

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS: REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THE POLITICS OF LONELINESS¹

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Abstract

VOICING LONELINESS

Ben Sharrock's *Limbo* (2020) follows the story of Omar, a Syrian refugee and musician who, carrying his *oud*, a stringed musical instrument, has managed to make his way to the UK.

Omar has been stationed on a mythical Hebridean island while he waits to see whether he will be granted asylum. On this 'purgatorial island', asylum-seeking inhabitants escape only in Border Office police vans ready to deport them, long-awaited letters from the Home Office confirming their status, or through death.² The film anticipates recent government policy to develop offshore asylum centres as well as echoing practices of dispersal that have long dominated resettlement efforts. It presents a 'crisis of empathy' rather than a crisis of refugees.

The tale of Omar and his fellow inhabitants on the island – all single men – is one of solitude.

While the group of asylum seekers from all over the world are collected – in the small and inadequate bungalows where they are housed, in classes held in the village hall where they practice job interviews and socialising with British people, as they queue outside the island's phone box to check on their status or contact family at home – their endeavour is singular.

Omar treks across the island, his *oud* always in hand though he no longer plays it, his cheeks

bitten by the wind. He watches videos of his life at home on his phone, a small portal to community, memory, joy. He fantasises about conversations with his brother, now embroiled in the resistance fighting at home. Did he make the right decision to be here, and not there? After a phone call with his mother, he changes the sheets on his single bed in his draughty room, the wind gusting through the bungalow's loft window, and he is briefly, powerfully, reminded of home. He visits the local supermarket seeking the ingredients to cook a dish that might taste like the kitchen he has left behind; sumac is not currently an ingredient that the Glaswegian Sikh shopkeeper stocks. On another phone call, he asks his mother to describe the food. He weeps. Amidst the visceral suggestion of his loneliness, the disconnect of this in-between place, there are moments of human relation; this is a gentle comedy which plays carefully with intimacy. But even after a triumph – where Omar plays his *oud* for the islanders in the village hall, finally returned to his music on the encouragement of Farhad, an Iraqi asylum-seeker who stakes a claim as Omar's manager and friend – the film ends with him once again wandering the island, instrument in hand. He is caught in this limbo where everyone's circumstance and fate are their own.

Refugees have been understood as a group who experience a particular and peculiar loneliness. From the 1950s, **refugees arriving in Britain have been associated with** pathologies of solitude. At **his** psychiatric clinic for Hungarian refugees at the Maudsley hospital, **Alexander Mezey** identified victims of isolation among those referred by reception workers. One 24-year-old teacher, who had difficulties finding anything other than labouring work in Britain, described a sense of hopelessness and despair at the situation he found himself in: 'I cannot live in this country, it is affecting my soul ... Everything fills me with forebodings.' Another, a mining recruit, 'a solitary boy, very attached to his mother' was so

unhappy on his arrival that he wanted to return home to the point of 'hysteria'. Mezey suggests that those who had been 'marginal' people in Hungary seemed more susceptible to falling victim to the culture of isolation which resulted from their exile.³ In the 1960s, the impact of age on refugees' loneliness in work by the British Council for Aid to Refugees. Elderly refugees, predominantly arrivals from European displaced persons camps, were deemed particularly vulnerable to isolation and poverty.⁴ 'Where do this group of elderly people turn to for companionship, help and social support?' They were found to be living in 'virtual isolation', stuck in inaccessible accommodation, with little or declining English comprehension and limited support networks. Those who were single were described as 'intensely lonely'.⁵ Refugee agencies' concern about loneliness continues: in 2014, the Forum, an organisation who work with migrants and refugees in London, published *This is How It Feels to Be Lonely*, their research into the experiences of their communities with isolation and loneliness. Amongst their respondents, 58 per cent saw loneliness as the major challenge facing refugees and migrants in the UK. 'My loneliness was a painful and disturbing realisation of being unaccepted and unloved, of being alone and having no other choice,' testified one of the contributors.⁶ Loneliness was consistent with loss of family and friends, the lack of social networks, language barriers, loss of status, loss of identity, loss of job or career and cultural differences, the consequences of racism and xenophobia. As the Forum report described, 'these challenges are inter-related and overlapping, trapping those who face them into a vicious circle and leading them to more isolation and loneliness and further damaging their health' (*This is How it Feels*, p?).

One of the most significant findings of the Forum's work, absent in historical examples, was the identification of the isolating impact of government policies: restricted entitlement to

welfare services, exclusions in employment and housing through immigration checks, precarity of position and the possibility of detention and removal (*This is How it Feels*, p5).

