Editors' Introduction

Borders, Boundaries, and the Impact of COVID-19 on Immigration to Canada

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Although Canada has long been regarded as a global leader in immigration policies and practices (Esipova et al., 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated existing challenges and vulnerabilities in Canada's immigration system (Esses et al., 2021). Border closures restricted who was able to travel, favoring temporary foreign workers who were deemed essential, while also creating lost cohorts of international students (Brunner, this issue) and weakening refugee rights (Abu Alrob & Shields, this issue). Considering employment specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic created and amplified disparities between workers who are required to physically attend work versus those who can work remotely, and it highlighted the issue of who has access to safe working conditions, paid sick leave, alternative childcare options, and other work-related resources and benefits (Dobusch & Kreissl, 2020).

As Brunner (this issue) explains, highly uneven (im)mobility has been illuminated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Between nations, border closures and restrictions were applied unevenly, impacting who was permitted to travel. Canadian borders closed in March 2020 to all categories of immigrants (economic, family, refugees and protected persons), resulting in a significant reduction in admissions to only 184,370, 46% short of the targeted 341,000 for that year (El-Assal, 2021). In the midst of these border closures, certain Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) were deemed

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"essential" – particularly temporary agriculture workers and those working in healthcare – and thus were exempted from the Canadian government's border restrictions (Kachulis & Perez-Leclerc, 2021). At the same time, the precarious nature of TFWs' employment conditions (including persistent lack of access to safe, uncrowded housing and universal healthcare) was revealed by the pandemic, and advocates heightened their calls for increased financial, healthcare, and settlement supports for these migrants (Canadian Labour Congress, 2021; Esses et al., 2021).

Within Canada, the implementation of local "lockdowns" varied dramatically between jurisdictions. As Rabiah-Mohammed and colleagues (this issue) and Banerjee and colleagues (this issue) highlight, these lockdowns led to intense feelings of social isolation for recent refugee families who had minimal access to green space and were still forming social connections in Canada. Of note, these lockdowns were particularly triggering for refugees who had spent time in captivity (Banerjee et al., this issue). For refugee families, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing structural inequalities, effectively eliminating progress in employment, social connections, language development, and access to suitable housing they had made since arriving in Canada.

Moreover, COVID-19 increased existing social inequalities between workers who are required to physically attend work (despite potentially unsafe working conditions) and those who are permitted to work from home (Dobusch & Kreissl, 2020). As Mensah and Williams (2022) describe, racialized groups, and Black immigrants in particular, were overrepresented among frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Toronto, for instance, Black neighbourhoods and Black people experienced disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infections (City of Toronto, 2020). Additional evidence suggests COVID-19 related deaths were at least two times higher among individuals living in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods (Subedi et al., 2020). Ultimately, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants were more likely than non-immigrants to die of COVID-19 (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Overview of the Contributions

This special issue includes six articles resulting from an open call for proposals about emerging research and perspectives on the effects of COVID-19 on Canada's immigration and refugee system. Both original empirical studies and theoretical papers that include a specific social justice focus (substantively, theoretically, or methodologically) were invited from scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives.

Using a Critical Social Theory perspective, Rabiah-Mohammed and colleagues examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Syrian government-assisted refugee families' experiences of housing instability.

Many of these refugee families experienced a profound sense of social isolation during the pandemic, made worse from spending months in small housing units with minimal access to green space, isolated from the social connections they had begun to build before the pandemic. Moreover, these families felt they were faring much worse than the general population in Canada due to limited employment opportunities, coupled with increased family expenses related to the lockdowns. Families already experiencing significant financial stress and instability prior to the pandemic felt that potential opportunities for employment and financial growth had been eliminated. This led to a growing sense of hopelessness about improving their housing situation. Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing structural inequalities, thwarting families' housing stability goals, and negatively impacting their likelihood of improving their housing situation. To mitigate these negative outcomes during and beyond Canada's post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery period, the authors recommend key policy changes related to housing, employment and social integration.

