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Redefining Home: Understanding Congolese Refugee Community Organization in the Greater Boston Area

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Abstract

For refugees that have been resettled into hostland nations, the creation of formal refugee community organizations (RCOs) dedicated to assisting immigrants represents a grassroots response to the stresses of migration. Despite their importance to the lives of refugees, RCOs have received little scholarly attention in the United States. Even less attention has been dedicated to studying the role of RCOs for African peoples. This research seeks to address these gaps in scholarship by analyzing community understandings of one RCO, the Congolese Development Center, among the Congolese refugee community located in the North Shore region of Massachusetts. Using qualitative ethnographic data, this research interrogates the interface between the organizational behaviors of the community and the societal structures that impact social organization, including global capitalism, systemic racism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal governance pressures. My findings suggest that these systems of marginalization and oppression fragment communities and exert pressure on the individuals and organizations at the bottom of the resettlement chain, replicating inequalities and limiting the ability of refugee communities to address the problems they face.
REDEFINING HOME: UNDERSTANDING CONGOLESE REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IN THE GREATER BOSTON AREA

by

Cameron MacPherson

B.A., Syracuse University, 2016

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Pan African Studies.

Syracuse University
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To my grandfather:

God love ya, Papa
Acknowledgments

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List of Acronyms

ACF—Administration for Children and Families
BPRM—Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
CDC—Congolese Development Center
DRC—Democratic Republic of the Congo
DTA—Department of Transitional Assistance
ECBO—Ethnic Community-Based Organization
EFE—English for Employment
ESL—English as a Second Language
FY—Fiscal Year
HUD—US Department of Housing and Urban Development
IINE or IIB—International Institute of New England, a resettlement agency that is often still referred to by its former initials “IIB” (International Institute of Boston)
IOM—International Organization for Migration
MAA—Mutual Assistance Association, or an organization that partners with the state/federal government to provide assistance to migrant populations
MORI—Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants (see ORI)
NRA—National Resettlement Agency. There are nine federally chartered resettlement agencies that receive cases and allocate them to a network of local affiliates throughout the country.
ORI—Office of Refugees and Immigrants. This is a state office in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.
ORR—Office of Refugee Resettlement. This is a federal office within the US Department of Health and Human Services.

R&P—Reception and Placement program, a federal grant provided for the initial resettlement of refugees to fund certain expenses for three months

RCO—Refugee Community Organization

SSI—Supplemental Security Income

TANF—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

UNHCR—Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

US—United States

USCIS—United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

USRAP—United States Refugee Admissions Program

Volag—shortened form of “voluntary agency.” In literature, this term is used to describe both NRAs and their local affiliates. In this research, the definition is confined to the local resettlement agencies.

WIC—Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children
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Table 1—Comparison between projected ceiling of refugees and actual number of refugees resettled for fiscal year 2017.
Introduction
On the streets of Lynn, Massachusetts, a city first settled by European colonizers in the early 1600s, an American history is being rewritten by the city’s many newcomers. Corner stores have become bodegas, church signs announce service times in Khmer, and dozens of languages are spoken on the sidewalks. Today, more than a third of Lynn’s residents were born outside of the United States (US), the country that Lynn predates (US Census Bureau 2016). It is a city with a rust belt tightened to its last notch, full of concrete-colored contradictions. The relative affordability and proximity to Boston attracts both low-income immigrants and a gentrifying middle-class. Rusting factories of the past compete with the sleek luxury apartments of the future for the right to preside over the city. It is here, within this distinctly American city in transition, that a large community of Congolese refugees, and a grassroots organization dedicated to helping them, can be found.

The Congolese Development Center (CDC) is a refugee community organization (RCO) that offers direct service provision to recently-arrived Congolese refugees. While resettlement agencies are tasked with the initial reception and placement of refugees, post-resettlement organizations like the CDC offer services several months after the arrival of refugees, once the resettlement agency’s mandate of service provision expires. As an ethnic community-based organization (ECBO), the leadership of the CDC comes from the same ethnic background as the community it exists to serve.

Despite their importance to the lives of refugees, RCOs have received little scholarly attention in the United States. Among the English-language literature, studies typically center around organizations within the United Kingdom or Canada. Even less attention has been dedicated to studying the role of RCOs for African peoples. My research seeks to address these gaps in scholarship and understanding. But any scholarly attempt to understand RCOs must
expand beyond the institutions themselves. The RCO sits in relation to a number of social networks and relational realities that comprise the social fabric of refugee life in a receiving nation.

This thesis attempts to understand the organization of Congolese refugees in the North Shore region of Massachusetts. The North Shore, a collection of working-class to middle-class suburbs roughly ten miles north of Boston, has resettled a significant number of Congolese refugees over the past several decades. Lynn, a city of roughly 90,000 people in the North Shore (US Census Bureau 2016), is where the CDC is located, and served as the primary field site for this research.

For an analysis of organizational patterns and behaviors, studying the Congolese community in the North Shore offers several benefits. First, the institution of the CDC provides a lens through which to view the organization of refugees. Second, the North Shore features both a well-established community of Congolese immigrants who arrived decades ago, and an influx of recently resettled refugees. I anticipated that these community dynamics would lead to a richer analysis of integration into both a nation-state and an extant immigrant community. Third, there are a number of context-specific challenges to resettlement in the North Shore, from high cost-of-living to gentrification, that impact the lives of refugees.

My initial conceptions of this project were rather neat formulations that detailed the functions of an organization and the responses of a community to migratory stresses. The reality I encountered in the field, through the stories and experiences of my participants, is far more nuanced and gritty. Through the participants who invited me into their lives, I witnessed the toll exacted by ill-conceived policies implemented by well-intentioned practitioners. This thesis tells the story of a community struggling against a resettlement system that constrains its capacity to
address the challenges it faces. This story cannot be divorced from the exploitative and intersecting effects of larger structural forces, including global capitalism, heteropatriarchy, systemic and institutional racism, and the ascendancy of nationalist extremism in the United States. All of these factors influence the ways Congolese refugees enter into American society and relate to one another, and serve as vital pillars for this research.

Methods and Conceptual Approach

Data for this research was collected over three months, from June to August of 2017, primarily through two methods: participant observation and ethnographic interviewing. The first month in the field was dedicated to observation. My conception of participant observation borrows from Dewalt and Dewalt (2011), who suggest that a researcher must actively participate in the culture of the community they hope to observe. To accomplish this, I embedded as an intern at the CDC, volunteering as an assistant case manager. Tasks associated with this role included accompanying clients to medical appointments, arranging for public benefit provision, or assisting with various problems when clients came to the office. During this time, I also attended informal community meetings at a Congolese Catholic church and visited the homes of community members. Data for this period was mostly gathered through jot notes, taken in the field, which I converted into field notes soon thereafter.

Following the observational period of the first month in the field, I began scheduling and conducting interviews in July. To schedule interviews, I would meet with a participant, provide consent materials, explain the purpose of the study, and then return to ensure the respondent understood their role, risks, and rights. I conducted nineteen semi-structured, ethnographic interviews. Six of the interviews were with refugee resettlement officials, and thirteen were with
refugees. Interviews took between 45 minutes and 3.5 hours to complete, with most lasting 90-120 minutes. Stylistically, I followed the grand/mini tour spiral method of questioning (Spradley 1979), a process-based line of inquiry which helps to identify major themes before teasing out specifics and particularities.

Most interviews were in English (13), with four conducted in French and two conducted in Swahili with the help of a translator. Four of the practitioners interviewed were women and two were men. Among the refugees interviewed, four were women, and nine were men. All but one of the male refugees were “single case refugees,” meaning they were resettled without any family members or dependents. Contrarily, all but one of the female refugees were resettled along with their families.

A key aspect of my methodology is the practice of braiding data, scholarship, theory, and thought into writing. In presenting ideas, I seek to elevate the stories of respondents to foreground experience within my research. Central to the Black feminist thought that guides this project is the idea that the personal is political. Margaret Ledwith, writing about the pedagogy and praxis of bell hooks, notes that Black feminist pedagogy places everyday stories at the heart of the process of critical consciousness. The notion that the deeply personal is profoundly political leads to a critical understanding of the nature of structural oppression, and the way that we are shaped in all our difference by structures of power that permeate our lives. By exploring the political nature of everyday encounters, we move towards the critical consciousness necessary to demystify the dominant hegemony and to change oppressive structures. (Ledwith 2011: 154)

bell hooks’ philosophy centers the personal, subjective experience as a site of knowledge and consciousness. The elevation of the subjective that represents a foundational tenet of Black feminism is at tension with the pursuit of objective reasoning that lies at the heart of social science. In scholarship, a balance must be struck between the dualist epistemologies that separate
the world into objective and subjective truths, structures and agents, and personal and political experiences, among many other dichotomies. Adhering to a single line of inquiry dooms any intellectual endeavor to failure; the most sanitized attempts at objectivity are frustrated by the relational perspective of the researcher, and the most veracious subjective accounts are discounted as idiosyncratic, irrelevant points of view.

Rather than indulging in dichotomous thinking that leads to artificial binaries, I approach knowledge (and the production of knowledge that defines pedagogy) as a spectrum that embraces multiple claims to various truths. In addition to traditional, linear scholarly writing, I present experiences from the field via asides that are separate from the overarching analysis. I draw attention to these asides by placing them in colored boxes embedded throughout the text. Each of the stories framed as asides represent a rather intense emotional experience for me personally. They capture moments that wrenched tears or induced feelings of anxiety and despair. I sought to re-create not only the narratives that triggered these visceral responses, but also the emotional and psychological experience of the stories through creative writing, thick description, and bearing witness.

With that said, I certainly do not seek to compare the experience of encountering traumatic stories with the very real traumas endured by my participants. It is not my intention to appropriate narratives of pain and hardship to redirect attention to the researcher. For precisely this reason, while I do include subjective claims, personal evaluations, and chart my emotions in these narrative insertions, I do not include myself as a “character.” The stories presented through narrative insertion reveal rather dramatic developments in my critical consciousness that changed the way I approached the topic. The personal experience of conducting research and
encountering stories became political in that it contributed to a process of conscientization that broadened my perspective.

I believe it is important to challenge the feminist assertion that scholarship can possibly locate the political within the personal experiences of subjects. Narrative contains political power, but it is the researcher who edits, curates, and selectively presents “the personal,” separating it from the experiences of the narrator. If an interview is rendered in any way for presentation to an audience, it loses meaning, elides nuance, and, most likely, presents only those aspects which the author found most important or relevant. To call attention to my fingerprints on the narratives of respondents, I separate the asides—both temporally, through flashback style writing, and physically, through self-contained boxes in the body of the text—from analytical writing.

The discussion of authorial authority leads to another point about my methodology. I am the lens through which stories are told and data is presented. As research instruments, my body and mind have been conditioned to experience and expect various privileges. I have been trained to recognize some identities that I embody, like my whiteness and my cisgender male presentation, as variables that affect how the world interacts with me, what participants expect of me, and how I am able to interpret the experiences of those who lack access to structural privileges. Other identities emerged as relevant to this research that I had not considered, including my ability to speak English, my position as an employee at the CDC, my American citizenship, my mobility, my ability to drive, and my educational level, among many, many others. I provide this list not to fulfill the penitential ideological practice of confessing to my privileges while providing no further account for their impact on my research. Rather, I hope to assert how the many privileges I embody have shaped the way I view the world, and render me
blind to the experience of oppression imposed upon those who occupy marginalized identities. This perspective pervades all aspects of my research, and must be accounted for in all documented exchanges, data, writing, analysis, and perspective.

According to some Black anthropologists, the modern, positivist foundation of anthropology, the discipline to which my scholarship is loosely tethered, has led to a perspective that has historically failed to account for the ways that knowledge and its production, like experience, is relational. France Winddance Twine, a Black female anthropologist challenging the epistemological foundations of anthropology through the practice of fieldwork, writes that:

After decades of self-reflexivity among ethnographers analyzing the practice of writing and conducting field research, the lack of sustained attention to racialized dilemmas is particularly noteworthy, considering the degree to which other axes of power have been theorized. (Twine 2000: 5)

I recognize that my position as a researcher intersects with my whiteness in every interaction and role as a producer of knowledge. Fanon provides some clue as to how embodying Blackness affects interactions with those who project whiteness, linking interracial behavioral differences to histories of oppression.

The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. (Fanon [1952] 2008: 8).

In the context of fieldwork, the racial identity Fanon mentions intersects with other identities of privilege to multiply the effects of power and the historically informed experience of subjugation. The reality that my whiteness affects the ways Black subjects interact with me places demands on both audience and researcher. The audience must account for the ways my embodied presence, my research objectives, and my positionality influence the language used to give voice to experience. And as a researcher, I must critically examine each interaction as an
exercise in power. The silence of selective self-censorship requires as much scrutiny as the practice of selective self-presentation. I cannot presume to know how to fill the resulting silences, or where to insert my own conceptions into that which is not said.

Silence, therefore, is a major theme in this work. Throughout scholarship on RCOs and refugees, silence pervades. From white scholars studying Black populations (or ignoring the social constructions that make these populations Black) to the dearth of literature by Black scholars on RCOs (or the marginalization of this work such that it is so hidden from the mainstream as to not exist), scholarship exists as an arena of violent epistemological struggle that suppresses voices or ignores the bases of oppression. Poet and Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde acknowledges the role of silence in her call to center the experience of Black peoples who embody multiple marginalized identities.

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself -- a Black woman warrior poet doing my work -- come to ask you, are you doing yours? (Lorde 1977)

By elevating marginalized narratives, centering exploitative structures, and advocating for systemic social transformation, I hope to meet the challenge that Lorde presents.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of this research is the relative lack of female voices among the refugee population. Without properly representing the female perspective, I worry that my analysis of the exploitative effects of heteropatriarchy is dulled. Two principal factors accounted for the over-representation of males in this research. First, there has been a concerted effort to settle a higher number of single cases to the North Shore. According to practitioners, single
cases are more likely to be men. Chapter Two will examine the dynamics that lead to a preference for single male refugees by resettlement agencies, changing the composition of the community. Second, as a male researcher, it was occasionally difficult to navigate the cultural and patriarchal barriers that prevented me from meeting more female participants. For example, Patrice, a male refugee in his early 40s, would not allow me to interview his wife. He suggested that a conversation would upset her and he was uncomfortable connecting me with her. Since I had no independent relationship with Patrice’s wife from any other setting, he was able to use his position as a gatekeeper to prevent her participation in the study.

A second limitation of my research is that I assumed a role of institutional authority by embedding as an intern at the CDC. In this capacity, I reported to the Executive Director of the organization and worked with refugee clients. While this provided key insights into the operations of the institution, I surmise that this position may have limited the data I gathered from participants. Despite my assurances to the contrary, there was likely fear that I might report any negative information to my “co-workers” at the organization, who wield a significant amount of power over refugees. Additionally, the organization played a key role in introducing me to participants. Because I was interested in interviewing clients of the CDC, the organization helped to connect me with refugees and arrange interviews. This expanded the universe of potential participants, but it also may have contributed to an unspoken power dynamic that identified me with the CDC. As I began writing, I also recognized that I might have become dependent on the organization in ways that may impact my ability to critically assess it.

Third, as noted above, my positionality limits this research. As someone who lacks the experiential knowledge of Blackness, femaleness, lack of US citizenship, and an inability to communicate in a nation’s dominant language, I can only speak with borrowed authority on the
power of these social constructs and realities. In addition to affecting the way I collect and analyze information, my whiteness was interpreted by the community in ways I did not expect. My supervisor lightheartedly alerted me to the fact that, as a white American with language skills in French and Swahili, I was arousing suspicion. One client, who refused to work with me, insisted that I was working on behalf of the governments of the US or Rwanda (framed as the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s regional rival), keeping tabs on the refugee population in the United States. Another swore that he saw me in the refugee camps of Goma during the First Congolese War in 1997. If so, that story would certainly surprise me (and my mother would have to justify voluntarily bringing her toddler to an explosive war zone in central Africa). While these stories were somewhat amusing, they also forced me to consider ways in which my positionality as a white American researcher limited my understanding in ways that are both obvious and obscured. How many more refugees would have been willing to speak with me if my body was not such a strong symbol for structural power and access?

The final limitation I wish to acknowledge is my inability to communicate with respondents in the language that they feel most comfortable expressing themselves. By asking that respondents speak in English or French, I prioritized my ability to understand over the refugees’ ability to express. Even the compromise of using a translator refracts language through another lens, distancing the account I heard from that the respondent wished to express. Meaning erodes at the interface of thought and language, and I suspect that my inability to communicate in the primary language of many respondents detracted from the articulations of their experiences.

Overview
Chapter One positions the RCO as an object of study in the academy, setting the theoretical foundation for an analysis of the CDC. In examining the dominant approaches that have solidified RCOs in the intellectual imagination, I interrogate and reposition three trends. First, studies of RCOs atomize and isolate the organizations from global structures that shape their functions and behaviors. This tendency prevents an analysis of structural forces, including those resulting from the overlapping effects of global capitalism with transnational racism and heteropatriarchy, from entering into conversation with the study of RCOs. Second, a Tocquevillian conception of civil society, which positions civil and associational society as an arena of resistance against tyrannical state power, obscures cooperation between RCOs and the state. By establishing a mean between Tocqueville’s formulation of civil society and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, the RCO is situated as a space of both resistance to and compliance with state objectives. Third, the legacy of Durkheimian functionalism dominates scholarship on RCOs, as organizations are reduced to idealistic models of services they provide. Functionalist approaches both limit understanding of RCOs with a narrow focus on services, and privilege the codes of understandings of researchers over those of the communities they serve. Functionalism obscures barriers to access that complicate access to institutional function, creating vertical relations that strip refugees and practitioners of agency. Subjecting the existing intellectual tools to critical scrutiny establishes a framework that guides my approach to the study of community organizational patterns.

Chapter Two examines the effects of neoliberal resettlement policies on the composition of and service provision to the North Shore Congolese refugee community. A privatized resettlement system that emphasizes competition, low public expenditure, and employment leads resettlement agencies to resettle more single case refugees, many of whom are male. The
preference for single male cases is communicated to refugees in the pre-resettlement process, changing decision-making and leading some to misrepresent their familial status. Arriving without familial kinship networks subjects refugees to the stresses of isolation and social fragmentation. The Congolese family becomes the unspoken target of policies that reduce refugees to their economic utility and necessities.

The failures of neoliberal resettlement policy are pushed down the chain for post-resettlement agencies like the CDC to correct. Chapter Three examines understandings of service provision and sociocultural roles of the organization within the community. The CDC, adapting to a national climate that is increasingly hostile to refugees, must navigate racialized policies that act as barriers to public resources for Black peoples. The community overwhelmingly approves of the CDC as a service provider, framing their cultural competency in opposition to services provided by the resettlement agencies. The organization, however, fails to account for or address the social isolation that is a predictable result of the economic fundamentalism that pervades refugee resettlement.

Finally, the conclusion calls for changes to the failed resettlement system that transfers stresses to those least able to cope with them. As a crucible of neoliberal governance, refugee resettlement presents, in stark relief, the dangers of economic fundamentalism, the inequality of an ethic of market competition, and the destruction of social bonds that link human beings. Reimagining refugee resettlement requires reimagining society, locating true empowerment in the redistribution of unequally allocated (and unethically attained) resources while centering the dignity of human beings in the social fabric we interrogate, deconstruct, and remake.
Chapter 1

“I see beyond the welcome”:

Repositioning the RCO in literature and theory
“This is the slowest elevator in the world,” said the program director of the Congolese Development Center, Viviane Kamba, in her syrupy French accent. She leaned against the rear corner of the elevator with her eyes fixed on circular lights that indicated the current floor of this old building. It seemed like the type of structure that had lived many lives, with faded linoleum floors and weathered brick walls that struggled against the gravity of time. We passed the second level, which hosted a small manufacturing line, and the third level, where a charter school teemed with noisy students, before the doors creaked open to reveal sterile, if faded, white cinderblock walls dulled by humming fluorescent lights. We had arrived at the New American Center.

The New American Center is a coalition of seven migrant community organizations, often called ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs), that support the integration outcomes of certain newcomer populations. A host of national and ethnic identities have their own organizations, from legacy immigrant ethnicities like Russians and Bosnians, whose numbers peaked in preceding decades and have declined in recent years, to populations like the Sudanese and Somalis, whose numbers have recently been climbing steadily or suddenly upward. Occupying two windowless offices in this space is the Congolese Development Center (CDC). Since its founding in 2003, the CDC has served Congolese migrants who now call Boston’s sprawling and gritty northern suburbs home. Over the years, the organization has covered a large swath of territory, spanning from Chelsea (just north of Boston) to Worcester (roughly an hour by car to the west). Today, operations are concentrated in Lynn, with informal and loosely organized satellite operations in Lowell and Worcester.

The CDC in Lynn has two employees. Viviane works part-time with the organization, balancing another job when she is not working with clients. She has a resonant, vibrant laugh
that sits just beneath the surface of her professional comportment, always one story away from dissolving her into a wide grin and a protesting hand that unsuccessfully attempts to suppress her giggles. A lifetime of service to vulnerable populations has taught her that most things eventually work out favorably, if you take a long enough time horizon, and that humor is occasionally a necessary ingredient in the difficult work of human service. But Viviane’s levity does not compromise her commitment to her clients or the seriousness with which she approaches social work. The demands on her time are intense. More than once when I was in the field, she called from her lunch break to conference in with a doctor via sketchy speakerphone, translating complicated medical diagnoses to clients and asking tough questions of medical professionals. She was born in Congo to a father who soon took her to France, where she spent much of her life before coming to the US. Now, having found stability here, she devotes her time to helping recently arrived refugees.