What if, instead of describing refugees **being** isolated or disconnected as a characteristic of exile, we thought instead about the structural enforcement of loneliness upon refugees? What if we saw loneliness not **as** something refugees are, but what they are made to be, as a form of hostility, of being inhospitable, as a weapon used by the state: to construct borders, to separate families and friends, to imprison, to detain, to deport, to take away belonging and opportunities?

This article offers a historical consideration of refugee loneliness and isolation as produced by the practices and processes of refugee resettlement. I concentrate here on one of the most longstanding policies of refugee resettlement as a mode through which isolation is enforced: dispersal. Often paradoxically produced to make refugees more 'acceptable' to the British population, receiving them by scattering them across the four nations, dispersal **has** frequently failed to integrate, assimilate or connect.

DISPERSAL WITHIN HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

The enforcement of isolation through the processes and logics of refugee resettlement undertaken by the UK government is an inevitable consequence of the hostile environment, described by Maya Goodfellow as a system 'whereby it was deemed acceptable to treat people not as human beings but as problems'.⁷ According to **the** Refugee Council, refugees are **500 per cent** more likely to have mental health needs than the UK population, produced both by the traumas of exile and by settling in the UK: the near-impossible asylum process,

fear of detention, deportation, destitution and homelessness, and concern about loved ones left behind. Ahmed, one of the Refugee Council's clients, who arrived in the UK from a refugee camp in Kenya, described how it felt to be apart from and then finally reunited with his wife and son: 'When people you love live in separate places you feel such loneliness.'⁸ Most refugees arrive alone and unsupported and are forced to deal with a strictly controlled and complex system of asylum approval. Even for government sanctioned arrivals, life in the UK is lonely. Those refugees who arrived from Afghanistan in 'Operation Warm Welcome' found the government's claims to be a 'big-hearted nation' rang hollow: less than six weeks later the *Observer* ran a story with the headline, "'Send us home," beg Afghan refugees stuck in UK hotels.'⁹ The inadequacy of this accommodation, access to healthcare and other local services – local authorities have been highly critical of central government support – has put paid to any notion of a welcome that was warm. And amid war in Ukraine, the UK government's response has been continually critiqued for the tangled knots of its bureaucracy and the long delays in processing visas so that families can travel together.¹⁰

But life in Britain has long been made hard for refugees and asylum seekers. The preoccupation with limiting numbers, which have quantified the refugee 'problem', is much longer established than the 2012 Coalition government's policy of hostility and highlights the partiality of claims to Britain's 'tradition of providing sanctuary'. Pioneering work by Tony Kushner with Katharine Knox has shown that 'reliance on notions of essential British decency and tolerance to protect refugee interest is misplaced'.¹¹ Becky Taylor has made it clear that 'if any case for a British tradition of tolerance and welcome exists than this needs to be acutely historicised ... Britain's inclination to accept refugees was consistently mediated through international interests and geopolitical factors rather than based on any stable criteria

of need.’¹² Jordanna Bailkin has shown the unsettling realities of refugee camps **faced by** previous generations of arrivals, the early iterations of the hotels in which Afghan refugees now find themselves.¹³ Even in that year of years, World Refugee Year, Peter Gatrell demonstrated the Government’s preoccupation with help for refugees meaning aid going outwards rather than refugees arriving on Britain’s shore.¹⁴

What we see across the second half of the twentieth century are two parallel and fluctuating dynamics in how refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in the UK. The first was a shift from collective arrivals – usually of a group of nationals fleeing for the same reasons – to majority individual arrivals from different states for different reasons from the mid-1980s, and the introduction of **the category of** asylum seeker. Since this shift, the management of asylum and immigration through deterrence has been on the rise, with the legal avenues for ‘unskilled’ migrant workers from outside Western Europe drastically curbed and increasing preoccupation with the phenomenon of ‘illegal’ immigration.¹⁵ Secondly, and in response to this, was a change in how the logic of sanctuary **was** understood, from a discourse of welcome that placed Britain as the host and refugees as the ‘grateful’ guests, to an insistence on refuge as a right. Though an understanding of rights broke through in the 1970s, it took primacy from the mid-1980s.¹⁶ Importantly, experiences of asylum and detention within and across ethnic and national boundaries placed refugees more actively in dialogue with the broader category of migrant, offering new possibilities for resistance.

