. Haya was on the waitlist for seven months before they accepted her.

I ask if it has gotten easier or harder since they arrived. In some ways easier and in some ways harder (Hasan). What is harder, I ask. In Canada there are a lot of laws and rules. Rules for everything. And getting a job is completely different. In Syria you can just go talk to someone and you can have a job for life. In Canada it is complicated, you need a resume. Also the food isn't as good here. And life is expensive. In Damascus you could get water from the taps on the street. Or ask someone for water. Or knock on their door and they would give you tea. "I wish someone here would knock on our door and ask for tea or water." Canadians are polite and kind but different. It's all about money in Canada (says Hasan).

The kids and husband go to mosque. Qamar stays home, she has gone twice. The rest of them go on Fridays.

Hasan has a friend from the refugee camp in Jordan who is living nearby. They are friends in Calgary, they have known each other for four years. When they first arrived, their father ran into an old friend from Syria at CCIS – it was a total surprise to see each other and be reunited at the other end of the world.

I ask about family. Qamar has family in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Syria. She talks to all of them by phone. Her family in Syria is in Damascus. Her youngest brother was arrested four/five years ago. She was able to speak to him by phone recently. He is skinny and unwell and it is very bad in jail. She weeps a little speaking about him. At least he is alive and you know he is alive (Haya). Haya says her sister's husband was arrested four years ago and they have heard nothing and she doesn't even know if he is alive. The not-knowing is awful.

Haya and Qamar speak to each other in Arabic. I ask Hasan – do you think your family would go back if the war was over? He says his father says he should go back (he being Hasan) to rebuild the country. It will take hundreds of years to rebuild – no seriously, like 200 years.

*Aischa:*

We arrive at Aischa's, Ali, her husband, is there when we arrive as well as kids. Two twin girls (Nour and Ngam) age 6; Yusuf who is 2 years and 4 months; Sha'ad who is nine. Ali shakes my hand and introduces himself. He leaves by the back door and we settle on the couches. No sooner do we settle then there is a knock on the backdoor and Olivia arrives [I know Olivia from previous work in the community, she is an active volunteer and well known in the social justice circles in Calgary]. There is a lot of warmth when she arrives. We are surprised to see each other. She has come to drop off a birthday present for Sha'ad (a sweater). She sits on the couch for a moment but keeps her coat on, indicating she plans to stay only a short while. I ask if she was connected to the family through CCIS. She says no, that last year Saima [from SRSG] put a call out asking for volunteers to practice English. Since then "Aischa and I have been joined at the hip." Yusuf seems delighted to see Olivia and he comes over to sit in her lap and give her hugs. Later Aischa tells me that at school the girls had to do a family tree and when they put their grandparents down they wrote, "Olivia." They have also been to her house a number of times and she visits every Friday. She tells the twins that she will miss their next birthday because she will be visiting family in Chile but she will bring them presents before she goes.

After Olivia leaves, Aischa brings out coffee and we settle down to talk. There is a knock at the front door and a little girl, white ("Canadian" says Haya) is in a snowsuit asking if the girls will

come out to play. Nour puts on her snowsuit and goes out. Sha'ad sits with us. Ngam watches TV on the floor.

I explain the research and give the usual disclaimer about not answering questions, she says it is fine she will answer the questions. I ask about her English level. I tell her I can tell her English is good and that she can understand. She says she will try and practice her English.

They have been in Canada since January 2016, arrived in Calgary, two weeks in hotel then moved to this house in Forest Lawn. They like this house because it is close to the kids' school (grade 1 and 3 at Patrick Airlie, regular class); Yusuf goes with his parents to daycare at CIES. They go to LINC full-time at CIES on 17<sup>th</sup>. She is level 3 and her husband is in level 4. She didn't know any English before coming to Canada. They drive now that it's winter but in the summer they walk. Her husband drives, she has class 5 but is scared to drive. She knows her neighbours to say hello when they pass. She has had no problems with the neighbours. When I ask about problems she says the only problem is English. She likes being close to other Syrians to speak Arabic. They would like to move into Calgary Housing but they haven't gotten in yet (they are on the list). They have to renew their lease, they will renew for another 6 months.

Before coming to Canada they were in a tent (refugee camp) in Lebanon for four years before coming to Canada. They are from Homs in Syria. They left Syria when the twins were six-months old and Sha'ad was three. Yusuf was born in Lebanon. The decision to come to Canada was motivated by school for the kids as the quality of school in Lebanon was very poor. Her family and her husband's family remain in Lebanon, they speak with them every day by Whatsapp.

I ask about their hopes/plans for the future. She says her husband would like a job – he would like a job now but he can't get a job until he has level 5 English [this seems to be something that people have been told as I have heard this before]. He used to work in construction back home and would like to do the same here. I ask Haya if she has heard of any of the Syrian men getting jobs and she says no, maybe some are driving trucks (small delivery trucks I think) but other than

that she doesn't know anyone with a job. Aischa did not work back home. She has a grade 8 education and was married at 17, which she says caused "many problems." She got married in 2006 she tells me. She is now 28 years old. I ask what she hopes for her kids. She asks what do I mean? I rephrase – what would you like your kids to do here? She says she would like them to finish school. She doesn't want her daughters to get married until they are maybe 20. She says she doesn't know what to expect because she didn't finish school. I ask if she likes the school here for her kids and she says yes, it is good, and she likes that the teachers talk to her about how it is going for the kids.

I want to ask her about where she goes for help/support so I start by saying, "I assume life has gotten easier since you arrived two years ago?" She shakes her head and says, 'no.' It is hard now because it's so busy with both her and her husband in school and the kids and they all come home from school at the same time and then she has to cook and clean. It's a lot of work. Right. I correct myself and confirm what she is saying. I say, when you have questions or things you don't understand who do you ask for help? She tells me that she has a neighbour, a Sudanese lady, who helps if they have questions. She says she and her husband can usually figure it out but sometimes the Sudanese neighbour helps [Haya says it is the same lady that helps some of the other Syrian women that we have talked to]. I ask if CCIS helped them. She says yes, for the first year they helped; they were GARs, and now they're on Alberta Works. CCIS doesn't help anymore. I ask if Sam and Saima helped. She says she hasn't seen Saima for over a year. She says they helped a lot in the first year. She was in the hospital with Yusuf for 10 days. She had a medical issue related to her c-section with Yusuf (translation was not clear here – Haya says a surgery in her stomach) and Yusuf was having health problems too. It was hard because her husband couldn't drive yet so Saima would come every day and take him to the hospital. Also, Olivia comes once a week to practice English (though not clear if she helps with paperwork, etc.)

I ask about the big differences between here and Syria. She says there it was easier with kids because they could play outside, they could go and be unsupervised but here they can't be. Also, they can't be left at home alone. It is a lot more work to supervise children here. Also, the vegetables aren't as fresh.

They get their groceries at No Frills, Walmart and their meat from the Lebanese store on 17<sup>th</sup>. Her husband does the groceries. She does not go to the Mosque – she stays home with Yusuf. Her husband goes and takes the girls. I ask about any problems with the hijab or being identified as Muslim and she says no, nothing. The only problem is with language. The kids don't go to any activities but sometimes their dad takes them to the pool down the street.

## Chapter 6: Destination Little Syria

### 6.1 Introduction -- Choosing Little Syria

On a cold day in November, Haya and I made our way by foot through the snow to the home of a woman named Souzan. On the way, Haya tells me that Souzan and her family had been in Canada for less than a year. They had arrived about a year after the big influx of Syrians in 2015-2016. Souzan greets us at her door wearing all black, and there is a little boy (Mohamed, age 8) and a man standing between the kitchen and the living room in a jacket like he is about to leave, which he does shortly after introducing himself as her husband. There is a small girl lying on the couch with a tube going into her nose. Her eyes are rolled back and her mouth is open, she is breathing audibly. Haya had told me earlier that this family had a child with a disability. I find out her name is Haifa; she is 9. We settle into the couches and the little boy proceeds with a series of small temper tantrums, he has a small tablet that he is watching but he moves between the couches crying (we later find out that he wanted to go with his father to Walmart to get a Halloween costume). A large TV plays an Arabic broadcast in the corner.

I ask Souzan about her children and she points to the girl on the couch, Haifa, age 9. Mohamed is 8 and she points to her belly, I can see now she is pregnant; she is due in January with a boy, they will name him Ali she tells me. Her husband's father's name.

Souzan and her family have been in Canada since March 2017. They arrived in Vancouver and spent 25 days in a hotel in Vancouver. She tells me that it was too expensive to live there and too hard to find a house, especially one that was suitable for their daughter. Her husband's friends from the refugee camp in Lebanon were in Calgary in Little Syria and they told them to come here. They would have only been able to live in a basement apartment in Vancouver. Some people said they shouldn't move to Calgary because of the snow but they came here anyway. First, they lived on the other side of the complex but it was too far from the bus and they had problems with the neighbours who were single men, loud, who drank a lot and made too much noise. This side is closer to Haifa's bus. Haifa goes to a school for children with disabilities.

Mohamed goes to the school down the street and is in grade 2. He likes school and his teacher tells him he is well dressed and he feels proud. They don't have a vehicle so Mohamed walks to school. The bus picks up Haifa. They have to carry Haifa to the bus (or push her in a wheelchair through the snow which is hard), so Souzan's husband doesn't go to English classes because he needs to be home to help carry Haifa because Souzan can no longer carry her because of her pregnancy.

She likes living in this neighbourhood because there are people she can speak Arabic to; she can't learn English yet at school because she is pregnant but she says she plans to go to school when her baby is able to go to daycare. She watches TV in English sometimes to learn. She also listens to the nurses and doctors when she is at the hospital and tries to learn words. Since moving to this house they have no problems with neighbours. They share a wall with an Iraqi family that is quiet and nice. I ask about where they get help. Her husband sometimes asks Haya's husband (they have a connection because they both have a child with a disability). Souzan is also able to use Google Translate.

## **6.2 Context**

Refugees face unique challenges in the Canadian housing market, especially during the initial years of settlement (Hiebert, 2009; Francis & Hiebert, 2014; St. Arnault & Merali, 2019; Rose & Charette, 2017). Both Privately Sponsored and Government Assisted Refugees face challenges in terms of finding adequate, affordable and safe housing upon their arrival in Canada. Further, data from the federal government on the economic integration of Government Assisted Refugees (post IRPA) suggests that it takes longer for them to integrate fully into the labour market, meaning their housing mobility is likely to be constrained by income (IRCC, 2016). Government Assisted Refugees often have large families – and this was certainly the case with the Syrian cohort – adding additional pressures on finding suitable housing (though large families also have additional financial resources through the Child Benefit, discussed further below). Funding for housing for resettled refugees is allocated by the Federal government (IRCC) and is based on Provincial social assistance rates, which are recognized as woefully out of step with the actual cost of housing in most Canadian cities and communities (Rose & Charette, 2017).



The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative brought these challenges – long identified by researchers in this area - into sharp relief. Finding appropriate housing for the massive influx of refugee families arriving in a short period of time proved one of *the* major challenges for RAP providers across the country (Rose & Charette, 2017; Oudshroon, Benbow & Meyer, 2019).

This was not a problem simply of finding housing for refugees; rather, it reflected the broader challenge of securing decent housing for individuals and families who have precariously low incomes. The failure of social assistance rates to keep pace with housing costs and the failure by various levels of government to provide affordable housing to people with low incomes, was made amply visible to those seeking to secure housing for several thousand refugee families in a short period of time. As Rose and Charette identify in their study of Syrian refugees and housing in Canada:

Over the past decade or so, rapid housing market inflation has led to increasing shortages of affordable rental housing in many cities welcoming Syrian and other refugees, while most provinces and city governments have funded few or no new social housing starts for over two decades (2017, p. 2).

This challenge of affordability impacted and continues to impact many of the Syrians who arrived in 2015-2016. In their study of how service providers navigated finding housing for refugees entering under the SRRI, Rose and Charette identify that affordability was the number one challenge for service providers. This is echoed by Oudshroon, Benbow and Meyer who interviewed Syrian refugees 16 months after resettlement about their housing in Canada: all participants reported that their housing situation was insecure or unsafe (2019).

Securing adequate, affordable housing for refugees arriving through the SRRI was a challenge in Calgary. While housing is generally more affordable in Calgary than in a few particularly expensive markets – Toronto and Vancouver, for example – Calgary still faces a housing affordability crisis, due to a shortage of non-market housing and the high cost of rental housing at the bottom end of the market (City of Calgary & Community Affordable Housing Collective, 2016; Khatoon, 2018). Data from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation from

October 2016 indicates that the average rent in the lowest quartile for private row houses and apartments was as follows (from Rose & Charette 2017, p. 47)

City	Rent for bachelor	Rent for 1 bedroom	Rent for 2 bedroom	Rent for 3+ bedroom
Calgary	\$750	\$900	\$1075	\$1100

Rose and Charette examine the discrepancies between the shelter component of the RAP allowance provided by IRCC and the actual cost of rent in different cities. In all cases the shelter component is out of step with the cost of rent – even at the low end of the rental housing market. They identify – and this echoes my findings as well – that the Canadian Child Benefit (CCB) ends up being used by families with children as de facto rent supplement. While the CCB insulates low income families somewhat from housing insecurity, it also creates inequities between large and small families. Charette and Rose, for example, identify that a single person renting a bachelor/studio apartment in Calgary would end up spending 83 percent of their RAP income on housing (Rose & Charette 2017, p. 18). In contrast, families with children under 12 receive up to \$500/month per child which can significantly improve access to housing.

The geography of refugee resettlement, and the attendant spatial concentration of Syrian refugees in a handful of neighbourhoods in east Calgary, was the inevitable outcome of an urban landscape that is characterized by inequality and income polarization. Townshend, Miller and Evans (2018) found that, compared with six other Canadian CMAs, including Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto and Halifax, Calgary shows the most pronounced decline of middle-income neighbourhoods between 1970 and 2010 and “the most striking increase in polarization” (p. 4). The authors note the remarkable growth in the share of census tracts classified as low or very low income from 11 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 2006 (p. 4). They describe Calgary as having:

A distinctively new geography of low income, in which inner-city concentrations of poverty have given way to a vast region of low and very low income in the northeast sector of the

city – many of these neighbourhoods have high concentrations of visible minority immigrants. (Townshend, Miller & Evans, 2018, p. iii)

Greater Forest Lawn falls categorically into the group of neighbourhoods defined as low or very low income by Townshend, Miller and Evans. Increased income polarization and its spatial manifestations are not unique to Calgary. As Rose and Charette identify, housing affordability and the lack of investment in affordable housing is a problem in cities across Canada.<sup>26</sup>

Calgary has one of the highest home ownership rates in the country (Calgary: 73 percent, Canada: 68 percent) (Khatoon, 2018), but ranks low with respect to the percentage of the housing supply that is non-market: Calgary's non-market housing supply is only 3.6 percent compared with 6 percent in the rest of Canada (City of Calgary & Community Affordable Housing Collective, 2016). Calgary has the dubious distinction of having some of the highest rents in the *lowest* quintile when compared nationally. This means that the cheapest rental unit in Calgary is on average higher than the cheapest rental unit in other major cities (Khatoon, 2018, p. 8).

Calgary is also notable for its high incomes: The median income for a household in Calgary is \$97,334 compared with \$70,336 for Canada overall (City of Calgary, 2018). The economy is specialized in oil and gas and professional services, and Calgary has the largest concentration of head offices per capita in Canada (Calgary Economic Development, 2020). Despite the high levels of wealth among some, the largest share of the population is employed in retail trade, which is a relatively lower paid industry (City of Calgary, 2018, p. 3). This creates a housing affordability challenge for people at the lower end of the income spectrum. Calgary's generally high incomes also drive up the cost of living, leading to a higher poverty threshold in the city – using the market basket measure of poverty, in 2016, 145,565 people were living in poverty in

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<sup>26</sup> In this chapter I explore the intersection of Calgary's political economy with the experiences of Syrian refugees in the housing market. My focus is on how refugees understand and experience the housing landscape, and as such, I am not able to fully unpack the political economy of the city. This is something I hope to explore further in future work.

the Calgary CMA. Pressure on the low end of the housing market including a scarcity of accessible, affordable rental options, pushes people into homelessness. Cities in Alberta have high levels of homelessness relative to their population and rank alongside Canada's larger urban centres (Gulliver-Garcia, 2014). Nearly 3000 Calgarians are homeless and over 4000 households are on the waitlist for Calgary Housing (City of Calgary, 2018).

Poverty in Calgary is also racialized and manifests spatially (as Townshend, Miller and Evans identify above). Analysis of the 2016 census indicates that poverty in Calgary is lower than the Canadian average (11.2 percent nationally lived below LIM-AT, compared with 8.9 percent in Calgary).<sup>27</sup> Yet – as elsewhere – this poverty is gendered and racialized, and intersects with other variables such as ability, Indigenous status and household composition. Data from Calgary indicates that on average, approximately half of those living in low income (LIM-AT) identified as immigrants (Eremenko, 2018, p. 6).

It is this context that shapes the geography of refugee settlement and informs the housing trajectories of refugees to Calgary. Discussions of housing 'choice' must be situated within an economic context where there have been few investments in public housing and where there is intense pressure on the limited affordable housing market. As discussed in the previous chapter, patterns of gentrification and the 'return to the city' by wealthy residents have 'pushed' low income residents out of the downtown core and into neighbourhoods in East Calgary (including Forest Lawn) (Smith, 1979). Concentrations of poverty – which is racialized and informed by immigration status – serve to produce some neighbourhoods as more affordable and less desirable. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, this economic and social landscape is often reframed as a matter of choice.

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<sup>27</sup> There are several ways of measuring poverty, in this study, the author uses LIM-AT which is "a relative measure, where a fixed percentage (50%) of median adjusted income per given economic family size." (Eremenko, 2018, p.1)

### 6.3 The trouble with enclaves

Concerns about the social and economic integration of immigrants are often expressed in spatial terms. The spatial concentration of immigrant communities is discussed as inherently problematic and as a barrier to successful integration. Below, I explore how these discussions shaped external beliefs about Little Syria by private sponsors and service providers. In actual fact, we know little about the relationship between ethnocultural minority integration and spatial processes, such as enclaves. Despite considerable analytic fuzziness around this relationship, there is a commonsense understanding that groups of new immigrants living together is problematic, especially when those spaces are characterized by poverty and other social problems (crime, poor infrastructure etc.)

Given the relatively scant research on spatial concentrations of poverty and immigrant communities in Canada, it is likely that much of the public concern around ethnic enclaves in Canada is informed by other contexts, including the United States and Europe. The ubiquity of narratives surrounding ghettos and urban marginalization in the United States – both in scholarship<sup>28</sup> and media, likely shape Canadian understandings of the social geography of urban spaces. Dinovitzer, Hagan, and Levi write: “in both criminological and public minds there continues to be a strong belief that immigration is causally linked to crime” (2009, p. 338). This causal connection is unfortunate because it contributes to a pervasive view that increases in immigrant concentration leads to increases in crime. In reality, studies in multiple contexts suggest that increases in immigration actually lead to a *decrease* in crime (in the US, see: Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005; in Canada, Dinovitzer, Hagan & Levi, 2009). This has been described as the ‘immigrant boost’ where immigration status is correlated with improved outcomes compared with native born populations (Dinovitzer, Hagan & Levi, 2009; Boyd, 2002; Georgiades, Boyle & Duku, 2007; McRae et al., 2020).

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<sup>28</sup> The American literature on concentrated immigrant poverty and neighbourhood effects (for summaries see: Sampson, 2019; Kubrin, Kim & Hipp, 2019) is vast and beyond the scope of the work I present here, the point I am making is that the *idea* of the ghetto and spatial entrapment by minority groups shapes commonsense understandings by many Canadians about ethnic concentrations in cities – regardless of data that suggests a more complex relationship between urban dynamics and racialized communities.

Despite this scholarship, the overwhelming *public* perception of the American context is a problematic intersection of poverty, race and geography, leading to spatial entrapment from which residents have few options for escape. Similar narratives dominate the European discussion around the spatial concentration of immigrant communities and the connection to poverty and race. This is exemplified most vividly by the *banlieues* surrounding Paris – which are home to second and third generation North African immigrants. The spatial arrangement reflects a broader pattern of social exclusion and marginalization that has led to highly publicized riots and violence. Similar spatial dynamics exist in other European countries including Germany, Belgium and Denmark with concerns exacerbated by both the ‘European migration crisis’ and the rise of Muslim extremism, including acts of terrorism on European soil. In the European context concerns about spatial concentration dovetail with the perception that immigrants from Muslim backgrounds, in particular, are not adapting to Western European liberal values and thus failing to integrate (Joppke, 2007; Triadafilopoulos, 2011; Adamson, Triadafilopoulos, & Zolberg, 2011; Kofman, 2005). The failure of integration in Europe is often seen as the result of a cultural incompatibility between European norms and values and Muslim religious expression (cf. Koopmans, 2013). Similar anxieties are playing out in other contexts including the United States and Canada (Razack 2007; Bakht, 2008; Korteweg & Selby 2012; Korteweg, 2017).

In Canada, the relationship between race, poverty and the spatial organization of cities is less clear. Much of the research in Canada is quantitative and explores the relationship between income, immigration status and residential geography (for a good summary see Hiebert, 2015). Literature in this area emphasizes the suburban nature of residential settlement for newcomers, countering previously held assumptions about inner-city settlement. This is the result of the gentrification of Canada’s inner-cities and more affordable housing in the suburbs (Walks & Bourne, 2006; Mendez, 2009; Ades, Apparicio & Seguin, 2012; Walks & Maaranen, 2008). While patterns of concentrated immigrant poverty are present in the Canadian urban landscape, scholars suggest that these patterns differ from the US context; the concentrations tend to be less

pervasive, more place and group specific and the income disparities less extreme (Walks & Bourne, 2006; Fong & Wilkes, 2003; Smith & Ley, 2008).

In a summary of the literature on ethnic enclaves in Canada, Hiebert (2015) points to some of the limitations in the Canadian literature: Most of it is drawn from the 2001 census and needs to be updated with current data; Very few studies are longitudinal, which means we have a poor understanding of how neighbourhood/residential dynamics change over time; Researchers often have different methodological approaches to measuring residential patterns leading to difficulty comparing studies; And finally, very little is known about the degree of choice and constraint that shape where immigrants end up living; this dovetails with a similar lack of understanding about the social lives of people who live in these communities (Hiebert 2015, pp. 7-8). Because quantitative methods continue to dominate this area of research, significantly less is known about the everyday life of immigrants living in 'ethnic enclaves' and the factors that keep them there, or motivate them to leave, over time.

Daniel Hiebert's 2015 study of residential patterns of immigrants to Canada's largest cities (Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal) provides an important overview of the complex interplay between urban space, immigrant integration and poverty. Drawing on data from the Canadian Census (1996 to 2006) and the 2011 National Household Survey, Hiebert uses a neighbourhood typology framework to classify census tracts into different kinds of neighbourhoods (white areas, white dominant areas, mixed visible minority dominated areas, mixed-minority enclaves, and minority group enclaves). He then expands the analysis to explore the differences between the residents of each type of neighbourhood.

