Resettlement and Resistance: A Critique of Classification and Social Domination Using Refugee and Host-Community Oral Histories

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Resettlement and Resistance: A Critique of Classification and Social Domination Using Refugee and Host-Community Oral Histories

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors requirements for the Department of Sociology

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One Google search of the word “refugee” and the screen is immediately populated with images of human struggle. They are often striking depictions of families left destitute by forced relocation. They evoke imagery of suffering and helplessness, suggesting that to be a refugee is to embody a state of impotence. Indeed, it is these pictures of tragedy that capture the hearts of those in distant locations privileged enough to have never experienced displacement themselves.

Given the high definition of these pictures, there exists a unique market just for capturing these perfect moments of vulnerability and stoicism. Consider the famous photograph of Sharbat Gula, for example.¹ Gula certainly captures these descriptors; her green eyes are brought to life by her worn-looking red scarf as she glares directly into the reader. Gula, having been orphaned during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, became a symbol for Afghan displacement when the international community anointed her “the Afghan girl.” The caption of this 1985 issue of National Geographic says it clearly: “Haunted eyes of an Afghan refugee’s fear.” Yet, in such a moment of vulnerability—such a personal close up of Gula’s face—I am taken by how impersonal the message is. Gula, at the time, was a symbol for displaced Afghans and the material hardship they endured. Her presentation on the cover of National Geographic symbolizes a different kind of

¹ Image by Steve McCurry. *National Geographic* (June 1985)
struggle though, one for representation and agency, that is fundamental to the way we think about refugee populations. It is this very issue that I explore in this paper.

As recently as 2018, estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put the number of displaced persons—persons who have been deported or obliged to leave their country or prior national residence (UNHCR)—at 70.8 million worldwide. Of them, there are 41.3 million internally displaced persons, 25.9 million are refugees, and 3.5 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR). Displacement places a critical pressure on the economic and social infrastructure of communities. It is also a cause of profound anxiety—to be physically uprooted is to occupy an enduringly precarious social position. Displaced persons face immediate material concerns: where do they go to find food?; where do they go if they are in need of medical attention?; where are they supposed to live? Accompanying questions of subsistence are longitudinal concerns of positionality. To be displaced is to have one’s way of knowing and interacting with the world—one’s sense of self—radically altered.

A site of several refugee resettlements, Jordan is a country deserving of further examination. Its 10 million citizens consist of native Jordanians, Palestinian-Jordanians, Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis, and smaller ethnic groups such as Circassians, Armenians, and Chechens (Minority Rights Group 2020). Each group’s unique interactions with Jordanian institutions affect how they form a self-conception. For example, Syrian refugees in Jordan have not been

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2 According to the CIA World Factbook, 69.3% of the population is “Jordanian.” Of the remaining 30.7%, 13.3% are Syrian, 6.7% Palestinian, 6.7% Egyptian, 1.4% Iraqi, and 2.6% belong to smaller ethnic groups. Interestingly, this official account does not precisely reflect the local perception of national demographics. I have been told by several Palestinian-Jordanians that Palestinian-Jordanians make up more than half the national population. What makes this official accounting so difficult, then, is the fact that there is no reliable census data for how many people living in Jordan are Palestinian. Really, whether someone qualifies as “Palestinian” depends on how we legally define “Palestinian” in addition to how a person identifies. The World Factbook bases its demographic calculation off of self-identified responses. However, it is not known whether the census-takers were presented with an option to identify as “Palestinian-Jordanian,” or if they were simply presented with broad national categories. This lack of clarity is one of my main queries in this paper.
granted Jordanian citizenship and many are unable to obtain valid work permits. The impact of this policy decision extends beyond concerns of subsistence. In fact, this decision plays a crucial role in informing public rhetoric on Syrian resettlement. Without work permits, some Syrian refugees have pursued employment “off the books.” Public perception of Syrian refugeedom thus consists of conflicting sentiments: while some Jordanians recognize the humanitarian importance of accommodating two million displaced persons, others are less receptive.

Especially for low-skilled host-community members who find themselves competing with Syrian refugees in the job market, refugees come to embody an unwanted other. Alternatively, almost all Palestinian refugees in Jordan, since their displacement in 1948, have been granted Jordanian citizenship. Concomitant with this formal reception, constructions of Palestinian refugeeness incorporate elements of Jordanian citizenship. They feature a symbiosis whereby agents engage an identification as both a Palestinian refugee and Jordanian citizen in a way that is unavailable for Syrians.

These processes came to occupy my curiosity as I studied in Amman, Jordan during the 2018-2019 academic year. As I grew increasingly familiar with the cosmopolitanism of Jordanian society, I began asking questions about what it means to be Jordanian. Slowly, I started speaking with my growing network of Jordanian friends on the topic. I asked them, who is a Jordanian? Their answers varied greatly. When asked which ethnic and national groups in Jordan should be considered refugees, there was rarely a consensus. The more I spoke with Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians about these issues, the clearer it became that notions of belonging are dynamic qualities. As I began recording these conversations and directing my focus towards questions of resettlement, I developed a wealth of data on the human experience of
refugeedom. Through these oral histories, I contextualize several important notes on selfhood, agency, and resistance in the meaning-making of refugeedom.

My conversations emphasized that resettlement is an ongoing project to navigate social space and imposed classifications. And while there are several ways to analyze this process, many scholars of refugee studies contemplate constructions of a “refugee identity.” Scholars of refugee and diaspora communities refer to “identity” as a product of groups’ movement, acclimation, and relative or comparative positions in their new social systems. I often find, however, that scholars take for granted what identity means practically. Surely, every experience of displacement—every traumatic encounter that accompanies one’s forced relocation—engenders a distinct type of identity. Moreover, it is unclear how much of an identity belongs to the identifier. Is an identity an organic form of self-classification, or is it an instrument of a broader regulatory regime (Butler 2008: 365)? What might be lost by relying on identity as the default tool in the refugee studies lexicon to describe how refugees navigate social space?

Whereas scholarship on resettlement uses it to analyze conditions of refugeedom (Shami 1996; Chatty 2009; Achilli 2015; Francis 2015; de Vries 2016; Hynie 2018), such authors take for granted that an audience should understand what a “refugee identity” actually is. As I discuss later, the way we talk about phenomena matters. Just as refugeedom has a long history of ill-suited terminology and definitions, clarifying our language when analyzing displacement is absolutely crucial. Though the shortcomings of “identity” as an analytical tool are partially attributable to linguistic limitations, the semantics are still worthy of critique.

Any further discussion of displacement and refugeedom requires clarification of some terms. “Refugee” is frequently activated by policy makers and international developers, but what exactly is a refugee? According to the UNHCR, a refugee is:
someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries. (UNHCR)

Of particular note is the notion that a person only qualifies as a refugee if they cross an international border. If their displacement does not meet this criterion, they are not formally recognized as a refugee. Those that are forced to relocate but remain in the country of their displacement are considered “internally displaced persons” (IDP). An IDP is:

someone who has been forced to flee their home but never cross an international border. These individuals seek safety anywhere they can find it—in nearby towns, schools, settlements, internal camps, even forests and fields. IDPs, which include people displaced by internal strife and natural disasters, are the largest group that UNHCR assists. Unlike refugees, IDPs are not protected by international law or eligible to receive many types of aid because they are legally under the protection of their own government. (UNHCR)³

The distinction between internally displaced persons and refugees is significant. Like refugees, IDPs are victims of a conflict. Yet, while the material conditions of refugees’ and internally displaced persons’ displacement are equally precarious, they contend with contrasting recognition in the eyes of the international community. From a humanitarian perspective, if the conditions of IDPs and refugees are so similar, there are very few justifications for this semantic distinction. All refugees are displaced persons, but not all displaced persons are refugees. A displaced person is created by their forced relocation, yet a refugee only exists so far as they

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³ It is worth noting that there would appear to be relatively few distinctions between an IDP and persons afflicted by homelessness. In practical terms, internally displaced people are homeless, just as homeless people are internally displaced. By this logic, people experiencing homelessness would also qualify as a type of displaced person. However, the international framework, as outlined by the United Nations and the UNHCR, maintains that one’s classification as an IDP or refugee must meet specific criteria. Mainly, this includes a risk of imminent violence. Under existing conventions, a refugee is a person that has fled violence and/or persecution and has crossed an international border. An IDP is someone that has also been exposed to these traumas, but has simply remained within the country of the conflict. Lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, mental illness, and drug addiction—some of the leading factors of homelessness as outlined by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP 2018)—are thus excluded from this conceptualization of who and what IDPs and refugees are.
meet discriminatory criteria. In addition to the trauma of being displaced, all displaced persons face the added burden of ensuring that their trauma is legitimized by governing bodies. In effect, the project to legitimize their refugeeess ensures their dependency on these bodies to adjudicate their humanity (Butler 2008: 366).

Resettlement is an acutely political act. To resettle and integrate into a new social space is a complex and potentially violent affair. As such, the economic implications of resettlement are often at the forefront of refugee conflicts, forcing policy makers and international bodies to confront questions of how to accommodate so many people. In that case, the decision to construct a refugee camp is a fairly common response. Given their immensity, the functions of refugee camps are a critical area of study across academic disciplines. Refugee camps are established for the most afflicted populations of refugee crises. Camps are not the only response to displacement though. In fact, roughly 75% of refugees reside in urban zones, generally in a neighboring country to which they fled. It should be concerning, therefore, that refugee crises are becoming increasingly common. Noting that the number of refugees has risen from 12 million in 2000 to 20 million as of 2018 (Duffin 2019), refining the ways in which we understand the sociology of language and space in refugee conflicts has never been more important.

When refugees seek refuge, they often find themselves at the very bottom of their new location’s social hierarchy. In the abandonment of one’s property, displaced persons also sacrifice forms of social and cultural capital. New host-communities present unique social

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4 Refugees Studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary field in its own right. Such programs now exist at the University of London, Tel Aviv University, University of Oxford, the City University of New York, and Depaul University to name a few.

5 UN Refugees
environments that displaced persons must quickly navigate. Without a social network or native cultural know-how, displaced persons often assume an estranged position in their new communities. However, sustained marginalization is not a solution to refugee resettlement. As displacement crises are showing no signs of slowing down, there is a danger that millions of additional individuals will find themselves newly disenfranchised in the near future (NRC 2020). We need only look at the horrific rise of armed conflict and political strife in just the last year ten years—the displacement of Yemenis and Syrians (Barnard 2017; Khaled 2020), the fleeing of roughly one million Rohingyas in Myanmar (Chowdhury 2020), and the movement of asylum seeking Central Americans (Martinez 2018)—to conceptualize the growing urgency of refugee studies.

I contribute to this field by using oral history to examine how some individuals experiencing refugeedom understand their social position. Rather than assume that these positions engender a collective identity though, I find “self-understanding” and “selfhood” to be more fitting tools to contextualize a person’s lived experience. Using Erving Goffman’s account of the development of selfhood within total institutions, we can make a more nuanced interpretation of refugee positionality without assuming that any two refugees have an identical experience with their refugeeness. “Selfhood” is not the only word that appropriately captures positionality, but it is one that is well-suited for classical examinations of the power dynamics between institutions and subordinate groups. In fact, the ways that Goffman’s theories on total institutions do not apply to cases of resettlement demonstrate where some of the weaknesses of Western frameworks of domination lie. For all the ways that Goffman’s work is valuable when unpacking social domination, recognizing its limits can further advance how we think about resettlement. I develop this argument more within this paper.
With this in mind, this thesis consists of several components. I begin by examining the refugee label and how it shapes normative discourses of refugeedom. I follow this with a discussion of identity and conceptions of self. Here, I unpack how self-understanding is a useful analytical tool when considering refugee agency. Equipping ourselves with historical literacy with regards to the term “refugee” is integral to any discussion of agency. “Refugee” is not an organic category; it is a political construction that legitimizes the position of the non-displaced. Though the “refugee” category has expanded over the last seventy years, it remains a device to impose political agendas and shape public discourse and, in many cases, is a form of symbolic violence that is frequently accompanied by physical violence and impoverishment.

Adding to the discussion of agency and domination, I examine refugeedom using theories of domination and resistance. I analyze refugee camps through the lens of total institutions. To apply such a lens, we have to establish what refugee camps are, what they look like, and how they function as vehicles of social stratification. Camps come in all shapes and sizes and vary in their degree of formality. Some camps serve as de-facto prisons, while others more closely mirror lively urban localities (UN Refugees). They are structured in order to most efficiently sustain the lives of as many refugees as possible. Camps require, therefore, mechanisms of supervision and control. Yet the formation of space has more than strictly physical consequences—it influences the basis of refugee selfhoods. As the refugee enclave is then the first institution that the refugee is exposed to, it is the context in which they forge a sense of self. This selfhood is lodged in navigations of an other status that is exacerbated by displacement from their host society and entry into a kind of caste system in their new world.

Refugees frequently embody a subordinate social position. This is not to suggest, however, that refugees are necessarily complicit in their own domination. Refugees are often
active agents of resistance. It is important to note here that my use of the word “resistance” will be used interchangeably with “empowerment.” When we say a refugee “resists,” we have to ask, resistance against what? It is my contention that refugee resistance is the project to infuse their own subjectivities into the narratives of their refugeedom. Here, I adopt Elizabeth Cooper’s conceptualization of refugee empowerment: “[it] need not be conceptualized as enabling outright resistance to a negative power of prohibition and/or punishment, but rather to realize positive, creative capacities that may advance the capacities of individuals to achieve various goals” (2007: 115). As a formally and informally othered group, the ways that refugees exercise their agency in their storytelling is how they refuse the regimes that dictate their refugeeeness for them.

Rather than be understood as inept and helpless subjects of displacement, I join a growing number of scholars who challenge normative readings of refugeedom. Found in Appendix A, I highlight three notable studies of refugee resistance that deconstruct western notions of refugeeeness, demonstrating the diversity within and across refugee groups. These studies were crucial in informing my own reevaluation of classification and resistance among displaced persons. Accordingly, I address these issues by using oral history, a fitting methodology that places the subjectivities of a people at the center of their own narrative. In this way, oral history, especially among refugee and host communities, is an important political act. It has prompted me to deeply reconsider normative renderings of refugeeedom and advocate for a refined conceptualization of displaced people. As Peter Gatrell aptly says, “this is not to overlook danger or to romanticize displacement, but rather to do justice to the meanings with which it is imbued and the multiple possibilities that it disclosed” (Gatrell 2013: 252).

Literature Review
What is a Refugee?

A lack of standardization regarding who and what constitutes a refugee is a key weakness of current displacement management. It is easy to conflate terms such as “migrant,” “immigrant,” “displaced person,” and “refugee.” Reflecting this colloquial ambiguity, there has never been a “one size fits all definition” of refugees (Gatrell 2013: 7). Rather, ascertaining what refugees are calls for a deciphering of legal definitions. Given this difficulty, scholars of refugee studies require a term that acknowledges the various refugee policies and practices at the governmental, inter-governmental, and non-governmental levels (Gatrell 2013: 7). As one such analytical tool, the term “refugeedom” is particularly helpful. Its use captures these institutional arrangements and the social complexities of displacement too. When scholars explore refugeedom, they examine the interactions between refugees and institutional structures that constitute a state of refugeeeness.

Despite this interplay, refugee voices are frequently excluded from discussions of their refugeedom. Their absence is chiefly felt in interactions with aid-delivering institutions. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and other entities offering humanitarian relief frequently shy away from empowering conceptions of refugeeeness in favor of more lucrative representations. As the case of Sharbat Gula demonstrates, publishing images of a refugee passivity and suffering sells. In such a blanket belittling of refugees, these depictions entirely deprive them of any discrete individuality. Aid agencies blur the details of refugees’ displacement as they become blended into one “collective category of concern” (Gatrell 2013: 10). It is little surprise, then, that so many commercialized pictures of displaced persons are
simply of women carrying their children, as if this indicates anything distinctly informative about their situation.\footnote{Top left image by UNHCR/Adnrew McConnell (2018). Top right image by UNHCR/H. Caux (2012). Bottom left image by Adrees Latif/Reuters (2019). Bottom Right Image by UNHCR (2016).}

Alternatively, when men are the subject of such media depictions, they are often described as a threat to whatever community is to take them in (Rivera and Werner 2018; Barry 2019).\footnote{Examples that immediately come to mind are Donald Trump’s 2016 denigration of Mexican migrants as “bad hombres,” Viktor Orban and Hungary’s construction of wall on their Eastern border to thwart the arrival of Syrian refugees, and increasingly hostile attitudes in Eastern Germany towards resettled refugees.}

To this phenomenon, Gatrell appropriately writes that “these images are no straightforward snapshots of reality but rather constitute an ‘iconography of predicament,’ which is framed in such a way as to stimulate compassion and loosen wallets. Their timelessness
neither explains displacement nor illuminates refugees’ strategies for survival” (2013: 11). If we were to discern which group are asylum-seekers, which are refugees, which are climate refugees (not officially recognized as refugees under existing official definitions), and which are internally-displaced persons, we would fail miserably. Public uncertainty of what and who displaced people are is exacerbated by depictions of displacement that suggest that distinctions between asylum-seekers, IDPs, and refugees are irrelevant. But conflating these terms accomplishes little other than to crudely universalize conditions of displacement, preventing refugees from inserting their personal humanities into public narratives.