The CDC is run by Eric Kamba, Viviane’s husband and the Executive Director of the organization. He is the only permanent, full-time employee. If he cannot be found in his office, with papers sprawled on his oversized desk and one or two refugees sitting across from him, he is typically in the field, responding to various crises, ensuring clients make their medical appointments, or assisting with public benefit issues. A half-fastened, untucked, short-sleeved button-down typically drapes his large frame. His booming voice effortlessly oscillates between the five languages he speaks. His phone always seems to be either ringing or on speakerphone; in either scenario it is at top volume. In many ways, I found he reminded me of my grandfather: a friendly, gruff presence unafraid to occupy space, who has little interest in delicacy and little time for inaction.
The importance of ECBOs is not simply the services that they provide, but the manner in which they provide them. ECBOs like the CDC are expected to provide “culturally and linguistically appropriate care and services,” which the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) defines as providing services “in a manner that is compatible with a client’s linguistic and cultural background” (ORR 2016: 2). Organizations like the CDC have become an increasingly important part of the refugee resettlement infrastructure. Within resettlement, ECBOs have taken on a role in “post-resettlement” service provision. To understand what is meant by the term “post-resettlement,” a brief (and simplified) outline of the refugee resettlement timeline, greatly informed by the work of Jessica Darrow (2015b), must be presented.

A series of national and international governance agencies, from the US Department of State to the International Organization for Migration, select refugees from camps for resettlement to receiving nations (such as the United States). After refugees pass a strenuous background check and are determined to have met the requirements for entry into America, the governance agencies hold a closed-door meeting with representatives from nine National Resettlement Agencies (NRAs), all of which are private, non-profit organizations that have cooperative agreements with the government to resettle refugees. Once each NRA receives its caseload, the refugees are assigned to local affiliates in cities around the country. In this work, I will use either the term resettlement agency or the term voluntary agency (shortened to “Volag”) to refer to these local affiliates for convenience and clarity, though Volag is sometimes equated with NRAs and not their local affiliates in other literature.

Volags then “resettle” refugees, which means situating refugees into their local hostland context and providing services. From the day refugees arrive, the clock determining their eligibility for services starts ticking. The State Department funded reception and placement
(R&P) services last for three months (US Department of State 2018). While there are a number of cash-assistance funding streams for the resettlement of refugees at the state level for Massachusetts, all generally end eight months after arrival (ORI 2017a). The Volag’s mandate, or the period of time for which the agency is responsible for the provision of services, expires at this point, eight months after the refugee sets foot on US soil. The expiration of the Volag’s mandate triggers two events. First, the Volags take on a less intensive case management role until 60 months after the date of arrival, monitoring the progress of these “non-priority” refugees while providing a very limited menu of services. Essentially, their work with the refugees is mostly finished. Second, the refugee is considered to be in “post-resettlement,” and is a target for services from ECBOs and refugee community organizations (RCOs). The CDC is one such RCO that provides post-resettlement services, and is the object (or perhaps the lens) of study for this research.

The first challenge of studying a refugee community organization is the difficulty in defining the term. Some scholars point to what has been termed the “RCO paradigm” established by Zetter and Pearl, which defines RCOs as “organizations rooted within, and supported by, the ethnic or national refugee asylum seeker communities they serve. Essentially, these RCOs are established by the refugees and asylum seekers themselves—or by their pre-established communities” (Zetter and Pearl 2000: 676). According to this definition, RCOs are defined, in part, by the role they play for forced migrants resettled to a new hostland. Central to the definition of the RCO is the sense of connection and rootedness in a community. Indeed, via the botanical symbol of the “root,” Zetter and Pearl implicitly state that the RCO channels strength and vitality from the community. But these criteria alone are clearly too broad to form the basis of a sustained analysis; any definition that draws no distinctions between a refugee soccer
league, a refugee church, or a refugee social service organization requires refinement. In keeping with the spirit intended by the quote, I borrow a definition from Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter which positions migrant associations as “modes of adaptation to new social relationships and norms” (2005: 13), applying only to formal social service organizations with the express objective of assisting with the (post-)resettlement of refugees.

This narrow definition of RCOs applies to organizations that connect refugees to resources, develop the socioeconomic capacity of the community, and offer direct services to refugees. Like Zetter and Pearl, I echo the importance of the RCO being of and based in the community. But just as the proximity to and relationship with an ethnic community is key to the definition of the RCO, the position of the RCO within a global economic, social, and institutional ecosystem is key to understanding its significance.

Before I offer my research and conclusions on the CDC as an RCO and its impact on the community, it is necessary to explore the existing literature and research that shaped this project. Despite the diversity of RCOs, the research on these organizations to date is surprisingly monolithic. Interrogating the theoretical foundations of the study of RCOs helps to explain the relative uniformity that researchers have applied to the study of these organizations. Findings and approaches tend to cluster around some combination of three overarching themes:

1. There is a tendency of scholarship to atomize and isolate individual refugee organizations (or similarly grouped organizations) in terms of receiving nation, ethnic community group, or social/cultural function. While such isolation is necessary for specificity and detailed nuance (and is, in some ways, replicated in this research as well), the result has been to quarantine RCOs from a holistic perspective that
acknowledges global structures, including the intersecting effects of transnational racism, global neoliberal capitalism, and patriarchal pressures.

2. Research tends to examine RCOs as an element within a larger civil society, according to the Tocquevillian definition. The emphasis here is on the mediating role such organizations play between the refugee population and the state, and the competition between the functions of the state and of free associations like RCOs.

3. Research on RCOs derives from a Durkheimian functionalist tradition that takes a utilitarian, transactional view of the roles of RCOs. Researchers impose their understanding of function upon the institutions they study, which obscures barriers to access and limits the agency of refugees in the studies.

The inherited intellectual tools that ground this study have yielded important and necessary contributions to the study of RCOs. Yet in order to fully and richly investigate the importance of the refugee community organization, the epistemological context must be examined, evaluated, and improved.

This chapter will examine the ways research on refugee community organizations has reflexively shaped the ways such organizations are understood, both within academia and in the realm of public policy. In testing the intellectual foundations, gaps and silences will emerge that undermine the researcher’s ability to arrive at a full understanding of RCOs. As limitations in scholarship are addressed and a new perspective is created, the emergent theoretical tools will be applied to the Congolese Development Center via qualitative data gathered from this institutional and community-based ethnography, situating the organization within a broader ideological environment.
Centering Global Capitalism and Race

With a casual, almost sleepy frankness, Frederic presented his acidic analysis of American destabilization of the global south. After he told me that “le capitalisme is killing our republic and human society today,” Frederic detailed why he never liked America.

When I said that I never liked America, it is with all of what has happened or what happened is based with who was the number one of the world. It's America. America is the number one. America is the one who's giving direction, giving order to do things to other people, and then when you look at immigrants, that helps because I'm an immigrant. I cannot deny it. Then I have to say thank you. I have to be thankful to the country who welcomed me. With warm hands to say that come in my country. I understand that, but myself, I see beyond the welcome.

Let's be honest. Even now our passports, they always say originally from just see then that identity still sticks with us. We are ‘originally from’ somewhere and then we are here. We've become citoyens [citizens] of this country, but every time they see it they say, no, this one is originally from there. And that's why I say they will never call me American. They will never call me American. They will always call me African because of what I am.

Any analysis of refugee resettlement that ignores the intersecting forces of race, global capitalism, and Western (neo)imperialism cannot account for either the causal effects that force refugee flows, or the social values that dominate refugee receiving societies. Within studies of RCOs, the tendency to limit studies to the functions of the organization creates problems of perspective for researchers that prevent a broader analysis. Typically, one of two approaches are followed:

(i) a specific ethnic community’s organizational capacity is studied within one locality and/or across several discrete localities, or
organizations are grouped by function (i.e. political incorporation, social service provision, etc.) and the institutions formed by refugees from various ethnic backgrounds are studied.

As with most resettlement studies, the nation-state is taken to be the relevant unit of analysis. This leads to a phenomenon Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2003) call “methodological nationalism,” or the centering of the nation-state in research that overemphasizes the peculiarities of each sovereign entity within an international system. The primary reason for methodological nationalism within RCO studies is that the state has, for the first time in the timeline of the refugee, become the most relevant scale of governance. While migration is (perhaps over-simplistically) described as the “orphan of the global institutional architecture” (Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2011: 7), refugees represent a rare incidence of multilateral institutional governance throughout the migration apparatus, from the granting of refugee status, to interim aid provision in camps, to (extreme) screening and the selection of refugees for resettlement in receiving nations like the United States (Betts 2013). Accessing state-specific public benefit channels and learning a language suddenly take precedence over navigating multilateral processes formalized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Once refugees have been resettled, they exit the international framework designed to resettle them and enter into a state’s domestic policy.

There exists an epistemological bifurcation between the categories of “forced migrants,” which includes refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, and “voluntary migrants,” who are presumed to choose migration for any number of freely selected reasons. Within this conception, refugee migration is the product of humanitarian international policy, whereas voluntary migration is the product of economics. Saskia Sassen writes that
immigration policy is shaped by an understanding of immigration as the consequence of the individual actions of emigrants; the receiving country is taken as a passive agent, one not implicated in the process of emigration. In refugee policy, in contrast, there is a recognition of other factors, beyond the control of individuals, as leading to outflows. (1998: 7)

Scholars have long established the fallacy of each of these concepts; many forced migrants voluntarily exercise agency throughout the migration process, and many voluntary migrants leave out of necessity rather than volition. But the division in definition and analysis remains.

Debates around definitions of refugees are vital because they shape the experiences and entitlements that migrants can claim. The very narrow label of refugee, which requires a migrant to be outside of their country of origin and, as a result of political, ethnic, or social affiliation, to have a well-founded fear of persecution that prevents their return to their native land (United Nations 1950), changes the rights to which one is entitled, the migratory pathway one takes for entry into a receiving nation, and the ease with which citizenship and civic rights can be obtained. Increasingly, scholars like Betts (2013) are calling for expanded definitions of refugeeness and forced migration, advancing terms like “survival migrants” to capture those emigrants whose human rights and needs are not met within their homeland context. But the labels placed upon migrants have enormous repercussions for their experiences. Importantly, because there exists a recognizable domestic governance apparatus for refugee admissions, controls on refugee admissions are more easily implemented than those for non-refugees.

Stephen Castles notes that migration controls often fail “because policymakers refuse to see migration as a dynamic social process linked to broader patterns of social transformation. Ministers and bureaucrats still see migration as something that can be turned on and off like a tap through laws and policies” (2003: 26). While Castles’ remarks help explain the expansion of
voluntary and illegal migration even through periods of more strict controls, his statement does not apply as neatly to formal refugee admissions in the United States. Because resettlement requires the coordination of an international governance regime with individual nation-states, and because refugee resettlement falls within the scope of administrative branch responsibilities, refugee admissions are particularly susceptible to restrictionist popular and policy movements. Indeed, the rise of Donald Trump and the subsequent throttling of America’s refugee resettlement program show the power of increased public and administrative resentment against migration; in comparing the first 5 months of fiscal years 2017 and 2018, refugee admissions in the United States have decreased by a staggering 77 percent, from 37,028 to 8,414 admissions (Refugee Processing Center 2017, 2018). Put another way, for every ten refugees resettled last year, roughly two refugees are being resettled this year.

Though the distinction between forced and voluntary migrants is perhaps overstated, there are clear differences in the needs of and controls on refugee communities that influence the way in which they organize. These differences are rarely reflected in existing literature. Indeed, it is rare that organizations specifically structured to assist with refugees or forced migrants are studied independently. Typically, refugee organizations are subsumed within a larger group of migrant community organizations. Economic or social analyses of voluntary organizations tend to focus on general migrant organizations, either including refugees within the broader category of “migrant,” or, more commonly, excluding the category of analysis altogether. If they are afforded their own attention, RCOs are typically studied in terms of some aspect of their clients’ “refugeeness”—that is to say, in the role they play with regards to some aspect of forced migration specifically, such as navigating asylum policies or assisting with experiences of trauma (Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter 2005).
The atomized approach to the study of RCOs limits the ability of researchers to examine two major facts of refugee resettlement. First, it constrains the ability of researchers to situate refugees within an increasingly global capitalist economy. Second, it terrifically handicaps understandings of race relating to refugees.

Suggesting that refugees are migrants forced to leave their home as a result of forces beyond their control, the international community obscures the role a global capitalist system, based largely on the exploitation of African peoples and resources, has played in acquiescing in, abetting, and creating the conflicts and crises that lead to displacement. While a detailed history of the exploitation of the Congo is impossible in this forum, the combined effects of: the abduction and ethnocide of African peoples in the 15th through 18th centuries during the transatlantic slave trade; the savagely violent rubber economy operated by King Leopold II in the 1800s; the mercantile colonial rule of Belgium; the surveillance and murder of Pan-Africanist Patrice Lumumba and subsequent death of the Congolese democratic-socialist movement; three decades of kleptocratic rule by Mobutu Sese Seko; and the past two decades of violence, largely funded by profits from militia- or foreign-operated mines, all relate to the (proto)capitalist need for cheap resources, expanded markets, and profit from African resources and surplus labor (Rodney [1972] 2011; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007; Autesserre 2006).

In addition to preventing the historicizing of conflict, disembodying resettled refugee populations from global structures and currents fails to contextualize the environment into which refugees integrate and which pressures they can expect. Changes to the world economy have caused dramatic shifts to both the peripheral economic sectors that refugees leave behind and the core sectors into which they are expected to integrate. Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) conceptualized the worlds-systems theory as an historical model of change rooted in a world
economy that leads to domination by core countries and the subjugation of peripheral countries. Peripheral countries are dependent on core countries for capital, while core countries exploit peripheral countries for labor and raw materials. Within migration, the world-system Wallerstein describes can be observed on the individual or familial level. Through networks of remittances and the maintenance of transnational kinship roles, refugees participate in a global exchange of capital that must be acknowledged in any study of their organizations. And via migration patterns, labor from peripheral countries can fill needs within core countries created by a global neoliberal economy.

The current economic structure, marked by states which have reduced barriers to competition via structural adjustment programs and multilateral trade agreements, incentivizes production sectors to shift from the high-wage and (formerly) well-organized labor of core nations to low-wage, non-unionized labor of periphery nations (Prashad 2012). Sassen (1999: 40) explains the effect of these pressures on the American economy:

As industrial production has moved overseas, the traditional US manufacturing base has eroded and been partly replaced by a downgraded manufacturing sector, which is characterized by a growing supply of poorly paid, semi-skilled or unskilled production jobs.

Low-paying, low-skilled jobs represent a growth sector in core economies like the United States. The growth in low-skill jobs, coupled with the fact that high-skill immigrants are often pushed into low-wage sectors of their new hostland economy, leads to an increased number of immigrants filling the low-skill labor need in advanced economies. Production, in other words, is rendered a high-growth, low-wage sector under conditions of global capitalism, which draws migrant employment. Refugees are incorporated into this economy, often with the help of the resettlement and ethnic community-based organizations that are supposed to serve their interests.
The second reality that a case study-based epistemology of RCOs ignores is the effect of race on refugee solidarities. While the studies of race and migration often intersect, with the study of refugees, race is often conflated with ethnicity in analyses of particular ethnic communities. It is not studied as a systemic, inherent feature of our global socioeconomic reality; rather, it is assigned as a series of prejudices that can be activated into mobilization of dominant (white) classes and policy restrictions. The study of the synergy between xenophobia and race in this context, often called “xeno-racism” (Cheran 2001; Fekete 2001; Searle 2017), is certainly a necessary and welcome inclusion.

Yet in order to fully understand the impact of race on the structures of governance, race must be analyzed as systemic, global phenomenon linked to economic profit. The inability to situate RCOs within a regime of global racism follows what Charles Mills (1997) calls an epistemology of ignorance, stemming from an inability of white academics (or those who do not interrogate the epistemological foundations of white supremacy) to discern the terms of what he terms the “racial contract.” According to Mills, the racial contract is a set of formal and informal agreements that have categorized the world into classes of full persons, called white, and a remaining subset of inferior humans, who are nonwhite. The benefits of full-personhood are protected by an international order that enshrines white privilege and maintains the systemic access to power that defines whiteness, all while obscuring the terms of the contract from the epistemological perspective of its beneficiaries. A lengthy passage from Mills both details the epistemological folly of white thought and the ambition of making systemic politico-economic racism legible:

What is involved [in the racial contract] is neither a simple variant of traditional European nationalism (to which it is sometimes assimilated) nor a mysterious political project unfolding in some alien theoretical space (as in the mutually opaque language games postulated by postmodernism). The unifying conceptual
space within which both orthodox white moral/political philosophy and unorthodox nonwhite moral/political philosophy are developing is the space that locates the (mythical) social contract on the same plane as the (real) Racial Contract… thereby demonstrating that these are contiguous, indeed identical, spaces—not so much a different conceptual universe as a recognition of the dark matter of the existing one. (Mills 1997: 111, emphasis in original)

In addition to positioning the social contract model of Western political authority in relation to racial supremacy, Mills laments the current intellectual tools for examining race. He critiques “white liberalism predicated on colorless atomic individuals and a white Marxism predicated on colorless classes in struggle” (Mills 1997: 111) as being insufficient for the study of race on the global level, which has infiltrated psychology, ideology, politics, and economics.

In a global capitalist system, the marginalized position of Black peoples has licensed exploitation by the West, creating a subclass of laborers that have been exploited throughout history. Michelle Wright (2004) notes that classist formulations of peasant inferiority articulated by French theorist Arthur de Gobineau were repurposed to justify slavery, just as Thomas Jefferson’s writings on Black intellectual deficiency “otherized” Black bodies and encouraged the unpaid exploitation of Black labor in slavery. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) writes that animalistic analogies to Black bodies enabled domestication myths to pervade regarding the paternalistic and supposedly civilizing role of whites in slavery. Importantly, Collins notes that racial distinctions were maintained by understandings of gender and sexuality, which served to create an underclass of sub-humans during chattel slavery. The concepts articulated in slavery (sovereignty over Black bodies) were replicated during colonial imperialism (sovereignty over Black lands) and neo-colonialism (sovereignty over Black societies and economies), continuing the exploitation of Black peoples and resources for Western profit. Walter Rodney (1972/2011: 89) notes, “Oppression follows logically from exploitation so as to guarantee the latter. Oppression of African people on purely racial grounds accompanied, strengthened, and became
indistinguishable from oppression for economic reasons.” What began as exploitation of Black bodies for profit became a socialized racial contract metastasized throughout all aspects of a global society, oppressing and marginalizing Black peoples.

CLR James provides a forceful reminder that the racial question cannot unfasten itself from an exploitative, class-based project of capital accumulation: “The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental” (James [1938] 1989: 283). Within the study of RCOs, race must be considered not only within the narrow confines of national ethno-centrism and xenophobia, but also as a construct that intersects with gender, sexuality, and nationality to be exploited as a profit mechanism. Race cannot be discounted as incidental to the organization of refugees, as it affects the conditions that cause forced migrants to flee their homelands, as well as the racial stratification of society that greets refugees once they are resettled.

We are left with two outcomes, seemingly at odds with one another. On the one hand, global capitalism, abetted by multilateral (neo)liberalization and pressures to expand production, creates in core economies a need for low-skill, low-wage labor that is often filled by migrants. On the other hand, a society built on racism leads the public to demand, and extremist politicians to pursue, restrictionist policies that limit the intake of forced migrants. It is not my intention to reconcile this dialectic, nor do I aim to provide a complete picture of the various other unacknowledged tensions, from humanitarianism to international development, that affect American immigration, including refugee resettlement. But it is necessary to reintroduce the global pressures of international systemic racism and an increasingly connected world economy into an analysis of RCOs.
Refugee community organizations are located within a web of social, political, economic, and international relations. Atomizing the study of refugees without reference to larger global trends, when coupled with epistemologies of ignorance ill-equipped to analyze migration in terms of race, gender, and identity, limit the scope of any study of organizational capacity in migrant communities. By isolating the RCO from global structural factors, the theoretical approaches that dominate the study of RCOs take capitalism and racism as inherent and un-interrogated features of global society, favoring the perpetuation of exploitative systems by failing to acknowledge them. The isolation of RCOs serves as a scientific control that directs focus to two dominant trends in the study of these institutions: the RCO as a component of refugee civil society, and the civic or social functions of refugee organizations that define their presentation in the academy.

The RCO as Civil Society: Historicizing the Theoretical Foundations

It is widely held that refugee community organizations represent a branch of civil society. According to Woldring (1998: 363), civil society is defined as “free associations that exist as intermediate institutions between citizens and the state, and in which citizens can realize their social freedom and equality.” Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first political theorists to write about civil society, framing it as a frontier of liberty and socio-political self-expression that the state, viewing a network of free associations as a threat to sovereignty, would attempt to undermine and coopt (Tocqueville [1835] 1988: 504-510).

Tocqueville’s thinking was framed by Hobbesian conceptions of the state that pervaded turn-of-the 19th century thinking. Indeed, even the use of the term “society” within civil society captures a dichotomous framing of state and society. Thomas Paine captures the tension between
state and society in his seminal *Common Sense*: “Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness POSITIVELY by uniting our affections, the latter NEGATIVELY by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first a patron, the last a punisher” ([1776] 2014: 4). To Paine, the constraining state is a force exerted on the populace to limit dangerous freedoms, and Tocqueville believes civil society exists as a barrier and safeguard to this totalizing tendency of the state.

