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Theorizing Queer Kinship and the Normative Family in the Canadian Sponsorship of Syrian Refugees

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Abstract

Canada's refugee sponsorship initiative gained international attention following the federal government's 2015 plan to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada through a combination of government and private sponsorship. The paper draws on media coverage of Syrian refugee sponsorship to examine how discourses around family and kinship in Canada's sponsorship program risk constraining the pre- and post-resettlement lives of Syrian refugees. Beyond the humanitarian lens, the paper draws on human-interest stories to identify the ruptures and emergences in the language of kinship at play in broader narratives and structures impacting Syrian refugees. Using critiques of heteronormativity emergent in feminist and queer geography, the paper asks how kinship and family are deployed, contested, and shaped in discourses around refugee sponsorship. Juxtaposing the normalization of "family" in tension with non-nuclear forms of kinship, such as extended kin networks and polygamous families, this work draws on queer theories of kinship to question how gender, sexuality, and familial structures are imagined and reconfigured by governments, refugees, and sponsors in the context of resettlement.

Keywords

refugees, sponsorship, kinship, family, sexuality, gender, queer, Canada, Syria

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Introduction

Following Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 2015 announcement that over 25,000 Syrian refugees would be resettled to Canada under the federal government's #WelcomeRefugees initiative,[1] Canada's sponsorship program was celebrated by the UNHCR and international refugee advocates as a model for a global response to refugee crises (UNHCR 2016).[2] Between 2015 and 2019, 44,620 Syrian refugees were resettled to Canada, more than half of whom were resettled through full or partial private sponsorship (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2020).[3] Canada's private sponsorship model, which builds on the 1976 Immigration Act, is the first of its kind to formalize private sponsorship into national immigration policy (Bond and Kwadrans 2019, 95). The outcome of this legislation has been the sponsorship of over 350,000 refugees and asylum seekers since the 1970s (Government of Canada 2021), and while significant research has been conducted on sponsored refugee populations in Canada and refugee families, few studies have examined the discursive and ideological implications of family and kinship in the case of refugee sponsorship.

Drawing on research conducted in 2019 and 2020 on Canadian and international media coverage of Canada's resettlement of Syrian refugees published between 2015 and 2019,[4] this paper investigates discourses around family and kinship in Canada's resettlement initiative to examine how the sponsorship model generates transformative possibilities for refugee resettlement, while it also constrains the lives of refugees through the normalization of refugees into nuclear families. Drawing on queer theories of kinship to interpret the narratives around Syrian refugees and their sponsors in human-interest stories, I interrogate how discourses of family restrict and reshape refugee families through the sponsorship model in two ways: first, through the normalizing structure of family in the formation of national immigration policies; and second, through a process that recruits the generosities of everyday citizens in the model of private sponsorship (alongside government sponsorship) wherein sponsors serve a disciplinary role in acculturating the refugee family into a normative family structure. Following Natalie Oswin's (2008) call to rethink queer geographies around "questions of race, colonialism, geopolitics, migration, globalization and nationalism," I look to narratives of family and kinship to think beyond the narrow interpretation of "sexuality and gender… and instead utilize queer theory to understand how sexuality is used as part of broad constellations of power across the heterosexual/homosexual divide" (90). Thus, rather than thinking of a sexual politics that interprets queer and heterosexual in opposition (89), I draw on a queer geography approach to interrogate the role of power in shaping the family and kinship in refugee resettlement. Although there is a wide body of research on sexual

[1] Of note, Trudeau's announcement explicitly excluded single men, except for gay men, from the resettlement plan. Research on gender and migration illustrates the wider context of racial and gendered bias and stereotypes against male asylum seekers, which target these men as "potential rapists and terrorists" (Allsopp 2017, 157) or "bogus asylum seekers" (Griffiths 2015).

[2] Since writing the first version of this paper, Canada has launched another resettlement initiative starting in January 2022, called the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel (CUAET), which granted people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine temporary work and study visas, and extensions on existing visas. Further research is needed to investigate the role of family in this initiative.

[3] Of the 51% Syrian refugees who were privately sponsored, 42% were resettled as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR) and 9% as Blended VISA Office-Referred Program (BVOR), whereas 49% of refugees were brought as Government Assisted Refugees (GAR).

orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) refugees, commonly referred to as SOGIE, this paper does not investigate this refugee category specifically. Instead, I ask: how do normative ideas of family shape and come into tension with broader ideas of kinship that (re)fashion refugee families?

To answer the above question, I begin by providing a brief background on Syrian refugees, Canadian refugee sponsorship, and scholarship on refugees and the family, followed by a short explanation of the research I conducted along with my research assistant in 2019-2020 and my choice to examine human-interest stories. Next, I look at 5 human-interest stories that draw out themes of family and kinship, the structure of the refugee family and the tensions emergent in the stories about affiliation, intimacy, and identification in the refugee-sponsor relationship. Turning to the construction of the normative family, I continue to contextualize the refugee family within the historical development of the nuclear family as a function of population management and immigration policy, as well as disciplinary power. Finally, looking at how metaphors of family play out in narratives about refugees and sponsors, I identify the ways that refugee survival is scripted into a framework that reinforces heteronormative hierarchies of intimacy in the structure of sponsorship. In doing so, I conclude with a proposal to reimagine the role of refugee sponsorship through a queer approach to kinship.