Among Hiebert's primary findings are the following: Certain ethnocultural visible minority groups are more likely to live in enclaves than others; the socio-economic characteristics of enclaves vary greatly from one another; minority enclaves tend to be places of cultural diversity rather than cultural isolation and while there are some systematic differences between those visible minorities living within enclaves and those living outside, there are not significant fundamental differences between the two groups. Indeed, Hiebert's data suggests that there are

more members of visible minority groups experiencing poverty living *outside* enclaves than inside them (Hiebert, 2015, p. 1).

Hiebert also suggests that refugees to Canada typically do *not* join enclaves because enclaves are just as likely to form in middle-income areas as in poor ones in Canada. This is the result of an immigration system that prioritizes professionals, economic immigrants and middle class people. Refugees, on the other hand, experience the greatest financial constraints and gravitate to places close to the bottom of the market (such as neighbourhoods in the Greater Forest Lawn Area in Calgary). Like Forest Lawn, these are not enclaves; but rather reflect a wide range of demographic diversity, with a population that includes new immigrants, refugees, a high number of Indigenous residents and a well-established ‘white’ working-class community (see Chapter 5 for details).

Hiebert concludes that while the economic integration of immigrants into Canadian cities continues to be a salient social and policy concern, the relationship between residential patterns and immigrant integration should not be viewed as necessarily exacerbating the challenges that immigrants to Canada face. Arguably, “single-group-dominated enclaves may provide economic assistance to their residents...enclaves, like other parts of the city, contain diverse populations — ethnoculturally, socio-economically and in terms of people’s religious affiliations” (p. 41).

#### *Concentrated immigrant poverty*

Quantitative data from the Census and immigration files allows researchers to obtain a bird’s eye view of where immigrants are settling, and how those settlement patterns intersect with other economic and social variables. For example, studies have found that children living in Canadian neighbourhoods with high immigrant concentration reported lower levels of emotional-behaviour problems for children from recent immigrant families compared with non-immigrant children, despite greater exposure to poverty (Georgiades, Boyle & Duku, 2007). McRae et al. found that children in areas with immigrant concentration and ethnic homogeneity had lower levels of child developmental vulnerability than those living in areas with diverse ethnicity (2019). The authors



suggest that “ethnic and ethnic-homogenous communities possess assets, aside from financial resources, that strengthen children’s ability to succeed at an early age” (2020, p. 10).

Yet few studies on immigrant residential patterns in Canada explore what these patterns *mean* to those who live in those neighbourhoods. Most scholarship in this area draws on large-scale quantitative data sets, with little attention paid to the meaning-making processes, choices and perceptions of those who live in the cities and neighbourhoods we study.

One exception is a 2008 study by Smith and Ley that used focus groups with immigrants living in several neighbourhoods in Toronto and Vancouver. They sought to understand how immigrants, living in poor neighbourhoods, felt about where they lived. Overall Smith and Ley found that their respondents suffered from a “triple jeopardy” of poverty, immigrant status and living in a poor neighbourhood. This contributed to “a sense of disabling spatial entrapment in poverty districts that served as a constant reminder of their dispiriting circumstances and limited agency” (2008, p. 703). Respondents reported anxieties over crime and fear for their children. They internalized the stigmatizing messages about their neighbourhoods that tend to dominate elite and media accounts. The perception that Canadian-born residents had withdrawn from these neighbourhoods contributed to feelings of isolation and social exclusion. Despite this predominantly negative account, residents of some neighbourhoods also disputed prevailing stereotypes about their community. They described where they lived as accessible, well-serviced areas with good amenities and access to social and mutual support (this was particularly true in neighbourhoods with better transit access). Respondents also tended to attribute feelings of safety to the presence of others who shared their cultural background, which resonates with other research in this area (Simich, 2003; Sherrell, Hyndman & Preniqi, 2005; Brunner, Hyndman & Mountz, 2014).

Another exception is the work of Annick Germain who has studied the relationship between ethnic diversity in neighbourhoods in Montreal and found that “the most multiethnic neighbourhoods also seem to have the least inter-ethnic tension” (Germain et al. 1995). She argues that diversity is part of “the vernacular of the social landscape,” and that it is within

diverse neighbourhoods that we find forms of ‘soft cosmopolitanism’ (2013, p. 32). Germain also writes about ‘the paradox of the ghetto,’ which she describes as the need to alleviate confinement and social isolation of residents within ghetto-like spaces, while also acknowledging that these spaces “protect [residents] from the discrimination, exclusion and rejection that await them outside” (Germain & Leloup, 2006, p. 61).

Discussions about the spatial concentration of immigrant communities, especially when this concentration intersects with poverty, geographic isolation and/or other social problems (crime etc.) tend to centre around the question of choice. That is, there is perhaps nothing inherently wrong with living in an enclave-like situation in a poor neighbourhood. Where this may become problematic is when those who live in these situations feel they have few options for mobility because of their socio-economic or immigrant status (or the intersection of these two). This is especially problematic if poverty becomes generational – and the poverty experienced by parents is passed on to children. This is what separates a ghetto from an enclave – ghettos are spaces that have historically been constructed to keep minority communities in a specific geographic location, isolated from the wider society. Enclaves, as Hiebert (2015) notes, emerge out of variety of factors and combinations of choice and constraint. Peach (1996) suggests that this is the difference between “good segregation” and “bad segregation” – segregation *itself* is not inherently problematic, rather, the degree to which that segregation is voluntary versus coerced is where it may become problematic. In the study by Smith and Ley discussed above, many respondents spoke of their residential situations in terms that suggest a lack of choice and mobility constrained by poverty and housing affordability, while others described their neighbourhoods in more positive terms, as places of social support and accessibility. These distinctions matter in policy terms when grappling with the question of social and spatial integration of immigrant communities.

## **6.4 Findings**

In this chapter I have presented three inter-related pieces of information: An account of one refugee family’s decision to relocate from Vancouver to Little Syria in Calgary; data around the economic context and housing affordability challenges in Calgary; and a summary of literature

on the spatial concentration of ‘ethnic’ communities across a range of geographies. These three accounts serve to contextualize the complicated story of refugee housing in one Canadian city. Decisions about where refugees live are shaped by competing variables that include: Personal and familial choices about the kind of housing and community they would prefer to live in; severe economic constraints in cities marked by income polarization and few adequate housing options; and value-laden narratives about immigrant and refugee ‘integration.’ The latter are not informed by evidence, but instead draw on normative ideas about ‘how’ minorities integrate and what makes a good neighbourhood.

The remaining section of this chapter takes up these themes to tell the story of refugee housing. I begin by examining the perceptions of those who assisted in the initial settlement of Syrians in Little Syria, arguing that anxieties over spatial concentrations of refugees are informed by assumptions about integration that are based on values, and not facts. I then move to a discussion of how housing choice reveals the agency and autonomy of refugees. I conclude by returning to the political-economy of the city to examine where refugee choice collides with limited options and a highly constrained context that radically limits mobility.

## **6.5 “We didn’t want to create a ghetto...”**

So what happened was, we needed, 3-bedroom apartments for those five, six and seven people families, right? [I: Yep] And Mainstreet [property management company] is one of the only in that area, is one of the only ones that has that combination, we had a huge number of that five, six and seven people families. Well if you’re in Forest Lawn, yeah, because that’s intentional because there is no other place that actually, and they couldn’t actually afford to have a self-standing house... So we jumped on it. And not intentionally, but, yeah, not intentionally, but we, and *we didn’t want to create like a ghetto so to speak, but that’s kind of what ended up happening because of the fact that we just had to do it fast and there was nothing else in the city that affordable for that price.* [Interview with Refugee Assistance Program provider]

Finding suitable housing for refugee families is a challenge at the best of times (Jones, forthcoming; Hiebert, 2009; Francis & Hiebert, 2014; Sherrell, 2010). This challenge was exacerbated by the sheer volume of refugees arriving in a short period of time, and, as the service

provider noted, finding housing for the large families while also staying within the social assistance level budget set by the Federal Government. These challenges were shared by RAP providers in other cities (Rose & Charette, 2017, Oudshroon, Benbow & Meyer, 2019)

For Government Assisted Refugee families destined to Calgary in late 2015 and early 2016, family size played a determining role in where they ended up living. As the service provider from the RAP provider explained in the quote above, there were limited options for housing the large numbers of families with four-five members at the Social Assistance Rates provided by the Government (39 percent of Syrian refugee families that arrived between November 4, 2015 and December 31, 2016 had families with between four and six members (IRCC, 2019b). It was also the case that these families preferred to be in structures more resembling stand-alone houses (attached townhouses in Little Syria fit the bill) compared with living in an apartment building. The RAP provider negotiated a rent reduction with the property manager, which incentivized housing Syrians in this housing complex.

The Mainstreet Housing complex that became home to 35-40 Syrian families was, in many ways, an optimal housing option for large families in immediate need of housing. The townhomes are relatively large, with three bedrooms and bathroom upstairs, a sunny main floor with a large kitchen and adjoining living room, and a finished basement that includes a washer and dryer. The rent was \$1250 a month which is considered a reasonable price for a three-bedroom townhome in Calgary. The townhomes are also built around a large open field which provided valuable public space for children to play in the warmer months. Despite the obvious benefits of the complex, there was immediate concern by service providers and others involved in the Syrian resettlement about creating a ‘ghetto.’

According to the RAP provider, once they had housed one or two families there, word spread among the Syrians in Calgary and many families insisted on moving to Little Syria. Several service providers interviewed had stories about Syrian refugees choosing to live in Little Syria despite having what the service provider believed to be ‘better’ housing elsewhere:

**Interview excerpt #1:**

P: We had one family, I'll never forget this family, he was going to pay \$700 rent...it's a subsidized housing type thing...and it was not far from there, you know, it was right off of 17th avenue...And he refused.

I: [Laughs] Too far?

P: No, he said, no he wanted to be in Little Syria and that he didn't care that it, it was a brand new place, like fully renovated and it was half the rent that he would be paying there. So I made him sign a paper saying, "You're paying double the rent here, don't come to me in two months and say I don't have any money for my children to eat because this is your choice." And, I had a lot of conversations like that. (Interview with RAP provider)

**Interview excerpt #2:**

P: Yeah, you know, people like they gather in the Forest Lawn, they want to belong, one of them, he used to live in Lake Bonavista, and I told him, this is my dream, everybody's dream to live there

I: In Forest Lawn?

P: No

I: In Lake Bonavista

P: Lake Bonavista

I: [Laughs] Oh that's what you told him, yeah, it's really nice!

P: Nice area, but he rather to move here, I told him, over there schools are better, life is better, service better, he said, "no, [if] I want see friends, I have to drive." (Interview with service provider from an Immigrant Serving Agency)

Both these quotes point to the priority of some refugee families to live in close proximity to other Syrian refugees despite the cost (example 1) and the perception by service providers and sponsors that there were more desirable neighbourhoods for refugees to live in (example 2). In this second example, the service provider refers to living in the south Calgary community of Lake Bonavista as "everybody's dream." The service provider was herself an immigrant to Canada who had lived in Calgary for several decades. Lake Bonavista is an older suburban neighbourhood with a predominantly white population. As the name suggests, the community

sits on an artificial lake, the homes are large and the property values are significantly higher than in east Calgary. Her comment reflects a commonsense attitude that I heard throughout my research from those living outside Forest Lawn: If people had a *choice* to live elsewhere, no one would choose to live in Forest Lawn.

The stigma associated with Forest Lawn was well-described by one of the stakeholders I interviewed. Kendra worked at the Community Resource Centre in Forest Lawn and was also a long-term resident of the neighbourhood:

So, I've personally been living in Forest Lawn for the majority of my life. I've also lived out in other communities...But I did feel the stigma, absolutely...When I went to Mount Royal University, and when I, like, take training, and you know one of the common questions is like "Where do you live?" When I say "Forest Lawn" like sometimes I just get a look, or you know, people sometimes they'll like...turn around. I feel it, I can understand how it impacts other community members.

As a long time Calgary resident myself, I am familiar with the negative associations that people who don't live in Forest Lawn have with the community. East Calgary has long been considered an undesirable, dangerous place to live (Ghitter & Smart, 2008).

Despite the broader negative perceptions about the neighbourhood, the draw of living with other Syrians motivated some Syrian families to move from smaller communities in Alberta. While most of the Syrian residents in Little Syria were Government Assisted Refugees, a few Privately Sponsored Refugees families managed to circumvent the perceptions of their sponsorship group and move to Little Syria.

Likely informed by the class composition of many sponsorship groups, Forest Lawn was considered an undesirable destination for these newly arrived refugee families. Many sponsors and volunteers that I spoke with reflected concern about the outcomes for those families that ended up in Forest Lawn. This concern was largely about Forest Lawn itself, which is perceived to be a poor neighbourhood with bad schools. The refugee women I spoke with reflected the

concerns of their sponsors and community volunteers who spoke directly to the Syrians about Forest Lawn being a bad neighbourhood:

**Fieldnote 1:**

Sara says that lots of people have said to her “why do you live in Forest Lawn? You should leave.” Which people say these things? I ask. Other Syrians at school (Haya confirms this, saying lots of people at her school also say this). Also – and she checks with Haya to confirm that she should be honest – other Canadians. Also, her son tells her that there are lots of problems at the school. Other people have said the schools are bad.

**Fieldnote 2:**

Layal says that a volunteer from one of the kids’ schools comes on the weekend to practice reading with the kids. They find it quite funny that she is very old and a volunteer – 70-years-old, her name is Ms. Jane. Ms. Jane has told them that the schools her children are in are the worst schools in the city so she feels she needs to come and help with the reading otherwise they will not learn to read in English.

There was also a belief that Arabic-speaking refugees should be spread out across the city and in neighbourhoods with English-speakers. The unspoken assumption was that spatial proximity to English speaking Canadians would facilitate integration. These perceptions were reinforced by the settlement agencies that encouraged private sponsors to find housing outside of East Calgary and away from the rapidly growing Syrian community in Forest Lawn. One private sponsor shared: “Our family [sponsored Syrian refugee family] wanted to move to Little Syria but the settlement agencies told us not to let them move there, that it was better for them to be in a different community further away from other Syrians, so that’s where we tried to find housing” (Private Sponsor, interview).

In a study of privately sponsored Syrian refugees in Alberta, Agrawal (2019) found similar ideas about language and integration: “sponsors vetoed the refugees’ idea to work or live closer to their compatriots. They argued that the refugees had to be surrounded by English and thus improve their language skills more quickly” (p. 956).

Despite the efforts of sponsors, a number of Privately Sponsored Refugee families ended up moving to Little Syria as soon as they could. Ousa and her family were one such family. She, her husband and their seven children were privately sponsored by a Group of Five in a small town outside Calgary. They lived there for about a year and moved to Little Syria in 2017. Their decision was motivated by the desire to live with other Syrians. Ousa reported that no one in this small town spoke Arabic, and they felt lonely and isolated, despite the kindness of the English-speaking sponsorship group. Ousa reported being much happier in Little Syria, now able to connect with other Arabic-speaking Syrian women, and more closely connected with a community.

These accounts reveal the values that undergird ideas about ‘refugee integration.’ Refugees should live in ‘good’ neighbourhoods (characterized here as having good schools and few poor people) and be far away from other Syrian refugees so they can learn English. The implicit – and at times explicit – assumption is that living in a white, middle class community away from people like them, will lead to better integration outcomes (i.e. learning English). In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that this is the case, and arguably, the benefits of living near others who share language and culture can insulate newcomers from isolation and loneliness (Simich, 2003; Ley & Smith, 2008). Also unaddressed in this equation is the role that imagined middle-class English-speaking white Canadians might play in facilitating or inhibiting integration. The assumption that simply living in a ‘better’ neighbourhood will lead to better outcomes is largely untested.

## **6.6 Refugee agency/autonomy reflected through housing choice**

At a national immigration conference in Montreal in 2017, representatives from various levels of government debriefed the successes and challenges of the SRRI. The representative from the Federal government spoke candidly about the challenges of finding housing for Syrian families – not simply because of the large family sizes and relatively small rental supplement – but because this group of refugees was quite “picky” about the kind of housing and where they lived. These findings are echoed in IRCC’s report about the SRRI published in 2016 (IRCC 2016, in Rose & Charette 2016). In my interviews with service providers and others close to the Calgary



resettlement initiative, I also heard about the frustration that service providers faced when a refugee family would turn down hard-won housing secured by an SPO.

In their comprehensive assessment of the challenges of housing during the SRRI, Rose and Charette also identify this challenge. I quote at length from their report:

Generally, however, in view of the size requirements and affordability constraints, RAP-SPOs could only offer their clients a limited range of choices. Several interviewees noted that a surprisingly large number of their clients were reluctant to accept the first, or even the first few, offers of permanent housing, typically on account of its basic character, the high density context or its location beyond walking distance to places of worship. This increased the workload on housing search workers, who had to find ways to assist their clients to **reconcile their expectations with local housing market realities** for families on a very tight budget...Interviewees believed strongly that the federal government's decision not to offer the usual pre-arrival orientation to the Syrian GARs contributed to widespread misapprehensions and inflated expectations of the quality of housing that would be offered to them on arrival. (Bold in original, Rose and Charette 2017, p. 16).

The complex desires, expectations and choices of Syrian refugees vis-à-vis their housing situation frustrated and surprised sector workers. In fairness to those working in the sector, they were working around the clock to find housing in a very tight market for an overwhelming number of refugees in a very short period of time. This also tended to take place with the media scrutinizing how long it was taking to get Syrians out of hotels and into housing (cf. Hunter, 2016). In Calgary, the crush of community volunteers and private sponsors, also added to the intensity of the work for those in the sector (SPO interview). One sector employee told me that it was not uncommon for her or her colleagues to end up at Walmart after a long day at work, buying winter coats for refugees because they were waiting on the cheques from the Federal Government to come through but in the meantime “you can’t just leave people like that” (SPO Interview).

Despite the good intentions of those working in the sector and those at a policy level, the frustration they experienced in the face of ‘picky’ refugees reveals the expectations and ideas that shape how refugees are imagined by their countries of reception: refugees are imagined and expected to be grateful – not picky. In conversations with those involved in the resettlement, I

was often reminded of the line attributed to the Swiss novelist Max Frisch: “We asked for workers; we got people instead” in speaking about guest-workers brought to Germany in the post-World War II era. In this case I think, “We asked for refugees; we got people instead.”

The decision to turn down housing from service providers, to relocate to a different province or city, or to leave the town or community of a sponsorship group challenged conventional ideas about how these refugees *should* behave. Instead of passive recipients of Canadian aid and benevolence, these refugee families pushed back, asking for something different or something better. In so doing, they re-scripted the relationship between the giver and the recipient of the gift (Nguyen, 2012). Scholarship on refugees has long demonstrated that rather than ‘speechless,’ refugees are political agents who assert their autonomy in important and powerful ways, despite the complex systems of governance that surround them (Malkki, 1996; Hyndman, 2000; Besteman, 2016; Tang, 2015).

During the SRRI, the relationship between the Canadian state – including the non-profit shadow state that carried out the bulk of the ‘work’ of resettling refugees – and Syrian refugees was inflected by what Didier Fassin has described as ‘humanitarian reason.’ Fassin argues that humanitarianism is structured by “a complex ontology of inequality...that differentiates in a hierarchical manner the value of human lives.” (2007, p. 519). The recipient of humanitarian intervention is stripped of their historical, biographical complexity, reduced to the category of victim: “Humanitarian testimony establishes two forms of humanity and two sorts of life in the public space: *there are those who can tell stories and those whose stories can be told only by others.*” (2007, p. 518, emphasis added).

In pushing back, just weeks or months after arriving in Canada, about what they believed constituted appropriate, adequate housing for their families, refugees were claiming the space to tell their own story, often with great inconvenience for service providers and sponsors. It was – and continues to be – difficult for those close to the Syrian community (as sector workers, community volunteers, and private sponsors) to accept that these families truly know what is best for them. Those who feel this way believe that *they* (the Canadians) know better because they

know the system, the context, the local geography better (etc.). For those who have worked in refugee resettlement for years or decades, they contend that they have seen this before. I raise this point not so much to suggest that one group knows better than the other (Syrians v. Canadians), but rather to point to the relational power dynamics between the two groups; and to suggest that refugees often have more agency than they are attributed through the humanitarian relationship.

As I suggest in the next chapter, Syrian families had a sophisticated understanding of what they wanted and needed out of their community. Little Syria was in the heart of a highly accessible and walkable neighbourhood, in close proximity to schools for both adults (language classes) and children, the housing stock was relatively well maintained, spacious and clean, amenities like grocery stores selling *halal* meat as well as No Frills were minutes away, and – as identified above – close proximity to other Syrians provided a sense of safety and security (even if not every family knew or even liked the others in the community – an issue I discuss further below).

Consider Sara’s family’s decision to relocate to Little Syria:

Like Souzan, Sara and her family, which included her husband, their two teenage sons and ten-year old daughter, were originally destined to a small city outside of Montreal in Quebec. They lived there for about ten months before deciding to move to Calgary. Along with the desire to learn English (instead of French), Sara experienced racial discrimination in Quebec:

They heard about Calgary from a Syrian friend that they met on the airplane to Canada. They stayed in touch using Whatsapp and Facebook. Their decision to leave Quebec was mostly because of the language – they learned some English in Syria (Sara studied English a little in school) but not French. Also, her sons did not make friends at school and wanted to learn English (her older son already spoke some English) so they decided to move to Calgary. Later in the conversation, I ask about problems being Muslim in Calgary and she says she hasn’t had any problems. “Maybe in Quebec?” says Haya. Yes. Sara tells us a story of how she was walking one day in Joliet and a man in a truck threw an energy drink at her from his car. She took down the information about the vehicle and gave it to the settlement agency (“Like CCIS but in Quebec”) after a week they didn’t do anything. (Fieldnotes excerpt)

They moved from Quebec directly to Little Syria and she was among the more enthusiastic respondents when asked about where they lived now:

I ask what she likes about the neighbourhood. She said they have a busy life, they like it busy. Last night they had 15 people over – drinking coffee, drinking tea, talking. I clarify – all these people are Syrian and all are neighbours. After this she will go to visit a friend who lives in Rundle (a few blocks away) for lunch. The kids have lots of friends who come to visit...I ask Sara how she knows so many people? She says that she always says hello to people on the street (she clarifies, she says “*Salaam*” to other Syrians) and makes friends with them. In general she seems perplexed by other people’s negative perceptions of Forest Lawn. “I am happy here.” They plan to stay for another year. I say, “You feel safe here?” “Of course.”

As I discuss in the next chapter, many of the women that I spoke with shared Sara’s perception that their community was safe. They laughed off comments from other Calgarians, Syrians and service providers that Forest Lawn was a ‘bad’ neighbourhood. And they found it comforting to live among other Syrian families.

