

The problem of the future in the spacetime of resettlement: Iraqi refugees in the U.S.

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Abstract

How do the lost futures of forced displacement converge with the impasse of being resettled to a “post-future” society such as the U.S.? Based on interviews conducted between 2016 and 2019 with resettlement agents, service providers and Iraqis resettled in the U.S., we argue that the condemnation of “expectations” (that is, realistic hope) coupled with the demand for refugees’ gratitude means that Iraqis resettled to the U.S. are asked to sustain a “hope against hope” for the fullness of American futurity, even in the face of its collapse. We argue that this prescribed structure of feeling distorts the affective realities of those for whom resettlement has meant at once the loss of past futures (e.g. professional qualifications, career trajectories, social status, or intergenerational cycles of care) and the running aground of capacities for futurity – especially as these capacities are bound up with transnationally stretched and reconfigured familial relations. What is at stake is the recognition of the crisis of futurity in the spacetime of resettlement and the rightfulness of refugee expectations for a more humane and fulfilling resettlement.

Keywords

Refugees, resettlement, future, family, temporality, expectation

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Introduction

A 2009 report by the Human Rights Institute at the Georgetown University Law Center on the experiences of Iraqi refugees resettled to the U.S. opened its executive summary with a description of the situation as follows:

Across the United States, many resettled Iraqi refugees are wondering how, after fleeing persecution at home to seek refuge in a country that barely tolerated them, they have found themselves in “the land of opportunity” with little hope of achieving a secure and decent life. From Washington, D.C. to Detroit to San Diego, recently resettled Iraqi refugees face odds so heavily stacked against them that most end up jobless, some even homeless. (HRI, 2009: 1)

How does this time and space of little hope come to take the place of the imagined future of resettlement? Resettlement, which the UNHCR (2020a) defines as “the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement,” typically appears on the horizon of displacement as the point of renewed futurity, where the temporal rhythms of ordinary life and the certainty of the future will be restored (Ramsay, 2017).¹ As one of UNHCRs three “durable solutions” for refugees (the others being integration within countries of first asylum or voluntary repatriation to the country of origin), resettlement holds out the promise of an opportune resolution to the crisis of displacement. Despite being ultimately available to fewer than 1% of those designated as refugees, this “resettlement imaginary,” as Georgina Ramsay (2017) terms it, circulates across humanitarian agencies, government policies, scholarly work, media representations and amongst refugees themselves. But what if – as the HRI report quoted above suggests – the spacetime of resettlement is itself the site of crisis, where residual attachments to past futures are deflated and the renewal of the future in “the land of opportunity” can only be expressed in scare quotes?

Based on interviews conducted between 2016 and 2019 with resettlement agents, service providers and Iraqi refugees² at four U.S. resettlement sites and in Washington D.C., the premise of this article is that, while much work has focused on the ongoing ramifications of refugees’ traumatic pasts, the problem for those who find themselves in the spacetime of resettlement perhaps more pointedly concerns the future. How does the problem of refugees’ lost futures – that is, the collapse of expectations and investments that war, displacement, and resettlement have rendered moot – converge with the impasse of being resettled to a society such as the U.S., where it seems that “the future is over”; or, as Berardi puts it, “Of course, we know that a time after the present is going to come, but we don’t expect that it will fulfil the promises of the present” (Berardi, 2011: 25)? Our argument is that, for Iraqi refugees resettled to the U.S., the problem of the future brews at the intersection of these crises.

The overlay of lost and cancelled futures in the spacetime of resettlement is inflected by colonial and imperial structures of power that put refugees in a subaltern relationship to the Western territorial nation-state, as those whose very *exclusion* shores up the progressive time and the colonial-imperial space of the nation-state system (Bhabha, 2013; Khanna, 2003). In this article, we argue that this positioning of refugees as subaltern fuels a discourse in which the obstacle to the wellbeing of Iraqis in the U.S. is conceptualized not in terms of, for example, the effects of employment-based resettlement policies that rush newcomers into dead-end jobs, but rather as a problem of Iraqis’ excessive *expectations*. Within this discourse, their attachment to likely futures is interpreted as entitlement (Parla, 2019). Furthermore, to have expectations that can then be *disappointed* in the process of

resettlement undermines the related demand that the refugee, as an object of humanitarian compassion and generosity, feel grateful for the future that they have been “given” (Gatrell, 2013; MT Nguyen, 2012). For Iraqis resettled to the U.S., this quashing of expectation coupled with the demand for gratitude means that they are asked to sustain a “hope against hope” for the fullness of American futurity, even in the face of its collapse. The tension between this prescribed “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) of refuge and the lived space-time of resettlement puts many Iraqis who are resettling in the U.S. in the position of “affect aliens,” estranged from what they are prescribed to feel (Ahmed, 2010: 42).

Finally, what is at stake in the demand that Iraqis resettled to the U.S. at once disavow their expectations and uphold an optimistic attachment to American futures is the affirmation of a particular spatial and temporal arrangement, one in which violence and oppression are mapped onto “other” (non-U.S.) territories and sealed into the refugee’s (unfortunate) past, while freedom and opportunities for the future inhere in the (American) here and now.³ Enrolment of Iraqis in this geo-historically over-determined “structure of feeling” works to neutralize unease over the U.S. war in Iraq, shoring up its historically contested righteousness and making invisible the entanglement between U.S. imperialism, Iraqi displacement, and the American present.