Both dynamics are important in understanding the structural enforcement of loneliness through dispersal. Dispersal **is just as** it sounds: the geographic spreading of displaced people across the UK. Forms of refugee dispersal have been in operation across the twentieth

century.¹⁷ It has been so consistently used because of its potential to solve the problem of housing refugees or finding them employment by moving them to where housing or jobs were. In applying dispersal, either as the consequence of other resettlement work – the geographic division of responsibilities across multiple agencies for instance – or as an explicit policy, isolation has been created and implemented not only by the state but by those third sector organisations supporting settlement. As we will see, these same groups were often those trying to solve isolation. During group resettlement schemes run by or co-ordinated with charities, the process of settling refugees from camps and hostels to more permanent homes was a numbers game, and a consistently fluctuating one, dependent on availability. In the years following the Second World War, the idea of refugees as ‘guests’ meant there was frequent reliance on willing hosts who might offer refugees housing or jobs, spreading them across the country. In the early 1970s, the arrival of exiles from Chile relied upon the work of the Chilean Solidarity Campaign; local committees, often linked to trade unions, welcomed small groups of refugees to towns and cities across the UK.¹⁸ The spreading of welcome was often spreading the ‘burden’ of hosting refugees, avoiding overwhelming local councils and local people with too high a concentration of new arrivals.

In the mind of the overwhelmed resettlement programme officer, sending refugees to where there was space for them or explicit offers of welcome, might avoid the resentment of those already waiting for council housing or improvements in their living conditions.

The mostly unspoken undertone was that dispersal would encourage refugee assimilation, even as multiculturalism as a policy became more prevalent.¹⁹ By minimising the number of refugees concentrated in one area, the burden of tolerance placed on the local population would also be lessened, encouraging a more welcoming reception. The process was vividly

delineated in the Ugandan Asian resettlement in the 1970s, where East African Asians were diverted to international destinations and where those who were permitted to arrive in the UK faced the division of the country into 'green' areas and 'red' areas, a traffic-light signal of 'welcome' and 'stay away', which kept new arrivals from moving to existing centres for the Asian diaspora, particularly around Leicester.²⁰ At the top level of refugee charities, there was a grudging acceptance of the restrictive conditions they were working in, and the underlying ideological rationale. In 1979, for example, when the British Refugee Council met with the GLC to discuss housing for Ugandan Asians and Vietnamese refugees in London, it was agreed that while 'ideally, families should be rehoused in groups so as to create small self-supporting communities', this should still be limited to 'no more than five or six families to avoid the creation of ghettos'.²¹

Critiques of dispersal for mass refugee resettlement did produce some small changes; the resettlement of Bosnian refugees in 1993 was still based on dispersal but within 'cluster' areas to pursue 'ethnic community formation'.²² But as the shift to individual arrivals from the mid-1980s continued, within an increasingly restrictive legislative framework which limited safe routes of arrival, the coordination of asylum policy enshrined dispersal as policy in the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act and the 1996 Housing Act. The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act formally instituted dispersal as policy, marking a shift towards 'a centralised and national support and accommodation system, in which eligibility for welfare provision was linked to the decision to accept dispersed housing on a no-choice basis'.²³ As a result, dispersal has, alongside deportation and detention, become 'normalised' as an 'essential instrument' of the control of migration.²⁴ Today, after being housed in 'reception centres', if asylum-seekers qualify for Section 95 support, they are moved to flats

and shared houses in the ‘dispersal’ regions: the North, Midlands and South West of England, Wales and Scotland – as in *Limbo* – not the South of England or London. Companies like Serco and G4S hold accommodation contracts in dispersal areas, or refugees and asylum seekers are placed in not-so-temporary hotel and B&B accommodation. These spaces have become symbolic of the inhospitable life facing refugees in Britain, what Daniel Trilling has called the ‘performance of immigration control’.²⁵ And it has only made the struggle to meet the needs of refugee and asylum seekers greater.²⁶

So how did dispersal enforce loneliness? Firstly, the prevention of refugees living together, or within existing diasporic or ethnically similar communities, breeds isolation and alienation: dispersal ‘worked against the interests of the refugees themselves’ (*Refugees*, p138). Esposito and Tazzioli have recently discussed ‘dispersing’ alongside ‘cramping’ as ‘political technologies of migration governmentality.’²⁷ Spreading asylum seekers across the country and then containing them to confined and often precarious spaces – temporary accommodation, hotels or army barracks – is understood as a method for illegalising and destituting asylum seekers, reducing their spatial presence.²⁸ It places the dispersed in a position of liminality, of limbo, and often locates asylum seekers in places of existing social deprivation.²⁹ Further, dispersal prevents the consolidation of collective bonds and solidarities.³⁰ As Tazzioli details elsewhere, dispersal dismantles ‘migrant spaces of life (*lieux de vie*) ... a spatial tactic that contributes to take terrain away from the migrants, making hard for them to stay in a place and to build autonomous spaces (*The Politics of Migrant Dispersal*, p?)’. Across the next section, I consider how dispersal **has** worked in reality and its demonstrably limited capacity to settle refugees by exploring the case of Vietnamese refugees in 1970s and 1980s Britain.