Background

The Syrian refugee crisis

The result of the Syrian war that began in 2011, the Syrian refugee crisis represents the largest displaced population to date in the twenty-first century. At the peak of the crisis, more than 6.6 million people in Syria had become refugees, making up approximately half of the 13 million people who had been displaced by the war, both internally and abroad. Syrian refugees comprise a diverse population across religious and ethnic groups, including ethnic Arabs, Yazidis, Kurds, Palestinians, as well as Muslims, Christians, and Druze (Dukhan 2018). In the decade following the start of the Syrian war, people fleeing Syria made up the largest refugee population globally, at 25% of the world's refugee population (UNHCR 2020). The majority of externally displaced people fled to nearby countries using land-based transportation or crossing borders by foot into neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, which host the vast majority of Syrian refugees globally. With limited infrastructure or intention to support and sustain refugees in accessing employment, long-term housing, healthcare, and education, the living conditions for refugees in these countries was minimal at best, with most refugees relying on the UNHCR and international aid organizations for providing the basic food, medical care, and shelter for those living in camps, informal encampments and shelters, over-crowded housing, and sheltering in non-residential spaces. The conditions facing externally displaced refugees were so dire that by 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to Europe by foot (while land borders were still open) and by sea, prompting outrage as images of bodies washed ashore along the Mediterranean circulated internationally. A significant body of research has been conducted on Syrian refugees in the adjacent countries and within the European Union, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail these findings further; however, it is worth remarking that research on private sponsorship in Canada indicates a significant role of the images of refugee deaths in the sea in influencing Canadian support for the refugee sponsorship initiative (Macklin et al. 2018).

Syrian refugee sponsorship and the family

When Canada announced that it would fast-track Syrian refugee resettlement by using the private sponsorship model, it followed an earlier case of rapid refugee resettlement from 1979-1980 when approximately 60,000 Indochinese refugees were resettled through government and private sponsorship after fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Because of this, a significant amount of research has been done on the outcomes of sponsored refugees from this earlier case (Beiser 2003; Molloy and Simeon 2016; Neuwirth and Clark 1981; Woon 1984). To date, a growing body of research on the Syrian refugee sponsorship population has begun to be published, focusing primarily on the post-resettlement outcomes of this group and public narratives of refugees (Elcioglu and Shams 2023; Hamilton et al. 2020; Hanley et al. 2018; Hanley et al. 2024; Hynie 2018; Hynie et al. 2019; Kyriakides et al. 2018, 2019; Omidian Sijani 2023 ; Tyyskä et al. 2018; Wallace 2018). However, only preliminary scholarship has been published on the role that family and kinship play in the resettlement of Syrian refugees (Hamilton et al. 2020; Macklin et al. 2020; Morris et al 2020).

More generally, research on post-resettlement outcomes for refugees has been predicated on an understanding of the family—including extended kinship networks—as a critical factor in determining refugee integration, economic independence, health outcomes, and post-traumatic recovery (Boyle and Ali 2009; Drolet et al. 2018; Killian and Agathangelou 2018; Weine et al. 2004). However, scholarly literature on refugees and the family also illustrates the tension in the role of the family in post-resettlement experiences, as some research posits the family as integral to the security and survival of refugees (Sloboin and de Jong 2015) while others note family can also be a source of stress, feelings of burden, and violence (Gangamma 2018; Timshel et al. 2017). Scholarly literature in this area suggests that ideas about the family, such as gendered household roles and economic roles in the family, can shape refugee resettlement outcomes (Deng and Marlowe 2013; Kibria 1994), including the impact of changing gender roles on family conflict (Darvishpour 2002). This body of research also points to the role of familial language in refugee-sponsor relationships, such as how power dynamics between refugees and their advocates can negatively affect refugees (Tilbury 2007).

The population of Syrian refugees brought to Canada under the resettlement initiative of 2015 was comprised of a high number of large families, with almost half of refugees coming as part of families with more than 4 family members (Hamilton et al. 2020, 7). The 2016 census data shows that 85% of Syrian refugees brought to Canada after 2015 comprised families, mostly two parents and multiple young children, and 44% were under 15 years old at the time of the census (Houle 2016). "Because the government gave priority to young families with children and vulnerable refugees, the demographic characteristics of government-assisted refugees were quite different from those of privately-sponsored refugees. In 2016, 94% of government-assisted Syrian refugee families were couples with children … In comparison, 78% of privately-sponsored refugee families were couples with children" (Statistics Canada 2019).