Banerjee and colleagues show how, similar to the Syrian refugees in Rabiah-Mohammed et al.'s paper, the conditions of social, economic and affective inequities experienced by Yazidi families (mostly women) in Calgary were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a Feminist Refugee Epistemological framework, Banerjee at al. demonstrate how the pandemic pushed Yazidi refugee women "back to square one," meaning the language and employment gains they had made since arriving in Canada disappeared as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, the lockdown was triggering for many of these refugees who had spent time in captivity after being captured by ISIS in Iraq. This emotional distress was intensified when mass graves of Yazidis were found in Iraq during the initial lockdown, but people were prohibited from traveling to Iraq to mourn these victims. Despite these negative impacts of COVID-19, Banerjee et al. showcase these women's agency, providing examples of how Yazidi women used their domestic caretaking responsibilities to advocate for their children even during the pandemic. The authors describe how participating in the "Land of Dreams" urban farming project in Calgary became a place for healing and community for Yazidi women, helping them create a decolonial, agentic future. Banerjee and colleagues argue that social justice-focused solutions to the inequities experienced by Yazidi refugees during the pandemic must be framed through a world-centered approach (focusing on the majority world or the Global South) and consider issues of gender and kinship.

Continuing on the theme of how the pandemic has amplified the vulnerabilities of migrant groups, Abu Alrob and Shields compare the experiences of three groups of migrants – refugees, asylum seekers and temporary migrants – and detail how border restrictions have led to a weakening of refugee rights. For instance, political narratives employing words like "essential" and "survival" were used to distinguish temporary migrants and admit them to Canada despite border restrictions that limited the

admission of refugees and asylum seekers. The authors argue that selective bordering practices that deny access to refugees and asylum seekers but allow access to temporary migrants depart from international norms regarding human rights and refugee protection. At the nexus of border studies, security resilience and migrant rights, Abu Alrob and Shields analyze the many challenges that COVID-19 has created. They employ a social resilience lens to explicate how rights-based strategies can be used to reconcile public health concerns with migrant rights during times of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, and during post-pandemic recovery and policymaking. They also demonstrate how a social resilience lens demands that policy responses mitigate the types of societal discrimination and inequalities that emerged in Canada's border and immigration policy response to the global pandemic.

Using a mobility justice framework, Brunner examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected education-migration – the recruitment and retention of international students – in Canada. Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, Canada was second only to Australia in its proportion of international to domestic postsecondary students, admitting just under 500,000 international students (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2020). Brunner considers how the pandemic impacted this system using an intersectional, multi-scalar analysis (Sheller, 2018). Brunner describes how Canada's COVID-19 travel restrictions led to a "lost cohort" of international students who remained abroad as post-secondary institutions moved courses entirely online. To address this and other implications of the pandemic's effect on physical international mobility related to international students, policy decisions were made such as loosening post-graduation work permit (PGWP) eligibility. Additional policy decisions (e.g., opening 40,000 permanent resident spots to recent English-speaking graduates with lowered selection criteria in May 2021) affirmed the government's increased focus on international students as a primary source of permanent residents via two-step migration. Throughout her analysis, Brunner invites reflection on the ethics of Canada's education-migration system, grappling with questions such as who gained versus lost as borders closed, and the future sustainability of the education-migration system.

The experiences of South Asian immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic are considered by Das Gupta and Nagpal. They use critical discourse analysis to analyze how conservative politicians represented higher COVID-19 infection rates among South Asians (specifically Punjabis), attributing infection rates to religious and cultural practices. The authors draw on several forms of media (radio talk shows as well as national, provincial, and local online media) that circulated and reinforced these discourses of danger associated with South Asians in COVID-19 "hot spots" such as Brampton and Northeast Calgary. They describe how discourses around South Asians, Punjabis and COVID-19 reveal continuities in culturalist understandings of South Asian immigrants. Further, they explain how a counter-narrative that attributes high infection rates to systemic issues like

precarious employment, over-crowded housing, racism, and lack of healthcare access emerged from other groups including medical experts. These counter narratives represent critical discursive resistance that advances a structural analysis of health in immigrant communities. Their discursive analysis of the political and media presentation of COVID-19 infection and South Asian communities in Canada can be read as part of a longer process of decolonial resistance emerging from diverse sections of Canadian society, including not just legal, but now medical experts who draw attention to the structural determinants of health.

