

## Article

# Unsettled Belonging in Complex Geopolitics: Refugees, NGOs, and Rural Communities in Northern Colorado

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**Abstract:** In Colorado, meat processing and packing industries profit from the low-wage labor of foreign born workers and refugees in particular. Scholars and journalists have examined the hazardous and environmentally unjust workplace conditions in meatpacking, and detailed refugee struggles in North American resettlement geographies. Our research builds from this work to examine how multi-scalar geopolitical processes shape processes of refugee resettlement and refugee labor in Colorado's meatpacking industries. Methods for this work include analysis of secondary data and twenty-two semi-structured interviews with various actors knowledgeable about refugee resettlement and/or agricultural production in Colorado. We argue various intersecting geopolitical processes—from immigration raids of meatpacking plants to presidential-level xenophobic discourses and ensuing immigration policies—interact to impact refugee resettlement and participation in the meat production sector. Moreover, while the U.S.'s neoliberal model of outsourcing resettlement to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been widely critiqued, we argue NGO employees, many of whom identify as foreign-born and/or refugees, work to build connection and belonging among refugees in challenging resettlement environments. We suggest a feminist geopolitics approach, which examines how the "global" and the "intimate" are deeply intertwined, is a useful perspective for understanding complicated racialized spaces in the rural United States, including efforts to build connections and empower refugee identities.

**Keywords:** feminist geopolitics; refugees; meatpacking



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## 1. Introduction

While meatpacking facilities have long been among the United States' most dangerous workplaces [1], the spread of COVID-19 among plant workers, a population composed largely of foreign-born workers, exacerbated environmental injustice, and workplace precarity [2]. In northern Colorado, meatpacking companies have been criticized for not protecting workers and encouraging them to work despite symptoms [3,4]. The JBS Greeley facility is one of Colorado's largest COVID-19 outbreaks to date, with at least 316 plant workers testing positive and multiple deaths; by comparison, only five corporate workers tested positive during the outbreak [5].

However, interview respondents with intimate knowledge of meatpacking labor and production also noted that, while the current pandemic is unprecedented (from global impact to politicians' intentional circulation of misinformation), immigrant and refugee workers are, in the words of one NGO representative, "always managing multiple intersecting crises." Low wages, workplace hazards, social isolation, poor housing quality, and

discrimination were cited as common issues by interview respondents, who are largely employees of non-governmental organizations (hereafter NGOs) working closely with refugees in rural Colorado. These intersecting stressors and crises, we argue, are situated in multi-scalar political-economic and geopolitical processes. The political contexts shaping refugees' everyday lives are abstracted and rendered in neoliberal terms by policy narratives that focus on refugees' economic self-sufficiency in free market economies.

Indeed, the U.S. government's overarching measure of refugee "success" is whether "self-sufficiency" is achieved, i.e., reduced or no reliance on government assistance [6,7]. While many refugees achieve economic independence from social support programs, studies show concerning occupational and earnings gaps when refugees are compared to other migrant groups [7–10]. Refugees remain in dangerous, low-wage "survival jobs" like meatpacking due to discrimination, lack of English skills, resettlement processes that ignore existing skills and desires and other factors [7,11–13]. Being "self-sufficient," in other words, does not equate long-term economic security or satisfaction.

Despite pressure on refugees (and other immigrants) to reproduce narratives of "The American Dream" [14,15], refugees experience various intersecting struggles in North American resettlement geographies. These struggles include: quality and affordable housing [16], building social capital (including marriage) [7,17], and dealing with racial and religious discrimination [14].

Neoliberal restructuring, moreover, has profoundly impacted refugee resettlement processes in the U.S. We define neoliberalism as a political economic project aimed at liberalizing trade and investment; minimizing state-imposed barriers to capitalist production; and promoting public-private partnerships, particularly in the context of state withdrawal in social spending like education [18], public health [19], and immigration [20]. Studies emphasize how the U.S. government increasingly serves the interests of firms over workers, privileging accumulation over social reproduction [21,22].

In refugee contexts, NGOs, both not-for-profit organizations and profit-driven companies, have taken on a significant role not only in resettlement processes, but also in provision of cultural, social, nutritional, and linguistic support [7,23–26]. In the UK, for instance, the government contracts reception services for asylum seekers to three private companies, leading to a lack of transparency and shrinking expertise and services [24].

The U.S. government outsources nearly every step of refugee resettlement to NGOs or contracting organizations known as VOLAGs [23]. VOLAG refers to eight private agencies and one state agency that have cooperative agreements with the State Department to provide reception and placement services for refugees arriving in the U.S. VOLAGs operating in the U.S. are often faith-based and include: Episcopalian Migration Ministries, Church World Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [23]. In addition to VOLAGs, other NGOs, both for-profits and not, work to provide refugees with services at federal, state, and local levels. In Colorado, key NGOs involved in refugee integration, resettlement, and services include: Immigrant & Refugee Center of Northern Colorado, Soccer Without Borders, Asian Pacific Development Center, Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, and Catholic Charities, among others.

NGO assistance and provision are extremely fragmented and bewildering [27]: with one agency handling housing, while others secure job placement, establish food aid, help find healthcare providers, and so on. In comparing U.S. resettlement processes with Europe, Van Selm [23] is worth quoting at length:

The US uses an entirely different model of public-private partnership. Almost every step of the refugee journey to resettlement involves private organizations. This is particularly the case for integration services . . . The US abounds with voluntary agencies, primarily, but not exclusively, faith-based (the most prominent being Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, and Episcopalian, along with the nonfaith-based Immigration and Refugee Services of America). The voluntary agencies are involved in implementing every part of the resettlement program from the moment refugees arrive, including the collection over time

of their interest-free loan payments for repayment of their journey to the US, organized by IOM (International Organization for Migration).

