Making Refuge
Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine
Catherine Besteman

How do people whose entire way of life has been destroyed and who witnessed horrible abuses against loved ones construct a new future? How do people who have survived the ravages of war and displacement rebuild their lives in a new country when their world has totally changed? In Making Refuge Catherine Besteman follows the trajectory of Somali Bantus from their homes in Somalia before the onset in 1991 of Somalia’s civil war, to their displacement to Kenyan refugee camps, to their relocation in cities across the United States, to their settlement in the struggling former mill town of Lewiston, Maine. Tracking their experiences as “secondary migrants” who grapple with the struggles of xenophobia, neoliberalism, and grief, Besteman asks what humanitarianism feels like to those who are its objects and what happens when refugees move in next door. As Lewiston’s refugees and locals negotiate co-residence and find that assimilation goes both ways, their story demonstrates the efforts of diverse people to find ways to live together and create community. Besteman’s account illuminates the contemporary debates about economic and moral responsibility, security, and community that immigration provokes.

Catherine Besteman is Francis F. and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology at Colby College and the author of Transforming Cape Town and Unraveling Somalia: Race, Class, and the Legacy of Slavery.

"Making Refuge is the extraordinary story of an anthropological reencounter as the ethnographer discovers that villagers she had lived with in Somalia two decades earlier have become her neighbors in Maine after they left their war torn country to seek asylum in the United States. Few studies have provided such a powerful albeit intimate understanding of the unexpectedness of globalization, variations in the experience of diaspora and complications of resettlement in a sometimes hostile new environment."—Didier Fassin, author of Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present

"The timeliest of books in these most troubling of times. The out of nowhere arrival of refugees and migrants at the doorstep of Europe and the United States—their sheer mass, the horrors of the journey, their inhospitable reception, the centrality of this to all that is political today—is the issue of our time. Catherine Besteman follows the journey of Somali refugees who resettled in the United States with brilliant insight and eloquence, and with the intimacy and soulful empathy that comes from years of acquaintance, both in Somalia and the United States."—Charles Piot, author of Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War
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