Tocqueville’s presentation of civil society positions free associations as separate from the state, and at tension with a power-hungry government. As Bloemraad (2005) notes, Tocqueville’s formulation represents a common theme in scholarship for analyses of civil society infrastructure on migrant integration. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that civil society is not only distinct from other superstructural elements, but entirely isolated from them. In his analysis of the measurement of ethnic communities, Fennema defines civil society as “the sphere that is not under coercion of the state, not within the sphere of the family, and also outside the market economy. In other words it excludes those spheres where human relations are driven either by biological necessities (the family), by economic necessity (the market) or by force (the state)” (2004: 429). To Fennema, and many scholars whose work investigates RCOs, civil society is an independent organ impervious to economic, political, and social pressures.

While civil society may serve as an important arena of resistance against state-imposed tyranny, it is clear that such a formulation requires cautious critique. Particularly in the arena of refugee resettlement, free associations like refugee community organizations cannot be considered wholly independent from the state. RCOs have been actively recruited and incorporated into state functions such as refugee resettlement. The network of ECBOs that assist
with post-resettlement in Massachusetts have formed a Mutual Assistance Association (MAA) coalition in partnership with the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) “to provide an array of community outreach, education and direct services to refugee communities in Massachusetts” (ORI 2018). The official website of ORI lists the services, functions, and names of civil society organizations that partner with the state government to administer aspects of the refugee resettlement apparatus. The relationship with the state is not contentious, but cooperative. Clearly, Woldring’s definition, in which civil society plays a mediating role between the individual and the state, proves far more satisfactory for the task at hand than that provided by Fennema. The very act of mediating presupposes contact with both sides, and thereby implies the connections that Fennema’s definition elides.

For the context of refugee community organizations in Boston, conceiving of civil society as an arena of conflict with the state requires expansion. As neoliberal governance pressures encourage the privatization of state functions and the creation of a dependent associational civic environment, a conflict- and separation-driven view of state-civil society relations is, in short, too simplistic (see Chapter 2). Instead, the interface between the public and associational spheres reveals key insights into the adaptations of both the state and civil society to various social and political pressures. There are webs of relations characterized by both conflict and cooperation.

An alternative view accounts for an interface between the public and associational spheres, transforming cooperation into a veiled arena of conflict. A number of scholars (Habermas 1989; Joyce and Shamba 1996) contend that state intervention or encroachment can lead to the “crowding out” of civil society, reproducing what Woldring (1998) identifies as the tendency of governors to consolidate and concentrate power in an attempt to make non-state
civic processes legible from a centralized perspective (Scott 1998). The very idea of crowding out presupposes quasi-territorial civic sovereignty and an invasion by outside influence. The state, seeking stability by extending its influence into the associational sphere, targets and controls those elements, which are most resistive and threatening to its power.

My position is that stability in the American refugee resettlement system has been maintained by institutions and organizations coordinating with the state, replicating its objectives and submitting to oversight of many functions. This conceptualization draws partly from Antonio Gramsci (1999) and his writings on hegemony, which evolve beyond both orthodox Marxist economism and a conflict-based relationship between institutions and the state. Ankie Hoogvelt notes that Gramsci “developed the notion of hegemony as a ‘fit’ between power, ideas and institutions to explain the stability of capitalist class relations and a national social order” (2001: 10). Gramsci’s contribution demonstrates the interconnectedness between institutions and ideas, on the one hand, and state power, on the other. Skeptical of class struggle as the lone explanatory agent of historical change, Gramsci proposes that the evolution of social structure culminates in hegemony, which, according to Stuart Hall,

transcends the corporate limits of purely economic solidarity, encompasses the interests of other subordinate groups, and begins to ‘propagate itself throughout society’, bringing about intellectual and moral as well as economic and political unity, and ‘posing also the questions around which the struggle rages…thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups.’ (Hall 1986: 15)

Hall’s articulation of Gramsci’s contribution creates space for cultural and social values, including race and gender, to merge with productive forces in creating relations of dominance. But the cumulative effect of hegemony is not total domination. In an important deviation from Marxist tradition, the dynamics of dominance do not lend themselves to an absolute victory, but rather to “relations of forces favourable or unfavourable to this or that tendency” (quoted in Hall
To Gramsci, the interests of the subordinated class and its institutions do not wholly disappear as a result of the victory. Substituting the Marxist zero-sum game of domination for a series of relational forces respects and accounts for the agency and struggle of both the subjugated and the subaltern (Gramsci 1999: 202).

The refugee resettlement apparatus features a host of subordinate institutions who submit to the hegemonic vision of resettlement dictated by the state, which represents the interests of the dominant social group. While American refugee resettlement civil society remains outside the purview and explicit control of the state, dependence upon the government and replication of state objectives suggest unequal forces of relations that benefit the state (and those whose power the state represents).

The perspective on civil society taken for this project balances the tensions of Gramsci’s and Tocqueville’s works. First, as an element of civil society, RCOs are viewed as derivative of the state, while remaining partially independent from the state. Though there exists hegemonic capture of ideology in civil society, there is a degree of separation between the public and associational spheres. This understanding strikes a balance between the relative autonomy of function and accountability mechanisms found in civil society with the unity of purpose and conceptual ideas found in coalitions with the state. The position I take represents a mean between certain scholars of RCOs, who create too strict a separation between political and civil society, and Gramsci, whose fuzzy distinctions between the two suggest a unified hegemonic coalition between the state and civil society.

Second, it must be acknowledged that American civil society is embedded within a global system of institutions and structures to resettle refugees. Althusser and Balibar, drawing from Gramsci, articulated the concept of “social formations” as a counterweight to Marxist
They argue that the economic forces of global capitalism result in a complex ordering of society, featuring multiple levels of articulation that weave economic, political, and ideological relations in overlapping structures that transcend the economic sphere alone (Althusser and Balibar 1997). It is within this relational network that RCO civil society exists. In a system of global capitalism, the economic forces of capitalist class domination, to quote Gramsci, “can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life” (Gramsci 1999: 409). Rather than determining superstructure, economic interests promote the development of hospitable ideas by shaping the intellectual terrain. Emerging from the soil of this terrain is the current civil society, which participates in both resistance to and compliance with a state-imposed agenda.

While the Tocquevillian tradition of civil society as the guardian of individual liberty has inspired important research on RCOs, the paradigm must shift to situate refugee organizations within broader ideological, social, and political environments. Re-orienting the perspective to account for hegemony and global economic forces is necessary for understanding the position and function of RCOs. When taken alone, however, it is far from sufficient. In addition to situating the RCO within an institutional ecosystem, it is necessary to examine the ways these organizations have been studied by researchers.

**The Limits of Functionalism and Integrative Modeling**

My initial ambition for this project was to determine the sociocultural role of refugee community organizations in the Greater Boston Area. In articulating this objective, I situated my research within a long line of functionalist analyses of migrant organizations. The guiding
hypothesis draws from the intellectual legacy of Emile Durkheim, whose writings serve as the lens through which migrant organizations are often viewed. Durkheim posited that the proliferation and diffusion of a capitalist mode of production fundamentally re-organizes society around the division of labor. In analyzing the effect of the division of labor on society, Durkheim draws from two pioneering thinkers. The first, Adam Smith ([1776] 1902), articulates the division of labor as a fundamental feature of capitalist society that increases productive capacity by encouraging differentiation and, consequently, specialization. The second, Karl Marx ([1844] 1964), argues that the division of labor associated with a capitalist mode of production leads to alienation (Entfremdung) from products, work, other people, and the self. Durkheim ([1893] 1984) suggests that as the division of labor in capitalism transformed relational identities, individuals became detached from the social bonds which previously held society together. Under such conditions, the question of social cohesion demands attention: “How does it come about that the individual, whilst becoming more autonomous, depends ever more closely upon society? How can he become at the same time more of an individual and yet more linked to society?” (Durkheim [1893] 1984: xxx).

The answer, for Durkheim, lay in organic solidarity. Contrast against mechanical solidarity, in which self-sufficient, undifferentiated “social molecules” relate directly to society and subordinate the self to the social unit, organic solidarity emerges from conditions of differentiation and the elevation of the individual, suggesting that individuals serving different functions could together create a collective social identity (Durkheim [1893] 1984: 84-85). The concept evokes Tönnies’ ([1887] 2001) distinction between kinship-/neighborhood-based solidarities (Gemeinschaft), on the one hand, and civic-/societal-based solidarities (Gesellschaft), on the other hand. Unlike Tönnies, who believed communal bonds were superior to societal
bonds, Durkheim upheld organic solidarity as a means for articulating identity in periods of structural transition. Undergirding Durkheim’s analysis is the conviction that under conditions of differentiation, each of the discrete institutions that collectively comprise society serves a vital function for the body social. Interrogating the function of the social unit reveals not only the role the unit plays, but also the social need the function addresses (Durkheim [1893] 1984: 11). From this theoretical framing—in which the function of institutions determines both their social value and the basis of communal solidarity—emerged the Durkheimian tradition of functionalism.

The relationship between organizational function and social need has led migration scholars to examine the factors that contribute to the emergence of migrant organizations. In his widely-cited article on ethnic organizations, Breton (1964) argues that three factors contribute to the rise of ethnic institutions: cultural differences between the migrant and native populations, the amount of resources available to the community, and the nature of migratory flows. Based on the confluence of these characteristics, Breton claims ethnic organizations can affect the “direction of the social integration of immigrants” (1964: 204), either into a native hostland society or into an ethnic migrant community. Ethnic difference, or a conflict between cultural values, leads migrants to seek organizations that encourage cultural self-expression and address community needs.

As Marquez (2001) notes, cultural conflict and intra-ethnic social solidarity can lead immigrant communities to fence themselves off and maintain a claim of cultural difference from the native society. The effect of this consolidation is the creation of institutions that not only address the needs of migrant populations, but also contribute to a sense of identity. Rex (1987: 16-17, cited in Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter 2005) captured the dual role organizations are believed to play in terms of both socialization and identity formation, stating that migrant groups
like ECBOs “may perhaps be thought of as playing for immigrant populations something like the role which Durkheim assigned to occupational groups. Clearly they do play some role in the socialization of the individual and offer him some kind of answer to the question ‘Who am I?’” Rex listed four main functions of migrant organizations: overcoming isolation, offering material help, advocating for interests, and promoting culture.

The ideas established by Durkheim, later elaborated by Breton and Rex, have had far-reaching effects on the study of migrant community organizations. As LaCroix, Baffoe, and Liguori (2015: 67) note, “RCOs contribute to individual and community well-being and integration into the wider society,” citing research that points to positive outcomes in terms of (i) resettlement assistance, care, solidarity, and crisis management (Nee & Sanders 2001; Portes 1995), (ii) economic adaptation (Nee & Sanders 2001), (iii) political and civic incorporation (Tillie 2005; Cordero-Guzman 2005), and (iv) mediation between communities and public institutions (Fennema and Tillie 2001; Mestheneos and Ionaddi 2002).

Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter (2005) call the functionalist approach the “general paradigm” of migrant organizations. Functionalist concepts have also been replicated in how organizations conceive of themselves. The CDC replicates many of Rex’s criteria for ethnic organizations on the mission page of its website, stating that the organization seeks to:

- Provide basic resources, services, information and skills needed to ease the transition and facilitate the integration into the new life in the United States.
- Strengthen the Congolese community by promoting mutual assistance, increasing their capacity to serve their local communities.
- Mobilize the expertise of refugees and immigrants through partnerships with a network of community-based organizations to ensure good use of the most relevant African expertise for sustainable development in Africa. (Congolese Development Center 2018)

Given the chance to define itself, the CDC refers to the functions it provides the community. I asked Eric, the Executive Director, about the role of the CDC in the community:
We provide a, uh, an array of services, mostly is direct services. I just mentioned a couple of them before, uh, you know, er that’s including, you know, helping refugees navigate the system. Uh, that's can be taking them to appointments, to their mail, teaching them skills, prepare resumes, apply jobs online, anything. So that's why it's just direct services include a lot of stuff there.

In applying Rex’s four primary functions, the statements articulated by the CDC regarding its role includes references to several of the four functions of migrant organizations. Importantly, the goals relate to overarching functions of the organization, relating to social integration into America and (Congolese) national development in Africa.

The functions of RCOs are valuable, according to prevailing research, for two reasons: the ability to achieve or facilitate some aspect of integration, and the ability to create access to social capital. Both integration and social capital, which are contested and rather nebulous terms, require definition for this research.

My definition of integration will derive from community psychology, borrowing what Floyd Rudmin (2003) presents as the fourfold theory of acculturation. Rudmin presents minority and dominant cultures (represented by the letters M and D) that are assigned positive or negative valence (represented by the signs + or -) based on their reception in a society. Integration, or the coexistence of two cultural forms in a system of bi-/multi-culturalism (+M +D), is contrast against: (i) assimilation, where the dominant culture is favored (-M +D), (ii) separation, where the minority culture is favored (+M -D), and (iii) marginalization, where both cultures are diminished (-M -D). Integration suggests the seamless acceptance of a minority culture and a dominant culture, where both are valued, maintained, and celebrated.

It is clear over the last two decades that America, like other “multicultural democracies,” has shifted away from this trend in favor of a more assimilationist model that requires knowledge of language, an emphasis on patriotism and nationalistic allegiance, and participation in a
citizenship regime (Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter 2006; Cheong et al 2007; Fekete 2001).

Nevertheless, integration, as I use it, will represent the multicultural ideal of promoting both the dominant and minority cultures without domination by the native culture.

Contrast against the sheen of idealism, the reality of integration is far more complex. Black scholars like Oliver Cromwell Cox note that the connections between class, race, and the exploitation of Black peoples makes the integration of Black peoples into white societies an impossibility. Klarlund, writing on Cox, captures how the perceived un-assimilability of Black peoples is central to exploitation for capital accumulation.

Cox relates racial antagonism to a political-class conflict. For the capitalist to keep this commodity of labor exploitive, ways to keep it exploitable must be devised. Race prejudice then became an important device to hinder the assimilation of the minority because assimilation would diminish the exploitative possibilities of this group. (Klarlund 1994: 88)

To Cox, racial difference is the axis of exclusion that forecloses opportunities for integration. Groups that cannot integrate into a society maintain a marginalized position that lends itself to exploitation by dominant groups. Steve Martinot believes that the marginalized position of the racial other produces dynamics of internalized inequality that give rise to structural racism.

Differentiation is not the driving force of racialization. What drives racialization on a daily basis is the system of social importance attached to the act of noticing, the self-superiorization that attaches to the inferiorization of the other. Racism is the name of this driving force, and racialization is its daily effect…. Prejudice is an expression of racism, the insult heaped on those already injured by oppression, on those denigrated by having been forced into inferiorizing social categorizations; it is an expression of complex social operations which racialize. One does not ostracize a group because one is prejudiced; one becomes prejudiced against a group because they have been ostracized, excluded, and oppressed. (Martinot 2003: 75-76)

For both Cox and Martinot, the very concepts of race and racism are incompatible with claims to integration or inclusion within mainstream society. This prevents Black peoples from
accessing the benefits and privileges associated with dominant culture. In short, integration is irreconcilable with Blackness in Western capitalist societies. The very premise of race and racism ensure that the dominant culture will always be privileged, justifying exploitation of Black peoples, cultures, labor, and bodies.

The second term requiring further definition is social capital. Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu 1986: 251). Bourdieu links social networks to the economic sphere, providing a resource that can be exploited to reap economic benefits. Though some scholars prefer a definition offered by Putnam (1995), which essentially argues for the inherent value of diverse social networks, I share the critique that it is too broad in that it celebrates “essentially social relations that produce good outcomes” (Nawyn et al 2012: 257). For a social resource to be considered capital, it must be exploitable by “social capitalists” to generate wealth.

I believe that, in the study of African populations, Pan Africanism must be examined as a tool of social capital. The central goal of the Pan Africanist movement is to achieve solidarity among African peoples all over the world. In theory, unity is the foundational rallying cry that galvanizes the Pan Africanist movement. This unity spans across ethnic and national divides, across continents, and across class lines. As Walter Rodney said, Pan Africanism occurs when “the people of one part of Africa are responsible for the freedom and liberation of their brothers and sisters in other parts of Africa; and indeed, black people everywhere accept the same responsibility” (quoted in Campbell 1996: 216).
Pan Africanism as a source of social capital cannot succumb to what Eddie Glaude calls the “troublesome notion of [B]lack interests” that lead to facile appeals to Black identity and the erasure of class, gender, sexual, and ethnic divisions (Glaude 2016: 127). Rather, Pan Africanism must be an exercise in self-definition against the hegemonic silencing of Black peoples.

Campbell offers that African cultural values like the dignity of human beings must replace material evaluations: “Pan Africanism is about the dignity of the African person and it is now clear that this dignity cannot be quantified in material terms” (Campbell 1996: 226). By centering dignity, African culture becomes a tool for countering economic fundamentalism within global neoliberalism, in which markets determine self-worth. Though Frantz Fanon was skeptical of undifferentiated continental unity, he offers a quote that captures the importance of developing Pan African culture as a means of resistance: “The problem is not as yet to secure a national culture, not as yet to lay hold of a movement differentiated by nations, but to assume an African or Arabic culture when confronted by the all-embracing condemnation pronounced by the dominating power” (Fanon 1963: 214).

Locating culture as a response to domination positions Pan Africanism as a tool of Black resistance. Indeed, emphasizing a Pan African culture based on the dignity of the African person intersects with the expectation that MAAs provide culturally appropriate services to clients. The CDC works with clients from a number of African nations, expanding their scope beyond Congolese nationals alone. As Chapter 3 documents, the CDC’s cultural competency and provision of non-material services represents a conversion of Pan African theory into social capital, centering the dignity of African peoples while connecting them with resources that can be exploited for personal benefit or survival.
Functionalist studies of RCOs tend to follow one of two dominant models: a deductive model, in which the RCO is hypothesized to serve a particular function, and researchers evaluate to what extent the RCO fulfills that function; and an inductive model, in which case studies of community organizations for specific populations are scrutinized to determine which functions community organizations serve. Both the inductive and deductive functionalist approaches yield key insights into the operations of RCOs, but are limited in that researchers impose a utilitarian understanding of function onto the organization that may not match the ways these organizations are understood, utilized, or intended. As Griffiths, Sigona, and Zetter (2006: 885) note, these conceptions are pervasive: “Idealized, functional models of RCOs and unproblematic notions of community and representation predominate in much of the literature.”

I contend that in order to best understand the sociocultural role of the RCO, less emphasis should be placed on function. It may not be useful for both RCO practitioners or the populations they serve to write a report card evaluating the provision of services by RCOs. Instead, I advocate for an emphasis on ground level understandings. Following the interpretivist tradition of Clifford Geertz (1973) and community-based refugee researchers (Steimel 2016; Stewart et al 2008), I have sought to analyze the ways people conceive of community organizations as cultural constructions. I borrow Geertz’s definition of culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973: 89). Deviating from a functionalist approach reaffirms the idea that organizations like RCOs are symbols, and as such represent fluid, ever-evolving social constructs that derive their power from multiple sources. It allows categories of meaning to originate from those who use these institutions, not those who study them. Attempting a bottom-
up perspective of institutions can illuminate barriers to access that a functionalist perspective may render invisible. Ethnography may provide a solution. As DeVault notes, the proliferation of institutional ethnographies, “built from the examination of work processes and study of how they are coordinated, typically through texts and discourses of various sorts” (DeVault 2006: 294), attempts to use qualitative tools to arrive at a textured understanding of organization(s).

The ability to name the functions an organization fulfills reinforces the power of researchers and the academic agenda in creating knowledge. Foucault ([1977] 1995) notes the relationship between knowledge and power, asserting that power and knowledge not only directly imply one another, but also reveal, through acquisition and modalities of knowledge, the effects of power and the ability to exercise it. Like any institution, positions of power and axes of privilege affect the ability of populations to activate the functions that RCOs supposedly fulfill. Shifting the axis of knowledge to accommodate different interpretations of organizations realigns power relations associated with the study of RCOs, both between researcher and subject population (epistemological power), and between organization and community (institutional power). In most functionalist analyses, and particularly in analyses of RCOs, power is structured vertically, possessed by those who operate structures and accessed by or selectively allocated to those who do not. Such an understanding threatens to erase agency while presenting power structures as immutable. My understanding of power draws from Foucault’s articulation of the term. He believes power

is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes and that they do not merely reproduce, at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behaviour, the general form of the law or government.... (Foucault [1977] 1995: 27)
Complicating the concept of power disrupts conventional conclusions of functionalism. It is my hope that restructuring power relations via an alternative theoretical lens will result in research that restores agency to clients of RCOs, elevating the position, perception, and knowledge of the marginalized.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is not to delegitimize or destabilize the approach that has guided the study of RCOs. Within this research, I will employ many of the same tactics I critique. I blur the distinctions of civil society, selectively presenting it both as mostly separate from the state and as mostly subsumed by the state. I will occasionally describe the RCO in relation to its function, as function is crucial to the cultural understandings of the institution. And I have chosen to study a single ethnic community within a single locality to bracket the field and lend my research specificity.