DISPERSAL IN ACTION

Dispersal's isolating powers are exemplified in the experiences of Vietnamese refugees arriving in Britain across the late 1970s and into the 1980s. In June 1983, the *Times* reported on the suicide of a thirteen-year-old Vietnamese girl, Nguyen Mau Phung, on a council estate in Lewisham. Her death 'speaks for 16,000', according to the newspaper's headline. The case followed an upswell in reporting about the instances of racist attacks taking place on 'inner city' estates, the targeting of Vietnamese refugees, and connections to the activities of the National Front. In this case, it was the shock of Phung's death which made the news, coming 'without warning'. Andrew Palmer, a case worker for the British Refugee Council, saw the lack of explanation as the most worrying aspect of this case. 'It raises questions about how many others among the Vietnamese refugees may be feeling so desperate, undetected by anybody.'³¹ The toxic combination of unemployment, poverty and the 'shock of a profoundly alien culture' exacerbated the isolation commonly experienced by the Vietnamese refugees. Palmer described the process of dispersal which had seen Vietnamese refugees spread across the length and breadth of the county, a few here, a cluster there, as a 'disaster'. Refugees from Vietnam were the group most subject to the 'spatial management' in twentieth century Britain, as Vaughan Robinson suggests.³² Significantly, the Vietnamese refugees were also subject to consistent rhetoric about their distinctiveness: Cold War refugees but not white Europeans, post-colonial but not from the former British Empire, their race (both ethnically Chinese and Vietnamese), their language (Cantonese and Vietnamese), their religion, their 'disadvantage' in terms of skills or employment experience relevant to life in Britain, their lack of familiarity with Britain and even Western culture and traditions. Their description as 'our most foreign refugees' fuelled understandings of their exceptionalism and we can see

how this played into the insistence on dispersal.³³ As refugees began arriving under the mass scheme, the charities managing their resettlement – the British Council for Refugees, Save the Children and Ockenden Venture – were instructed that geographic spread was the order of the day. Each of the three charities were charged with different regional responsibilities to ensure this coverage as refugees were taken from resettlement camps and sent to start their new lives. As the charities struggled to find housing in which to place refugee families, they were faced with the response of unwilling local councils, who quoted Home Office recommendations to explain why they could not make housing available: any more than fifty refugees in in any one area was ‘undesirable’.³⁴ The language used about the cost of refugee presence and about their ‘undesirability’ was then echoed in local response to refugees which reinforced ideas about how many refugees in one place were too many.

We know how unsatisfactory this process was for the Vietnamese refugees from how many undertook secondary resettlement, whether in requesting transfers through the local council’s housing office, simply moving themselves somewhere else, or moving to be near somebody more familiar.³⁵ This was often at the risk of losing further charitable support. The British Refugee Council advised their field workers that unlike other council tenants, Vietnamese refugees who wanted to be settled in London or other large cities would not be allowed to refuse the standard two offers of accommodation: ‘We cannot allow choice of area of resettlement, and there must be no refusals.’³⁶ A small group of Vietnamese refugees who left the Sopley Reception Centre in Hampshire to find accommodation in London were told they would not be entitled to any assistance so as not to encourage others to leave camps and move to the city. When they visited the Council’s offices for help, they were taken out of the building by the police.³⁷ The policy of limiting refugee choice on housing led to resignations: Simon Chapman, a driver with the British Refugee Council who helped move Vietnamese

refugees into the housing provided by local authorities, left because of the conditions of housing on offer. Chapman's resignation was a broader critique of the position the BRC had taken in relation to local authority and state provision for refugees, a kind of dependent gratitude for what was available rather than more confrontational or radical demands for necessary support. Norah Morley-Fletcher, then general secretary of the Council, told *The Times* that it had to take what was offered. 'If [we] did not take the flats, they would go to other council tenants. The last thing we want is resentment from the local English population,' she says. 'Most of the refugees understand that.'³⁸ In preserving the fragile sanctuary offered through scarce state resources, the cost was paid by the refugees, denied choice, agency and community.

Regardless of charity policy, refugees continued to move as a way of escaping isolation, preferring to make their own connections and make use of their own limited resources to escape the circumstances imposed by dispersal. This was particularly the case for refugees sent to quiet rural areas, who often found it 'frightening and oppressive' and sought to move despite the relatively good quality of their housing (*Vietnamese Refugees in Britain, p16-17*). About half of this was within the same region, sometimes in search of employment but primarily to join up with friends and family. In a report for Ockenden Venture about the Vietnamese on Merseyside, the author found that the houses made available to refugees were in areas and types of property generally considered hard to let, where refugees felt isolated, creating frequent requests for transfers to new areas in the pursuit of settlement. This report included a series of 'observations' about dispersal which, though the author claimed they did not want to debate the merits of dispersed settlement, read as a robust critique:

