

# Making refuge in a neoliberal country

An interview with Catherine Besteman

*by Yasmine Bouagga*

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**How do refugees experience everyday life in the United States? Anthropologist Catherine Besteman investigates the experience of Somalian refugees in Lewiston, Maine, from their application for resettlement to their struggles in a world that disrupts their social organization and their lifestyle.**

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## *Making Refuge*, by Catherine Besteman

Since the early 2000s, the city of Lewiston (Maine, USA) has witnessed the arrival of newcomers: Somalian Bantus, mainly originating from isolated rural areas, who came in the US through government resettlement programs for refugees. The arrival of these refugees, who now make up to 15% of the total population of this middle-range deindustrialized city, was greeted with surprise and worry. Local controversies emerged: would they become a disproportionate weight on public services and social welfare? Could culture gaps be overcome? Would their children adapt to school, or would they become delinquents?

In a book entitled *Making Refuge*, anthropologist Catherine Besteman (who is also a professor at Colby College) takes these questions in reverse: she investigates the experience of the refugees themselves, from their application for resettlement in the United-States— in order to escape refugee camps in Kenya—to their choice to settle in a small town rather than in African-American ghettos of large cities. Her analysis finely details their arrival in a world that disrupts their bearings, their social organization and their lifestyle. How can they find

their place in a new society organized around individual success rather than collective solidarities? How can they maintain family cohesion while undergoing these transformations? How can institutions such as schools or the municipality be understood and communicated with? Catherine Besteman offers a unique document that supports a strong reflection on what social integration is in a neoliberal context.

**Books&Ideas: Your research emerged from the controversy over the difficult integration of these families in a small post-industrial town in Maine (North-East). Refugees were accused of being a burden to public services, or even a threat to public safety, as rumors of Somali teenagers forming gangs circulated. How did you come to recount this difficult experience of integration from the point of view of the refugees themselves?**

**Catherine Besteman:** Many of the people featured in the book come from a small community in southern Somalia where I lived and conducted fieldwork in the late 1980s. We had lost touch during Somalia's war and in the massive displacement that it produced. Some of the people from that community who survived the war by fleeing across the border into refugee camps in Kenya were later accepted into the US refugee resettlement program, and, following their arrival in the US, chose to move to Maine, where I live. We met each other again in 2006, totally by accident. After our reunion, community members asked me to write a book about their experiences since the onset of Somalia's civil war, arguing that my earlier book about their lives in southern Somalia was now sorely out of date. So the idea for the book originated with community members. I think that our historic associations—I knew their parents and grandparents, had walked their farmland and played with their little brothers and sisters—contributed to a sense of trust that I would not betray them or write about them as people without a past. I spent the first couple of years after our reunion visiting other members from that small community in their new homes in other American cities: Syracuse, Hartford, Springfield, Seattle and trying to piece together an understanding of exactly what had happened to their community during the war. These stories became the basis for the chapter that explained how they became refugees, forced to flee their homes and farms. Over the subsequent decade, I worked with community members who were building community-based associations to represent themselves with city leaders, to advocate for their interests, and to challenge local institutions (schools, hospitals) to reform their practices in order to accommodate them. I occupied various roles: as an advocate, assistant, compañera, scribe, occasional grant-writer, friend, sounding board, and so forth. But my positionality was clear: I was not a policy maker or invested in enabling the institutions of government to better police or control the immigrant population. This is important, because ethnography undertaken with vulnerable or poor communities is sometimes funded through institutions that are oriented toward creating better policy initiatives and it is rare that this vantage point takes the perspective of the intended objects of policy as central, foundational, and primary. While I also share the perspectives of others who live in Lewiston (city planners and authorities, local people frightened of the newcomers, and local people who dedicated themselves to supporting the newcomers) my primary interest was to reflect the perspectives of immigrant community members.

