

PART II Lewiston

Arrival Surprises

After passing the final interview and promising to pay back the \$3,200 loan for their airfare, Isha's family finally began their journey to the United States in 2005 when they were sent to Atlanta. Their recollections of their airport arrivals buzz with uncertainty about how to navigate the new setting. Deplaning along with everyone else, the family walked through the airport to board a small train. But because they could not read or understand English and no one helped them, they remained on the train circling the airport over and over before finally figuring out where to exit, even though the escalator stymied them until they felt bold enough to step on after carefully watching how others navigated the moving stairs.¹

Isha's sons Iman and Cabdulkadir, who left Kenya together a few months after Isha's voyage, did not realize their destination was Atlanta until they arrived. After deplaning they were immediately whisked away by armed immigration and police officers, who marched them to a locked room where they were guarded by white men with guns, so frightening fifteen-year-old Iman that he forgot all of his hard-earned English language skills. He thought that they were taking them away to kill them, a not unrealistic possibility in the experience of a young war survivor. Eventually the brothers were released, but since they had been kept so long in custody the caseworker sent from the resettlement agency to pick them up at the airport had given up and gone home. Iman was allowed to phone Isha, who was thrilled because no one had informed her that they were arriving in Atlanta. Another relative, Ahmed, remembers stepping outside the airport into the February evening in his T-shirt to wait for his ride and realizing that his body was beginning to shake uncontrollably. "I didn't know what was happening!" he recalls. "I thought I was becoming really sick." Only later did he learn that he was freezing. He had never experienced cold before.

Refugee resettlement in the United States is managed by eleven federally approved voluntary agencies, called VOLAGS, that are contracted by the federal government to provide arriving refugees with modest assistance during their

first weeks in the United States. The agencies, which are mostly faith-based nationwide organizations such as Catholic Charities, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, bid on contracts with the U.S. State Department to resettle refugees in the cities where they have offices. The VOLAGs are responsible for meeting arriving refugees at the airport, providing some cultural orientation training, settling them in housing, and enrolling children in school and non-English-speaking adults in English language classes, a welcome that ends when the ninety-day resettlement contract between VOLAGs and the U.S. government concludes. As a VOLAG manager in Maine told me, “The ultimate goal of the reception and placement program is that clients will be self-sufficient within ninety days.” When I expressed astonishment about this expectation for illiterate, non-English-speaking refugees to the director of the VOLAG in Syracuse, he shrugged and said, “Well, that’s what they pay us for. After ninety days we move on to the next group of arrivals.”

The VOLAGs are not responsible for placing resettled refugees in jobs, although they often attempt to connect their clients with job training and career services programs. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) offers a modest reprieve for some refugees struggling to attain self-sufficiency: during their first eight months in the United States, those who fail to find employment and who do not qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families may apply for additional assistance (\$230 per adult per month in 2010) through the federal Refugee Cash Assistance Program. But ORR is quite clear that by their eighth month, when this assistance ends, “Self-sufficiency must be achieved without accessing [further] public cash assistance.”² Whereas Hmong refugees, who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s with a similar background as non-English-speaking illiterate farmers, received up to three years of direct federal support as well as greater support for English language classes, how Somali Bantus were to become immediately economically self-sufficient was unclear to everyone. Although the news accounts mentioned in chapter 3 had warned that Somali Bantu refugees were poorly prepared for life in the United States, such warnings did not translate into greater assistance for their transition; to the contrary, they arrived on the heels of deep budget cuts for economic support during their adjustment, including intensive English classes, job training programs, and child care and transport for adults in programs. Their experience reveals an ironic contradiction of the refugee resettlement program: the very people who must present themselves as dependent recipients of charity in order to gain resettlement must, within the space of a few weeks, become economically independent and productive residents who make no demands on their American host communities.

The refugees from the Banta-Bu'aale area were resettled by VOLAGs all over the United States, finding themselves in Atlanta, Columbus, Syracuse, Tucson, Portland (Oregon), Houston, Dallas, Denver, Hartford, Springfield (Connecticut), and other places. Their stories about their first weeks, while retold with humor, reveal just how unprepared they were to become self-sufficient within ninety days. Before arriving in the United States, refugees attend a few cultural orientation classes in the refugee camp to prepare them for the expected rapid transition to American life. Friends from Banta recall learning about new technologies (light switches, elevators, toilets, electric and gas stoves, refrigerators, thermostats) and new rules for family life, but nothing about the racism and discrimination they would experience in their new host communities or in the workplace.