The relative satisfaction that Syrian families in Little Syria expressed about their housing choices resonates with other studies on housing and immigrants and refugees. Ley and Smith (2008) found that immigrants living in poor neighbourhoods that were walkable, accessible and close to amenities were more satisfied than those living in more remote, isolated or poorly serviced communities. Oudshroon, Benbow and Meyer (2019), in their study of Syrian refugees and housing, note that their participants reported feeling isolated in neighbourhoods without amenities where they would have to take multiple buses. Burke Wood, McGrath and Young (2011) in their study of refugees in Calgary found that Karen refugees who were dispersed across the city found the city’s poor public transit posed a barrier to community connection and left refugees feeling isolated and alone. These studies suggest that rather than a naïve misunderstanding about the best place to live, Syrian refugees who actively chose Little Syria, identified crucial protective factors that would enhance their quality of life in a new and strange place.

## 6.7 Looking forward – constrained mobility and the housing landscape

In the summary of the literature on ethnic enclaves, I cited Peach's distinction between what he describes as 'good segregation' versus 'bad segregation.' He suggests that bad segregation happens when people have few choices over where they live and experience a sense of spatial entrapment in their neighbourhood or community. In their study of immigrants living in poor neighbourhoods in Toronto and Vancouver, Ley and Smith found that many of their participants did experience feelings of entrapment – unable to escape the “triple jeopardy” of poverty, immigrant status and geography (2008, p. 708).

As this research was conducted during the early years of resettlement, it is too early to determine the extent to which Syrians living in Little Syria – and in east Calgary more broadly – will have choices over where they live and move. But indications are that they regard living in Little Syria to be a case of Peach's 'good segregation'. In the section that follows, I highlight some of the factors that have continued to shape decision-making around housing for Syrian refugees in East Calgary.

### *Constrained mobility I – discrimination and sense of safety*

The desire to live in proximity to other Syrian refugees was a driving force behind the creation and establishment of Little Syria. In the following chapter I describe the networks and social connection that exist in Little Syria and the web of support for refugee women. In this section, though, I want to be cautious about romanticizing the ethnic enclave and the connections that exist between women. The more time I spent with Syrian women in Little Syria, the more I came to see differences among women and families living in these four-square blocks. As my relationship with my community-connector, Haya, deepened, she also explained differences between families that would not have been visible to me – patently an 'outsider' in this Muslim, Arabic-speaking, Syrian community.

People more familiar with the dynamics of resettled refugees might be able to explain that they tended to be Government Assisted Refugees, and therefore were more likely to come from rural or semi-urban areas in Syria, have lower levels of English and formal education, and have large

families. All the women who participated in this study were also Sunni Muslims who wore the *hijab*. While this was all true, Haya would describe much more nuanced differences. Geography played a large role in explaining these differences: Haya and her family were from Homs. The families we interviewed were from all over Syria: Daraa, Damascus, Idlib, Aleppo and Hama. While they were all Syrian, these differences in geography were significant to Haya and others I spoke to throughout the research.

I ask about my theory that one of the reasons I think maybe Little Syria exists is because Syrians like to live near their extended family – which is what both Mlak and Haya have explained about their past. Mlak says yes – she likes living here because there are so many Syrian people around. Haya rejected the idea outright. She says no – these people are not family – these people from Daraa and all over. They are not familiar to her. They are not family. Many of them are not educated and they don't remind her of family. But she has a few people who are like family – Hala and Layal. Mlak has Fatima – the single mother who lives next door.

The differences *between* families in Little Syria was often glossed over by those outside the community, including service providers, sponsors and other Syrians, though these differences were significant and shaped how those living in the community understood their place within it and their relations with one another.

These differences sometimes came to a head over the parenting practices of other families in the community. One woman I interviewed had moved a few blocks away from Little Syria because of concern over her children: When she lived in Little Syria, she felt she didn't have control over the whereabouts of her children. It was common for large groups of Syrian children to run around together playing both outside in the large public space at the centre of the housing complex (as illustrated at the outset of this dissertation), and also going into the homes of other Syrian families. Sometimes her daughters would get in fights with other children and parents would complain. She also had problems with the neighbourhood school and felt her kids were better off in their new school.

Haya also expressed concern about some of her son's (Syrian) friends from the neighbourhood. While she liked that her kids had lots of friends living close by, she worried about the parenting

styles of some of the other Syrian families in the neighbourhood. She also quietly expressed concerns over the politics of some of the Syrian refugees in the neighbourhood – believing that they did not share her views on the Assad regime. These differences present a complex account of ‘living in community’ that should disrupt romanticized ideas about minority communities living together. That said, I suggest here that despite these differences and fractures within the community, Syrian refugees still found the familiarity of living with other Syrians preferable over the unknown of living far from one another. This was evident by the number of families I met who left *and returned* to Little Syria.

Most Syrian families that I spoke to had put their name on the waitlist for subsidized housing. The waitlist for Calgary Housing is estimated to be about 4000 people long and it can take years for people to get access to below-market rate rental accommodation (City of Calgary, 2018). While the cost of the housing was a motivator for applying for Calgary Housing, service providers also explained that Syrians believed that because Calgary Housing was government-run (instead of through a private company or landlord), it was more likely to be a fair housing arrangement (SPO interview).

Getting a coveted spot in Calgary Housing was described by Haya, as “winning the lottery.” I interviewed several families that had moved from Little Syria into Calgary Housing. Two were in nearby housing complexes just blocks from Little Syria. Another family moved further away from Little Syria, to subsidized housing in the city’s northeast. They lived there for a few months before returning to Little Syria, giving up their coveted spot in Calgary Housing. The husband explained that they did not feel safe in their new neighbourhood and worried about theft.

Souzan’s family, whose story opened this chapter, also got a spot in Calgary Housing and moved into a subsidized housing unit in east Calgary in early 2019. They stayed in the house for a few months but experienced unending harassment from neighbours on one side. The harassment included racist denigrations and emptying the public garbage bins on their doorstep. After several months of this, the family returned to Little Syria.

The threat of discrimination and violence – both real and perceived – reinforced the sense of security that living near other Syrian families provided. Discrimination experienced outside the neighbourhood served to reinforce the sense living among those like them – even when they didn’t necessarily share politics, geography, class, education or parenting values with these Syrians – was the least bad option.

### *Constrained mobility 2 – employment status and cost of moving*

As discussed above, Syrian women liked Little Syria because of its proximity to schools and amenities; they liked living near other Syrian families and they appreciated the large public space for their children to play in during the warmer months. Despite these benefits, there were also challenges with the housing itself – specifically as families continued to grow in size. All of the women I met through this research had children, and the majority had young children. Several of the women I interviewed became pregnant during the course of this research, including Haya, my community connector. In 2018, five babies were born to the 15 women I knew best in the community. These new babies added to already large families who already had four, five or six children.

While Little Syria remained a nice place to live, families started to feel the pinch of overcrowding. The particular challenge was the fact that the townhomes in Little Syria only had one bathroom – a challenge for families of six or more.

While Haya and her husband often discussed a desire to move out of Little Syria, they ended up signing another six-month lease shortly after their fifth child was born in the summer of 2018. Akram, Haya’s husband, had been looking at other places to live – preferably a stand-alone house somewhere not too far from where they lived now – but everything was too expensive. Their income was fully dependent on government transfers (Alberta Works and the Canada Child Benefit) and they could not afford the significant increase in rent that moving to a bigger house would require.



Aischa and her family recently tried to move out of the housing complex. They found a bigger house for their family of seven (five children and two adults), while the rent had been manageable, the heating bills were too high and they could not afford to stay in the home. They returned to Little Syria less than a year after moving out. In 2019, Haya and her family were able to move, but ended up staying in Little Syria and moving to what they felt was a better townhome a few blocks over.

In addition to the income barrier, employment status also shaped access to housing for Syrian families. At the time of writing, in early 2020, none of the families I interviewed had entered the labour market. This meant that even with a sizable child benefit and Alberta Works, landlords were largely unwilling to rent to unemployed families. I heard several accounts of landlords turning down Syrians for housing even when the cost of the housing was not significantly more than what they were already paying in Little Syria. Syrians reported that the landlords turned them down based on one of two factors: either because they were unemployed or because they had children, and the landlord didn't want to rent to families.

## **6.8 Conclusion**

Speaking about the mass arrival of refugees in Europe in 2015, one policy maker commented: “We [local authorities in Europe] don't have a refugee crisis, we have a housing crisis” (Housing Europe, 2016 in Soederberg 2019, p. 924). To some degree this describes the situation in Canadian cities, including Calgary, where housing has become increasingly unaffordable: The Syrian arrivals revealed the significant barriers that low income families face in a polarized housing market. This prompted decision making and self-advocacy on the part of refugee families who clashed with service providers and private sponsors over what ‘good’ housing and a ‘good’ neighbourhood means. In this way they challenged normative ideas about what it means to be a refugee and how communities are built and sustain those within them. Despite this promise, the wider political economy of the city, suggests that the agency and choices of low-income and refugee families will continue to be strained by the realities of an income polarized, uneven city and the failure to address the crisis of housing affordability.

## **Chapter 7: Geographic reflections on the question of ‘integration’**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the question of if and how refugees ‘integrate’ into their host societies. Integration is a highly contested concept with a complex lineage (these themes are addressed in the conceptual framework chapter). I suggest that discussions of integration need to be grounded materially and spatially. Much of the data on integration in Canada draws on large data sets that explore the outcome of refugee cohorts over time; this data is largely econocentric in focus, tracking the employment, language, and housing of immigrant and refugee groups over time (Kaida, Hou & Stick, 2019; Hiebert, 2009; Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014).

Qualitative studies of refugees offer insight into the complexity of how those ‘markers’ of integration are achieved (Brunner, Hyndman & Mountz, 2014; Simich, 2003; Creese 2011; Teixeira, 2014). For example, Brunner, Hyndman & Mountz describe the delay in ‘integration’ – English language learning – imposed by the desire for Acehnese refugees to marry someone from back home (2014). While small and ethno-specific, these studies reveal the complexity of integration as lived experience. However, rarely do these studies attend to the role that specific places play in shaping processes of integration and cultivating or inhibiting feelings of belonging and connection.

As such, in this chapter I advance a discussion of integration focusing on the place in which these processes occur. As a spatially focused account, I draw on the disconnections and (fragile) connections that shape refugee life in this particular micro-enclave. Integration to Canada is framed by the state as a ‘two-way’ process that demands that both newcomers and Canadians adapt and make efforts at inclusion/being included: “integration is a two-way process for immigrants to adapt to life in Canada and for Canada to welcome and adapt to the newcomers.” (IRCC, 2017, p.1). In this chapter I examine how the burden of integration is placed largely on the shoulders of newcomers, in this case a refugee population that is othered as Muslim, Arabic-speaking and poor.

I argue that there is a disjuncture between Canadian state imaginaries of refugee incorporation, as well as services for refugees and newcomers and the lived experience/reality for refugees. Integration is imagined by the Canadian state as a two-way street with both the state and society and newcomers working to accommodate and include the other. This imaginary cultivates a ‘telos’ of Canadian settlement and integration – follow these steps toward integration! This is perhaps best reflected through the Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) program where refugees are told if they participate and learn English they will have access to the labour market. This is fundamentally discrepant with the reality of labour market integration in Canada – I will show how LINC performance and employment outcomes are difficult (if not impossible) to correlate. Even refugees who succeed in LINC struggle to connect to the labour market. If they do find work, it is often work that does not require advanced English. For example, research on refugee employment in Alberta found that 77 percent of refugees were in jobs earning less than \$20/hour and 60 percent were in jobs classified as low skill (NOC Code D) (Esses, Burstein, Ravanear, Hallman & Medianu, 2013; see also: Krahn, Derwing, Mulder & Wilkinson, 2000). Similarly, the immigrant service sector, heavily invested in by the state, is an unreliable source of support for refugee families.

Beyond imaginaries of the Canadian state, Canadian society itself is imagined as an inclusive and multicultural space<sup>29</sup> and the value of relations with ‘those outside one’s group’ is considered a significant marker of ‘integration’ yet the experiences of refugees suggests that inclusion into ‘Canadian’ (white) society is elusive. Despite the spatially constrained nature of their life in Canada, we will see how refugee women still experienced discrimination from their Canadian neighbours. They experience the city as a difficult and dangerous place; hostile to them because of their visible status as Muslim women and Arabic speakers. Similarly, their

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<sup>29</sup> In an editorial published in *The Globe and Mail* around the time of the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, philosopher and public figure John Raulston Saul wrote: “the Canadian concept of living in a perpetually incomplete experiment may seem radical to many in the Western world. And yet you could simply see it as a profoundly non-racial approach to civilization – one based on the idea of an inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us” (Raulston Saul, 2016).

interactions with mainstream services – such as education and healthcare – is shaped by mistrust and misunderstanding.

In light of the failures of this two-way imaginary, Syrian women find connection and precarious forms of belonging in the people closest to them – their family here and there, a few chosen Syrian neighbours, and when they need support, Arabic speaking neighbours. I theorize this as ‘placemaking’ following Miraftab’s definition as the “everyday actions and practices that take place not only locally but also transnationally and are critically influenced by the materiality of the place in which they occur” (Miraftab 2016, p. 28). These practices of placemaking are shaped by gender and are spatially constituted. They recall Lê Espiritu and Duong’s concept of feminist refugee epistemology (2018) which draws awareness to the “intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested” (2018, p. 588).

## **7.2 Integration imaginaries of the Canadian state**

One of the most cited pieces of literature in relation to refugee integration is Ager and Strang’s 2008 “operational definition” which describes not only the markers but also the means of integration. Alongside housing, health and language, employment is considered a key marker in studies of refugee integration (Ager & Strang 2008). For the Canadian nation-state, having invested heavily in the costs of refugee resettlement, refugee employment is viewed as an important return on that investment. As such, many of the studies on refugee outcomes center on refugees’ ability to access and integrate into the Canadian labour market, thus achieving financial independence from the state (cf. Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017; Bevelander & Pendakur, 2012).

Canada has a robust settlement and integration infrastructure funded largely by the Federal Government. In 2017-2018, the Canadian federal government invested \$778 million in settlement services across the country, outside the Province of Quebec (Treasury Board, 2019). These included services focused on language training, community supports, information and orientation related to employment and programs for children and youth (IRCC, 2019a). This infrastructure is largely credited with the ‘success’ of immigrant integration in Canada, as compared to other countries, such as the United States (Bloemraad, 2006)

Despite the rosy ‘big picture’ of immigrant and refugee integration, scholarship reminds us that there isn’t one story of immigration or integration: “...there can be no single story of migration or experience of inclusion/exclusion, integration/confrontation” (Miraftab, 2016, p. 75). These processes are highly variegated and complex. Immigrant and refugee reception varies by where and when it happens, the histories and legacies of a particular place, social imaginaries of inclusion and belonging and so on.

These distinctions are significant in relation to Government Assisted Refugees arriving after 2001 and the passage of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)*. IRPA shifted the criteria for refugee admissions from selection criteria based on the potential for refugees to integrate into Canadian society toward prioritizing highly vulnerable refugee groups. This includes refugees with large families, those with disabilities or health concerns, people who have experienced protracted displacement and refugees with low literacy in their first language (Sherrell & Newton, 2020; Hiebert & Sherrell, 2009; Hyndman, 2011). People who work with resettled refugees in Canada point to the paradox that those selected for refugee resettlement are selected based on their heightened levels of vulnerability, yet shortly after arrival they are treated like other categories of immigrants, with the expectation that they will achieve economic independence rapidly. This is likely the legacy of a Canadian refugee system that was based on selecting refugees with high levels of human capital (education, labour market experience) who were likely to ‘integrate’ quickly into the Canadian labour market. While the selection criteria have changed, it can be argued that the services available for post-IRPA refugees have not kept pace with the specific needs of this group.

In her research with Somali refugees in the US, Bestemen notes that “The very people who must present themselves as dependent recipients of charity in order to gain resettlement must, within the space of a few weeks, become economically independent and productive residents who make no demands on their...host communities” (2016, p. 104). While Canada offers a more robust resettlement infrastructure for refugees than what is available in the US, the pressure on refugees to attain economic independence and enter the labour market remains, though it is variable

depending on which province refugees reside and the provincial welfare regimes in different places.

The achievement of economic independence is challenging for this category of refugees precisely because of their heightened levels of vulnerability that made them candidates for resettlement – including complex health issues and disabilities, large families and low literacy in their first language. According to data from the Canadian Government, as of 2010, it was taking Government Assisted Refugees ten years after landing to catch up with refugees in other categories in terms of earnings – and these were still only 60 percent of the Canadian average (IRCC 2016c in Rose & Charette p. 2).

These intersecting and complex articulations of vulnerability were visible in the lives of my participants: None of the women in my study – with the exception of my interpreter – had education beyond a grade eight level and in turn had low literacy in Arabic. Most came from large families – some had as many as 12 siblings - and grew up in relative poverty in Syria. Their husbands had worked as labourers, or outside Syria in construction (in Lebanon or UAE), some of them sold goods at the market. All had large families in Canada – the fewest number of children of a family I interviewed was three, but most had five, one woman had eight children. Several families had a child or children with disabilities – including children who had Down’s Syndrome, were hearing impaired, or had cerebral palsy. Adults also reported complex health issues – chronic pain, blood infections, cancer, diabetes etc.

These variables added complexity to the task of finding employment in Canada. Beyond these, however, Syrian refugees arriving in 2015-16 were also uniquely positioned, not simply because of the overwhelming level of interest in their arrival, but because they arrived without the pressure of a transportation loan – which usually accompanies resettled refugees. Most GARs are saddled with the large cost of travel to Canada (the average loan cost is approximately \$3000).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In her study of refugees in Vancouver, Francis notes: “A single mother of five from a protracted refugee situation starts her life in Canada with a debt of approximately \$11,000, which she must pay off within three years. Interest accumulates with each missed monthly payment is garnished from Child Tax Benefit cheques.” (2010).

This loan must be repaid to the government. Studies on the transportation loan suggest that often refugees may stop taking language classes in order to get work to begin repaying the loan and that it causes considerable stress and anxiety for recipients (Wilson, Murtaza & Shakya, 2010; IRCC, 2015; Francis, 2010). Syrians resettled under the SRRI were not burdened with this loan.<sup>31</sup>

Without the transportation loan hanging over their arrival, Government Assisted Syrian refugees were funneled into English language classes. Learning English was viewed as critical for integration into Canadian society – including the labour market.<sup>32</sup> Thus, all the Syrians in Little Syria dutifully commenced English language classes through LINC – Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada.<sup>33</sup>

When I started my research in the winter of 2017, about a year after the SRRI, most of the women I met were still registered in LINC but they still had very limited English. One year after arrival in Canada, the federal funding had come to an end and all the families I met had transferred to provincial social assistance (Alberta Works). In order to be eligible for Alberta Works, individuals have to demonstrate that they are either looking for work or enrolled in an education program that will lead to employment. Thus, adults in Little Syria came to see their income as dependent on their participation in language instruction. Over the course of my

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<sup>31</sup> Syrians arriving before the SRRI (in early 2015) or after (in 2017) were charged with the loan and were required to pay the government back.

<sup>32</sup> With the exception of Haya, none of the refugees I met in Little Syria spoke any English when they arrived in Canada. I did meet other Syrians, outside of Forest Lawn, who did. They tended to be Christian, highly educated and had professional backgrounds - they differed significantly from the women I spent time with in Little Syria.

<sup>33</sup> In Calgary, the arrival of several thousand English language learners in a short period of time quickly overwhelmed the system. Because most Syrians were entering LINC at the beginner level (Level 1), the sector scrambled to open up enough classes at the lower levels to meet the needs of the Syrian population. Instead of simply offering more classes, the Federal government made the decision to divert resources from existing language programs to the lower levels, in turn ending classes for language learners in more advanced programs. This was met with frustration by language providers who believed it was deeply unfair that those who had made it to level 5 & 6 now had few or no options for continuing their language instruction.

research in 2017-2018, I observed that LINC programs became more rigid about student participation and attendance. Men often remained in LINC while women paused their participation when they became visibly pregnant and following the birth of babies.

Participation in LINC was understood by my participants as an essential step in acquiring a job in Canada. Throughout my research, I heard from numerous Syrians that they had to reach CLB (Canadian Language Benchmark) 5 before they could get a job.<sup>34</sup> This was a clearly a message they had received from language instructors and settlement practitioners, and yet it is disconnected from the reality of the Canadian labour market. Employers are unfamiliar with the Canadian Language Benchmark system and language proficiency is evaluated in person with an employer deciding on the spot if someone is proficient. It is also the case that there are jobs available for individuals with low literacy and who have limited English – such as construction, moving furniture, in warehouses or meatpacking. Research indicates that those who enter Canada as refugees often end up working in ‘temporary’ or precarious jobs and in jobs below their skill level or qualifications (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017, p. 17; Esses et al., 2013; Krahn et al., 2000).

The pressure to excel in language classes was a burden on Syrians who struggled with the long hours in a classroom and the largely text-based structure of LINC. Hani – the husband of one of the women I interviewed and spent time with – reported that he got headaches from the long day in the classroom. He had finished grade six in Syria and had worked in construction before leaving Syria during the war.

Four years after arrival, few refugees had found employment beyond what they might have upon arrival (that is, jobs that require extremely limited English). Syrians – even with level 5 – often

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<sup>34</sup> “The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) standard is a descriptive scale of language ability in English as a Second Language (ESL) written as 12 benchmarks or reference points along a continuum from basic to advanced. The CLB standard reflects the progression of the knowledge and skills that underlie basic, intermediate and advanced ability among adult ESL learners.” (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, ND). Most of the Syrians I met through my research had very limited or no English when they arrived in Canada and thus started in CLB 1.



expressed dismay that despite their purported proficiency, they still could not understand when ‘Canadians’ spoke to them.

Akram’s case well exemplified the challenge facing Syrians in the Canadian labour market:

Akram worked in an office in Syria. He had a high school education. Upon arrival in Canada he spoke no English. He started taking LINC classes shortly after arriving in Calgary. He found the English classes tedious and felt like his English was not improving. Despite his struggles he continued to progress through the Benchmarks. When he ‘completed’ level 4 he tried to resist the move to level 5. He told his instructor he wasn’t ready; but they said that he had to continue into level 5. In the meantime, he was experiencing pain related to his teeth. A visit to the dentist resulted in the removal of all his teeth. He had not understood the dentist when he explained the procedure and was totally unprepared for the loss of his teeth. While he was fitted with dentures, they did not fit correctly, and he had constant pain if he wore them. This impacted his ability to eat and his wife expressed to me that she was concerned about his wellbeing – he seemed sad and depressed. Several trips to different doctors and dentists did not ameliorate the situation related to his teeth. While he continued to attend language classes, he said he did not feel his English was improving. On the four-year anniversary of his arrival in Canada, Akram’s English continued to be at a very beginner level, he had no teeth, trouble eating food, he was gaunt from not eating, and was clearly unhappy, if not depressed, about his situation. While he told me he would like to find work and support his family, he did not know where to begin to find employment. From my perspective, the barriers to gainful employment also seemed enormous.

Akram’s story mirrored the experiences of many Syrians, for whom the Canadian labour market was viewed as impenetrable to non-English speaking outsiders. Despite a desire to find work, they struggled to connect their language learning to gainful employment and remained on the outside looking in. Like Akram, often health issues added complexity to the task of learning a new language or seeking gainful employment.