By problematizing and expanding each of these concepts, it is my hope to improve upon the existing paradigm and apply a cross-disciplinary examination of refugee community organizations that uplifts the marginalized perspective and properly situates it within a global framework. In turn, I seek to ensure that my codes of understanding are not imposed upon the community, but rather emerge from it. From Frederic, whose narrative opens this analysis, I learned how refugees perceive the effects of global capitalism intersecting with race, gender, and otherizing identifiers to marginalize them. This is the “force” behind forced migrants. This must be the starting point of any research on refugee communities.
Chapter 2

Yanking the chain: Neoliberal resettlement,
global refugee regimes, and the North Shore Congolese community
In 2016, the United States resettled more than 16,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), more than from any other country (BPRM 2016). Over 300 Congolese refugees were resettled into Massachusetts in 2016, representing a higher number of resettled refugees than any other African nation for the first time ever, ranking third total behind Haitian and Iraqi refugees (ORI 2017b). A significant portion of these refugees were resettled into the North Shore suburbs of Boston, including the city of Lynn.

Lynn represents a space of both challenge and opportunity for refugee resettlement. While the region lacks many of the social antecedents necessary for the successful accommodation of refugees, including affordable housing, sustainable employment, and quality public transportation, Lynn has developed a unique institutional ecosystem to maximize service delivery and integration outcomes for refugees. Through a partnership with the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI), a coalition of six ethnic community based organizations (ECBOs) in Lynn joined the main refugee resettlement organization serving the region to provide comprehensive, centralized resettlement and post-resettlement services.

The focus of this chapter is to examine the practices of policy implementation by resettlement and post-resettlement agencies, examining the extent to which non-governmental agencies, sub-contracted by the federal and state governments, communicate, replicate, and effect the objectives of the state based on the specific challenges of the receiving community. First, an outline of the resettlement infrastructure in the United States will be provided, examining the sub-contracted outsourcing of service provision to private agencies and the emphasis placed on self-sufficiency as the principal objective of resettlement. The privatization of services, which introduces competition for scarce and conditional funds, leads practitioners to favor measurable economic outcomes over the cultural or social needs of refugees. Next, the
practices and responses of practitioners will be examined in terms of the self-sufficiency objective. This analysis reveals two key findings: (1) consistent resource constraints lead practitioners to focus efforts on economic-based objectives, foregrounding measurable results that exhibit returns on investment and leading to economic fundamentalism in evaluations of the resettlement process; and (2) practitioners describe a transition toward accepting mostly male, single-case refugees, who are often considered the most easily employed. Resettling single individuals is an adaptation of resettlement implementation that eases burdens on resettlement agencies and transfers stresses and hardships to refugees. Finally, the paper will conclude with an analysis of the effects of the many decisions, adaptations, and practices that define the resettlement regime, examining how the implementation of resettlement policies impacts the refugees these organizations serve. The subsequent adaptations of the resettlement system, in turn, place added stress on refugees, as well as the post-resettlement ECBOs that exist partly outside of the purview of the state.

**Overview of the American Resettlement Regime**

The Refugee Act of 1980 created the contemporary US refugee resettlement framework. In addition to determining which individuals would be eligible for resettlement into the United States, Sec. 412 of the Refugee Act (1980) authorized the creation of programs for the “domestic resettlement of and assistance to refugees.” The Act empowers the Secretary of State to work with “private non-profit voluntary agencies” and state governments in the administration of resettlement aid. The State Department contracts nine private, non-profit National Resettlement Agencies (NRAs) to administer reception and placement (R&P) services, which occurs for the refugee’s first ninety days in the US (US Department of State 2018). The nine NRAs subcontract
a network of over 300 local affiliates that operate in 48 states (Darrow 2015a); these local agencies will be called either Volags (short for volunteer agencies) or resettlement agencies, used interchangeably in this work. Within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, an additional layer of support is leveraged through partnerships with Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs), or grassroots ethnic community organizations that provide social support and direct services to refugee populations (ORI 2017a).

Since the 1980 Refugee Act, the United States has relied on Volags and other private non-profit organizations in the resettlement and integration of refugees (Holman 1996; Kramer 2003). The privatization of state functions emerged in the transition from what is called the “welfare state,” characterized by the ambitious social programs that marked postwar American government, to the “neoliberal state,” defined by an emphasis on limited public expenditure and the downsizing or privatization of social programs (Harvey 2005; Kramer 2003). Within American domestic politics, the late 1970s and 1980s marked a shift toward neo-liberal policies, including the devolution (Alexander 1999) and privatization of state functions; an increased emphasis on the individual, rather than the society, as the target of legislative action; and the strengthening of restrictive conditions on receipt of public benefits (Harvey 2005). Evolving from the Chicago school of economics and the teachings of Friedrich von Hayek, the theory of neo-liberalism regards state involvement as an intrusion into free-market mechanisms, which should always provide for the optimal use of resources. Therefore, it follows that the refugee resettlement apparatus, which is largely viewed as a pillar of public welfare, would be privatized as part of a marketization process to both introduce competition into service provision and reduce public expenditure on direct aid (Brodkin 2007; Lipsky & Smith 1989; Smith & Lipsky 1993).
The competition among refugee service providers that results from the creation of a resettlement market is waged over access to refugees. For fiscal year (FY) 2017, Volags were funded approximately $2025 per refugee to provide access to refugee cash assistance, healthcare, and employment services, according to a cooperative agreement with the Department of State (BPRM 2016). These federal provisions cover two major expenses: the cost of assistance, aid, and services provided to refugees, and, when coupled with the capital raised through fundraising and private donations, a significant portion of the administrative and human capital costs of Volags.

Rather than allocating a set amount of funding that would cover the costs of resettling a known quantity of refugees, the state ties funding to each individual refugee resettled. To the resettlement agency, the refugee becomes both client and commodity: an individual in need of services, and an economic unit that accounts for institutional solvency. Privatizing and decentralizing the resettlement regime introduces competition for the scarce resource of refugees. To cope with institutional financial stresses and respond to competition, street-level practitioners—those who Lipsky (1980) identified as being tasked with converting social policy into action for a target population at the level of implementation—tend to resort to predictable survival mechanisms, including devoting more time to fundraising, documenting community needs, or reporting program outcomes (Smith & Lipsky 1993). In short, less time and energy is spent delivering much needed services, and more time is spent securing the funds necessary to do so.

Furthermore, the inability to plan for the future subjects service providers to the whims of a capricious political system. In the United States, the administrative branch can exert totalizing influence over the entire refugee apparatus, both in policy formation and in implementation. In
recent months, this has meant starving the Volags of the refugees that provide them with funding.

I found myself in the tidy office of a resettlement agency, across a small, Formica table from a resettlement administrator. It was the day after the Trump administration announced that refugee intakes would be capped at 50,000 later that week, and all other refugees would not be allowed entry until the end of the fiscal year in September. We had already discussed some of the implications of the cap: how the time-sensitive health certifications of certain refugees in camps would expire and their cases would likely be delayed for months, if not years, more; how an idle file of approved health insurance applications and housing requests needed cancellation; how families, who had waited years to reconnect with loved ones, were grappling with newly introduced uncertainty.

As the conversation progressed, I asked her about the timeline for securing affordable housing, a precious and scarce commodity in the greater Boston area where the fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment is over $1700 (HUD 2017). She discussed the necessity of locating housing between the time a case is approved for intake and the refugee arrives.

Oh yeah, you find it before they arrive because if you were to guess when someone was going to arrive before you had a travel notification, then you could be paying for housing that—oh my goodness. You just reminded me that we have to cancel an apartment.

She pulled out her legal pad, filled with notes related to specific cases, including from the emergency call that pulled her out of the interview for ten minutes.
As she scrawled, “Cancel two bedroom apartment” and underlined it twice for emphasis, she said, “We had an apartment that we’ve actually already paid first and last months’ rent for that we don’t need anymore.

“Because there are no more arrivals.” She capped her pen and sighed.

A fickle and unstable resettlement apparatus is inefficient because a lack of information and the inability to plan ahead lead practitioners to waste resources. Not only did the agency miss its opportunity to claim funds associated with the resettlement of these refugees, but it also had committed both time to find housing and money to pay for it, neither of which would be put to productive use. The experience of this official demonstrates the uncertainty that pervades a service sector administered by an executive branch that is unreceptive to its international obligation to resettle refugees. Upon taking the reins of the American resettlement regime, the Trump administration drastically reduced the number of refugees admitted to the US. President Obama’s pledge to resettle 110,000 refugees in fiscal year 2017—the highest total in American history—fell far short as a result. President Trump assumed office and implemented both a temporary ban on refugee admissions and an indefinite suspension of visas from a number of refugee-sending nations. The final number of refugees resettled in fiscal year 2017 was less than half the number Volags had prepared and budgeted for: 53,716 (Refugee Processing Center 2017). In the greater Boston area, several resettlement agencies that had prepared for a record number of refugees and, therefore, a dramatic increase in funding were instead forced to lay off workers, limit and economize resource provision, and even consider ceasing participation in the R&P program (Parker 2017). International Institute of New England, one of only two Volags to
resettle refugees in the North Shore, faced a budget shortage of nearly $300,000—21 percent lower than expected (Parker 2017).

To survive, resettlement agencies must make a strong case that they warrant a sustainable caseload of refugees to resettle. As a condition of the federal aid made available in the Refugee Act of 1980, the resettlement agencies, in conjunction with state governments, must submit to the Secretary of State a plan which describes “how the state intends to encourage effective refugee resettlement and to promote economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible” and “insure that language training and employment services are made available to refugees receiving cash assistance” (Refugee Act of 1980).

The Refugee Act does not provide a definition for economic self-sufficiency. While self-sufficiency is not concretely defined, the Act does mandate that refugee service providers (Volags and state governments) maintain records, report specific data, and contribute to a report to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of public investment in refugee resettlement. By analyzing the reporting mandate the Act imposes on service providers, the pillars of “self-sufficiency” can be gleaned.

To assess the effectiveness of resettlement funding and service provision, the Act requires an annual report to Congress that provides “evaluations of the extent to which … the services provided under this subchapter are assisting refugees in achieving economic self-sufficiency, achieving ability in English, and achieving employment commensurate with their skills and abilities…” (ORR 2015: 1). All three main objectives identified in the ORR annual report—self-sufficiency, English language ability, and employment—are presented through measurable statistics, suggesting that there is a benchmark for each goal that some portion of refugees attain. Self-sufficiency is measured by its inverse in terms of refugees’ access of public
benefits; language ability is measured in proficiency levels; employment is measured in labor force participation and employment rates. Yet aspects of this evaluative process obscure the spectral reality of fluid concepts such as employment. While a client may have a job that the state or Volag deems “commensurate with their skills and abilities,” the refugee may interpret their status either as below their skills and abilities or as underemployment, particularly in a high cost-of-living region like the Greater Boston Area. A refugee may be counted as “employed” for statistical purposes, when the reality may reflect underemployment or job insecurity. Understandings of these evaluative categories are imposed upon refugees rather than self-reported by them.

The discounting of local knowledge, or what James Scott (1998: 335) calls metis, relinquishes control of the system from those within it and assigns power to the state: “The destruction of metis and its replacement by standardized formulas legible only from the center is virtually inscribed in the activities of both the state and large-scale bureaucratic capitalism…. The logic animating the project, however, is one of control and appropriation.” Scott’s concept of “legibility” is premised on measureable metrics that enshrine administrative logics at the expense of local logics, privileging the measurements of administrators over the experiences and accounts of the public. The resulting metrics are both universal (able to be understood at any point within a system) and universalizable (able to be imposed upon any specific context). By adhering to a common standard, the state attains the ability to influence structures and systems from the top and center, while limiting the influence agents can exert from below. As Heilbron (1990: 22-23) writes, this is a particularly evident trend in evolving bureaucratic states: “The need for the increasingly bureaucratic state to organize itself and control its resources gave an impulse to the collection of vital and other statistics…”.
Self-sufficiency marks an arena in which the goal has been defined by the bureaucratic metrics used to measure it. For one of its refugee grant programs, the ORR defines self-sufficiency as

earning a total family income at a level that enables the case unit to support itself without receipt of a cash assistance grant. In practice, this means having earnings that exceed the income eligibility level for receipt of a TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] cash assistance grant in the state and the ability to cover the family living expenses. (ORR 2015: 20)

Self-sufficiency is described in terms of the individual’s eligibility for and use of public welfare resources. According to this definition, an individual cannot count as self-sufficient if accessing certain types of public welfare.

Of the three main objectives of refugee resettlement articulated above, the least clearly defined and the least measurable statistic, self-sufficiency, is presented as the most important in both the Refugee Act and throughout the resettlement regime. Refugee resettlement practitioners describe the pressure to achieve self-sufficiency for their clients. While the importance of devising a measurable benchmark is key to the legibility of the system, the responsibility for both defining and effecting refugee self-sufficiency falls to the resettlement agencies that implement policy.

In the absence of a benchmark for self-sufficiency, practitioners seize upon the concretely defined auxiliary goals of the system, as communicated by reporting requirements. The desired outcomes are thus conflated with the measurements used to evaluate them. For example, early employment and linguistic proficiency become the main goals expressed by refugee resettlement practitioners, even though these are merely metrics for the broader goals of self-sufficiency and cultural integration. In practice, even these two strands become conflated to achieve a measurable success parallel to the federal government’s definition of self-sufficiency; as will be
discussed later, language is taught only insofar as it can lead to employment in order to reduce dependency on public benefits. In the context of high competition and scarce funding resources, statistics and reporting requirements related to state legibility assume vital importance, which shapes the ways practitioners make decisions about and resettle refugees in the North Shore.

**Defining Self-Sufficiency: Economic Fundamentalism, Employment, and the Welfare State**

As Brodkin (1990) notes, the implementation of policy by practitioners should be viewed as an extension of the social politics that create it. The distance between policy objective and policy outcome, she writes, is not only limited to the arena of policy enactment, but also is contested in spaces of implementation. By determining the implementation of refugee resettlement, street-level practitioners exert influence on the outcomes of policies (Darrow 2015a). The delegation of refugee aid administration by the Department of State to the non-profit and state-level public sectors enables those who implement the policies the latitude to define its objectives.

The burden of interpreting the objectives outlined by the state is shifted to street-level practitioners, upon whom reporting burdens are placed. Lipsky (1980) notes that street-level bureaucrats mediate the relationship between clients and the state. He writes that when policy is subject to discretionary implementation, as nearly all policies are, practitioners wield significant influence over policy outcomes. Within refugee resettlement, as difficulties in implementing policy increase with a combination of resource constraints, a non-voluntary clientele, and outcome directives which are difficult to measure, practitioners resort to certain coping mechanisms that ease performance pressures.
I asked one resettlement official what portion of the agency’s cases achieved self-sufficiency.

Yeah well it's—I can say that it’s like a hundred percent of the cases. Because our newly arrived refugees—well it's like the [window for] cash assistance closes in eight months. So it means we have to make sure that they get a job in three months. It [failure] only happens with those kind of clients that are disabled.

Having provided basic and urgently-needed services to many refugees that had phased out of this Volag’s service provision mandate, I was quite surprised to hear how supposedly self-sufficient they were. To this official, finding a job is the benchmark of self-sufficiency. The official explained how employment, and the income it provides, can lead to a self-sufficient lifestyle, featuring a hypothetical refugee named “Client:”

So when we help them find a job, then there's that improvement to your income. That means the client's going into self-sufficiency. It means that the client is not coming to ask for food stamps, the client's not coming to ask for cash assistance, for any other unearned income. So Client is helping himself. Client is buying a car, starting another part time job, supporting the family. Client's buying stuff for the house, even. It means that Client's leaving our place that we rented for the client. So Client's moving to another place, renting his own house, Client's making credit history. Client understands how to make credit history and understands how to rent a house or room for his own. That’s improvement and all that self-sufficiency implies.

Clearly, the jump from initial employment to the comfortable lifestyle described above requires some contortion. But while this response may not serve as a particularly useful definition of self-sufficiency, it reveals the importance of employment to the evaluation of resettlement success for street-level practitioners. The response can be broken into two categories. The first part relates to the refugee’s accessing of public benefits. The second relates to the client’s purchasing power. In both, the metrics are economic, revealing the centrality of economic measurements in evaluating self-sufficiency and employment as the key to achieving it.
I contend that employment maintains a central position within the resettlement process for two reasons. The first is that it represents an easily measureable policy outcome. All refugees enter the country unemployed. The ability to acquire a job for migrants is a positive outcome. In a hypercompetitive resettlement environment, employment rates provide metrics that can easily be compared against competitors to justify an increased caseload of refugees and, therefore, increased funding. The second is that income earned from employment reduces the public expense associated with refugee resettlement. The income cap for receipt of public benefits (for individuals) is below full-time, minimum wage employment, meaning that taking any minimum wage job would disqualify a refugee from receiving cash assistance.

Employment fulfills the institutional objectives of both the Volag and the state. For the Volag, employment provides a measurable economic metric that contributes to the overarching resettlement objective of self-sufficiency. For the state, employment reduces the total amount spent on welfare in refugee resettlement. The response of the resettlement official suggests that attaining a job, an auxiliary goal in service to the broader ambition of “self-sufficiency,” is, in fact, interchangeable with self-sufficiency itself. Furthermore, by employing every refugee and claiming a 100 percent self-sufficiency rate for the refugees trusted to their agency’s stewardship, the official asserts a claim of superiority to leverage in a competition against other resettlement agencies for more refugees—the lifeblood of the resettlement infrastructure.

Other practitioners corroborate the stance of the resettlement official. Differentiating their own stance from that of the federal government, one Commonwealth resettlement official offered:

I think that the interpretation, especially from a federal perspective, of what self-sufficiency is is one's capacity to rapidly—the ability to get a job, to keep a job, and to overall have an income that would be able to support you and/or your family. Being able to live in the region that you're resettled.
Self-sufficiency is defined in reference to employment and the income it generates. As the conditional funding apparatus incentivizes resettlement agencies to achieve employment results, the pressure of the “workfare” state, which ties entitlements to employment objectives, is extended to influence not only the refugee recipients of public benefits, but also the decision making of street-level organizations and their practitioners (Brodkin 2013; Darrow 2015a).

To encourage strong employment outcomes, the resettlement system in the North Shore has made several accommodations. The first is tying receipt of services to a maintenance of effort requirement. One resettlement practitioner, who works for a Volag, described the process for refugee intake. After taking the newly arrived refugee to the housing the Volag has found and paid for, a need assessment is completed. The services the Volag will provide are explained, and the refugee then signs an agreement to receive services from the resettlement agency.

But it’s like voluntary—if he doesn't like the services, he can just move on and just quit anytime the client wants. Because some clients have money, some clients that might have relatives, he wants to move on. They wanted to move on on their own, which never happened yet but there's flexibility for the clients to go.

Of course, the concept of choice is illusory. Framing the refugee as a consumer of resources, capable of shopping for the best service provider, ignores the reality that the refugee will be hard-pressed to find any other agency, which did not receive the federal funds to resettle them, to voluntarily provide the vital services Volags offer. Presenting narratives of choice is central to the neoliberal project, because it reinforces the apparently inherent nature of the market as a fundamental organizer of society while shifting blame for inequalities onto individuals who “choose” to be poor. Intersecting with social Darwinist pseudo-theory, Black peoples, including Congolese refugees who are implicitly admonished for not “choosing” a resettlement agency that provides better services, are disproportionately pathologized for the
inequalities they experience which are central to the neoliberal project (George 1999). Though inequality is treated as incidental to neoliberalism, in reality it is foundational and fundamental. As David Harvey asserts, “Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project” (Harvey 2005: 16).

Further illuminating the specious nature of economic choice in the life of the resettled refugee is the nature of the relationship between the refugee, the labor market, and the resettlement agency. Within the agreement, as reported by another post-resettlement official and a refugee, are requirements that make service provision contingent upon agreements to both actively seek employment and accept a job that is offered. As I did not obtain an agreement, I cannot confirm whether any document contains these terms. But these responses suggest that whether or not this provision exists in the signed document, the requirement to seek employment and accept any job offered to refugees is being communicated to clients at the level of implementation. Such a contract would thus allow the Volag to terminate its services if employment is not pursued or is declined, as the service provider can deem the refugee non-compliant and stop providing services. Refugees would be shuttled into the first employment offer extended to them, regardless of their preparedness to work or their satisfaction with its terms.

In the case management manual provided to participants in the Massachusetts Refugee Resettlement Program, early employment is described as “a vital first step toward basic self-sufficiency” (ORI 2017a: 8). It is also often the point where refugees must forfeit the public benefits they receive through refugee cash assistance. This “vital first step” is often an unwelcome one for refugees, as one post-resettlement practitioner described.
I still sit with them and kind of try to budget things and explain to them that this cash assistance you get—it's not going to be forever. And I spent yesterday about an hour and a half with a person with this same voice: "I'm not going to make it if I take this job. It's not going to be enough for me to pay the rent." Okay. But you have to look at the long run. It gives you security. It gives you a safety net. It gives you benefits and this and that. "Yeah but I have my family now." So this is the hard part.

The practitioner’s conversation with this refugee reveals the shortcomings of using employment as a metric of self-sufficiency. Though the refugee will soon achieve employment, there are basic economic needs that will not be met with this plan. Counting this case as a successful example of a refugee achieving self-sufficiency is tone-deaf at best and dishonest at worst. Additionally, in accepting the first job offered, refugees are unable to devote the time to attain the qualifications necessary for a job more “commensurate with their skills and abilities.”

In addition to the maintenance of effort requirement, the objective of refugee English education is not to integrate newcomers into an English-speaking nation, but rather to prepare refugees for employment. One Volag administrator explained:

Our English language classes here are complementary to our employment classes. So at this moment, unfortunately, we do not offer full ESL services. We offer what is called EFE, it’s English for employment. So we are doing sort of specific, targeted English training to help people secure employment or secure job upgrades. So someone that’s seeking more comprehensive ESL, they wouldn’t get that in our office. They would have to go to another service provider.