Our focus on Iraqis resettled to the U.S. is driven by a commitment to critical refugee studies, which seeks to bring war and refuge into the same frame (Espiritu, 2014). We began our research in 2015, over a decade after the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq had begun. As a result of this war and subsequent occupation, by 2007 there were nearly 2.2 million UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees. In the decade 2003–2013, E.U. member states granted refugee status to 40,000 Iraqi refugees (Fandrich, 2013), while the United States admitted nearly 85,000 Iraqi refugees between 2007 and 2013 (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013). Our multi-sited study of Iraqi refugee resettlement to the U.S. consisted of fieldwork in Jordan and Turkey undertaken from 2015 to 2016 and in the U.S. from 2016 to 2019. The U.S.-based portion of our study (which is the basis of this article) consists of fieldwork in two larger and two smaller cities, all sites of substantial resettlement of Iraqis post-2006, and in Washington D.C.⁴ Our data collection includes interviews and focus groups with over 60 domestic participants, recruited from resettlement agencies, medical centers, county health departments, Iraqi community centers, legal aid, psychosocial services, and voluntary organizations that provide support services for such vulnerable groups within refugee populations as the elderly, survivors of torture, or survivors of domestic violence. Our interviewees were administrators, case workers, mental health screeners, employment agents, counsellors, attorneys, psychologists, social workers, physicians, community leaders, and Iraqis who came to the United States via resettlement and Special Immigrant Visa processes.⁵

In the following section, “In the space of the future,” we lay the groundwork for our argument by taking up the problem of futurity as it relates to refugee resettlement. The next three sections draw from our interview-based research. While the first two sections, “A recipe for disappointment” and “Your good life in the past,” examine affective orientations towards past and promised futures in the spacetime of resettlement, the third section, “Let their children be their future,” takes on the problem of what Franco Berardi (2017: 13) calls “futurability” by examining the projected or thwarted capacities for the future that inhere in the present of the “durable solution.”

In the space of the future

The idealized path of refuge is from temporally and geographically distant sites of violence and war to the “here and now” of the “durable solution” characterized by security and

freedom. But as critical scholars have noted, this spatiotemporal mapping reinforces geopolitical and humanitarian logics that tend to naturalize and obscure both the causes and effects of forced displacement (Ehrkamp et al., 2019; Espiritu, 2014; Jacobsen, 2022; Loyd et al., 2018; MT Nguyen, 2012). For one, refugee journeys are not in fact linear but instead take circuitous and cyclical routes both geographically and temporally (Griffiths, 2014; Mountz, 2017; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). Further, as Lisa Malkki has influentially argued, a fixation on refugees' traumatic pasts tends to render them the objects of humanitarian intervention and to make less visible the ongoing-ness of forced displacement (Malkki, 1995). And finally, projecting resettlement as the aspirational endpoint of the refugee's trajectory – the point at which the future will start up again following intervals of suspended time in camps, borderlands, detention centers and sites of asylum-seeking – distorts the lived temporalities of forced displacement both during times of “waiting” and after the “durable solution” (Horst, 2006; Horst and Grabska, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). In short, the linear model of refuge is inadequate for understanding the lived spatiotemporalities of forced migration.⁶

Instead of a linear polarization of past and future that also works spatially to fix violence and suffering at an imperial distance from U.S. shores, we engage the past futures of forced displacement as they shadow the American present. Framing our study of refugee resettlement in relation to the problem of the future, we enter the currents of queer and left scholarship that has grappled with the “myth of the future” (Berardi, 2011: 18) rooted in modern expansive capitalism and what Lee Edelman calls the “reproductive futurism” of generation and inheritance (Edelman, 2004: 17). The sense that, over the past 30 years, societies in Europe and the United States have come to face the “slow cancellation of the future” reflects a collapse of the expectations that ideologies of capitalist modernism and liberal democracy had nurtured (Berardi, 2011: 18; Fisher, 2014). For Lauren Berlant, this loss of promised futures is apparent in “the affective languages – languages of anxiety, contingency and precarity – that take up the space that sacrifice, upward mobility, and meritocracy used to occupy” (Berlant, 2011: 19). While Edelman refuses the compulsion to repair the heteronormative, bourgeois promise of “futurity in the privileged form of the child” (2004: 15), other scholars have sought to reformulate the problem of the future “beyond the impasse of the present” along the lines of queer utopian or Afrofuturist thought (Keeling, 2019; Muñoz, 2009: 31). Without imposing a misleading coherence on these perspectives, together this diverse field of scholarship is concerned in particular with the failure and disintegration of European and American modernist mythologies of progress, generational gains, and ever-expanding wealth for ordinary people. They ask us to consider therefore how this “slow cancellation of the future” in the West inflects the problems of futurity for refugees resettled to these societies.

To address the spatiotemporal dislocations of subjects living in the wake of violence, loss and cultural devastation, this article brings critiques of liberal futurity into conversation with critical refugee and postcolonial studies. We bring these fields together in two main ways. First, we suggest that Iraqis resettled to the U.S. become what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls “affect aliens” insofar as they are asked to uphold a structure of feeling that positions them as subaltern in the American present, entitled to nothing but the expired dreams of Western modernity. Second, we argue that, in the spacetime of resettlement, the problem of the future crystallizes with the disruption of conventional “teleologies of living” that are bound to the (hetero)temporalities of the family (Edelman, 2004; Freeman, 2010: 5). These familial logics of inheritance, genealogy and reproduction are based on a horizon of “reproductive futurism” that casts nonconforming (queer) lives as unthinkable and subject to violent abandonment (Edelman, 2004: 2). Refugee subjects individually may (or may not)

maintain fidelity to reproductive futurism. They are nonetheless “queered” in the process of displacement, insofar as resettlement practices that aim to shore up U.S. territoriality and national identity – such as the denial of overseas credentials, employment-based resettlement policies that foster deskilling, and the separation of families – place them outside the linear trajectories that secure white, bourgeois, heterosexual privilege (see also Cohen, 2005; El-Tayeb, 2013; Oswin, 2019; Shakhsari, 2014). In suggesting that queer critique provides powerful analytical tools for understanding the spacetime of refugee resettlement, we follow David Seitz’s argument for the salience of “queer critical mappings of power [...] to scholarship grappling with late modern nation-states’ drive toward the violent production, policing, fencing, management and expulsion of ‘stateless’ populations” (2017: 439).⁷ Thus while these fields (queer, critical refugee, and postcolonial) are not reducible to one another (or even to their own self-identity, each being heterogeneous and dynamic), we situate our study at their intersection to show how the crisis of futurability in the spacetime of resettlement is produced through interlocking systems of power that at once imperil, upend, and alienate Iraqi lives.