Research on Syrian refugee families in Canada illustrates the impact of resettlement on family roles and the changing meaning of family for refugees (Al-Janaideh et al. 2023), including mothers (Abi Zeid Daou et al. 2024; Omar 2023) and fathers (Al Mhamied et al. 2023). Resettlement places new emphasis on family role dynamics, as Syrian parents who lost access to extended family support—including relatives and neighbours—struggled with the

shift from providing cultural and religious transmission to focusing on children's protection and success (Al Mhamied et al. 2023, 339, 409; Omar 2023, 1213). In one study on Syrian refugees in Germany and Turkey, displaced Syrian refugees who were able to relocate with their larger extended families in Turkey expressed greater support and intergenerational care than those in Germany (Alkan 2022; 756), despite lacking secure legal status (757), which illustrates how immigration policy impacts both family structure and the meaning and role of family for refugees.

New research on Canada's #WelcomeRefugees initiative (Alatrash 2018; Hyndman, Payne and Jimenez 2017; Labman and Pearlman 2018) has illustrated key ways that ideas of kinship are central to both the experiences of Syrian refugees in Canada, and the role of sponsors in the refugee process (Hanley et al. 2018; Hynie 2018; Hynie et al. 2019; Kyriakides et al. 2018; Labman 2016; Lenard 2016; Macklin et al. 2018; Macklin et al. 2020); however, no studies to date have investigated how the normalization of family and kinship shape the refugee-sponsor relationship, as well as post-resettlement experiences and outcomes. As Macklin et al. (2020) argue in their working paper, *The Kinship between Refugee and Family Sponsorship*, one of the first studies to examine the sponsorship relationship in the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Canada, "private refugee sponsorship depends on establishing and maintaining personal relationships… Yet, the formal architecture of private sponsorship configures relationships between sponsor and refugee with no obvious contemporary referent and few historical antecedents. Little is known about how refugees and sponsors experience the relationship" (1). Following Macklin et al.'s observation on the role of kinship in refugee sponsorship, this paper offers a theoretical framework to historicize and situate kinship as a key factor in refugee sponsorship in the case of Canada's resettlement of Syrian refugees. Using discourse analysis to contextualize human interest stories on refugee-sponsor relationships, I introduce a queer theory approach to kinship to better understand how normalization of the family can impact refugee resettlement initiatives.

Methods & Discussion

Between 2019 and 2020, I worked with a research assistant to collect over 100 articles covering stories of Canada's private sponsorship of Syrian refugees to review how the media framed Canada's resettlement initiative. Using keyword searches for "refugee*" and "sponsor*" in both newspaper databases available through our institutional library and search engines to identify news articles, op-eds, documentaries, and other texts and media objects, our goal was to survey how sponsored Syrian refugees were being described and discussed in public discourses. While a growing body of media analysis research is now available on both sponsored Syrian refugees (Omidian Sijani 2023; Tyyskä et al. 2018; Wallace 2018) and international treatment of Syrian refugees in the media (d'Haenens et al. 2019; Toker 2019; Zheni 2019), few studies have looked closely at the narrative discourses relating to family and kinship in coverage of sponsored refugees. Among the articles, op-eds, and documentaries I examined, I found five human-interest stories on Syrian-refugee sponsorship in Canada that illustrated overlapping discursive themes around family and kinship within the refugee-sponsor relationship. Using a close reading of narrative themes relating to family, kinship, relationships, and integration in these human-interest stories, I explored the above themes through a critical analysis using queer theories of kinship, critiques of the normalization of the nuclear family, and critical refugee and migration studies scholarship. Recent research on refugees has examined human-interest stories as a rich site for discursive analysis (Abdelhady

and Delioglu 2022; Steimel 2020). While other qualitative methods, such as interviewing, can reveal details of lived experience, analysis of human-interest stories can illustrate the interplay between the narratives told by and about refugees within the frameworks of intelligibility normalized in media framings and public discourse.[5]

In their work on human interest stories on Syrian refugees in Turkey, Abdelhady and Delioglu (2022) argue the "human-interest frame personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the news… that generate feelings of outrage, empathy, sympathy, or compassion; or emphasize the ways individuals or groups are affected by the issue/problem" (100). Because this type of coverage provides both news and a narrative structure that aims to elicit emotion in the reader, these stories can provide rich insights into broader discourses shaping the refugee and sponsor relationship. The five stories I focus on below were featured in national and international platforms, including *The Star* (Canada), a series in *The New York Times* (US/International), and the online docuseries, *Sponsor|Land*. Using an interpretive rather than empirical methodological approach to examining the discourses around family and kinship in these stories, I investigate how language and meaning are constructed and navigated within a wider geopolitical context of the nuclear family structure and resettlement practices. Consequently, I offer the following theoretical and discursive analysis to examine how family and kinship are articulated in the context of Syrian refugee sponsorship to highlight the potential for alternative entry points into understanding refugees and sponsorship beyond models that reinforce the nuclear family.