As it turned out, the lessons on technology offered inadequate preparation because they were either inaccurate or incomprehensible in the context of the refugee camp. Sadiq remembers the emphasis on cleanliness and abundance: "The stoves were white and clean and beautiful. We were all amazed by how clean everything was. And we learned there was plenty of food. They showed us an open fridge, and it was full of food!" Iman had heard that everyone uses computers in the United States, so with remittances from Isha of \$20 per month he paid for a privately run computer course in the refugee camp so he would arrive prepared. The course, which ran for five weeks, taught him how to turn the computer on and off and use the keyboard, but neglected to teach him about the Internet, printing, or word processing because the teachers in the refugee camp had procured no Internet connection, paper, or software. People tell funny stories of living in the dark for days after their arrival before relearning how to use light switches, or sweltering in apartments where the thermostat was accidentally set at 90 degrees because they couldn't remember how to control the heat, or racking up hundreds of dollars in long-distance phone charges from calling their relatives all over the country before learning that long distance calls cost extra.

After their early mistakes, resettled Somali Bantus shared their stories to help each other adjust, and within a few months many adults were adept at household technology, learned to shop at Walmart ("We know which aisle is the one with the foods we recognize," explained one woman), and use public transport. Sadiq arrived in Syracuse determined to find the local community college, so after dropping his children off at school during his first week he boarded the first bus he saw because someone had told him the college was at the end of the bus line. "I rode the bus to the end of the line, but there was no college!" he recounted, laughing. The kind driver realized he was lost and explained to him that Syracuse had many bus lines that went many different

places in the city. For the next few weeks Sadiq rode the buses every day after taking his kids to school so he could learn all the routes.

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

Although the promise of education was a huge draw for those who signed up for resettlement, the reality after arrival was a crushing disappointment for many. As the second Somali Bantu to graduate from high school in the refugee camp, Sadiq could hardly wait to enroll in college after resettling in Syracuse, but he also went to work right away as was expected of him, at Stickley Furniture, where he milled trees into lumber while wearing earplugs, breathing filters, and big goggles. He worked from 5 AM to 3:30 PM, heading straight to Onondaga Community College after work, where he took classes until 9 PM. Returning home at 10 PM, he slept from 11 PM until 3:30 AM before rising to get to work on time. He rarely saw his wife and children when they were all awake. His job, which required him to work fifty-five hours a week, Monday to Saturday, paid him \$420 per week, which was not enough to support his family. He soon realized that coming to America did not really mean getting an education. It meant manual labor and poverty.³

Many Somali Bantu refugees did not initially realize that students in the United States are assigned to educational levels on the basis of age rather than ability, which meant that refugee students were placed in grade levels far above their abilities, producing terrible frustration and humiliation as they flailed and failed year after year. The expectation that a fifteen-year-old who had never been to school must be placed in tenth grade, even if that would only ensure his failure, simply made no sense to the resettled refugees, who understood that such a system would doom their older children and offer nothing to young adults. They had thought that all who wished would be able to attend school, entering whatever grade level was appropriate for their reading, writing, and speaking ability, as was the case in the refugee camp schools. The principal of Lewiston's high school sympathized with their dilemma, telling me that it is ridiculous and harmful to expect a teenager with no educational background to be able to achieve enough quickly enough to graduate within the mandated time frame. He said, "It just won't happen. They won't graduate,

but the expectation that they should is terrible for everyone,” by which he meant that not only are the students and their parents horribly disappointed, but their failure also counts against the school’s graduation statistics. “It’s a rotten system,” he concluded. Even young adults arriving in the United States from the refugee camps expected to be able to progress through elementary school to high school to college. As a forty-year-old non-English-speaking man from Banta lamented when he realized that education would never be an option for him in the United States and that his lack of education would doom his prospects for a decent job, “It is over for us [adults] here. This place is for our children.”

Because all resettled refugees over the age of sixteen are expected to seek work, even if attending school, many high school students faced additional barriers to educational success. Caliyow Isaaq’s sixteen-year-old son, Musle, had been greatly excited to attend high school when he arrived in the United States with Mohamed and Xawo, but his resettlement caseworker refused to enroll him in high school because of his age. After months of arguing with the resettlement agency, he finally appealed to school authorities, begging to be allowed to enroll in high school. Although he ultimately won the right to attend school, he could barely pass his courses because he was placed in ninth grade after only completing third grade in the refugee camp. One day he showed me his coursework, which included, for his social studies class, pages and pages in his careful neat lettering of the assigned phrases, “I want to be an American Citizen,” and “I am patriotic.” Almost all of the young Somali Bantu refugees who came to the United States as teenagers failed to graduate from high school.