The U.S. outsourcing of every step of resettlement to NGOs via “public-private partnerships” represents a staunchly neoliberal method for limiting state spending and involvement in social sectors. Moreover, federal funding for refugee resettlement has failed to keep up with admissions and has been continuously slashed over time [23].

The U.S. model of resettlement has been widely critiqued for NGO-related issues including: VOLAG lobbying power [23]; skimming institutional overhead from refugee resettlement stipends [28]; organizations’ reliance on volunteer labor [29]; and agency workers’ reproduction of social hierarchies around race and class [29]. Despite these serious concerns, many NGO employees—who often understand the institutional and geopolitical structures and issues in which they operate—work to help refugees navigate life in northern Colorado.

While much has been written about refugee processes, including the environmentally unjust conditions under which meatpacking labor occurs [1,2] and limitations of social movements to address worker rights [30], there has been little research linking global and national level geopolitical shifts to local NGO interventions and relationships. This paper fills this gap by examining how refugee resettlement and labor in Coloradan meatpacking facilities are situated in broader geopolitical trends. For instance, historic highs in workplace raids and deportation of undocumented workers (largely from Latin America) led to recruitment of refugee workers in meatpacking plants in historically conservative towns like Greeley and Fort Morgan, Colorado. These shifting social geographies have yielded new challenges marked by xenophobia and questions of belonging for both rural communities and refugees. NGO actors, some of whom identify as refugees, help foreign-born workers navigate these and other challenges. Based on qualitative interviews, analysis of secondary data, and feminist geopolitics, we examine the ways broader scale geopolitical and political economic shifts impact refugee admissions and meatpacking in Colorado, and the ways NGO employees work to build a sense of belonging and access for new immigrants in neoliberal policy environments.

## 2. Feminist Geopolitics

Feminist geography has examined how the global and the intimate are mutually constituted entities [31,32], revealing the inseparability of masculinized geopolitics, such as war, and “banal” intimate violence, like domestic or workplace abuse [33]. A feminist geopolitical approach “redraws the boundaries of the geopolitical and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the operation of power at multiple scales” [34] (p. 572).

Feminist geographers have shown how refugees are resettled to countries, like the U.S., that played major roles in conflicts and displacement. This research provides insight into “multifarious and multi-scalar relations between nation-states” [35] (p. 338), unsettling categories of belonging [36], and co-productions between socially constructed geographical divisions (i.e., North/South, core/periphery) [37–39]. Following the Vietnam War, for instance, Vietnamese constituted most of Colorado’s refugee population. With changes in global geopolitical conflicts, Somali, Congolese, and Rohingya populations are among Colorado’s more recent refugee groups.

The category “refugee,” Patricia Ehrkamp [15] argues, embodies close connections between war and intimate spaces of refuge. While refugees resettled to Colorado claim other identities, including “foreign-born workers,” terms like refugee or political asylum “point to the responsibility of contemporary nation-states for abiding by their humanitarian and legal commitments” [15] (p. 815). This is particularly important as nation-states increasingly develop new discursive, legal, and military techniques for evading commitments including detainment in camps and other sites [40–42]. The experience of becoming and being a refugee is marked by long-term uncertainty and waiting [41,43–45].

In the aftermath of 9/11, personal, national and economic security and belonging are defined in opposition to the figure of the immigrant and/or refugee [46,47]. While

recent mobilization of crises narratives around migrants have been particularly blatant in terms of racism and xenophobia, diverse actors—including academics and journalists—have long gained from the reproduction and circulation of crisis tropes in immigration and border security [48]. Anti-immigrant discourses have become more common under the Trump administration and justify discriminatory policies. From the Muslim travel ban and Border Wall to President Trump’s discursive framing of African countries as “shithole” nations [49], Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals [50] and immigrants as “... animals” [51], recent years have ushered in unprecedented racialized vitriol against refugees and immigrants [52].

While a feminist geopolitics approach examines how such doings and sayings impact bodily vulnerability and experiences [53,54], researchers also examine and practice ways to build more just and livable worlds [55,56]. Much of this work explores resistance as small, gendered, and everyday acts. As Faria [57] (p. 6) explains, “Threaded through this work is an understanding of violence and resistance as knitted-together, with attention to mundane, quiet, and/or indirect practices of resistance that are often ignored in the literature and in life.”

Scholars have thus criticized academic tendencies to cast refugees and immigrants as victims in camps, detention centers, and resettlement contexts [43,58,59]. Acts of resistance among refugees and asylum seekers includes hunger strikes [60], protests regarding the Colorado meatpacking industry’s handling of COVID-19 [61], and transnational theater [62]. However, there has been little focus on the role of NGO actors themselves in helping refugees negotiate geopolitical contexts at different scales and in rural contexts in the U.S. in particular. As such, this paper seeks to understand how refugee and NGO dynamics are both situated in, and profoundly impacted by, broader scale geopolitical trends, while NGO employees simultaneously seeking to build more livable worlds in rural Colorado.

### 3. Methodology

This research draws on semi-structured interviews and analysis of secondary datasets. Originally, we sought to speak with stakeholders knowledgeable about land-use and labor changes along Colorado’s Front Range as hydraulic fracturing, aka “fracking”, expanded rapidly in recent years. We hypothesized labor scarcity issues on farms as Latinx workers moved from agriculture to higher-wage oil and gas work. Based on the existing literature, we also suspected refugees were unable to access these higher paying fracking jobs due to a lack of English skills. While this assumption is supported through our interviews, deeper analysis of qualitative data yielded unanticipated results, including how refugee resettlement (like oil and gas extraction) are shaped by multi-scalar geopolitical trends and the ways NGO actors work to build networks of belonging in northern Colorado.