Unclear legal definitions have also contributed to a public ambivalence on refugeedom. Notably, constructions of refugeedom began to change following the rise of new nation-states in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century (Gatrell 2013: 19). Following WWI and various population transfers between states, refugeedom crystalized as a condition of persons removed from their nation of origin. The fallout of WWII also contributed to the development of a refugeedom language. The United Nations quickly identified the need for an international framework for refugee management and formed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR would be an inter-governmental body designed to mitigate the obstacles that refugees face in their resettlement. To do so, the UNHCR drafted its Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951. The Convention, designed to protect persons that had fled their nation, remains the principle framework informing conversations of refugee resettlement and international intervention.

The main goal of the 1951 Convention was to clarify who and what a refugee is. Under Article 1A, refugees are defined as any person who:

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular
social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (1951 Convention)

While this definition established motivations for displacement, its efficacy was hindered by its rigidness. Article 1A strictly recognizes persons displaced before January 1st, 1951 as refugees. By this account, a refugee could only be someone that was European and displaced during the conflicts and aftermath of WWII. As displacement crises became increasingly common during the 1960s and 1970s in the Middle East and Asia, relying on a temporally limiting definition proved to be ineffective. This language was amended in 1967 to remove geographic and time-binding criteria. Despite this amendment, Article 1A still focuses on “persecution” as a leading cause of displacement, yet fails to define “persecution” in the Convention (Maley 2016: 21). The Convention mentions “persecution” in a passive construction, leaving questions of accountability unanswered (Maley 2016: 21). Elsewhere, when the Convention’s language is interpreted strictly, persons fleeing climate change or economic crises are left out of the Convention’s mandate all together. Consequently, the Convention’s imprecise language left more questions than answers during its applications in the mid to late 20th century.

Fortunately, the international community is not entirely dependent on the 1951 Convention’s framework. There are several entities that have provided helpful additions to the refugee definition. The Organization of African Unity (OUA) offers one such framework that is more flexible than the UNHCR doctrine. In 1969, the OUA adopted the Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. Incorporating several sections from the UNHCR’s 1951 Convention, the OUA added that a refugee is any “person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order
in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality” (OUA 1967: 3). Though the OUA’s doctrine operates at a regional level, it importantly recognizes internally-displaced persons in a way that the UNHCR Convention does not (Gatrell 2013: 6).

The OUA is not alone in refining the 1951 Convention. In 1984, several Latin American governments issued the Cartagena Declaration. Contributing to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 amendments, the Cartagena Declaration specified that refugees are “persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order” (UNHCR: 36). Like the OUA’s 1969 Convention, the Cartagena Declaration succeeded in raising visibility around the internally displaced. Whereas the 1951 Convention discussed displacement as a product of persecution, by 1984, the international community made progress in specifying how persecution is perpetrated. In a span of 34 years, the legal notion of a refugee changed from a European who fled their country before January 1st, 1951 due to persecution, to any person, irrespective of time and geography, that was forcibly removed from their homes and country of origin and could not return.

Such rapid alterations to the refugee term are a testament to how quickly the nature of displacement changes. Though violence and persecution dominated the focus of the 20th century, the international community is becoming increasingly familiar with the notion of “environmental refugees.” However, there is yet to be an official revision that incorporates environmental refugees into the UNHCR framework. While a reading of refugee history demonstrates that
definitions are routinely subject to change, the international community cannot afford to be slow-moving. These doctrines and conventions, aided by depictions of refugees’ supposed submissiveness, create an amalgamation of the refugee as a nationless victim of persecution who is unable to ensure their own safety.

However, despite a refugee’s nationlessness, displacement can emphasize a sense of solidarity along national lines. This is especially true among large communities of displaced persons from a close-knit community (Gatrell 2013: 43). In these situations, refugees can frame their displacement along a “common sense of loss and the need for collective effort” (Gatrell 2013: 43). Intragroup solidarity is a way for displaced persons to inject their subjectivities into the refugee term where there is formally none. Thus, while the above conventions resolve some confusion about what refugees are legally, they do not tell us who refugees are subjectively. Facing a fear of erasure, building national solidarity around displacement allows refugees to impart their own narrative into constructions of refugeeeness that are otherwise made for them by the institutions that oversee their refugeedom.

Clarifying the Identity Concept

The inadequacy of language to capture the nuances of displacement is a key difficulty in the analysis of refugeeeness. The reason I rely on a construction such as “refugeeness” is precisely because of this linguistic hurdle. And while it is unlikely that any one word or expression can ever offer a totally satisfactory interpretation of displacement, critiquing the available language is a worthy exercise. Particularly, it is important to ask what words can describe this state of refugeeeness in a way that is both analytically meaningful and accessible outside of academic circles.
“Identity” is a popular choice among scholars studying how people navigate their social environment and interpret their position in it. However, identity is often ill-suited for critical analysis. Specifically, what does it mean to have an “identity?” What exactly does an identity clarify? There is an unbounded number of racial, gender, sexual, religious, and ethnic identities—but how much substantive insight does using “identity” to examine these positions really provide? Judith Butler (2008) writes that an identity “sometimes functions as a politically efficacious phantasm” (2008: 365). It is an expectation of a certain style of performance that is dictated not by an agent but by a regulatory regime (2008: 366). With identities, it is a dominant discourse that produces these meanings, that names and essentializes what is. Yet, how is the agent determined when it operates under the title of an identity (Butler 2008: 366)? What and who are “made manifest and fully disclosed” when they are identified (Butler 2008: 367)? To claim that a person is their performed identity is to “suggest a provisional totalization of [them]” (Butler 2008: 367). In this way, identity restricts as much as it might liberate. Those that are identified must negotiate their dependency on this classification and their refusal of its totalization (Butler 2008: 366).

We encounter this issue when identity is employed to analyze displacement. To say that someone practices a refugee identity offers very little information on the meanings and experiences of their refugeehood. For as much as identity names a collective people, it also omits much of their personhood. With refugees, using “identity” as the medium for critical analysis is to conflate “experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and [self-identification]” into one vague category (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2). It is to totalize the notion of refugee. What is it that refugees indiscriminately share though? The “refugee identity” says that someone is a refugee, but does naming this identity actually address
the conditions of their displacement and resettlement? The answer is often “no”—naming a “refugee identity” merely subsumes a people into one blanket category, creating new expectations for their refugeeess. It is not until a refugee is named “refugee” and assigned a “refugee identity” that the world affirms their existence. Yet, this affirmation of refugeeess is itself an extension of an orthodoxy that says that refugees are without agency and individuality (Butler 2008: 366).

To address this concern, identity has been increasingly critiqued with an intersectional lens. More and more, scholars look at the multiple interacting identities of a person or people rather than a unified one. In these conceptions, identity is conceived as a more fluid classification. The need for intersectionality when studying marginalized groups has made this fluidity necessary. In acknowledging fluidity, researchers analyze a hybridity of identities, how individuals navigate the forces that impose labels onto them, and how individuals refute these meanings (Hatoss 2012: 65). Despite this flexibility, it is unclear how identity offers critical insight into its practitioners’ lives. Simply identifying that identity is a product of human interaction and social context renders us unable to conceptualize identity discretely. Without carefully outlining the particular relationships, narratives, and orientations of an individual, we are left with an undifferentiated tool to analyze someone’s positionality (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 36).

To procure a more differentiated mode of analysis requires that we consider the power dynamics involved in labeling. It is important to discern, for instance, how institutions construct and apply classifications on individuals, and what the implications are for such classification. In the case of displaced persons, the UNHCR has become an agent of classification. As it constructs a refugee definition, the UNHCR naturalizes it as the mode of classification (Bourdieu
1981: 86). It is authorized “to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 15). It creates the refugee label and its concurrent connotations. Refugees were initially European, now they are not geographically bound; refugees used to only be victims of persecution, now there are additional possibilities of victimhood. Yet this process of labeling is not void of struggle—“collective identity contains an unresolved and unresolvable tension between the definition a movement gives of itself and the recognition granted to it by the rest of the society” (Melucci 1995: 48). We might expect, therefore, that there exists a tension between refugees and the institutions that adjudicate their status.

Individuals play a role in meaning-making by pushing back against imposed classifications. In doing so, they employ resistant discourses to propagate their own understandings of self. Alberto Melucci describes this process as the construction of a “collective identity.” And while we still encounter the limits of “identity” as an analytical tool, he appropriately outlines how a group of individuals form self-classifications. Asserting themselves in the negotiation of their classification, individuals “construct” their action by means of ‘organized’ investments: they define in cognitive terms the field of possibilities and limits they perceive while at the same time activating their relationships so as to give sense to their ‘being together’ and to the goals they pursue” (Melucci 1995: 43). Groups practice a reflexivity that is inevitably dynamic—the meanings that the individuals create are constructed and reconstructed with every interaction within the social environment (Melucci 1995: 43). Their renegotiations of collective identity produce a system of classification from which they are able to recognize and generate meaning (Melucci 1995: 46). Molding a collective identity is thus a collaborative process as it accounts for the institutional imposition of meaning and intragroup
discourse (Hatoss 2012: 48). Accordingly, the collective identity framework offers some insight into the negotiations of meaning between an institution and the social agents within it. However, those relying on collective identity as a conceptual framework must be wary of how its applications can be insensitive, and totally blind, to intragroup variation.

“Identification” is another useful construction for studying the way individuals derive meaning from their social positions. Unlike identity, which relies on a generalization of group position, identification requires that we specify the agents at hand (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14). Emphasizing the specificity of the actor helps to disentangle suppositions of “internal sameness” that are often activated when discussing identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14). Brubaker and Cooper continue, “Identification - of oneself and of others - is intrinsic to social life; ‘identity’ in the strong sense is not” (2000: 14). Yet identification too is subject to the sensitive negotiation of power dynamics that are fraught in constructions of collective identity. Mainly, identification lends itself to subtler manifestations of collective meaning-making. Whereas collective identity includes a more active type of performativity, identifications can be constructed overtly, even passively, through public narratives and discourses (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 16). The possibility for anonymity here is especially useful for marginalized persons whose public identification might jeopardize their safety. As it does not discriminate against agents who, out of necessity, passively construct a self-identification, identification is a valuable analytical device for studying positions of refugeedom.

Another useful mode of classification is the notion of “self-understanding.” More than identity, collective identity, and identification, self-understanding focuses on an individual’s “situated subjectivity” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17). Brubaker and Cooper define this type of subjectivity as a “sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and how (given the first two)
one is prepared to act” (2000: 17). There is significant value in emphasizing the subjectivity of the social agent. Primarily, employing self-understanding as an analytical tool prevents us from making assumptions of homogeneity. It accommodates for outliers whose narratives do not neatly fit into the shared conceptions of any one group. A self-understanding grants its practitioners room to practice an individuality that can operate fluidly; it can be congruous with wider group classifications, or it can repudiate them. It is not bound geographically or temporally to social membership nor to the necessity of performativity. And, it affords the possibility for individual agency in classification where identity or collective identity do not. For these reasons, self-understanding is currently the best tool to unpack the applications and internalizations of refugee classification.

**Spatial Domination and Its Implications**

Refugee studies has much to draw from sociology. As part of their training, sociologists critically analyze the social structures and systems that perpetuate inequalities. Sociologists equipped with these skills are able to employ a “theoretical leverage” and deconstruct the official definition of refugees (Fitzgerald and Arar 2018: 397-399). Social theories of domination and resistance are especially germane to refugeedom. When states are met with the task of handling displaced persons, they consider how integration will affect their economic, social, and political stability. Host-community concerns about refugees are often elevated during times of instability. Host communities can, for example, grow to understand potential competition in the job market as a notable source of conflict (Ruisi 2019: 4). Anxiety over how population spikes will affect the quality of public education, housing, access to natural resources, and social services are particularly important to note (Francis 2015: 6-7). Given this task, states often find that in order
to protect the security and emotions of its citizenry, a refugee camp separating refugees from society is the most efficient strategy for preserving national stability (Turner 2015: 394). States, here, consider how the integration of low-capital persons might shock the class divisions of their society. Building a camp can then be understood as a juridical response to slowly introduce demographic change and reduce the possibility of class upheaval between host-communities and vulnerable resettling populations (Gramsci 40).

Competition over resources can disrupt a host population’s embrace of refugees. Threat perception is influenced by an individuals’ vulnerability; low socioeconomic status host populations are an example of a demographic whose perception of threat is significantly high (Hynie et al. 2018: 268). Refugees’ entrance into a community would most affect the perceived security of this group. As vulnerability affects a willingness to share resources, local populations can frame their situation as a struggle against their own disenfranchisement (Francis 2015: 3). A complicated interaction between refugee groups and host communities can transpire where “attitudes and behaviors in favor of (vs. against) refugees may be interpreted as the willingness (vs. reluctance) to share collective resources with refugees” (Bohm et al. 2018). A state’s decision to establish a refugee camp is often inspired by these economic considerations.

Camps typify a space that isolates refugees from the wider community. In this way, there are important parallels that can be drawn between most refugee camps and “total institutions.” The concept of total institutions, as developed by Erving Goffman (1961), describes an institution whose infrastructure is predicated on the isolation of a “large number of like-situated individuals” (1961: xii). Individuals in such an establishment are tangibly cut off from the public. Similarly, an institution qualifies as “total” when individuals undergo “all the aspects of [their] life on the premises in the close company of others who are similarly cut off from the
wider world” (Goffman 1961: 203). Spaces such as mental hospitals, prisons, and even some schools are all fitting examples. These spaces prevent outside influences from permeating their walls, marking an intentional effort to create a policed space (and time) that is largely inaccessible to the outside world.

Many refugee camps closely meet this geospatial criterion of total institutions. A camp, like a total institution, is established in order to accommodate a group that is otherwise unable to ensure their own security and who might also pose a threat to the host community (Goffman 1961: 4).

Accordingly, refugee camps are typically located in geographically removed plots of land that are accented by the presence of a physical barrier. Yet, to erect a wall is as much a symbolic choice as it is architectural. It is to denote inhabitants as politically and physically incongruous with the public (Dalal et al. 2018: 65). To contextualize this conversation with visual aid, we can look at Za’atari refugee camp in northern Jordan as an example.⁸ Za’atari is defined by its clear

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⁸ Image from Nina Berman: [http://www.ninaberman.com/zaatariinside-these-walls](http://www.ninaberman.com/zaatariinside-these-walls)
allocation of space—its tangible borders, decorated with lopsided barbed wire, constitutes the border that separates the camp’s Syrian refugees and the nearby northern municipalities.\(^9\)

Za’atari camp, now the fourth largest city in Jordan, hosts upwards of 76,000 refugees (UNHCR).\(^10\) That is 76,000 like-situated individuals who are kept detached from the outside world.

The visual contrast of space is a telling feature of Za’atari camp’s “total” quality. As demonstrated by the second image, there is a clear physical demarcation that indicates Za’atari camp’s refugees’ isolation. Note that there are only two roads in and out of the camp and the barrenness of the surrounding landscape. Clearly, the camp was architecturally imagined to restrict foreign contact as much as possible. With barbed wire-clad walls, Za’atari camp certainly does not scream of humanizing accommodation for humans experiencing psychological trauma. Its glaring restriction of movement suggests a prison-like quality that is integral to the camp’s control of its residents (Olivius 2017: 297). The creation of space in such a way facilitates the institution’s surveillance of its inhabitants’ daily lives (Goffman 1961: 7; Olivius 2017: 291). Even in the absence of security cameras or guards, refugees find themselves contained by the camp’s architectural constraints. Incessant monitoring, or “constant sanctioning interaction from above” (Goffman 1961: 38), thus becomes integral to the camp’s handling of refugees.

Camp residents shape their lives around this spatial orientation. A camp’s restrictive social world is the basis of reality for refugees. In this experience, camps engender a sense of collective selfhood (Goffman 1961: 148). When a camp acts as a “total institution,” it sets

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\(^9\) Image from planet.com: [https://www.planet.com/gallery/zaatari-camp/](https://www.planet.com/gallery/zaatari-camp/)

\(^10\) Of Za’atari camp’s 76,000+ residents, almost 20% are under the age of five. As of 2019, 29% of local households were female headed. More than 13,000 residents have Jordanian work permits, 19% of which are women. There are more than 18,000 children enrolled across 32 schools (UNHCR).
normative expectations on refugee behavior (Scott 1991: 4). Likewise, the conditions of a refugee’s integration are set by the policies that structure their lives (Hynie 2018: 268). And in the case of refugee camps more specifically, it is the very policies and camp infrastructure that constructs the social world that refugees engage with. The social and political infrastructure of a refugee camp creates the subjects who inhabit it. If the conditions of a camp include total isolation, the refugee comes to embody an inmate of sorts—a person bound to their institution (Goffman 1961: 7). As de facto inmates, they are seemingly powerless to reject the regulations of their social world (Scott 1991: 76). For an institution to define a refugee as “other” is to make them other. We can understand this meaning-making, the process of lending institutional meaning to certain bodies, as a classification struggle.