In short, Somali Bantus faced nearly insurmountable barriers in achieving economic self-sufficiency through employment and education, the two things they had been promised as opportunities available to them in the United States, learning, instead, that their illiteracy, lack of English, lack of education, and subsistence farming skills were a poor fit for life in America, that fears of their foreignness constrained their access to employment and school, and that no one had a plan for closing that yawning gap. They were, in the words of a 2010 report about the refugee resettlement program prepared for the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Abandoned upon Arrival.”⁴ Four years after the Somali Bantus began arriving in the United States, ORR sponsored a national conference of Somali Bantu refugee immigrants to assess their resettlement successes and experiences. Somali Bantu representatives from all over the country attended, where they listened to speakers, participated in workshops on subjects ranging from jobs to education, networked to form a national Somali Bantu organization, and had the opportunity to ask questions of ORR staff.

After a panel called “Somali Experiences in Somalia and the Diaspora,” audience members talked about their initial challenges with sky-high utility and telephone bills and other financial and educational issues. One man stood up to ask, “I am wondering about the fact that we came from the poorest country to the poorest refugee camp to the poorest towns where our children were placed in the poorest schools where other children were already failing. I am wondering why this is.” Many resettled refugees wondered the same thing; why were they brought to America only to be poor? Why were they brought to America to be placed in impoverished, dangerous housing projects and failing schools? Why were they brought to this country and abandoned? As David Haines observes in his review of refugee experience in America, spare support for resettled refugees struggling to make ends meet means poor housing, dangerous neighborhoods, poor transport, and poor schools: “It is ‘welcome to the other America.’”⁵

Choosing Lewiston

Isha’s family had a rough start in Atlanta. Iman was attacked several times on his way home from junior high school by young men in their public housing project; Isha was abused by their neighbors; and the family struggled financially on the meager assistance they received. Frightened and intimidated by their African American neighbors, they decided within a few months of their arrival to relocate to Lewiston, which had been identified by other resettled Somali and Somali Bantu refugees as an affordable and livable small city with good public housing, safe schools, a very affordable cost of living, more financial support than in other cities, and the familiarity of a growing Somali community. That Somalis and Somali Bantus would choose to move to one of the whitest states in the country made perfect sense to those refugees who wished to distinguish themselves from the African Americans they met in public housing projects in large cities, reflecting a broader pattern among black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean.⁶

When Isha’s family decided to move to Lewiston, their VOLAG caseworker in Atlanta arranged for someone to drive them in a minibus all the way to Lewiston, where they were dropped off at the apartment of friends. Within a few weeks, Isha moved her family into a tiny downtown apartment within walking distance of the downtown shops, park, high school, police station, Adult Education, International Health Clinic, and Trinity Jubilee Center, where Isha joined hundreds of other people every Thursday for the food pantry. Iman enrolled in high school and her grandson Abshir enrolled in grade school, but Isha gave up on the effort to learn English at adult education classes, having spent several unsuccessful months in adult English language learner classes in

Atlanta. “I’m an old woman,” she explained, “and my mind is back in Africa, with my other children I had to leave there.” Iman found an after-school job at L.L.Bean working 4 PM to midnight; no time for homework. Idris, adept at English from studying hard in the refugee camp, joined an interpreting agency as a translator, while Isha continued her community work as a spiritual healer, cared for her grandchildren, cooked and kept house, and mediated family disputes in her community.

Isha’s apartment in an old downtown tenement building sits between the upstairs apartment of her nephew (Cali Osman’s sister’s son) and his wife and five children, the downstairs apartment of her other nephew (my former field assistant Garad) and his wife and nine children, and a neighboring apartment housing her son, Cabdulkadir, and his family. In all, thirty members of her extended family moved into the building to live together again. Despite its location in a dilapidated building with peeling paint and listing porches, Isha’s home is filled with reminders of the family life I remember from Banta: a large extended family compound, segregated gender roles, a matriarchal presence watching over grandchildren, a constant stream of visitors, an olfactory aura of frankincense, cardamom, and tea mixed with roasted meats and boiled corn, an incense dish used for healing rituals always present and ready. Isha’s parlor is always busy as she serves tea and snacks to family and friends in a room draped with brightly printed nylon wall coverings and lined with colorful plastic woven floor mats. Isha’s two dozen grandchildren from all four apartments constantly dart in and out to play and greet visitors. When the kids get too rambunctious, Isha silences them with a quick word or movement. The rooms initially held little more than floor mats and a TV, but gradually the family acquired mattresses, bed frames, and, finally, a huge wrap-around velour sofa in a style popular with Somali families.

