

## **Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine**

*Catherine Besteman*

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The term *refugees* has become the latest buzzword, causing people to either spew hate speech or extend a warm welcome – thereby creating a firm dividing line. There is so much discussion about refugees that people sometimes forget the very individuals who are forced to stand astride that dividing line. Who are they? What are their stories? What does it mean to be a refugee? How are they coping once they reach the United States? How are their lives impacted by this divisive debate? What are the struggles they continue to have? How are they influencing the larger communities where they live? Catherine Besteman addresses all of these questions (and more) in her timely study, *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine*.

Besteman introduces the book by speaking of her yearlong stay in Banta, Somalia, as part of her anthropological fieldwork during the late 1980s, just before civil war broke out. She then immediately shifts the lens to Lewiston, Maine, in the year 2010, home to a large Somali refugee community. Juxtaposing these two worlds to frame her inquiry, she delves into Banta's pre-war history: a simple yet harmonious village life built around communitarianism and happiness within poverty, of agriculture and the "rule" of village elders, of pre-defined gender roles and extended families.

After the war started, her efforts to keep in touch were thwarted by the increasing violence and displacement. She learned in 2006 that many of the villagers' relatives now lived only a few hours away from her in Lewiston, then in the midst of an economic downturn due to the closure of the mills that had attracted French Canadians a century ago. This mainly white town experienced a sudden transformation when thousands of Somali refugees began to arrive in 2001 "looking for safety, a low cost of living, financial support, and a way to re-create community support structures" (p. 14). How the town dealt with this completely unexpected development forms her book's main theme.

Through tracing these refugees' lives from peace to war, from Kenyan refugee camps to resettlement in Maine, Besteman's seven years of ethnographic fieldwork challenges some popular assumptions, namely that refugees are docile and dependent victims who benefit tremendously from

humanitarian aid; their situation is an emergency (and temporary) situation; and all immigrants experience a common course of assimilation, when in fact refugees constantly struggle with abject poverty, an enormous disadvantage in language/literacy, and unveiled racism. Hence, she asks “what humanitarianism feels like to those who are its objects” (p. 29) and investigates what happens when refugees suddenly become your neighbors and how integration takes place.

The author weaves in globalization as a significant element of the Somali Bantu story by detailing Washington’s support of Siad Barre, the corrupt Cold War-era dictator, the weaponization of Somalia, Washington’s loss of interest in him after the Berlin Wall fell, and the country’s descent into militia-based chaos. Emphasizing that Somalia’s violence was a direct result of “global entanglements,” Besteman notes that the Somali refugees’ “dislocations brought them into close and intimate encounters with the American citizens whose taxes helped to fund American Cold War patronage ... and [the] military intervention that destabilized their homeland” (p. 56).

While their resettlement was described in terms of humanitarian generosity to helpless dependents, the author finds a very different reality: The refugees insist that they actively participated in formulating a unified identity, in reorienting families to fit American standards, and were involved in practically every stage of the resettlement process. They recounted grueling interviews, accusatory questions, repeated vetting before being allowed on the plane, and being told that they would have to repay the price of the tickets. Thus they were debtors before they even arrived. In addition, many families were torn apart along the way and America was presented to these “untouched by modernity” people as a miraculous place, which proved to be an enormous challenge after they were suddenly left without much assistance in a completely alien land.

Besteman documents how such incongruous displacement eventually led to waves of Somalis arriving with the hope of living close to fellow refugees and recreating their pre-war support systems, and how the Lewistonians’ response ranged from seeing them as an “uninvited, unwelcome, and dangerous intrusion” to those who welcomed them warmly, aiming their anger and disgust at “poor institutional support for indigent and marginalized immigrants” (pp. 111-12). A third strain she examines is the financial straits a city faces when confronted with an onslaught of impoverished and illiterate refugees, especially with very little outside support or previous experience. She validates and describes each version through its representatives: hardworking city officials, vitriolic mayors, or committed social workers.