If we recall from Pierre Bourdieu (2018), classification is a dynamic social process. It is the product of social conflict wherein victors are empowered to shape a common sense (Bourdieu 2018: 52). In essence, it is a battle over the right to naturalize one’s visions and classifications of the world (Bourdieu 2018: 86). This battle over meaning-making centers around clashes of constitutive power. Constitutive power, referring to a group or person’s ability to impose meaning, is a metric of one’s faculty to dominate. Thus, the imposition of meaning is greatly relevant to refugees whose social world is by all means constituted for them. In a conversation of the power to impose meaning, the refugee camp administration is afforded unwavering legitimacy in their dictation of common sense. Especially in cases where states are not signatories of international refugee conventions such as the UNHCR 1951 Convention (Jordan, for example), they are granted total control in determining the terms of their refugee camps (Hynie 2018: 266).
The constitutive power to project meaning onto refugees is what constitutes camp-bound refugees’ social world. Consequently, who is construed as a “political other,” and who has the power to construe in the first place, is rooted in this question of power and separation (Horvath and Amelina: 4). As the refugee becomes cognizant of their lived stratification, they internalize their ascribed subordinate status. From this understanding, the “refugee” label encapsulates the refugee’s otherness, embodying a derogatory quality that informs the synthesis of refugee selfhood.

Refugeedom, so radically different than the social and political life of refugees before their displacement, strips refugees’ prior world from them. The restructuring of everyday life reshapes refugees’ conception of self. When a camp enforces isolation and control over the refugee, it redefines refugees’ orientation to the social world. The refugee camp—from the very first day it absorbs refugees into its social system—initiates a “curtailment of self” (Goffman 1961: 14). Curtailed are the refugees’ preceding orientations and relationships that informed the basis of their selfhood. Prior to institutionalization, these relationships were a beacon in refugees’ effort to navigate their social reality; they were the social things that reassured them of who they were. Stripped of such relationships though, a new sense of self emerges that is marked by arranged isolation (Goffman 1961: 148; Scott 1991: 76; Hynie 2015: 271). Refugee selfhood is exacerbated by interactions with the camp infrastructure which demarks them as incongruent with the national setting (Olivius 2017: 291; Ayham, et al. 2018: 65). As a result, refugees develop a sense of self that is entrenched in their vilification.

This stratification is internalized by refugees. In Goffman’s analysis of selfhood, he noted that “the self arises not merely out of its possessor’s interactions with significant others, but also out of the arrangements that are evolved in an organization for its members” (Goffman
Whereas we might think of selfhood as something cultivated independently, we must consider the social conditions from which selfhood arises. The “self in this sense is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed,” but instead emerges according to the existing social structures of an environment (Goffman 1961: 168). The institution wages a careful project to assimilate the inmate/resident into its social world. A total institution with clear barriers, like that of Za’atari camp, is the first experience with curtailment of self that the refugee understands (Goffman 1961: 14). One’s shift in status from person to inmate is catalyzed by the physical reality of their practical internment. This institutional arrangement yields the emergence of a new selfhood that is informed by one’s relationship to their dominators and their like-situated associates (Goffman 1961: 148).

Curtailment of self is further exacerbated by material deprivation. Seeing as though movement requires that refugees travel light, to seek refuge necessitates the abandonment of most private property. If this is the case, then, one’s shelter within the camp is likely the only basis of private property that a refugee family has to claim as uniquely theirs. Yet, where camp shelters are mass created and identical to one another, refugees might grow to understand that their domestic space does not truly belong to them. Rather, it functions as a type of substitute possession (Goffman 1961: 19). As the refugee is either stripped of or has lost their old private property, the

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11 Image by Leslie Young/Global News (2014)
total institution makes an effort to replace their possessions. However, these replacement items are notably standard issue—they are “uniform in character and uniformly distributed” (Goffman 1961: 19). While Za’atari camp tries to accommodate its refugees by issuing necessary substitute possessions, the uniformity of these possessions emphasizes the refugee’s dispossession. Uniformity of experience and of property yields an inevitable understanding that the self no longer belongs to the individual, but to the institution. Surely, the refugee, and their decedents born into the camp setting, confronts the urgency of the question—what is actually mine?

Refugee selfhood is characterized by such dispossession. From it, refugees construct a dynamic sense of self entrenched in the navigation of marginalization (Fitzgerald and Arar 2018: 398). Their position is imposed on them and formally requires that they develop a sense of self that adheres accordingly (Scott 1991: 76). A normative expectation for refugee behavior is thereby fashioned, setting a rigid and routinized expectation for self-expression. When a heightened severity of institutional barriers sets the boundaries of everyday life, subjects are cognizant that their authentic sense of self is sacrificed (Scott 1991: 110). A shared sense of self, and the loss of authentic selfhood, is thus woven into this experience of collective marginalization at the hands of the institution (Goffman 1961: 168).

This process can also be understood through the lens of a “moral career.” In his exploration of total institutions, Goffman noted that the moral career of a person “involves a standard sequence of changes in [their] way of conceiving of selves, including, importantly, [their] own” (1961: 168). The moral career is shaped by the social institutional procedures that reorient the person and the way they view their world (Goffman 1961: 168). In such a dynamic, selfhood and a moral career live within the institutional system. The self is ascribed a moral
quality as it develops according to the dominating social system and its regulations. Rather quaintly—“the self in this sense is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him” (Goffman 1961: 168). Morality, in this way, exists to the extent that individual behavior conforms to expectations for performativity. Because the total institution’s efficacy is contingent on the consistency of everyday life, the moral career is the institution’s way of routinizing all things.

Where residence in a camp like Za’atari constitutes a social world, the moral career of refugees is rather rigid. Selfhood, as it is constituted for them, is a question of performativity—how does the refugee meet the expectations of their “refugeeness?” Do they interact with the social system in a way that confirms their refugee status? In other words, do they engage the social world in a manner that is consistent with their camp’s ascribed moral career? As the camp dominates the refugee’s life, it presumes that refugees will practice a selfhood that legitimizes their powerlessness within the institution and society at large.

This notion, however, only accounts for a top-down reading of selfhood. How else might refugees experience themselves and their moral careers within the institutional setting? As structures designed to control bodies, refugee camps are aptly equipped to outline a refugee moral career. Yet, how might institutionalized selfhoods be refuted by refugees? In spite of this institutional arrangement, how do refugees undermine expectations of their performativity? In order to answer this question, we must adopt an understanding of selfhood that is not exclusively top-down. The ways that a selfhood might be forged bottom-up is an area of study that leaves much to unpack. Surely, an institutionalized selfhood is not the only way refugees navigate the social world. It is necessary, therefore, to consider how articulations of refugee resistance might
inspire a rejection of institutionalization. Or, at the very least, how might resistance challenge the totality of the institution. In the case of marginalized persons of all kinds, to ignore the possibilities of their resistance to social domination would be to deprive them of their humanity. For us to conceive of camp-bound refugees as institutionalized agents alone is to deny them of an existence outside their institutional setting.

**Resistant Refugee Selfhood**

Shared experiences and selfhoods facilitate a camaraderie among the institutionalized. The total institution’s effort to routinize life creates a unique cohesion between like-situated persons. After all, to engender a collective selfhood is to create the collective; it is to create the basis of existence for a social group and thus to create the social group. Therefore, a collective curtailment of selfhood might also yield a concomitant kindling of tight interpersonal connections and political appetite (Olivius 2017: 293). It is crucial to recognize how group experiences of disenfranchisement in a refugee camp may cultivate solidarity in the negotiation of new selfhoods.

Solidarity is important for the empowerment of marginalized groups. It has notable implications for resistance and selfhood (Goffman 1961: 58). Conceptions of self derive from the way a person fits into a social relationship, but also in the ways people “resist the pull” (Goffman 1961: 320). Whereas a sense of being emerges according to one’s interaction with the social world, selfhood can be explored through the rejection of this world as well (Goffman 1961: 320). That is, a refugee’s sense of self is predicated on the labels imposed onto them in addition to their resistance to the labels (Perdigon 2015: 89). Consequently, it seems that camps would breed a selfhood embedded in a unified subculture of resistance (Scott 1991: 134-135).
Here, the word “resistance” should be understood within the context of the refugee’s restricted mobility, both geographically and in the ways they are allowed to assert their individuality. In this way, any refugee’s construction of selfhood is rooted in lived dualities. On one hand, refugees are assigned material conditions and labels that tell them who they are in relationship to the host-community. And yet, refugees also repudiate the terms of this classification.

One source of tension within this refusal is the issue of power. For as valuable as Goffman’s lens is in refining our reading of social domination and resistance, there lies a lingering question of whether it acknowledges systemic inequalities that also impact the way certain people can “resist the pull.” Naturally, not all persons situated within an institution have an identical capacity for resistance. For example, how might race, gender, sexual orientation, class background, religious identity, and any other form of social identification influence the degree of access that someone has to a course of resistance? In the case of refugees, we might consider how the terms of resistance for refugee women differ from refugee men (Indra 1987; Gerver and Millar 2013). Indeed, a fair critique of the total institution lens is that these issues of social stratification might not seem to be immediately reflected in the framework. However, this critique presumes that social life exists in the total institution as it does outside of it, that the meanings of one’s identification bear the same significance within the institutional universe as they did outside its walls. Rather, a total institution strips these identifications in its effort to curtail its subjects’ prior selfhood. The total institution creates its own subjectivities that function within its institutional social world. While individuals inside a total institution construct their own selfhoods, they do so within the boundaries of the total institution they inhabit.

Resistance, then, has a spatial requirement. It is limited to the space and props that exist within the confines of the institution. As a result, any form of resistance within a system of
social domination requires a domain to wage subversion. Resistance cannot operate without social and/or physical space that is at least partially free from institutional oversight (Scott 1991: 123). Free space is requisite for resistance, offering individuals “a feeling of relaxation and self-determination, in marked contrast to the sense of uneasiness prevailing” in the day-to-day confines of a rigid refugee camp (Goffman 1961: 231). To resist the camp infrastructure is to reestablish the terms for a refugee’s social position in the world. Free space opens the possibility for an authentic exploration of selfhood in a way that is wholly impossible under the all-pervasive scrutiny of a total institution.

To carve out free space is an oppositional maneuver. In fact, it directly opposes the total institution’s infrastructural objective to routinize and moderate all facets of daily life. The total institution exists to delimit the potential for self-determination. The very existence of space free from institutional oversight would jeopardize the total institution’s domination. Accordingly, free space is fought for and won by members of a subordinated group (Scott 1991: 119). It is attained only when the subordinated group rejects elements of their disenfranchisement. Combatting the total institution is dangerous though. Because of this, resistance materializes in necessarily subtle ways. This recognition challenges classical images of refugees as powerless actors (Cooper 2007: 111). Instead, refugees must be understood as agents who actively “negotiate their relationships, activities and ways of knowing the world” in their mission to reconstruct social space and redefine their selfhood (Cooper 2007: 111).

Free space is often won using a “hidden transcript.” This theory of resistance has the potential to enrich the study of refugees and their negotiation of power dynamics. The hidden transcript of a subordinated group is the “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders… [It] consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices
that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 1991: 4-5).

However, it is not limited to resistances that only happen when the dominators are not looking. In fact, many successful forms of resistance exist in plain sight but are simply not recognized by members of the dominant group. These subtler resistances are an expression of an “undeclared ideological guerilla war that rages” within a dominant discourse (Scott 1991: 137). They include rumor, gossip, disguise, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, and anonymity—all of which are gestures that hide cryptic political messages of a subordinated group (Scott 1991: 137). The hidden transcript thus highlights the disguised dissident acts that challenge the dominant group’s position of power that is naturalized by the “public transcript” (Scott 1991: 20)—the set of normative behaviors that reinforce the dominant group’s values (Scott 1991: 4). The authors of the public transcript thus dictate the terms of public engagement between them and the subordinate group.

Within the context of refugeedom, we can understand the public transcript as the normative script for interaction between refugees and their camp/host-community. The public transcript assures refugees’ obedience in order to protect the social infrastructural integrity of the camp. In the eyes of the camp institution, the camp cannot successfully control its residents without a discourse that legitimizes its jurisdiction. Without assurances of their control, the camp would be unable to deliver aid to the refugees that live within their walls. Efficiency is paramount here. The public transcript thus ensures that intra-institutional interactions run smoothly.

The public transcript of refugeedom is critical to any reading of resettlement. It highlights the terms of interaction between a socially dominant host-community and an often subordinated refugee population. It is a reflection of all the social systems and impositions of
meaning that tell a resettling community who they are and how they must present themselves. Consequently, any responsible reading of the politics of resettlement must consider not only how refugees interpret this expression of social domination, but how they refuse it. The artful deployments of resistance embedded in a marginalized group’s hidden transcript are often inaccessible to a non-local eye. The hidden transcript’s efficacy relies on its ability to remain unrecognizable. As a result, uncovering the hidden meanings of these resistances requires that scholars interact directly with its practitioners. Engaging with the agents of this resistant discourse is the only way, then, to appreciate the self-determined meanings of their positionality.

**Methodology**

Fittingly, oral history is one methodology that captures this necessity. For this thesis, I use oral history to analyze the process of resettlement and integration in Jordan. I conducted oral history interviews with nine individuals in Jordan during the 2018-2019 academic year. Jordan’s history as a host of different ethnic and national groups was well represented among my narrators: I recorded the oral histories of five Palestinian-Jordanians (three of whom live in a camp), four native Jordanians, and one individual from a Palestinian-Jordanian and Palestinian-Syrian background. Though my initial interest was in gathering narratives from Palestinian-Jordanians, it became clear that narratives from the host-community would be required as well. As refugeeeness is an ongoing project of meaning-making by both refugees and the communities around them, native Jordanians play an active role in shaping refugeeeness.

Though the data collection for this project happened during spring 2019, I did not begin writing this thesis until my Political Domination and Consent senior seminar at Dickinson College in fall 2019. I spent much of that senior seminar contemplating the theoretical lenses
that best fit discussions of refugeedom. This resulted in an exploration of the consequences of physical space for refugee agency and resistance. Specifically, I examined how camps inform constructions of a refugee’s self-conception, and inversely, how refugees refute institutionalization. Much of that discussion of space, agency, and resistance finds its way into this paper. I situate those conversations in the literature review with significant additions and revisions. Where the seminar paper was solely a case study analysis, I rely on oral history in this project to add more personalized narratives. Oral history allowed me to listen to the current experiences of persons affected by displacement and contextualize them within theoretical frameworks of self-understanding, domination, and resistance.

**Understanding Oral History**

Marella Hoffman outlines the uses of oral history in refugee conflicts in *Practicing Oral History Among Refugees and Host Communities*. I owe much to this book on account of its thoroughness and direct relevance to my project. The oral history method’s effectiveness comes from its participatory approach where stakeholders (the project’s participants) actively pilot the history-telling process (Hoffman 2019: 8). By placing the stakeholder at the front of the historical narrative, oral history offers utility to a variety of academic and professional disciplines. It is widely being incorporated into legal proceedings, policy decisions, media broadcasting, and therapeutic interventions to trauma (Hoffman 2019:10). In all of these cases, oral history practitioners forge a dialogue with their narrators—the individual telling their story—to procure an honest account of a historical event from the narrator’s perspective.

Where oral history distinguishes itself from other forms of qualitative research is in the centrality of the narrator. In doing so, oral history ensures that there is:
• Genuine power-sharing in the interview process;
• Transparent publishing and archiving of all transcripts;¹²
• A thorough framework of ethical protections for narrators at all stages;
• Some ownership of the finished products and positive outcomes for narrators.  
(Hoffman 2019: 42)¹³

Compared to more structured interview models, oral history enables narrators to guide the story-telling. It is not the oral history interviewer’s position to uncover every minute detail of the narrator’s life, but to listen to the important components as identified by the narrator. Whereas other forms of qualitative research grant the researcher unequal power in the data collection process, the power-sharing dynamic in oral history promises that the storyteller remains central to the narrative they are graciously providing (Hoffman 2019: 100).

Although oral history distinguishes itself from other research methods, it follows the same ethical principles. Informed consent, whereby the narrator understands how any information they provide will be used and shared, is a necessity with any form of interview. In order to receive informed consent, communicating with the narrator in the narrator’s language is required. Moreover, the oral history interviewer must explain who they are, their project and its intent, and what role the narrator will play in the research process (Hoffman 2019: 106). An emphasis on security is also important, especially for vulnerable communities who may be putting themselves at risk by broadcasting their opinions. Data protection plays an important role and it is incumbent on oral history interviewers to make sure that their interview recordings and transcriptions are stored securely and will be discarded appropriately. Oral history serves as a useful tool for researchers when employed methodically and ethically. Yet, oral history is a

¹² Recordings will be kept safely archived along with all transcripts.
¹³ This last note is slightly more difficult to ensure in my case. Because this thesis is written in English, it would be impossible to share a rough draft with my Arabic-speaking narrators. It would be equally impossible to translate the work for them given the allotted time. However, my hope is that this project encourages readers to challenge their own preconceived notions of who and what refugees are. While a more intangible outcome, shifting the way we conceive of refugeedom to include dignifying representations is a positive outcome nonetheless.
flexible methodology and its applications should vary according to the narrators’ needs. As a result, an oral history with refugees requires its own careful considerations.