“A recipe for disappointment”: Expectation

The “resettlement imaginary” (Ramsay, 2017) is steeped in a promise of futurity: the assumption that the “solution” to forced migration will be achieved if one can reach the projected endpoint of resettlement. Yet at the same time as an optimistic attachment to the telos of refuge infuses the practices and discourses of resettlement, refugees’ own *expectations* – that is, *their* projections of likely futures – are cast as a problem in the spacetime of resettlement. This duality, in which those who have become subject to refugee administration are both incited to hope and stripped of their expectations, is manifest, for example, in a joint International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and UNHCR report published in 2009, titled “Observations on the resettlement expectations of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.” The report observes that high expectations regarding resettlement are often fostered at sites of first asylum, and quotes the Senior Project Manager of a Community Services Center in Beirut explaining this encouragement:

To make life tolerable [during the long wait between first interview and final decision], the refugees need to have high expectations, embellished with elements of a really good future to fill them with life energy. Low expectations would not have the same effect, and realistic expectations would not be the remedy they need to make it through the waiting period. (Riller, 2009: 8)

But the author of the report expresses misgivings: “As of which point in the resettlement process should the high expectations then be addressed? They might be ‘fuel for survival’ but may also serve as the recipe for disappointment and very problematic integration experiences” (Riller, 2009: 8). The report goes on to suggest ways in which more realistic understandings what resettlement entails might be fostered, including recommendations for “addressing passive entitlement thinking” (10).

The “problem” plaguing resettlement futures is thus couched in terms of the expectations of the resettled. That some Iraqis arrive in the U.S. with expectations that are let down by the realities of resettlement has been a common observation amongst those working with the population arriving post-2006 in what is known as the “third wave” of Iraqi migration to the U.S. (Jamil et al., 2007; Yako and Biswas, 2014). In the words of one of the resettlement agents in our study, “I think people [US citizens] often have this vision of everyone must come here and just be so overjoyed.” Yet, as he goes on to observe, in reality new arrivals

are immediately confronted with the difficulty of surviving on their meager resettlement stipend and living under crowded conditions – in the case of some our respondents, in an expensive American city already suffering from around 9% unemployment before 2020.

As in the 2009 ICMC/UNHCR report quoted above, these expectations are often traced to popular media representations of life in the U.S. or to misinformation circulating in sites of first asylum or passed along by American sponsors of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs)⁸ who oversell the prospect of life in the U.S. One of our respondents, a resettlement agency employment officer who himself had arrived on an SIV, suggested that the best thing that could be done to ease the difficulty of resettlement (and to prime his clients to accept low-status employment and thereby fulfil the employment targets of his office⁹) would be to mentally prepare people for the actual hardships of resettlement. Indeed, those arriving on SIVs may be especially prone to disillusionment with the promised future of resettlement: as one agent explained, “They [SIV holders] have had strong relationships with American military, and diplomatic personnel told them what the life in America is about. [...] They expect a lot more. [...]” Arriving to find themselves over-crowded in small flats, beholden to inadequate public transportation in mid-sized American cities, making do with cash assistance that barely covers the rent and expires after eight months, and unable to transfer professional credentials, the “crisis ordinary”¹⁰ (Berlant, 2011) of resettlement becomes, as a service provider put it, “an added trauma to what they already are experiencing.” Or, as another resettlement agent reflected, “It’s easier the fewer expectations you had when you got here.”

The complaint of “entitlement thinking” snaps at the heels of those displaced from Iraq. In the words of one resettlement agent: “So, unfortunately, but understandably there develops reputations. I think people generally empathize with tragedy. What they don’t empathize with is a sense of entitlement.” This reputation of “entitlement” amongst Iraqis is often indexed to their (over)generalized and often racialized difference from other refugee populations. As one agent reflected,

In some ways, it [resettlement] is harder for the Iraqi engineer than it is for the illiterate 23-year-old Congolese person [...] I remember one client we had, and basically he was like the director of disease control and environmental toxins and things for the City of Baghdad. That guy, it’s hard. And I would say some can and do, and some don’t.

The invocation of literacy appears neutral, used to extend sympathy to a refugee with a professional background. Yet, the comparison denies or dismisses psychological suffering for the Congolese person on the basis of illiteracy (notably, a eugenic era measure separating those who would be granted entry from those who would not (Baynton, 2016)). The invidious comparison and bootstrap rhetoric works against both people. The professional’s success can be used against other refugees and immigrants for failing to overcome oppression; his failure can be used against him for expecting more than the “standard” refugee.