- a. Dispersal has hindered the formation of a Vietnamese community and as a result the establishment of self-help.
- b. Dispersal has created a certain degree of isolation.
- c. This has resulted in the need for further and continuing support.
- d. It has also hindered the natural emergence of leaders amongst the Vietnamese because of secondary movement.
- e. The absence of a Vietnamese Community is a major factor contributing towards the movement to London.
- f. Dispersal, in some instances, paid little regard to social factors such as religion, ethnicity, class etc.
- g. Caused Local Authorities to be reluctant to finance facilities for such small numbers of people.
- h. Distance from ELS facilities and Chinese food shops outside of Liverpool.³⁹

The list is a litany of failures, of deprivation, absence and disconnect. These issues had national relevance, creating more work for charities in the long run as they undertook the welfare support that ‘an established ethnic community would offer’ and enabling local authorities to justify not providing any special provisions to a numerically small and disenfranchised population. While the refugees were housed – the fundamental measure of resettlement in this period – the policy had deeper implications for their ongoing lives in Britain. By the early 1980s, the charities were drawing similar conclusions: the Joint Committee for the Reception for Refugees from Vietnam (JCRV) reported in 1983 that while dispersal had ‘spread the load’ on local authorities, it had created an unevenness of settlement and had insufficient regard for employment and training as well as the additional stress and isolation placed on those they were meant to be helping. Elsewhere in the report, the JCRV recommended that ‘in some areas where the number of Vietnamese is particularly small, no community support has developed and the refugee organisations judge the prospect for these isolated families so poor that it makes sense to help them if they wish to move to another area where the Vietnamese community, and local support groups are stronger.’⁴⁰ Dispersal was a failure.

MAKING BRITAIN HOSPITABLE

Because refugee loneliness and isolation has been long identified and pathologised, we can also see evidence of how it has been addressed. For those settling refugees, loneliness and disconnect have been seen as evidence of them being ‘unsettled’ and therefore vulnerable to social ills and evils, from juvenile delinquency to psychological distress as we saw with Alexander Mezey’s Hungarian patients. Generally, there have been two approaches to this, often overlapping or co-creating. The first is the amelioration of loneliness, formalising networks and spaces of sociability and support, creating places of warmth and safety within the hostility. The second is the more radical: resistance to the very structures through which isolation is imposed. These two approaches echo the tensions between host/guest and rights-based frameworks for welcoming refugees. The first relies on hospitality from the host. The second positions the refugee not as a guest but with rights equivalent to those of citizens.

Let us start with hospitality and friendship. The Forum’s 2014 research came from the organisation’s attempt to ‘fill an important gap in the lives of isolated, lonely refugees and migrants ... the mentoring initiative developed by the Forum aims to make people more active, to help them meet new people and to facilitate informal relationships’ (*This is How it Feels*, p16). Concepts of hospitality and welcome like these have long historical resonances, in theological and secular contexts, and have found practical application by volunteers and professionals alike in the visiting, befriending and hosting of refugees, contemporaneously demonstrated through the charity Refugees at Home and the hugely enthusiastic response to the Homes for Ukraine scheme in 2022, though not without *its* problems.⁴¹ Making someone ‘at home’ or visiting them in their ‘home’ suggests both the conviviality of the occasion and the transformation of a place in which one lives into this more meaningful site of habitation.

Visitors and ‘friends’ have responded to charities’ calls to act as go-betweens, providing information and local knowledge, practicing English, driving refugees to job interviews. These have been seen to counteract local hostilities and to help refugees better navigate the benefits and assistance available to them, occasionally to the chagrin of those volunteering as they witness the extent of statutory and charitable support offered to ‘non-belongers’ at the expense of the resident working-class population. The role of host has, most frequently, been taken up by women: quasi-mothers to children from European displaced person camps who came to Britain on holiday schemes in the 1950s, or stalwarts of local refugee committees, which often drew on the existing networks of Women’s Institutes and parish councils.⁴² Volunteers could act in ways in which the state could not, providing warm spaces that tempered the sharpest edges of bureaucratic resettlement.

Hospitality has not been solely the preserve of British ‘hosts’. Existing diasporas and newer arrivals have long helped to establish communal spaces of shared language or culture, whether in lunchtime social clubs for elderly refugees from Eastern Europe in the years following the Second World War, often revolving around religious centres, or longer stays in designated hospital wards or halfway houses. This provision was a kind of retreat: an opportunity to escape the challenges and demands of exile, to return to community. The creation of spaces of belonging for refugees has evolved through refugee community organisations in the 1980s and 1990s and continues to the present (*Refugee Community Organisations*, p188-198). The shift to spaces run by refugees for refugees, to eat together, to read newspapers from home, to have cultural events, tracks a corresponding trajectory to the rise of municipal multiculturalism and the availability of funding, often from individual

councils like the GLC, to facilitate more organised group gathering than what might have taken place in private home (*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, pp177-194).