**Understanding Refugee Oral History**

As the title of Hoffman’s book suggests, there are a variety of histories to be told in any refugee crisis. Broadly, there are refugees and non-refugees. Beyond such a binary, there is a range of experiences, histories, and conceptions of self. Just as there is multiplicity embedded in the “refugee” label, a host-community is comprised of diverse narratives. An oral history of refugeedom must account for these voices, then, in addition to refugees. Critically engaging the meaning-making of refugeeeness requires that the voices of non-refugees, who play passive and active roles in meaning-making, are heard. To this extent, oral history, especially on refugeedom, is inherently a political act—it is a way for both researcher and narrator to craft a narrative that likely challenges normative political frameworks rooted more in conjecture than in refugees’ own actualities.

Oral history interviewers must be empathetic to the host community’s unique attitudes. Empathy is required if the researcher is to build a nuanced understanding of how host populations interact with refugees. Frequently, and especially in host-communities in developing countries like Jordan, host-communities can feel overshadowed by the attention that recent migrants are given (Hoffman 2019: 27). When heard, host-communities can provide insight into how they have been affected by the arrival of displaced persons and how interventions can be made to best accommodate all parties. To this extent, there are several questions to think about when recording host-community oral histories. For example, a

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14 This orientation to social research closely follows Max Weber’s “verstehen,” or empathic understanding.
researcher must consider what the site of refugee resettlement looked like prior to refugee integration. This includes accounting for the host-community’s needs and issues before the arrival of refugees. Equipped with this understanding, the researcher is then in a position to ask how refugee resettlement has impacted a host community. And, they might ask how efforts to address some of the challenges of resettlement have failed to confront these issues. Finally, the researcher must consider how much host communities are bearing the burden of helping refugees, and how much they are being supported themselves. (Hoffman 2019: 74).

Investigating refugees’ narratives requires a meticulous approach. Refugee oral histories must provide a safe space for honest self-expression. Doing so allows refugees to share their stories and unpack their trauma safely. Trauma is particularly important to consider here and can be broken down into four stages:

1. The trauma that drove them from their home;
2. The traumas of the refugee journey;
3. The stress of ‘arriving’, if they are lucky, at their hoped-for destination and applying to be allowed to stay, even temporarily;¹⁶
4. The momentous challenge of rebuilding a new life there from scratch, if they are one of the small minority given asylum. (Hoffman 2019: 100-101)

No two refugees experience these stages equally. Nor is it necessary for refugees to have experienced all four stages at all. Exploring these traumas requires that the oral history

¹⁵ This last point was particularly salient in my experience. Though my primary interest is displaced persons’ experiences with relocation and resettlement, I was quickly intrigued by the ways that the host-community understood the material and emotional costs of refugee integration. This was more pronounced with regards to the recent Syrian refugees rather than the Palestinian-Jordanians who have been in the country for up to 70 years. On the Syrian newcomers, some of my narrators shared a dismay that some Syrians receive monetary aid from international organizations while also allegedly squeezing native Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians out of local resources. For instance, a couple of my narrators shared with me that Syrian refugees are able to work at a lower wage than native Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians because they can rely on international aid to supplement their income. These narrators felt that they were being undercut for job opportunities by a population that is already receiving monetary benefits, leaving them without local resources and outside support.

¹⁶ It is worth noting here that the “stress of arriving” does not exactly apply to the individuals that I spoke with. Because they were all born in Jordan, none have actually experienced physical displacement in their lifetime. For the Palestinian-Jordanians that I spoke with, they are second and third generation displaced persons. However, this does not mean that the difficulties associated with resettlement are not woven into their daily lives. Particularly, the paradox of a permanent refugee camp is one source of tension that I will explore.
interviewer consistently practice an empathic understanding of hardship, taking care to allow the refugee narrator to be in control of their history-telling.

As helpful as Hoffman is for her work on designing oral history projects with refugees and host-communities, not all individuals fit so cleanly into these categories. Specifically, places with long histories of resettlement complicate the refugee/host-community dichotomy. Palestinians in Jordan reflect this dilemma. Are Palestinians who were born, have grown up, and started families in Jordan still refugees, or are they part of the host-community? In what ways are they both? I demonstrate that the Palestinian-Jordanians I spoke to do not identify with the term “refugee.” Even so, many former Palestinian refugee camps that have become bustling urban localities still bear the word “camp” in their name. Given the strong sense of injustice and desire to return to Palestine among Palestinians in Jordan, their “refugee” status is enduringly unclear.

This lack of clarity has been complicated by the Syrian refugee crisis. Since 2011, more than 670,000 Syrians have registered as refugees in Jordan (World Food Program USA). Despite the existing uncertainty surrounding Palestinian-Jordanians’ own refugee status in Jordan, the entrance of Syrian refugees has turned them into a host-population. Syrian refugees have settled in rural townships and in urban centers; they have also entered the workforce, occasionally competing with Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians. For all the ways that Palestinian-Jordanians are still resettling in Jordan, the arrival of a newer refugee community emphasizes that they are host-community members too. As a result, my oral histories with Palestinian-Jordanians required that I treat them both as refugees and as a host-community. The dual pressure of being a part of a refugee community and a host-community has important consequences for Palestinian-Jordanians’ self-understanding in Jordan. In this case, it required
that I consider 1) the historical trauma that Palestinian-Jordanians experience as being a displaced group; 2) how their experience as part of the host-community throughout Syrian refugees’ resettlement might induce its own frustrations; 3) how the interplay between these two positions might further exacerbate the difficulties of Palestinians’ displacement.

My Personal Oral History Process

My oral history project followed an unusual chronology. Though I am engaging this study for the completion of a senior thesis, my research process began in spring 2018 during my sophomore year. As a sociology major and Arabic language minor, finding a way to merge my specializations was important for me. To do so, my plan had always been to study abroad in Jordan (the main study abroad location for undergraduate Arabic learners). Recognizing that executing data collection for a senior thesis during a junior year abroad is not a traditional route by sociology students at Dickinson, I consulted a sociology faculty member for advice. Together, we worked through my early academic curiosities in the Middle East, recognizing that these would most certainly change once I began my ten-month stay in Jordan. Noting that I did not have a research question nor specific research focus at that point, we decided that I would delay submitting a project for IRB approval.

Upon arriving in Amman, my plan was to develop my language skills in colloquial Arabic while exploring potential areas of interest. I wanted to conduct some form of interviews with local community members, so improving my spoken Arabic in the regional dialect was a necessity. I felt that being accompanied by a translator would only emphasize my foreignness as yet another Western scholar writing about the Middle East. Though Jordan is home to a heterogeneous demography, I recognized that my physical presence would stand out and might
not always be wanted. I was conscious, for example, that me being a non-Muslim white person might make some Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians uncomfortable, especially if I was asking them to open up about sensitive social or political issues. I was particularly conscious of this dynamic when I entered Baqa’a camp. Baqa’a camp relies on UNRWA, the body designated to oversee Palestinian resettlement, for necessary social services. However, in late 2018, President Trump slashed the U.S. annual contribution to UNRWA from $360 million to $60 million. In 2019, the US again cut its contributions, this time down to zero. Such drastic cuts have left UNRWA struggling to meet its annual budget of $1.2 billion. Schools and healthcare have noticeably suffered since the financial constraints. Therefore, as an American, I was initially concerned that my presence might be associated with the urgent financial concerns that the U.S. government has now created for the local community (Reinl 2019). To speak the regional dialect proficiently was therefore requisite should I be able to create meaningful connections with the locals with whom I would interact.

Early in my time abroad, I grew interested in Jordan’s history as a site for refugee resettlement. I began to wonder how the country has changed following generations of integration. Similarly, I wondered what constituted Jordanianess. I was surprised to hear, for example, that Jordan had granted citizenship to nearly all Palestinian refugees since 1948 (with some exceptions). A policy embracing refugee integration on such a large scale seemed at odds with global stances towards migrants that have grown to be increasingly more insular. I decided that I wanted to examine the process of Palestinian refugee integration in Jordan. I wondered how Palestinians in Jordan might form a self-understanding—are they Palestinian or Palestinian-Jordanian?; do they consider themselves to be refugees despite having settled in Jordan for decades? I consulted back with the sociology faculty member and we decided that in order to
start exploring these questions, I should start speaking with members of the local community. If possible, I should ask to record these conversations. Naturally, this required that I receive informed consent.

I did not begin scheduling conversations until the spring 2019 semester. At this point, I had developed a strong proficiency in colloquial Arabic (ACTFL-certified Advanced-High) and felt comfortable with the prospect of engaging in lengthy political conversations. Ultimately, I was able to schedule and conduct nine conversations (the shortest being 21:57 minutes and the longest 57:23 minutes). Given more time in Jordan, I would have liked to incorporate additional narratives into my project. I was wary, however, of rushing into any conversations, preferring to have developed a relationship with my narrators before inquiring about their life history. Even so, I was careful not to overlook tacit knowledge between the narrators and myself. In each interview, I made a concerted effort to unpack the basics of the narrator’s experience. In all cases, I deliberately began with demographic questions to serve as the springboard for my deeper investigation. As such, the nine narrators I recorded represent a range of experiences and positions in Jordanian society. They include five university students, a university faculty member, and three young professionals. These nine individuals represent four Palestinian-Jordanians, four native Jordanians, and one individual of Palestinian-Jordanian and Palestinian-Syrian origin. They are listed in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrators</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad</td>
<td>Palestinian-Jordanian from Baqa’a Camp</td>
<td>Late 20's</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Works locally in Baqa'a Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ube</td>
<td>Palestinian-Jordanian from Baqa’a Camp</td>
<td>Late 20's</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Works locally in Baqa'a Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>Palestinian-Jordanian from Baqa’a Camp</td>
<td>Late 20's</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Works locally in Baqa'a Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khalil</td>
<td>Palestinian-Jordanian and Syrian-Jordanian</td>
<td>Early 20's</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Undergraduate Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In all cases, these individuals were either someone I grew to know well personally, or were introduced to me by a close acquaintance. Of the nine narrators, I recorded the oral histories of eight narrators entirely in Arabic. Where I encountered issues with translation during the transcription process, I sought the help of Dickinson’s Arabic Language Teaching Assistant.

I approached each oral history interview with careful consideration for proper research ethics. I introduced myself to all of the narrators and explained that I am a sociology student studying refugee resettlement in Jordan. Before starting each interview, I made sure that the narrators(s) agreed to participate and that they consented to me recording our conversations (audio only) which would be securely stored and password protected on my laptop. Their names are changed in this paper to protect their identities. For those that wished to be identified, I use their real names. Especially where my interviewees were women, I was careful that I was not jeopardizing their safety or reputation.\(^\text{17}\) I catered my questions to this sensitive dynamic by

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\(^{17}\) In Jordan, interactions between men and women are subject to greater scrutiny than in the U.S. While there is a wide range of local perspectives on the issue, the Jordanian culture is generally more conservative on women’s issues. These conservative beliefs have both religious and secular origins. This being said, there are certain spaces where interactions between men and women are more permissible than others. The University of Jordan, for example, was one space where young men and women interact with relative freedom. It is entirely normal for groups of men and women to sit together, talk, laugh, and engage in social relationships. As a gated campus, the University of Jordan offers male and female students an escape from some of the social pressures that inhibit their social freedom. This is especially the case for female students. I was told by several female students and alumna that some women bring a change of clothes with them to the University. Because almost all the University’s 40,000 students are commuter students, some female students leave their homes wearing more conservative clothing, only to change into something different when they arrive at campus. It is clear in these cases that the architecture of physical space, the University, facilitates the parameters of social interaction. Outside the campus walls, women’s rebellion against traditional cultural norms might not be tolerated. As my awareness of cultural norms and boundaries developed, I recognized that the University campus would be an ideal place to listen to women’s narratives. Though male and female interaction on campus is not entirely immune to conservative cultural norms, it is one of the more freeing spaces for women.
focusing on the power-sharing of oral history, allowing for them to shape a conversation with answers that they felt completely comfortable providing. Additionally, all of my recorded conversations with women were conducted in public places where interaction between men and women is absolutely normal. This was intentional. Of the four women I spoke with, three were conducted on the University of Jordan campus. The other was conducted in an office building with other narrators present.

As my thesis is a study of Palestinian refugee selfhoods and agency in Jordan, I found it important to focus on a particular subset of Palestinian refugees. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Ube, a socially and politically active Palestinian-Jordanian, from Baqa’a camp just twenty minutes outside of Amman. I am deeply appreciative of Ube as a friend, cultural guide, and narrator. Through Ube, I was introduced to some of Baqa’a’s 100,000 residents. In Ube’s gracious hospitality, I ate dinner with him at his family home, attended a wedding, and volunteered at a local orphanage where he works every Friday. When I told him my aspirations to study Palestinian refugee experiences in Jordan, he made sure that I was exposed to as much as possible before my departure back to the United States. All of these experiences in one way or another were crucial to my appreciation for how Palestinian refugees make sense of their social positions in Jordanian society. The depth of my insight would not have been possible without him, and for that, I am incredibly grateful.

I would like to briefly return to the issue of positionality, especially when it comes to my access to Palestinian refugee communities. As a Jew, I spent significant time thinking about how Palestinian refugees might receive me. I wondered if they would be able to distinguish me as an American Jew from an Israeli—whether my narrators would conflate the two and look to me as a perpetrator of their displacement. I tried to put myself in a Palestinian refugee’s position and
think about the feasibility of separating the two. Ultimately, I decided to withhold information about my religious identity. Despite the importance of total honesty between the narrator and oral history interviewer, I felt that openly identifying as a Jew might induce conflicting emotions for my narrators whose trauma is so protracted. At all points, I wanted to make sure that the narrators, and anyone else I engaged with, felt as comfortable as possible. In most cases, my ability to speak colloquial Arabic and my empathy towards Palestinian refugees made questions about my faith rare; these factors enabled local communities to see past my otherwise glaring foreignness. For as gracious as all of my narrators were, I did not want my religious identity to get in the way of their ability to tell their story honestly. While I had reservations about not being totally forthright, it was a necessary measure to ensure that the narrators felt at ease in their history-telling.

**Data Analysis**

This data analysis consists of several parts. I analyze some of my narrators’ general views on resettlement in Jordan. I proceed into a discussion of self-understanding from the perspective of my Jordanian narrators. As host-community members, their own-self conceptions are renegotiated each time they interact with a new refugee community. Unpacking these self-understandings of Jordanianess demonstrates how it is a fluid identification. Accordingly, I integrate the self-understandings of Palestinian-Jordanians into my analysis as well. I explore how my Palestinian-Jordanian narrators access the duality of Jordanianess and Palestinianess. The fluidity of these self-conceptions is rooted in navigations of race, class, and all things social that affect the way a person is perceived.
I supplement this analysis of Palestinian-Jordanian self-understandings with a deeper dive into the oral histories of three of my narrators from Baqa’a camp, a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of the capital, Amman. Baqa’a camp is a unique space both in the way that it is situated physically and in the way that it situates its residents socially. When using the total institution lens to investigate how the camp operates, I find that Baqa’a camp functions outside Goffman’s model of institutionalization. For all its worth in explaining the process of selfhood construction, its application to Baqa’a camp is necessarily limited. We run into an unfortunate conundrum then: in many ways, this thesis is a critique of western conceptions of identity and social domination, and yet, I rely on such frameworks to analyze refugeeness in Jordan. Though a limitation, this should not detract from the inherent value of using and critiquing these theoretical lenses. Doing so reveals where they are in need of further refinement and how they can be more comprehensive across sociohistorical contexts. This issue is particularly salient in my final discussion of Palestinian-Jordanian liminality. For Palestinian-Jordanians, their duality as both refugee group and host-community complicates the theoretical frameworks that inform my analysis.

**Representations of Refugeedom**

When I asked Tariq, a young Jordanian electrical engineering masters student at the University of Jordan, whether he considered Palestinian-Jordanians to be refugees, he shook his head. In his opinion, “the things that used to differentiate Jordanians from Palestinians are shrinking.” This is a popular opinion among young Jordanians who are too young to have witnessed the first generations of Palestinian integration in Jordan and the tensions that it initially stoked. For Tariq, there is very little that separates a Palestinian-Jordanian from him. He lives
among Palestinian-Jordanians in Jerash, a city outside of Amman. He studies at a public university alongside Palestinian-Jordanians who have the same right to public education that he does. To him, Palestinian-Jordanians satisfy all the criteria for Jordanian citizenship.

Ahmed has a different take. As a professor at the University of Jordan in his fifties and from a fairly powerful family in Jordan, he has greater historical insight into Palestinians’ resettlement in Jordan. When asked if Palestinians are refugees in Jordan, Ahmed responded, “legally I don’t think so, but as a social status, yes.” Ahmed reveals a delicate fluidity in the Palestinian experience in Jordan, prompting the question of how a people can be both refugee and non-refugee. What does it mean to have a refugee social status and yet have “rights like any other Jordanian” (Ahmed)? Even so, Ahmed was careful to spell out Jordan’s embrace for different migrant groups. He proudly relayed that Palestinian-Jordanians “have everything. They have access to employment and elections and any job they want—they have access to many resources here in Jordan.” On one hand, Ahmed sees how some Palestinian-Jordanians have encountered challenges during their resettlement. On the other, he has an optimistic take on the future of local refugee resettlement. For the majority of Tariq and Ahmed’s lifetimes, the social distance between refugees and Jordanians has shrunk across the country.