Narratives of family in human-interest stories

In one of the first human-interest features developed on sponsored refugees, *The New York Times* (*NYT*), profiled three families sponsored by groups in Toronto: the al-Hajj family, the Mohammad family, and the Ballani family (Kantor and Einhorn 2016a). Wissam and Mouhamad al-Hajj along with their three children—and a fourth born soon after arriving in Canada—came from a farming and shepherd community near Aleppo and fled to Lebanon during the war, were profiled in two subsequent articles along with three of their sponsors, Peggy Karas, Liz Stark, and Carol Atkins (Kantor and Einhorn 2016b, 2017). Abdullah and Eman Mohammad, a former grocer and nurse who were sponsored along with their four children after fleeing to Jordan by a group including Kerry McLorg and Susan Stewart, were also featured in a second article that focused on their daughter Bayan (Einhorn and Kantor 2016). Lastly, Muaz and Sawsan Ballani, a young couple who wed in Syria through an arranged marriage one month before fleeing for Jordan, were sponsored along with their son by a group headed by Helga Breier. In addition, I also examined two more family stories: Mohammad and Nada Kanaan, sponsored in Calgary and featured in a national story in *The Star* (Yousif et al. 2019), and Abdel Malek and Sawsen along with their 11 children—with a focus on their older sons Sleiman, Ramez, and Ahmad—who were sponsored by a group in Picton, Ontario, including Carlyn Moulton, Robin Baranyai, and Deb McGrath, featured in *Sponsor|Land* (Hozer 2017).

Across the narratives about these five families, a recurring theme of familial bonding permeated the narratives both sponsors and sponsored refugees told about their relationships. In Wissam al-Hajj's description of her relationship with her sponsor, Peggy

[5] Steimel (2010) argues that human interest stories can reveal dominant social discourses around refugees (220).

Karas, she expressed: "'I feel like Peggy is like my friend, my mom, my sister'" (Kantor and Einhorn 2016b). Further, the authors describe Karas as a "maternal figure" to the al-Hajj family (Kantor and Einhorn 2016b), "part of what made it so difficult to step back was that the Syrians and Canadians filled gaps in one another's lives in a way none of them had anticipated: Wissam al-Hajj had lost her mother as a girl; now the older Canadian women became maternal figures to her… Ms. Karas longed for grandchildren and had embraced the four Syrian children as if they were her own" (Kantor and Einhorn 2017). Similarly, the description of the relationship between sponsors and the Mohammad family blurred the boundaries between family and home, as "the Canadians and Syrians were in and out of one another's homes for tutoring, computer lessons or celebrations. They shared parental tasks, such as communicating with teachers, since the Mohammads spoke little English. 'What they gave us, a brother wouldn't even give to his own brother,' Mr. Mohammad said" (Einhorn and Kantor 2016). In these narratives, sponsors are described as taking on "quasi-parental" roles in the refugee family (Macklin et al. 2020, 8), guiding them through their acclimation and integration into Canadian life, as well as serving as additional parental figures, guardians, and surrogate grandparents to the children. These relationships are depicted in positive terms in many of the human-interest stories. Still, they are also relationships embedded in tension, as in the case of the Ballani family, where "the sponsors worried that they were becoming helicopter parents, as Ms. Breier put it" (Kantor and Einhorn 2016a).

Macklin et al. argue, "the parental comparison seems irremediably patronising and, in relation to Syrian refugees, orientalist in its specific manifestation" (2020, 8). According to their research, "the language of 'sponsorship' … overlays conceptions of family with relations of dependence and autonomy" (3), whereby "the sponsorship regime apprehends a refugee family (or fragment thereof) as a social unit that not only socialises its members, but which itself must be 'socialised' into Canada via the settlement and integration process. Sponsorship does not rely solely on contractual obligation, but also on the formation of personal, affective bonds of partiality, commitment and intimacy that give tensile strength to the formal connection" (4). As such, these relationships rely on the intimacy developed between refugees and their sponsors to ensure continued support beyond the official sponsorship period, as many sponsors and refugees clearly express in these articles that refugee families struggle to achieve economic and social independence within such a short window.

"Month 13," the colloquial way of referencing the official end of the twelve-month sponsorship agreement for privately sponsored refugees, marks a particularly loaded narrative anchor in qualifying the kinship between refugees and sponsors (Lenard 2019). In *The New York Times* features, Month 13 marks a point where "every group of sponsors and refugees had to determine what their new relationship would look like. Some were mutually relieved to be done, but the chemistry never quite right. In other cases, the Canadians continued directly funding the Syrians, unable to cut the financial cord" (Kantor and Einhorn 2017). Continued support in these stories relied on the successful intimacy of the refugee-sponsor bond through the development a relationship rooted in kinship rather than contractual obligation. Even the metaphor of financial dependency as an umbilical cord suggests a parental-relationship at play in these relationships, where reliance on sponsors is not only an economic relationship but also social. Wissam al-Hajj, for instance, "felt sure that the sponsors would remain by their sides and that, apart from financial matters, Month 13 would not change their relationship" (ibid.). In other cases, the changes in the intimacy of

refugee and sponsor resulted in a wider shift in the relationships built multi-directionally, such as when Kerry McLorg, one of the Ballani family's sponsors, was diagnosed with breast cancer, and the Ballani family and other sponsors took the initiative to help care for her (Kantor and Einhorn 2016a). In its ideal form, the mutuality and reciprocity of such relationships offer an almost utopian hope for what private sponsorship makes possible, wherein the reorganisation of familial bonds and kinship networks embed refugees and their sponsors in new structures of intimacy and survival. However, even when such bonding does occur, the tension between refugees and their sponsors persists.