Between April 2019 and July 2020, we conducted interviews with twenty-two individuals from organizations focused on refugee resettlement, immigrant issues, food aid, and agriculture. We also interviewed local farmers and two county officials. Interviews were difficult to procure due, in part, to the political nature of meatpacking and refugee populations in Colorado [63]. We did not directly recruit refugees for participation in the study due to language and cultural barriers [64] and discomfort burdening this population with additional time commitments and risks during COVID-19. We instead draw on accounts of NGO representatives, some of whom identify as immigrants and refugees. These individuals are acutely aware of geopolitical contexts shaping resettlement and many work to build belonging among refugee and immigrant populations. By not directly recruiting refugees, however, we are missing first-hand accounts of meatpacking work and NGO services and place-building efforts. While this is a limitation of the study and grounds for future research, we are not describing refugees’ experiences of the NGO-led projects described below, nor are we evaluating the effectiveness of these projects. Both endeavors would require direct discussion with refugees. Rather, we are interested in the practices

people, including NGO employees, employ to build spaces of belonging in neoliberal, and sometimes outright xenophobic, policy, and cultural environments.

Initially, we identified key informants, particularly NGO representatives, via an internet search and contacted them by phone and/or email. We also employed snowball sampling, asking interviewees to identify other potential participants with the knowledge of refugee and/or meatpacking issues. Nineteen interviews were conducted in Weld County and three were conducted in the adjacent Morgan County.

Between March 2019 and February 2020, sixteen interviews were conducted in person, usually at the participant's place of employment. The lead or second author conducted interviews, with the help of at least one undergraduate student who helped ask questions and took detailed notes. All student contributors were paid as research assistants and are co-authors on this article. In some instances, we took tours of NGO offices and food pantries to better understand services provided. After March 2020, the lead author carried out six additional interviews via Zoom or phone due to precautions regarding COVID-19.

Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 min in length. Twelve interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed. In other interviews, detailed notes were taken and typed up directly afterward. To avoid projecting a priori assumptions onto data, a grounded theory approach [65] was followed wherein repeated ideas, experiences, or elements were tagged manually. Forty-four broad topics (or "codes") were identified and manually labeled on the transcripts, such as: "English skills," "racism," "government immigration policies," "meatpacking workplace conditions." We also paid close attention to how codes varied according to positionality and experience. For instance, and unsurprisingly, an individual identifying as a refugee, person of color, and NGO employee possessed different understandings and experiences of racism in northern Colorado than a white county food pantry employee. This research was approved by Colorado State University's Institutional Review Board.

Finally, we examined secondary datasets and reports including those from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Weld County, numerous NGOs and advocacy organizations, industry publications, and the State of Colorado. Analysis of secondary data helped triangulate trends described in interview data. Below, we discuss the results of this research, first touching on the broader geopolitical context in which refugee resettlement occurs more broadly in the United States, and, in particular, in Colorado.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Geopolitical Conditions of Refugee Resettlement in Rural Colorado

Refugees are often resettled to countries that played direct or indirect roles in their displacement. Below, in Figure 1, we see how these dynamics play out in Colorado with an influx of Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s, and, more recently, with populations from Somalia. In both countries, the U.S. played significant roles in conflict and displacement. Besteman [66] provides a crucial understanding of how the United States contributed to destabilization of Somalia—resulting in the present-day influx of Somali refugees to the U.S. [67]—through the funding of Siad Barre's army (even after military efforts were marked by violence and abuse), encouraging land privatization and installing the CIA in Mogadishu.

While global refugee populations are at the highest level since WWII as people flee war, violence, poverty, climate change impacts and environmental degradation, national-level politics hugely impact resettlement processes. Several respondents suggested shifting priorities and preferences in U.S. immigration and refugee policy are among the biggest factors determining long wait times in refugee camps. One NGO representative drew from her own experience:

We were in Kenya [at a refugee camp] and had one final interview at the [U.S.] Embassy. Everything was looking good and we knew we would be resettled soon ... this was after seven years in Kenya, so we were so ready ... and then 9/11 happened, and things fell apart, and it was another four years before we came to Colorado.