Nevertheless, the duty to befriend or visit refugees remains keenly felt by the 'host' nation.

These visits can be clumsy, poorly executed or underwritten by paternalism, as detailed in Vesna Maric's memoir *Bluebird*, about her experiences as a Bosnian refugee in the 1990s.⁴³

Maric had been living in Britain for over a year, first in Penrith where coaches of Bosnian refugees were brought through the sponsorship of a local charity, and then in Exeter, where she was reunited with her mother. Each week, a local couple – Jack and Myra – came to visit them in their home, as volunteer refugee 'befrienders'. Maric and her mother were both baffled and bored by these strange yet regular visits, where conversation is tedious at best – 'the weight of their silence dropping in the room like a bloated carcass'. Through conversation with other Bosnian families, they discover that Jack and Myra are forcing their visits on different people every night of the week except Sunday, not only forcing their dull company on the Bosnians but costing them valuable money as they cater for the couple. Maric's mother eventually asks the pair if they could return the invitation and visit their home. This is enough for Jack and Myra to strike their family off the visiting list (*Bluebird*, pp144-152). The delicious descriptions of Jack and Myra from Maric's memoir puncture the 'do-gooding' many may have imagined themselves to be undertaking. Expectations of gratitude were frequently placed upon refugees for the welcome and hospitality they received from charities and volunteers.⁴⁴

Hospitality becomes ever more important in the context of dispersal and its isolating impulse.

Dina Nayeri recognises the scope for getting hospitality wrong but urges the continued efforts of visitors and befrienders. She writes that what refugees need is,

...friendship, not salvation. They need the dignity of becoming an essential part of a society. They have been so often on the receiving end of charity that when faced with someone else's need, their generosity and skill shine. Now and then, they will fall short, their wounds will open; they will have too many needs. You might misstep and cause harm. That is better than drawing *a thick line* around them.⁴⁵

Dispersal feels something like drawing a thick line around refugees, dividing their numbers, placing them on a map, keeping them boundaried and atomised. To return to the Vietnamese refugees, we can see how those charities following the policy of dispersal, drawing this line, also made attempts to build bridges across it. The illogic of this practice is striking: enabling the refugees to stay together in larger groups, in existing diasporic communities, where resources could be concentrated, would have saved a great deal of time and created opportunities for communities to develop. Nonetheless, they persisted. This was particularly in the work of Ockenden Venture, who prided themselves on their 'small and personal' approach in the manner of their founder Joyce Pearce and who placed a premium on voluntary support groups who would welcome refugees to an area and integrate them within the local community. This would both promote connection and relieve any strain on local authorities as they envisioned the support groups eventually providing most of the assistance required (*What Welcome?*, p90).

Volunteers recruited to these support groups were from a mixture of backgrounds, enabling translating and interpreting work to be done and for Ockenden to 'serve' the whole community, a seeming recognition of multiculturalism both within Britain and the refugees being resettled. These groups drew support from many of the usual voluntary organisations, including the Women's Royal Voluntary Service, the Council of Churches, the Red Cross and the Rotary Club, and drew on their established practices and relationships. In Dudley, for

instance, led by Reverend Peadon of the Central Methodist Church, the group had identified a ‘befriender’ from each church and seemed ‘to be turning more to Rotary as a model than the other Council of Churches Project’.⁴⁶ Groups also benefitted from membership of those with professional or vocational expertise: at Stafford, an adult literacy tutor helped with education; in Stoke-on-Trent, the council’s Housing Welfare Officer was a member of the group; in Worcester and Droitwich, the group was described as a ‘fairly high powered one and was able to obtain considerable financial and practical resettlement resources’.⁴⁷ In Loughborough, the group was run through the Community Relations Council and was particularly active, ‘concerned not only for the refugee resettlement there but Third World implications’ (*Local Support Groups*, p4). When reporting on groups’ progress, values like competency, resourcefulness and sensitivity were praised by Ockenden staff. Hinckley’s group were continuing contact with refugees well ‘in a supportive but not patronising way’ (*Local Support Groups*, p3). Only in one case was the racism facing refugees acknowledged within Ockenden’s support group reports. In Walsall, two women from a local church had come forward having negotiated ten units of accommodation on their own accord and then started a support group. One of the women subsequently withdrew because of ‘persistent threats from racist groups’, while the other continued (*Local Support Groups*, p12).