The kinship of sponsorship

At the core of the refugee-sponsor relationship is what anchors refugees and sponsors to one another. Is it a legal and economic agreement mediated by the government—a contract that ends at Month 13—or is it an emotional attachment that maintains the relationship beyond the twelve months? Human-interest stories want to tell us about the importance of these emotional bonds in securing the successful integration of refugees post-resettlement and the generosity and kindness of sponsors, whose humanitarian image is tempered by narratives of overly concerned or meddlesome sponsors. These narratives suggest that regardless of the reason, circumstance, or structure, refugee sponsorship is an antidote to the cruelty of war and the indifference of global responses to the refugee crisis. However, beyond critiquing sponsorship initiatives—which undoubtedly have improved the likelihood of survival of countless refugees awaiting resettlement or the freedom to return home—I offer this critical reading as a starting point for understanding how the normalization of the family shapes both private sponsorship and the Canadian response to the refugee crisis.

Farida Tilbury argues, "refugee advocates and refugees are producing new meanings, or new applications, for the old category 'family', broadening out its relevance to challenge more critical categorisations of refugees" (2007, 645). This practice illustrates the need for different ways of both narrating and structuring refugee-sponsor relationships that make space for how to move through and past the tension, violence, and trauma inherent in the displacement, resettlement, and integration nexus that shapes refugee resettlement in Canada. Research on immigrant communities has highlighted how the conditions of migration can reshape kinship organisation within notions of family and identity (Foner 1997), which can include a new or renewed focus on "distant kin to the position of closer relatives" (964) wherein non-related members of a community are redefined as kin through familial language. These strategies illustrate how displacement and resettlement reshapes the family while the contours of what is constituted by family shift and change in new contexts.

Stories about refugees and their sponsors in the media can reveal different narratives of kinship from the tropes of benevolent sponsor and needy refugee and instead tell us how refugees and sponsors navigate power in their relationships in unexpected ways. As one sponsor, Peggy Karas, explained "I don't think I expected to be so close to them and care so much about them as I do. I thought this was going to be somewhat distant" (Kantor and Einhorn 2017). It is these unexpected developments in the refugee-sponsor relationship that I turn to next to investigate how sponsorship anchors the refugee family in neoliberalised formations of the family in Canada.

The Sexual Politics of the Family in Refugee Sponsorship

Who is the refugee family? What might seem like a simple question is made complex by the uneven structure of how family is defined across linguistic, cultural, national, legal, and geopolitical contexts. Do biological or legal definitions bind the family? Is the family produced through relational or economic configurations? Is the family constituted by cohabitation or social roles? While rhetorical, these questions help illustrate the evasive nature of what structures our understanding of the family under humanitarian schemes for resettlement, particularly as the national determinations of what constitutes as "family" are mapped transnationally through refugee resettlement selection.

Coalescing around natalist citizenship and restrictive immigration policies of the early twentieth-century during the post-war period, the nuclear family in Western nation states came to serve not only a function of socialisation but also economic organisation and nationalism through techniques of taxation, family planning, wealth accumulation, and demographic population management. With the rise of population science and eugenics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the role of biological reproduction and kinship took new form as making family was no longer a consequence of social organisation for sustenance, but a means of managing human population by delimiting those groups whose reproduction should be restricted and those groups whose reproduction should be enhanced. In this way, the modern idea of sex, gender, and race emerged out of the classification system organised by the management and control of populations through reproduction. By the mid-twentieth century, the gendered and racial management of population took on a new form, through "*selective* national goals for engendering economic prosperity through calibrated population 'adjustment'… via national population control policies" (Clarke 2018, 14). This approach to population management can be seen in both positive and negative controls, such as family planning incentives and open immigration policies on the one hand, and eugenics policies, forced sterilization, and immigration restrictions on the other. Canadian immigration policies that welcome immigration can thus be understood within wider population management techniques, such as to address demographic decline and unmet labour market demands.

With the rise of nation state formations, the family also served a key function in the exercise of sovereignty, through the power of the state to grant citizenship via the natal politics of inheritance and immigration regimes of naturalization. As structures of family and social organisation were reconfigured under industrialisation and urbanisation, the family served to anchor the relationship between gender, sexuality, and power through governmentality, wherein family became regulated by institutions—such as law, medicine, education, and government—at the same time that the family constitutes a disciplinary space where individuals learn and internalise social norms (Foucault 1986).