In Akram's case, shared by many Syrian men in Canada, barriers to employment were about more than simply the inability to earn an income; being unemployed meant Syrian families were locked out of other opportunities as well. For example, when trying to secure different housing – outside of Little Syria – Akram was turned down by three different landlords because, despite being registered in fulltime language classes, he was still technically unemployed.

A service provider familiar with the Syrian community described the challenges of employment for Syrian refugees in Canada:

...in general, none of these parents came here willingly, they were, I wouldn't say forced, but they had to. And it was the option they didn't know anything about. So, it was just like, "let's go to Canada, oh perfect, we're going to Canada," but *when they arrived here and saw that Canada is not what people think it is. The job is not waiting for you, the language is a problem, and all these things.* (Service provider interview)

This echoed the comment by Hasan, the 20-year-old, grade 12 student, who I introduced in the ethnographic interlude, who was struggling to find opportunities in Canada:

What is harder [about life in Canada]? I ask. "In Canada there are a lot of laws and rules. Rules for everything. And getting a job is completely different. In Syria you can just go talk to someone and you can have a job for life. In Canada it is complicated, you need a resume." [Fieldnote excerpt]

### **7.3 Integration as a two-way process**

Ager and Strang's model of refugee integration centers on the importance of social capital, specifically the need for both social bonds and social bridges. Social bonds refers to connections within one's own group, and social bridges refers generally to connections with individuals 'outside of one's group.' Ager and Strang discuss social bridges in relation to two forms of social connection. The first is the general friendliness of people they encountered on a regular basis and the second refers more specifically to participation in a range of activities with different groups of people, for example, sports, academic classes, religious worship, community groups and political activities (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 180). Bridging social capital is seen as a critical factor in assuring refugees connect to the larger social and economic context in which they live. In Canada, the 'two-way' street of integration suggests that refugees should be able to forge

connections with those ‘outside’ their own group. These connections are seen as particularly important and valuable.<sup>35</sup>

Little Syria – and communities like Little Syria – are viewed as potentially problematic from an integration standpoint because of concern that concentrations of ethnocultural minorities will prohibit the cultivation of critical social bridges. This was a commonly held view by some service providers, private sponsors and even other Syrian refugees who did not live in Little Syria: too much Arabic, too many Syrians, no one will learn English, they will never integrate into Canadian society.

In the imaginary of Canadian integration, these refugees enter places where they are welcomed by the host communities and made to feel part of the Canadian ‘inclusive circle’ expanding ever wider (Raulston Saul, 2016). And indeed, the overwhelming attention and outpouring of support that characterized the Syrian arrival would certainly shore up this imaginary. Macklin et al. (2018) describe how private sponsors experienced refugee sponsorship as a form of active Canadian citizenship that felt authentic to their experience as ‘Canadians.’

Yet this model of integration fails to attend to the specific geographies that make up the reception communities of many refugee families. Forest Lawn – and East Calgary more broadly – is a highly diverse community with a long history of receiving refugees (Vietnamese, Somali, Sudanese and now Syrian). It has a dense concentration of Indigenous families who have moved off reserve and into Calgary. Forest Lawn has also absorbed large numbers of low income and

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<sup>35</sup> In a recent study measuring the integration outcomes of immigrants/refugees to Canada, the authors developed a measure of social capital that included the following variables: “Social capital variables include bonding and bridging social networks. Bonding is derived from the survey question “Think of all the friends you had contact with in the past month, whether the contact was in person, by telephone, by text or by email. Of all these people, how many have the same mother tongue as you?” The variable is coded as 0 (none), 1 (a few), 2 (about half), 3 (most), and (4) all. Bridging is based on a series of questions asking whether the respondent, in the last 12 months, was a member of or participated in a union or professional association; a political party or group; a sports or recreational organization; a cultural, educational or hobby organization; a school group, or neighbourhood, civic or community association; a service club; a seniors’ group; or a youth organization. The bridge variable is derived by counting the number of types of groups, organizations or associations the respondent participated in during the last 12 months, with a score ranging from 0 to 8.” (Hou, Schellenberg & Berry, 2016)

economically marginalized people who were displaced through gentrification in Calgary's downtown. These histories and geographies mean that Syrians are entering a highly diverse, complex social and political economy of a highly variegated 'superdiverse' neighbourhood. All these 'newcomers' – refugees, urban Indigenous, and displaced poor – arrive in what was formerly a white working-class town (annexed by the City in 1961).

This geography had a profound impact on the Syrians who arrived in 2015-16. Indeed, the formation of 'Little Syria' was noted in the local news with a glossy magazine spread replete with pictures of smiling Syrian families and children on bikes (Lambert, 2016). Neighbours who lived in the housing complex before the arrival of the Syrian refugees complained that the name 'Little Syria' effectively erased everyone who lived there before, who was not Syrian (Interview with City of Calgary Social Worker). Immigrant and refugee populations often viewed Syrian refugees less as the achievement of Canadian multiculturalism and humanitarianism, and more as a group of 'White' refugees who received exceptional treatment. At the same time, Syrian refugees were viewed by some segments of Canadian society as risky outsiders because of their status as both Muslims and refugees.<sup>36</sup> As such, they at times experienced a form of 'banishment' and othering through their encounters with some facets of Canadian society (Bakht, 2008).

To most people familiar with the Syrian community in Forest Lawn, it was clear that the gendered division of labour meant that women were more likely to be at home and it was men and children who ventured out into the wider Calgary community. A service provider – himself a young Syrian man, working with refugee youth at the nearby high school – did identify discrimination as a big factor shaping the lives of the students he worked with. When I shared

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<sup>36</sup> A quick scan of the comments section on articles about Syrian refugees reminds us of the hostility that Muslim refugees face in Canada:

One commenter, Claire Farmer, wrote: "so i too wonder why your country is terrible! Just hoping all that stays there is Syria and not in Canada. Your culture, ways etc are 85% not wanted here in Canada, however I do realize that there are some bleeding (sic) here that welcome syrians and other thirld (sic) world nation people. I also wonder what Canada will become in 10, 20, 30, 40 50 years from now. By then the white society will be extinct" (comment on article by Kury de Castillo, 2019).

that most the women I spoke with through my research (ostensibly the mothers of the youth he worked with) did not identify discrimination explicitly, he responded laughing: “Because they don’t leave their homes!”

He was not wrong: If anyone was experiencing hostility or difficulty with the wider community, it was more likely to be men and children. Certainly, Qamar’s older children were quick to identify racist or discriminatory experiences that they had faced in the city, unlike most of the women I interviewed. Yet, despite the relatively limited geography of the women I interviewed, whose lives centered on their home, they were still cognizant of the potentially hostile attitudes toward them in the community:

**Fieldnote excerpt #1:**

In Little Syria, they had problems with their Canadian neighbours. They didn’t speak enough English at the time their neighbour would always yell at them and say bad things (no one is clear on what he said exactly). He would yell at their father. Then one day the boys were playing, and the man came over with another man and had a large piece of cement, they were going to hit her father with it. The boys got in between. Aseel – who is explaining this story to me – says she saw this happening from the window and called the police. The men pushed her brother very hard. This happened only six months after they arrived in Canada so they didn’t understand English. The police arrived and handcuffed her father – this seems to have been very upsetting. The Canadians told the police that her father had started it and that he had a knife. There was a woman (Canadian) making a video on her phone. The Syrian family thought she was trying to make them (the Syrians) look bad but later they realized that she was trying to help them because she showed the police what had happened. When they cuffed the father, all the kids started to cry. The police saw how upset they were and told them it was ok, it was ok so they took the handcuffs off. I asked how this made them feel and Layal said, (through Haya), it made us regret coming to Canada. The kids were so scared they didn’t go to school for two weeks. Aseel smiles and says now it is better. (Fieldnotes excerpt 111117)

**Fieldnote excerpt #2:**

I ask if she’s had any problems with being Muslim. She says no. Haya asks about the hijab. Hala tells us a story about how one day she was walking near her old house on 14th avenue. A woman with a little boy was walking toward her, the little boy went to run into the street in front of a car. Hala grabbed the boy to prevent him from running into the street. The woman started screaming, “Don’t touch my child! Don’t touch my child!” Hala imitates this, yelling aggressively. I ask if she thought this was because she was wearing a hijab, she shrugs, maybe. Haya explains to me, and likely for Hala’s benefit, anyone would have done

the same thing if they had seen a child running into traffic, but the woman decided to yell. (Fieldnotes excerpt 120917)

**Fieldnote excerpt #3:**

Haya's sons were playing outside and a woman from across the courtyard came over and started yelling, saying that Haya hadn't been supervising the kids and Yousef had hit her daughter with a stick on the neck. Haya said she looked but the little girl was fine and didn't have a mark or anything. Her kids said they had done nothing wrong. Haya said she tried to get the woman to calm down but she wasn't having it, "Why she like that? Why she yelling?" (Fieldnotes excerpt 100717)

In their study of Government Assisted Refugees in Canada, Sherrell and Newton (2020), note that Muslim women did experience harassment and discrimination because of their visible status as religious minorities. This was the case for the women in my study, who rarely ventured beyond the housing complex where they lived. Even within this limited geography, they still encountered hostility. This hostility compounded other feelings of fear about Canadian society in general (specifically around drugs and sexuality and the threats to their children – discussed further in the next chapter). It also reveals the challenge of building social capital for those who are viewed as other and whose presence is not welcomed but seen as threatening. These accounts call to mind Amin's comment that "[a] politics of interpersonal contact should be treated as an experiment without guarantees" (2013, p. 5-7).

*Failure of mainstream services*

Writing about immigrant integration, Freeman suggests that "no state possesses a truly coherent incorporation regime...Instead, one finds ramshackle, multifaceted, loosely connected sets of regulatory rules, institutions and practices in various domains of society...*immigrants are mostly managed via institutions created for other purposes*" (Freeman, 2004, p. 946-948, emphasis added).

Throughout my research, I saw multiple examples of missed connections between Syrian families and the systems and services they interacted with. In this context, I am referring to 'services' in the broad sense of the word, beyond the immigrant serving sector. As recently as 2017, research on the use of settlement services found that nearly 47 percent of newcomers to

Calgary had never accessed formal settlement services (Calgary Local Immigration Partnership [CLIP], 2017). This echoes earlier studies which found that roughly 53 percent of newcomers never access services (Esses et al., 2013).

The reality of life in Canada is that most refugees are far more likely to interact with non-immigrant serving agencies in the course of a regular day. Most Syrians who were not working – at the time of my fieldwork this was all of them – were registered in LINC classes. All of the women I interviewed had children, and the vast majority of them had several children under the age of five, including many who were either pregnant, had infants or both. While some attended English classes regularly, many had interrupted their language learning to care for new babies.

This meant their English was extremely limited. They did not drive and only a few had taken public transportation such as a bus. They did not go to mosque, preferring to pray at home. While they did all the cooking and meal preparation for their families, it was their husbands who went out and bought groceries.

When described in these terms, these women appear extremely isolated. And yet, there were still systems with which they came in very regular contact: Their children's schools; various forms of the public health care system; and several government bureaucracies (for example, Alberta Works, the Canada Revenue Agency and Calgary Housing). It was often during these interactions that I saw profound examples of missed connections between refugee women, their families and the wider service world with which they were required to interact.

It was often the case that women would share the documents that they received from the healthcare provider (doctor, nurse, pharmacist etc.) and ask me to translate. This included highly complex instructions for medications. In one example, a woman we visited had been sent home from the pharmacist with instructions to collect a stool sample from her son who was ill:

Following the interview, A. tells me she has a question for me. She goes into the kitchen and returns a small plastic bag with papers inside and the POISON symbol on the outside of the bag. She tells me she got it from the pharmacist in [neighbourhood] but they told her

to go home and read the instructions, but she doesn't understand. In particular there is a small plastic vial with a yellow cap and liquid inside – she doesn't understand what to do with this vial. It also has a big POISON symbol on it. I read the papers and see that there is a medical requisition form for a stool sample to test for parasites. I look at the other paper which is a small booklet with instructions printed in many languages – Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, but not Arabic. I read the English instructions which are written in tiny font and struggle to understand what is being asked... The instructions emphasize that the liquid is toxic and to be very careful handling the sample. I explain this to A. She says, “Why can't they do this?” I laugh and agree with her. She tells me that she asked the pharmacist to explain what to do but she would not – “Just go home and read the instructions” and yet none of the instructions were in Arabic. [Fieldnote excerpt 111817]

This example brings to light the challenge refugees face interacting with mainstream services.

This is only one of many examples I heard where the response from the ‘service provider’ would be to tell the ‘client’ to go home and read the instructions. One woman I interviewed told me she had called the lab to make an appointment for a blood test and was told, “Call back when you speak English.”

In 2019 the media covered the story of a 9-year-old Syrian refugee girl who had committed suicide. The press reported that she had been bullied at school and her parents' complaints to the school had gone unheeded. According to CBC: “[Her] mother says bullying at...school went unchecked for months. Friends of the family say that could be because concerns raised with the school were lost in translation, and much of the bullying was done in Arabic, so went unnoticed by English-speaking staff” (Rieger, 2019). The girl's parents reported that their complaints to the school about the bullying went unanswered. The mothers with whom I spent time expressed their dismay over the situation. It seemed to further confirm their unease with life in this strange Canadian society.

One area where there was increasing distrust is between refugees and the healthcare system. Syrian refugees arrived in Canada with multiple health issues (IRCC, 2019b) and coupled with pregnancy, there was much interaction between the health care system and refugee families. Despite this regular interaction, stories circulated in the community about Syrians being mistreated at the hands of the Canadian medical system. As I continued to visit the community over the years, women would describe the mistreatment they or their neighbours received at the



hospital. These accounts centered on what women perceived as callous treatment by medical staff who were largely incompetent or deliberately cruel.

In one case, Souzan – who had a child with cerebral palsy – recounted that a doctor had told her that her daughter would be better off dead and that the medical system could assist her with her death. In another case, a Syrian man had a blood infection that resulted in one of his legs being amputated. His wife was asked to sign a paper at the hospital authorizing what was described to me as a “suicide shot” (likely a do not resuscitate order) from the hospital.

**Fieldnote excerpt:**

The conversation centers on health, beginning with Ousa’s recent pregnancy with twins and subsequent miscarriage. The women discuss their dissatisfaction/confusion with her experience at the hospital where she was told she was bleeding badly and needed to have an operation. She expressed confusion over whether the operation was necessary or whether the doctors were simply trying to stop her from having more babies, because she already had eight children. Haya translates for me: “She is still bleeding, but she thinks maybe now she can’t have more children because the doctors took out part of her [she gestures to her belly] She is in pain but does not want to go back to the hospital.” I nod and want to ask many questions but I don’t know if it is appropriate (July 2019).

It was one of Ousa’s eight children whose eye was badly damaged after she fell holding a glass. The Canadian doctors attempted to save her vision in that eye but were unsuccessful. Ousa and her husband were convinced that the doctors simply had not tried hard enough. As such, they were in communication with doctors in Syria – believing they might be able to offer better advice than what they had received in Canada.

These examples point to the relative failure of ‘mainstream’ services to adapt and support the needs of refugee families. They also reveal the distrust that emerges between these systems and refugee women when families feel like the systems have mistreated them or that they care little for their families (especially children). It was not possible for me to understand how this distrust emerged: Was it a language barrier? Medical incompetence? Divergent cultural or religious approaches to the complex questions of healthcare (DNRs, options for medically assisted death etc.)? What was possible to observe, however, was the power of these accounts to inform how

Syrian families came to see and understand the landscape of services and supports that surrounded them – encouraging a belief that they were best supported by those closest to them – and that ‘Canadian society’ was not necessarily there to protect or look after them.

#### **7.4 Gendered geographies of placemaking**

Describing a “feminist refugee epistemology” Lê Espiritu and Duong (2019) ask that those who study refugees attend to the ways in which refugees remake their lives in ways that elide the binary categories of refugee representation (victim or hero). This means attending the “improvised, fluid and alternative, homemaking, healing and survival strategies” (2019, p. 588) of refugee women. In her work on labour migrants in the midwestern United States, Faranak Miraftab (2016) makes a similar argument – if one looks only at the site of *production* (in her case, the brutal work conditions in a multinational meatpacking plant in a small town in the Midwest), the migrant workers she studies are brutalized, exploited, and unable to form solidarities with other workers because of explicit divisions across race, ethnicity and immigration status which are exploited by the plant. Yet, when Miraftab turns her attention to the spheres of social reproduction – to the arrangements of childcare, leisure and residential geography, she finds that migrants from diverse racial, ethnic and immigration backgrounds find fragile but potent points of connection. She describes this as a ‘relational politics of place:’ “Differences among the diverse groups...are relational; and shape relational politics that are complex, tentative and open to future renegotiation...a relational politics of place overcomes binaries of victimhood and heroism” (2016, p. 206).

This was true in my research as well. Meeting Syrian women in their homes, surrounded by their children, and living in close proximity to a number of other Syrian families, it was clear that these refugee women were enmeshed in networks of care that would have been difficult to ascertain through other research methods that were not ethnographic or place-based. They were engaged, as Lê Espiritu and Duong rightly note, in strategies of “improvised, fluid and alternative, homemaking, healing and survival.”

Attending to these strategies is significant because it helps push back against a narrative that renders refugee women voiceless and reproduces them as victims (Malkki, 1996; Razack, 1996). This is important political work in a time when Muslim women, specifically, endure additional scrutiny, imagined as always, already victimized Third World Women (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 1984; cooke, 2008). In this final section of the chapter, I seek to advance a discussion of refugee ‘integration’ that moves beyond a relationship of belonging that is tied to the nation-state. Here I explore the connections and intimacies that shape the lives of women in Little Syria.

### *Geographies of settlement*

The chief complaint and difficulty facing Syrian women in Forest Lawn was the loss of extended kin networks and the support that attended them. Women missed their sisters, mothers and sometimes even their elder children, and the wide network of support that these women provided, especially with the domestic work required of raising many children. The Syrian women I encountered often had several children under the age of 12, requiring enormous amounts of care and supervision. They were also doing this work in a new country, with new and different rules around discipline, different cultural understandings of safety, childhood independence and values around gender, sexuality and religion (this is described further in the next chapter). In addition to this complexity, women were also expected to attend language classes and continue to perform domestic duties such as house cleaning and food preparation.

In the absence of extended kin, the spatial configuration of the Mainstreet Housing Complex provided an optimal setting for the collective supervision of children which was preferred by the Syrian women in this community. The configuration of attached townhomes surrounding a large field meant that for some of the year – basically from when the weather warmed up in the spring to when it got cold again in the fall – children could play outside and Syrian women could sit together, share coffee and food, and socialize. While the collective approach to parenting clashed with Canadian expectations of appropriate supervision – as evidenced by the anecdote about children on donated bikes that opened this dissertation – the spatial organization of Little Syria alleviated some of the overwhelming weight of domestic responsibility that had shifted onto the shoulders of individual women upon arrival in Canada.

In interviews, women acknowledged that the presence of other Arabic-speaking Syrian women was something they appreciated about where they lived. While it is important not to overstate the value of these connections or suggest that all 35 Syrian families lived together harmoniously and without conflict (as discussed in the previous chapter), all of the women in the study identified having two or three close friends who were also Syrian women.

Syrian neighbours relied on one another for information and support. For example, Haya was often called upon to help translate forms or to make phone calls on behalf of other Syrians in the neighbourhood. Mlak's teenage children were known throughout the community as technological wizards – able to repair broken phones and computers. Syrian neighbours also compared notes on accessing Canadian supports such as social housing, Arabic-speaking doctors, and the best English classes.<sup>37</sup>

Proximity to other Syrian families created a buffer against the perceived unknowns and fears generated by the wider society. They provided a sense that there were (trusted) 'eyes on the street' – keeping an eye on your child, disciplining them if necessary, watching your house to make sure there was no theft or danger. These connections also ensured proximity to other women who shared the experience of having babies and raising children in a radically new context, who observed Ramadan and Eid, and with whom the complexities of social interaction were uncomplicated because they were familiar. This familiarity cultivated a fragile sense of safety and comfort and helped ease the isolation and loneliness that attends migration and forced dislocation.

### *Intimacies in place*

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<sup>37</sup> Unsurprisingly, this sharing of information between families was both useful and problematic – it allowed this new community to share information and learn about resources, but it also provided a context in which misinformation and distrust spread easily. For example, when one family got access to a particular kind of benefit, others wondered why they were not eligible.

While the majority of participants identified their closest connections to be with family and Syrian neighbours, there were emergent connections with other (non-Syrian) neighbours, which are also relevant to our discussion of integration.

Hala was one of the women I interviewed who invited me to come and visit her following the interview. She was a dedicated student of English, despite having four children at the time of the study (including a very busy two-year-old). She was a social person who had many friends and liked visitors. She and her family had also ‘won the lottery’ and had moved into Calgary Housing a few blocks away from Little Syria. It was not unusual to arrive for a visit at Hala’s and find other visitors already there. One day I arrived, and there was another young woman there (she looked to be in her early 20s). She looked as though she had been crying and when she left, Hala explained that she had been in a fight with her mother so Hala had told her to stay as long as she needed. The woman was Lebanese and spoke little English.

Later the same day, as Hala and I settled into lunch, another neighbour arrived, Farah. I met Farah several times during visits to Hala’s – she was from Bangladesh, a single mother of three children, and lived next door to Hala. Hala explained to me that she tried to help Farah - according to Hala, she had no idea how to do basic housekeeping because she had housekeeping staff back in Bangladesh. One day, Hala and her eldest daughter, Sandra, went and helped her ‘properly’ clean her home. The day I visited, Farah had brought over some curried salmon for Hala to try (Hala discreetly told me later she did not like this woman’s cooking, but she received it graciously). Farah also had a two-year-old who was always throwing a tantrum the few times I met him. Hala told me that he was a very difficult child, always screaming and crying, and Farah was exhausted but had little help. Hala seemed to take it upon herself to support Farah, offering suggestions to try and get the two-year-old to stop screaming, and advice on housekeeping. In turn, Farah, whose English was more advanced than Hala, helped her with translation of government and other documents.

These kinds of relations were not unique to Hala, though her extroverted personality and sociable nature ensured that her house often had visitors. Throughout my research I often encountered

women or heard about women from the neighbourhood who were connected in various ways with the Syrian women I knew.

Aischa, Haya and several other women identified a young Sudanese woman who lived in Little Syria who could be called upon to help with paperwork and other questions that came up. She was an Arabic speaker, a *hijab*-wearing Muslim woman, and in university (this last point was emphasized when the Syrian women spoke about her). She was seen as a trustworthy source of knowledge and information and an effective decoder of the mysteries of Canadian society.

In another case, Layal described meeting an Egyptian-Canadian woman who worked as a teller at the neighbourhood branch of her bank. Layal and her husband were setting up a bank account and the Egyptian-Canadian teller was assisting. The bank teller told Layal that if she or her family needed assistance with other issues, they could call her. She provided her personal phone number and they called her several times with questions about paperwork and other issues.