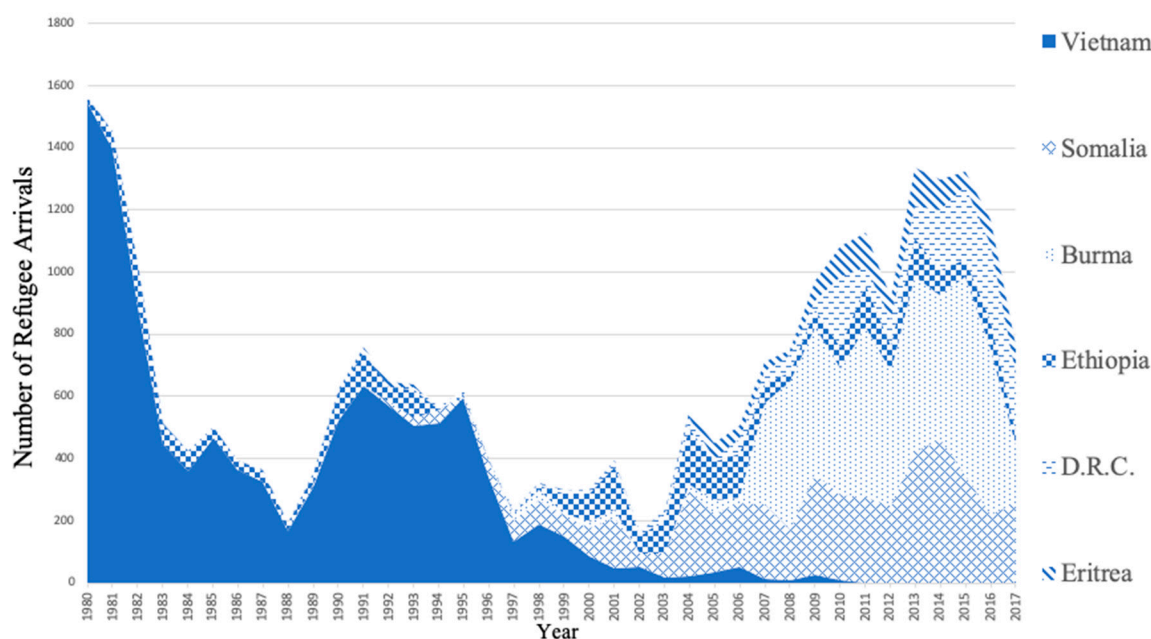


Figure 1. Refugee arrivals in Colorado organized by country of origin (State of Colorado 2020) [68].

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 brought anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment to the surface, with lasting consequences for refugees and immigrants [15]. Following 9/11, immigration and citizenship bureaucracy was brought under the enforcement-oriented and hyper-militarized Department of Homeland Security [14]. In 2002, refugee admissions dropped to just over 27,000 from a fairly steady figure of almost 70,000 since the mid-1990s [14,69].

During George W. Bush's administration (2001–2009), policies related to immigrants and refugees had mixed results. Bush supported creation of a guest worker program and path to citizenship for immigrants. He gave temporary protection status to 150,000 Salvadorans [70], which was later revoked under Trump [71], and maintained a ceiling on refugee admissions between 70,000 and 80,000, consistent with past administrations [72]. At the same time, Bush authorized a 700-mile fence at the U.S.-Mexico border [73,74] and increased border security. Since Congress was unable to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill, states began passing their own legislation. More than 500 state immigration bills were introduced in 2006 [75], including bills like Arizona's SB1070 that included racial profiling and denial of emergency services to people who cannot prove legal residency. In Colorado, bills included various measures aimed at cracking down on immigration, such as requiring identification to access government benefits.

The mid-2000s (also under Bush) brought increased workplace raids targeting undocumented immigrants. In December 2006, raids against Swift & Co. resulted in 1284 arrests across Colorado, Texas, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, and Utah [76]. Investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents identified 4300 employees in Swift & Co.'s plants (out of 14,000 total) who possessed "questionable documentation" [77].

The 2006 Swift & Co raid had lasting consequences for workers and meatpacking plants in northern Colorado. Children were separated from parents, deported or held in custody, and unemployment and lengthy and costly court battles ensued for those who remained [77–79]. In Greeley, 261 individuals were arrested, despite Swift & Co's attempt to stop the raid via court order; the meatpacking plant lost 11 percent of its workforce [73,78,80,81]. In 2007, JBS purchased Swift & Co and incorporated the Greeley plant into its global meat production empire.

In 2008, as part of George W. Bush's "Operation Endgame", there was another meatpacking plant raid in Postville, Iowa in which 389 employees were arrested and 297 were deported [82–84]. About half of the plant's workers were affected [85]. Most recently, under

the Trump administration, raids in Mississippi led to the arrest of 680 individuals and deportation of 170 [86]. At the time of their occurrence, each of these raids—Swift & Co (2006); Postville (2008) and Mississippi (2019)—had the distinction of being the biggest in history [78,87], illustrating that deportations are an important and ongoing strategy in U.S. immigration policy, one that transcends party divides.

The Obama administration, moreover, enacted contradictory practices of record deportations and increased refugee resettlement. The Obama increased admissions high was nearly 85,000 in 2016 [88]. Deportations also hit all-time highs under Obama in 2012 with 407,821 deportations, largely undocumented people from Latin America [89]. The Trump administration has continued high numbers of deportations while slashing refugee admissions to the lowest number on record. In 2017, Trump reduced refugee admissions to 45,000; a year later, the number dropped to 30,000 [88]. By fiscal year 2021, refugee admissions were set at 15,000, an all-time low.

Immigration raids in meatpacking possess the capacity to impact profit margins and production in a powerful economic sector. In our study area, Weld County (with just under two million acres of agricultural land) is the top agricultural-producing county in Colorado and consistently ranks among the United States' top ten [90]. Beef cattle, dairy, animal feed, and grains (wheat, corn, alfalfa) are among the county's most important commodities [90]. Weld County is also home to JBS, the world's largest meatpacking company [91]; neighboring Morgan County is home to Cargill, which is ranked as the third largest meat and poultry processor in the United States [92].

These firms are politically and economically powerful players in a highly concentrated industry where four companies control over 80 percent of beef processing [93]. JBS reported a net revenue of US\$51.7 billion for 2019 [94], whereas Cargill reported a revenue of US\$113.5 billion for fiscal 2019 [95]. An enormous contradiction in the politically conservative American meat industry is that profit is created and maintained by passing risk onto workers and by underpaying labor. This is enabled through the degradation of workplace protections and labor rights and health and safety deregulation, but also by hiring workers who are undocumented or have other vulnerable statuses [96,97]. A regional agriculture expert noted labor scarcity due to deportations, "If immigration comes by you can lose half your labor that day . . . Everything's a cycle, and right now labor is tight." As raids deported thousands of undocumented workers in meatpacking and other food sectors, corporations, ranchers, and other sectors looked to refugees as a cheap, reliable, and perhaps most importantly (given new anti-immigrant and geopolitical contexts) *documented* labor source.