The specific, targeted English taught by Volags often fails to account for linguistic exchanges that might occur outside of low-skill workplaces. “It's vocational English,” one post-resettlement official said. “It's survival English. It's English to survive to this life. So we kind of provide the tools and English what to do and how to do it.”

Focusing limited English-teaching resources on employment-related training also makes it more difficult to navigate other aspects specific to refugee life, including the public benefit and healthcare sectors. Survival English does not equip refugees to form self-sufficient or
independent communities, and it confines their sphere of interaction to a workplace. A targeted
approach to English stunts the ability of refugees to interact with native-born Americans,
refugees from other linguistic backgrounds, or other communities that may help refugees access
resources or exchange knowledge. Reflecting on his first several months in the US, Clement, a
male refugee, recalled how, prior to developing English skills through other classes, simple tasks
like going to the store become much more difficult for refugees who have only been exposed to
EFE training.

Or I say, okay so I need this thing and now I can go to the supermarket and buy
it…. It's not like before. Before, people were busy and if I asked someone
something, they wouldn’t understand because you were speaking another
language.

The major success of EFE is to concentrate resources into an employment-based
objective that can be measured, reported, and converted into benefits for resettlement agencies.
EFE represents a response by resettlement agencies to the stresses of neoliberal competition,
revealing the priorities of the State through the adaptations of its privatized system. The most
significant adaptation of the North Shore resettlement environment, however, is not in the ways
services are provided to clients, but in the demographic composition of client population itself.

**Creaming the Cash Crop: Resettling and Redefining Single Male Refugees**

“I don’t know if you’ve heard about it on the North Shore,” said one post-resettlement
official. “The resettlement agency has made a decision to bring in single people for mostly
different reasons. And they put them together—and that's the only way to survive in one
household.”

The Boston metropolitan area, in which the North Shore is included, has some of the
most expensive housing in the United States (HUD 2017). The combined effects of
gentrification, urbanization, high property taxes, and discriminatory renting practices make housing an incredibly difficult challenge for resettlement practitioners.

“It is so hard. It’s one of our biggest challenges,” said one resettlement administrator.

“Part of what you have to consider when you’re renting an apartment isn’t just can we get it at the right time, does it have the right amount of bedrooms, but also of our client’s finances. Are they going to be able to self-sustain this?”

One post-resettlement official identified the rent increases resulting from gentrification as “the biggest problem we have”:

Even now, people that have the means and money, they are buying properties here. And it’s very difficult for our refugees here not only to have an apartment, but the rent is skyrocketing. The price is going up and up. And the salary, some of them don’t even have a job. So it’s very difficult for them to keep it up…. We have a solution, but it’s a short-term solution. Some of them, especially men, they have what we call shared apartment, so you could see two people in one room. And if the cost is 500, everyone is chipping in 250. That’s how this problem will be solved.

Resettling individual refugees allows for cost-sharing not only within an apartment, but within a bedroom. Two refugees of the same gender can cohabit a bedroom and split the cost, halving the price of housing per refugee.

Housing refugees in this way enables a more efficient and cost-effective expenditure on rent. Volags can resettle a higher volume of refugees while improving the financial standing of each one. Shared housing of individual refugees is the ideal solution for conceptions of the refugee as *homo economicus*: consumers of scarce resources with limited capital available. Emphasizing the individual as the relevant unit of economic decision-making centers the concept of choice. Meillassoux wrote on the creation of *homo economicus*: “the principle explanation of the economic phenomenon is to be found in the behavior of individuals and boils down to a problem of consumers’ attitudes” (Meillassoux 1972: 95). Narrowing analysis to the level of the
individual makes consumer choice and preference the variables that determine economic status, diminishing the impact of structures that limit the ability of agents to freely choose among available options. A resettlement official, discussing the practice of rooming individual refugees together, emphasizes the benefits of shared housing while mentioning (and perhaps overstating) the capacity of refugees to choose their living situations:

In this case these decisions are being made without you and oftentimes it's—oftentimes it's amazing and works very well and groups of roommates become very, like a family and they're supporting each other. And in some cases there are conflicts and managing those conflicts becomes a real role of the, of the case specialist and sometimes people choose to not keep living together or they meet other people after they resettle here and they become better friends with them and get apartments together.

By emphasizing positive outcomes and the decisions of certain refugees to remain in cohabitant residences, the official minimizes the fact that “these decisions are being made without” refugees. They do not initially choose to share a bedroom with another person. Yet the rhetoric of choice pervades throughout responses, reflecting the centrality of bounded economic decision-making in resettlement.

Resettlement agencies note other benefits to accepting individual cases. Other rationales for resettling individuals fall in line with scripts related to self-sufficiency. A Commonwealth resettlement official said:

[S]ingles in most cases tend to become self-sufficient more quickly since they don’t have a family to support and can tend to live together in roommate situations, which can just go very well for them as individuals, and also economically. It just tends to work out. They can just tend to get on their feet more quickly.

This response positions the family as a drain on resources, and, therefore, an economic barrier to self-sufficiency. The administrator states that rooming together has both personal and economic benefits. But in assessing the benefits of assigning multiple refugees to a room, a
divide emerges between resettlement and post-resettlement officials. When I asked a post-resettlement official about these benefits, I received instead a list of difficulties that arise.

People may not know each other, I mean, even if people are brothers, friends, sometimes friends do have problems. So now can you imagine people who do not know each other who have to share an apartment? There could be—this one could be blaming the other one for not being clean. There’s always some small problems.

Another post-resettlement leader shared the views of their clients:

We see people we resettle in Lynn. How many of them expected old houses? Shared living? You know, lack of resources? How many of them, especially when I served my first Iraqi families, they were crying here in this very office saying we fought for this. We were caught in the middle. We had businesses, we had everything back there. We came here and believed in this. We live in this small apartment with nothing basically with so limited resources.

The shared living that has become a fixture of individual resettlement alleviates certain economic pressures from refugees, but they amplify a number of social costs. Refugees report that sharing a bedroom is dehumanizing, suffocating, and stressful. These non-measureable, non-economic stressors are rendered invisible by a system that prioritizes efficient spending of resources, maximum number of refugees settled within a locality, and economic indicators of resettlement performance, all while distancing the effects of structural inequalities by presenting them as decisions made by refugees themselves.

Additionally, there has been a preference exhibited for men to be resettled. Jessica Darrow (2015b) notes that gender is a relevant variable in employment outcomes for refugees, with maleness being associated with higher earnings. An ORR report (2015) finds that for the years 2011-2015, males (relative to females) have dramatically higher employment rates (69.0 to 39.0), higher labor force participation rates (75.7 to 45.7), and lower unemployment rates (8.8 to 16.2). Male refugees are much more likely to secure employment.
The ability to provide shared living accommodations and the relative ease with which individual male refugees attain initial employment comprise the basis of Volag support for individual male resettlement. The resources of the resettlement agency are thus invested in a carefully selected population that has been curated by Volags to be the most employable, least resource intensive, and most likely to result in favorable economic outcomes. The street-level practice of funneling resources to those clients who are most likely to succeed is called “creaming” (Darrow 2015b). A key distinction of the resettlement apparatus, though, is that creaming occurs not as a result of selecting the best from within a pre-defined population, but by selecting and defining the population itself.

Local resettlement agencies, like the ones that resettle refugees within the North Shore, are affiliates of NRAs. As local affiliates, they are able to exert a measure of control over the populations they are assigned to resettle. At the national level, the allocation of refugees throughout the country is determined by three stakeholders: the NRAs, the US Department of State, and IOM (International Organization for Migration), the international agency that links refugees in camps with resettlement agencies around the world. The NRAs receive allocations of refugees and then recommends cases for particular local Volag affiliates. These affiliates then make a decision on the cases: they either assure the case and agree to resettle the refugee(s) associated with it, or they choose not to assure the case and the NRA seeks another affiliate to assure the case.

In the Boston area, the local affiliates almost always assure the cases assigned to them. While street-level bureaucrats have the power and mechanisms to alter and refuse established policy, they instead exert influence prior to the formation of policy. In other words, rather than changing the policy dictated by decision-makers, street-level organizations arrange for their
preferences to be written into policy at the time of refugee case allocation, obviating the need to turn away cases. NRAs understand the resource constraints of the Boston area and recommend mostly individual cases for resettlement to Boston affiliates. The NRA attempts to create a portfolio of refugee cases such that the Volag does not need to turn any cases away. In this way, the local context for refugee resettlement influences decision-making at the national level. But the influence of the local context extends further into the global sphere as well, affecting the decision-making and displacement narratives of refugees in pre-resettlement as well. Analyzing this phenomenon suggests the presumption that single refugees lack family to support proves too simplistic.

*Petier, one of the single male refugees resettled to the North Shore, walked into my office radiating exuberance. He had just completed two weeks of training for a good paying job—$20 an hour, of which he got to keep $16 after he paid dues to the contracting firm that connected him with the employer. We were conducting our second interview, and he let his fantasies wander. He spoke of finally having the money to hire a lawyer and expedite the family reunification process, of looking into modest homes (his four daughters could share two rooms, right?) and investing the money he now spent on rent in a mortgage. He had just started to tell me about Kenya, where his wife and daughters lived, when his phone rang.*

*He lost his coveted job while sitting in front of me.*

You know a man’s life depends on his job. I told you, I have a family. So I already planned. You know, even today, I sent my sister $100 today. You have to help. They told me they don’t have food. Food. They don’t have—I can show you.

*He dug a receipt out of his pocket.*
From Western Union. Today. Before he turned me in. Here. This is from Western Union today. I sent a hundred dollars today. And now, in the job, they are saying that no job. So how am I going to help my family now?

Because in Africa you cannot find these kinds of things. Without any reason you stop someone’s job? And yet he has fixed—you know in Africa once you have a job you start planning your life through that job….Because here, you can die. You think like this, it goes like this. Just for no reason. No reason! No reason. Just they stop you. How? And how am I going to pay the rent? It’s terrible.

*Petier paused to pull out his phone. He planned to call his now former co-worker, an Ethiopian refugee, to hatch a plan to gain employment.*

Complicated! Complicated, you can’t understand. You are driving a car but you are seeing the road. But the car is not going where you want it to go. It is not going that way. You crash.

*He closed his eyes. We kept talking. He told me he wouldn’t tell his wife; a man cannot involve a woman in such matters. She would start to worry.*

Who is going to help me to pay my rent? Nobody. Nobody. Ah! Ehh… Sometimes I always wonder not—why? I always wonder why, which kind of life is this? You know, jumping jobs is no good. It is not that I am willing to jump jobs, but the jobs are willing to jump me.

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The reality for many of the single male Congolese refugees that seek resettlement in the United States is that they are not “single” at all. Many maintain transnational kinship ties to spouses, children, and relatives back in Africa. Through a social network of knowledge sharing and rumors, the preference for individual male refugees is communicated to refugees in the pre-resettlement process in camps. In their pre-screening process, male refugees are advised to either present as single or file an individual case to expedite their resettlement.
Claude, a refugee, proposed to his girlfriend while his resettlement case was being processed. He told the UNHCR officials that he planned to marry his fiancée prior to being resettled. He remembers the officials telling him that changing his marital status could delay his departure. “They said, ‘If you put your wife right now, you’re going to stay again five years or even six years.’” Claude waited, got married after his paperwork was processed per the officials’ advice, and was able to reunite with his wife 18 months after his arrival.

Like Claude, Gilbert met his wife as a refugee. He was not yet married, so he applied as a single case refugee. He remembers seeking the advice of UN resettlement workers in the camp.

I was already passed through the process, so I asked the, the people of UNHCR. They said it should be better for you to go over there and fight for her to come over. If you just put it in your paperwork right now, it will delay. Yeah. We'll start over. Yeah. And you have to make it so you understand it. I have a year, a year and four weeks now over here. So the paperwork is already there. She will already get approved. I'm just waiting for it to work. We'll just start the interview over there and then she will be.

Jean-Claude received the same advice, but his circumstances are not as fortunate. He was already married at the time his case was processed for resettlement, and was convinced to list himself as single and leave the rest of his family out of the paperwork. He was quickly resettled, but now may be unable to access channels for family reunification because he made false statements on his migration forms.

Last time my child, she was sick when—she was sick. And my mom, she was sick. I think to start to take care of my child, to start to take care of my mom, to start to take care of my younger sister. I said, OK. So I was thinking it's hard to me because here in America, when you were a single, it's so hard to you. Back home, at least you have your wife and child.

He reports getting frequent seizures, causing him to miss work and incur substantial medical bills. He attributes his ailment in part to the stress of separation from his wife and his three-year-old daughter. Several respondents associate physical health breakdowns with the
trauma of separation from their families, from headaches to insomnia to digestive issues. Cameroonian scholar Tatah Mentan, writing on African spirituality, connects physical illness in African populations with alienation from traditional familial units: “sickness is an imbalance of the body and on one’s social life which can be linked to a breakdown in one’s kinship and family relations” (Mentan 2017: 211). Isolated refugees locate the social stresses of familial dislocation corporeally, affecting their livelihoods by necessitating expensive medical procedures and preventing them from maintaining employment. These physical costs are hidden from view in a system that values measureable, economic indices of success.

By resettling “single” men, the agencies are not always, in reality, choosing a population with no family to support. Instead, they are displacing the familial responsibility of the male parent, exacerbating the challenges of providing for their kin. Mothers who are not resettled are exploited through the unpaid labor of child-rearing. Resettled husbands and fathers still send money to their families, but the cost is hidden as a personal expense associated with “non-essential” income, or money that does contribute directly to the means of survival for the refugee. The resettled men must draw from desperately scarce capital to provide material support for their families.

The separation of Black males from their families has historical roots in capital accumulation. Tracing the same pathways from continental Africa to North America followed by today’s refugees, the transatlantic slave trade wrenched families apart and reorganized kinship to serve maximally (re)productive purposes (Collins 2005: 56). In the late-19th century, when the Congo was under the colonial rule of King Leopold, Belgian forces would kidnap wives and children, holding them hostage until men harvested a set quota of rubber (Hochschild 1999: 161).
In the pursuit of cheap, compliant Congolese labor, the Congolese family has long been a target of separation.

By fragmenting the family, the cost of providing for the family becomes the responsibility of the individual rather than the state. Many migrants are ineligible for a number of social services until after five years of residency in the United States (Mathema, West, and Fremstad 2017). But if immigrants were more eligible for public benefits and families remained intact, the household size of refugee cases would increase. As the household size increases, so, too, does the minimum income for access of public benefits. Even with a low-paying job, refugee families with larger household sizes would be able to support a family if they could access additional channels for family funding, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and other public benefits geared toward the family. It is conceivable that self-sufficiency for such refugees may include some form of public assistance or public benefit. Yet such a conception would contradict formulations of self-sufficiency that rely on minimal public expenditure. Instead of a sustainable option for stability that makes use of public resources, support for families is not accounted for in a resettlement regime that places the individual as the unit of policy.

While it is almost certainly not the intent of resettlement agencies to alter the migratory pathways and decision-making of male refugees and lead them to abandon their families, the preferences of street-level practitioners leads males to present as single for easier resettlement. The resettlement regime fractures the Black family, creating a “single” male individual whose employability, flexibility, and need for immediate capital produces a compliant laborer that fits neatly into the capitalist economy.
Refugee resettlement in the US, spurred by the imbricated structures of society, creates circumstances that encourage male family figures to leave their families. Those who are parents thus become “absent fathers,” echoing a controlling image of that emphasizes a supposed tendency of Black men to abandon families and abdicate familial responsibilities. Sincere researchers have framed this alleged phenomenon as a product of cultural values, pathologizing poor Black communities while providing only a gesture to structural factors that constrain the choices of minority actors. Mercer Sullivan’s 1989 piece, entitled “Absent Fathers in the Inner City,” attempts to break away from framings of the “culture of poverty” to explain the less-explored, supposedly more veracious cultural values and responses of Black communities, including in the Brooklyn neighborhood pseudonymously dubbed “Projectville,” to the problem of absent fathers. While Sullivan advocates for policies that move beyond “assumptions that uncontrolled sexuality and an undeveloped work ethic are at the root of the problem” (Sullivan 1989: 58), using thinly-veiled dog-whistle identifiers like “inner-city” and “Projectville” associates the problem of absent-fathers with Black peoples while eliding structural conditions that concentrate poverty within minority neighborhoods. The result is that the absent father is uncritically presented as the product of a cultural Other. Such scholarship appeals to stereotypes that equate Blackness with a culture of poverty, evoking ideations of race that shift the blame of poverty and inequality on the poor. These controlling images, which, as Chapter 3 will demonstrate, racialize social programs and create barriers to access for the receipt of welfare benefits by Black peoples, define the landscape into which Black Congolese single men resettle.

Because of the challenges associated with cost-of-living, housing, and sustainable employment, the preferences at the level of implementation lead to a resettled population in the North Shore that is more likely to be employed and the less likely to be eligible for long-term
public benefits. These preferences are communicated through the various phases of the global refugee resettlement regime, changing the decision-making of refugees in the pre-resettlement process. And, when the refugee is a parent, these channels of communication shift the burden of family responsibility from the state to the lone resettled refugee. In addition to the economic costs imposed upon refugees, the stresses of separation take a significant toll that can be charted in responses of poor mental, emotional, and physical health.

Conclusion

The street-level decision-making of resettlement agencies should be called into question for contributing to a system that introduces stresses into the lives of refugees in pursuit of favorable economic metrics. But resettlement agencies are not solely responsible for this outcome. The neoliberal, privatized system of resettlement, which positions the refugee as both indigent client and precious commodity, necessitates certain survival tactics in a local geopolitical context that has high rents, scarce employment opportunities, and a high cost-of-living. The competitive market inevitably results in a system that privileges a population that is highly employable, easily integrated into a difficult housing context, and least eligible for public benefits. A performance-based system of competition inevitably leads to an emphasis on economic measurements, rendering invisible the non-economic human costs of pursuing economic fundamentalism. And a resettlement architecture based on minimizing public expenditure inevitably results in a resettlement regime that places the individual, and not a collective groups such as the community or the family, as the unit of policy targeting.

The ways in which resettlement organizations respond to and cope with the specific resettlement challenges particular to the North Shore lead to changes in the resettlement regime
on both the global and local level. The ramifications of these migratory changes are left for other agencies to solve. Post-resettlement refugee community organizations, which operate largely outside of the hypercompetitive neoliberal resettlement regime, are well-positioned to address community-wide needs that result from the stresses of resettlement, dislocation, and fragmentation. Now that the context for refugees has been established, the next chapter will examine the role of the Congolese Development Center in resettlement and post-resettlement for Congolese refugees in the North Shore.
Chapter 3

“My friend is my job”: Understandings of the CDC, community, and social cohesion
In what became a fairly regular ritual during my three months working with the CDC, Eric burst into my office with a handful of papers and an air of exasperation. On this occasion, Placide, one of our elderly clients who is illiterate in his native Swahili and speaks virtually no English, had his application for disability supplemental security income (SSI) benefits denied. Of the several doctors providing his healthcare, one had failed to sign the document that Eric had sent to them, included alongside clear instructions for properly completing the forms and passing them along for review. Placide, who suffered from splenic dysfunction that, along with advanced age and language inabilities, prevented him from finding a job, had recently become ineligible for cash assistance from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). His time on public benefits was up. He either needed SSI, or he needed to find a job.

The previous day Placide had come into my office, a sure sign that his preferred service provider, “Papa Eric,” was in the field. Through a combination of hand gestures, Google translate, and my very limited Swahili knowledge, I was able to deduce that he was low on money and needed the SSI. It appeared urgent. He pulled out the smart phone he feared losing the ability to pay for—it was the only way he had to contact his wife in the refugee camp, he said—and opened the DTA app, which showed the money in his bank account. He was left with $0.32 to his name.

“You see, people think it is easy to get disability,” Eric said, brandishing the rejection papers as evidence against this argument. “But it is not easy. Now, you tell me—what is he supposed to do? What would he do without us?”