**Books&Ideas: Your involvement in their stories, which also has an emotional aspect, allows for a very lively narrative throughout the book. It also enabled you to access rare**

**information, bringing to light the constraints faced by the refugees as well as their strategies to cope with them.**

**C.B.:** Even though I had lived in Somalia and understood the forms of sociality that animated community life, it was surprising to see how Somalis living in Maine managed to retain some of those practices in a context of a society vigorously committed to individualism, privatization, profit, and the cult of the personal. Goods, money, children, food all circulate among households and every community member feels entitled to participate in this circulation. Women buy groceries in bulk and later distribute their purchases among families. Women share childcare responsibilities. People share cars and cover each other's expenses; the community raises money collectively to cover health care costs, funerals, unexpected expenses, bail, and so forth. The surprise with which Somalis watched Americans tally up restaurant bills so that everyone paid for what they consumed was a reminder that in the Somali community, whoever had money that day paid for everyone. This of course is all changing—such community-centric practices are really hard to sustain in a society like ours, so reliant on personal property and consumption. But for at least a decade Somali forms of communitarianism remained paramount.

I suppose the other surprise was learning about the extent to which refugees and, more generally, poor people who use public services, are surveilled and regulated by the state. People who live in public housing, receive welfare benefits, or participate in job training or parenting programs funded by the state are subject to a vast range of surveillance practices to ensure they are not breaking any rules, misrepresenting their qualifications to receive benefits, earning more than they should be, engaging in domestic practices defined as unsafe or unhygienic, engaging in criminal behavior, and more. They are constantly required to account for themselves, their decisions, their behavior, their failure to achieve certain standards, their inability to conform to certain requirements, etc. This is compounded by the scrutiny they receive in public as black Muslims who talk and dress differently. Glimpsing how people manage to live in the face of such universal scrutiny was revelatory for me—although certainly not news for those who live every day in the eye of such scrutiny.

**Books&Ideas: In your study, you show how the relationship to the resettlement country varies depending on people's age and gender. Youth and women can find new spaces of personal expression, while older people and men appear to have lost their bearings. Why are the reactions so different?**

**C.B.:** I think the book explains this situation fairly well. Lots of programs target women and youth for opportunities and job trainings, but few target men, who are treated as expendable and more problematic than women. Men struggle with their loss of authority and respect, and because of a variety of things—women's empowerment programs, welfare support for women but not men, job training programs oriented only toward women, the division of household labor—find their position in the domestic unit less stable and their standing as knowledgeable and capable elders in the eyes of the outside community less secure.

**Books&Ideas: Refugees face strong incentives to become economically self-sufficient at an individual level as quickly as possible. This injunction is out of touch with the community's own coping strategies, which include solidarity between the members of the group and exchange of services. How can social service practices be reconciled with the customs and habits of those receiving aid?**

**C.B.:** There are a number of issues here, but the most important one may be the many forms of mutual support that Somalis engage in that are not recognized as counting as economic activity. For example, women regularly provide food for community gatherings such as ritual and social occasions. Women regularly baby-sit each other's children and grandmothers often watch their grandchildren. English speakers regularly translate for non-English speakers. Car owners regularly drive friends who lack cars to work, school, or appointments. Somali community leaders devote hours and hours every week to unpaid community organizing and support activities. The list goes on and on. But none of this registers in the eyes of the state as economic activity, which means that the statistics about Somali unemployment imply that Somalis are idle and non-working when they are actually devoting countless hours every week to solidarity and support services for fellow community members. So a more expansive understanding of 'work' and 'economic activity' that doesn't fetishize individually earned income as the only legitimate and worthwhile measure of success could help here.

**Books&Ideas:** These refugees come from extremely poor and rural areas which, as you show in your research, are in total contrast with the consumption-driven American dream. However, once they are resettled in the US, these refugees live on the margins of the labor market and can only access low-paid jobs. They often end up trapped in poverty, and one refugee summarized the situation with this question: "What is the basic reason that you bring me to an ocean and then tell me to go swim by myself?". Is this what you analyze as a "neoliberal definition of refuge"?