The focus on refugee subjects’ expectations obscures the role that U.S. employment-based resettlement policies and discourses of “self-sufficiency” play in draining the potential from resettlement futures. The U.S. resettlement goal of refugee “self-sufficiency” as quickly as possible (ideally within eight months of arrival) means that refugees are positioned to accept available employment but are not supported in schooling, aside from English-language acquisition, that might improve their wage-earning potential. Scholars and practitioners alike have come to the conclusion that this goal “might succeed in getting refugees to work, but [...] rather than getting them started on a career trajectory with upward mobility [...], at best earn[s] refugees’ access to ‘survival jobs’” (Garnier et al., 2018: 96; see also

Campbell, 2018; Capps and Newland, 2015; Darrow, 2015). Sidestepping the real problems that these employment policies present for Iraqi futures, the discourse on expectation psychologizes for management. As suggested by the ICMC/UNHCR report, this could be through “kind but clear messages that a promising start of a new chapter in life is not necessarily dependent on duration of benefits but on the survival skills and mentality of the individual refugee” (Riller, 2009: 12). In other words, as Shanique Campbell (2018: 139) argues in her trenchant critique of the U.S. failure to uphold refugees’ rights to practice their professions (as legally obligated by Article 19 of the 1951 Refugee Convention): “Refugees who are determined to continue their professions are advised to control their expectations.” The responsibility for the problem of refugee futures is thus transferred from the policies and practices of resettlement onto the displaced individual’s affective orientation.

In the moral economy of affect, there are not only right habits but right feelings (Ahmed, 2010). When it comes to affective orientations towards uncertain futures, hope is more championed than expectation. The distinction between hope and expectation, as drawn by Stengers, is that while hope engages the open sphere of the possibility, expectation refers to “a calculated anticipation authorised by the world as it is” (Parla, 2019; Stengers, 2002: 245). In her book *Precarious Hope* on migrants from Bulgaria seeking legalization in Turkey, Ayşe Parla critiques both the validity of this duality and the normative work that it does to elevate the radical potentiality of hope against the more mundane register of “the reasonably expected” (Parla, 2019: 168). While Parla’s research concerns how the separation of hope and expectation devalues the ordinary hopes of migrants, her critique is illuminating also for the way that it highlights the different valences of hope and expectation within the affective paradigm of refuge. For while migrants and refugees are cast as figures of hope (Pine, 2014), the slightest gradation from hope to *expectation* is enough to put the displaced subject “beyond the pale” of humanitarian reason. Unlike hope, expectation is neither cultivated for its radical potential nor nurtured as a sign of a resilient human spirit (Parla, 2019). In effect, having “expectations” (which can then be disappointed) is the affective supplement of

resettlement policies that quickly transform the worthy refugee, accepted and admitted upon humanitarian principles, into a member of the unworthy poor, whose deservingness is determined and qualified by their success at entering the labor market and staying off public cash assistance. (Darrow, 2018: 97)

The worthy refugee is authorized to hope and dream, but not to arrive with concrete and worldly expectations regarding their standard of living.

The idea that refugees might arrive with expectations that can be disappointed, rather than only as pitiable victims grateful for the humanitarian largesse of the receiving country, rubs against the prescribed narrative of refuge and interferes with “the mood and inclination to feel for the refugees, to look after and be good to them” (Volkan, 2018: xiv). The refugee subject who brings *expectations* is a “killjoy.” According to Ahmed (2010: 65), “The feminist killjoy ‘spoils’ the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness.” Likewise, expectations spoil the mood of humanitarian compassion: they spoil the desire to do good for suffering individuals and thereby to relieve (historical) guilt feelings (Espiritu, 2006; Fassin, 2012; Hook, 2011; Nguyen, 2012). To bring expectations to the U.S. is to bring an unseemly reminder that the U.S.-led war in Iraq involved the destruction of lives worth living. Simultaneously, the disappointment of expectations points up the failure of American futures to compensate for what has been lost in the spacetime of displacement. In short, “expectation” signals the irreducible subjectivity

– and ongoing entanglement with other times and places – of those whom the discourses and practices of resettlement tend to make into “objects” of humanitarian administration and set on the teleological path to refuge.

“Your good life in the past”: Gratitude

If *expectations* (and associated disappointment) spoil the mood of humanitarianism, what is called for instead is *gratitude*. As many scholars have argued, the figure of the grateful refugee stitches together the legal, representational, and quotidian framings of debt, deservingness, and virtue that form the backbone of the humanitarian logic of refugee resettlement (Healy, 2014; Moulin, 2012; Nguyen, 2012; V Nguyen, 2013). Moreover, the call for gratitude is entwined with the demand for a particular telling of one’s past. As Didier Fassin notes, humanitarian compassion is a gift that calls for a counter-gift, but one that maintains the asymmetry of the social relation between givers and receivers, taking the form of “the obligation on the receivers sometimes to tell their story, frequently to mend their ways, and always to show their gratitude” (2012: 3). To perform one’s role as an object of humanitarian compassion thus involves both an affective orientation towards gratitude and an obligation to narrate one’s past such that it props up this structure of feeling. To hold an ongoing attachment to something other than an American future – to remain attached to another place, another time, another (lost) future – violates the terms of this “gift.” In holding such attachments, those who have achieved the vaunted “durable solution” of resettlement find themselves in the position of what Ahmed calls “affect aliens,” or “those who are alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world” (Ahmed, 2010: 164).

Those working in resettlement are aware of how demands for gratitude, and even feelings of gratitude, sit uneasily alongside the ambivalence and complexity of their clients’ situations. As one resettlement agency service coordinator explained:

Something that we hear often, too, is if someone who arrived as a refugee dares to express dissatisfaction, it’s challenging. It’s almost like – I’ve heard sometimes people say – not so much [those] who work in resettlement, but you know, someone at a training out in the community, more like: “Well, they should just be grateful. They should just be grateful that they’re here.” And it’s like, okay, yeah. I think at some level, they are. But then, there’s this huge other piece of loss and sadness and derailment of dreams and family and everything that is very much a part of that.