In an unusually honest reflection on the work of the Regional Officers within the charity in 1985, it was acknowledged that many of the British workers and volunteers still felt ignorant of ‘Vietnamese values and culture’ and the such ‘ignorance can communicate itself quite easily as racism’; the hiring of more Vietnamese staff was hoped to help.⁴⁸ A critical evaluation of the Vietnamese refugee resettlement programme in 1989 by Dr. Agathangelou, from Birkbeck College, outlined some of the problems of the support groups: from failing to

be available for mundane but crucial tasks like form-filling to an ‘excessive sense of Christian zeal’ in some groups which threatened Vietnamese religion and culture.⁴⁹ This was much more ‘salvation’ than the friendship Nayeri has espoused. While Agathangelou praised the success of the programme in providing refugees with shelter, the values of generosity, openness and democracy in all aspects of the programme were deemed insufficient in the face of an isolating policy framework. Despite the potential of these voluntary groups to enact friendship and kindness, these were easily exhausted resources.

RESISTANCE

Part of the frustration of working with historic reports and policy decisions about refugees’ loneliness is the absence of refugees’ own experiences of being alone. The inchoate and contradictory nature of isolation and loneliness that might never be voiced to even one’s closest family or friends – as in Omar’s experience in *Limbo* – remains vexingly out of reach in the records of hosts and befrienders. Where we can locate refugee agency and refusal of these isolating principles are in the myriad forms of *resistance* which have existed in tandem with policies of dispersal and illegalisation. Resistance here is understood as a collectivising force which necessarily insists upon connection or draws upon the resources of community solidarity. If we place resistance within the earlier established framework of change – collective arrival of guests to be hosted, individual arrivals whose refuge ought be protected as a right – we can read refugee responses to dispersal as resistant acts alongside more explicit and radical contestations of the isolating and hostile environment. For instance, the refusal of housing by Hungarian refugees in the 1950s might have been understood as a rejection of British hospitality by those who offered it, but was also an expression of desire to

be together.⁵⁰ The decision to undertake ‘secondary migration’ was a recurring feature of collective refugee resettlement: just because refugees had been allowed into Britain’s borders did not mean they would stay where they were placed.

Once we have the shift of the mid-1980s, with the rise of individual ‘asylum seekers’ whose access was not guaranteed and a concurrent rise of the language of rights to insist on safe passage, just procedures and fair access to state support, resistance became even more clearly articulated despite intensifying tensions around migration.⁵¹ Partly, as I suggested earlier, this relates to ‘refugee’ becoming an increasingly collapsed category, with very few groups afforded the designation of refugee, instead being seen as asylum seekers, economic migrants or ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’ immigrants. The possibilities of cross-migrant organisation were more readily seized, not least because two people fleeing the same country under similar circumstances might have very different eligibility as refugees in the eyes of the state.

Further, I would suggest, the explicit politics of deterrence brooked explicit responses because they offered something clear and substantial to fight against. Rather than earlier collective arrivals where restriction might go unnoticed by many looking at images of groups arriving at ports and airports, or where dispersal was enshrined in reports of local generosity welcoming ‘their’ refugees, the activity of the state and the Home Office as bordering forces became ever clearer.

This was not least in the press attention garnered by those resisting the hostile environment, who refused to let it isolate or alienate. In the same year that Agathangelou’s damning report was published, other forms of shelter for refugees were being radically contested. In the early hours of the morning of 18 January 1989, the Church of the Ascension in South Manchester

was stormed by police and immigration officers. Viraj Mendis, a Tamil refugee, had taken sanctuary within the vestry of the church in 1987, as he appealed against a Home Office deportation order to return him to Sri Lanka. On this cold January morning, Mendis was seized in the church's sacristy and carried away in his pyjamas, shouting 'Murderers, murderers'. He was subsequently held in Pentonville prison and deported. In response to this case, Timothy Renton, then Home Secretary, made clear that the concept of sanctuary no longer existed in law: 'We reserve our right to secure the removal of any immigration offender who has taken refuge in a church or temple, although it has not been thought necessary to do so in any case to date', he said.⁵²

It might seem that Mendis was a lone figure, isolated as he faced the full weight of a state determined to remove all who it deemed 'bogus' or 'illegal'. But Mendis was part of a much broader community of resistance to the anti-asylum and immigration rhetoric of the 1980s, as coalitions of anti-racist, anti-fascist, feminist, leftist and anti-deportation organisations fought to prevent the forcible removal of individuals and the separation of families and to offer sanctuary.⁵³ As part of the press coverage of Mendis' deportation, Refugee Forum – an umbrella group of refugee-run organisations – described its own version of 'the underground railway', committed to harbouring refugees against what its co-ordinator Ronnie Moodley deemed the deliberate techniques of the Home Office to 'isolate and scare asylum-seekers to make them feel alone and helpless when told they must go'.⁵⁴ Moodley, a Christian reverend and refugee, was immersed in Liberation theology. 'The goal is nothing less than a qualitatively new community in which the role of oppressor and oppressed is completely done away with ... In Britain, resistance, for immigrants, migrants and refugees, means not only giving support to those detained, refused or deported, but actively working against such