The apartment connects memories of Somalia to other places—the spiritual world, the diaspora world, Kenya, and, of course, America. The TV is usually blaring a video of a wedding in Somalia, the refugee camp, or elsewhere in the diaspora—the ubiquitous entertainment in Somali homes. Loud, modernized new versions of classical Somali music from the video compete for sensory awareness with the goat meat and corn porridge often bubbling on the electric stove. Isha doesn’t keep much in her cupboards because she is too short to reach above the first shelf, so although her kitchen is typically American, life in this room is still lived on the floor, where everyone sits, plays, prepares food, and rests.

Isha and her extended family had joined a flow of Somali Bantu refugees from Syracuse, Dallas, Houston, Denver, Columbus, Springfield, Atlanta, Hartford, and elsewhere who began moving to Lewiston in 2005 after

learning about Lewiston's amenities from Somalis they had known in the refugee camps, who had themselves resettled in Lewiston from 2001 to 2004, making the city a gathering place for former neighbors seeking once again to live near each other and for families and polygynous marriages separated by the resettlement process to reconstitute themselves. Many Somalis and Somali Bantus joined the migration to Lewiston because they found they could not possibly support themselves in their new cities on minimum wage jobs or welfare support and they hoped the lower cost of living in Maine and the ability to re-create community support structures based on sharing resources would make life more manageable. Given that their bid for resettlement was predicated on their ethnic distinctiveness from and abuse by other Somalis, the choice by resettled Somali Bantus to join a Somali community in the diaspora points to the tensions inherent to Somali Bantu identity as racially marked but still culturally, linguistically, and religiously Somali. These tensions would find expression in Lewiston as well.

Outlining Lewiston's Stories

The arrival in Lewiston of so many poor, uneducated, illiterate, and unexpected residents sent a shock wave through a city already struggling with years of economic decline following the closure of the mills that had employed 70 percent of the city's workforce a century earlier.⁷ The national conversation about immigrants, focused so intently on their economic and cultural impact, is reproduced in the different versions of Lewiston's story about the first decade of Somali refugee immigration told by residents. Since the federal government tries to achieve refugee economic self-sufficiency by cutting off financial support to resettled refugees within a few weeks of their arrival, the details of their longer-term economic sustainability are left to local communities to sort out. "Integration" is a muddy term, stretched between visions of assimilation that many Euro-Americans believe characterized the experiences of their immigrant ancestors and hopes for a multiculturalism that includes economic assimilation to property ownership, wage-paying employment, and capitalist values alongside the celebration of cultural traditions like dances, songs, and special foods. Concerns about economic sustainability and integration play out in different versions of Lewiston's story. The next three chapters each tell a different version of Lewiston's story of the first decade (2001–12) of Somali and Somali Bantu immigration from the vantage point of different groups of residents.

In the first version, city officials highlight the financial burden on the city of accommodating unexpected impoverished refugees in the context of a retreating welfare state, emphasizing the pressure they faced to develop pro-

grams for refugees that conformed to federal legal requirements for accommodating diversity in the absence of outside financial support, local refugee resettlement agencies willing to apply for grants, and any previous experience with managing refugees and cultural difference, all while responding to the concerns of Lewiston's citizens about the cost to the city of meeting the needs of refugees. Since the refugees chose Lewiston and not the other way around, Lewiston's city officials emphasize how the city has tolerated their presence while adopting a business-as-usual approach to minimize their potential disruption to the city's coffers and its way of life. Praise for Lewiston's generosity in accommodating difference and addressing the challenges posed by the unexpected arrival of so many refugees anchors this version, which honors the hard work of city and social services administrators who found themselves scrambling in 2001–6 to build programs for refugees from scratch in an environment of severe economic constraints and social hostility in a way that would not negatively impact the city's native residents. Chapter 4 introduces this "tolerant, business-as-usual" version, a story of legitimate self-congratulations that begins to crack when one reads the local newspaper or listens in on conversations between Lewiston's residents who are unhappy about their city's transformation.⁸