#### 4.2. Refugee Recruitment in Colorado Meatpacking Industries

Meatpacking firms in Colorado (and other states) began proactively recruiting Somali refugees to replace workers lost in immigration raids [14,85,98,99]. JBS advertised new positions in newspapers, on the radio, and on billboards, offering slightly increased salaries and signing bonuses [100]. JBS visited African restaurants in Denver, offering cash to people who would work in Greeley [101]. JBS specifically targeted folks who had factory experience, noting refugees had the legal right to work, unlike undocumented immigrants. JBS does much of its recruitment through word of mouth, incentivizing workers to refer people to the company. One employee, Mr. Amaan, was given \$2400 for referring two friends to the company [100]. He later developed a system where he would "drop off more than a dozen refugee workers" at the plant in the mornings [100]. Greeley Mayor, Tom Norton, normalized these practices in racialized terms stating, "We're a pretty conservative community, and I would say we don't want illegals...but we do want a labor force." [102].

The active recruitment of refugees in meatpacking has transformed rural communities and populations across the U.S. As Mills [14] (p. 62) put it, "Meat processing plants played a major role in restructuring U.S. social geographies from the urban metropolis to the country town." Somalis have been resettled in Colorado since the 1990s (Figure 1), mainly in Denver and Colorado Springs. In 2008, there were only 300 Somalis and very

few Burmese in Greeley [103]. By 2011, 1200 Somalis and 600 Burmese lived in northern Colorado in response to meatpacking recruitment and employment [103,104]. Today, the presence of refugee and immigrant populations is noteworthy. There are 12,277 foreign born workers in Greeley, representing approximately 10 percent of its population, and 2201 in Fort Morgan, which is roughly 20 percent of its population [105].

Resettlement can have profound impacts on local people, including culture shock as resettled individuals introduce new languages, customs, and foods to rural, conservative communities. Racist discourses from public officials at various scales further undermines integration and condones white supremacy. These differences can create misunderstandings and lead to tension or confusion with local populations [14]. Additionally, reduced federal funding for refugee services in neoliberal capitalism has strained local economies, forcing state and local entities to find new ways to financially support the integrations of new community members [27]. These factors highlight the vulnerability refugees face in new communities and reinforce policy strategies that quickly place refugees in low wage employment to ensure a basic level of self-sufficiency.

#### 4.3. Refugees and Program Limitations: Self-Sufficiency and Job Immobility

A large part of refugee resettlement revolves around job placement. Thus, it is unsurprising that labor “scarcity” in meatpacking, due, in part to immigration raids, is viewed by policy makers and VOLAGs as a viable economic opportunity for refugees that also maintains agricultural production. Placement at the “survival job,” the initial job placement designed to promote economic “self-sufficiency,” occurs within the first 90 days and is often in process before refugees set foot on U.S. soil. Employers are identified within resettlement agencies’ networks. As Lumley-Sapanski [7] (p. 3) explains, “This emphasis on rapid job placement and economic self-sufficiency, present in the Refugee Act of 1980, has been critiqued for its effect on the quality of job placement.” Prior work experiences or preferences are also negated, leading to dissatisfaction and limiting career growth opportunities [106,107].

Emphasis on the “survival” job and economic self-sufficiency frames refugees in terms of potential economic productivity and autonomy from state services, thereby obscuring other vital needs including health care, experiences with culture shock, access to culturally important foods, and education opportunities [27,28]. The end result is that, while the U.S. has the world’s highest rate of job placement for refugees, people resettled to the U.S. have lower quality healthcare, education, and overall integration than other Global North receiving countries [23]. Nawyn [108] argues that emphasis on the “survival job” channels refugees into low-skilled, ethnic niche jobs that perpetuate racialized and gendered hierarchies in labor markets.

Emphasis on refugees’ immediate economic survival and employer needs take priority over the skills and desires of refugees themselves. One NGO official, who identifies as a refugee and came to the U.S. as a child from Ethiopia via a Kenyan refugee camp, explained:

My father was a high school teacher in Ethiopia. He loved teaching and was popular among his students ... when we came here [Colorado] in 2008 he worked at JBS. He lacked the English skills or resources to work toward a teaching career in the U.S.

While this job-skill mismatch is a common experience for refugees [64,109], Lumley-Sapanski [7] found access to English language training has profound effects on long-term economic mobility in the U.S. This holds true in refugees’ experiences in northern Colorado, as they are often recruited in meatpacking positions, which are notoriously hazardous and low-paying, but require little to no English skills. Low pay and long work hours also limit economic mobility and job satisfaction since workers rarely have time and energy to get the additional training they need to find another job. An NGO employee in Greeley explained:

Refugees arrive in the US after long periods of uncertainty. When [refugees] arrive ... they have 3 months of limited assistance to learn English. But who can learn English in three months? Meatpacking is always hiring because of the high



turnover and it pays enough and doesn't require English. Well, it pays enough to keep you alive, but not to get you out of poverty. And they [refugees] have no leisure time, between work and keeping afloat.

While there are other labor options in Weld and Morgan counties, such as fracking and construction (due to rapid population growth and suburban development), refugees often do not have the skills they require, contributing to the racialized labor market segmentation described below. Both construction and oil and gas sectors pay higher wages than meatpacking, creating competition for certain types of laborers (see Table 1). For instance, in 2019, the national average for hourly wage in oil and gas was \$19.85 [110]; the average in construction was \$20.06 per hour. Slaughterhouse and meatpacking, by comparison, paid on average \$14.23/h.

**Table 1.** Average Hourly Wages for Laborers, May 2019.

| Occupation                              | National | Colorado | Weld County |
|---|----------|----------|-------------|
| Slaughterhouse and Meatpacking Laborers | \$14.23  | \$16.10  | _____       |
| Construction Laborers                   | \$20.06  | \$18.09  | \$17.20     |
| Oil and Gas Roustabouts                 | \$19.85  | \$22.21  | \$19.97     |

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wages (2019) [105].