After relating the town's responses, the author narrates the refugees' experience to reveal the enormous challenges they face: women having to seek jobs and men expected to help with domestic chores; finding jobs and the insecurity of temporary jobs; working odd hours and the subsequent decline of communication within the family; life in dilapidated apartments with minimal furniture; children failing grades and constantly being suspended; the disenfranchisement of elders; war-related depression and trauma; the need to financially support family members still in Kenyan or Somali refugee camps; how the ongoing violence affects the state of affairs back home; and the need to care for many children in claustrophobic spaces, among others. Even so, she traces their agency in creating a niche for themselves and forming their own organizations; providing support across various families and pooling their resources; and working with social workers, teachers, and the police to ensure that their voice is heard. Thus she counters the traditional victim narrative with one of proactive contributions, active concern, and consistent hard work.

While relaying these refugees' journey, Besteman provides ample material to support her claims and continues to problematize simplistic, one-dimensional depictions of what refugees endure – detailing globalized politics, constrained refugee life, and perplexing transplantation to foreign lands. Her forceful argument reveals that these supposedly passive, apolitical receivers of goodwill see themselves as equal participants with the right to have their concerns addressed. Although sometimes flustered by officials who are more interested in setting the agenda than listening to their issues, these refugees continue to adapt to the American system and find ways, through organizations such as the Somali Bantu Youth Association of Maine, to help ensure their children's future, identity, and wellbeing. Thus not only are they integrating themselves while keeping their culture and multiple identities intact, they are also influencing their surroundings by exposing Lewiston to Somali food, language, and clothing. They are creating a network with local social workers, teachers, and the police, all of whom are making space for and facilitating them, as well as exchanging cultural practices. And by claiming Lewiston as their town, they have made room for themselves, so that *hijabis* are no longer an anomaly, despite the existence of xenophobes. According to Besteman:

They are in the process of shaping and becoming not assimilated Americans, but something new, and they are doing so by forging solidarities and networks with a wide range of collaborators who themselves are transforming their understanding of community through these engagements. (p. 288)

*Making Refuge* is an important contribution to the current national debate on immigration, especially as more and more immigrants refuse to leave their cultures behind and assimilate into the American “melting pot” – a term that is openly questioned today. Besteman depicts Somali refugees as vocal, enfranchised, and dynamic members of the nation, instead of “guests” who should be grateful and respect existing norms. At a time when the United States is struggling for its own identity, whether as a predominantly white Christian nation or one characterized by multiple races with a shared sense of nation, Besteman claims that “new versions of ‘America’ are being forged” in small towns like Lewiston as “mobile immigrants and long-term locals create new forms of sociality, understanding, and collaboration” (p. 287). Furthermore, her research shows the unexpected results of globalization and the devastation and displacements it can cause, as well as how unaware Americans are of Washington’s interventions abroad that cause people to flee their homelands.

Besteman’s work helps readers understand that humanitarian work and assimilation are two-way roads, especially because she knew these refugees before war upended their lives and thus can show just how much agency they have exerted to fit into a life that is totally alien to them. But there might be a drawback here: She does not include those Lewistonians who struggle with what they see as an invasion, but only quotes from blog posts and comments, and records no instances of interaction with them, focusing instead on debunking popularly held myths. This is a conspicuous void, for she interviews city officials, social workers, teachers, and policemen; profiles Somali activists, community leaders, and others; and provides a glimpse of Somali life in Lewiston by detailing lives of ordinary Somalis and how they are faring – and yet glaringly neglects to engage the very residents of Lewiston who feel most threatened. Furthermore, while Besteman details globalization’s impact on Somalia, she neglects to discuss the roots of Lewiston’s economic depression beyond the casual mention of the mills’ closure. If she had added these two aspects, her research would have represented the viewpoints of all of the town’s residents.

All in all, *Making Refuge* is an indispensable resource that adds layers of meaning to the refugee experience and is increasingly relevant in today’s debates over immigrants, refugees, and globalization’s worldwide impact.

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