It was also the case that several members of the Syrian community were getting their tax returns completed by a Lebanese-Canadian woman who worked at 'the Lebanese store' (a store selling primarily Lebanese products in the neighbourhood). She offered her services completing and filing tax returns to her customers. She charged \$30 and the Syrians who employed her were pleased with her services.

In a recent critique of conventional integration models that emphasize the importance of 'bridging social capital,' Wessendorf and Phillimore (2018), suggest that

It is not necessarily the forms of bridging social capital with the white majority population which are important for integration. Rather, social relations of differing affective and functional depths with a variety of people of both white and minority...as well as migrant background are crucial for settlement. (p.135)

This well reflects the situation of Syrian women I encountered, who had limited forms of 'conventional bridging social capital' but did possess a range of relationships ('of varying

affective and functional depths') with a range of other people in the community. Syrian women were cognizant that there were some questions and pieces of work that could not be accomplished either within the household or by Syrian neighbours. Here, they turned to support from other Arabic speaking women they met in the community.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, as in Hala's case, they also formed friendships and relations with non-Arabic speakers who shared other commonalities, such as the shared experience of mothering in a new and different context.

### **7.5 “*Next year, in Syria:*” Imaginaries of home and mobility restrictions on resettled refugees**

March 2020 marked the nine-year anniversary of the Syrian revolution. It did so as the conflict continues in Syria. While Bashar al-Assad remains in power, he rules over a country destroyed by war – towns and cities razed to the ground, and some 13 million people displaced, including 6 million refugees (UNHCR, 2019b). For the Syrians I met, the question of the future is a difficult one. I asked all the participants what they imagined for their future, and many spoke about their hopes for their children, and perhaps their own plans to learn English, for their husbands to find work. The future seemed unknown and unknowable. When I asked about returning to Syria, all but two of the women I met told me they hoped to one day return to their beautiful country, but they also acknowledged that was likely impossible. For many, as long as Bashar is in power, the war continues, and the country is not theirs to return to.

In the short term, families centered their future around visits to family in the countries they had left – Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. A major focus was imagining future visits and reunions with family members overseas. This imagining was shaped around a five-year window from their arrival in Canada. This was because of a restriction placed on these refugees by the countries

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<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that despite the overwhelming level of interest and engagement by Canadians in the initial resettlement of Syrians; much of this support and interest had faded by the time I began my formal fieldwork (approximately a year after arrival). While most of the women I met spoke about a Canadian volunteer that had supported them when their family first arrived in Canada, only one family continued to have a close relationship with that volunteer.

they left when they chose to be resettled to Canada (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey). In order to be resettled, these families signed paperwork indicating that they would not return to these countries for a period of five years. This prompted families to focus on putting in the years to get their Canadian citizenship so that they could return to their countries of first asylum to visit relatives. Stories circulated in the community about people who had tried to return and had failed. For example, one man had allegedly flown to Jordan to see his dying mother, only to be refused exit from the airport. Despite having Canadian Permanent Residency, the Jordanian government still perceived this man to be a ‘Syrian refugee’ – a label that persisted even after resettlement – and as such, not eligible for entry into Jordan.

These limits on mobility presented an unexpected form of border control that followed these families beyond their arrival in Canada. The majority of scholarship on refugee mobility and forced migration attends to the restrictions placed on refugees seeking safety – blocked by the numerous forms of border control that determine where refugees will be able to make their lives (Mountz, 2010). This includes extra-territorialization (Mountz & Hiemstra, 2013; Mountz, 2011), the externalizing of asylum processing (Collyer, 2007; Hyndman & Mountz, 2008) and protracted displacement in refugee camps (Hyndman & Giles, 2011). Yet research in this area tends to overlook the pernicious forms of migration governance that follow refugees even *after* resettlement.

This migration governance extends itself into how Syrian refugees imagine their settlement and belonging in Canada: The various strategies of placemaking described above include building relationships with other Syrian families who share this experience of containment and immobility. They share with these families the double burden of mobility restrictions upon resettlement and the challenge of family reunification. In the early years of my research I was often asked about how refugees resettled in Canada could bring relatives over to Canada. This was and is a very difficult question to answer. The Liberal Government opened the doors to refugees during the SRRI in 2015-2016 and then returned to a more limited system for resettled refugees that persists to this day. Syrians in Canada quickly learned that the possibility of



bringing family over to join them would be a very difficult, costly, multi-year process and nearly impossible for older relatives such as siblings and parents.

These limitations – both on travel and family reunification – shape the citizenship claims of refugees in Canada. They extend the label of ‘refugee’ beyond the formal period of displacement that is often recognized as constituting refugee life. They shape the way refugees organize their lives and forge connections in Canada. Ager and Strang identify ‘citizenship’ as a foundation of integration for refugees.<sup>39</sup> While Government Assisted Refugees are afforded many of the same rights as citizens in Canada, the impossibility of meaningful family reunification and the protracted constraints on mobility, create disparities between this group of refugees and other Canadian citizens.

I conclude with an excerpt from my fieldnotes written in July 2018 that exemplifies the protracted experience of displacement that shapes life for Syrian refugees in Calgary:

*It is a hot evening in July 2018, Haya has invited me to come celebrate Eid. She tells me she will go and visit the women in the neighbourhood and say, “happy Eid” (this is her translation). I am surprised because Sijod, the most recent addition to the family, is only six weeks old. When I arrive, Haya is wearing a light blue jalabiya and matching hijab. There is elaborate embroidery on the dress and I notice it is fancier than what she usually wears. I complement her on the dress and she tells me it is new for the holiday. I ask her about her family in Syria and if they are able to celebrate the holiday. She tells me that Akram sent money to his family so they could buy a goat to slaughter for the holiday meal. She shows me a video of the festive occasion, filmed in Homs and sent back to Canada as a way of thanking them for sending the money to participate in Eid. Haya says they miss*

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<sup>39</sup> Ager and Strang take an expansive view of the term citizenship: “refugees...were generally clear that in an integrated community, refugees should have the same rights as the people they live amongst. This shared basis of entitlement was seen as an important prerequisite for refugees to live harmoniously with non-refugees.” (2008, p. 176-77)

*their family but that even with the goat and the celebration nothing is the same there, and the celebration isn't the same when everyone is scattered all over the world.*

*Haya wraps Sijod in a blanket and we head out walking across the field. I ask about the kids: The older children are all out playing with different friends. Akram and Yousef are visiting one of Akram's friends for coffee. The sun is sinking but the day is still hot as we walk across the field. There is a massive soccer game happening in the middle of the public space with boys of all ages playing. We pass a group of women sitting outside Amana's house, drinking coffee while a group of toddlers plays on an old plastic playset. We pause and say, 'Salam Alaikum, Eid Mubarak' but we pause briefly and Haya explains we are on our way to visit Ousa.*

*When we arrive at Ousa's she is sitting outside with Reem, both are wearing full black jalabiya and hijabs with white embroidery. They are sitting on plastic chairs around a small black table. When we arrive we say, 'Salam Alaikum, Eid Mubarak' and exchange the customary three kisses. Reem, Haya and I sit down and Ousa goes inside. She returns a few moments later with Orange Crush in four small plastic cups, and a plate of sweets. We each take a glass of Crush and the women raise them toward one another as if to say "Cheers" except they say something in Arabic which Haya translates to me as, "Happy Eid, inshallah, next year we will be in Syria." We sit with the women for a while, sipping the very sweet orange crush and eating sweets. Haya holds sleeping Sijod in her arms. The conversation is entirely in Arabic, and Haya occasionally translates parts of it for me.*

*Reem and Ousa start discussing Asma al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's wife). Apparently she has been recently diagnosed with cancer. The three women speak for a few minutes and then Haya turns to me, she says, "We were talking about how we hope she dies." The other two women look at me unflinchingly and nod. Reem says something to Haya and gestures at me, Haya says, "She says, she deserves to die for all the Syrian children they have killed." I nod and say weakly, "She and Bashar are terrible people and they have blood on their hands." The women nod. The conversation moves on. After a while, Haya signals that*

*it is time to go. We get up to leave. Ousa insists that we stay (I have learned to expect this among these women). Haya thanks her and says we have to go visit Sara. Ousa insists we take some sweets with us as we go. We all stand and exchange three kisses and Haya and I make our way to Sara's house.*

*We ended up visiting three groups of women that night. At each we are served trays of coffee or tea and there is a tray of sweets on the table for us to eat and take with us. At each home, after the drink is served, the women raise their glasses and say to each other, "Eid Mubarak, Inshallah, next year in Syria."*

## **Chapter 8: “Control your children” – Social reproduction and the political work of parenting**

### **8.1 Introduction**

Shortly after moving some 40 Syrian families into Forest Lawn, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) started to receive complaints about the new families:

We would get phone calls from neighbours and from Mainstreet [the property management company] saying the neighbours complained that these kids are out till late at night and they're in hordes and they're just out of control and so we brought them back in, we oriented them... We even went there, to Little Syria, they have the school there, and we did an orientation there too, saying, 'Listen, control your children.' (Interview SPO)

This chapter explores how refugee mothers navigate caregiving responsibilities in a radically new geography and socio-political context; as well as the public responses to their caregiving.

Parenting is political work, informed by the economic, social and political context in which it takes shape. As refugees, children in Little Syria are positioned as at-risk and vulnerable and as Muslims, there is scrutiny over the parenting decisions within families vis-à-vis gender relations, domestic violence, and religion. The decisions and choices they make as mothers take shape in a specific geography that narrows the choices and opportunities available to families – from the mundane (distinct cultural understandings of what supervision entails) to the serious (children calling the police on their parents); Syrian mothers are constantly encountering a system of values, rules, and socio-legal frameworks that are unfamiliar and often at odds with their own ideas of what good parenting looks like.

The lives of Syrian women in Little Syria center largely on their roles as mothers and members of large extended families. Migration radically reorganizes family life – creating new kinds of work for refugee women. In this case, they take on responsibilities maintaining ties to family back home, while also struggling to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their children in Canada. This happens in context where they face specific forms of surveillance as racialized, low-income and ‘refugee/newcomer’ mothers who are viewed as potentially poor parents. This experience of

surveillance is familiar to many low-income and racialized families in Canada (cf. Kershaw, 2010) but it is new to the refugee families from Syria.

This chapter begins by exploring the reorganization of family life following resettlement – specifically the loss of extended kin and the impact that has on the care work of refugee women. Here I also explore the work women do to maintain ties with family overseas.

Part two explores how the work of parenting is never a ‘private’ affair (Faircloth, Hoffman, & Layne, 2013). In this section I explore how racialized women (and their children) become entangled in wider discourses shaped by Canadian politics and values. I offer two examples: In the first, I explore how Syrian mothers understand the concept of ‘supervision’ and how this takes shape within the geography of Little Syria. In the second, I explore the difficult consequences of reorganized family life for racialized families in Little Syria – as children seek to usurp parental authority and the legal weight of the state bears down on families.

The last section continues this exploration of parenting as political work, examining how Syrian mothers understand the ‘safety’ of their children in Canada. They are largely unconcerned about the purported crime and violence of the neighbourhood in which they live, but they are concerned about the wellbeing of their children in the context of permissive ‘Canadian’ norms around sexuality. This is risky work too, as these families, as Muslims, endure specific scrutiny with respect to Islamophobic discourses and problematic cultural imaginaries that are shored up by the Canadian nation-state, and its institutions.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> A note about religion: In this chapter, as in the rest of this dissertation, I explore the relationship between Syrian women who are observant Muslims and the wider context in which they now find themselves. I discuss their religion in relation to what I perceive to be wider social and institutional responses to their religious identities – for example, experiences of discrimination stemming from wearing the hijab. In this chapter, I discuss the work of mothering and how cultural and religious values inform aspects of this work for Syrian refugee mothers. My discussion stems from what I observed and conversations I had with Syrian women in Little Syria – for example, about the decision to opt children out of sexual education in school; or their plans for their daughters vis-à-vis marriage. Yet, as the reader will note, I do not center this discussion on what it means to the women in my study to be Muslim, or how their religious identification/faith intersects with their belief system and identity. These questions were far beyond the scope of the kind of interactions I had the privilege of having in Little Syria; and would have been very difficult through translation. My discussion here, then, should not be read as an analysis of ‘how Muslim women parent’ (mindful that there are many versions of Islam, and many ways this shows up in parenting and other practices).

## 8.2 Social reproduction and the political work of parenting

Refugee families arriving in Canada must learn to navigate the tacit norms and expectations, as well as the explicit socio-legal structures, that govern family life in Canada.

Syrian refugee women repeated back to me the instructions they had received from settlement workers and community volunteers when they arrived in Calgary: Children cannot be left alone; Children must be supervised when they play; Children must wear helmets when they ride bicycles; In Canada, children can call the police if they are scared. There were also messages from the school: Read to your children; practice English with your children; Potato chips are not an appropriate snack for children; A parent or guardian must be present to pick up your child from school. And on it went.

Understanding and absorbing these messages about what it means to be a good parent in Canada constitutes a form of labour for refugee families, with the largest burden falling to women. The term “social reproduction” refers broadly to the range of practices used by individuals, households and communities to ensure their daily and long term means of existence (Winders & Smith, 2019). Feminist geographers explore the way in which social reproduction links households, neighbourhoods, regions, nations and other scales (Winders & Smith, 2019, p. 881). In the wake of forced migration, asylum, and resettlement, social reproduction is radically, forcibly, reorganized to accommodate the new configurations of families and households (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003; Parreñas, 2001; Silvey, 2006; Safri & Graham, 2010).

For the Syrian refugees in my study – all of whom were mothers and all of whom were in regular contact with family members elsewhere – family was a source of emotional, financial and

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Rather, I present an analysis of how this group of women who are, in many ways, racialized through their identification as Muslim (Joshi, 2006), alongside other variables that render them minorities (Arabic speakers, low-income, and refugees), navigate the wider institutions and value systems that shape expectations about mothering in Canada.

practical support, but also required considerable work to ensure the continuity and care of their family life in Canada. As I describe in the previous chapter, refugee families experience significant constraints with respect to belonging in mainstream Canadian society: These include a labour market that is oblique and difficult to access, a city that is experienced as risky and violent and services that mistreat or misunderstand the needs of these women and their families.

In the wake of these failures, refugees draw on the forms of care and community that are available to them – and this largely means their family. With the failure of a public infrastructure to support ‘integration,’ the work of resettlement is absorbed by households and is privatized. Feminist scholars have noted that in the current context, care work is largely privatized, and the purview of families, with women at their center (Peake & Reiker, 2013; Vaiou, 2013). Similarly, feminist geographers interested in transnational families have noted the work that immigrant, migrant and refugee women do to maintain networks of care across vast differences in geography (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003; Pratt, 2012; Parreñas, 2001)

Divergent ideas around parenting and childhood independence reflect the way parenting is inherently political: “Parenting is a globalizing set of ideas and practices that cannot be separated from considerations of global power inequities” (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013, p. 4). Non-normative families – including immigrant families – are often caught up in these power inequities: “they variously grapple with the hegemony of national and state visions of best parenting that often position them as other and simultaneously as deficient. They – or their children – risk being defined as pathological, somehow at risk of ‘not succeeding’ ...” (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013, p. 15).

These stakes are heightened for Muslim refugee families in Canada who endure scrutiny specific to their identity as visible religious and racialized minorities. Research points to the rise of Islamophobic discourse in Canada and the shift toward a greater emphasis on ‘integration’ (Abji, Korteweg & Williams, 2019; Korteweg, 2017; Joppke, 2013). While this emphasis is not necessarily new (there is a robust body of literature from critical race scholars that demonstrates the racial and gendered underpinnings of Canada’s immigration policy and settlement

infrastructure (Li, 2003; Thobani, 2007; Abu-Laban, 1998)); The specific discourses that surround Muslim families – their values, composition, gender dynamics and so on – are important to examine.

A large body of scholarship from the European context explores the relationship between Muslim families and discussions of immigrant integration (Grillo, 2008; Rytter, 2012; Bonjour & de Hart, 2013). This scholarship examines the ways in which the immigrant family has become a site of anxiety for European nation-states: “migrant families (and their composition, their way of life) have become a true obsession for migration policies and public opinion” (Balibar, 2004, p.123). The migrant family – and its attendant transnational ties, kinship and marriage patterns, gender and generational orders – has become causally connected to the perceived failure of immigrant integration:

There is a perceived ‘failure’ on the part of immigrants to integrate, which is often laid at the door of their families, or rather their practices of familial relations, and the (collectivist) principles (cultural, religious) which underpin them. The immigrant (i.e. non-Western, non-European) family, the principles and practices it espouses, are constantly seen as a threat to the values of the individuated (neo)liberal (or Christian) worldview. (Grillo, 2008, p. 31)

The ‘non-Western, non-European’ family that is the greatest ‘threat’ to the European nation is, unsurprisingly, the Muslim family. Here, a long history of Muslim exclusion intersects with problematic narratives about patriarchal gender norms ‘at odds’ with European liberal democratic values – such as gender equality and individual liberty. The relationship between family migration policy, European nation-states and the “failure” of Muslim/migrant families is complex and geographically specific.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This is evident in policies that limit family reunification for immigrant families; for example, Denmark requires that those who wish to marry a non-Dane must prove ‘national attachment’ to Denmark (Rytter, 2011). Rytter points out that this has disproportionately impacted the Muslim immigrants in Denmark – and the Pakistani-Danish community specifically – because of higher rates of transnational marriage. Similarly, Anniken Hagelund (2008) writes that in Scandinavia the immigrant family has become “a key site of conflict” in debates about integration, multiculturalism and ethnic relations (p. 71). While much public attention is directed toward sensationalized accounts of honour killings, forced marriage and female circumcision, there has also been public (and policy) concern over more mundane aspects of the immigrant family, including gender and generational relations within the family and practices of transnational (arranged) marriages. These debates have ushered forth more restrictive immigration and integration policies that serve to reinforce a narrative about the incompatibility of immigrant families within liberal-



As in the European context, critical scholarship in Canada suggests that the immigrant family has become a site of immigration regulation and governance, though arguably not to the same degree (Joppke, 2013). Under the Conservative government (2006-2015), numerous changes were introduced to Canada's various family reunification policies. This included an aggressive campaign against "marriage fraud" (Gaucher, 2014) resulting in the introduction of a 'conditional' form of Canadian permanent residence for sponsored spouses. A similar campaign was launched to address concerns over forced marriage, resulting in the prevention of 'proxy marriages.' These issues have been downplayed by the present Liberal government, but the legacy of these policies remains in the conversations around Muslim 'integration.'

Immigration policy and regulation has also echoed the European emphasis on 'culture.' This has been described as the "culturalization" of immigration policy with debates focusing on "social cohesion, national identity, the limits of cultural diversity and the alleged 'failure' of integration" (Bonjour & de Hart 2013, p. 62). These discourses are amply present in discussions over immigrant and refugee families, especially for those who are Muslim.

In this framing, it is Muslim women whose bodies become a site of particular scrutiny. Alexandra Dobrowolsky argues that women in Canada are both 'invisibilized' and 'instrumentalized' in current discourses on citizenship (2008). This refers to the lack of substantive social policy addressing the social and economic issues facing women (invisibilization) while simultaneously women, especially migrant women, have become "hyper visible, purposefully positioned in the public eye" (p. 466).

Arat-Koc (2012) extends this argument to argue that gender inequality is treated as a problem solved for white women while gender inequality persists as a 'cultural' problem for racialized women. The problem with this cultural turn is that it is totally devoid of a structural critique of

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democratic states.

the economic and social challenges facing immigrant women in Canada. For example, a lack of recognition of foreign credentials or an increasingly polarized labour market, rather, “[there is] an *intense* public and state *gaze*, almost exclusively, on personal patriarchal relations taking place in racialized families and communities” (p. 9). The intensity of this gaze varies depending on prevailing political attitudes and by region– the current CAQ government in Quebec, for example, is deeply invested in a culturalizing political discourse.

Concern of patriarchal relations within Muslim families shapes the context in which Syrian families in Little Syria find themselves. It impacts the ‘private’ decisions within households and adds complexity to the work of social reproduction and emotional labour of Syrian mothers who are largely responsible for raising children and maintaining relationships with extended family members elsewhere.

### **8.3 Reorganized family life**

Syrian families in Canada are deeply enmeshed in familial and kin relationships that span the globe. These relationships demand considerable efforts to maintain and are composed of financial, emotional and technological connections. A recent study of Syrian refugee mothers in Toronto found that the loss of extended family which women felt was fundamental to raising children was the “first and foremost stressor” for participants (Milkie, Maghbouleh & Peng, 2018, p. 12). This was also true of the women I encountered, who identified the loss of extended family as the greatest challenge they faced in Canada.

I was surprised to learn early in my research that for the majority of the refugees in Little Syria, extended kin networks were often present in the refugee camps or countries of first asylum where they lived before being resettled to Canada. In their accounts of leaving Syria, many spoke of traveling with siblings and parents. While the size and contours of the family unit changed over time – perhaps one family would decide to leave the refugee camp in the hopes of finding a better living situation outside the camp, most of the women in Little Syria had left siblings, parents or other family members behind in Lebanon, Jordan, or Turkey when they agreed to be resettled to Canada. This meant that despite the terrible rupture of leaving Syria, in some ways,

the experience of resettlement was more disruptive to the organization of family life than the original dislocation from Syria. This is often misunderstood in conventional resettlement narratives where the trauma that refugees experience is supposed to happen during the war, not during resettlement (Tang, 2015).

The loss of family upon resettlement to Canada precipitated a major crisis in social reproduction for families, especially for women who had to take on additional responsibilities in the wake of the enormous loss of their extended kin. These responsibilities included maintaining ties to those kin who remained overseas as well as navigating parenting in a radically reorganized household - without the support of a wider extended family network.

As I moved through my research I often met and spoke with relatives ‘back home’ – both in Syria and in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon – families were in daily contact with relatives through Whatsapp and Facebook. It was not uncommon to share a meal with a Syrian family and have a relative in Jordan (Turkey, Lebanon etc.) ‘join us’ through the tablet or phone. Grandmothers in Turkey met their Canadian-born grandchildren through the screen of a tablet and watched them grow up from across the world. Children born in Canada, and those who arrived as very young children or babies, had relationships with adults they had never met except through the screen of a phone. For the adult women in this study, they were invested in connecting their children to their extended family despite the distance of geography and time and space, which required daily contact and ongoing interactions with relatives all over the world.

Families in Canada were sometimes the conduit between family members. For example, one participant had two sisters that had remained in Syria. They were both living in Homs, though in different areas of the city, held by different factions during the war. The telecommunication between the two parts of the city had been cut and it was reportedly too dangerous to travel to the other area. This meant that these two sisters communicated to one another through their sister in Canada.