When asked why refugees cannot access higher-paying jobs in oil and gas, one respondent explained:

Few people have their own cars, or speak English. Even applying for the position is daunting and difficult . . . they work at JBS because it's one of few options . . .

Even in a competitive labor market due to construction and oil/gas expansion, refugees possess few job options or negotiating power due to compounding language and resource limitations.

Refugees constantly manage "multiple intersecting crises" in these employment environments, including struggles with food insecurity. Several respondents described Weld County refugees as living in "food deserts" with little access to fresh produce within close proximity of homes. One NGO representative captured the contradiction well:

It's a shame . . . these populations are propping up the entire food system, and many don't have enough to eat.

Several respondents, moreover, noted refugees have difficulty accessing culturally important foods like Halal meat or vegetables. While stories of entrepreneurial success around camel milk and other imports have gained attention in the local media [111], many respondents with knowledge of refugee conditions, identified food insecurity as a continued concern, and work to bolster people's access to healthy foods.

#### 4.4. Resettlement in Times of Institutionalized Islamophobia

Most recently, refugee dynamics have been profoundly impacted by the racist, xenophobic, and anti-Muslim discourses. Anti-Muslim sentiment has been central to the Trump administration's 2017 executive order which sought to restrict or ban people's entry to the U.S., particularly those from Muslim countries. Although the first and second iterations of the ban were struck down by federal judges who found them discriminatory, the Supreme Court upheld the third policy version in June 2018. This decision has dramatically affected people seeking refuge from places like Somalia and Burma. According to data from the U.S. Department of State's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), the average number of Somali refugees arriving to Colorado dropped 98 percent when comparing the post-ban period (2018–2020 federal fiscal years) to the pre-ban period

(2010–2017) [69]. Similarly, the average number of Burmese refugees arriving in Colorado dropped 80 percent in the same period [69] (Figure 1).

According to one respondent interviewed in May 2019, the United States planned to admit a maximum of 18,000 refugees in fiscal year 2020, down from 30,000 in 2019. This is the lowest number of refugees resettled in the U.S. since Congress created the nation's refugee resettlement program in 1980. Global refugee populations, meanwhile, are at an all-time high since World War II [112]. An employee of a refugee assistance organization explained in 2019:

There is primary and secondary resettlement. Primary is the person brought first to the resettlement area. The number of primary refugees is decreasing dramatically because the quota has dropped from 110,000 to 30,000 . . . Greeley is getting 4 people a month. But secondary resettlement [wherein people move autonomously once in the United States] is rising because the low-cost of living.

Currently, secondary resettlement is occurring from Greeley, where JBS is located, to Fort Morgan, about an hour away, which is home to Cargill. Fort Morgan, where cost of living is reduced and refugee recruitment has occurred in meatpacking, has become one of Colorado's most racially diverse towns [105]. Farmers we spoke with, who are all white and have worked land for generations in Weld County, noted changing race dynamics. One farmer near Greeley described the change:

. . . in the meat industry there's all the people from Somalia. Fort Morgan has a big population of them too. Do you know where Fort Morgan is?.... That's where [name redacted] was teaching and 90% of her class was Somalian . . . nothing against any color or anything, but . . . we drove through Fort Morgan and stopped at a light and you see like 50 black kids over there, 50 black kids over there, and there wasn't 50 in the state when I was a kid . . .

While no interviewees, including white farmers, slandered or critiqued Somali or other refugee populations in interviews, NGO representatives consistently noted discrimination—in schools, businesses, social media, etc.—is a real problem in Weld County. This has been substantiated repeatedly in news media [104,113], as well as in lawsuits that document discriminatory practices based on religion [114], or lawsuits on discrimination between different ethnic/racial groups at the meatpacking firm [115]. As Greeley resident, Samuel Adams, stated “We should only let people come in who are willing to assimilate into our culture. Our culture is Judeo-Christian. Their culture is warlord, murdering, lying, pedophile tyrants” [116]. In nearby Fort Morgan, local coffee shop owner Candice Loomis started a 2009 petition urging refugees to leave town [114,117]. In the petition, Somali refugees were described as “lazy freeloaders who refuse to learn English and talk rudely on cellphones” [114]. Equating refugees to terrorists, Loomis goes on to say she is frightened because “it only took a few Muslims to bring down two buildings, and we've brought hundreds of thousands of them here [to the United States]” [114]. The presence of Africans on Fort Morgan sidewalks also resulted in calls to the police for “concerns over safety” and “loitering” [98,114].

It is in these historically conservative and sometimes xenophobic spaces that refugees, and Somalis in particular, are doubly vulnerable to racism and Islamophobia. This targeted violence and discrimination, “cement their [Somalis] understanding of this hostile environment, which has for centuries marked itself as the pinnacle of liberty, and define proactive and empowering ways to negotiate it” [14] (p. 57). As the next section details, NGO actors work to build community and help refugees navigate coalescing challenges.

#### 4.5. Food Organizations and Aid

Despite the many challenges refugees face, various individuals and organizations in northern Colorado work to support refugee and other immigrant populations. Food plays a central role in these efforts. The county's mobile food pantry, for instance, brings produce and meat directly to communities and households that may lack transportation or access. One county official explained:

Policies shift about who can access resources, and how often . . . . USDA sets those guidelines and they can change . . . . Right now people must be at or below 130% of the poverty line [approximately \$1354/month for a one-person household, or \$2311/month for three people] . . . . Refugees are generally able to get food because they have documentation and meet these qualifications.