Muhammad had his own view on the classification of Palestinians in Jordan. Muhammad is from Baqa’a camp—the largest Palestinian refugee camp in the country.\(^{18}\) In his unique position as a camp resident, he conveyed that integration is a natural consequence of

\(^{18}\) Baqa’a Camp was one of six camps established for Palestinians who left the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. In its early stages, it was home to roughly 26,000 refugees and 5,000 tents spread across 1.4 square kilometers. In the subsequent years, UNRWA, the UN agency that oversees Palestinian resettlement, replaced the tents with 8,000 shelters. Since then, these shelters have been altered to include concrete shelters and buildings. Today, there is limited available demographic information on the camp. What is known is that Baqa’a camp is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan and is home to more than 100,000 Palestinian refugees. As a site of resettlement, camp residents face several social and economic challenges. Notably, 32% of the camp residents live below the national poverty line of 814 Jordanian Dinar (1,147 USD). Almost 20% of persons living in the camp are unemployed. 46% of camp residents do not have health insurance (UNRWA).
resettlement. “We’ve been here for 70 years...we’ve married them and they’ve married us,” he told me. With formal recognition as Jordanian citizens and decades of intermarrying between refugee and host-community families, it would seem that the social conflicts of Palestinian resettlement are slowly shrinking. However, reiterations of this narrative mask the ongoing challenges of Palestinian-Jordanians’ resettlement. Muhammad explained that some native Jordanians “think that we took their jobs, that we took and took and took.” Moreover, he noted that people from the Baqa’a camp are routinely viewed as “mashkaljiyyeen,” translating to people causing problems. Similar to Luigi Achili’s study of Palestinian-Jordanians in al-Wihdat camp (Achili 2015), this word suggests that Muhammad’s presence in Jordan is problematic. Despite his family having been in the country since the late 1960s, Muhammad’s designation as a “mashkaljiyye” is a challenge to the popular notion that Palestinian integration is improving in some linear fashion. His experience reveals a deeper reality of lasting prejudice against Palestinian-Jordanians still living in refugee camps.

Yet, my narrators had contrasting views of this process. When I asked Ahmed whether Palestinian-Jordanians are discriminated against in Jordan, he emphatically answered:

I don’t think that there is a real obvious discrimination, you can’t as a professor deal with students as if they are Jordanian-Jordanian or Palestinian-Jordanian. You can’t as a doctor say the same thing. You can’t as a neighbor say, ‘I don’t want to come to your house because you’re Palestinian Jordanian or because you’re Jordanian-Jordanian.’ I don’t think that there is a really obvious and really clear discrimination against any other social background or identity.

Ahmed’s insistence on a national origin-neutral paradigm whereby prejudice is a non-factor is curious given his recognition that some Palestinian-Jordanians remain in socially subordinate positions in Jordanian society. This contradiction scratches the surface of the complexities of the ongoing project of refugee resettlement in Jordan. I dive deeper into the opinions and classifications of some native Jordanians in the following section.
The Self-Understandings of Jordanians

A principle goal of my early research question was to better clarify what “Jordanian national identity” is. I wanted to know who claimed it and who had access to it. Accordingly, I asked all of my narrators how they identified. I was curious to hear who they were and how they understood their position within Jordan’s social fabrics. Moreover, I was interested in how they have seen Jordan change on account of the steady integration of new populations. As Salma, a young Jordanian student at the University of Jordan, explained to me, “Jordan isn’t a very big country in terms of space, and we already had a ton of Jordanians.” For Salma, however, pressure on Jordan’s already limited national resources has confirmed to her that Jordan is “a country that loves to help everyone. We accept people, people from Syria or Palestine, people that faced wars and problems” (Salma). Though she admitted that there is “a little negative pressure” on Jordan’s national institutions, Salma proudly aligns herself with Jordan’s embrace of refugee communities. Embedded in her answer to this identity question is a perceived responsibility to “help everyone.”

Among the narrators, a key value of Jordanianess was the importance of hospitality. As it has roots in various regional and cultural customs, it is salient in activations of Jordanianess. For example, Tariq, the engineering student from earlier, explained that “as Jordanians, it’s normal to accept any person” and that “the Arabs love to host and welcome people.” Yet, hospitality merely implies a temporary embrace of a visitor. In Jordan’s case, the resettlement of Palestinian refugees is increasingly a permanent affair. Nevertheless, embracing refugees is an expression of Jordanianess in these narrators’ self-understandings. To emphasize this point, Salma stressed that Jordanians and Palestinian refugees “coexist because in the end…we
welcomed them, and we gave them services, employment opportunities, protection, and security.” Salma’s Jordanianess is lodged in the understanding that she and her countrypeople have long been an ally of the displaced.

Ahmed was slightly more skeptical of this basis of Jordanianess. Although Ahmed spoke proudly of Jordan’s role in Palestinian refugee resettlement, he acknowledged that years of refugee integration has come at a price. He described “discussion among Jordanians about their future and the national identity of a Jordanian since the Syrians are so proud of their national identity, and the Palestinians [are too] in the same way. But the Jordanians tend to be, for example, a minority in their country.” In Ahmed’s eyes, the introduction of so many new populations has rendered any unified conception of Jordanianess unattainable. Rapid demographic change has obscured a once distinctly Jordanian collective identification which is now infused with ethnic and cultural diversity. Indeed, a growing pluralism in the country has made delimitation “with respect to others [and their] ability to recognize and to be recognized” that much more difficult for native Jordanians (Melucci 1995: 45). Changing demography has blurred who fits into a collective imagination of Jordanianess and who does not. In effect, it has become more difficult a project to create the “politically efficacious phantasm” of what a Jordanian looks like (Butler 2008: 365), challenging naturalized notions of “Jordanian” as an exclusive category.

The different conceptions of Jordanianess between Salma and Ahmed reveal an important issue with popular conceptions of identity. Melucci’s proposed collective construction does not accommodate for individuals, such as Ahmed, whose understanding of a collective Jordanian identity is obscured with every new addition of a displaced community. Therefore, the confusion surrounding a collective Jordanianess emphasizes the utility of the self-understanding paradigm.
With its innate subjectivity and fluidity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2, 17), investigating the multiple meanings of Jordanianess is best done by studying the self-understandings of the people that practice it. For example, while Tariq expressed optimism about the future of refugee integration in Jordan, aligning himself with Salma’s position, he too sees how demographic change impacts the economic and social position of native Jordanians. Specifically, he is displeased that some Syrian refugees have started to fill jobs in the already limited Jordanian job market. He explained:

I, for example, had a job. Then came a Syrian who took my place because the manager can pay the Syrian less. So it became that Syrians were taking the place of Jordanians. A Jordanian, when he works, for example, makes maybe 500 dollars, and it has been 500 for 15 years which is really great in terms of the average Jordanian… When [Syrians] take work opportunities, you have social problems and phenomena. When a father and his family have economic struggles, their social position is not going to be relaxed. As a result, there might be a lot of divorces, maybe families grow apart, maybe the father leaves his children, maybe there’s sickness. When there’s pressure on people it can affect them psychologically.

Tariq’s underlying concern appears to be how refugee integration disrupts the social and economic stability of native Jordanians. His story is an example of how host communities can frame their less-welcoming opinions of refugees as a defense against their own disenfranchisement (Francis 2015: 3). His earlier optimism that refugee integration is “getting better” is paired with subtler concerns for his own security. Tariq’s Jordanianess—his self-understanding as a host-community member—is thus complicated by this delicate balance between hospitality and his own subsistence.

This sentiment was nicely captured by Fatima’s explanation of Jordanians’ ongoing role in refugee relief. As a first-year student at the University of Jordan from a lower socioeconomic background, Fatima also bears concerns about her future position in the job market. She admitted that the arrival of so many Syrian refugees has put economic pressure on locals. Even
so, Fatima was careful to articulate the lasting importance of embracing new refugee communities. She argued that just because refugees might have caused initial economic pressure, “that doesn’t mean that we can’t host them in our country. It would be inhumane. It’s the human responsibility. Sometimes this stuff is more important than the economic things because one day they will hopefully go back to their country. Imagine if someone came to you and said ‘hi I’m running from the war…’” Fatima’s compassion for displaced persons is impressive. She is of the very demographic that Francis argues might frame refugee integration as a threat to one’s personal security (Francis 2015: 3), and yet she maintains a self-appointed responsibility to empathize with resettling persons’ vulnerability.

Through Ahmed, Salma, Tariq, and Fatima’s stories, we get a sense of the range of attitudes among Jordanians on their changing standing in Jordanian society. Being part of a host-community to several resettling populations, their unique self-understandings add nuance to popular readings of “Jordanian identity.” Their stories demonstrate why unpacking Jordanianess requires more than what identity or collective identity offer. An investigation of the changing meanings of Jordanianess demands that we keep in mind Jordanians’ “situated subjectivity” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17). While Ahmed, Salma, Tariq, and Fatima all have equal claim to Jordanian “identity,” such an analytical tool fails to tell us how its construction is individually reshaped by demographic change—how the agent is determined under the title of this identity (Butler 2008: 366). To infuse their subjectivities into the analysis of Jordanianess demonstrates why self-understanding is a more dynamic mode of analysis. It is this very infusion of subjectivity that I emphasize in the following analysis of my Palestinian-Jordanian narrators’ self-understandings.
The Self-Understandings of Palestinian-Jordanians

Highlighting the subjectivity of refugee groups ensures that we respect the multiple ways in which they experience their resettlement. It is important to recall, however, that refugees are persons who are displaced across national borders. Under this legal definition, none of the Palestinian-Jordanians I spoke with are formally refugees. For some of them, their great-grandparents were first to bear the refugee label. For others, it was their grandparents. I find the transferability of refugeeess to be a curious element of Palestinian-Jordanian refugeedom. Going into my oral history interviews, I wondered how someone could be part of a “refugee” community if they had never been displaced themselves. As a more accessible analogy for American readers, why do we not refer to the children of immigrants as “immigrants,” yet the “refugee” label sticks with individuals who are two, even three, generations removed from displacement? This is not just a question of legal citizenship—it is a query into how displaced persons interpret the social mechanisms that stratify a society.

On this account, the Palestinian-Jordanian narrators in my project had different conceptions of what it meant to be a part of a resettling community in Jordan. A young female student at the University of Jordan, Tasneem molds her self-understanding as a Palestinian-Jordanian within the wider blending of Jordanian and Palestinian populations. Early into our conversation, I asked her what the differences are between Palestinians and Jordanians. “I don’t see a difference between the Jordanians and Palestinians,” she answered. “We’ve always had the same culture almost and same ideas and dialect so there’s a lot of mutual understanding. So, I don’t say that I’m just Palestinian, I say that I’m Palestinian-Jordanian.” Tasneem’s Palestinianess is interwoven with all the elements that make her Jordanian. She is a Jordanian citizen, she herself was not displaced, and she lives a relatively comfortable life as a commuter
student at the university. Removed from her family’s initial resettlement, there is very little that makes her feel like a refugee.

Tasneem does not share an outsider label that Muhammad more openly gravitates to. Muhammad is from Baqa’a camp—a Jordanian citizen living in a refugee camp like Baqa’a’s 100,000 other residents. As I walked through Baqa’a camp with Muhammad and Ube, another resident of the camp, I noticed frequent Palestinian imagery that draped building exteriors. The images include Palestinian flags and references to cities like Nablus and Jerusalem. They are often paired with images of struggle as the below enclosed fist might represent. Such images inescapably exist in the consciousness of Baqa’a’s residents:19

In Muhammad’s words, people in Baqa’a “hold onto these emotions and hope more. They hold onto their homes when they experience pressure.” For Muhammad, in this case, “home” is not Jordan. Even though he was born in Jordan and is a Jordanian citizen, Muhammad’s self-understanding is rooted in the lingering sense that he is still displaced. Unlike Tasneem, who outwardly merges her Palestinianess and identification as a Jordanian with greater ease, these identifications are not so neatly woven for Muhammad.

For Palestinian-Jordanians like Muhammad, Baqa’a camp’s numerous commemorations of a Palestinian homeland emphasize one of Gatrell’s most important points on resettling communities. Refugees often frame their resettlement along a “common sense of loss and the need for collective effort” (Gatrell 2013: 43). In Muhammad’s case, his residence in Baqa’a camp is a constant reminder of his perceived incongruity within Jordanian society. Whether his Palestinianess and Jordanianess are mutually exclusive is not immediately clear. Regardless, whenever Muhammad interacts with Jordanian institutions, or returns to his home in Baqa’a camp, he is reminded of his refugeedom. He is reminded of all the ways that he still occupies an othered position in Jordan, not necessarily on account of his Palestinianess, but on account of his protracted refugeeness.

Illustrating this point, Muhammad identified the Jordanian army as an institution that alienates vulnerable Palestinian-Jordanians. “There are some Palestinians that are scared to have interactions with the army,” he revealed to me. Ube joined in—“only a small percent of the army is Palestinian.” When I asked them what Palestinian-Jordanian underrepresentation in the army means for their daily lives, Layla—a fellow resident of Baqa’a camp—added that “Jordanians consider this to be their country, that they have to be higher up. They always think that they should be on top.” With every encounter with this state institution, Muhammad, Ube, and Layla feel further estranged from a collective Jordanianess. For this anxiety to be induced during interactions with the army is indicative of the way that Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s vulnerable position is enduringly a source of othering.

The Palestinianess of these Palestinian-Jordanian narrators is integral to the way they form a self-understanding. Its durability after decades of resettlement means that it still informs the self-understandings of Palestinian-Jordanians who have never been to Palestine. The basis of
this Palestinianess is complex, but Ahmed—the Jordanian professor—offered an interesting theory as to why it remains a focal point: “Jordanian-Jordanians still don’t have a strong and solid background, or at least ground to prove their national identity while the Palestinians are already there. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the biggest proofs of their national identity.” That the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—which is responsible for the displacement of Palestinians—would serve as the basis of Palestinianess seems to be reflected in my narrators’ attitudes. The conflict’s protracted 70-year nature has meant that generations of Palestinians have been subject to reiterations of the same trauma. Without any sense of closure, it is lodged in the consciousness of multiple generations.

This reading of shared trauma lends itself to Melucci’s model of collective identity. According to Melucci, “the continuity of a subject [and] its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; [and] the ability to recognize and to be recognized” are fundamental to constructions of collective identity (1995: 46). Using these criteria, Tasneem, Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s experiences of Palestinianess loosely constitute a “collective identity.” As a people, they have lived in Jordan since at least 1948, adapting with varying levels of social and economic success. Moreover, especially for those living in a camp, they routinely experience a delimitation from native Jordanians. More than Tasneem—whose family’s economic stability facilitates a less finite distinction from this host-community—Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s stories are a reminder of how some Palestinian-Jordanians still occupy an othered social position. Particularly for this trio, the Palestinian imagery that lines the camp’s buildingsides highlights a refugeeeness that helps them differentiate themselves from others and mold the changing meanings of their resettlement.
However, this framework for collective identity must be applied cautiously. We must be mindful of the multiplicities that are embedded in any collective identity. To claim that these similar experiences of resettlement create a Palestinian-Jordanian identity is to essentialize what Palestinian-Jordanianess means. It is to superimpose a notional classification onto the lived self-understandings of each individual. Tasneem’s more casual merging of Palestinianess and Jordanian identification manifests differently than for Muhammad, Ube, and Layla. Additionally, it would be nearsighted to suggest that Muhammad, Ube, and Layla construct an equivalent Palestinianess. While Melucci’s model for studying the meanings imbued in a collective are partially helpful in the analysis of self-classification, its implicit lack of accommodation for those that do not neatly fit into the collective is a critical weakness. I expand on this shortcoming in the following section.

**Race and Palestinian Refugeeness: Where “Refugee Identity” Fails**

One of the most interesting conversations I had throughout my time in Jordan was in Baqa’a camp with Muhammad, Ube, and Layla. After a twenty-minute bus ride from the University of Jordan, I met Ube in the center of Baqa’a. By this point, Ube and I had developed a fairly close relationship. Ube has a bright smile and seemed to know all of Baqa’a’s 100,000 residents. As we walked from the bus station to meet Muhammad and Layla at a nearby office, I was excited to incorporate more narrators from Baqa’a into the project. For close to an hour, I listened as the three of them told me about life in Baqa’a camp and how its residents are received by the wider Jordanian society.

In our discussion of the obstacles that Palestinian-Jordanians from Baqa’a face, my hope was to procure a better idea of how the trio experience marginalization. However, rather than
focus on adversities that affect Palestinian-Jordanians as a whole, Ube shifted the conversation to another area of concern. Unlike Muhammad or Layla, Ube’s self-understanding of his Palestinianess is informed by the fact that he is Afro-Palestinian. Race, for Ube, is an inescapable reality that adds complexity to his interaction with a collective Palestinianess. At times, Ube’s blackness alienates him from both native Jordanians and other Palestinian-Jordanians, even the like-situated ones that might share his social and economic status as residents of a camp.