**C.B.:** Yes, exactly. A neoliberal definition of refuge is one that allows a person to have crossed a border and then tells them they are on their own to forge a new future, devoid of state support and assistance, subject to deportation if they make a mistake. A neoliberal definition of refuge is one that carries a single definition of success: personal economic independence. And if they fail, the neoliberal definition of refuge is clear that their failure to provide for themselves economically is their fault. A neoliberal definition of refuge does not conceptualize of refuge as life affirming, nurturing, or promising of personal growth toward a different kind of future; rather, it is one that insists that any kind of job, even the most demeaning, exploited job with absolutely no future, is the price to pay for having gained the right to cross the border.

**Books&Ideas:** In *Making Refuge*, you show how critically important school is for refugees. It fosters their ambitions for a better life, and promotes their socioeconomic inclusion. However you also show that the relationship between refugee families and school staff can be difficult: there are misunderstandings, failures and frustrations. What kind of initiatives on the part of schools or refugees could help address these issues?

**C.B.:** Outreach to and inclusion of parents is critical. The situation I describe in the book—of a high dropout rate and disproportionate disciplining of immigrant youth—details efforts to circumscribe the ability of parents to engage with schools because refugee parents were considered too problematic, too different, too uneducated, too unpredictable, and too unknown and schools were envisioned as sites of assimilation and disciplining. To the contrary, the clearest path to success for schools with refugee students is to engage refugee parents in the life of the school (as volunteers, classroom assistants, employees, school monitors and chaperones; also to ensure parents and teachers have the opportunity to engage with each other regularly, and to offer space in the school welcoming to parents) and to

ensure that refugee students see themselves represented in school materials. Schools *have* to be responsive to and responsible for the students they have, orienting their pedagogical materials and practices and community outreach goals to the needs of their communities. Furthermore, discipline more in line with a restorative justice model rather than a strict punishment model is far more effective at helping to incorporate newcomers. Punitive discipline (detention, suspension, demerits, and so forth) is alienating and humiliating.

**Books&Ideas: You criticize the approaches that analyze integration difficulties as the result of a culture clash. Why do you think cultural differences are not the only factor explaining these problems? What other interpretations do you offer?**

**C.B.:** I argue that ‘culture’ is often used as a smokescreen for ‘race’ and ‘class.’ Cultural differences were simply not the real problem for integration—racism and poverty were. Cultural differences are negotiable, understandable, discussable, and normal in community life. Communities always have internal differences of all sorts that get worked out and debated in the normal flow of life. But racism is different; it is a preformed and derogatory judgment about profound difference in which one side sees itself as the arbiters of value and worth. The problems that Somalis faced in Lewiston were not (mostly) ones of cultural difference; they were due to racism, to hostility to their presence as black Muslims, to a reluctance to allow them rights of self-determination and a political voice. When someone screams “Dress like an American!” to a Somali woman in a Walmart parking lot, they are insisting that they have the right to make a value statement about the targeted woman’s aesthetics. I interpret this as an act of racism, not as a culture clash about sartorial choices.

Certainly, there were cultural differences that had to be negotiated as well, of course. Newly resettled Somalis were accustomed to community meetings where anyone who wishes has the right to speak—a radical practice of democracy. American meetings are much more tightly run, where only certain people have the right to speak and time is strictly kept. Somalis learned the rules and structures for American meetings and conformed. And Americans who were invited to attend meetings of the Somali community also learned to change their expectations of what a meeting structure should look like. Children who had never attended school had to learn the bodily discipline demanded of American schoolchildren. Sometimes that discipline was exerted in a racist way—Somali children were far more likely than non-Somali children to be punished in school. But bodily practice in public schools is a cultural norm that Somali school children rapidly learned.

The problem with attributing integration challenges to “cultural differences” is that it essentializes culture, making culture something that seems non-negotiable, inflexible, hard-edged, and fundamental, and often lays the blame for problems with integration on the newcomers. But this is an inaccurate understanding of culture, which is far more malleable, responsive, mutually constituted and creative. And it is an inaccurate understanding of community-building, which requires *everyone*—newcomers and long-term residents alike—to work together toward new understandings about how to live together.