According to Foucault (1990), "since the eighteenth century the family has become an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love; that sexuality has its privileged point of development in the family" (108). In this way, "the family is the interchange of sexuality and alliance: it conveys the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality; and it conveys the economy of pleasure and intensity of sensation in the regime of alliance" (*ibid*). Feminist Foucauldian work on the family suggests that the family is not only a key site for the disciplining of the child's sexuality but also traces the genealogy of gendered social roles in the modern family (Taylor 2012). In this way, the family is the primary site through which both

sexuality and gendered social roles are constituted (Rubin 1975), shaping both the individualising effects of disciplinary regimes of gender and sexuality and the institutional power of governance and citizenship through the economic unit of the family. As feminist work on the family has illustrated, the interconnected role of the nuclear family and patriarchal social organisation is central to the systemic oppression of women (Macleod and Durrheim 2002; Mandell 2005); however, queer theorists and sexuality scholars have also been interested in the role of the family in structuring not only gender and sexuality but social norms that govern gendered behaviour, embodiment, and political projects through compulsory and coercive heterosexuality, monogamy, and reproduction (Butler 2004; Eng 2010; Rubin 1975; TallBear 2018; Wiley 2016).

Tracing the genealogies of regulatory practices around family and kinship, scholars of race, colonialism, and the history of sexuality have identified the way that the family has served to domesticate subjects through techniques of racialisation, colonial domination, and population management (Benjamin 2018; Dua 1999; Stoler 2002; TallBear 2018; Wiley 2016). This work highlights how the family serves a key function in governmentality through the relationship between family (marriage), citizenship (passports, civility, eugenics), private property (colonial land dispossession and population management via land ownership and title), inheritance (wealth and citizenship), and compulsory heteronormative reproduction (parental-rights and custody). Scholars of Indigenous and sexuality studies have long argued that the imposition of Western sex/gender systems on Indigenous populations served to disrupt Indigenous kinship systems, by making "heterosexuality compulsory as a key part of breaking up indigenous landholdings and 'detribalising' native peoples" (Rifkin 2005, 27). Through explicit practices of governmentality, such as the enactment of property and inheritance laws, civil law, and policing, in addition to the ideological role of Christianity's "civilizing" mission through coercive re-education in residential and boarding school systems, the nineteenth century established colonial kinship formations wherein "monogamous marriage, the nuclear family, and privatised homemaking" (31) were essential techniques used to break Indigenous traditions and sovereignty and ensure that land could be privatised, expropriated, and extracted.

The shaping of the refugee family into a nuclear form

In their analysis of print and news media, Tyyskä et al. (2018) found positive representation of Syrian refugees framed refugees as "part of a nuclear family" while negative representations focused on "their family structure" (158). Thus, representations of the family figure prominently in media coverage *and* refugee selection, both figuratively—as a representation of the deserving Syrian refugee fleeing war—and structurally—as central criteria for selection when Canada prioritised the resettlement of women, children, families, and sexual and gender minorities. Despite the tenacity of the nuclear form as the prototypical model of the family, non-nuclear family structures have persisted alongside this dominant trope. When we consider the geographic, economic, and social organization of how Syrian refugees lived prior to displacement and resettlement, it becomes clear that the "refugee family" of resettlement is a projected structure that reshapes the contours of how family is constituted by Canada's own nuclear formulation. While this is true of all family-classification

systems within immigration policy,[6] the impact of this feature of normalisation around the family has ramifications on the Syrian refugees brought to Canada under the resettlement initiative. For instance, a 2015 Citizenship and Immigration Canada profile on Syrians stated, "families are quite extended in Syria; they include not only parents and children but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It is not uncommon for extended and immediate family members to live together in a single dwelling" (12). However, in the selection of family members for resettlement, only nuclear family members (parents and children) and vulnerable extended family members (aging and ill grandparents, adult siblings deemed at risk), were selected for resettlement.

What do we make of the dissonance between non-nuclear structures of the family and the predominance of the nuclear family form in refugee resettlement? Although Canadian immigration policy can include consideration over extended family members in higher risk cases of resettlement, research on Syrian refugees in Canada highlight the negative impact of changes in family structure into the nuclear form on refugees (Hamilton et al. 2020, 19). The impact of the imposition of the nuclear family structure appears to be at the root of the tension in many of the human-interest stories told about Syrian refugees in Canada, who were dislocated from the structure of familial cohabitation with extended family members through resettlement. From the outset, immigration policies simultaneously pre-determine *and* restructure the refugee family in the form of the heteronormative nuclear family unit,[7] what Anna Carastathis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi (2018) argue is a consequence of "methodological heteronormativity … ubiquitous in the move to humanise (or dehumanise) refugees through framings of their own reproductive histories and futures, constructing them as fathers, mothers, families, pregnant women, or, in taken-for-granted binary gender terms, as 'men' and 'women-and-children'" (1122).

Despite the domestic structure of cohabitation, childcare, and economic dependency that may have shaped families prior to fleeing Syria and during the period of asylum, the family eligible for resettlement only occasionally includes grandparents, and rarely includes adult children. Siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, and other extended family members are ineligible for sponsorship *as a family*. Instead, these extended members of resettled refugee families must await invitations from Canadian sponsors open to taking on *new* sponsorship agreements or openings in government sponsorship and resettlement. In their research on private sponsorship and family reunification, Morris et al. (2020) argue that the private sponsorship model is positioned as "a tool of family reunification [that] depends too much on the preferences and perspectives of sponsors, who may not have the capacity to facilitate such reunifications, or who may not agree that reunification is valuable in the first place" (131).