Our discussion of this dynamic began with Ube commenting on the typical attitudes towards black people in Jordan. “In Jordan, the number of people that foster racism is high,” Ube said.

Layla disagreed, “No, not that many.”

“You guys don’t have the right idea of racism,” Ube quickly responded. “How many people think that white is better than black? How many, people think that white is preferable? How many people in Jordan don’t like blacks?” Amid the growing tension in the room, he continued, “if someone white sees someone black, what’s the first word that they say?”

“Abu Samra’a,” answered Muhammad. “Samra’a,” meaning the color brown in Arabic, is used to identify people with darker complexions. “Abu” means father. Together, the phrase is sometimes used to address a person with dark skin.

For Ube, this differentiation on the basis of color is a problem. “This is racist!” he exclaimed. “Why? I’ll tell you why. Because it’s discrimination—you’re differentiating on the basis of color. That is racism!” The phrase “Abu Samra’a” thus represents a pejorative
demarcation in Ube’s opinion. While “Abu Samra’a” might seem a harmless colloquialism for some, it is not so innocuous to Ube.

Layla and Muhammad questioned whether something seemingly innocent like “Abu Samra’a” could really make Afro-Palestinians in Jordan feel alienated from the rest of their refugee communities. Determined, Ube explained how it is not an isolated incident of his marginalization. Nor is it the most derogatory. He told us of several encounters where Jordanians and fellow Palestinian-Jordanians addressed him with “hey slave!” or “hey you black!” Over the course of his explanation, the volume of his voice increased and I got the sense that he had long fostered these emotions. Ultimately, Ube expressed that members of his most intimate social community “see me and my color as something negative.” As someone that derives strength from his solidarity with other camp residents, these episodes of marginalization upset Ube.

Further emphasizing the Afro-Palestinian community’s alienation from the rest of Jordanian society, Ube probed Muhammad and Layla for answers. He asked, “how many white people wouldn’t marry a black person?”

“I don’t know but maybe there’s some,” Layla replied.

“Okay, and why?” pushed Ube.

Muhammad offered an explanation—“because of their customs and traditions.”

“Customs and traditions because they’re black,” Layla followed.

Layla’s admission that Afro-Palestinians are subject to prejudice, even from members in their own refugee community, was an important affirmation for Ube. He succeeded in articulating how racial othering uniquely affects him. It complicates the way that Ube orients himself to the

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20 By “white people”, Ube is referring to lighter complexion Palestinian-Jordanians or Jordanians, not ethnically Caucasian persons.
wider collective and how he derives a self-understanding as a Palestinian-Jordanian from Baqa’a camp.

This delicate balance between a collective Palestinianess and intragroup colorism is a fitting example of why collective identity or identity are insufficient analytical tools to examine refugee positionality. Unfortunately, there exists relatively little demographic information on Baqa’a camp and refugee camps more widely in Jordan. Even so, demographic diversity emerges in various forms in any social system. Therefore, a notional “refugee identity” does little to capture the pluralities of a refugee experience. Ube’s case is a challenge to any analytical tool that implies an “internal sameness” among a community (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 14). Indeed, a conversation of a Palestinian-Jordanian collective identity or Palestinian refugee identity presumes that its identifiers have a consistent experience of self within their social environment. Not only does this ignore the necessity for variation within groups, but is an iteration of the refugeedom trope that says that all refugees look and behave a certain way. To rely on collective identity or refugee identity as the mode of our analysis would be to blend refugees into one “collective category of concern” (Gatrell 2013: 10). Instead, Ube’s story exhibits why an individual’s situated subjectivity is so critical to analyses of refugeeness (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17). It is not enough to rely on some speculative sense of “being together” or “collective sense of classification” (Melucci 1995: 43). By including unique self-understandings into the frame of analysis, we recognize the necessity of intragroup variation innate in any social category. In doing so, we acknowledge an agent’s ability to determine the meanings of their own classification. As persons that are otherwise denied from asserting their own agency, this is a necessary concern for refugee groups.
“Wasta” as a Classed Reading of Self-Understanding

Similar to the way that racialization adds nuance to normative readings of resettlement, my narrators’ self-understandings are impacted by the classed elements of their refugeedom. One of the better-known sources of class tension in Jordan is the concept of “wasta” or “connections.” “Wasta” is a flexible term. In some cases, it more closely translates to nepotism. Those with “wasta” have a far easier time with professional and social advancement than those without it. Elsewhere, “wasta” mirrors favoritism or corruption. Someone with “wasta” might have an easier time getting out of a traffic ticket, or might feel more empowered doing something considered to be taboo. As might be expected, then, Jordan’s social and economic elite activate their “wasta” to protect their dominant social positions. “Wasta” thus represents a form of social capital that allows certain individuals to traverse Jordanian society in a way that is beneficial for them. Its exclusivity means that it disproportionately injures lower socioeconomic status Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians who are not able to summon a comparable social currency.

Yet, “wasta” is more than simply knowing the right people—it means being a part of the right people. Here it is limited to certain clanships or tribes in Jordan. It is important to distinguish popular Western conceptions of tribes—dominated by notions of barbarism and primitiveness—from the reality of clanship in Jordan. Clanship, which is largely tied to geographic region, is a fundamental part of Jordanian society that upholds national order, often influencing judicial processes and patterns of local governance. It also manifests in more inconsequential spaces, such as the annual student elections at the University of Jordan. Fatima, a female Jordanian student studying political science, told me how student elections closely follow tribal politics. She expressed frustration that students simply vote for the candidate from
their home region—“for example, we could make a list of three candidates and all the people from the south would follow that guy [from the South], because same region means same tribes.”

She continued:

And even if you wanted to take a look at the names, you’ll see that the same families and tribal names are switching from position to position...so we turn to try to find jobs in the NGO’s because we have no hope that any one of us will [be offered] a position unless you’re from their family.

Without the “wasta” necessary to land a desirable job in the public sector, Fatima will have a more difficult experience with social mobility. In this case, “wasta” is a social credential that protects a classed stratification of Jordanian society. Clanship, therefore, is inevitably decisive in the way that it partitions Jordan. One’s clanship matters, and being able to claim membership of a reputable tribe means having immediate access to a vital form of social capital.

Given that clanship and one’s “wasta” is inexorably tied to geography, displaced persons are adversely affected by “wasta’s” ubiquity in Jordan. As resettling persons, refugees in Jordan are unable to activate their “wasta” in a way that locals can. If one’s “wasta” determines their access to critical social institutions, then those without it would be lastingly denied a chance at social advancement. Where “wasta” plays such an important role in one’s subsistence, it effectively guarantees that displaced persons without it remain fixed at the lower economic and social brackets.

The idea that “wasta” would act as a mechanism of social stratification was emphasized by each one of my Palestinian-Jordanian narrators’ self-understandings. Even though she occupies a financially stable position, Tasneem stressed just how divisive clanship and “wasta” are in Jordan—“The people that are really intense with their clanship, they’re not happy when a Palestinian-Jordanian says, ‘I’m like you.’ They’ll think that because their clan is originally
from Jordan, that they can’t accept that a Palestinian would be Jordanian like them.” Palestinian-Jordanians that have resettled in Jordan have naturally had less time to reconstruct strategic social networks than native Jordanians, adversely affecting their social and economic standing in the country. This is not to say that no Palestinian-Jordanian is able to activate their connections for personal gain. Rather, it is a commentary on how invocations of “wasta” inherently hinge on one’s not being displaced.

During my conversation with Muhammad, Ube, and Layla, they quickly brought up “wasta” as a critical issue in Baqa’a camp. Layla identified “wasta” as the “biggest thing not just in the camp, but all of Jordan.” “From the smallest thing to the biggest thing, everything is impacted by ‘wasta,’” added Ube. Furthermore, Muhammad emphasized Fatima’s point that Palestinian-Jordanians without “wasta” are frequently denied access to public sector jobs. Describing the Jordanian government, he said, “all of their names are from the same family or are cousins. They don’t choose the right person; they just choose a relative.” Muhammad is keenly aware of how those equipped with “wasta” have social capital that allows them to assume positions of power. On the contrary, those without “wasta” remain at the margins of society, plainly conscious that they are unable to amount such a social credential due to the smaller window they have had to strategic social networks.

I want to emphasize again that not all displaced persons or decedents of displaced persons are unable to activate “wasta.” Khalil—a Palestinian-Jordanian student at the University of Jordan—stressed that the issue of “wasta” is not bound to refugee communities in Jordan: “the idea isn’t that someone is a Syrian refugee or Palestinian refugee. No, the idea is if you have connections with people in high positions…It’s not if you’re a refugee, but if you’re part of the right clan.” However, where social capital is tied to clanship, the individuals who belong to a
powerful local clan benefit from their “wasta” more than individuals who are resettling in a foreign environment. The issue of “wasta,” then, is an expression of the disparate levels of social capital between social classes in Jordan. Displaced persons who have had less time to develop access points to critical institutions are put at a further disadvantage.

Recognizing the classed elements of refugeedom should serve as yet another reminder of why the “situated subjectivity” of the agent is integral to an analysis of refugee positionality (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 17). Considering the subject’s subjectivity ensures that we do not create assumptions of internal sameness among social groups. Identity and collective identity fall short as analytical devices for this very reason. To describe a collective Palestinian-Jordanian identity tells us nothing of how different Palestinian-Jordanians traverse social space. By the same token, assuming that a collective identity has implicit value is to commit the same carelessness that media depictions of refugeedom depend on. While it is unlikely that scholars would argue against there being embedded pluralities in refugeedom, the field’s reliance on identity deprives refugees a voice in their plight for self-expression and situates them under the control of a regulatory regime (Butler 2008: 365). Acknowledging the varied expressions of any self-understanding dislodges refugees from the bounded space that is created when they are assigned an identity.

**A Deeper Dive into Baqa’a Camp**

At this point, I would like to focus more exclusively on Baqa’a camp. Baqa’a camp is a site where the duality of Jordanianess and Palestinianess is integral to its resident’s positionalities. The camp typifies a paradox of belonging that we find embedded in constructions of Palestinian-Jordanianess. Baqa’a camp residents are Jordanian citizens, yet live
in a refugee camp. They are legally allowed to access Jordanian public institutions, yet there exist nearly none within the camp. In fact, education, health, and other critical social services are handled almost exclusively by non-government entities. Baqa’a camp thus presents a fascinating dilemma—how might Palestinian camp residents negotiate the dual meanings of their formal Jordanian citizenship and their alienation from critical Jordanian institutions? This interplay is an important source of tension that is deserving of further examination.

Before I ever traveled to Baqa’a camp, I had no idea what a refugee camp looked like. When I started to research some of the more notable camps around the world, I was taken by their glaring isolation. To me, they resembled spaces of captivity rather than accommodation. The images often showed sequences of tents spread across arid, dry plains. That’s why when Ube first invited me to take the bus with him into Baqa’a camp, I was caught by surprise. Perhaps my naivety was informed by my reliance on Google Images as my visual introduction into refugee camps, but I was genuinely surprised that I might be able to access the camp so freely and intimately. I found myself even more surprised when we got off at our stop—a fairly large public square surrounded by storefronts and three-story buildings. In my imagination, I had pictured more than tents, but I did not expect to find myself immersed in a bustling city of 100,000 people. And yet, whenever Jordanians or Palestinian-Jordanians refer to Baqa’a, they use the Arabic word for camp—“mukheyem.” It is in the way that Baqa’a camp challenged my own preconceptions of resettlement that I was motivated to more closely analyze how it obscures the lines of belonging. Why was this city designated a “camp” if there are no tents to be found and if its residents have been Jordanian since 1968?

To recall from earlier, my brief analysis of Za’atari camp—a camp constructed for Syrian refugees over the last decade—relied heavily on the application of Goffman’s total institution
lens. Particularly, how its like-situated residents remain tangibly cut off from society; how, given substitutive possessions, they are expected to adapt to their resettlement; and how the camp is architecturally imagined so as to engender a refugee performativity—that the camp’s refugees would remain passive and compliant with their practical internment. A simple glance at the camp’s geography from above confirmed the apparent totality of the camp’s imagined role in resettlement.\textsuperscript{21}

![On the other hand, satellite imagery of Baqa’a camp presents a distinctly different narrative.\textsuperscript{22}](https://www.planet.com/gallery/zaatari-camp)

\textsuperscript{21} Image from planet.com: [https://www.planet.com/gallery/zaatari-camp/](https://www.planet.com/gallery/zaatari-camp)

\textsuperscript{22} Image from Google Earth
Unlike Za’atari camp which is mostly isolated from surrounding localities, Baqa’a camp is directly connected to Jordan’s capital, Amman, via major public infrastructure. Whereas Za’atari camp is formally removed from Jordanian society, Baqa’a camp is integrated into it. For Baqa’a camp to be both a refugee camp and an integral part of Jordanian society mirrors the lived duality of its residents—they too are both refugee and Jordanian. Under this section, I delve into a closer reading of the social conditions that have enabled Baqa’a’s residents to explore this duality.

**Baqa’a Camp and the Total Institution Lens**

While popular conceptions of refugee camps point to them as architecturally similar to total institutions (Fitzgerald and Arar 2018: 397-399), Baqa’a camp breaks from this tradition.
Fitzgerald and Arar illustrate, as I have, how the surveillance over refugees’ lives typical of many refugee camps is characterized by a type of total control. I might add to Fitzgerald and Arar’s analysis that in addition to heightened supervision, subjects living in total institutions face a curtailment of their prior selfhood, adopting a selfhood that is more in line with the institution’s expectations. Goffman calls these changes to a performed selfhood the “moral career” (1961: 168). Where refugee camps function as total institutions, the refugee moral career might require that refugees adopt a selfhood that is submissive to the camp administration. This dynamic would require that refugees—similarly situated in their camp surroundings—have a routinized experience of daily life. And, in addition to these elements, that the camp residents would assume a socially and geographically marginal position in the wider social context. To this effect, the total institution creates the subjectivities and the subjects living within it. While refugees in a total institution play a role in crafting their institutional selfhood, it is the total institution that provides the site and props for its exploration.

Baq’a camp meets some of these characteristics of total institutions. I have spent some time describing how the camp’s residents remain fixed to a marginalized space in Jordanian society. This includes their difficulty in amassing social capital, and the lack of social services provided by the national government. Analogous to the way that Goffman describes like-situated individuals (1961: xii), then, Baq’a residents are like-situated in Jordan’s social fabrics. Naturally, this does not mean that there is no plurality in the way that people from Baq’a understand how they are situated. My discussion of how race and class add nuance to one’s perceived refugeeness was precisely to articulate this point. It is important to consider, for example, how someone’s race, gender, or any social identification might impact the extent to which they are permitted to determine a self-conception. The potential imbalance of who is
equipped with the power to dictate meaning is central to a critique of Goffman and should underscore the handiness of Bourdieu’s discussion of constitutive power (Bourdieu 2018: 86). Still, while power might not be accessed equally among all persons in a total institution, there are ways in which a shared conception of selfhood might highlight how they are like-situated.

That there exists a term for persons from Baqa’a camp—a “Bagawee”—is a testament to this solidarity. In the way that it was described to me, the term “Bagawee” harbors a pejorative quality—not quite a slur, but not used with a positive connotation. At the very least, it is an adjective assigned to someone from the camp. Here, it would be like calling a northerner a “Yankee” or someone from Pittsburgh a “Yinzer.” Like these disparaging terms, “Bagawee” carries a classed denigration that delineates a person from the broader populous. It is a rhetorical indication of someone’s social position as a camp-dweller. To that end, it is a delimitation that separates populations in Jordan. In Goffman’s reading of delimitation in total institutions, like-situated individuals are typically “cut off from the wider world” (Goffman 1961: 203). Yet, “cutting off” normally involves one’s tangible removal from society. This is not so in Baqa’a; its residents move freely around the country and many commute daily to Amman for work. However, if we amend our reading of “cutting off” to include how someone might be symbolically separated from the social—how a “Bagawee” is a demarcated other—Goffman’s analysis has important utility.

To adjust this reading of “cutting off” requires that we recall Bourdieu. In the absence of a physical barrier that cuts Baqa’a’s residents off from society, a symbolic barrier rises. By this, we can understand one’s designation as a “Bagawee” as rooted in a classification struggle (Bourdieu 2018). When non-Baq’a residents project the “Bagawee” label, they naturalize the otherness of camp residents (Bourdieu 2018: 86). At least when it is employed in public
discourse, that a “Bagawee” is other becomes integral to the common sense of the wider population (Bourdieu 2018: 52). While this distinction between camp dweller and non-camp dweller does not include physical isolation typical of total institutions, it is exacerbated by the material deprivation of the internal population. “Here, there’s poverty and unemployment,” Muhammad expressed. “We don’t have anything in the camp. The children play where? In the streets! People wake up and go crazy! Our schools are awful. For me, when I was studying, there were 51 students in a class. One teacher to control 51 students!” Unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and an underfunded education system are integral to the way that Muhammad understands Baqa’a’s distinctiveness from the rest of society. His use of the collective “we” implies that to be from Baqa’a is to have dealt with these shared conditions. Although the above aerial images of Baqa’a demonstrate that the camp and its 100,000 residents are not physically cut off from the wider social world, the “Bagawee” label situates them as other. They are cut off not by tangible means, but symbolically.