**Books&Ideas: A dominant ideology in France considers “communitarianism” as an obstacle to the integration of immigrants, and to life in a shared society. By contrast, you show how, in the context of the US, Somali associations can play an important role in the refugees’ adaptation to the local society. What do these associations do? And do they get recognition for their work?**

**C.B.:** The immigrant-founded and run associations are critical bases of community solidarity and support, especially in contexts where community members are living in real poverty, struggling to learn the new language, suffering traumatic memories and losses, confused about how to adjust to their new places of residence, and alienated. In Maine, several immigrant community leaders created vibrant community associations to advocate for immigrants and refugees, to interact with public authorities, to offer a legible structure with which members of the host community could interact, and, most importantly, to offer all kinds of support to community members, from translation services to rides to financial support to representation in legal or bureaucratic matters. The community organization office is a safe space for community members, where community meetings can be held to make decisions about internal matters but also about engagements with host community organizations (like schools, hospitals, city council, and so forth). Community leaders use community-based organizations to gauge public sentiments, needs, problems to be addressed, and to workshop and debate various strategies to address problems. The community-based organizations about which I write in my book are thriving, continuing to offer various forms of support to community members, ranging from farming projects to soccer leagues. They also provide a meeting point for people from different backgrounds to work together and learn about each other.

**Books&Ideas: The case of Somali Bantu refugees is one of state-organized migration.<sup>1</sup> Their arrival in the US had been planned, and organizations were mandated to help them integrate. On a smaller scale, a similar model has been set up in France since 2015 in response to the Syrian crisis. In your opinion, what are the advantages and the limits of this model?**

**C.B.:** One advantage is that migration is legitimized by the state, which has authorized entry and assured certain protections and benefits for the few chosen for resettlement. People resettled through official resettlement programs are guaranteed certain benefits and services that others, such as asylum seekers or unauthorized border crossers, are not, and the organizations funded to provide them with services are supposed to be responsible for offering support that is not similarly extended to other migrants and asylum seekers. This is of course a distinction created by law and it could be changed.

But there are limits to this model. Xenophobes target resettlement organizations as responsible for bringing those imaged to be ‘terrorists’ into the community, which can turn public resentment against organizations who resettle refugees. Resettlement organizations may not be tightly tied to local host communities, and thus may not have the capacity to confront such challenges of racism and xenophobia. Furthermore, resettlement organizations provide the services for which they are funded but may not be able or willing to extend themselves beyond what their contract funding covers. I am not sure what would be a better structure to ensure support for newly resettled refugees. Some argue that municipalities should be responsible for resettlement, receiving federal funds to assist in the process, but municipalities might then be encouraged to refuse entry to refugees altogether, which would be a very dangerous development.

It is also worth noting that resettlement through state-legitimized mechanisms offers a modicum of support, such as a pathway toward citizenship or at least a green card. In the

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<sup>1</sup> It followed a mobilization in the US to offer a safe haven for this ethnic group that was suffering from discrimination, even in the refugee camps in Kenya where they had resettled after fleeing the Somali civil war.

recent past, these forms of legal ‘belonging’ offered protection against deportation. But this is no longer the case. The US has quickly moved in the direction of mass deportation, such that even people who have lived here for decades can become deportable if they commit an infraction or if their past record indicates they once committed an infraction that has become a deportable offense. This is deeply shocking and disturbing and must end.

**Books&Ideas: It appears that since the election of Donald Trump, the situation has become more difficult for refugees in the United States. Can you explain what has changed?**

**C.B.:** Well, the President has dramatically restricted refugee entries to the US, and with the so-called “Muslim ban” has ended the hope for family reunification for many resettled refugees who left behind family members. His divisive, anti-Muslim, xenophobic and racist rhetoric has opened public space for xenophobes to rant against migrants and refugees and consequently migrants throughout the country have experienced a sharp spike in hate crimes. In response, some refugee communities are turning toward more vigorous forms of democratic engagement, such as voting drives and supporting community members to run for public office. Ilhan Omar from Minnesota is the first resettled Somali refugee to win a US Congressional seat, and I suspect many more will follow.

This interview was conducted by Yasmine Bouagga with the support of Loreena Aubree, Isaure Hurstel and Noëlle Guinard (students, ENS-Lyon, France).