Families also had significant financial ties to relatives back in Syria and in other parts of the world. It was not unusual to send money back to family members for specific occasions, such as Eid. It was also the case that Syrians resettled to Canada were called upon to assist when a family member needed a costly medical treatment. Refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have precarious access to healthcare and are required to pay for treatment. Syrians in Canada were often asked to send money to assist an ailing relative with the cost of a surgery or treatment. This was a burden on families in Canada who had significant financial constraints as resettled refugees and often caused conflict between husbands and wives over who to send money to and how much, as the example below suggests:

After Hani leaves I ask Hala about her family. She says there was a problem with her brother. He had a surgery but after he was still very sick (something to do with his stomach). Her father called to tell her that he needed another surgery. He is in Lebanon (her whole family is in Lebanon) and the next surgery would cost \$2000 USD. She wanted to send some money but her husband didn't want to. He wants to send money to his family. She said they fought for ten days and then yesterday she sent \$200 without telling her husband. Her brother got the surgery and is doing better. He has eight children and a wife – ten people to support. She talks about how her family has many, many children. Another brother has ten children, he married a widow with four children and then they had six. Her sister has four children and no husband.

The majority of women I spoke to and spent time with as part of this research had young children. The average number of children among the families I interviewed was five, and this number continued to rise over time. Several of the women I interviewed became pregnant and had babies in the year after our interview. This included my community connector, Haya, who had her fifth child in June 2018. There were only a few women we spoke to who were candid about the fact that they did not plan to have more children. One participant, who was in her forties and therefore quite a bit older than the other participants, had four children between the ages of 14 and 21. Another woman similarly had four children, the youngest of whom was nine.

In a third case, one participant was actively using birth control, despite having young children and a husband who wanted more children. Her decision to use birth control, her reluctance to have more children, and her husband's desire to grow the family, were topics of much conversation among the other Syrian women in the community. That her private family planning

decisions were a subject of public discussion conflicted with my own ideas of what constituted appropriate topics for public and private conversation. Yet I also had to quickly become comfortable with regular, and direct, conversations about my own childless state, especially in relation to what was considered by my participants as my advanced age (33 at the time of most of the interviews). There were several women my age who were already grandmothers, and thus I was a source of both confusion and pity.

The women in Little Syria viewed babies and pregnancy as a source of good fortune and a gift from god. When I became pregnant toward the end of my fieldwork, the news was welcomed with enthusiasm by women in Little Syria, and my pregnancy became a source of discussion and debate – specifically speculation over whether I would have a girl or a boy.

For service providers and those working with the Syrian community in Little Syria, the decision to continue to grow what were already seen as VERY LARGE families was viewed with less enthusiasm. I heard various accounts of why women were choosing to have more children: Many blamed the husbands, and what was perceived as the inherent patriarchy within Muslim families. Others believed that families were choosing to have more babies because of the sizeable Canada Child Benefit that accompanied an additional dependent child. In both cases, the decision to have more children was viewed as problematic, irresponsible and not fully the choice of the woman having the baby.<sup>42</sup>

And yet, for the women who participated in this study, having large families was considered the norm and was typical of the family arrangements that most women had experienced growing up in Syria. When I started conducting life history interviews, I would begin by asking about an early memory from their life in Syria. All involved accounts of large families sitting together and sharing food. Of the six women with whom I conducted life history interviews, all described

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<sup>42</sup> The framing of these mothers as irresponsible welfare recipients aligns with what scholars in the United States have found with respect to the stereotype of the African-American mothers as ‘Welfare Queens,’ who are “content to sit around and collect welfare shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring” (Collins 2009, p. 79; Dow, 2015).

belonging to families with as many as 10 to 14 siblings. Not only did they belong to large conjugal families, they also all lived in close geographic proximity to their extended families. It was commonplace for women to go and live with their husband's parents upon marriage. Even if the couple did not share a home with the in-laws, they often lived in the same building or neighbourhood.

The decision, then, to have more children, despite already having large (in Canadian terms) families, might be seen as a strategy by refugee women to (re)claim a sense of security and familiarity in a new and unfamiliar landscape. In this way it can be seen as a way of 'doing kinship' (Stack, 1975; Van Vleet, 2008; Jaysane-Darr, 2016). For the women in this study, their lives in Syria had largely centered on their responsibilities and identities as mothers; these roles were challenged through displacement, forced migration and resettlement. In Canada, one way of reasserting this role, and finding a form of continuity and security, was through having children.

The decision to have more children, however, often collided with the reality of mothering in Canada without the support networks and familial relations that shaped mothering practices in Syria. When describing their lives in Syria, women spoke about a collective approach to parenting. Mothers and mothers-in-law were particularly helpful; providing extensive care and support to children, often right from birth. Sisters and sisters-in-law similarly provided additional supervision and support. Women in an extended family would often split up the domestic tasks: Some were responsible for cooking, others for cleaning and others for caring for children.

One participant, Hala, described how her mother-in-law traveled the treacherous route from Syria to Lebanon, during the war, when Hala gave birth to her son. Her mother-in-law arrived and stayed for six months in the tiny crowded room she and her four children and husband were living in to help take care of the newborn. Hala was one of the few women I interviewed who was reluctant about having more children. Her reluctance, she told me, came from the sense that she had no idea how to care for yet more children without family support around. From her first to her last child, she had always had women from her or her husband's family around to help.

She noted that in Canada, women are expected to do it all by themselves, and this was not a task she aspired to take on.

#### **8.4 Parenting as political work**

Parenting is political work that takes place within specific geographies and contexts. Paul Kershaw, following Patricia Hill Collins, argues that parenting represents a form of political citizenship. He suggests that mothers use caregiving to build the social, cultural and political identities of their children. This work is required for families who “cannot count on the public sphere to validate group identities” (Kershaw, 2010, p. 396). While some might suggest that this statement is overstated, and that many minority children do find some validation within the public sphere (indeed this is the purported promise of multiculturalism), there is evidence to suggest that the children of immigrants to Canada often experience forms of exclusion from Canadian society (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007)

In this section, I explore two examples of the constraints that refugee families face as they navigate parenting in a radically reconfigured context. The first is relatively mundane, and has to do with the concept of ‘parental supervision,’ the second is more serious, and explores the relationship between racialized, immigrant families and the police.

##### *What constitutes supervision?*

As the settlement worker from CCIS described, the large numbers of refugee families living in close proximity to one another, with so many young children, prompted complaints from the property management company and neighbours. This led CCIS to run a workshop at the neighbourhood school with the key message being “control your children!”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> A progress report on the Syrian resettlement in Calgary written by CCIS documented challenges around the resettlement, parenting was identified as source of concern: “Majority of the parents are limited with proper parenting skills to disciplining their children as per Canadian standards. This is a common and ongoing issue among Syrian refugees, which has posed a lot of criticism from the neighbors, landlords and the teachers” (CCIS, 2016).

This message sunk in with the refugee mothers I spoke to through my research. When asked about the big differences between parenting in Canada and parenting ‘back home,’ Syrian mothers would explain to me that parenting in Canada was much more onerous because, “in Canada, the kids have to stay inside, in Syria they can go play outside and it’s ok but here I need to supervise them, they can’t just run all over the place.”

The spatial and environmental geography of Little Syria informed how mothers interpreted this message. In the winter, children were kept inside, as parents had little interest supervising children playing outdoors in the snow and subzero temperatures. When women visited each other – which was typical on Friday evenings and weekend days – they would often bring their small children with them and the kids would play together at the home of the woman they were visiting. This was typical in my interviews, where my community connector would bring her daughter who would play with the children in the home of the interview participant; often other children around the same age would drop by to play as well. It was this context that the women I spoke to found difficult and exhausting: Too many squirrely children contained indoors.

In the summer, the dynamics changed dramatically. The spatial layout of the neighbourhood was conducive to children playing together in the large public space at the centre of the housing complex. The housing complex was made up of a series of attached town houses, surrounding an open green space. Syrian mothers would park themselves in small groups outside the home of a friend, would pull chairs and small tables out of the house, and sit and ‘supervise’ their children as they played in the green space.

To the Syrian mothers, simply being out-of-doors in relative proximity to their children, even if the children were not necessarily visible to them (off biking around the housing complex, or playing soccer at the other end of the field), constituted appropriate supervision. Very young children stayed closer to the groups of women, but even they had a tendency to drift off toward the larger and more distant groups of children. It was commonplace for the older siblings to supervise the younger ones, so a seven-year-old brother would be implicitly charged with monitoring the activities of his two and four-year-old siblings.



The following excerpt from my fieldnotes captures the approach to parenting typical of the Syrian women in Little Syria:

Hala, Haya and I walk to the playground across the street from Hala's house along with three of Hala's kids (ages 2, 5 and 7) and two of Haya's (ages 8 and 11). We sit at the table and Hala pulls out a bag of peanuts and a 2 liter pop bottle with water in it, along with a few small plastic cups. We settle in to eating peanuts and chatting about the neighbourhood, discussing a Syrian family that moved to Toronto and recently moved back to Calgary. Haya's oldest daughter sits with us. The other four children go to the playground and take over a very large swing. It is a swing with a large disk that can seat many children. Three of them climb on the swing and Hala's oldest daughter starts to push them. The children loudly chant "MORE HIGHER," screeching and laughing as the swing goes higher and higher. There are three little girls lingering around the swing, trying to join the Syrian kids. The Syrian kids on the swing don't seem to notice. Hala and Haya don't pay attention to the kids and seem unconcerned that their kids are 'not sharing.' I notice one of the little girls who was lingering by the swing goes over to her father, who is reading a newspaper on a bench, and complains that she can't get on the swing. The father looks over at our table and reluctantly gets up and goes over to the swing with his daughter, ensuring she gets a spot on the swing. He pushes the swing for a while. The Syrian kids are unfazed and continue to happily chant, "MORE HIGHER." Eventually he returns to his seat on the bench. His daughter remains on the swing. The other two girls attempt to get on the swing but have to settle for pushing. The Syrian children remained on the swing for the duration of our time at the park. Throughout our time there, Haya and Hala remained at the picnic table, chatting and swapping stories, completely unconcerned about their children who were busy entertaining themselves. (Fieldnotes excerpt, May 15, 2018)

As this example illustrates, the approach to parenting exemplified by Syrian mothers contrasts with Canadian middle class norms about appropriate levels of supervision; as well as distinct ideas about playground etiquette. Time spent at a play park frequented by middle class white parents in Calgary illustrates this point, with parents (mostly mothers) taking an active role in ensuring their children participate in ways that adhere to norms around appropriate behaviour. Children are encouraged to 'share' and not spend too much time on one piece of playground equipment. Children are expected to learn quickly the signs that other children want to use the swing or slide that they are using and then move along to another piece of equipment. Young children, under the age of three, are generally not left unattended on the playground out of concern for their safety. In the Canadian context, it would also likely be inappropriate for a parent to discipline a child that was not their own.

For Syrians, however, I observed that it was quite common for women to discipline children that did not belong to them (and for that child, in turn, to respond as though he had just been disciplined by a parent). I watched this often during my interviews; the mother I was interviewing might disappear into the other room to make coffee, and the gaggle of children would begin fighting over who had control over the shared tablet, and Haya, veteran mother of five, would shush them sharply and say one of the few Arabic words that I quickly learned “*La*” (which means “no”), the children would stop fighting and look chastened.

Thus, what appeared to outsiders as a hands-off approach to parenting (one service provider described it, “laissez-faire approach to parenting”) was less about parents *not* attending to their responsibilities as parents, and more reflective of a belief that supervision is the responsibility not just of individual mothers, but of the wider community. These families described contexts both in Syria and often while in the first country of asylum, where they had other family members – aunts, uncles, siblings, parents and grandparents – keeping an eye on their children and making sure they were behaving. In Little Syria, Syrian families reproduced a version of this collective approach to care, though it seemed limited to the Syrian women in the community. It was thus viewed as inadequate supervision on the part of the wider neighbourhood, which no doubt led to the complaints that CCIS and other service providers received about ‘out of control’ Syrian children.

#### *Disrupted roles in the wake of migration – Who is responsible for children?*

When I applied to the University Ethics Board to undertake this research, they expressed deep concerns over conducting research in private homes. Some of this concern had to do with my safety as a researcher, and some had to do with standard issues around privacy and research with households but one question they asked was particularly revelatory about the assumptions and frameworks that guide conventional understanding of minority families. The Ethics Board asked, “*How will the researcher deal with a situation in which a participant reveals parenting actions that may be considered abusive in Canada?*”

Baked into this assumption are two problematic notions: First, that immigrant/refugee families use ‘abusive’ approaches to parenting on such a regular basis that I – an occasional visitor – would witness these practices. And second, that refugee families are unaware of Canadian laws and norms around which ‘parenting actions’ are considered abusive. Both these assumptions were wrong – I never witnessed anything resembling ‘parenting actions that may be considered abusive in Canada,’ and families were *very* clear about Canadian censures on corporeal punishment, as these messages are almost *over-communicated* to refugee families upon arrival in Canada.<sup>44</sup>

As Faircloth and colleagues identify, parenting is shaped by the same politics and inequities that are present in the wider world. This means that racialized, immigrant, Indigenous and poor parents are often subject to greater scrutiny and surveillance than white, middle class families (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013; Kershaw, 2010). I believe it was this inequity that shaped the question of the Ethics Board, guided by problematic assumptions underlying conventional imaginaries of immigrant families, and that a similar question would not have been asked had I proposed research in the homes of middle-class white families.

The scrutiny on families in Little Syria was specific to their trajectories as Muslim refugees with limited English. This was also likely compounded by the spatial politics of Forest Lawn, where there is a large police presence and fear of child welfare is ever-present. The women I interviewed were very clear about the rules around appropriate discipline for their children in Canada, having effectively been told that corporeal punishment would result in having their children taken away from them.

Research on children from immigrant and refugee families points to the ways in which children are often required to assume adult responsibilities and act as language and cultural brokers between their parents and the wider community. Refugee children and youth often gain English

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<sup>44</sup> It is not unusual, of course, for Ethics Boards to ask about issues related to child protection: Researchers are required to report child abuse in the event that they observe it. However, the specific way this question was asked by the Board positions immigrant/refugee families as potentially more deviant than non-immigrant families.

language capacity faster than their parents and their engagement with the Canadian school system (and labour market) makes them slightly better equipped to navigate Canadian systems and bureaucracies. While these young people often play critical roles in supporting their family's adjustment to life in Canada, this 'role reversal' can also lead to intergenerational conflict as children assume responsibilities previously held by parents (Creese, 2011; Besteman, 2016; Ong, 2003).

While still at the early stage of the settlement journey for many of these families, it was evident that these patterns were already emerging within the families I interviewed. It was commonplace for Syrian children and teenagers to have more advanced English than their parents. No doubt their full immersion in the Canadian school system facilitated this. Older children were often also employed, working part-time jobs after school at the mall. Service providers reported that those who arrived as older adolescents (16-18 years and older) often chose employment in the construction industry rather than going to high school. I did not observe this in my own research, but the women I spoke with tended to have young children (infants to age 12) and so I didn't get the chance to speak to many older teenagers.

Yet even in homes with younger children, it was obvious that early adolescent teenagers had significant responsibilities. This was especially true of 12 to 17 year old Syrian girls, who took on domestic responsibilities such as caring for their younger siblings, preparing tea and coffee for guests, picking up the impromptu messes caused by siblings, resolving disputes between children, reading and translating documents for parents, answering phone calls from unknown numbers, setting up medical and other appointments for family members, assisting with filling out paperwork for welfare and other government agencies, and translating between their parents and non-Arabic speakers who arrived at their door.

It was also these children who brought messages about Canadian culture, law and expectation into the homes of Syrian families. This manifested itself in various ways – through the acquisition of video game systems, violent video games, specific Canadian convenience foods – but also with youth making decisions about appropriate times to call the police. Messages about

domestic violence and a child's right to phone the police if they are experiencing abuse at home is something conveyed clearly to children in schools.

During my fieldwork there were several incidents involving children calling the police. One in particular highlights the challenges that families face navigating an entirely new criminal and socio-legal context in Canada. The story circulated throughout the community of women in Little Syria and was the topic of intense discussion, scrutiny and judgment. Several service providers also spoke about the incident as a way of describing the challenges that some Syrian families were facing adjusting to life in Canada.

This was the way the story was understood by the women who shared it with me (this account has been slightly modified to protect the privacy of the family and maintain anonymity):

One of the families in Little Syria had four children, two sons in their late teens and early twenties and two daughters, who were twelve and six. There was an incident in the home – there were differing accounts about what happened – but it resulted in the daughter calling the police. The police arrived and removed the father from the home. The details of the case remained shrouded in secrecy yet continued to circulate as gossip in the community.

I later learned through conversations with service providers assisting the family that the police implemented an Emergency Protective Order (EPO) which required the offender (in this case the father) to leave the home. An EPO requires that the offender leave the home for 3-4 months. He moved to a house in an adjacent neighbourhood and respected the conditions of the EPO.

There were varied accounts of what happened specifically to prompt the police to remove the father from the home. A settlement worker familiar with the case described it in the following terms:

Now we are dealing with a family, believe me, they are the most respectful family. The situation, the girl she is 12 years old, she is young lady, like in the culture, she has to [dress] conservatively, she was wearing short blouse and low [gestures to neckline], then the father

hold her hand and told her, he swear at her and push at her, “go and change.” [I: Right] Because she has two older brothers and there [are] visitors coming to them. She went upstairs, called the police. Still the phone was in her hand the police was at the door. Like the police came, arrested the father, without interpreter.

I: very scary

P: Very scary! You know I have been 30 years in this country, I am a good citizen, believe me, when I see the police I start shaking [laughing]...I spoke with the girl, she said, “When I saw two policemen and a woman come arrest my dad, I start shaking, I thought he would come to talk with him.” [I: Hm. So the father was he removed from the home?] He moved, he spent two days in the jail and he has a court last week, he has another court on Monday

I: For child abuse or something

P: For the child welfare involve and the wife said, like, “We are not angels, but he never hit me, he never hit the kids, he always supportive of the kids,” and she showed me the pictures of their life and that day...he came from the hospital, he was [I: not well] not well. They have to consider that. But, no...(Interview, Immigrant Service Provider)

In the community, this story was a source of intense discussion. In the months that followed the incident, I was asked by all the women I interacted with about my opinion on the police: Did Canadian women call the police on their husbands? Was it acceptable for children to call the police? Why did the police remove the husband from the home? Did the police do the right thing?

A general tenor in these conversations centered on several key themes.

The first was a sense that the father had been mistreated by the police: Several women told me that he was a good father and husband, he had clearly sacrificed everything for his family to come to Canada, and now he was here trying to take care of them, and this was how they repaid that kindness. In individual conversations with women, some confided that they also had the occasional problem with their husband, but they would never call the police. Much of the blame in the situation was placed on the wife/mother in the household, who was believed to not have adequate control of her daughter.

This tied to a second major concern, which centered on questions of control and family authority. The usurpation of parental authority in the family, especially by a young teenage daughter, was seen as deeply inappropriate and problematic. It reinforced concerns over what strategies were available to Syrian parents if they could not discipline their children in ways that were familiar to them. Fear and anxiety over the possibility that children might call the police – leading to disastrous consequences – left refugee mothers feeling powerless to control their children. Milkie, Maghbouleh and Peng (2018) identified similar concerns over police and discipline in their study of Syrian refugee mothers resettled in Toronto.

Finally, the incident reinforced the belief by adults in the community that the police could not be trusted – a sentiment that I heard throughout my time doing fieldwork. I heard of three incidents where police were called by Syrian families (including the incident described above) and in each case it was a child who called the police, reflecting a generalized distrust and anxiety toward the police shared by adults in the community. Negative encounters with police in Canada, such as those I have described, as well as the legacy of living in oppressive police state (Syria), shaped these beliefs on the part of adults.

Questions over police involvement in domestic (‘private’) matters draws attention to broader concerns over the shifting nature of authority and power within families. Shifts in generational and gender orders are a common outcome of migration. Scholars working with refugee families have noted that these are often exacerbated by the relative cultural and linguistic competence of young family members (children and youth) compared to parents, who have a harder time adjusting to life in a radically new context (Creese, 2011; Besteman, 2016). As gender roles and responsibilities are renegotiated post-migration, families have to adjust to new relationships of power, authority and responsibility.

These renegotiations also take place within a context where Muslim families endure extra scrutiny relative to the way women and girls are treated within what are imagined as *extra*-patriarchal households. Muslim women are imagined as needing to be ‘saved’ from the barbaric practices of their culture (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Muslim men are seen as particularly oppressive,

with a greater propensity for violence. In the case above, the teenage girl reportedly believed that the police would come and give her father a hard time for pressuring her to change her clothes, instead he was arrested and removed from the home.

## **8.5 Competing visions of safety**

The critique implicit in the comments about Syrian parenting by service providers, volunteers and private sponsors was that these parents cared less about the safety and wellbeing of their children: Children were unsupervised, they did not wear helmets, they ran around unattended, they were allowed to eat too much sugar, parents didn't read with their children and so on.

Yet it was clear to me that concerns over children's safety and wellbeing were central and preoccupying concerns of the Syrian mothers in Little Syria. In this final section I explore the work that Syrian mothers performed with the aim of keeping their children safe. I theorize this work as emotional labour, and like the work of parenting described above, I understand this labour to be deeply political and performed largely by women (Winders & Smith 2019, p. 881).

Concerns over safety went beyond playground politics and helmet use and extended into concern over protecting their children from what were perceived to be problematic aspects of Canadian society. In this section I explore how these concerns manifest in relation to sexual activity.

A central concern of Syrian mothers was the perceived ubiquity of sexual activity in Canada. Despite relatively limited interactions with 'Canadian culture,' Syrian mothers were aware of the stark differences between Canadian acceptance around public displays of sexual activity and those they were used to in Syria. When asked about their sense of safety, women would often say that while they felt safe in the neighbourhood, they were concerned about the incidents of public sexuality that they had witnessed. The following examples reflect these concerns:

### **Fieldnote excerpt #1:**

One time she was home alone and she looked out the back window (which faces onto an alley) and she said she saw a man and a woman "doing the sex." She said, "*alhamdulillah*" that her kids weren't home.



At a park with her children she also saw a couple making out (the girl sitting on the boy's lap and they were kissing) she gathered up the children and took them home

Another time she and her husband were driving with their two sons on 14th avenue (near their house) and a woman came into the street, maybe drunk, she was totally naked and she threw herself on the car. She was totally naked and her son was old enough to know what was happening.

She said this is difficult in Canada because back home this never would happen – no public nudity, kissing, sex etc. [Excerpt from fieldnotes 100717]

### **Fieldnote excerpt #2:**

She tells me the story she heard recently from a Somali woman in her English class: Her son had a Canadian girlfriend. The girlfriend was visiting the house and she wanted to go upstairs with the woman's son. The woman said, please no, stay down here and sit with us but the girl kept saying, no, it's ok, we can go upstairs. She said, the woman kept asking the girl to leave – "it's nighttime, it's getting late, you should go, your mother will worry about you." But the girl kept insisting it was fine, her mother would think it was fine.

We talk about how for some Canadians this behavior is ok or acceptable, but for Muslims it's not ok. I explain that for lots of Canadian families that would probably not be ok either but it depends.