evils, by confronting the unjust laws which allow them.⁵⁵ For Viraj Mendis in Manchester, Rajwinder Singh at the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple, or Pina Manuel at the St Aloysius Roman Catholic Church, these faith centres offered both protection and rallied support around their cause in vigils, ‘sanctuary fasts’, rallies, marches, petitions and media publicity.⁵⁶ These moments of solidarity, through both public and necessarily hidden sanctuaries, were acts of resistance sending out a message of compassion and communal support. This was a place in which isolation of individuals and of their cause could be resisted, a statement of not being alone.

The City of Sanctuary movement which began in 2005 has attempted to revitalise aspects of these practices, aiming to build ‘a culture of hospitality’ and create ‘a network of towns and cities throughout the country which are proud to be places of safety, and which include people seeking sanctuary fully in the life of their communities.’⁵⁷ Yet often times, this movement has fallen into the earlier ameliorative patterns of supporting refugees, rather than the more radical resistance pursued by Mendis and others. As Oska Paul has recently argued, the movement’s focus specifically on refugees means a ‘framing of sanctuary (that) reproduces mainstream narratives of the “good” and “bad” migrant, which undergirds much of the design and justification behind the United Kingdom’s hostile immigration policies and rhetoric’.⁵⁸ My own borough, Lewisham, was recognised as a Borough of Sanctuary in May 2021. Part of their aims to enact the principles of sanctuary includes creating opportunities for relationships of friendship and solidarity between local people and those seeking sanctuary, and then turning empathy into action. This work includes both the settling of newcomers and the unsettling (as Susanna Snyder has identified) of hostile attitudes and policies.⁵⁹ In Lewisham, this has meant a refusal from the council to collaborate with the

Home Office on new immigration rules on rough sleeping, guaranteeing free school meals to all children regardless of their immigration status, promoting the ‘Safe Surgeries’ scheme so that undocumented migrants can safely visit GP offices and removing the Home Office’s embedded officer from the council.⁶⁰ Much of this focus, as Paul finds, came from the intervention of Immigration Action Group (IAG), a collective of migrant parents at a primary school in Lewisham. Their actions demonstrate ‘the potential of migrant groups to co-opt and reconfigure the sanctuary framework to bring about policy changes in ways that address the wider violence of the hostile environment’ (*Expanding Sanctuary*, p12).

Resistance is powerful but it is also precarious and vulnerable. In early 2023, far-right protesters clashed with police outside of a hotel housing asylum seekers in Knowsley on Merseyside. The group, Patriotic Alternative, have deliberately targeted dispersal areas. Elsewhere, though, on Kenmure Street in Glasgow, on Evan Cook Close in Peckham, outside the Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, outside Manston Detention Centre, people have gathered in their hundreds to stop immigration raids and deportations and to protest the conditions in which migrants are housed, to say we are with you, you are our neighbours, our community, we will not let them take you away. Welcome, sanctuary and solidarity are being actively fought for and protected, resisting categories of illegality designed to separate and isolate, asserting a belonging that resists the hostility of our environment.

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12. Becky Taylor, *Refugees in Twentieth-Century Britain. A History*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p27. (Hereafter *Refugees*.)
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14. Peter Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World's Refugees, 1956-1963*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
15. Alice Bloch, *The Migration and Settlement of Refugees in Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp 44-7.
16. Samuel Moyn and Jan Eckel (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, University of Pennsylvania, 2013.
17. Darling, 485. While here I consider internal dispersal within the bounds of the nation, we should also keep in mind the international dispersal that has already taken place, determined by which countries have opened their borders to refugees and on what scale. Sara Cosemans discusses this in relationship to East African expellees and diasporic citizenship, 'The Politics of Dispersal: Turning Ugandan Colonial Subjects into Postcolonial Refugees (1967–76)', *Migration Studies*, 6:1, 2018, pp99-119.
18. Shirin Hirsch, 'Chileans in Exile: Experiences of British Interaction and Return', *Oral History*, 40:1, 2012, pp47-56.

19. See Paul Gilroy on municipal anti-racism, in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Routledge, 2002 (1987), pp177-194. (Hereafter *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*.)
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35. Felicity Edholm, Helen Roberts and Judith Sayer, *Vietnamese Refugees in Britain*, Commission for Racial Equality, 1983, pp16-7. (Hereafter *Vietnamese Refugees in Britain*.)
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40. Surrey History Centre, 7155/7/5, *Vietnamese Refugees: Their Needs and Our Responses*, June 1983, p2.
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