Eric often directed my attention to facets of his work, as if he wanted to ensure that I made note of certain information. He seemed keenly aware of my presence as a researcher, and
appeared eager to shape my understanding of the topic. In the anecdote listed above, this meant ensuring that my perspective enabled me to invert the dominant narrative surrounding refugee resettlement: that refugees consume a substantial sum of public resources and often become a “public charge.” The USCIS calculates the likelihood of becoming a public charge in determining “admissibility” of migrants or naturalization of citizens, offering the following definition:

For purposes of determining inadmissibility, “public charge” means an individual who is likely to become primarily dependent on the government for subsistence, as demonstrated by either the receipt of public cash assistance for income maintenance or institutionalization for long-term care at government expense. (USCIS 2017)

The fallacy that refugees represent a cost to citizens and taxpayers has recently been thrust into the national rhetoric with the anti-immigrant, anti-refugee extremism of the Donald Trump presidency. On March 6, 2017, Trump sent a memorandum to then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, then-Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions (who, as of this writing, has not yet been fired or re-assigned). The memo mandated the production of:

a report estimating how many refugees are being supported in countries of first asylum (near their home countries) for the same long-term cost as supporting refugees in the United States, taking into account the full lifetime cost of Federal, State, and local benefits, and the comparable cost of providing similar benefits elsewhere. (Trump 2017: 3)

Of course, embedded in this language is a fixation on the cost of domestic refugee resettlement without any reference to potential benefits, economic or otherwise. The presumption that refugee resettlement represents a superfluous burden for the “average American taxpayer” (a lightly coded appeal to whiteness and the protection of white wealth) rejects the reality of resettlement. Long-term studies of refugee populations disprove the suggestion that refugees are
voracious consumers of public benefits. The racialization of the refugee, who is inherently viewed as an “other” inserting herself into American society, harkens depictions of controlling images of people of color accessing public welfare. In particular, the “welfare queen” image was central to racial reforms of welfare that project blame onto a pathologized poor and distract from the structural inequalities inherent in society. Ange-Marie Hancock (2003: 36) writes that the welfare queen represents an “indigent version of the Black matriarch controlling image…a dominant mother responsible for the moral degeneracy of America.” Scholars like Wahneema Lubiano, drawing from conceptions of unruly Black female dominance detailed in the Moynihan Report on the “Negro family,” have connected the stereotype to a so called “culture of poverty:”

Within the terms specifically of, or influenced by, the Moynihan Report and generally of the discourse on the “culture of poverty,” welfare queen is a phrase that describes economic dependency—the lack of a job and/or income (which equals degeneracy in the United States); the presence of a child or children with no father and/or husband (moral deviance); and finally, a charge on the collective U.S. Treasury—a human debit. (Lubiano 1992: 337-338)

Other stereotypes, including the “welfare loafer” (Gilens 1999: 66), presume that the “undeserving poor” grow accustomed to welfare benefits, which obviate the need to find gainful employment. Patricia Hill Collins writes that controlling images like the welfare queen and the welfare loafer are “key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender” (1990: 68). Indeed, such images are also key in influencing policy. Ideations surrounding both race and the erosion of the Black family, coupled with sexual politics and policing of welfare recipients, can be seen in the “four purposes” of one public benefit: TANF, or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. The four purposes of TANF are to:

1. Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes.
2. Reduce the dependency of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work and marriage.
3. Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies.
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. (Office of Family Assistance 2017)

The four purposes of TANF locate the causes of poverty, which drive one to seek public benefits, in the family and the sexual practices of welfare recipients. When coupled with the hyper-racialized rhetoric surrounding welfare benefits, the effect is to blame the very need for welfare on sexual and familial practices—components of some supposed “culture of poverty.”

As the last chapter details, it is the refugee resettlement apparatus and the employment objectives of the state, and not the culture of Black peoples, that contributes to the separation of Black families in refugee resettlement. Forcing refugees to maintain transnational kinship ties shift the burden of providing for the family from the state to the individual, eliminating the need for family-directed welfare for single-case refugees. The structure of the global economy, which influences the policy practices of the state, not only pathologizes Black sexuality and family structures; it destroys the family unit to alienate workers from social bonds that might interfere with the neoliberal, nation-state project of welfare restriction and capital accumulation.

The state erects barriers that make it difficult for people to access public benefits and ensure that those who do receive such benefits truly are worthy. In refugee resettlement, this takes place through both the narratives of displacement that frame “refugeeness” (Malkki 1995), and an extreme vetting procedure (which has, under the Trump administration, become downright draconian). If, against the odds, the refugee is selected for resettlement into the United States, she is entitled to funding distributed by her resettlement agency. But the benefits are temporary, and the barriers to welfare access continue to affect refugees like Placide. By highlighting the difficulty in obtaining SSI benefits, I believe Eric wanted to dispel the presumption that refugees are freely granted economic benefits via an expansive welfare system.
The reality is that refugees represent an economic benefit to society. The very report that Donald Trump demanded in the above memorandum proved that refugees provide over $63 billion more in government revenues than their resettlement costs. The draft of this Trump administration report lauded the entrepreneurship of refugees, the boosts to rustbelt economies (which have experienced population decline following the dismantling of organized labor in the 1980s), and the contributions of refugees to civic society (New York Times 2017). These findings, however, were never made public, as the Trump administration rejected the draft and refused to publish the report.

Yet despite the revenue (and government profits) that refugees contribute, the fear of the “public charge” is projected onto Black refugee bodies. In a private meeting on migration with lawmakers, President Trump allegedly lamented the practice of accepting migrants from places like Haiti and Africa, referring to these as “shithole countries” (despite the fact that Africa is a continent) and expressing a preference for migrants from countries like Norway (Dawsey 2018). The president’s comments cannot be separated from equations of Haiti—the first Black republic and a target of racist rhetoric, symbolism, and policy for American presidents from Jefferson to Lincoln (Horne 2015)—and Africa with Blackness, and the equation of Norway with whiteness. In advocating instead for a merit-based system and an end to the long-standing US practice of family reunification (which he calls “chain migration”), President Trump seeks to redefine migration according to racial-class identity. The supposed fear is that migrants will not assimilate, will represent a drain on public resources, and will overwhelm white Americans, fundamentally changing the ethnic, cultural, and social composition of the United States (Huntington 2004). The fear, in essence, is that the white privilege upon which the United States
is built will erode with the admission of non-white migrants. Poet W.H. Auden captures the public perception of refugees in his poem “Refugee Blues:”

-Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said; "If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread": He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me. (Auden 1962: 256-257).

I hesitate to justify the admission of refugees in terms of their many contributions to society, because it simply inverts the narrative while retaining the damaging perceptions that frame our toxic discourse on migration. Activist Brittney Packnett expressed the basis for valuing the humanity of migrants from so-called “shithole countries”:

-I know it’s tempting to spend a lot of time defending Haiti and Africa by displaying all of the success stories from said places. I get it. I’m just not participating. I don’t owe Donald Trump anything. Least of all an explanation of my humanity. Running to present images of Haiti and Africa that “dispel the myth” give entirely too much credence to a preposterous premise in the first place. In fact, the question doesn’t need to be dignified with that response. Sadly, white supremacy has never been dismantled, shaken or rattled by displays of individual achievement by people of color.¹

While it is necessary to visit the history of race, welfare, and migration to provide context for domestic resettlement policies and attitudes, countering the erroneous conceptions that frame refugee resettlement debates legitimizes racist arguments.

Eric’s comments in my office led me to think more deeply about the role of the CDC in the community. The questions that animated my research, however, were not those related to the link between the RCO and state benefits. Surely the CDC plays an important role in service provision and technical knowledge, but the function of the CDC as an RCO can provide only a very limited perspective on how it impacts the life of refugees like Placide. Instead, I direct my

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¹ Brittney Packnett’s Twitter page, accessed April 8, 2018, https://twitter.com/MsPackyetti/status/951845862430429186.
focus to the latter part of his statement: “What is he supposed to do? What would he do without us?”

Placide came to the office nearly every day, sometimes sitting for hours in Eric’s office, chatting with one of the few people he knew who shared his language while waiting to be helped. The challenges of integrating into American life were compounded for Placide as someone who lacks literacy, familiarity with English, the youth and health necessary to find a job, and a network of individuals upon whom to rely for assistance. There are difficulties that Placide faces, and he turns to the CDC to address them. He needed the CDC to manage. This was clear. Less clear is the extent to which the CDC depends on Placide, and other members of the community, to survive. How would Placide survive without the CDC? And how would the CDC survive without clients like Placide?

To understand the link between survival—both individual/communal, on the part of the refugees, and institutional, on the part of the CDC—the relationship between the refugees and the RCO must be further examined.

**Understandings of the CDC and Direct Service Provision**

Overwhelmingly, the Congolese clients of the CDC are happy with the services that the organization provides. Responses relating to service provision were consistent with the role described by the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) for ethnic-community based Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs):

Through grants administered by MORI, MAAs provide Social Adjustment Services, including Post-Resettlement Community Services (PRCS), and Youth Adjustment Services (YAS). Direct services may include helping an individual to schedule an appointment, enroll in a class, fill out an application form or understand a letter from their child's school....
These organizations provide programs, including English classes, job training, mental health support, civic education, and others those refugee community members need to succeed in their new lives in the United States. (ORI 2017b)

The refugees report that they are pleased with the services provided to them. Clement, a male refugee in his thirties who speaks limited English, explained the types of services the CDC provides.

They helped me to learn how to start—how to go to the store, how to pay money for transport, to take the bus. They have helped me with food stamps because I didn’t work so they helped me. Also they bring me to the hospital, and with medicine.

Often, responses would center around mediating complex government processes. One of the most unique services that the CDC provides is support for notoriously complicated family reunification applications, including in the petition for Gilbert’s wife.

Yeah, for me to get like the paperwork for my green card, everything—he’s the one who sent the paperwork to Texas, and all the paperwork. Then after that the paperwork comes, but to my mail, if I get something like a receipt, he have to translate it. I get this and this and this. What should I do with that? He told me. Wait, they'll call you or wait. They'll send you the address where you're going to your interviews that they were to ask. So, it's mostly like paperwork that you get and you don't know what to do with. Yeah, everything paperwork that I was telling him I needed a new job. He always explained to me about life in Boston, how to survive. You work hard. He teaches me everything.

In addition to helping refugees navigate certain processes, Gilbert’s response reveals how the organization provides knowledge specific to the local region of resettlement. Additionally, through providing insights on how to survive in Boston, the organization provides support beyond the mandate detailed by ORI. The CDC often provides material support, for which they have little (if any) budget, when clients like Jean-Claude are struggling to survive.

Viviane, she always liked me. Viviane and Eric, they are a good person and sometimes me, I don't have food here. I can call sister Viviane. She could come. She buys food and everything. Sometimes I don't have money to pay for my food. I can call Eric where sister Vivian and they could help me to pay my phone. Gives me something.
Alice, an older refugee woman, noted the support Viviane provided after a trip to the hospital.

Viviane has helped me. [A home health aide and a volunteer], they’ve helped us with papers, with our problems, all the problems that have come with this country. If we have a problem with, for example, responding to papers, I call Viviane, I call [the aide or volunteer]. After I was in the hospital, it was Mama Viviane who brought me water to drink, food.

Providing material support beyond the mandate, caring for the sick, and visiting with clients all extend the services offered by the CDC beyond the roles of an MAA enumerated by ORI. I interpret these acts of community as providing culturally and linguistically appropriate care, a benefit of MAAs. Congolese cultural values may lead the CDC to pursue certain forms of care. Alice noticed a difference between American and Congolese cultures:

But here, you all live according to the laws of the nation. If you work, you are fine. You are good. But if you don’t work, who is going to give you money? I don’t see anyone who is going to give money to someone. But back home, even if you just have five dollars, someone comes and says, “Grandmother, I didn’t eat at my home. My children have not eaten.” I will take those five dollars and I’m going to change it. I’ll give two dollars to him and leave myself three dollars. “Go with that. Have your wife cook a meal for your children.” Back home, it’s like that. But here, in your country! (Laughs.) Bad bad bad.

Sharing resources and ensuring that members of the community have enough is central to Alice’s framing of Congolese culture. It is reflected in the purchase of groceries or the payment of an outstanding phone bill. In addition to providing culturally appropriate care, the CDC teaches skills to refugees, enabling them to develop independence and perform functions necessary for survival in the US. Speaking through a translator in her native Lutenda, Patricia, a single mother of six who was resettled over a year ago, explained how a translator, whom she described as an employee of the CDC, helped with an array of actions that are necessary for refugee life.

[Translator:] When she first gets the food stamps, she starts with food stamps in the house for like two weeks and then she showed the translator—and then the
translator showed them how to use it. She took the number down and put it in the phone. Like if you wanna know how much money you have on the food stamps you gotta use the phone. She showed her how to use it. Then he took her to the bank and showed her how to get money from the cash. Then she took her to the market and showed her how to buy food with it.

Praises of the CDC are often contrasted against dissatisfaction with the care provided by resettlement agencies. Patricia’s translator, for example, filled a key need for her service provision. She reports that her caseworker often did not interact with her.

[Translator:] She’s saying that the translator did a lot of work because she would usually see the translator and not the caseworker. Like the caseworker she saw more than five times or less, only five times. But the translator, she saw her almost every day for two years and a few months.

For several refugees, much of the frustration with resettlement agencies centers on the strictly enforced time limits that dictate when services from resettlement agencies end. It is important to note that not all sections of the resettlement regime are subject to the same policies. Post-resettlement agencies differ from providers of R&P (Volags) in several key ways. First, they often receive funding from state-level, rather than federal, funding streams. The state funds that post-resettlement agencies access often take the form of project-specific grants, providing a fixed amount of money that is not dependent upon refugee intakes. Both, of course, raise money through private donations as well. Second, the post-resettlement agencies that comprise the MAA coalition tend to focus on a specific ethnic or regional community, positioning the community, and not the individual refugee, as the target of service provision. Whereas resettlement cases are either individuals or family units, post-resettlement broadens the scope to the level of the community. Third, MAAs tend to be more lenient with service provision mandates. R&P providers receive federal funds for 90 days of services, and resettlement agencies have mandates of eight months (or twelve months for priority cases), after which refugees become ineligible for material assistance, and 60 months for case management.
responsibilities\(^2\) (ORI 2017a). Post-resettlement agencies, though technically subject to the same 60-month mandate, tend to work with clients even after the mandate has expired. While still subject to reporting requirements, government audits tend to only occur for specific programs that receive state funds.

I asked several practitioners about the expiration of mandates for resettlement agencies. The decision to move on from cases of refugees is framed in terms of organizational priorities. Refugees who have been in the country longer are considered lower priority than recent arrivals, presumably because, as one resettlement official states, they have been receiving funds for a longer period of time:

So, when three months after arrival when they get the job they make money. And after one year they are now self-sufficient. They are stable. And then we have new people added that year. We have we are following new people and these people they are now, they are now kind of they are running their own fields and then they still follow with them. But they wouldn't be the priorities now because they have enrolled in all the services they are receiving English classes and, like, their children are going to school. So that's the priority will be the new arrivals.

The assumption made by this official, true to functionalist idealism, is that once refugees have been connected with services and enough time has elapsed, the refugee will be on her way to self-sufficiency. The problem is that not all respondents arrive equally prepared to integrate into the US economy and culture. For some, like Gilbert, the mandate is sufficient. He arrived in the US having spent time in Zimbabwe, where he picked up the national language of English. As a young male in his early twenties with language skills, he was able to find a job in two weeks. His evaluation of his resettlement agency is quite positive.

I didn't know nothing about it that they say they buy me a bed, they buy from me plates, whatever. And then I said, all right, thank you. I just appreciate it because I

\(^2\) The mandate is for 60 months or until the refugee (family) reaches durable self-sufficiency, defined as a household income at or above 450% of the Federal Poverty Line, a level called durable self-sufficiency. Importantly, this measure is tied solely to income level and no other measure of self-sufficiency. This is the only reference to a definition of self-sufficiency in Massachusetts refugee resettlement materials.
came here and I didn't even have nothing. I appreciate it for what they did to me. And then the people they were saying they're supposed to give you money each and every month. And I said the best thing is what they did to take me from where I was, where life was bad for me and bring it over here...

Most refugees, however, did not have as easy of a time integrating, and found themselves in need of support well beyond the mandate of the resettlement agencies. Several reported confusion or dissatisfaction when the service stopped, in some cases abruptly.

Because that's my caseworker. He, I don't know. He stopped not working. Not only that, people when we came here, because when we were in camp they told us a lot of things that when you go there they can give you money to welcome in the America. But when we came here, we didn't receive any amount of money....

While Jean-Claude’s response may appear to mean that he received no money whatsoever, he later clarified by explaining that the funds were insufficient to meet his needs. This was a common response among the refugees I interviewed. In particular, high rent, even when halved by placing two refugees to a bedroom, drained the checks they received and made survival difficult. Even the transition from cash assistance to wages from employment represents a challenge for some refugees, and blame is assigned to the resettlement agencies. Petier was resettled by International Institute of New England (IIINE), which is commonly referred to by its former initials “IIB” (for International Institute of Boston). He scoffed at the first job he was offered by IIB. “IIB—the job they are giving people, they cannot sustain me,” he said. He noted his expenses, both in the US, paying for the three-bedroom apartment he shared with five other refugees, and at home, paying for the education of his four daughters. “11 dollars? I cannot! My first job in America, Eric got me that job. $13.50.” Later in the interview, he became even more critical of “IIB”:

If there is some organization, they hold their people like this (crosses arms across chest). But IIB when you are here, they just (flings open arms). Fight on your own. Yes, I can fight on my own. What they offer you is worthless job. They
should consider first intellectual capacity of someone. Me, I am learned. I am not a bogus. You cannot give me any any any job. I have no language barrier.

Petier articulates underemployment of refugees, which is a common struggle for former white-collar professionals whose qualifications are meaningless in the receiving country. Several refugees noted that the money they brought in was insufficient to cover expenses, blaming the resettlement agency for directing them to low-paying jobs. In reality, though, due to the pressures of the global economy, there are likely few jobs available for refugees in the Boston area that pay better.

Alice was particularly critical of her resettlement agency, Catholic Charities. “And then I came here, and Catholic Charities welcomed us. Not good. It was not good.” She shook her head vigorously, closing her eyes slightly. She recounted her time in a hotel as she waited for her house to be available. She was brought American foods for which she had no appetite, while being offered no money whatsoever. “They left us for two months—one month, or even two months—without even one dollar to wash clothes.” The tone that carried her French transformed from bemused wonder to outrage as she described the next challenge: the house to which she was brought.

After leaving there for Lynn, we were put ten to an apartment. Only one toilet. Just like when I came here. We were nine people. But there was only one toilet. Only one toilet!

As she described the problems her elderly, incontinent roommate created for the other inhabitants of the house, it became clear that her resentment stemmed from an inability to keep the space hygienic and safe. A fellow refugee who lived in the home would clean urine off the floor and wash her clothes. “She’s like my mother,” he said, according to Patricia.

The economic solution devised by resettlement agencies—to pair refugees two to a room in order to lower the per capita cost of soaring rent prices—has created a number of conflicts for
the refugees. Viviane explained to me that an increasing amount of her time is being spent resolving issues between roommates. “It really is unfortunate. We are seeing a lot of fighting between roommates.” In some cases, disagreements escalate to violence. “The roommate, we had two roommates who—one came up with a knife. And I was surprised it was considered as domestic violence.”

When I interviewed him, Petier had taken to sleeping in the living room of his tiny, two-bedroom apartment. He shared the space with three Eritrean refugees, who speak a different language and, according to Petier, have irreconcilably different customs.

You know, mixing people, mixing people with other people and that… other people they came, you know? You cannot mix someone who came from the city center and someone who came from the village. It can’t be. It’s like oil and water. You get my point? Yes. People are dirty, man. Noisy! Because they don’t know but it’s not their fault because where they brought up back home in the village. But somebody brought in the city center, he gets it. He’s civilized upstairs. You see? I say no, the guy is sleeping let me not make noise. Let me be like this. But a villager? You make noise because low level of education also matters. But just persevering, let me work hard to save something to get my own house. Eh, see the challenges?

Throughout the post-resettlement process, the practices of resettlement agencies create stresses that are passed down the line to refugees and post-resettlement RCOs. The practice of resettling individual cases and housing those refugees together may increase the likelihood of economic success for refugee populations by decreasing their expenses. But the low wages earned in the jobs that agencies are able to secure for refugees make life difficult to sustain. While these refugees may count in reports as self-sufficient, the CDC has to provide material assistance for the basic rights of food or the technology necessary to keep in contact with family. The refugees have to provide unpaid labor—like cleaning up after incontinent housemates—to ensure that they can remain healthy and safe. The different treatments of mandates by resettlement and post-resettlement agencies speaks to divergent focuses. The resettlement
agency, focused on the level of the individual, establishes organizational priorities for new refugees to ensure that their performance can justify new cases. The post-resettlement agency, focused on the level of the community, extends both the timeline and the scope of the mandate to include services not dictated by the state, provided over a longer time horizon.

Resettlement agencies are tasked with the impossible: given minimal funding to resettle refugees in a high-cost area, they are expected to create a productive workforce in a period of time that is too short with a population that is unlikely to succeed. The state puts unrealistic expectations on agencies to effect its employment objectives using a deeply flawed institutional and policy architecture. The agencies have made predictable adaptations to increase their chances of success. For the most privileged refugees, this system works well. Claude, a Congolese male in his twenties who speaks good English and has the capacity and stamina to advance in his full-time job, was able to leverage the system and achieve a relatively comfortable life in a matter of months.

But Black feminist thought reminds us that just as multiple coinciding axes of privilege foreshadow success, the structural disadvantages of society disproportionately impact those who occupy and embody identities of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality affirms that the combination of identities each individual simultaneously possesses, signifying varying levels of systemic privilege or oppression, cannot be separated from other aspects of the self. Each layer of identity is imbricated upon others to determine a person’s ability to access privilege or leverage structures (Crenshaw 1991). Alice, for example, is a septuagenarian Congolese woman who speaks no English. Her various disabilities limit her mobility in Lynn, which is an inaccessible city. She feels the effects of resettlement agency policy acutely because the system is not designed to benefit women, non-English speakers, the
elderly, and persons with disabilities, all of which she embodies simultaneously in every interaction with state and resettlement officials. From the perspective of the state, such persons are more likely to be a “public charge.” As a result, Claude is hailed as a success story, while Alice’s humanity is continually contested, if not outright denied, by a structure that renders her invisible and extraneous.

The answer to the question that initiated this line of inquiry is clear: refugees like Placide would have a much more difficult time surviving without the CDC performing the un(der)paid, unheralded, and often unrecognized labor of correcting the deleterious consequences of resettlement policy. Yet there are a number of effects that have not been addressed. This leads to the second question: how would the CDC survive without refugees like Placide?