Relationships that are not anchored in legible family terms—such as non-related kin, close friends, sister-wives or second and third wives (in the case of polygamous families), live-

[6] In Canada, the *Immigration Act* defines "the degree of relationship that can serve as a basis for sponsorship with the Family Class" (Trempe et al. 1997, 43).

[7] Despite the existence of sponsorship and resettlement programs for gender and sexual minorities, commonly referred to as SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression), in the case of the Syrian refugee program, SOGIE refugees were distinct from the family resettlement category. Thus, SOGIE Syrian refugees have been treated in public representations as individuals, rather than members of larger families, including family members who may be seeking resettlement.

in domestic workers, and other figures who are not constituted as "family"—are unintelligible in narratives framing refugees, despite the possibility that such relationships may be longstanding and central to the lives of people living elsewhere.[8] Instead, normative formulations of the family become essential markers in making refugees legible for resettlement.

Kinship in sponsorship beyond the normative family

Taking the stories of refugee-sponsor relationships as a site to think through the friction around how power and kinship take shape in refugee resettlement, I turn to these narratives to challenge wider formations of gender and sexuality in national policies on immigration *and* to rethink the role of kinship and kin-making in the resettlement of refugees. While Macklin et al. (2020, 13) highlight the tension that sponsors experience in their awareness of the power imbalances that exist in the refugee-sponsor relationship, these relationships nonetheless hinge on a promise and simultaneous impossibility of intimacy. Laden with the legacy of Canadian colonial violence that positions white middle-class Canadians as both financially and socially capable of privately sponsoring refugees, the kinship that sponsorship is anchored on relies on the assumption that refugees should be indoctrinated into the Canadian way—and not vice versa. If narratives of refugee-sponsor relationships in human-interest stories reveal how the relationship of sponsorship transforms both refugees and sponsors, why not expect Canadian sponsors to change the way they organise their lives, their ideas of family, and their expectations around social roles among kin, through sponsorship? Many of the stories told about refugees and their sponsors describe the experience that sponsors have with refugees as being both profound and transformative (4). What would it mean to come at the refugee-sponsor relationship from the other end, and ask instead how sponsors and refugees might *both* be transformed through the kinship embedded in these new relationships?

Until now, I have used the word "kinship" rather loosely, defining it as the extended familial networks that anchor notions of family and community. Anthropological and historical work both illustrate the wider formations of kinship organisation in pre-capitalist societies (Holy 1996). "To an anthropologist, a kinship system is not a list of biological relatives. It is a system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships" (Rubin 1975, 169). The separation of kin from the communal served to manage shifting economic relations of labour, such that the family as a discrete unit became increasingly necessary for the organisation of labour through industrialisation. Rather than repair the normative family through its nuclear form, I end this paper with a turn to kinship in its post-structural and queer framing to help theorise how we might reimagine the relationship between refugees and sponsors. The post-structuralist formulation of kinship takes up critiques of the sex/gender system by further interrogating the role of gender, sexuality, and family in the normalisation of sexuality as a vector of population management structured by the hetero-patriarchal nation-state, simultaneous to attention to the non-normative intimacies emergent in queer and other formations of family, community, "chosen family," and kin.

[8] Indeed, bigamy is widely accepted as a given family arrangement that *should* be excluded from immigration eligibility (Trempe et al. 1997, 43).

According to Judith Butler (2004), "kinship is neither a fully autonomous sphere, proclaimed to be distinct from community and friendship—or the regulations of the state" (103). As such, the question for Butler is not so much "which relations of desire ought to be legitimated by the state but also who may desire the state, who may desire the state's desire" (111). In doing so, Butler points to the role of the state in managing both the structure of kinship through the regulation of the family *and* the desire to be recognised by the state as an intelligible family form. The kinship of refugee sponsorship, insofar as it attempts to bring refugees into neoliberal intelligibility, forecloses the possibility of alternate orientations for intimacy and kin-making in the refugee-sponsor relationship by shaping the desired outcome of sponsorship in the autonomy of the refugee family.

What would it mean to desire a different outcome for sponsorship? For Butler, "in making the bid to the state for recognition, we effectively restrict the domain of what will become recognisable as legitimate sexual arrangements, thus fortifying the state as the source for norms of recognition and eclipsing other possibilities in civil society and cultural life" (115).

While Morris et al. (2020) argue that "states should be focused on doing more to protect family unity, especially for refugee families" rather than relying on sponsors to serve in this role (131), I propose that a queer kinship approach to refugee resettlement would expand the category of family in refugee resettlement by denaturalising the family more broadly. Queer and critical kinship theories offer new ways of thinking about relationality beyond genealogical and biological—or "consanguineal"—relations (Eng 2010; Kroløkke et al. 2016). These new approaches to kinship instead theorise the concept through the "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2012, 2), as effects of new kinds of (im)mobilities (Kroløkke et al. 2016, 5), and through speculative and transformative frameworks for kin-making (Clarke and Haraway 2018). For Adele Clarke (2018), making kin "refers to the daily actions that transform partial relations into deeper ones, kinship crafted through the exchange of things, sharing activities, and other practices" (33). This shift to thinking of kinship as a practice—rather than a stable, fixed, or inherited set of relations—suggests that kinship can be a site for new forms of relationality to take shape. As Donna Haraway (2018) proposes, "kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans. Making kin and making kind (as category, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, caring, kindness, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story" (92). Through the lens of kin-making, the kinship of refugees and their sponsors might be reinterpreted and transformed from one of familial dependency and normalisation, to a model of kinship built on the process of interdependent transformation.