This sense of a “derailment of dreams and family” suggests orientations to past and future objects that do not conform to the spatiotemporal teleology of the resettlement imaginary. In the derailment of “everything that is very much a part of that,” what is lost is not only the past, but a future that inhered in that past. As Zainab Saleh (2021: 30) writes regarding the nostalgia of Iraqis she worked with in London, “Unlike the present, the past held the prospect of a promising future [. . .].” While Saleh’s subjects are not least of all bereft of their political hopes for Iraq, the “piece of loss and sadness” arrives, at some point, in many forms. In the words of an Iraqi respondent we interviewed in the U.S.:

We realize how painful it is to stay on our own feet starting, managing house and utilities and so on. That is the time you start thinking about the past, and your good life in the past, and those traumas start coming in.

The feeling that one had a “good life in the past” has no place within the conventional narrative of refuge.¹¹ For those who have achieved the “durable solution,” to reflect on the past and its lost futures – that is, to maintain an attachment to futures that did not unfold, despite one’s expectations – carries a risk: it is to engage with objects that are “judged by others as ‘the wrong objects’” and potentially “to recognize that one has been *made an alien*” (Ahmed, 2010: 171, 168, emphasis in original). During our research, we observed the unease that followed a gentle expression of dissatisfaction: “Yeah, yeah. Yeah. No, I’m good.” Interviewees qualified and tempered their comments about missing elements of their lives as they had been in Iraq, either before the war or before displacement. Others mourned missing out on the intergenerationally extended networks of care that would make child-raising easier for young parents and daily life more manageable for the elderly. Some talked of experiencing racism or xenophobia in the U.S. But even as such topics came up, our interviewees were reluctant to display dissatisfaction without qualification and hastened to affirm the positive dimensions of their lives in the U.S. – including, most often, the security for which they came.

What is at stake is more than the individual’s “adjustment” in the spacetime of resettlement. The affect alien’s allegiance to past objects threatens to pull back the curtain on the American present. As Ramsay writes, “The refuge provided to refugees through international humanitarian systems is *conditional*, requiring that they conform to lifestyles that benefit the hegemonic future horizons of the societies that host and receive them.” (2018: i, emphasis added). To take Ramsay’s point further, it is not only refugees’ lifestyles that are calibrated to the benefit of “hegemonic future horizons,” but also their affective orientations; or more precisely, these prescribed lifestyles are *premised upon* a certain affective relationship to the future. This intersection between a social constellation, its dominant logics, and an affective arrangement are perhaps best captured by what Raymond Williams (1977) termed a “structure of feeling,” a concept “that allows some purchase on the vague, amorphous affective conditions that are nevertheless critical to the differential translation and expression” of particular logics in specific contexts (Anderson, 2016: 745). In short, the practices and discourses of resettlement insert the subjects of refugee administration into a differentiated “structure of feeling” towards the future, one that at once puts *expectation* beyond the pale and demands gratitude as a sign of an *optimistic attachment* to a highly invested, national future: the “American Dream” and its promise of a future of opportunity and upward mobility (Delbanco, 1999: 3). Forcibly displaced from the trajectories of past futures, refugees resettled to the U.S. are called upon to uphold what Honig (1998: 1) calls “the myth of an immigrant America.” The contemporary failure of this myth is no more in view than its history, for indeed the “American Dream” never was what it pretended to be, given that such futures were “only ever available to certain valued lives, [and] came at a cost to other racialized, gendered, and classed lives” (Anderson et al., 2020: 662).

Thus at the same time as many Iraqis in the U.S. face the loss of *expected* futures (the “derailment of dreams”), they find themselves called upon to uphold an optimistic structure of feeling out of sync with a tattered American present in which precarity and stagnation have brought post-industrial generations to the brink of exhaustion (Silva, 2013). Rates of upward mobility in the U.S. have fallen sharply since the 1940s, with only 50% of the 1984 birth cohort earning more than their parents, compared to 92% of the 1940 birth cohort (Chetty et al., 2017). In a society characterized by contracting prospects, the normative resettlement imaginary imposes on refugees the structure of feeling of another, dream-like era, one painted with the brush of optimistic attachment to the open potential of American futures. By addressing this spent future without expectation, only hope, the *grateful* refugee

seems to guarantee or verify the continued power of a mythic horizon of American futurity. In this sense, the refugee subject is called upon to feel gratitude and optimism *in the place of or on behalf of* the other who can no longer sustain these attachments: to be the “extimate” bearer of expired feelings (Kingsbury, 2007). Of course, migrants and other racialized subjects have multiple ways of challenging the structures of feeling and idealizations that they are called upon to uphold (Lowe, 1996; Muñoz, 1999). The refugee who carries expectations and the capacity to be disappointed into the spacetime of resettlement is the agent, intentionally or not, of such a challenge.

“Let their children be their future”: Futurability

When expected futures crumble and the inheritance bequeathed by resettlement turns out to be an everyday struggle for survival in the U.S., what emerges is a *crisis of futurability*: an incapacitation of the future in all its unactualized potentiality. This crisis of futurability crystallizes with the disruption of conventional “teleologies of living” that are bound to familial logics of inheritance, genealogy and reproduction (Edelman, 2004; Freeman, 2010: 5). Most directly, these familial logics unravel in the wake of the loss and dispersal of loved ones in processes of displacement and refugee administration. With the administrative disintegration of multi-generational households and the transnational stretching of kinship networks, families suffer a deficit of pooled resources, young people are forced to leave school for work, and elders are stranded without the duty-bound care and respect of their adult children (Löbel, 2020; Yako and Biswas, 2014).

The impact of family separation on the ability to carry forward the time of a life are reflected in the following excerpt from our interview with a young woman (pseudonym “Azima”) who, along with her older brother, was resettled to a major U.S. city while the rest of their family remained in Jordan:

I have to get up at 6:00 and eight hours of working, then I arrive home at 6:00, 6:50 sometimes, depends if I catch the bus. [...] And my brother doesn't speak English, so he tried to learn. I bought him a book to learn, but still he has a long journey. But now, we really need our family. We really miss them.