Scholars have critiqued food aid models as a neoliberal intervention, rooted in white privilege, that do little to address underlying structures shaping inequality, poverty, and farmworker exploitation [118–120]. However, despite the unjust processes shaping poverty and food insecurity in the first place, respondents working in these organizations overwhelmingly felt food aid provides relief for refugee and other families.

Respondents also noted oil and gas companies donate to local food organizations, including much-needed vehicles. Oil and gas companies also fund teacher training in local public schools to help educate students on the “benefits” of extraction [121]. Respondents working in food and community organizations noted the importance of diverse funding sources to reduce reliance on oil and gas corporations. Others worried that, if extraction becomes restricted (by regulation or low commodity prices), companies might become more “conservative” in their donations. Corporate “philanthropy” is not apolitical, but rather strategic in shoring up political support for causes, including controversial industries.

Community-based food projects outside the corporate philanthropy and government models also exist in Weld County. New initiatives aim to help refugees develop their own farming spaces locally, where they can grow their own produce, including products vital to diverse food cultures. Likewise, many refugees come from agrarian backgrounds and have tremendous knowledge about agriculture. As many refugees experience health issues related to food insecurity in resettlement contexts (including micronutrient deficiencies, dental issues, and hypertension), community gardens are of cultural and health importance [122]. Growing food can likewise be therapeutic for refugees who have experienced trauma in conflict settings, and face new challenges (racism, isolation, workplace dangers, etc.) in resettlement contexts [123,124]. While respondents described farming endeavors as in initial phases, they were hopeful that these initiatives would empower refugees and make them less dependent on neoliberal models of food aid.

Provision of food to struggling laborer populations is also situated in broader-scale geopolitical contexts. The Trump Administration’s “trade war” with China resulted in market stagnation for commodities such as corn, pork, dairy, wheat, and soybeans, the producers of which constitute an important Trump voting base [125,126]. As part of a 24.5 billion USD bail-out for U.S. farmers, the Trump Administration purchased approximately 1.3 billion USD in agricultural commodities from U.S. farmers [127]. With few viable markets for these goods, the Administration turned the agricultural products over to “nutrition assistance programs” [125]. Ironically, some of those benefiting from surplus food via Trump’s “trade war,”—refugees and other immigrants, in particular—are the same populations the Administration has slandered through racist and xenophobic Tweets.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in food waste [128] and reduced food donations [129,130] at a time people experienced significant need, one food organization employee explained the lingering impacts of Trump’s trade war with China:

We were receiving so much food that would have gone overseas . . . . pork, dairy, but also some ‘shelf stable’ foods. The crates were lining up and the freezer was bursting at the seams [laughing], plus we didn’t have enough volunteers to help us distribute food. Now that we have more people applying [due to unemployment and economic impacts of COVID-19] I guess we have a surplus . . . . we’ve been able to tap into that when donations reduced [from grocery stores].

In other words, food aid and access for refugees and other laborer populations are situated in geopolitical and economic contexts at global, national, and other scales.

#### 4.6. Building Belonging

Beyond providing food aid, NGOs seek to create a sense of place and belonging for refugees and immigrants. Xenophobia and discrimination have long been an issue for refugees in rural communities in the American West, including Weld and Morgan counties. As previously stated, residents of traditionally conservative, white, rural communities have been slow to accept—and are sometimes hostile towards—resettled refugees, including Muslims [131,132].

Several NGO representatives argued an effective path to overcoming xenophobia is depicting refugees as economic assets who pay taxes, open businesses, and have “purchasing power.” This strategy is also employed at the state level, as seen in a 2018 report released by Colorado’s Department of Human Services, Refugee Services Program that highlights refugees’ contributions to state job and economic growth. These data indicate that refugees contributed significantly to economic growth over a 10-year period (2007–2017), generating 13,200 jobs and over \$6 million dollars in economic activity from new salaries and wages, and over \$2.4 billion in industry activity [68].

Similarly, drawing from Martin Luther King Jr.’s idea of the “beloved community,” one NGO employee explained:

I frame it as these people have purchasing power. If you’re not making an attempt to market to them, not connecting, then you [business owner] are missing out. These people want to go to banks, buy kids clothes, buy commodities . . . It is important to talk about the collective purchasing power these communities have.

In historically conservative places like Weld and Morgan counties, wherein economic discourses of deregulation and privatization often underpin support for local land-uses and politics, this is a strategic move to frame refugees in an economic language embraced and mobilized by rural whites. NGOs and networks of differently situated actors also work to build cross-cultural understanding and empathy among long-term citizens of Weld and Morgan counties. Rather than framing refugee contributions in economic terms, respondents suggest newcomers possess an opportunity to teach county residents about the world. Refugee women work together to produce traditional crafts and foods which are sold at “World Refugee Day” and other events. Other NGO employees worked with local public school teachers to develop classroom curriculum highlighting cultural backgrounds of Somali and Ethiopian students. And one energetic NGO employee organized weekly and informal coffee dates for refugees and Weld county senior citizens. As he put it, these informal conversations—which were attractive, in part, because of the free food provided—destigmatize refugees among the community’s most conservative residents and promote cross-cultural dialogue and exploration. Long-term Fort Morgan residents recognize these efforts as working to break down stereotypes and enriching cross-cultural understandings [133].

Organizations also support refugees and immigrants in learning English. Fluency in English provides economic and career mobility for refugees, thus preventing stagnation in low-paying and dangerous meatpacking jobs. One organization pays stipends to refugees and other immigrants to continue English courses after gaining employment in “survival jobs.” The same NGO is also starting a new program focused on women empowerment through apprenticeships and helping women plan and pursue careers. These approaches place English literacy and economic mobility at the heart of belonging and community acceptance. These methods mirror other programs that NGOs around the United States have employed to assist refugees in holistic cultural integration [108].