The human interest stories told about refugees and their sponsors already tell us that both figures are changed through the sponsorship relationship. If change—not education and management of the family into an autonomous neoliberal economic unit—through a lateral transformation of both refugees and sponsors is the goal of sponsorship, then we might be able to re-articulate the tensions in refugee-sponsor relationship in productive ways that undermine, rather than reinforce, the disciplinary power of the family and the power inequities and hierarchies that govern it. Because immigration policies, such as those used in Canada's resettlement initiative, serve not only to regulate and manage refugees through the normative model of the nuclear family within Canada, but also to naturalise the nuclear family transnationally through the selection process of refugees for resettlement—and family class

immigration more broadly—denaturalising the nuclear family as the anchor of immigration and refugee resettlement is the first step in disrupting the violence enacted on refugees who are separated from their kin.[9] This involves challenging the relationship between neoliberalism, power, and kinship in refugee sponsorship by confronting the asymmetry of how refugees are positioned vis-à-vis their sponsors; not as dependents but as partners and collaborators, making possible new ways building sponsorship relationships.

Because a feminist geography and geopolitics approach anchors on challenging the presumed public/private divide that is central to feminist critique (Hyndman 2000, 215), I want to conclude by thinking speculatively about what a transformative approach to the Syrian refugee crisis might look like through a denaturalised approach to refugee sponsorship that collapses the separation and power division between state sovereignty in determining immigration policies and eligibility, and the ethics of sponsorship as a role that can be shifted from one of humanitarian aid and disciplinary power, into a relationship of kinship embedded in collaboration and co-responsibility.

Conclusion

I end this paper by thinking speculatively alongside Ruha Benjamin's (2018) proposal for "*reorienting ourselves towards kinship not as a precursor but as an effect of social struggle* [that] *denaturalises what kinfulness means and how to enact it*. All kinship, in the end, is imaginary. Not faux, false, or inferior, but as … a creative process of fashioning care and reciprocity" (64, emphasis original). What does a denaturalised version of refugee sponsorship through new kinds of kinship look like? First, it would entail changing the narrative of refugee resettlement by re-scripting sponsorship from a story of Canadian benevolence to a narrative of co-responsibility. Refusing the feel-good stories of sponsorship, because saving victims of war is not a remedy for the violence of war, holds us accountable for our shared responsibility in a globalised economy of war that economically benefits the global North, and Canadian arms industries, specifically. Since a feminist geography approach asks us to consider for whom policies and practices of human mobility, security, and governance are deployed (Hyndman 2000, 219), and how colonial history, race, class and nation intersect with gender, I propose that we look to resettlement and sponsorship as a case for reparation that war-profiting nations must pay for their role in inducing refugee crises rather than as acts of benevolence. Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor (2024) describe this as a transformative model of reparation (24), wherein "state-led redistribution" is "a matter of right, not charity" (30). A sponsorship model rooted in reparation aims to transform the effects of dislocation caused by war, by also transforming the intimate and everyday lives of people in both the role of sponsor and refugee.

Second, we would refuse the use of sponsorship to discipline refugees into neoliberal citizens. This means integrating refugee families with sponsoring families, not as dependents

[9] Although the 1997 Immigration Legislative Review's 34th recommendation articulated that "legislation should, to the extent possible, permit sponsors to define family" (Trempe et al. 1997, 45) and proposed a 3rd family class category of "relatives or close personal acquaintances of the sponsor's choice" (47) in recommendation 40, such changes have never been fully articulated through a complete denaturalisation of the category of family or the shifting of power from the sponsor to a collaborative selection process; nor have these recommendations from been implemented into immigration legislation or policy.

or as autonomous, but as collaborators in survival. Interdependence not independence would be the goal of sponsorship. This, in turn, entails denaturalising and unsettling the nuclear family; instead, family could be replaced with kin—a lateralised (rather than patronised) set of relationships determined by refugees as partners with sponsors. This rethinking of kin over family aligns with existing scholarship on refugee kinship relations, which illustrate how notions of family and kinship exceed normative models of the family (Clark-Kazak 2011, 101). Refugees and sponsors would act as partners in determining who would join the resettlement group—which may include members of the traditional family but may also include polygamous family members, members of extended family, and others who figure into the daily survival of the people who have been displaced by war. This also means unsettling orientalist *and* cultural relativist narratives that naturalises Syrian refugees through patriarchal tropes. Lastly, it means being open to the discomfort of uneasy relations, hard truths, and incommensurable structures of violence. We must be able to tell the difficult stories of continued loss, displeasure, trauma, conflict, and injury caused not only by war, but by the experience of resettlement itself and the frictions in the relationships that build between refugees and sponsors.

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