“I walk by myself”: Isolation and Community Fragmentation

Nearly every time I visited Alice, she would, at some point, pull out her phone, open WhatsApp, and scroll through pictures of her daughter, her son, her grandchildren. “It was this one’s birthday,” she would say, or, “This one is named Alice after me.” A wistful smile would spread across her face. I am very fond of Alice. She had a charming, sparkling humor that matched the twinkle in her eye, a joviality that lightened our interactions. Her emotions lived just beneath the surface of her expressive face.

The isolation Alice has experienced in the US has been intense. After her resettlement agency closed her case to prioritize new arrivals, she was left with minimal human contact for weeks. The arthritis that limited her movement and the
diabetes that affected her health worsened, and her situation became increasingly dire.

I stayed at my house from the 1st until the 30th without speaking to anyone like this. I was alone in bed. If I got up, I sat down over there. I bathed, I rested, if I had to cook I would cook, if I didn’t cook I would rest, always in my bedroom like this. From the 1st to the 30th I didn’t even go outside. If I went outside, I would walk a little like this by myself. I would always return here because when you don’t know the language, where will you go? If I go like that, I will come back quickly. Back home I would walk a bit and it would cause me a bit of pain, but nothing like now. Not even with a cane. I walk by myself like that. I walk by myself.

She told me her head had begun to bother her when she arrived—she thought too much of home. Before she was diagnosed with a benign brain tumor, she attributed the head pain to the stress of separation from her loved ones.

Unsurprisingly, after spending a month mostly alone with her health deteriorating, she ended up in the hospital. After a brief stay, her doctors assigned a team to monitor her; they deemed her suicidal.

She sighed. “Moi, je suis comme prisonnier,” she said: I am like a prisoner.

I stayed alone. Every month—one month, two months, three months—alone! No. And when I went to the hospital, Betty [the home health aide] started to come, and Viviane, too. And the nurse, and the doctor who came here. At night, the woman who worked here started just to talk with me. And so it went like that. My head started to hurt and lost function little by little. It was hurting me each and every day. But who could I tell? Who am I going to tell? I was alone. I was alone.

Now, I met Betty. It’s Betty who was the first one to come here and then, and then the other one who followed her. They stayed here together. We started to chat, we started to talk, until she brought an interpreter—she speaks in English, and me, I speak in Lingala. With the interpreter it has been good, up to now.

She paused. Her eyes began to water before she broke down into sobs.
Mais j'ai besoin de mes enfants. I need my children. (Cries) Because I'm always alone! I am always alone. Like [the volunteer], she comes twice a week. I am always alone. If you want to see Viviane, you call her. If you don't call, she is over there. I have sent for her. Stay in there herself. Viviane works. If she doesn't have work, I am always alone.

As can likely be expected from a system that resettles mostly individuals and fractures traditional kinship units that organize human life, the experience of isolation for Congolese refugees in the North Shore is widespread.

Participants provide a number of factors that contribute to their feelings of isolation and loneliness. First, the need to work long hours to meet the cost of living in the North Shore creates a culture of “busyness” that stymies the development of social bonds and community formation. The inability to organize socially is particularly damaging for those separated from their families. Second, inadequate language learning programming both prevents refugees from connecting with those who do not speak Congolese languages and makes independence and autonomy difficult. Both of these factors will be unpacked in further detail.

*The Business of Busyness*

*Gilbert scheduled our interview in the two hour break between his full-time jobs. He arrived in a bomber jacket, a Chicago Bulls fitted cap, and clean sneakers. His English was excellent; he credited his education to both the time he spent in Zimbabwe (and the woman he married there) and his consumption of American music. 50 Cent, he reported, had long been his favorite rapper.*

*Gilbert cast a leonine gaze, resolute and unflinching, that matched his strong presence. He reflected on his past with a frankness bordering on rehearsed emotionlessness, procedurally describing the escape from his home, where his*
mother was being raped and his father was staring down the barrel of a pistol. He found an opportunity to slip through the door and he ran. He kept running when he heard two gunshots. He didn't dare turn around to look.

“I think way too much,” he said. “That's why I've got two full-time jobs.”

For Gilbert, overemployment is not just an emotional coping mechanism—it is the only way to achieve his desire to buy a trip back to Africa once he gets his green card.

I have to work so hard to get the money. Then I have to know what exactly is my departing time where my parents are. Are they still alive? Yes or no? If I find out, that's OK. Without that, I'll never have peace. See if they've already passed away. I will see. I'll see their grave and that's my life. I have to work hard and get my paper and try to make a visit one day to see if they're still alive or not.

*His steely composure ruptured as he dissolved into deep sobs. He lifted a hand to cover his face. The cries erupted from his chest.*

It has been Gilbert's dream to come to the US since he was a child. Initially dissatisfied with his new life in Boston, he crafted a different ambition: he decided to chase his American dream. “[B]y the time I came over here,” he said, “I realized that the American dream is to make people pay your bills. If you make some people pay your bills, that’s the American dream. If you're paying your bills by yourself, that is not the American dream. You're kidding yourself.”

*He sleeps four hours a day, he said, or maybe five on a good day. But he is determined to achieve a life of comfort and wealth.*

I have to live the way I want. Not like, not like living the life like it doesn't work. I'm working. I'm going to spend money. I don't spend my money. I saved my money. I don't go out. I don't even have a friend in Boston. My friend is my job. … I always say that I live with our family no more so—so it's God first. Money is second. Yeah. God. Money. That's it.
Gilbert’s assertion that he has no friends in Boston is framed as a product of his intense work schedule. A number of refugees attribute their lack of social bonds to the need to work. Forced to work long hours to meet basic needs, refugees experience strain that is transferred to their social and communal livelihoods. Frederic explicitly connected community isolation to a capitalist mode of production:

We're so busy. This is killing us. We have to work. We have to find two jobs. Yes. I understand that these people have two jobs, that people that have three jobs, but they know the notion of the family. They know the notion of to have a community is better, but you cannot force them…. [W]e all hide behind the American system: capitalism.

As noted in Chapter One, the division of labor leads not only to the fragmentation of a workforce, but a fracturing of society. The adage that time is money acquires new salience for low-wage earning refugees with high expenses; respondents report pressure to devote a larger share of their time to productive labor and less to developing social bonds. As hours are exchanged for capital, the time spent on social interaction vanishes.

Pierre Jalée explains that the laborer in a capitalist system, separated from the means of subsistence necessary for survival, commodifies her time for sale in a market in order to afford that which is necessary to live (Jalée 1977: 22-24). In a high cost of living context like the North Shore suburbs of Boston, the refugee faces one of two options. The first—seek high-wage employment and devote a relatively small number of hours to labor—is an impossibility in the short-term for all refugees. Even the highest-skilled of entrants have qualifications that are not recognized by the hostland society. This option is perhaps accessible in the medium/long run only to the most privileged refugees, whose combination of productive capacity, linguistic competence, and personal sacrifice enable them to eventually climb an unlikely ladder and reach
self-advancement. This is the goal of Gilbert. The second, more likely option available to refugees is to seek low-wage labor and commodify an even larger portion of time to additional employment by taking on another job. Working “two jobs” is central to the responses of both Gilbert and Frederic. The ability to seek a second job also represents a form of privilege, allocated along divisions of gender.

Marthe, a working mother of six children, was under the impression that there were not many Congolese in the community:

They are there, but they are not many.

Q: Do you spend time with other people in the community?
Only in the school, but to walk around—I don’t have time because I work.

It should be expected that women describe themselves as having little free time. Due to a division of household labor at the family level and cultural gender norms, women are expected to provide the additional unpaid labor associated with child-rearing. Hochschild and Machung (1989) introduced the term “second shift” to account for the housework, childcare, and familial labor expected of working mothers upon returning home from their job. Among first generation immigrants, research suggests that gender inequities in terms of household labor remains higher than native populations and later generations of migrants (Hwang 2016). Women’s time, sold as labor, is valued less when sold on the open market. They also have less time to sell, as household and familial duties disproportionately fall to the immigrant woman. Thus, though time is money, women are less able to convert their time into productive capital, but remain “busy.”

Busyness is a key to refugee survival. As used by refugees, it represents a coded response that encapsulates the need to commodify labor, exploitation by gendered economic systems, aspirations for a better life, and the subordination of social priorities for the sake of economic advancement. Social and communal bonds are sacrificed at the altar of the wage economy.
The result of busyness is social isolation. By social isolation, I mean the condition and experience that results from being apart from a social unit. The clearest evidence of isolation is the variation in responses regarding the size of the community. Isolated refugees, like Marthe above, were under the impression that there were very few Congolese peoples live in the region. Jean-Claude echoed this sentiment, while suggesting that the community was less active than the one he experienced in refugee camps.

I don't know a lot of Congolese here in Lynn. No. Yeah, I know only the friend here who was my friend in school here. Yeah. I don't know anything I—like because when I was in Zambia and camp, that was making like a community, a group like boys like you, like when you find a program we can help you and me. I couldn't have a program. You could have been like that, but here in Lynn I didn't see that.

The refugee community in the camp is linked with access to opportunity structures. In Lynn, the ability to share knowledge of opportunities with a community is foreclosed because Jean-Claude does not know enough Congolese people to create a similar community.

The most extreme response regarding the size of the community came from Patricia. A translator relayed her message: “Because the only Congolese here are like Eric and her wife, no one else. Because like whatever her problems, she goes to Eric, Eric with her problems and he helps her.” I was quite surprised, having met scores—if not hundreds—of Congolese immigrants during my time in Lynn. She pointed to the upstairs of her home.

“There’s others up there,” the translator said. Earlier, she had mentioned the group of single men who lived on the upper level of her small duplex. She never went up there though as a single woman—mingling with unmarried men was not something to do in her culture, she explained. “The only Congolese people she knows here they’re solely above. There not a lot of them.”
How is it that some people can integrate into a Congolese community in Lynn while others do not even know it exists? I asked Frederic about whether the Congolese community is strong for newcomers.

I would like that, but strong, strong. I can be honest with you. No. I can be honest with you. Now when I say that, it’s because I see because population that I see in CDC, I don't see them in the community. That I know they are not. And then that's hurtful because for me, when they say that the Congolese community, that means anybody who came with that label of Congolese, he has to be known or yes and no the community, but people that I see in CDC, some of them are focused that—they don't know if there's a community here. They don't know these people, they don't know that they can go to people to talk to….

When you look in the CDC, the charts there, you can see that there are a lot who are refugee, Congolese, but when I go now to the church or when I go to the community who used to, who has been here for a long time, but I don't see the new-coming in those areas. The new-coming who have been known are the ones who have been come. They say that they didn't come as a refugee. They come as an asylum or they come for school or this kind of stuff. Those are the more norms, but when you see kind of like a refugee, they still be in their corner. That's why I'm saying that.

According to Frederic, being a client of the CDC makes it likely that a refugee will not be a part of the community. Frederic appears to articulate a difference between refugees and the ones who “have been come”—the established community of migrants that arrived decades ago.

By stating that there are differences between refugees and asylum seekers, it appears that Frederic’s analysis of the established community presents a division that keeps the “new-coming” refugees separate. Unfortunately, because I limited my interview population to refugees, my data fails to answer the question of why refugees are not integrated into the established Congolese community.

The evidence suggests quite clearly, though, that the CDC has not successfully advocated for the integration of refugees into a broader community. Whether or not there have been efforts to connect refugees to the community is not particularly clear. The second item of the
organization’s mission statement would suggest that the development of a Congolese community, presumably comprising both newly arrived refugees and established Congolese immigrants, is central to the organization’s practice: “Strengthen the Congolese community by promoting mutual assistance, increasing their capacity to serve their local communities” (Congolese Development Center 2018). Yet the responses of participants suggests not only that such a community does not serve the needs of refugees, but there are questions as to whether a coherent community of Congolese immigrants even exists. Jean-Claude described to me a feeling of helplessness and confusion in seeking direction.

Where can I go? Where I can have a problem, I run this way, I can go somewhere and go like this to help. It’s not like money, to be money. No. Just advice. No someone giving me advice. No. Maybe do like this, like this. It’d be like this. So that’s why I want to help from some, from you advise me how I can take care of my family. I can take care of myself and—and all of my things. I am all alone if no one but myself here. No family. I have no one like this.

More than a request for assistance, Jean-Claude suggests that the inability to solve his problems stems from a lack of co-present family. He expresses not only a desire to solve his problems, but also a need to no longer be alone. By evoking the image of a Congolese family, he hearkens an expansive and central social unit that is key to Congolese life. African scholars like Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1984) note that extended kinship is central to the African family. Participants in my research reiterated this point, connecting it with the specific example of the Congo. Alice said:

But us, we are Africans. With Africans, it’s always a family matter. If you are in the family, you marry. The wife takes care of the whole family. If you have a father, mother, you wife stays with your parents and takes care of your mother, father, and brothers. You eat together. You see? …In Africa, it’s the family. It’s the aunts, the uncles, mothers, fathers, grandfather, grandmother—all are family.

The link between a large, extended family and an assertion of African identity reveals why the fragmentation of the family in individual resettlement can be so pernicious, and why
experiences of isolation can be so acute. The sense of familial duty—of taking care of kin—creates a social function for this kinship unit, linking Alice’s expression of isolation with Jean-Claude’s desire for a social network to help address his problems. The concept of Congolese family is echoed by Frederic.

[Y]ou have to understand in African culture, it's not only you, your wife and your kid or you and your mother. Now you have cousins, you have an uncle, you have a—all these, these people. That's African culture. When they said in the family, that's your family because it's not only the one who you sent here with them, but all these people you know.

The wide family structure from which Congolese refugees are alienated creates a need for community and social belonging. This social need is not currently being met, as respondents describe feeling alone and detached from a Congolese community. Even though the needs typically fulfilled by an immigrant social network are being met, the opportunity to seek assistance or social fulfillment from a community of Congolese immigrants does not fully exist.

*Language and Isolation*

In the story that opens this section, Alice notes that her physical mobility is limited by the inability to speak English. She asks, “[W]hen you don’t know the language, where will you go?” Her words speak to a larger question—perhaps an existential one—of the ability to discern direction and seek guidance in the absence of linguistic competence. Lacking fluency in the language of the hostland nation, the refugee experiences a smaller universe of individuals available to offer assistance who speak their same language. Clement recalls the initial difficulty of communicating before he became comfortable speaking some English:

The difficulty of language is for someone to understand you. You have to try to find someone who can communicate in the same language as you, and then it becomes easy. But I don’t always know beforehand. There are things I am looking for, but because when you don’t know the language it becomes difficult.
According to Clément’s response, communication as a temporal exchange occasionally extends well beyond verbal articulation. There is a need to prepare for interactions by searching for translators and activating social networks for any task requiring communication. For Clement and many refugees, the CDC fills this need. Through translation, the institution’s resources can connect refugees to resources.

But language plays a more important role than simply connecting refugees to resources. Researchers have demonstrated that communities which lack sufficient language support experience social isolation (Allen 2007). Studies of Sudanese refugee women suggest that the language instruction offered to refugees does not equip them to engage their surroundings or environment (Warriner 2007). The combined effect of these two findings compound in the North Shore, where language instruction consists of English for Employment (EFE) rather than full English as a Second Language (ESL) programming. English, the dominant language, is presented as a productive force of human capital rather than a necessary component of human life.

Challenging the dominant conception of language as a tool primarily useful for economic integration, a team of researchers led by Stephanie Nawyn found that the primary concern for many refugees were factors like an inability to access information, the exacerbation of social isolation, and anxiety about navigating structures and formal procedures without being able to adequately understand them (Nawyn et al 2012). The refugees in Nawyn’s study lacked access to an ethnic community-based post-resettlement organization like the CDC, so the solution to these challenges was often to locate bilingual co-nationals, who themselves lacked resources, to assist with translation as problems arose.
While the Congolese refugees in Lynn expressed difficulties with English in terms of access to employment, the economic concerns were secondary to social and procedural concerns. Patricia, speaking through an interpreter, believes that her inability to speak English may limit her ability to make friends.

Maybe it’s because she doesn’t speak English. Because like even if she tried to make friends, they wouldn’t be speaking the same language so it would be hard. You wouldn’t be understanding each other.

Patricia suggests that her network of social contacts is decreased because the number of people with whom she can communicate is relatively small. Through the translation services it provides, the CDC offers an avenue for knowledge sharing and navigating many of the complex procedures that are central to refugee life, including family reunification, public benefit assistance, and vital documents received through the mail. In describing the linguistic and procedural assistance the CDC offers, the emphasis was placed on paper and documentary forms.

I will use the term “documentary civic society” to describe the use of paper and documents to mete out privileges and benefits from the state. Paper became a symbol that represents potential access and encapsulated the anxiety of a powerful, unforgiving state. In some ways, the documentary procedures that characterize American life, transmitted through paper documents, create dependency on the CDC. The CDC decodes the document, describes the procedure, and directs action. Consider this statement from Alice:

If I have something, I call her [Viviane]. If there are letters, I call her, “Come here to read this. What does it say?” If she comes to see, she says it says this, this, and that.

Alice clearly understands that letters often require prompt action, particularly for refugees who receive government communications through the mail. It is the role of the CDC to demystify the processes that are contained within the various papers and render them legible for
clients. Placide, the elderly refugee who was denied SSI benefits, would come to the CDC office nearly every day with a stack of envelopes to be reviewed by Papa Eric. He grew very upset on several occasions when a roommate took his mail from the mailbox and never passed it along to its intended recipient.

In addition to maintaining the power to decode papers and documents, the CDC also has the expertise to initiate complex procedures centered around paper. For processes like family reunification, in particular, the paperwork is incredibly complex and specific. Procedures must be carefully followed. Gilbert mentioned the centrality of the CDC in his attempts to reconnect with his wife. “I found Papa Eric, who is the one who helped me to do all the paperwork,” he said. “He always—all of it's done for me.” By doing the work for Gilbert, Eric exercises his expertise to accomplish the goal of family reunification without sharing knowledge of the process with him.

Paper, as the vessel for official state communications, assumes an authority that refugees recognize, but that some cannot discern. By positioning itself as the central point of contact for both translation and the technical expertise to direct clients, the CDC fills a critical need of the community, created, in part, by the decision of resettlement agencies to teach language through EFE programming. The centralized model of service provision leads the CDC to accumulate technical expertise, leading to two effects. First, this division of labor allows for specialization and the refinement of expertise. The CDC, in short, becomes better at its job. Second, the community becomes dependent on the institution. If technical knowledge and translation services were distributed throughout the community—meaning if the institution did not position itself as the sole point of reference for the decoding of documentary civic life—then the community
could draw upon and develop its own resources, skills, and knowledges to address its problems outside of the CDC.

Such an approach would mean shifting (or redistributing) the burden to the community, which presents new problems. The community would not be compensated for this additional labor, while the CDC receives public and private funding dedicated to these purposes. Additionally, it is not clear whether the community is capable of successfully providing advice and services for a complex regime of paperwork. Nevertheless, engaging the extant community more would serve an important social function: connecting refugees with one another, and achieving a Congolese refugee community—a group of people connected through a common bond. Perhaps language offers the opportunity to develop a network of bilingual co-nationals that create links between newly arrived refugees and the larger community.

But the necessity of learning the dominant language proves both the centrality of language to the national project, and the failure of thinking about refugee resettlement in terms of integration. Integration—the valuing of both minority and majority cultures in a coexistent, multi-ethnic society—would require work on the part of the dominant culture to create a society that values and incorporates minority languages and makes it possible to survive without linguistic intermediaries. That is not the world respondents describe, or that I experienced as a researcher. The reality is a society that makes half-hearted attempts at minority language acknowledgment. The clearest examples are signs at hospitals with instructions written in dozens of languages that direct non-English speakers to access translation. But the refugees and the hospital staff reported frustration with the translation network, which often led to a search for alternatives (including co-present translators) or, more troublingly, a decrease in the amount of
information communicated to non-English speakers. Recognizing that the conditions for integration do not exist, refugees instead report a desire for linguistic assimilation.

For Black peoples in white-dominant societies, language is exercised as a nationalistic tool that erases history and experiences of oppression. In articulating his disdain for America, Frederic links the English language to the national project of colonialism and imperialism. “Myself, I never liked English because it was like, I had a conception as a student: they're the one who is making so many nations unpeaceful.” When he was young, Frederic’s teacher would ask him questions in English. He would respond in French.

Frederic’s rejection of English stems from its association with the (neo)colonial legacies of violence and oppression of English-speaking states. His response evokes Jamaica Kincaid’s writing on language and its association with national consciousness. She captures the violence of Western language as a homogenizing tool, particularly when imposed as a standard for Black peoples.

For isn’t it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal’s deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal’s point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me. (Kincaid 1997: 32)

Frantz Fanon similarly linked the use of language to the personal experience of nationalism, equating the deployment of linguistic knowledge to an endorsement of the cultural values of a civilization “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (Fanon [1952] 2008: 8).
The expectation of linguistic assimilation imposed upon Congolese refugees expands upon an American history on the use of language to assign alterity to Black peoples. Michelle M. Wright, writing on the American creation of Black identity, asserts that the use of language was central in the creation of a nation from abstract ideas. She positions logos and language at the center of the composition of the American nation, and restricts citizenship only to those who have access to it.

Logos, therefore, directed and represented the *reality* of the American nation, further suggesting that only those who had access to this logos—those who were literate—could direct and represent the nation. Although the literacy level among the white population was low, the *idea* of a literate Negro was itself fantastical, as only the former were associated with the spoken and written language, and it was language that composed the nation. (emphasis in original, Wright 2004: 55)

Wright goes on to note that Thomas Jefferson, the wealthy plantation owner turned president who espoused some of the most foundational theories of American racism, frames the Negro as a non-literate, inferior corporeal entity that could not transcend the limits of his own flesh to achieve the rationality necessary for language, logos, or, consequently, membership in the American nation.