I've never been so far from my family for this period, like one year. Never. I never slept out of my house. I'm always with my family, but now, it's been one year. It's very – and now, we're really concerned because of the Supreme Court decision [upholding the 2017 immigration ban]. We don't know what will happen next.

War, displacement, and the hardships of everyday survival have shredded the life course of both siblings: Azima's brother lacks English skills because he left school to support the family when their father was shot in Iraq. Now in the U.S., it is Azima who has the requisite skills to work and support her brother, but she also must keep the household: “And I have to cook for my brother because women should cook,” citing the expectations of her culture and also her mother, whose admonitions to cook for her brother exert no less power for the distance that separates them. Azima feels herself sinking: the responsibilities of work and household overwhelm her, and she longs to go back to school, since her BA from Iraq counts for nothing in the U.S. Without her family nearby to arrange a match, and with the relentless demands of her current work and home life, she wonders if she will ever be able to marry. Her experience of displacement has shredded the geographical continuity of familial and social networks and shattered the time of a life, its fragments absorbed into the long

days of work, bus rides, cooking, and an endlessly deferred future-time of (family) restoration: a “regime of crisis ordinariness [...] more like desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out to the horizon” (Berlant, 2011: 117).

The interruption and dispersal of familial relations puts the future in crisis. Just as Azima feels that living without her parents is living away from home, older refugees resettled to the U.S. without their adult children (who might remain at the site of first asylum or have been resettled to another country, often for arbitrary reasons and no choice of their own) find themselves in an unexpected situation: the futurity that they had invested in their children has been stripped from them. At one community center, two social workers (both themselves from Iraq) explained Iraqi family dynamics like this:

Social worker 1: There is no 18.

Social worker 2: There’s no such a thing. Married or not married, you’ll see a girl who’s 50 but living with her parents.

Social worker 1: Right. The sister, the husband, the brother and mom all live together. They live together all their life, and now, the system, our system, separates them. That is the worst I can do to the Iraqi people because all their life never been separated, even to go from one town to another.

“The system” – that is, refugee administration both at the international level and as it refracts through national refugee resettlement and family reunification policies – enacts “the worst” that can be done. For although the UNHCR (2011: 207) officially recognizes “culturally diverse interpretations of family members” (to accommodate polygamous marriages), refugee administration nonetheless routinely cleaves the family as a “unit” from the family as a dynamic, geo-historically emplaced set of relations (Bonet and Taylor, 2020; Kallio, 2019). The implications of this range from a mismatch between resettlement policies and historical patterns of mobility (such as extended families maintaining transnational networks in the Middle East; see Chatty, 2014) to the devastation of futurability – or capacities for the future – that results from the breaking up of multi-generational households and extended networks of care and duty.

For those who have been resettled with their children, these children may find themselves conventionally cast as the site of a (potential) revival of futurity. Placing the child on the horizon of resettlement futurity not only reflects a revival of capacities for the future through an optimistic attachment to American promises of opportunity and security, but also may help to retrieve past futures for those whose professional trajectories had been aborted. As one resettlement agent described it, while some who were physicians in Iraq returned to work in medicine or paramedical fields, others “just let their children be their future.”

In the context of the slow deterioration of American life, such attempts to (re)animate the future by pinning it to the child may be a form of “cruel optimism” burnished and enhanced by the dominant logics of humanitarianism (Berlant, 2011). The dominant trend is for downward mobility for all refugees resettled to the U.S. in recent decades, regardless of background or even English language abilities (Gans, 2009; Hauck et al., 2014; Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). Comparing refugee populations to immigrant and U.S.-born populations, a 2015 Migration Policy Institute study found that the median household income for refugees who had been in the U.S. five years or less during the period 2009–2011 was 42% that of the U.S.-born and dropping, with Iraqis and other recent migrants having the lowest relative household incomes and showing the least signs of “upward mobility” in this regard (Capps and Newland, 2015). Further, to the extent that refugees

resettled to the U.S. in the 1980s were somewhat able to improve their economic situation generationally, this is no longer evidently the case – a fact not surprising given that this entrenchment of inequality and increasing uncertainty also describes U.S. society more broadly (Chetty et al., 2017; Silva, 2013).¹² This is not to lend credence to anti-immigrant groups that cite such data as cause for restricting refugee resettlement and immigration, but rather to observe the shared conditions of precarity and “temporal dispossession” across lines of citizenship (Ramsay, 2020).

Whether or not parents are resigned to “let their children be their future,” children are not empty vessels carrying forward their parents’ derailed dreams. Those working with Iraqis through community centers and other voluntary organizations, especially in larger cities, note both the successes of Iraqi young people attending community colleges and the challenges facing youth in these communities. At one of our research sites, we heard about young people who had been out of school for years in countries of first asylum being dropped into grades by age rather than previous schooling and being passed through school, even walking at graduation, without actually earning a diploma. In both of the large cities where we conducted our research, interviewees told us about the (highly taboo) problem of drug addiction amongst Iraqi teenagers; as the director of one community center put it, “You see a lot of teenagers, they’re addicted to drugs which is so sad. [. . .]. There’s no future.” And even amongst those who avoid the quicksand of life in the U.S., the “gift” of resettlement futurity is not always easy to accept. The director went on to tell us of a 14-year-old girl who refuses to go to school: “Sometimes, the kids, they don’t want to be here.”

In some ways, there are always fissures in the ground of reproductive futurity, cracks that mean that the child does not fulfil their scripted role. But those resettled to the U.S. experience a profound scrambling of generation – a crumpling, stretching, or folding of the temporality of living – that goes beyond the usual failures of reproductive futurity to deliver its promises. An employment agent whom we interviewed explained how “starting a new life here” involves starting “from the first beginning”: “You take the first step, then the second step.” And in the words of another Iraqi interviewee:

You start over in a different country and different language and learn everything again like a baby. Like a baby, learn the language and the culture and the system, and the law, and learn how to work because the system here is different on the job.