She tells me another story about how when she first arrived she had a Canadian volunteer who would visit and talk to her. At the time, Amena could only speak a little English but understood more. The woman told her it was common for 14 and 15-year-old girls to have babies in Canada. I find this perplexing. Amena says she told that woman that if that happened to a girl in Syria they would kill her (she is laughing as she says this). She tells me that she went to the doctor's appointment this week for something baby related (listening to the heartbeat) and she said she was there and there was a line of five pregnant women and one of them was just a little girl, maybe 14 or 15. And she was all by herself. This troubled Amena. I joked that it is ironic that the Syrians find it so upsetting to think about unwed pregnant teenagers whereas Canadians think it's terrible that Syrian women get married so young. I said, I guess you might see pregnant young women in Syria but they would have husbands. We both laugh. She says that only a few women get married that young in Syria and I say that only a few women get pregnant that young in Canada. (Excerpt from fieldnotes 02102018)

Both these examples point to how specific narratives about the 'cultural' differences between Canadian ('western') and Syrian ('eastern') become mobilized and reinforced as a dichotomy. In her research on African immigrants in Vancouver, Gillian Creese (2011) points out that 'idealized' family forms become mobilized by immigrant families contrasting 'African' families

with ‘Canadian’ families. Despite the wide variation in family formations across Africa, African immigrants identified values common to African families that differed from those they encountered in Canada. While those in Creese’s study identified values such as parental authority, respect for elders and so on, Creese rightly points out that, “[when] embraced by state agencies such as the police or social services, this view can lead to more intensive scrutiny of African immigrant families” (p. 151).

Muslim refugee families from Syria faced a similar challenge with respect to what they distinguished between their experiences of mothering back home and here in Canada. ‘Canadian’ norms represented a more open embrace of difference and freedom (something participants identified as positive vis-à-vis religious tolerance and political expression) but this ‘freedom’ also posed a threat to the safety of their children. This freedom manifests itself visibly through the presence of sex workers in the neighbourhood, sexual education in schools, and stories of unwed, sexually active teenage girls in Canada (as evidenced by the story Amena described above).

Anxieties about public displays of sexual activity and premarital sex translate into decisions around parenting. This included the decision to opt their children out of the sexual education offered in schools.<sup>45</sup> The mothers I spoke with in Little Syria had decided to opt their children out of the sexual education programming in schools. They did this while acknowledging it as an imperfect solution. Syrian daughters reported that as soon as they and the other Syrian children were reunited with their classmates following the sex ed class, their classmates filled them in on the details of what they had missed. This meant the children were receiving sexual education but by word of mouth from their peers – a suboptimal outcome (according to Syrian mothers). Parents acknowledged this risk but also felt their children were simply too young to be exposed

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<sup>45</sup> In Alberta schools are obligated to inform parents about sexual education and parents can choose to keep their children out of the sexual education program. This legislation was advocated for by Christian parents in the province who object to the promotion of sexual education in schools.

to detailed information about sex. When I asked about what the appropriate age for sex ed might be, and who might be best to share that information, Syrian mothers remained vague on details but generally felt that their children needed to be “older” and that that information was best conveyed by members of the family.

This anxiety also translated into a concern about protecting daughters from possible pre-marital sexual encounters, leading to discussions of marriage for young Syrian women. In my research, I asked all the women I interviewed about their own marriage and their hopes and plans for their children. While many of the women I interviewed were married in their teens (ages ranged between 14 and 20), all spoke about wanting their daughters to get married when they were older (20 years old was an age that came up quite a bit).

While some of the women in this study married when they were young adolescents, child marriage in pre-conflict Syria was not the norm: a study from 2006 suggests that 13 percent of girls under 18 were married in Syria (Save the Children, 2014). Research in this area suggests that early marriage and child marriage is associated with poverty and a scarcity of educational opportunities (Bartels et al., 2018; Bunting, 2005); this aligns with what I heard from the women in my study, many of whom grew up in large families, experienced poverty as children, and often left school to support their family through domestic work until they were married.

The conflict in Syria and the mass displacement of the population has led to an increase in child marriage among Syrian girls who have been displaced (one study estimates the rate to be 35 percent of Syrian girls/women are now married before the age of 18). Studies indicate that this increase is the result of the threats of gender-based and sexual violence that young women face in refugee contexts, as well as the extreme economic hardship faced by families who are displaced (Bartels et al., 2018). This research shows that

both men and women viewed child marriage as a negative reality and acknowledged the negative impacts it has on the lives of young girls. Like other members of the family (including the girls themselves), fathers often viewed early marriage as a response to unfavourable economic conditions and safety concerns in the community. (Bartels et al., 2018, p. 10).

I highlight this point because of the representational risks associated with discussing early and childhood marriage in the context of Muslim families. It is critical that early and child marriage not be viewed as an inherent ‘cultural’ practice of Syrian families, but rather the consequence of specific geographic, economic and political contexts. It tends to be driven largely by fear over sexual and gender-based violence – which is a very real threat to refugee girls and women in asylum contexts such as refugee camps (Bartels & Hamill, 2014; Abu, 2013; UN Women, 2013; International Rescue Committee, 2015)

The Syrian mothers I interviewed expressed a desire for their daughters to be married later in life than they had been, yet there were abundant concerns by those who surrounded the community – service providers, teachers, non-Muslim Syrians, community volunteers – about the risk of daughters being married off too young.

One service provider, himself a secular Syrian working with Syrian youth at the local high school, explained what he was seeing with adolescent Syrians:

Mostly, if we were to do statistics, mostly parents would like their daughters to get married soon, their male sons to find jobs and ignore school because construction brings a lot of money, so go and work instead of just wasting your time solving math problems...It’s to save [their daughters]! Also they are too scared of this society, so it’s better for her to be married and be home, instead of coming back at 3 AM from a nightclub. That’s the mentality. And I’m being extremely real. I don’t like to sugar my words, no, no, no, it’s straightforward and it is what it is. So for them, it’s like, instead of we lose our traditions, we lose our kids, we lose, it’s better for them to be saved with someone from their own culture.

I asked Haya, the woman who I hired as a community connector and research assistant, about early marriage for teenage Syrian girls. She said that she had not heard of such a thing happening in Calgary:

Haya tells me that she hasn’t heard of anyone trying to marry off their daughters in Canada. And she tells me she doesn’t like that, that it should be up to the daughter when she gets married. [I know from our previous conversations that she got married at 20]. She says maybe it is some people with very little education, “I think these people have stone brains” is how she describes them – which I think is a funny way of describing it – She says, I think

some people here want to marry their daughters because they are scared that they will do anything here, they will have sex with anybody, so they want to get them married early. (Fieldnotes excerpt 111117)

Another time, I was sitting with Haya and two other Syrian women, Hala and Aischa, the conversation turned to the topic of Aischa's brother in Lebanon. He has seven children and a 14-year-old niece in his care. Aischa tells the other women that her brother has secured a husband for the niece and she will get married shortly. The three women cluck disapprovingly and shake their heads, 14 is too young, they agree. I mention that I saw a UN report saying that a lot of Syrian refugee girls in the camps are getting married so young because they are displaced. Aischa says that it's because he has too many children, he wants to marry one off.

These comments reveal the complex sentiments that surround the issue of early marriage – the mothers in my study were categorically opposed to early marriage, and often cited their own experiences as examples of why getting married too young is not optimal. Yet, they were also deeply concerned about the ubiquity of sex in the culture around them and were focused on protecting daughters from the excesses of this culture.

Concerns over early and 'forced' marriages within immigrant families became a topic of fevered political conversation in Canada in 2015, when the then Conservative government introduced the "Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act." This Act criminalized – and in some cases *re-criminalized* – certain activities identified as 'barbaric cultural practices' (including polygamy, forced and early marriage). Parliamentary and committee debates surrounded the issue with many questioning the explicit connection between these practices and ambiguously defined 'cultural' communities (Abji, Korteweg & Williams, 2019). While the Act did not define specific communities, it did tie immigration penalties as consequences for participating in these activities, thus implicitly tying these 'barbaric' practices to immigrant communities.

These conversations entered the media and public consciousness and became a central theme in the 2015 election campaign. The Conservative Party proposed a national tip line for people to report on 'barbaric cultural practices' and some candidates floated the idea of a Values Test for

immigrants to Canada. While the Conservatives were defeated in the election, concerns of the ability of Muslims to integrate into Western liberal democracies remains a source of public discussion and debate – both in Canada, the United States and across Europe.

Given the early stage of settlement for the families in this research, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which early marriage, and the tensions that surround it, will become a critical issue for both the Syrian community, as well as the wider Canadian community that surrounds these refugee families. In her research on resettled Somali refugees in Maine, Catherine Bestemen (2016) notes that anxieties over premarital sex and preserving the reputations of daughters was a preoccupying concern for the refugees she studied. Like the Syrian refugees in Little Syria, the Somalis in Maine have values informed by specific historical and cultural interpretations of Islam. The generational differences in how these interpretations are lived and experienced produces tensions between parents and children in the US. These differences are exacerbated by the vastly different experiences between Somali youth, many who were born either in refugee camps in Kenya or in the US, and their parents, who grew up in villages in rural Somalia. These vastly different experiences make it difficult to reconcile values between parents and children, and for generations to understand one another. When I asked Aischa, a mother of five, about her hopes for her children, she paused and then said, “It is very difficult for me to imagine.”

## Chapter 9: Conclusions

This dissertation seeks to contribute to three interrelated discussions related to the study of migration.

First, I explore the relationship between a specific place and processes of ‘settlement’ and migrant incorporation. This analysis is grounded in the following key questions: How are processes of migration and settlement influenced by the local geographies in which they take place? What difference does place make? What does a spatial lens offer our understanding of refugee ‘integration’? In addressing these questions, I contribute to scholarship on integration and the uneven geography of cities, as well as how belonging takes shape in contexts marked by multiple, intersecting forms of vulnerability, such as Forest Lawn.

The second is scholarly discussion on *refugee-ness* and resettlement. In this discussion, I critique the normative language of solutions that surrounds the concept of resettlement and explore instead how resettlement is experienced by those who are resettled. I ask: What does resettlement look like from the perspective of refugees? What new forms of sociality and belonging/precarity and displacement does resettlement open up?

Finally, as a study of refugee women this work engages questions of feminist geography related to transnational households, the meaning making processes of refugee women, and the social and cultural contexts of social reproduction (care work, emotional labour and parenting) in the context of migration. Here I ask, how do Syrian refugee families navigate life in a radically new place? How have refugee mothers created their worlds and made meaning for themselves in a new context?

### 9.1 Revisiting the key arguments

In the section that follows I revisit the central arguments of this thesis:

## 9.2 Place matters

Refugees and migrants in Canada reside predominantly in cities (Statistics Canada, 2016). This was also the case during the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative; the majority of refugees from Syria who arrived between 2015 and 2017 ended up in Canada's urban centres. Yet cities have little jurisdictional control over immigration policy including refugee resettlement. Cities are also increasingly characterized by challenges around housing affordability and income polarization (Rose & Charette, 2017; Townshend, Miller & Evans, 2018). Despite this, there is scant scholarly attention in Canada on the relationship between the uneven nature of urban landscapes and the lives of migrants and refugees who live there (Darling, 2017). Where such analysis does exist, it tends to be quantitative and explore larger patterns related to housing and settlement patterns (cf. Hiebert, 2015; Agrawal & Kurtz, 2019).

My work has sought to unpack the relationship between urban poverty and refugee resettlement using a geographically specific and ethnographically informed approach to data collection. I explore in detail the neighbourhood where a significant number of Syrian families ended up living in 2016 (and where many continue to live today). In Chapter 5 (*Placing refugees*), I examine the economic and social landscape of Forest Lawn through a mixed methods approach that includes census data and case studies from qualitative observation at the Community Resource Centre. I argue that this context – of intersecting, complicated dynamics of displacement – provides a crucial grounding for understanding processes of refugee 'settlement' and integration.

Forest Lawn has long been a reception community for refugees, as well as other people who have been displaced either through migration or other forms of displacement (including gentrification, economic marginalization, and ongoing processes of displacement stemming from colonization). Syrian families benefit from this legacy because of the lower cost of housing and diverse amenities in the community; but their presence there also contributes to public anxieties over the ghettoization of refugees in stigmatized, 'undesirable' neighbourhoods.



Sponsors and service providers believed part of their responsibility to newly arriving Syrian families lay in ensuring their successful integration into ‘Canadian society.’ In this sense ‘integration’ took on a profoundly spatial dimension: encouraging families to live far away from other Syrians and in neighbourhoods they considered better than Forest Lawn (i.e. affluent, white communities). Anxiety over the relationship between a particular place (Forest Lawn) and a group of people (refugees), reinforces the idea that some places are marked as zones of exclusion, ‘dumping grounds’ (Cheshire & Zappia, 2016) where refugees will be at risk of social isolation and, thus, fail to ‘integrate.’ Forest Lawn inhabits this space in the mental imaginary of many middle class Calgarians – as a crime-ridden, poor and blighted neighbourhood.

The stigma associated with Forest Lawn came to inform how the emerging community of Little Syria was perceived by those outside it: service providers, private sponsors, community volunteers and even other Syrian refugees in Calgary would point to Syrian families living *outside* of Little Syria and suggest that those families *wanted* to do the work of integration, in a way that was lacking by those who chose to live among other Syrian families in Forest Lawn. In this way, it reproduced a wider narrative about the failure of self-sufficiency in poor people in general – that if they worked a bit harder, perhaps they wouldn’t be poor. This echoes Besteman’s comment that “the hostile treatment of refugees reveals much about the hostile treatment of others...who struggle with idealized requirements for self-sufficiency and identities marked by cultural or racial difference” (Besteman, 2016, p. 198).

These ideas about Forest Lawn, and about life in Little Syria, reveal the nebulous and largely value-laden nature of discussions over integration. The implication that refugees will experience better outcomes if they live in middle class white neighbourhoods instead of superdiverse communities like Forest Lawn actually reveals more about those making that assumption than it does about processes of integration or the urban geography of Calgary. The connection between neighbourhood and refugee ‘outcomes’ is largely untested. While I did not focus on refugee families living *outside* of Forest Lawn, the fact that many families within the community did leave, only to return, speaks to, at a minimum, some preference for life within this neighbourhood.

Despite the broader perception that Forest Lawn is an undesirable and unsafe destination for refugees, the Syrian families I spoke with argue *for* the community. They speak in largely favourable terms about their housing, the available amenities in the neighbourhood and its accessibility (to schools and shopping within walking distance). The families in Little Syria also articulated the specific benefits of living in close proximity to other Syrians. While I seek to disrupt romanticized perceptions of enclaves, I found that Syrian families did find living near to one another provided a degree of security and safety that they felt they lost when (some) moved away (often prompting their return to Little Syria).

In this discussion, I also point to the presence of agency – albeit constrained – with respect to the housing and neighbourhood choices of Syrian families. Despite the objections and concerns by service providers, community volunteers and private sponsors, Syrian refugees had clear ideas about the kind of housing and the kind of neighbourhood that they wanted to live in. In this way many *chose* Little Syria and continue to choose it. Yet these choices are constrained by the wider political economy of Calgary – a city with scant non-market housing and few affordable housing options (City of Calgary, 2018). In this sense, Syrian families make housing choices that put protective factors such as proximity to other Syrians, accessibility to schools and language programs, and access to safe public space, ahead of other factors; including and especially untested presumptions on the part of the wider community about what constitutes a ‘good’ neighbourhood and where refugees will be most quickly ‘integrated.’

Approaching the study of housing accessibility and urban geography from the perspective of newly arrived refugee families provides insight into the highly circumscribed nature of housing for poor families in a mid-size Canadian city. Calgary’s housing situation during the influx of Syrian refugees in 2015-16 was considered relatively enviable compared to the situation facing refugees in Toronto and Vancouver, yet it was far from ideal.

The housing situation facing Syrian families reveals wider problems around housing affordability, accessible cities and the failure of the social welfare system to protect those at risk

of housing insecurity (both migrant and non-migrant). Ironically, the large number of children among Syrian families (viewed by many as a burden and reflective of the patriarchal, religious and decidedly *unmodern* nature of Muslim families) actually insulates these families against the worst extremes of housing unaffordability. Access to the Canadian Child Benefit adds significantly to the household budget of families with children; whereas people without children or with few children are dependent on welfare alone which is woefully out of step with the cost of housing. In either case, the question of equitable access to housing remains unsolved both for refugees on fixed incomes (many post-IRPA Government Assisted Refugees in their early years in Canada) and for other people who live in poverty.

Housing continues to be framed in terms of choice rather than situating choice within a broader political economy of housing availability and constrained incomes. Like other issues related to refugee inclusion, the choices of families are seen through a narrow cultural lens, rather than through a lens that takes a wide view encompassing the range of priorities for refugee families – including access to public space for children, walking distance to schools for mothers who don't drive, and proximity to community connections that incur a sense of safety and security.

A productive and important question for researchers and advocates in this area is to consider not just what better options for housing refugees might be, but what housing equity looks like in our contemporary urban landscapes. And from a policy lens, which order of government is responsible for ensuring housing equity? Is the uneven geography, poverty, and crisis of housing affordability characteristic of many Canadian cities simply the responsibility of municipal governments to address? What role do other orders of government, provincial and federal, have in addressing this crisis?

### **9.3 Resettlement as a strategy, not a solution**

In Chapter 3, I lay out the conceptual challenges with respect to resettlement. Resettled refugees are among the smallest categories of refugees in the world, with between one and three percent of refugees resettled annually (UNHCR, 2019a). Resettlement is highly discretionary and there is

no legal obligation on the part of states to participate in international resettlement efforts (Garnier, Jubilut, and Sandvik, 2018). As such, it remains one of the few means by which refugees can escape the protracted displacement and slow violence of refugee camps (Hyndman & Giles, 2011).

Resettlement, however, is also a strategy that states – such as Canada – use to assert sovereignty and manage their borders from unwanted arrivals, such as asylum seekers. Resettlement offers a degree of control that is not available to the state when large numbers of refugee-migrants arrive *en masse* at the border.<sup>46</sup> Hence, our analysis of resettlement benefits from a critical discussion of the wider migration management regime to which displaced people (refugees, migrants, asylum seekers) are subject. This includes processes of what Hyndman and Mountz have described as ‘*neo-refoulement*’ – geographically based strategies of preventing asylum by restricting access to territories (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008).

While both normative and critical accounts of resettlement tend to focus at the scale of the international refugee regime and the various nation-states that participate (or not) in the global management of refugees, less is known about how resettled refugees themselves understand their experience of resettlement. Scholars who have sought to understand resettlement from the perspective of those who experience it argue that resettlement is better understood as a strategy, not a solution (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). Eric Tang offers the term ‘refugee temporality’ to describe “the refugees’ knowledge that, with each crossing, resettlement and displacement, an old and familiar form of power is being reinscribed” (2015, p. 21). Similarly, Ramsay suggests that resettlement opens up new forms of precarity and violence that were previously unimaginable on the part of refugees (2017).

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<sup>46</sup> Refugee resettlement and refugee-migrant arrivals at the border are linked in policy but not necessarily in reality. That is – having a refugee resettlement program does not impact how many asylum seekers (LCRs) will make a refugee claim in Canada in a given year. The literature in this area, however, does link resettlement to strategies that seek to limit in-land refugee claims (such as Canada’s Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States and Canada’s Multiple Border Strategy) (Hyndman & Giles, 2017; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020).

For the refugee mothers that I met, resettlement was viewed with ambivalence: Resettlement to Canada offered a higher degree of human security, but also meant being cut off from their families (with whom many lived, even in asylum contexts). It offered opportunities for their children in good schools, but it came with the threat of losing these children to a culture and context that was incommensurate with their own life experiences. It promised the opportunity for Canadian citizenship, but full inclusion in Canadian society remains elusive.

In Chapter 7 (*The question of integration*), I suggest that despite the promise of integration as a ‘two-way’ street – the burden of ‘integrating’ falls largely to newcomers. This is largely the result of significant structural barriers to integration facing post-IRPA Government Assisted Refugees. These structural barriers include: A settlement and integration system designed for immigrants with high levels of ‘human capital’ (education, English language ability, professional backgrounds) that fails to meet the needs of post-IRPA Government Assisted Refugees; mainstream systems (healthcare, education and policing) that are not equipped to support individuals and families with ‘diverse’ needs; felt discrimination by people in the wider community and neighbourhood and policy regimes that limit the mobility of refugees and render meaningful family reunification next to impossible.

During my time conducting fieldwork with Syrian women, I often observed the gaps between the mainstream services that are meant to be universally accessible, and the women in my study. I point to the growing distrust between Syrian women and the healthcare system as an example of this gap. These gaps impact refugee families, but they also speak to broader fault lines in our services and systems for people who experience barriers to inclusion in the form of equitable services. These are challenges for refugee women with language and literacy barriers, but they are also challenges for people who do not fit an imagined mold of ideal service user – English-speaking, able-bodied, middle or higher income, and having no discernable ‘cultural’ needs (such as a preference for a female doctor, for example).

The failure of this ‘two-way’ integration system leaves refugee women looking elsewhere for connection and support. I argue that it is more productive to use the language of ‘placemaking’ –

the “everyday actions and practices that take place not only locally but also transnationally and are critically influenced by the materiality of the place in which they occur” (Miraftab, 2016, p. 28) – rather than ‘integration.’ This allows for a more nuanced and complex understanding of how refugees build their lives and make meaning out of their circumstances. I argue that despite the exclusions refugee families face – from the labour market, through felt discrimination, and through the aforementioned gaps in the system – Syrian women persisted in finding and building sustaining, affective connections.

These connections were often with other Syrian women who had shared similar experiences of dislocation through both the displacement of war and resettlement. They also shared experiences as mothers and of learning how to be a mother in a new and unfamiliar context. I emphasize that while there are significant and important differences *within* the Syrian community in Forest Lawn, women often identify one or two close friends who are also neighbours and with whom they feel comfortable. Often Syrian women also state that the presence of other Syrian families – even if they didn’t know or like all of them – heightens their sense of security in Little Syria.

I also describe the fragile and emergent connections between Syrian refugee women and others in the neighbourhood who were *not* Syrian but who were part of their social network. This included other ‘helpers’ – such as a Sudanese university student and neighbour, who acted as an informal settlement worker, called upon to help with government paperwork and other difficult documents – but also more informal friendships that developed. I describe Hala’s relationships with her neighbours – other women and mothers – and the mutual support they offered each other.

These connections between Syrian women and the various individuals in Little Syria with whom they formed relationships reinforces Wessendorf and Phillimore’s claim that it is crucial to look beyond bonding and bridging frameworks in discussions about ‘integration.’ Superdiverse contexts – such as Little Syria and Forest Lawn – mean that the relationships formed between newcomers elide categorization between those ‘within’ one’s social group and those ‘outside.’ In their study of migrants in London, Wessendorf and Phillimore found that migrants benefited

from a range of affective relationships with other migrants: “social relations of differing affective and functional depths with a variety of people of both white and minority...as well as migrant background are crucial for settlement.” (2018, p. 135)

These connections and forms of support that I observed between Syrian women and their neighbours would have been difficult to identify or document through research methods that were not place-based or grounded in ethnography. By *being there* in the community, I was better able to observe and understand these interactions and their importance to the Syrian women in this study.