In (re)producing Blackness as a physical aberration and whiteness as a coloring that signifies an ability to transform words into deeds, Jefferson hoped to sidestep a point made over and over again by antislavery factions: the fact that the Negro possesses all the characteristics ascribed to humans and therefore could be confused with no other species. Jefferson allows for the Negro’s humanity in the vaguest sense but would never allow for his ability to become an American. Although he failed to convince others of the need for wholesale expatriation of Negroes, Jefferson was able to print indelibly on the white American mind this idea of the Negro as antithetical to the American nation. (Wright 2005: 64)

Language is central to the nation-building project in part because it is central in defining race, creating a subclass of persons whose oppression is justified and whose exclusion from American society is incontestable. Within the Congolese community, language operates as a tool that inherently positions the Black subject as the Other in the American system. It justifies the
exploitation and oppression of those who are excluded from, or are defined as antithetical to, the American nation. Documentary civic society and the paper on which it is printed serve as vessels that encapsulate the interwoven dynamics between language, alterity, race, and the nation-state. It is a major nexus of state power that is wielded against refugees, serving as barriers to basic needs from benefits to families and requiring intermediaries to decode.

African culture, in both kinship and linguistic practices, locates the Congolese refugee as a racialized other. The barriers erected to safeguard the public benefits of white societies and limit access replicate fears, internalized beneath the level of consciousness, of Black individuals consuming supposedly scarce resources, changing white culture, eroding white privilege, and fundamentally transforming society. The American resettlement project shows that integration into American society—the coexistence of multiple cultures—is impossible for Black refugees from the Congo. The state is designed to instead promote assimilation, the incorporation of refugees into a racialized subclass of humans for whom oppression and marginalization are justified, normalized, and expected.

**Conclusion**

The conditions and practices of refugee resettlement in the North Shore lead to a hyper-fractured Congolese community, positioning the CDC as a gatekeeper to institutional knowledge after the resettlement period. In its “civil societal” role of mediating the relationship between the individual refugees and the state, the CDC delivers cultural competence that refugees appreciate and prefer to the services provided by resettlement agencies. They cooperate with the state in connecting refugees to state services, while deviating beyond the explicit mandate of the state when the conventions of culture deem this most appropriate.
The ability to navigate, translate, and decode power through the symbol of paper, coupled with the lack of kinship- and community-based Gemeinschaft alternatives, centers the CDC in post-resettlement service provision. Just as refugees depend on the CDC to navigate the complex procedures that define their experience of American life, the CDC depends on a refugee community with consistent and steady needs for institutional survival. A cynic might suggest that the CDC, having a vested interest in a dependent community, intentionally separates refugees from the community and hoards expertise to maintain relevance. But I view the failures of the CDC as a subordination of the important to the urgent. Overburdened employees, responding to constant crises, lack the capacity to critically evaluate practices. Time constraints do not allow the institution to evaluate organizational behavior in these terms. But the result of the structures of global capitalism, hegemonic state power, and white supremacist ideology that both scaffold and permeate refugee resettlement and post-resettlement, combined with the choices of the agents who operate within them, lead to conditions that create a culture of mutual dependency between the refugees and post-resettlement agencies.

Each party to the organization—the refugees and the community organizations that exist to serve their needs—exploits the other as a social resource to survive. But the exploitation does not operate in the same way. For refugees, the exploitation comes as way of attaining fundamental human rights: money to pay for rent, the opportunity to be with one’s family, the security of healthcare, among many others. The CDC exploits refugees to ensure institutional survival. Ultimately, this reality safeguards resources that the refugee community desperately needs. At this current moment, the many benefits the CDC provides likely justify the exploitation necessary for its existence. Yet a question emerges: is the full provision of human rights
compatible with the coexistence of the CDC? Would the institution survive without a dependent clientele that required its services?

Simply because the CDC offers net positive services does not mean it should be spared such critical questioning. So long as there are people in need, the CDC will continue to offer a venue for assisting the refugees. But that does not mean that more sustainable, empowering alternatives should not be imagined. When Eric entered my office with Placide’s SSI rejection papers in hand, he held in his hands the key to survival for both Placide and the CDC. He held evidence of systemic racism and exploitation that both creates refugees and enacts barriers to prevent them from thriving. He held access to state power that could be selectively allocated to refugees. He held the privilege of institutional security, and separation from the crises that justify the existence of the CDC.

“What would he do without us?”

When the CDC asked me this question of Placide, the Placides asked me this question of the CDC.
Conclusion
Refugee resettlement in the United States is a flawed system that exerts excessive pressure on all aspects of the resettlement regime. The demands of the conditional funding apparatus established by the government force resettlement agencies to compete for refugees, leading them to change both the populations they resettle and the ways resources are allocated to clients. The preference for single male cases, the most employable clientele of resettlement agencies, is reflected in the cases designated for resettlement in the North Shore and is internalized by refugees in the pre-resettlement process. Those refugees who report having no family to be resettled along with them are sent to refugee-receiving countries without kinship networks. Husbands and fathers who misrepresent their familial relations in an attempt to appear “single” are separated from their families. They face the added stress of supporting wives and children while struggling with separation from them.

Additionally, the imperative placed on employment leads resettlement agencies, facing the strains of limited funding and scarce resources, to devote their efforts to maximizing the employability of their clients. While this approach supports the hazy economic goal of self-sufficiency, defined at the level of implementation by street-level practitioners, it comes at the cost of developing certain cultural competencies that are necessary for full social integration. Many of the failures that result from the decisions of and the pressures placed upon resettlement agencies are passed along to post-resettlement organizations like the Congolese Development Center (CDC). The CDC offers culturally appropriate and, according to participants, superior service provision that is desperately needed by the community. While the CDC provides vital functions for the community by serving as a centralized point of access for post-resettlement resources, the organization does not address the social isolation and loneliness that respondents identify as central to their experience of life in the US.
It is undeniable that Congolese refugees experience subjugation and oppression resulting from their location in society. The community is not to be blamed for the difficulties they face, nor are they expected to be solely responsible for the amelioration of these oppressions. Deviating from the intellectual tradition of blaming marginalized individuals and communities for the oppressions they experience, my research locates inequality not in the failures of refugees, resettlement agencies, or post-resettlement organizations, but in the overarching structures of society. The practice of pathologizing marginalized communities and individuals, tied with conceptions of race and gender that are central to an exploitative economy, exacerbates the challenges faced by Congolese refugees attempting to integrate into American society. Entering US society embodying Blackness subjects Congolese refugees to a position of systematic exclusion that limits opportunities and positions the Black body outside of American citizenship, exposing the fallacy of integration and revealing assimilation as the central (if unspoken) objective of refugee resettlement. The structures that shape the subjugation of Congolese refugees are not determinative; they do not presume a monolithic experience of oppression and exploitation imposed upon this marginalized population. Rather, the structures of society shape spaces of both resistance and compliance that contribute to the specific oppressions experienced by the community.

The CDC, like all RCOs, is positioned in relation to larger structures of economics, governance, and society. Focusing solely on the functions these organizations fulfill, as much scholarship on RCOs does, ignores the variables that impact the ways RCOs relate to clients, respond to pressures, and address structural inequalities. Functionalist analyses have failed to adequately account for global and national structures that determine the operations of institutions. The underlying presumption of functionalism—that social organizations will emerge
to address underlying needs—must be critically examined and perhaps inverted. Soysal asserts that “the organizing principles and incorporation styles of the host polity are crucial variables in accounting for the emerging organizational patterns of migrants” (Soysal 1994: 85-6). It is both the needs of the community and the structures of society that determine what organizations will look like, whom they will serve, and, ultimately, how they will function.

The functions of the CDC have shifted to accommodate massive changes in the composition of the Congolese community being resettled into the North Shore. These changes are catalyzed by a global economy of neoliberal governance that exerts pressures on refugees and the agencies that resettle them. The emphasis of service provision for resettlement agencies has been placed on providing material support to encourage economic self-sufficiency. But the inability to address many of the needs that refugees face push issues down the service chain to post-resettlement agencies. In correcting the problems of resettlement, the CDC is forced to choose between addressing what Martha Nussbaum (2003: 39) calls the “first-generation rights” of political and civil liberties, or the “second-generation rights” of social and economic rights.

While it is helpful to think of certain rights as more central to the resettlement project of human development than others, the division between generational rights articulated by Nussbaum requires tailoring. In particular, separating political rights from economic rights ignores the intertwined experience of structural forces that define governance in the neoliberal age. The reality, as David Harvey (2005) notes, is that neoliberalism has led to the unification of the economic and political spheres. Pierre Bourdieu writes about the conflation of economics and politics, and the effect on social agents caught within this consolidation of power:

[T]he unification of the economic field tends…to hurl all social agents into an economic game for which they are not equally prepared and equipped, culturally and economically. It tends by the same token to submit them to standards objectively imposed by competition from more efficient productive forces and
modes of production….In short, unification benefits the dominant. (emphasis in original, Bourdieu 2003: 93, cited in Calhoun 2006)

In 1944, Karl Polanyi presciently wrote, “To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment…would result in the demolition of society” (Polanyi [1944] 2001: 76). Within refugee resettlement, the market has determined not only how the Congolese community organizes and which resources it is able to access, but also who gets to be included in the resettled refugee community. The human rights of refugees that relate to their ability to define and create a social community have been either largely unaccounted for or entirely neglected. The Congolese community, assembled by various market mechanisms that privilege the individual over the community and create conditions of economic fundamentalism, provides an unfortunately fertile soil to witness, on a small scale, the demolition of society that Polanyi predicted.

The trend of neoliberalism leads to the erosion of national sovereignty through multilateral trade agreements, international economic institutions, and the proliferation of multinational corporations that exert outsize influence on states (Harvey 2005; Prashad 2008). Inequality soars as the economic gains of trade liberalization are concentrated among a transnational capitalist class, leading to an experience of economic stagnation for all other segments of the population. In the US, as politicians reassert the importance of the nation-state in populist nationalism, this economic stagnation is blamed, in part, on vilified migrants, who are defined by their cultural unassimilability, their economic incompetence, their voracious consumption of public benefits, and their willingness to compete with (and “undercut” by accepting less favorable terms than) white workers in the labor market. While such narratives ignore evidence of the economic benefit of immigrants, they prey upon, exacerbate, and create racial narratives of inferiority that assign alterity to migrants. A supposed competition for scarce
economic resources, framed as a battle between native and foreign populations, leads to the revival of xenophobic nationalist narratives that re-inscribe membership to the American state along increasingly salient ethno-racial lines.

In the United States, the Trump administration has weaponized the legitimate use of physical force granted to the state (Weber [1919] 1965) to police migration by emphasizing law and order, expanding deportation, restricting asylum claims, targeting the long-standing policy of family reunification, and advocating for the creation of a physical wall along the land border between the US and Mexico (Bloemraad and de Graauw 2017). Trump’s policies may curb “voluntary” migration to some degree, but they cannot stop the many social processes that lead peoples to travel across borders and enter into the United States in ways that are viewed as both legal and illegal. Refugees, however, represent a different case entirely. Unlike other pathways of migration, the executive branch of the US government, currently led by anti-immigrant extremist Donald Trump, can essentially halt all intakes of refugees.

While the figures have been presented elsewhere in this project, the specific details bear repeating. The administration proposed resettling 45,000 refugees for fiscal year (FY) 2018, the lowest number since the formal refugee resettlement program began in 1980 (USRAP 2017). Based on the first six months of resettlement data for FY 2018, the administration is on track to resettle 21,096 refugees for the year—less than half of the record-low projection (Refugee Processing Center 2018). Non-white refugees are disproportionately affected by Trump administration policies. The Trump administration ensured that the US fell far short of the FY 2017 ceiling of 110,000 refugees set by the Obama administration, resettling only 53,716 refugees total (Refugee Processing Center 2017). Table 1 shows that while refugees from non-white regions fell far short of projected totals set by the Obama administration, white refugees
from Europe resettled by the Trump administration actually exceeded the ceiling established by Obama (see figure 1). Trump, and other anti-immigrant white nationalists in government, can effectuate preferences for white migrants in refugee resettlement precisely because the entire domestic resettlement regime is under the purview of the administrative branch, without any substantive checks on the authority of the president to determine which or how many refugees are resettled.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>FY 2017 Projected Ceiling</th>
<th>FY 2017 Actual Number Resettled</th>
<th>Difference from Projection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>20,232</td>
<td>-14,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>5,173</td>
<td>-6,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>1,688</td>
<td>-3,312</td>
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<td>Caribbean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Near East/South Asia</td>
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<td>Europe</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>5,205</td>
<td>+1,205</td>
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</table>


Table 1—Comparison between projected ceiling of refugees and actual number of refugees resettled for fiscal year 2017.
Because resettlement funding is tied directly to the number of refugees resettled, the money made available for refugee resettlement declines in proportion to the decrease in refugee admissions. By starving the resettlement apparatus of refugees, the Trump administration could inflict long-term (if not permanent) damage to the capacity of the United States to resettle refugees in the future. Agencies that currently have well-trained, experienced staffs may be forced to lay off workers or shut down their operations entirely. If this occurs, even an administration that views refugees more favorably could have fewer private sector partners to accept cases for resettlement. Ultimately, this means that resettlement and post-resettlement agencies may not be able to provide adequate care to the communities they serve in the intermediate and long terms.

Eric Kamba, the Executive Director of the CDC, acknowledged the nature of the current policy environment when I asked him about his hopes for the future of his organization.

I’m just saying that we are trusted in the community, we have experience, and we like helping people. That’s what I’m saying is the mission for us. We are wishing for good conditions of work so that we can continue to provide services to the people we serve to help our community. So I wish that in terms of navigating the politics, we are going to have a good immigration policy, maybe 5 years from now or 8 years from now that would allow community-based organizations or small community-based organizations to be here, to help refugees.

While Eric foregrounds policy concerns, it is obvious that the CDC will not allow an unfavorable administration to prevent them from serving the community. With policy and public discourse changing so drastically, the future demands changes of the CDC. The refugee community will not continue to expand as it has in years past, meaning that fewer clients will need the services offered by the CDC. Additionally, many of the arenas in which the CDC has cultivated expertise, from family reunification applications to navigating processes associated
with migration, will cease to be relevant as some of the most important functions of the organization become targets of policy change.

There are two possibilities for the future of the CDC. The first is that the CDC adapts to the pressures of policy change to continue serving a similar role for the community, mediating the relationship between individual refugees and the state. By continuing to position itself as the gatekeeper to institutional and procedural knowledge, the vertical relations that link refugees and the CDC would be maintained. But this structure does not solve one of the principal challenges facing refugees: fragmentation, isolation, and a lack of social bonds. In fact, this vertical orientation leads refugees to see the CDC as the extent of the community, rather than as a part of a larger community of Congolese peoples. Clement, a male refugee, articulated a common response among participants, stating that a community does not exist beyond the walls of the CDC.

> When I think of the Congolese community—before, I didn’t know about them. When I talk about a Congolese community, I talk about this office. After I came here, that’s it. Before, I didn’t know anything.

> By maintaining its central position as a point of access for social capital among refugees, the CDC becomes a stand-in for the larger community. Prioritizing service delivery results in some positive outcomes for refugees, but a potentially myopic focus may ignore other human needs that are not addressed. There is a danger that clients of the CDC are defined by the serious problems that the organization addresses. In a lecture on asset-based community development, Cormac Russell explains the danger of a “client-service” relationship.

> So often when we label people as vulnerable, or as deficient, or as problematic, what we actually do is define them out of community, and redefine them, not as friend and as neighbor, but as client in a service system. And I think that when we do that we take some of the soul away from the person, all in the name of helping them. (Russell 2016)
Perhaps a better future for refugees would result from re-imagining the role of the CDC. If the CDC can decentralize its authority and distribute access more equitably throughout the existing Congolese population of the North Shore, it would create conditions more favorable for horizontal relations that encourage social bonds among Congolese co-nationals.

It is important to note that the CDC believes itself to play a central role in re-establishing social connections among the community. As Eric noted in his interview, by working on family reunification applications, the organization seeks to bring together families and address the principal source of loneliness and isolation among refugees.

Now, some of them people make friends or do not make friends, try to go to church, different churches… That does not replace—all of that, you could have those single individuals—they could be younger, they could be older, but that does not replace the family. We have petitioned for the family to come, and maybe the petition is denied, so that is another layer of problem when we see what they can do, what else they can do to help with that.

Eric’s response acknowledges the importance of family, but downplays the role of friendship, companionship, and social interaction. The CDC, with access to a number of refugees that could benefit from interactions with each other, is in the best position to facilitate the creation of a strong community. Guided by the tenets of Pan Africanism, this community must be grounded in the dignity and solidarity of Black peoples across ethnic, national, and linguistic identities.

But in appearing to place the onus on the CDC to forge community, I want to be careful not to replicate the practice of displacing the failures of migration governance and assigning it to the community organizations at the bottom of the chain. Community empowerment cannot be subsumed by hegemonic narratives that maintain focus on oppressed individuals or communities. It should not be incumbent on Black communities to correct the structural inequalities and stresses imposed upon refugees.
Several changes can be made to the resettlement architecture that would benefit refugees. First, changing the financing of resettlement by providing a set amount of funding for refugee resettlement would reverse the pressures of competition. Instead of a system that commodifies refugees and forces private resettlement agencies to compete for funding, allocating a set amount of money for resettlement would shift performance pressures to the state, which would need to admit the proper number of refugees to maximize the use of its funding. If the state allocated a set amount of funding but failed to resettle the number of refugees accounted for in the budget, then the refugees who are admitted would benefit from additional dollars per refugee resettled.

Second, the metrics of success should shift from state-centered objectives to people-centered objectives. Metrics tied to employment, self-sufficiency, and consumption of public benefits center the priorities of the state at the expense of refugees. Refugee satisfaction, happiness, and self-reported success would serve as better metrics for service provision that empower individuals. Such a mechanism would account for non-economic measures of well-being, enabling policymakers and practitioners to focus on the variables that refugees report as being most important.

Third, a commitment should be made to increase funding for grassroots organizations that share cultural values with the communities that are served. Funding grassroots community organizations to work on cases from the point of arrival would likely result in better outcomes, and would prevent some of the failures of culturally incompetent service provision from being pushed down the chain. Empowering Black communities and organizations—the vessels of African culture in the US—would center Pan Africanism as a solution to the inequalities inherent to American society. By restoring the power of African culture and enabling agents to determine
their destiny, Black refugee communities could reject the cultural domination that David Ikard suggests delegitimizes Black history and ancestry.

[B]lacks do not seek cultural-specific answers to their social and political queries because they have been conditioned to venerate the dominant culture’s notions of self and reality and treat their African history and ancestry with suspicion and shame. (Ikard 2007: 81)

Pan Africanism can serve as a cultural response to the traumas endured by an exploitative resettlement infrastructure while inverting the cultural values of white supremacy. Specific reforms of the resettlement architecture, when accompanied by sufficient transparency and accountability mechanisms, can alleviate some of the stresses that resettlement inflicts upon refugees. Ultimately, though, reformism will not be a sufficient solution to the problems faced by refugees. The presumption undergirding this analysis—that the inherently unequal and exploitative structures of global neoliberal political economy create the problems that refugees face—directs any ultimatum of action towards the redistribution of unequally allocated resources.

The marketization of all aspects of society, which is inherent to the neoliberal project and serves as a racialized justification of social inequalities, violently erases the systems of exploitation that subjugate those who embody marginalized identities. Black peoples, women, and those who cannot access privileges in society are encouraged to solve their own problems in bootstrap narratives that place responsibility and blame on the oppressed. Hard work or, in the case of RCOs, tactful organization are celebrated as the supposed remedies to marginalization. The ideological prevalence of such fallacies obscures the foundations of the problem and confounds any attempt at achieving a sustainable solution.

Margaret Ledwith forcefully asserts the importance of maintaining a critical perspective of empowerment, even when conducting an analysis on the level of the community.
Empowerment is a transformative concept but without a critical analysis it is all too often applied naively to confidence and self-esteem at a personal level, within a paradigm of social pathology, a purpose that is usually associated with personal responsibility for lifting oneself out of poverty, overlooking structural analyses of inequality….

Empowerment is not the same as self-help: it involves a process of critical consciousness as a route to autonomous action but it is not an alternative solution to the redistribution of unequally divided resources. (Ledwith 2011: 13, 29)

It is my hope that this research represents a step towards the critical consciousness necessary to envision a society that respects the dignity of refugees, addresses the inequalities that are fundamental to our society, and critically examines the racialized hyper-exploitation of Black peoples that defines the current phase of global capitalism. True empowerment of the Congolese refugee community is incompatible with a society that exploits and limits the opportunities of Black peoples. In order to correct the stresses of migration, a fundamental restructuring of society must occur. Government must divorce itself from economic forces that dictate policy outcomes. Profits cannot be valued more than human lives, and deficits cannot be feared more than structural inequalities. Perhaps most importantly, narratives of fear, competition, and alterity must be reconciled to erase divisions that create subclasses of humans and inflict such severe damage on the human psyche.

The Congolese community in the North Shore of Massachusetts captures the effects of concentrated neoliberal economic and political philosophies that impose pressures upon governments, non-profit organizations, and individuals. The social bonds that enrich human life are erased, and individuals struggle to survive. If we are to avoid the social breakdown that attends the marketization of all aspects of society, we must learn from the experiences of the resettled Congolese refugee community and be motivated to change the foundational features of our society that are responsible for the degradation of fundamental human rights.
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