In the spacetime of resettlement, it is as though the adult is born again into the helplessness of infancy, retaking the first stumbling steps of life. Such a reduction in capacity is an element of what Seitz critiques (2017: 439) as “asylum-seekers’ consignment to infantilizing psychic, spatial, and temporal liminality and precarity.” Meanwhile, further jamming domestic power hierarchies, children sometimes become culturally and linguistically fluent ahead of the adults in the household.¹³ Alongside the adult who is learning everything again “like a baby”, the child who becomes master of this new world contributes to the folding of time and the scrambling of expected trajectories.

While the queering of the spacetime of family and life-course in resettlement has the potential to create new openings and opportunities (including for some Iraqis to escape dangerous familial networks, see Kallio, 2019), it nevertheless is also the case that the jamming of these naturalized futures takes place as part of the de-valuation and even making-unintelligible of refugee lives. The administrative destruction of familial relations and logics in the lives of the displaced is part of how refugees are made subaltern and

securitized within the state system (see also Ehrkamp et al., 2021). As Sarah Smith et al. (2019: 144) write, “[O]ne way through which the (white) U.S. nation-state is territorialized is the mechanism of denying childhood and kinship to racialized peoples in the name of ‘protecting’ the white family.” Or as Rahul Rao (2020: 17) puts it, “re-productive futurism never sacralises children of colour.” For Iraqis resettled to the U.S., the collapse of reproductive futurity thus takes place in the crushing maw of ongoing and historical practices that have torn apart non-white, indigenous, and subaltern family formations in the name of territorializing and securitizing the modern nation-state (Povinelli, 2011; Rifkin, 2017). The problem of the future in the spacetime of resettlement thus arises where the exclusion, imperilment, and alienation of queered and racialized subjects converge.

Conclusion

“What prevents people, relations, things from being seen as proximate, implicated, and dependent?” (Stoler, 2018: 479; quoted in Saleh, 2021: 8).

A shift from understanding refugees in terms of traumatic pasts to a focus on the problem of the future – indeed, a future that, however broken, is widely shared – brings into focus the entanglement of the times and spaces of war and resettlement. What Iraqis have lost in war, displacement, and resettlement (loved ones, homes, communities, careers, status, life-course, legibility, *futurability*) is not incidental to what the West has historically and contemporaneously arrogated to itself. To put it bluntly, U.S. wealth, security, global power, and self-aggrandizement are *premised* on the ongoing colonial-imperial violence that the West has delivered upon the Middle East. Indeed, Iraq has been critical to U.S. economic and political interests over the past four decades (Gregory, 2004). While this relationship and its cost to the Iraqi people may elude much of the American public – a situated ignorance (Pred, 2007) that enables the securitization of migration and fuels persistent demands for refugee gratitude – the role played by the U.S. in Iraqi displacement is highly visible to Iraqis who, whatever their feelings about the previous Baathist regime, generally understand “the United States as responsible for the demise of their homeland” (Jamil et al., 2007: 200). In short, “[t]hrough military intervention, the prolonging of wars, and the support for Saddam Hussein” the U.S. has structured the conditions of Iraqis’ displacement and of their resettlement (Saleh, 2021: 208). As Fern Hauck et al. put it mildly in their cross-cultural study of “factors influencing the acculturation” of Burmese, Bhutanese, and Iraqi refugees, U.S. responsibility for what Iraqis have lived through “may contribute to [Iraqis’] expectations for government assistance that exceeds that which they are currently receiving” (Hauck et al., 2014: 345).

But to carry expectations into the breach of a historical present where the myth of the future no longer coheres (Berardi, 2011) is to present a “problem,” one that is compounded by the demand for gratitude and optimistic attachment that accompanies the humanitarian “gift” of resettlement (Nguyen, 2012). “But you must smile – you must express gratitude for having been received,” writes Ahmed (2009: 46), referring to the context in which Black subjects are made to embody diversity for organizations and are expected to exhibit gratitude as they do so. This situation is familiar when it comes to the demand for refugees to embody the idealized self-image of the West (as a site of opportunity, freedom, and humanitarianism) and express feelings of gratitude corresponding with the privilege of being received. The 2009 ICMC/UNHCR report provides a glimpse of how nonconforming affective orientations are “managed” through refugee administration. Primarily a study of the expectations of Iraqi refugees at sites of first asylum, it concludes with a “view from the

other side”: a brief look at what resettlement agencies report regarding how these expectations play out. The report concludes:

Once the Iraqi refugees learn that many Americans do not have healthcare and have to work two jobs to make ends meet, their overall mind set changes and high expectations are being lowered. [...] The matching grant program requires them to start working within four months of arrival in the U.S. If refugees complain about the duration of financial support, they are reminded by case workers that they were not resettled for a better life but for a *safer* life. (Riller, 2009: 31)

Summarily, the future is deflated. Expectations are neutralized, promises forgotten, responsibility denied. At the point of “durable solution,” the futurity of resettlement is enfolded within crisis ordinary of American life, where two jobs and no health care somehow transmute to “safety” and are all one has any right to expect.

