

## HOME NOW: HOW 6,000 REFUGEES

Transformed an American Town

Cynthia Anderson

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For the past thirty years I have been intrigued by the dynamics of refugee resettlement outside of major metropolitan areas across the world, and especially in the United States. Like labor and other migrants, refugees have in recent decades increasingly settled in secondary cities, smaller towns, and rural regions, including in the South, in the Midwest, and in the Rustbelt. Unlike other immigrant populations, refugees have little say on their initial placement, and are relocated primarily due to decisions made by the federal government and its resettlement agency partners and their networks. The fate of refugees who end up in disparate communities across the United States has become a topic of much political debate and controversy in recent years. What happens to those who go not to more traditional immigrant destinations like New York City, Miami or Los Angeles but rather are placed in small towns in California and Massachusetts, in rural Georgia or Idaho, or in rustbelt cities in Ohio and Pennsylvania? And what happens to the communities who have welcomed newcomers into their midst? Have they changed and if so, how?

It is with such interests in mind that I picked up Anderson's *Home Now*. Its title and blurb promise a focus on refugee resettlement in Lewiston, Maine and the ways in which that process has played out through the turbulence of the recent past. The book does tell that story, but this is less a tale about Lewiston and more about (some of) those who live in it. In many ways the town is really a backdrop to the accounts of a handful of individuals whose lives, struggles, and successes Anderson illuminates over the course of five years – and how these personal narratives shed an intimate light on the debates regarding immigration, identity, integration and belonging that are roiling the United States as well as the world. I was curious to return to the story of Lewiston in particular. Within immigration and especially refugee resettlement studies, the tale of the town in the Northeast is notable and somewhat notorious. In 2002, in response to ongoing (primarily secondary) migration by Somalis into Maine and into Lewiston in particular, the then-mayor penned an open letter to newcomers advising them not to come and warning that city services would be overwhelmed by their arrival. This act spurred a furious set of responses and counter-responses, with white hate groups cheering the stance and a much larger number of immigrant rights supporters and the Somali community itself pushing back against the xenophobic rhetoric.

In her book, Anderson takes the reader back to Lewiston more than a decade later to see how Lewiston has emerged from such tensions. In particular, *Hope Now* is focused primarily on the Trump years, between 2015-2019 and on the months leading up to and including the U.S. presidential election and the first year of Trump's presidency. The author takes the reader through election rallies and campaign promises, travel bans and the suspension of the refugee program, and more locally, the controversy surrounding a proposed bill to ban Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the Maine legislature. Anderson also shows us the events that frame the lives of people living through these moments – jobs sought, taken and left, education pursued (and endured), relationships explored, nurtured, ended and begun, weddings, funerals, trips, purchases, and plans, all the many decisions and outcomes of daily life that happen regardless of the drama taking place on the national stage.

Anderson's book is not a scholarly take on resettlement, though an increasing number of academic texts take up this question of immigrants and refugees outside of the major cities. Examples include studies of immigrant settlement in places like Nashville (Winders 2013), the US south (Ehrkamp and Nagel 2017), rural areas (Nelson and Nelson 2011), Fargo (2020), Utica (Kraly and Vogelaar 2011), Minneapolis-St. Paul (Chambers 2017), and my own research on Vermont (Bose 2020). Such work has sought to complicate many of the standard narratives and well-worn tropes of immigration and integration – what such journeys look like and what outcomes they produce. Thus, while there are many similarities one finds in the stories of resettlement whether in Boston or Chicago, Turlock or Twin Falls, there are also specificities and unique contexts that can be brought to life through a book like *Home Now* that does a deep dive into a particular case.

Anderson is well-positioned to tell this particular case, having grown up in the Lewiston area and having covered the region extensively in several previous news articles. She has returned more recently for both personal and professional reasons to live part of the year in Maine and takes up the tale in a particularly fraught moment, as locals (newer and older) question the value, purpose and outcomes of settling mostly African refugees in a mostly white, aging post-industrial small town. Anderson's background as a journalist and a non-fiction writer is reflected in the cadences and norms of *Home Now*. This is no academic treatise; there are no long discussions of methodology, no discussion of how she gained access to the main subjects of her book, no explanation of how she processed or analyzed their stories, no account of how she gained their trust to retell such intimate details of their lives, and no mention of whether those who are featured in the book received any backlash or criticism for opening up in the way that they did. Indeed, this is one of the things I found most jarring in the book – that it is so open and candid about the central figures, with their names, lives and even images featured prominently throughout. Especially in the field of refugee/resettlement studies, the tendency is much more common to mask or obscure identities for all kinds of reasons.

But of course, this is a journalistic account, not a research article or a scholarly monograph. And being so does not diminish from the depth of Anderson's work, which is clearly based on extensive and meticulous ethnographic research including repeated long-form interviews and participant observation within communities with which she is intimately familiar. Her familiarity with Lewiston is on display throughout the book and she intersperses the narrative

with her own memories and attachments to the place itself. The central characters in *Home Now* are a number of resettled refugees and asylum seekers in Maine, mostly from the Somali, Somali Bantu and Congolese communities. They include men and women, parents, high school and college students, and activists and community leaders. Anderson also features a number of other secondary and tertiary characters – others within the resettled communities, several local advocates who support them, and a few who have been active in opposing refugee resettlement in Maine. All are presented not as representative of their particular politics or communities, but rather as illustrative of the complicated and often contradictory nature of the dynamics of resettlement.

Overall, I found *Home Now* to be an engrossing read – in many ways it felt more like a serialized podcast or documentary than a book. In this sense the book feels like a series of vignettes where the reader returns repeatedly to each of primarily five lives and sees how each of Anderson's central and supporting characters are reacting to changes in their own lives and to the swirl of politics and culture all around them. How does the asylum seeker react to new changes in visa rules? What do the refugees think of the Trump rallies in Maine that demonize them directly? How do the proponents of the anti-FGM bill respond to the failure of their legislation? I was left wanting more context for all of these stories – in some ways it felt like just a small window into a particular moment, and I felt like the introduction in particular did not do enough work to set the stage for the book to come. A mere handful of pages introduce Lewiston, even less detail is presented about the author herself and precious little time is devoted within the book to introducing Anderson's relationships and connections within the community. This last would have been especially helpful because the reader is left wondering how indeed she managed to make inroads into communities (especially the Somali and anti-refugee groups) that generally show significant amounts of distrust of outsiders. I also would have liked to have seen a reframing of the introduction; as mentioned earlier the title and introductory chapter sets up an expectation that Lewiston will be the centerpiece of the book, but it rather quickly fades into the background and the central characters rise to prominence. This is not a failing in the book – it is the stories of Abdikadir, Carrys, Fatuma, Jamilo and Nasafari that are the most compelling and captivating in *Home Now*. Having been able to anticipate this trajectory from the outset of the book might have made it a little less unexpected as a reader however. *Home Now* would make an excellent complementary reading for researchers and especially undergraduate students interested in the lived experiences of refugees in smaller locations – though I would recommend pairing it with more scholarly works that introduce and contextualize the reasons for those placements in the first place.

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