A second version characterizes Somali refugees as an uninvited, unwelcome, and dangerous intrusion into city life. In this xenophobic version, presented in chapter 5, refugees are bearers of economic, physical, and cultural insecurity who bring with them the uncivilized customs of their warring homeland, the threat of different moralities, and the danger of economic penury. Chapter 5 reviews anti-immigrant/refugee sentiment during Lewiston's first decade of Somali immigration in the form of ten insidious myths reiterated in editorial commentary and blogs in the local newspapers, by two of Lewiston's mayors during the first decade of Somali immigration, and circulated in public and private commentary by citizens who cite the blogs and mayoral pronouncements as the basis of their anti-immigrant views. I include a small selection of quotes from blogs and editorials to provide the flavor of the online commentary that paralleled and was often quoted in daily conversations about refugees. Although editorials were signed, blog comments were usually anonymous, but nevertheless infected and inflected private conversation, at least until one newspaper decided to shut down the possibility of anonymity late in the decade because of concerns about the public impact of persistently vitriolic anonymous commentary. The myths' tenacity reflects predominant American concerns about resettling refugees (and accepting immigrants) in "our" midst, concerns that trouble the idea of charity toward refugees with hostility to cultural difference and economic costs and raise questions about how to

define community and collective moral responsibility in a globalized world characterized by mobility.

The third version, the communitarian story presented in chapter 6, pushes back against such hostile views by insisting on an expansive definition of community and a delight about the possibilities for social transformation that arriving refugees brought to Lewiston, while also betraying disappointment, disgust, and even rage about poor institutional support for indigent and marginalized immigrants, gatekeeping efforts to contain refugee agency and engagement in city life, and the hostility of colleagues and friends toward refugees. The people in this category, sometimes derided as out-of-touch liberals, social worker types, or even, in the colorful words of the current mayor, “boo-hoo white do-gooders and their carpetbagger friends,”⁹ express frustration at the narrow, tolerance-based approach to building programs for refugees taken by institutional leaders, marked by an unwillingness to look to models from other cities that had more experience with diversity, refugees, or both. Chapter 6 profiles social workers, teachers, and community activists and advocates who see the future of the refugees as the future of Lewiston, who have found personal renewal and transformation through their work, and who advocate communitarianism rather than tolerance.

The Somali Bantu refugees’ views of their first decade in Lewiston opens part III, which, in contrast to these three versions, highlights their hard work to make Lewiston their home by fighting for and negotiating their place and their rights. This “refugee agency” version speaks of their efforts to create life anew in Lewiston, access available resources, adjust to American cultural practices, and construct a new life designed by them. In this version, the refugees are the protagonists in creating their own refuge and the architects of their lives in Lewiston. As we shall see, their perspectives on self-sufficiency and integration vary considerably from the story of conformist assimilation that anchors the mainstream American view of Euro-American immigrants.

The versions contain different perspectives about the economic costs of refugees and the insecurity provoked by difference. The first (tolerance) version (chapter 4) emphasizes how Lewiston successfully accommodated different cultural practices within an overall framework of assimilation, becoming a model for other cities faced with large numbers of new immigrants while keeping a careful lid on costs. The second (xenophobia) version (chapter 5) blames refugees for Lewiston’s ongoing economic ills, claiming that economic resources spent on assisting foreign refugees are starving deserving local community members of the help they have earned as hard-working citizens. The third (communitarian) version (chapter 6) promotes an expansive, inclusive definition of community and sees the refugees as a redemptive force for an

ailing city, even while expressing anxiety about what the future holds for Lewiston's refugee population because of the impact of racism on Somali youth identity. This version reflects a belief that diversity and expanded support for the poor are desirable and that the city, state, and federal governments should expend more resources to support the refugee community. The version that opens part III shows how refuge is created by the refugees themselves rather than provided by the host country, through their hard work to build community support structures, negotiate among themselves about changing practices of self-governance and intracommunity support, and demand equality and respect from their new neighbors.

All of these versions simultaneously are true and they have uneasily jostled against each other during Lewiston's first decade of Somali immigration. Lewiston's three mayors during the first decade of Somali settlement personified the different viewpoints: Mayor Raymond gained notoriety in 2002 for writing a letter against Somali immigration that sparked a neo-Nazi rally. Mayor Gilbert (2007–11) used his newspaper column as a bully pulpit to denounce anti-immigrant myths and celebrate the renewing potential of new immigrants to Lewiston. Mayor Macdonald was elected in 2011 (and reelected in 2013) on an explicitly anti-immigrant platform that promoted condescending caricatures of Somali immigrants. The radically different viewpoints about Somali immigration held by the mayors reflect the profound contradictions that Lewistonians, old and new, experience every day as the city continues its dramatic transformation and these narratives compete for ascendancy.