This analysis suggests that our theories of refugee/immigrant integration benefit from different ways of seeing. This is especially true for efforts that seek to understand the gendered and gendering aspects of integration. The refugee women that I encountered are not likely to be found in settlement agencies, attending language classes, or learning how to sell their ‘elevator pitch’ to a prospective employer in an employment workshop. Additionally, their visible appearance as Muslims, the large number of children in their families, and the fact that they speak little English, renders them further outside of an imagined Canadian ‘mainstream.’ When described in these terms, policy makers and people who study ‘integration’ start to get a little nervous – will these women *ever* integrate?

I am reminded of an experience I had early on in my fieldwork: I shared excerpts of my fieldnotes (all identifying information removed) with a colleague in sociology who works on issues related to gender and domestic violence prevention. I wanted her perspective on some of what I was seeing and observing during my fieldwork. After reading my notes she commented – “These women are so isolated! Their husbands get to go to the mosque, and shopping, and they drive all over the city, but these women are stuck at home with all these children.”

I was taken aback by her comments: What my colleague identified was certainly *true*, men in the community had much greater mobility than the women I met; yet the women I encountered and spent time with were *deeply enmeshed* in networks of care and community; largely with family

both here and in Syria, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. And within Little Syria, women also looked after one another – texting and visiting, drinking endless cups of coffee and sugary tea, serving sweets and fruit, minding each other’s children, observing Ramadan, celebrating Eid, circulating items for new babies (strollers, bassinets and so on). There was also a ‘dark side’ of this community – gossip, surveillance, competition over scarce resources (the best language class, the Arabic-speaking doctor, donations from the Syrian Refugee Support Group). But even the dark side of community is, after all, *community*.

In many ways, despite the dislocation they experienced through resettlement, there was a degree of continuity to the lives of the women I met, which centered on their roles as wives and mothers, and also as caregivers to their extended family all over the world. This continuity provided a kind of bridge to other connections – both with their Syrian and non-Syrian neighbours. These connections are far from the traditional markers of integration that consume policy makers and academics in this area, but they are nevertheless valuable.

Acknowledging the capacity of refugee women to make meaning and build lives in resettlement is important political work for opening up the category of ‘integration’ and moving away from econocentric logics. It is important to explore “the refugees’ rich and complicated lived worlds, the ways in which they labour to have resilient, productive and even heroic lives in displacement.” (Lê Espiritu 2014, p. 20).

Yet this should not foreclose addressing the systemic and policy barriers that isolate refugee families and circumscribe their lives in Canada. For example, significant efforts to ‘integrate’ women through language classes such as LINC, occlude other policy reforms and investments which might yield ‘better’ outcomes for these women – this includes meaningful opportunities for family reunification. It also includes demanding that service providers, *especially* so-called ‘mainstream’ services, are trained and equipped to support clients with complex needs – including language and literacy barriers.



#### 9.4 Social reproduction reconstituted through migration

That the women I met were deeply enmeshed in networks of care and connection did not come without a cost. Refugee mothers were carrying the double burden of providing care to relatives overseas (in refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon; as well as family who remained in Syria) and learning how to navigate the work of mothering in Canada. This care constitutes a form of emotional labour – which scholars have noted is deeply political work (Winders & Smith, 2019) – despite happening largely out-of-sight within the confines of the household and family.

My intervention here builds on work by feminist sociologists and geographers who have explored the way family life is reconstituted through processes of migration (Parreñas, 2001; Pratt, 2012). While the Canadian state generally measures ‘integration’ through the lens of individual achievement (income, language acquisition etc.). Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that *families* are the “primary agents of migration with decisions based on collective family consideration rather than individual concerns” (Lewis Watts, 2006; p. 84; Creese, Dyck & McLaren, 2008). These scholars suggest that it is immigrant and refugee women who often absorb the work of supporting the ‘settlement’ of other family members within a household. Similarly, in their study of Syrian refugee mothers in Toronto, Milkie, Maghbouleh and Peng (2018) suggest that refugee mothers often serve as buffers for the mental health strain of their children.

Concomitantly, scholarship on the ‘transnational family’ points to the ways in which – even in the wake of migration, separation and relocation – family networks struggle to remain intact and critical to the economic and psychological survival of the transnational family (Parreñas, 2001; Pratt, 2012; Zhou, 2012; Levitt, 2001). Liu writes: “[W]hile home can be geographically relocated, family as a sociocultural and economic unit, remains connected” (in Zhou, 2012, p. 3). Research points to the ways that extended family networks work to support one another – economically, psychologically, culturally – over time and across distance (Kraler, Kofman, Kohli, & Schmoll 2011; Baldasser & Merla, 2014; Horn, 2019). Though maintaining these ties

does not come without a cost – and families often suffer from the toll that attends processes of migration (Pratt, 2012; Ley, 2010).

This was the case for the women in Little Syria, who are deeply connected – financially, psychologically, and emotionally – to family members in other places. They devote significant time and resources to maintaining these connections through daily conversations on various digital platforms (Whatsapp, Facebook). They also send money to family members in refugee camps which was often used for healthcare and other life-giving necessities. In Canada, most of the Syrian women I met opted to continue to grow their families; having more children a year or two after arrival. This contributed to a sense of continuity and familiarity, which reproduced a version of the large family networks they had grown up with in Syria.

Yet as I describe in Chapter 8, the desire to reproduce the large families with which they were familiar, collided with the daily reality of raising children and managing large families in Canada – a context that is relatively inhospitable to large families. I argue that parenting is a form of emotional labour which is deeply political. This is the case especially for minoritized – racialized, poor, immigrant/refugee and Indigenous – families who endure additional forms of surveillance and scrutiny vis-à-vis their parenting choices (Kershaw, 2010). The families I encountered in Little Syria experienced this scrutiny - from service providers, community volunteers, the healthcare and education systems, their neighbours, and the police. The work of mothering, specifically, was often evaluated by these agencies, organizations and individuals, and Syrian mothers were often found to be lacking.

The perceived failure had a spatial dimension which took the shape of Arabic-speaking, ‘out-of-control’ refugee children taking up public space, on playgrounds, on bicycles, and in the makeshift soccer field at the centre of Little Syria. For the mothers in this study the few months a year where they could take advantage of this public space were a palpable relief, yet by allowing their children to take up this space, Syrian families also drew attention to themselves, and to their differing perspectives on supervision and discipline, contributing to a widely held view that these mothers were unconcerned with their children’s safety (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layne, 2013;

Kershaw, 2010). Yet, as I suggest in Chapter 8, Syrian mothers were *deeply concerned* about the wellbeing of their children, but this concern manifested itself in ways that were distinct from middle class Canadian ideas about appropriate parenting. Understanding these differences, and adjusting to these norms, required significant labour on the part of refugee mothers (Winders & Smith, 2019).

Similarly, like other immigrant and refugee families to Canada, Syrian families had to contend with the disruption to generational and gender orders within their own households. Syrian children and youth advanced more rapidly into Canadian society – learning English quickly and becoming immersed in (a version of) the Canadian mainstream through their daily interaction with the school system. This meant they often claimed power from their parents by bringing messages from the wider Canadian world into their homes. As other scholarship on immigrant and refugee families finds, this became problematic in relation to the police (Creese, 2011; Ong, 2001). I point to one such example in Chapter 8. The confidence of English-speaking, Syrian-Canadian children collides with a criminal justice and social service sector that is ill equipped to adequately support the needs of non-English speaking, ‘non-normative’ (i.e. Muslim, racialized, poor, refugee) families.

These interactions between so-called ‘mainstream’ organizations (police, schools, healthcare systems) and refugee families from Syria take shape within a wider governance and discursive context that scrutinizes Muslim families in particular for their perceived irreconcilable differences with ‘Western’ liberal democracy (Hagelund, 2008; Grillo, 2008; Balibar, 2004). Muslim families – both in Canada and elsewhere in the ‘West’ – have become a site of concern over the purported failure of multiculturalism (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010) and the need to set limits on ‘cultural’ difference (Triadafilopolous, 2011). These families are scrutinized because of the risk to and of their children. Young Muslim men are a site of concern vis-à-vis the threat of radicalization (King & Taylor, 2011); young Muslim women are a site of concern because of the threats they face from their families (imagined as authoritarian, extra-patriarchal and oppressive) (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

One of the central violences of Orientalist discourse is the capacity to *know* and *represent* the ‘East’ well in advance of actually encountering people imagined as being from ‘the East.’ This takes shape in the conventional wisdom that circulates about Muslim, refugee families and their imagined barbarity and backwardness. One of the central goals of this dissertation was to address the question: How have refugee mothers created their worlds and made meaning for themselves in a new context? This question is itself an invitation for those who work with refugee women to consider how we might *centre* the perspectives of women and mothers in our analysis of policies, programs, services and supports. Rather than knowing in advance the needs and concerns of this population, how might we seek to understand their priorities in ways that disrupt an Orientalist gaze?

Refugee women from Syria navigate these discursive and governance contexts as mothers. As with paradigmatic understandings of ‘integration’ discussed in the previous section, it is crucial to both acknowledge and recognize the labour refugee women do to sustain their families in a profoundly new context, while also encouraging critical reflection on how ‘Canadian’ systems and structures that encounter refugee women and families might themselves adapt and adjust toward broader and more inclusive understandings of family life and motherhood. Rather than treating these families as a problem to be solved, what might a more nuanced, inclusive accounting of their lives in Canada offer? Instead of offering program interventions that target the perceived problematic cultural practices of parents, how might programs invite in a more careful, relational understanding of what it means to mother and to be part of a family in Canada?

## **9.5 Study limitations and future directions**

Research on refugees in Canada tends to be either quantitative and derived from large datasets, or qualitative and focused on a specific ethnocultural group. There are obvious limitations to both approaches having to do, as I referenced earlier, with our ways of seeing. The big picture offered through quantitative data can provide a view of the general trends over time and across regions. This can be helpful for understanding the wider contexts in which different processes

take place (language acquisition, employment and health, for example).

Yet this way of seeing precludes another way of seeing – the one I have opted to engage here: qualitative methods open up a space for a more textured, nuanced account of everyday life. In choosing to take a qualitative and ethnographic approach, this work is open to the critique that these findings are not generalizable to anything beyond the four-square blocks of Little Syria. If the point is to focus on the relations between people in a particular place – how can we hope to learn anything about anything beyond the few dozen people I encountered and have described here?

Qualitative research is often subject to this kind of critique. I would suggest however, that rather than understanding this work as a story of ‘Syrian refugees in Canada’ – a group that cannot be generalized more than any other group might be, it is instead more productive to use this material to understand the interfaces between particular systems and spaces and the people who live within those spaces. Instead of seeking to answer, how Syrian refugees are integrating in Canada, we might more productively ask what value systems underpin ideas about refugee integration and how might these be challenged to create more inclusive relations? How do contexts shaped by poverty and underinvestment inform the reception of newcomers? How well do mainstream systems support people with language and literacy barriers? What specific challenges do mothers and families face through resettlement?

There were several areas of inquiry that I was not able to explore in this work that I believe would have benefited the overall analysis.

The first is accounting for the differential way gender shapes process of migration and ‘settlement’ and my deeply limited interactions with men in Little Syria. While I describe situations that happen *to* men in this community, it was very rare that I actually sat down and engaged with men in the same way that I was able to engage with women. This was a limitation born out of a methodological approach I chose: doing interviews in the homes of participants and working with a female research assistant meant that we participated in the conventional social

dynamics of the neighbourhood where women socialize with other women, and men with other men. This means that my description of family life is limited to how women imagine and understand family life in migration. It is highly likely that men in Little Syria have entirely different understandings and expectations for their lives in Canada. I have no doubt that this dissertation would be richer had I had the opportunity to engage men more fully in my research process.

A second significant area of inquiry that I was unable to explore more deeply in this work is the relations between newly arrived refugees and the people with whom they live in close proximity. While I touch on some of these relations – describing, for example, the demographic profile of Forest Lawn and some of the people who reside there – I did not engage fully in *their* perspectives of their neighbourhood, and what it means for Forest Lawn to be a destination for refugees and other newcomers. Both Faranak Miraftab (2016) and Catherine Besteman (2016) take the opportunity to engage the perspectives of long-term residents in their studies of migrant workers (Miraftab) and Somali refugees (Besteman) in small town Illinois and Maine respectively. Engaging these perspectives adds a more complex account of the diversity of reception contexts and attitudes that shape processes of migrant and refugee placemaking. I believe that my work would have been enhanced by a more critical engagement with other Forest Lawn residents, in addition to my interviews with service providers, sponsors and people who worked in the neighbourhood.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging again the partial nature of my own interactions with the women whose lives I have described, in part, in this dissertation. As I note throughout the work, I was patently an ‘outsider’ in this space – limited in particular by my lack of language competence in Arabic. It was not only language that was a barrier between myself and the women I met in Little Syria: While we were relatively close in age, our life experiences were profoundly different. Haya – the woman I hired to support my research – was critical to connecting me to the women in this community, and for translating what was said. She also provided much guidance and insight into dynamics and interactions that I would well have missed on my own. It is not an understatement to say this research would simply not have been

possible without her. And yet there remain deep limitations in what I was able to collect, learn and represent in this work. These limitations remain my own.

Despite the profound differences in language and culture between myself and the women whose lives I describe herein, it is worth considering what kind of subject position might have been better equipped to conduct this research. Perhaps another Syrian researcher would have been better suited to the role – yet the differences in class and education (and perhaps political orientation, geography, religiosity and religious identification) between such a researcher and the women I met, would have also positioned her as an outsider.

Ultimately, it is more productive to consider not who might have done this work better, but to consider what ethical translation and representation mean across difference. As I articulate in Chapter 4 (*Methods & Setting*), despite the deep challenges and limitations of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic research, I do believe it is important for researchers to engage difficult questions through processes that centre the experiences of those whose lives are shaped by the policies and governance regimes that we seek to understand. In this case, refugees should be at the centre of our discussions on what it means to be resettled. Despite the inherent pitfalls of representation, this work is worth doing.

## **9.6 Final reflections**

The first time I visited Little Syria it was shortly after the Eid holiday in July 2016. It was the middle of the afternoon and children were out of school for the summer break. I watched as a large group of children between the ages of two and 12, chased each other through the green space at the centre of the housing complex. Many were wearing what were clearly new clothes, bought for Eid, including a boy who looked about eight, wearing nearly a full suit, riding a bike two sizes too big at breakneck speed at the front of the group of children. Other boys also rode bikes, some too big and some too small, trying to keep up with him. The rest of the children ran behind laughing and screaming. Very small children toddled behind trying, and generally failing, to keep up with the big kids. It was a joyful and chaotic scene. While there were no adults visibly supervising the children, I could see groups of women in headscarves sitting outside the various

townhouses, drinking coffee and chatting with one another. They were attending to the babies they had with them, as well as a few toddlers too young to join the larger groups of children.

It is likely that many of the bikes the children rode that day were donated by the Bike Lady – the generous Calgarian who sought to ensure that every Syrian refugee child in Calgary should have a bike of their own. Yet, as I describe in Chapter 1, this gesture of Canadian generosity quickly collided with the expectations over how these bikes *ought* to be used. The disjuncture between a gift given and a gift received is an animating theme of this dissertation.

The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative would likely not have happened had the photo of Alan Kurdi not circulated as widely and caused such an immense outpouring of grief and demand for a political response to the suffering of Syrian refugees. The photo of a dead child provoked a powerful emotional response in people around the world. The connection to Canada encouraged the belief by many that Canadians had to do something to address the terrible tragedy of the Syrian refugee crisis.

His death, then, provoked a humanitarian response which led to a humanitarian solution: the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative which resettled 40,000 Syrian refugees in just over a year.

Miriam Ticktin, in a recent essay, argues that humanitarianism is a poor response to the injustice of violence at the border (such as the case of refugees dying trying to reach Europe by boat in the summer of 2015). She argues that humanitarianism “relies on a very narrow emotional constellation, and this in turn constrains our responses.” This narrow emotional constellation includes compassion, empathy, benevolence and pity. For those seeking sustained solutions to the injustice of the border, we must find “new affective and political grammars in response to suffering, injustice and death” (Ticktin, 2016, p. 256).

Ticktin critiques humanitarianism on three specific grounds. First, she argues that humanitarianism relies on the innocence of those receiving humanitarian aid (such as refugee



children). This serves to differentiate innocent (deserving) from guilty (undeserving) recipients of aid. ‘Genuine’ refugees are deserving; ‘economic migrants’ are not. Second, humanitarianism is driven by the logic of emergency. This suggests that dying while crossing borders is a short-term emergency rather than the inevitable outcome of militarized borders and xenophobic publics, and something that, tragically, has been ongoing for decades. And finally, humanitarianism is driven by compassion, which as Ticktin points out: “insofar as it focuses on individuals and not structural realities, compassion cannot by itself further a politics of equality.” (p. 265).

Most critiques of humanitarianism center on the fundamental inequality that comes from choosing one group to be saved over other groups (Dauvergne, 2005; Fassin, 2012). This is what led Catherine Dauvergne to describe humanitarianism as a “poor stand-in for justice” (2005, p. 7) – yet she acknowledges humanitarianism is one of the few options available for ensuring the human security of refugees. There are no easy resolutions to these critiques of humanitarianism. Didier Fassin argues, humanitarianism is structured by “a complex ontology of inequality...that differentiates in a hierarchical manner the value of human lives” (Fassin 2007, p. 519). And this certainly is the case with the SRRI which elected to resettle *Syrians* and, further, to focus on offering resettlement opportunities to families with children over single men. In this sense, the SRRI is a quintessential humanitarian gesture; by its nature it is exceptional.

Yet beyond the politics of the border, humanitarianism also shaped the response by Canadians toward Syrian refugees. Upon arrival in Canada, Syrian refugees were given exceptional treatment relative to other refugees: They were exempted from transportation loans, they received additional funds through the corporate donations, and they were the beneficiaries of a ‘whole-of-society’ nation-building effort invested in their arrival.

Yet this response, while important, existed within the same humanitarian logics that Ticktin describes: Requiring innocence and passivity on the part of those being welcomed, existing in the time-space of an emergency (now allegedly resolved through resettlement), and vested in compassion.

In seeking to ‘welcome refugees’ those doing the welcoming were often taken aback by the assertive agency (“pickiness”) of those they were welcoming. These new arrivals demanded better and different housing, they wanted to live near other Syrians, they wanted to live in neighbourhoods that were deemed unsafe or undesirable by their middle-class sponsors and settlement workers. In this way, Syrians proved to not be innocent or passive, but rather fully human (“neither damaged victims nor model minorities” as Lê Espiritu (2014, p. 2) argues).

While Canadians involved in the resettlement initiative (and here I will count myself) believed that for those being resettled, the ‘emergency’ of their experience as refugees was now *over*, little thought or attention was given to the fact that for those arriving without kin, another emergency had begun. As Hyndman and Giles write, resettlement is a form of displacement (albeit a privileged one) (2017, p. 97). Families now had to contend with the work of raising children, securing employment, learning a new language, and navigating a profoundly different landscape, without extended family, and often while living in relative poverty.

It was also the case that for those of us on the ‘welcoming’ side, there was a general forgetting that the emergency that propelled this movement of refugees was (and is) not over. The war in Syria goes on, interminably. Family members of those resettled to Canada, who remain in refugee camps and asylum contexts, live in situations where their personal security is by no means assured. And, for those who decided to come to Canada, they are limited in their ability to visit family or to bring family to Canada.

The public outpouring of support and interest in Syrians on the part of Canadians could not be sustained:

A focus on emergency requires us to be surprised over and over again; shocked, as if this were the first tragedy, the first horror we had been confronted with. It is not sustainable...the emotional toll it takes to feel horror each time, as if it were the first time. (Ticktin, 2016, p. 264)

When I began my formal fieldwork in 2017, the large numbers of enthusiastic Canadian volunteers and sponsors that rushed in to optimistically assist Syrian families in their early days in Canada were, with few exceptions, nowhere to be found.

In their absence they left children's bicycles, their names on phone and heating bill contracts which they had set up prior to the arrival of 'their' Syrian families, sometimes donated laptops or children's toys, and stories, usually told by breathless children, about the things they had done with their sponsors and family volunteers during their first months in Canada: Trips to the zoo! The Calgary Stampede! Skating lessons! Swimming lessons! These activities had largely disappeared along with the volunteers and sponsors. What are we to make of this absence? What does it reflect about the limits of humanitarianism?

The answer, of course, is not to ridicule and shame those who were there and then left, but to consider what this might say about humanitarian gestures and the *short-termism* that shapes our understanding of resettlement. My critique here is not aimed at specific individuals involved in resettlement as either sponsors or settlement workers, but rather to consider the ways in which our current policy regimes emphasize individual efforts over collective, society-level solutions to the challenges of exclusion and marginalization.

If, as Ticktin, argues, compassion does not equal justice, feelings do not equal rights, we are required to consider what a more equitable and just gesture toward 'newcomers' might look like.

Because refugees cannot be seen to receive more social benefits than Canadians, the benefits refugees receive match those of other low-income Canadians. This has a certain logic to it: how could a policy be defended if newcomers were given higher levels of social support than those already struggling in Canada? Yet in defending this policy of 'equal treatment,' advocates inadvertently shore up the measly and grossly inadequate social supports available to all low-income residents. The question is not *should refugees be offered more than Canadians?* It is, rather, how can our social welfare system better support all people who live in poverty?

We have come to accept that some people in our society – somewhere between eight and ten percent of the Canadian population, depending on how you count it, will simply live in poverty. Each month, people living in poverty often have to choose between paying rent, putting food on the table or paying the heating bill. That this ten percent is predominantly female, racialized, newcomer or Indigenous, seems only to further render this level of poverty acceptable.

Perhaps, rather than rushing in at the beginning with our exceptionally high hopes for a group we have deemed exceptional, our efforts at inclusion would be better served by less compassion and more equity. A reliance on a compassionate response to human suffering will always fall short of a more sustained commitment to inclusion. When we reduce inclusion to acts of generosity or kindness over sustained investments in systems, in structural change and in articulating better policy, we inevitably fail communities. People doing nice things becomes a stand-in for investments in equitable programs and services, for building affordable housing, for investing in ‘culturally responsive’ programming by mainstream services. Relying on the generosity of Canadians works for a minute, but it does not ensure the inclusion of marginalized populations over the long-term.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Guide Syrian Families:**

#### **Warm up:**

Family composition

Daily life (Work? School? Kids school etc.)

Length of time in Canada

Length of time at current address – if not in little Syria, where did they live before?

#### **Neighbourhood:**

What do you like about the neighbourhood?

Do you know your neighbours?

Transportation – how do you get from here to school/work/kids school?

Drive/bus?

Where do you get your groceries?

Difficulties with neighbours?

#### **Services and Support:**

If you have difficulties, who do you ask for help?

Do you go to the mosque – masjid? (why/why not?)

Where is the rest of your family? How often do you speak to them?

Do you have a family doctor? Where?

#### **Other:**

What are the biggest differences between Syria and Canada?

Has life gotten easier or harder since you arrived?

What are your plans for the future?

Anything else you want to share with me?