This recognition brings us to our central insight: that attention to the crisis of futurity in the spacetime of resettlement enables a politically and theoretically significant argument for the “proximate, implicated, and dependent” (Stoler, 2018: 479) nature of Iraqi and U.S. pasts, presents, and futures. By drawing attention to how the spacetime of resettlement is not a different time or place than the impasse of the “slow cancellation of the future” in the U.S. and more broadly, we make it clear that the crisis of futurity for Iraqi refugees is *part of the same present*, not other to it – a recognition that undermines the racialized and colonial logics that continue to prop up U.S. militarism and the pathologization and criminalization of those who have been displaced as a result. In short, if in displacement there is a becoming unintelligible of the future, this is a crisis that differentially implicates all who subsist today in the impasse of the present. This is a crisis, we affirm, that calls not for the continual propping up of progressive temporality on the shoulders of those whose affective allegiance to a mythic “American Dream” is demanded; nor for the re-inscription of colonial-imperial cartographies that place trauma and violence at a remove from securitized American shores. Instead, in the wake of the crisis that crystalizes in the overlay between lost and cancelled futures, we can only call for an orientation towards the presently impossible: an orientation towards a “better life” that does not follow from this moment but to which one must nonetheless commit.

Our aim is thus to restore to view the *rightfulness* of Iraqis’ expectations for a supported, humane, and fulfilling resettlement to the U.S. Perhaps we can stretch what Vicki Squire and Jonathon Darling (2013: 69) have called “an analytics of rightful presence” in their study of *City of Sanctuary* in Sheffield (U.K.) to likewise argue for “the rightfulness of what is claimed, demanded, or assumed through presence” within a political frame that entails the “the refusal and contestation of the victimization or subordination of those who are conventionally defined as ‘refugees.’” The rightfulness of Iraqi expectations (what is claimed, demanded, assumed) in the spacetime of resettlement (that is, through presence) arises at the point of intersection between U.S. imperialism, Iraqi displacement, and the shared crisis of futurity in a diminished U.S. present. In underlining these relations, our work supports the reconfiguration of asylum as reparation for past injustice, as “a means by which states can rectify the harm they caused to individuals by turning them into refugees” (Souter, 2014: 326). Our hope is that, in the convergence of lost and cancelled futures, we might yet recuperate other possibilities for solidarity, responsibility, and reparation: alternative futures to be rightfully expected.

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Notes

1. We use “futuraity” to refer to “the quality or state of being future” (second definition, Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The nuance of futurity as a *quality* allows for putting into question the time to come: that is, while there might always be a moment after (a future), that moment itself might subjectively lack “futuraity,” or the qualities that we associate with the future – whether these qualities are that it will fulfil the promises of the present or the trajectories of the past. Later in this article, we also introduce the term “futuraibility” from Berardi’s (2017) work, a term we use as he does to indicate the capacity for futurity, that is, the ability to project qualities (whether of continuity or change) onto the future and to operate in the present with reference to such a future.
2. Refugee is a legal category designated by the administrative apparatus itself through UNHCR refugee determination procedures (UNHCR, 2020b). We use this term judiciously, mindful that it does not essentially define our research participants.
3. Elsewhere we have foregrounded the topological spatiality and temporal folding of displacement, see Ehrkamp et al. (2019, 2021) and Loyd et al. (2018).
4. We chose the four resettlement cities for our research based on geographical patterns of Iraqi resettlement in the U.S. Two were major cities with large, well-established populations of Iraqis, including many who came in previous waves of migration. Two were smaller cities that had only recently become U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) resettlement sites for Iraqis. We do not name these cities in our publications to protect the anonymity of our research participants. The comparison of the research sites is an element of the larger project but is not central to this article. This is not to suggest that the struggles of resettlement are the same everywhere. While cost of living, crowded accommodations, and long commutes between home and work were more acute problems in larger cities, those who found themselves in smaller cities faced other issues, including car-dependency, social isolation, and lack of Arabic-language or culturally appropriate services (such as women only hairdressers). Yet these comparisons are not central to our argument here.
5. There is overlap between these categories of interviewees. The majority of our 62 U.S.-based research participants worked in refugee administration, service provision, or health *and* were themselves from Iraq (often having arrived in the U.S. a decade or so previously). These interviewees often shared both professional and personal experiences and reflections. In addition to these interviews with Iraqis and others in the role of service providers, we conducted two focus groups with refugees (composed with help from service providers) and six in-depth individual interviews with refugees at the four sites. Across all groups and sites, Iraqis we spoke to in the U.S. were from a range of class, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, with the majority being Arab and Muslim.
6. For an excellent overview of how “migration management operates through the prism of time” that identifies five areas of emerging scholarship in this area, see Melanie Griffiths’ (2021: 317) review of time and temporality in migration studies.
7. See Seitz (2017) for an excellent discussion, with reference in particular to asylum seekers in Canada, of how “subjectless queer critique” (Butler, 1994; Eng et al., 2005, Oswin, 2008) allows us to understand a range of differently marginalized positions as queer and thereby opens possibilities for alternate solidarities.

8. The Special Immigrant Visa program for resettlement to the U.S. is for those who worked with the U.S. Armed Forces or as a translator or interpreter in Iraq or Afghanistan.
9. Resettlement agencies are responsive to an ORR mandate for “self-sufficiency” defined in terms of employment. Matching funds for further service provision are tied to agencies meeting state-level quotas regarding the number of refugees placed into jobs within certain time limits. For example, at the time of our study, some matching funds were contingent on getting 80 percent of clients into “employment scenarios” within four months of their arrival (see Benson and Panaggio, 2019).
10. For Berlant, the crisis ordinary is “an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on” (2011: 8).
11. It should be noted that “the past” is also changeable; as Saleh (2021: 31) notes in her study of Iraqi nostalgia and the retroactive idealization of Saddam Hussein’s regime, “acts of remembrance are always informed by the conditions of the present.”
12. These conditions are not unique to the U.S. For example, Suzanne Hall’s (2021: 3) work has traced “a combined political economy of displacement” that brings into focus how the 2008 global financial crisis, deindustrialization, and the state’s retraction of public services have affected migrant lives in the U.K.
13. The full scope of relations between refugee youth and parents is more complex than can be addressed here (but on Iraqi youth and parental authority, for example, see Smetana et al. (2015)).

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