Another organization in Greeley focuses on creating a sense of belonging for refugee children and their families through soccer. Through play, kids create community with one another, staff, and volunteers. Coaches and volunteers mentor children and become advocates beyond the soccer field, helping them navigate public school system complexities and difficulties. Expanding on person-to-person connections, this organization also has a mentorship program pairing refugee family with “established” families in the receiving community, thereby enabling cultural exchange, development of English skills and sup-



port. Many local organizations are also involved in World Refugee Day which educates receiving communities about refugee culture and experience through food, music, dance, and film viewings. Organizations overwhelmingly recognize the importance of building interpersonal relationships to establish a sense of belonging.

Additionally, one non-profit seeks to reshape perception and treatment of refugees as “second-class citizens” by using newcomers’ strengths and skills to create welcoming spaces. The organization opened a community center where refugees and immigrants can access resources and engage in activities. The aim of this space is to foster inclusivity and interculturalism by not making English a barrier to participation. Newcomers themselves teach classes, thereby reframing “expertise” and helping build confidence. Past classes include Spanish lessons, piñata-making, cooking, and Zumba.

The Zumba classes in particular seemed to foster connection: participants started meeting before class to socialize and after class they would get ice cream at a nearby immigrant-owned shop. People who previously felt isolated from the larger community built spaces of belonging, starting with the community center and expanding outwards. In overwhelmingly stressful and isolating experiences like refugee resettlement, such connections and spaces make profound differences in the lives of refugees, in fomenting connections among people with similar life experiences and in developing a sense of entitlement and belonging to place. The Executive Director of this particular NGO also explained an activity that seeks to connect immigrants and refugees with the broader community:

[W]e’re also doing art space work with them [refugees and immigrants]. We started doing a project, a mural [at the organization’s office], with some of the high school students from newcomer backgrounds, and then some CSU [Colorado State University] students . . . who were also from newcomer backgrounds. Really tying into that place-making notion that’s going on, like where they are contributing their touch and their own meaning to a space because they contributed to it . . . And hopefully it’s something that [the] city will use too for Main Street, where we could provide that community approach where we bring in different groups and they work around a shared vision for a mural or some kind of art project, and then we create it together.

This approach moves beyond refugees assimilating into their receiving community by learning English and paying taxes, and empowers young folks from “newcomer” backgrounds to transform physical spaces in ways that are culturally meaningful to them. It focuses on the knowledge and talents refugees and immigrants can contribute to place-making efforts that bridge refugees, immigrants, and established residents.

## 5. Conclusions

Broader geopolitical events continuously (re)create segmented and racialized labor markets in northern Colorado, shaping how different types of populations—immigrants, refugees, and minorities—are received and valued at the local level. As higher-paying oil and gas and construction industries expanded, many “established” Latinx workers sought employment in these sectors, contributing to a labor shortage in agriculture that has been further exacerbated by historic levels of federally-driven deportations. Meatpacking industries in Colorado recruited refugee workers—as a cheap and *documented* labor source—to maintain profits in a politically and economically powerful sector.

While refugees are among the most bureaucratically vetted and screened populations in the United States and possess clear legal permission to work, they ironically experience similar workplace harms and discrimination as undocumented immigrants. This is in part due to poorly designed resettlement processes that put economic self-sufficiency above all else. In neoliberal policy environments, the state frames and values refugees in economic terms—economic “self-sufficiency,” and thus autonomy from state services, is prioritized above all, even if achieved via low-wage, hazardous jobs. Rather than helping refugees achieve goals they identify and desire, folks are quickly channeled into “survival jobs,” including hazardous meatpacking positions. While these jobs may provide refugees with

needed wage stability and benefits, they often reflect highly physical work with long hours and little job mobility. These practices are largely reductive, reproducing social divides which undermine processes of integration and well-being.

Furthermore, the counties described in this article are among Colorado's most conservative. In Weld county, Trump won 58 percent of the county's vote in 2020 [134] and 70 percent of the vote in Morgan county [135]. It is thus contradictory that many voters support an Administration that has repeatedly slandered the same populations—immigrants from Latin America, African refugees, etc.—that prop up local industries and the region's largest employers. Various actors, including NGO employees, work to counter Islamophobia and racial discrimination by using economic calculations to value refugees in terms local economic contributions. NGO actors are very much a part of the neoliberal governance of refugee resettlement, as they are the subcontracted arm of the state charged with putting national policies into action at the local level. However, as our work shows, they can also produce sites of belonging and resistance to racist states. Despite their importance in the resettlement process, there has been little focus on the critical role that NGOs play in creating belonging. By focusing on how NGOs in two U.S. counties in northern Colorado help refugees negotiate geopolitical contexts, our paper helps to fill this gap in the literature.

Indeed, the extent to which diverse people and organizations work to help refugees and other migrants access resources such as food, healthcare, women's empowerment groups, Zumba, and build spaces of belonging is remarkable. Despite existing injustices described in this paper, NGO employees, some with intimate, first-hand knowledge of immigrant and refugee experiences, build connections and community in empowering and thoughtful ways that transform rural space and identity over time. It is crucial that when we research the conditions under which injustice occurs, that we also examine stories and examples of the people who seek to build connections and other ways of being despite challenging circumstances. Furthermore, policy and funding interventions aimed at supporting refugees and immigrants must also look to the experiences and expertise of existing local NGOs who are doing the complex work of building bridges between migrant populations and their receiving communities, often in adverse local environments in a neoliberal policy space that offers little funding and few staffed positions.

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