Like South Asian immigrants in Canada, Black individuals and neighbourhoods were overrepresented in frontline occupations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and experienced disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infections (e.g., comprising 24% of COVID-19 cases in Toronto despite representing less than 10% of the population; City of Toronto, 2020). In this context, Mensah and Williams analyze data on income, employment rates, housing, COVID-19 infection rates and deaths to examine how COVID-19 has impacted Black immigrants and non-immigrants in Toronto. Using a social justice lens, Mensah and Williams reveal how the racial status quo in Canadian society has allowed for the externalization of risk to be disproportionally borne by Black communities. To address these inequities, they propose that material improvements are needed in terms of employers being prepared to pay essential workers (including undocumented immigrants and temporary labourers) wages that are commensurate with the essential nature of their jobs. Mensah and Williams encourage employers to provide humane working conditions, paid sick leave, and incentives such as reduced hours. Finally, they urge authorities to distribute vaccines and other resources in ways that prioritize the most vulnerable.

While these six papers employ different theoretical and methodological perspectives, they all shed light on three important issues. The first is the differential (im)mobilities experienced by refugees and immigrants to Canada, and the rights and resources they are able to access. In part because of the economic contributions they make to Canada's economy, during the pandemic international students were able to continue to enrol in educational programs, even if their studies were remote, and temporary essential workers were prioritized for entry to Canada. Refugees, on the other hand, who have the greatest need for the protection offered by mobility, were effectively stalled (Macklin, 2022). The diversity of entry categories used by those coming to Canada has resulted in inequities in the rights and supports available to them. Those most affected include international students who do not receive federally funded integration supports, temporary workers whose primary connections and resources are provided by their employers, and refugees who at times receive insufficient resources to manage the first year of arrival.

The second issue this special issue highlights is how the pandemic exacerbated already existing problems experienced by migrants and minority

communities in Canada. Intersectional disadvantage in housing and employment and in accessing other services became more acute as the pandemic raged. Understanding the degree of disadvantage newcomer populations face, and how this disadvantage may be worsened by crises such as a pandemic, is necessary for developing effective policy responses.

The third issue the articles highlight is that of agency and resilience. Despite the enormity of the challenges faced, newcomers often demonstrate effective agency and resilience, and there are a number of examples of community led approaches that can support these vulnerable individuals. Identifying and analyzing these examples and then creating policies that effectively support promising practices will build community resilience and enhance individual, family and community agency.

Moving Forward

As we write this introduction (in January, 2022), Omicron has become the dominant COVID-19 variant. Once again, borders are closing (Marcus & Neild, 2021). In early December, Canada closed its borders to any non-Canadian who had been in South Africa, Mozambique, and several other countries in Southern Africa. Some countries (e.g., Israel and Japan) have closed their borders to all non-citizens (Marcus & Neild, 2021). Twenty-two months after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Canada, lockdowns are once again being imposed, including strict curfews in Quebec (Government of Quebec, 2021), and many provinces and territories are delaying students' return to in-person learning (Wong, 2022). Vaccine inequities are again being revealed through slow booster roll-outs, low rates of childhood (ages 5-12) vaccinations, etc. Moreover, access to PCR testing is exceedingly limited in some regions, while pricing and access to rapid tests has created additional COVID-19 inequities (Somos, 2021). Altogether, it seems that many of the inequities that were illuminated in this special issue have yet to be resolved. Even political rhetoric (see Das Gupta, this issue) has changed very little, with Alberta Premier Jason Kenney stating during an interview with Rick Bell of Postmedia on December 22, 2021, "and what's the next bat soup thing out of Wuhan?" (Ritchie, 2021).

Despite the challenges Canada continues to face during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there is no doubt that immigration will continue to be an important part of Canada's post-COVID-19 recovery strategy (Esses et al., 2021). Rabiah-Mohamed and colleagues (this issue) argue that the government needs to consider sustainable solutions to Canada's housing crisis, including creating more affordable housing units. This issue is of particular concern for refugees and immigrants, but it is also a structural factor for all Canadian residents; during the pandemic real estate prices have ballooned and in 2021 Canadian housing affordability deteriorated the most it has in decades (National Bank of Canada, 2021). Relatedly, refugees and

other vulnerable groups should be given special consideration when it comes to financial support, employment programs, and the like. This must include fair working conditions and pay for essential workers on the frontlines (Mensah, this issue). Innovative programs that promote healing (e.g., the "Land of Dreams" program described by Banerjee et al., this issue) should also be prioritized. As Abu Alrob and Shields argue, meaningful engagement with migrant groups in the development of these policies will increase the effectiveness of these strategic responses. Moving forward, governments are encouraged to enact COVID-19 socio-economic recovery responses that address the disproportionate burden COVID-19 has placed on migrant groups. As the articles in this special issue have revealed, policy responses that create structural reforms to reduce inequalities will be essential.

Acknowledgements

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