However, Baqa’a camp’s symbolic seclusion means that social life within the camp includes relative freedom from public scrutiny. We might think of this dynamic as akin to Scott’s conception of the public transcript. As he illustrates, the public transcript is the mode of popular discourse that normalizes a subordinate group’s low social position (Scott 1991: 79). The term “Bagawee,” in all the ways that it conventionalizes Baqa’a residents’ otherness, is an expression of this paradigm. Yet, within the intangible walls of Baqa’a camp—walls created by the symbolic distinctions of the camp members’ otherness—Baqa’a residents elude the public transcript. They escape the modes of classification that emphasize their dissimilarity from the wider populous. In doing so, the camp offers a “place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (Scott 1991: 4). Once “offstage,” Baqa’a residents are empowered to engage in
the social things that “confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 1991: 5). Scott calls this very dynamic the “hidden transcript.” The hidden transcript of Baqa’a camp operates behind the nonphysical walls of the camp. Where the public others them as “Bagawee”—thus a durable reminder that someone is still in the process of resettling 50 years after their displacement from Palestine—Baqa’a’s internal social world protects them from its negative connotations.

Therefore, Baqa’a creates a space for its residents to draw meaning from their experience of protracted displacement in a way that is most dignifying for them. Ube, my Afro-Palestinian friend and guide throughout Baqa’a camp, aptly captured this idea:

You see, my father has a kind of “red line” with Palestine. He won’t let anyone talk badly about Palestine. Why? Because he lived there in Palestine…The people that live in Baqa’a have a strong love for Palestine. You can see it when you walk in Baqa’a—all of the pictures... Since we’re young, always we hear about Jerusalem, Palestine, how our grandfathers and fathers were over there, all the stories. We have a great love for it. The way that Palestine is commemorated so intimately in Baqa’a camp is an important manifestation of this hidden transcript. This is not to say that commemorating Palestine would be disallowed outside of the camp. However, modes of self-expression are afforded greater freedom inside of it. In the camp, for example, Ube and his father are free from outside skepticism regarding their integration—free from the opinion of some native Jordanians, like Ahmed, that displaced Palestinians “don’t have any choice but to be like a Jordanian, just like any Palestinian-American or Palestinian-German or Palestinian-European. They have to be committed to the country and not mind the new region or land.” So, while it is not dangerous to openly profess one’s Palestinianess out in the broader Jordanian society, it can exacerbate the subtle tensions of Palestinian resettlement in Jordan. Baqa’a’s importance as a free space is thereby crucial for its residents’ negotiation of their fluid social position.
As a free space, Baqa’a’s offers Ube and his like-situated peers greater freedom from a curtailment of self. In the total institutions that Goffman examined, he demonstrated how prisons and asylums strip their subjects of all the social things that inform a self-conception. This includes dispossessing the subject of their former relationships and material possessions so as to create a uniform discourse of everyday life (Goffman 1961: 14). However, an institution’s effort to curtail this sense of self has a logistical requirement. Generally, it requires that they be physically sequestered from their prior social environment (Goffman 1961: 148; Scott 1991: 76; Hynie 2015: 271). Institutions that succeed in creating physically separate spaces will invariably be more successful in curtailing their subjects’ prior conceptions of self. Thus, it follows that refugees living in camps with physical indications of their isolation would be more susceptible to a curtailment of self than others.

Without physical separation or incessant institutional oversight, Baqa’a camp is a space where life prevails without this type of curtailment. Nearly all forms of social service are provided by non-governmental entities. Bodies like the UN provide schooling, sanitation, and healthcare to camp members because the Jordanian government does not. There are few state apparatuses that integrate Baqa’a residents into a public discourse or Jordanian consciousness. This sentiment was emphasized by Fatima who, though she is not from Baqa’a camp, offered an interesting analysis of how they are situated in Jordan. She explained:

You have to understand that when you go to the camp, the Baqa’a camp, and do a study, it’s not going to be the same results as when you are talking to Palestinians who are already engaged at the society and are not living in the camp. People at the camp are very strict to their country, Palestine, and say that they have to turn back. And these kinds of are stricter with their country—that they’re going to go back one day and that [Jordan] is not their place more than the people who already blend in at the society and are living their life naturally...So it was, are you Palestinian or are you Jordanian or are you in between. Palestinians keep saying they’re from Palestine, and Jordanians say “hey you’re in my country.”
Fatima openly acknowledges that people from Baqa’a camp are not engaged with Jordanian society in the same way that other Palestinian-Jordanians are. However, this is not so much on account of their physical isolation, but is an expression of how social life in Baqa’a operates outside the periphery of the public transcript. An expectation that Baqa’a residents should more readily integrate and assimilate into Jordanian society is strained by the relative social freedom that the camp provides—a freedom that allows its residents to practice their own selfhoods in a way that they want, or cling to a prior conception of who they were before they were displaced.

As Fatima alluded to though, more outward expressions of Palestinianess can be a source of tension. Luigi Achilli’s study of al-Wihdat camp, another Palestinian camp in Jordan, also demonstrated this point. Both al-Wihdat and Baqa’a residents are classified with the pejorative “mashkaljiyye” or “troublemaker” label (Achili 2015: 264). Both communities of Palestinian refugees are similarly situated in and around Amman, and both foster an internal culture of pronounced Palestinianess. Yet, in spite of how one’s refugeeness and otherness might complicate resettlement, Palestinianess remains a fundamental component of al-Wihdat and Baqa’a residents’ self-conceptions. This sustained Palestinianess flourishes despite its potential to entrench its practitioner in stigma.

For all the ways that Muhammad, Ube, and Layla experience marginalization—their inability to amass necessary social capital, inadequate social services, and poor infrastructure—propounding their Palestinianess is an act of defiance. It is to acknowledge how they are afflicted by marginalization on account of their social and economic status as displaced persons, and to reshape that narrative of their resettlement. As practitioners of this resistant Palestinianess, they assume the role of the classifiers rather than the classified. They are the agents of classification, rejecting a discourse that insists that they shed their Palestinianess and
more readily integrate into the wider Jordanian society that has hosted them for more than 50 years. Al-Wihdat and Baqa’a thus represent domains where like-situated individuals occupy a free space clear of institutional oversight. As James C. Scott outlines, this freedom is integral to active resistances (Scott 1991: 123). Free spaces breed a culture of solidarity that is critical for the undertaking of a resistant sense of self—or resistant Palestinianess (Goffman 1961: 58). This self-conception is rooted in the ways that camp residents “resist the pull” of dominant discourse that insinuates that they are other and that espouses them to shed their otherness (Goffman 1961: 320).

Muhammad, Ube, and Layla “resist the pull” by injecting their own subjectivities into their classifications. Their expressions of Palestinianess and of their refugeeness are not an admittance of subordination, but a rejection that it would be subordinating. From Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s accounts, they are endlessly proud of their Palestinianess. And, it seems that its impact on Ube’s sense of self has never waivered. On why people in Baqa’a continue to orient themselves around their Palestinianess, he said:

Of course, in the beginning, the people from Palestine thought that maybe it’d be just a month, or week, and then they’d return to Palestine. But now it’s 70 years. There are people that never got rid of their home because they wanted to return [to Palestine]. They don’t want to live here in Jordan. So the nice thing in the camp is, okay, we have a Jordanian passport and I’m considered a Jordanian citizen 100% and have total rights. But, the thing that’s different—especially for the people living in Baqa’a—is the right to return. Meaning, I, even if I’m 100 years, I want the right to return to my home country, Palestine. Everyone in Baqa’a knows where they’re from, name of their clan, why? Because one day they’ll return and go to their land.

Concurrent with the sentiment that Ube would prepare to return to his “home” in Palestine even when he is 100-years-old is an indefinite embrace of his refugeeness. At least part of Ube is Jordanian—he has citizenship, a passport, and all the other indicators of formal belonging. Yet,
even these things are not enough to undo the lingering sense that he is still displaced, that his and
his like-situated peers’ residence in Jordan is merely a temporary affair.

Ube’s negotiation of selfhood is lodged in the recognition that he is not totally Jordanian,
yet still possesses the legal marks of Jordanian citizen. Similarly, he is not technically from
Palestine, yet was socialized in a Palestinian enclave. He occupies a liminal space, constantly
negotiating the things that tell him that he is Jordanian and the things that make him feel
Palestinian. Ube’s resistance is not a rejection of Jordanianess, as some Jordanians might
suggest, but a resistance against his socially subordinate position. Confronted with stigma,
discrimination, and inadequate infrastructure, Ube inserts dignity and pride into what it means
for him to carry the legacy of displaced persons.

_Palestinian-Jordanian Liminality as Both Refugee and Host-Community_

So far, I have considered how Muhammad, Ube, and Layla form self-understandings of
their resettlement in Jordan. Much of this analysis involved contrasting the positions of
Palestinian-Jordanians and native Jordanians. However, with the rise of the Syrian refugee crisis
in the early 2010s, it would be impossible to ignore how their presence has affected already
fragile social fabrics. In the backdrop of all the difficulties that Palestinian-Jordanians still living
in refugee camps face, more than 670,000 Syrians have registered with the United Nations as
refugees in Jordan. This figure alone is roughly 10% of Jordan’s total population—a population
that was already working through questions of national identity and resource management
(World Food Program USA).

Almost all of my oral history narrators expressed concern regarding the management of
Syrian refugees who have now been in Jordan for close to a decade. The most salient theme in
these conversations was how Syrian refugees might take the place of Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians in the job market. For instance, Ahmed, the faculty member at the University of Jordan, noted that “Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians share the same concern that Syrians that could displace them from the economic market—displacing people from the market and strengthening the economic status for the Syrians. Absolutely, it will make the competition rise again between the Jordanians and the Syrians and the Palestinian-Jordanians.” Ahmed neatly sums the very issue that Francis and Bohm et al. (2018) explore in their analysis of resource sharing in host-communities. Not only do they find that vulnerable populations are less willing to share resources with newcomers, but that they frequently frame refugee integration as a cause of their own marginalization (Francis 2015: 3; Bohm et al. 2018). Though Ahmed’s standing as an academic means his position in the job market will probably be unaffected, he offers an indication of how Syrian resettlement in Jordan has reframed national conversations of resource management.

This idea was emphasized during my conversation with Muhammad, Ube, and Layla in Baq’a camp. As Palestinian-Jordanian refugee camp residents, the trio are precisely the vulnerable demographic that Francis and Bohm et al. describe. In fact, it took merely a couple of questions before Muhammad entered into one of the more emotional segments of our group conversation:

Jordan is small and has few resources. There were 6 million people before the Syrians came, and the people wanted jobs, help, services. They want and they want and they want….So when Syrians came, 2 million of them, they also wanted health services and jobs. And like any refugees, they need a house, help, they want food, water, they leave the camps and work. But us, the opposite happened. It started to be that the refugees would leave their camps and work where? In the shops, and etc. So it started to be that they took the opportunities from who? The Jordanians [Layla adds an audible indication of her agreement] For instance, we have a restaurant in Baq’a and most of the workers are Syrian!
The conversation continued:

Ube: Not only in the restaurants. It’s the bakery and the market. Maybe a Jordanian takes a monthly salary of 250 [Jordanian Dinar], and maybe the Syrian asks only for 200.

Muhammad: 200. Why? Because the Syrians receive other forms of aid too. They get aid from organizations, but the Jordanians don’t receive any aid.

Ube: First thing when the Syrians first came—where did the people want them to go? To refugee camps. But in the camps, they get money, they have a house, and they have food…so there are some people that hate the Syrians, to be honest. But I think this stuff is natural. When refugees come from a country to a second country, there are some people that hate refugees.

Ube and Muhammad’s frustration stems from the ways that the arrival of a new population of displaced persons has upset the national, social, and economic order. While many Syrian refugee camps, such as Za’atari camp, have drawn public attention, there are more Syrian refugees in Jordan living and working outside of refugee camps than there are living in them (UNHCR). This reality was well-reflected when Muhammad informed me Syrians are now working in Baqa’a camp where unemployment levels are around 17% (UNRWA).

Since its inception, Baqa’a camp has been a free space for displaced Palestinians to cultivate and practice their Palestinianess away from Palestine. Despite how they experience marginalization in Jordanian society, it remains a space where residents escape public expectations on their resettlement. The camp community has always been able to rely on a shared sense of Palestinianess in order to navigate a new life in Jordan. However, the seemingly unwanted presence of Syrian refugees in the camp is a challenge to the camp’s exclusively Palestinian makeup. For non-Palestinians to occupy a position in the space not only places a strain on the local economic market, but disrupts the solidarity in which camp residents rely on. Considering all the ways that camp residents experience marginalization outside of Baqa’a camp,
this solidarity has an important social utility. It acts as a support system for Baqa’a’s like-situated residents who derive their strength from their shared social position.

This case was further represented by Muhammad’s selective identification as a Jordanian. To recall, he noted that Syrians are supported financially by international aid agencies whereas “Jordanians don’t receive any aid.” Merely minutes before, though, our conversation had been focused on how Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s status as camp-dwellers denotes them an outsider in their own country. In fact, Muhammad and Ube’s earlier elaboration of how Palestine is their “home” indicates that they still foster a sense of displacement. And yet, Muhammad, here, employs the word “Jordanian” to convey how Syrian refugees have impacted all people living in Jordan. It is here that he is not only a Palestinian refugee living in Baqa’a camp, but a Jordanian citizen too. Whereat times these self-conceptions seem at odds, on the issue of Syrian refugees, they blend to form a unique hybrid. For all the ways that Muhamad’s social world tells him that he is a displaced person, Syrian refugee resettlement leads him to momentarily reject his own refugee label. Much in the same way that Karen refugees selectively reject their own classifications (Sharple 2016: 48), Muhammad situationally activates his Jordanianess to frame his threatened economic and social position in Jordan. Unavoidably, Muhammad caries the liminal emotions, characteristics, and social positions of a refugee and host community.

Muhammad’s integration of this sense of self into his everyday life is what makes the lived positions of Palestinian-Jordanians so dynamic. By unpacking how people form a self-understanding, we can better appreciate the longitudinal difficulties of resettlement. It equips us with a better appreciation of how socially subordinated groups assert their power despite their marginal position. Yet, an orthodoxy tells us that displaced persons of all kinds are unable to exercise such agency. As a group that is normally deemed incapable of self-expression and self-
determination, examining these processes is our way of respecting their humanity and the meanings that are integral to it.

More closely studying the position of Baqa’a residents reveals how Palestinian-Jordanian selfhoods have been uniquely forged by camp residents. For all the ways that the camp functions as a free space for refugee selfhood and self-expression, it is a theater for the very tension that affects the wider Jordanian public. It is a microcosm of the delicate relationship between locals and Syrian refugees that has affected the lives of everyone living in Jordan—Jordanians and Palestinian-Jordanians included. And, it is the site for rich amalgamations of self-understanding among Palestinian-Jordanians who simultaneously navigate Jordanian society as a resettling population and member of the host-community. Muhammad’s perceived threat from Syrian refugees causes him to blend his Palestinianess and his Jordanianess—two selfhoods that represent seemingly distinct symbolic positions in Jordanian society. To study how Muhammad is the pilot of this liminality is our way of respecting the agency of all the displaced persons who find themselves in a similar position. It is our way of recognizing their humanity in the face of all the traumas and economic hardship that inform the meanings of their resettlement.

**Conclusion**

Using oral history, I have explored the process of resettlement and integration in Jordan, investigating how constructions of self-understanding are a necessary area of study for scholars of displacement. Considering the self-understandings of a people requires that we account for how they are agents, at least to some degree, in their own classification. An infusion of this individuality is an important shift away from normative conceptions of displacement that imply that refugees are uniformly incapable of self-determination. That public exposure to refugeedom is typically limited to pictures of starving children and groups of people jammed into camps only
further perpetuates this perception. However, subscribing to this notion of who and what a refugee is trivializes their humanity. It is to suggest that refugeedom is a static phenomenon—that material deprivation and marginalization are the only truths to a refugee’s lived experience. Indeed, when we blindly adhere to this notion of refugeedom, little room is left for the refugee as a dignified agent of their own social world. This is not to detract from the urgency of relieving refugees’ material needs, but is a reminder that that displacement is more than a material affair.

Scholars must equip themselves with more sophisticated ways to analyze resettlement. While it is tempting to rely on an abstraction such as identity to do the analytical heavy lifting, identity tells us surprisingly little about an individual’s unique individuality. There is an implicit collectivity in the identity concept that, although situationally useful, can operate under a more dangerous assumption of homogeneity. Thus, scholars’ use of identity as the medium for critical analysis is complicated by this imprecision. Almost ironically, scholars of displacement who rely on “refugee identity” as their mode of analysis—even when trying to dignify and empower a refugee community—succumb to an unfortunate paradox. The internal sameness implicit in a construction of “refugee identity” is hardly distinguishable from popular media’s indiscriminate depictions of refugees. In both cases, the notion that there would be a uniform condition of refugeeness dangerously endures.

With this recognition, analysis of refugeedom requires analytical lenses that integrate the subjectivities of refugees whenever and however possible. Tools such as “self-understating,” “self-conception,” “sense of self,” and “selfhood” are all frameworks that situate the refugee as the agent of their meaning-making. It would be impossible, for example, to ascertain someone’s self-understanding without talking to them—impossible to procure an idea of one’s sense of self without listening to their story and their emotions. Only when talking to Muhammad, Ube, and
Layla was it clear how their lack of social capital uniquely marginalizes them from the rest Jordanian society. And, only after talking to Ube, my welcoming Afro-Palestinian guide through Baqa’a camp, did the issue of race add depth to what it means for Ube to belong to a community of displaced persons. Whereas as identity must constantly be qualified in order to accommodate for the intersectionalities of any one social position, intersectionality is inherent in self-understanding and other frameworks that spotlight the agent’s subjectivity.

In order to develop this argument, I used Erving Goffman’s total institution lens to closely examine Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s experience in Baqa’a camp. A total institution confines a group of like-situated individuals to one physical space where most facets of their daily life are dictated for them. As the total institution determines the script for everyday discourse, it creates an expectation of what and how its residents should be. This process of enforcing a “moral career” among the institutionalized is the institution’s way of ensuring continuity and lasting control over its residents. It imposes a type of institutionalized selfhood that individuals are to maintain throughout the duration of their institutionalization. Thus, in instilling a moral career within a group, the total institution requires that persons shed all the previous senses of self that informed their prior selfhoods.

Applying the total institution framework to Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s experience in Baqa’a showed how the camp breaks from traditional conceptualizations of refugee camps. Compared to other refugee camps, even camps in Jordan, that are vastly more surveilled, Baqa’a camp is a relatively unpolicied space for its residents. Without public institutions that might serve as the medium for the installation of a moral career, Baqa’a camp is a free space for the 100,000 individuals that call it home. This has important implications for the landscape of Palestinian-Jordanian selfhood construction. In the absence of institutional forces, Baqa’a camp
does not curtail its residents’ prior senses of self. In fact, constructions of Palestinianess are a vibrant and durable part of Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s daily lives. This manifests in their pronounced desire to return “home” to Palestine one day, and is tangibly apparent when walking through the camp’s streets. The Palestinian murals, flags, and slogans that dot Baqa’a camp’s buildingsides are a constant reminder of the importance of Palestinianess within the camp.

I have also argued for how this type of Palestinianess is an expression of resistance. Residence in Baqa’a camp is a stigmatized position in Jordanian society. It signifies that someone has not completely integrated into the Jordanian host-community. That Baqa’a camp is even referred to as a “camp” at all connotes its residents’ otherness. Because a camp insinuates a temporariness, it would seem that someone’s prolonged residence in Baqa’a camp would be its own self-contradiction. For all the ways, then, that some Jordanians place pressure on Palestinian-Jordanians to more hastily integrate into Jordanian society, maintaining a proud Palestinianess is at least partially a defiance in the face of this tension. Again, it is not that to be Palestinian-Jordanian in Jordan is inherently stigmatizing; however, for Baqa’a residents to cling to their Palestinianess is a challenge to dominant discourses that ask why they are not more Jordanian 50 years after their resettlement. Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s maintained Palestinianess, both inside and outside Baqa’a camp’s non-physical walls, is their way of resisting the notion that their refugeeeness should be damning in the first place.

Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s Palestinianess are all expressions of their daily negotiation of classification. They are agents of meaning in a classification struggle. While they assert a more dignified understanding of what their Palestinianess means, much of the outside world maintains that refugeeeness is an unchangingly undignified and helpless position. Negotiating these two positions is complex enough an exercise of classification. And yet, their self-
classifications are complicated by their coinciding social position as a host-community to Syrian refugees who have resettled in Jordan over the course of the last decade. With this added layer of complexity, Muhammad, Ube, and Layla’s unique self-understandings are products of an interplay between all the social things that emphasize their own refugeeeness, and all the other indicators that they are Jordanian. As a result, they inhabit a fluid position in Jordanian society imbued with constant renegotiations of refugee Palestinianess and host-community Jordanianess.

With much appreciation to all of my narrators who kindly shared their stories with me, we must recognize that refugeedom is a constantly changing construction. And yet, for all the millions of displaced persons worldwide, the West is largely unaware of how these individuals navigate the meanings of their displacement and resettlement. Only by considering the subjectivities of refugees and the members of their surrounding host-community do we get a sense that they cannot possibly be selfless, nameless, identificationless beings. Despite all the presentations of refugees that suggest that they embody a homogeneity of powerlessness, recognizing their discrete individualities dignifies their humanity. Refugees are not just “the Afghan girl,” they are Sharbat Gula—they are agents of their own classification in spite of all the forces that dispossess them of this capacity and displace them from their humanity.
Appendix A

Cases of Resistance from Around the World

I use the following case studies as a warmup of sorts for the application of these theories to contemporary displacements. I find it helpful to incorporate these analyses of refugeedom to remind us, yet again, that displacement and resettlement are not new social phenomena. Even so, applications of social theory are glaringly missing from most analyses. Engaging the above theories of selfhood/self-understanding, domination, agency, and resistance allows for a more nuanced reading of refugeedom that I employ in the analysis of my data.

Subversive Selfhood: Palestinians in Jordan

With this recognition, we can more closely analyze existing scholarship on refugee agency from around the world. Luigi Achilli’s study of Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan is one such example (2015). Achilli centers his study on al-Wihdat camp, a refugee camp inhabited by individuals who some Jordanians deem “incapable of integrating into Jordanian society” (Achili 2015: 263). As they are commonly adjudged as “others,” they embody a socially-other position in society. Othering in this context not only denotes that a camp resident carries an embodied social stigma, but that they are reminded of their otherness whenever they return to the physical and social world of their camp.

Emphasizing this condition, the Jordanian community surrounding al-Wihdat camp has negative views of the camp dwellers. Camp residents are seen as threatening, immoral sinners, religious fanatics, and “mashkaljiyye” (troublemakers) (Achili 2015: 264). The word “mashkaljiyye” is particularly revealing given its connotations. “Mashkaljiyye” is assigned to a person who causes problems. The word comes from the Arabic word “mashkila” which means
“a problem.” This descriptor suggests that their very existence is problematic. For a group of “mashkaljiyye” to be concentrated in a camp thereby ensures that they remain under surveillance. The avowed goals of total institutions are applicable to these persons then: “educating and training; medical or psychiatric treatment; religious purification; protection of the wider community from pollution” (Goffman 1961: 83). In this case, we might say that al-Wihdat residents are understood as pollutants. As “mashkaljiyye,” they embody a perceived toxic influence on the surrounding social environment.

Al-Wihdat camp members are seen as “contaminating” the surrounding Jordanian localities. This would imply that they do not belong in Jordan. And yet, while their presence is problematic in the opinion of some Jordanians, the majority of Palestinian refugees in Jordan have Jordanian citizenship. “Refugeedom” implies a statelessness, but the case of Palestinians in Jordan complicates this reading. Almost all Palestinians, from the time of their entrance into Jordan 70 years ago, have been issued Jordanian citizenship. Yet, how does a group embody a refugeeness, an effective statelessness, when they have settled in their new location for multiple generations?

Because many poorer Palestinian-Jordanians continue to inhabit the early refugee camps of their preceding generations, camp life has been a detractor to their “Jordanianness.” Rather, their residence in Palestinian enclaves has fostered a sustained “Palestinianess.” To this notion, Palestinians in camps like al-Wihdat elude a mandated curtailment of self (Goffman 1961: 14). Instead, the concentration of Palestinians in Jordan has ensured the maintenance of their Palestinian selfhoods in spite of the refugee camps that they find themselves residing in. As Achilli points out, one of the most potent avenues for Palestinian refugee resistance is their clinging to a Palestinian “identity” (2015: 265). In fact, al-Wihdat residents “continuously
reproduce their allegiance to Palestinian nationalism” despite the stigmatization of refugeedom. While being Palestinian in Jordanian society is not necessarily stigmatized, being a refugee can be. For Palestinian refugees in Jordan to staunchly maintain their refugee status and “Palestinianess” would seem to ensure that they remain non-Jordanian. Yet here, the “refugee” label is commandeered by refugees themselves. While refugee selfhood might be imposed by the camp institution, refugees embrace the “refugee” label situationally as a source of power (Fitzgerald and Arar 2018: 391).

It is this artful manipulation of meaning-making that ties closely to Scott’s analysis of resistance. To recall from Scott, “what may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends” (1990: 34). Thus, whereas embracing Palestinian refugeeeness may appear to be an embrace of subordination, it has a subversive agenda for those that practice it. It marks the reassertion of autonomy where autonomy has been so concertedly diminished (Goffman 1961: 314). Self-determination of labeling is thereby a way that spatially insecure Palestinians resist the terms of their marginalization.

The “Refugee” Label Among Displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma Borderlands

A similar negotiation of meaning and self-understanding can be observed in Rachel Sharples’s ethnography of displaced Karen in Thai-Burma refugee camps (Sharples 2016). Sharples finds that restrictions over space and movement segregate host-community and refugee populations (2016: 38). Concomitant with this spatial asphyxiation, status and selfhood derives from the allocation of space (Sharples 2016: 41). In the case of displaced Karen, camp bureaucracies devise a labeling system to identify and regulate the flow of migrants (Sharples
For the sake of efficiency, using numbers instead of names makes governing refugees more manageable. Even so, it is inherently dehumanizing. To use an ID number rather than a name strips the person of their subjective selfhood (Goffman 1961: 14).

And yet, displaced Karen are not complicit in this dehumanization. Like Achilli, Sharples demonstrates how displaced Karen assert their subjective narratives into their self-understanding. In this way, Sharples’ study engages the subversive steps taken to challenge social hierarchies (Scott 1991: 4-5). She finds, for instance, that Karen employ rhetorical methods to challenge their camp’s total control (Sharples 2016: 42). To lessen the psychological toll of displacement, Karen refer to their camps with terms similar to their villages or townships—rather than a place of internment, Karen artfully refer to the camp’s main road as a “highway” (Sharples 2016: 43). While seemingly insignificant, this maneuver reaffirms that they have an existence independent of their refugee camp (Goffman 1961: 314).

Such an articulation of dissent operates as part of the hidden transcript. To refer to a camp using terms reminiscent of Karen villages does not explicitly challenge the basis of the camp’s authority. Yet subtly, it undermines the institutional goal of curtailment of self. We might say that the successful employment of a hidden transcript—the subtle manipulation of language in a way that is largely inaccessible to camp officials—has allowed for articulations of resistance in more emboldened ways. By humanizing their social environments, these refugees achieved “a feeling of relaxation and self-determination, in marked contrast to the sense of uneasiness prevailing” in their refugee camp (Goffman 1961: 231). Building on this success, Karen have started to construct makeshift churches and schools for their camp communities (Sharples 2016: 43). The clever use of language and space here, though seemingly minute, is important for the understanding of power relations (Scott 1991: 9). For Karen to find ways to
assert their agency in the face of spatial domination should be understood as an expression of resistance.

Karen also explore a reclamation of selfhood by negotiating the imposed “refugee” label itself. The imposition of selfhood is a crucial component of total institutions. Refugees, however, can manipulate the application of this institutional selfhood. Ethnographic research has shown that refugees selectively employ their “refugeeness” where it is situationally fitting (Achilli 2015: 265; Fitzgerald and Arar 2018: 391). According to Sharples’ observations, displaced Karen approach the “refugee” label similarly. In the Karen camps, there is an expectation that a “real’ refugee must look and live a certain way—that refugees should only receive institutional support if they appear helpless and immobile. To be a refugee, here, “suggests a model of how a refugee should look and behave” (Sharples 2016: 47). The expectation for a certain behavior closely follows the performative quality of an institutional moral career (Goffman 1961: 168). It is an important finding, then, that displaced Karen occasionally identify as “migrant workers” instead of “refugees” (Sharples 2016: 48). In the selective application of one or the other, Karen carve space for their self-determination. While both of these terms adhere to the criteria of the public transcript—in fact, they acknowledge the refugee’s statelessness and weak social position—their applications have a subversive property. For a displaced Karen to situationally reject the “refugee” label in favor of “migrant worker” is to at least partially dictate the terms of their social world. While their lived experience may be that of marginalization, the affirmation of their agency should be understood as a challenge to the conditions of their imposed domination.
Refugee performativity has been a key part of the discussion so far. In Goffman’s analysis of total institutions, he found that total institutions function to reeducate and resocialize inmates (1961: 4). This agenda requires that the inmates be understood as an impediment to social stability outside the institution’s walls. When refugee camps operate in this way, they physically emphasize the refugee’s need for “reform” (Olivius 2017: 292). We find a very similar dynamic in the case of displacement in Malaysia. Refugees in Malaysia are often subject to treatment that reaffirms their dangerous “otherness” (de Vries 2016: 881). This otherness, as is commonly found in other contexts of protracted displacement, takes an ethno-racial property (de Vries 2016: 881; van der Zwan et al. 2017: 519-520). Otherness thus becomes the medium by which refugees in Malaysia understand their selves and their position in Malaysian society. While de Vries uses “identity” to discuss refugees’ embodiment of otherness, we can substitute “self-understanding/selfhood” in this case. What she unpacks are the ways in which refugees in Malaysia interact with their social world and construct a conception of self in accordance with the bureaucratic structures that maintain their marginalization.

Seeing as though Malaysian law either denotes a migrant “legal” or “illegal,” questions of selfhood and social position are entrenched in this conversation. Selfhood, here, is constructed according to one’s “legal” or “illegal” existence. As such, the possibility of resistance is tied to positionality. de Vries employs the term “performative production of refugees” to describe this project (2016: 883). Her use of “performative” should instantly remind us of performativity in total institutions. To recall from Goffman, the self exists only to the extent that it dwells “in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him” (1961: 168). Thus, where a refugee exists as a performer, it is to say that they display a selfhood in accordance with the total institution’s social universe. When we adopt this
consideration for performativity as a basis of selfhood, one’s “illegality” can be understood as their embodied political and social incongruence to their new social environment.

In the case of “illegal” migrants in Malaysia, to obtain a UNHCR identity card is an important avenue for resistance. This card challenges the embodied illegality of being a refugee in Malaysia. In many cases, it provides needed security to those who otherwise might be victims of detention and corporal punishment (de Vries 2016: 876). For as long as possession of a UNHCR identity card protects refugees from violence, it is an important way that they challenge their subordinate position. However, although a UNHCR identity card might protect refugees from physical danger, it increases their visibility. There is no way to obtain an identity card other than to volunteer oneself as a subject to be controlled (de Vries 2016: 883). Thus, evading Malaysian officials requires confronting UNHCR officials. Where refugees in Malaysia may be desperately seeking to exercise their self-determination, to register for a UNHCR identity card would appear antithetical to that mission, despite the safety and protection it affords.

Noting the delicateness of this issue, we have to reorient ourselves around what voluntary visibility means for refugees’ domination and resistance. Possession of a UNHCR identity card grants the UNHCR control over the refugee’s life. At the very least, card possession affirms a public recognition that the authority of the UNHCR is legitimate. It would appear that to register as a refugee and subject oneself to increased visibility is to consent to one’s further domination. This being said, what we might find in this dynamic is a manipulation of “consent.” We can apply Scott’s lens to refine our reading of this issue:

On the open stage the serfs or slaves will appear complicitous in creating an appearance of consent and unamity; the show of discursive affirmations from below will make it seem as if ideological hegemony were secure. The official transcript of power relations is a sphere in which power appears naturalized because that is what elites exert their influence to produce and because it ordinarily serves the immediate interests of subordinates to avoid discrediting these appearances. (1991: 87)
The semblance of consent is an innovative tool in refugees’ arsenal of resistance. For displaced persons in Malaysia to register with the UNHCR and receive an identity card may appear to be willful subjugation. However, such a project should also be interpreted as an expression of resistance. When equipped with a card, refugees are in a position to challenge the illegality that Malaysian officials ascribe to them (de Vries 2016: 886). The decision to make oneself increasingly visible, while potentially risky, brings with it protection from physical danger, as well as access to work, education, and healthcare (de Vries 2016: 887).

It would prove impossible, surely, for refugees to openly challenge the authority of Malaysian officials and the UNHCR. Refugees’ position of material dependence renders them unable, in most cases, to survive if not for outside assistance. Thus, rather than be overtly subversive, refugees in de Vries’s study resist their domination in a way that does not directly undermine systems of authority. These refugees challenge the basis of their domination “within the official discourse of deference” (Scott 1991: 95). Because of this, they are protected from the repercussions of being openly insubordinate. Resistance, therefore, is more complicated than purely public displays of rebellion. In fact, to do so would completely ruin the necessity of remaining partially invisible. An act of resistance that undermines existing power structures in a concealed way is thus the pinnacle of refugee resistance—it is an exhibition of symbolic sleight of hand where refugees reject their imposed subordination within the public discourse of their domination.
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