

## Filling a Critical Gap: Refuge at 40

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## Filling a Critical Gap: *Refuge* at 40

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### KEYWORDS

forced migration studies; refugees; *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*

*Refuge* is an engaged scholarly outcome of the fraught Cold War in Vietnam and the human displacement that it spawned. It is a fundamental catalyst of Refugee Studies, also known as Forced Migration Studies, as an interdisciplinary scholarly field and vital medium for mobilizing knowledge about human displacement. As I begin to co-author my next paper for *Refuge*, I accepted this invitation to mark the journal's four decades of publishing as an opportunity to reflect on how critical this venue has been to the emergence of the field of refugee studies, and on my own avid interest in the journal as a scholar. My engagement with *Refuge* has been as frequent author and co-author (Brunner et al., 2014; Hyndman, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2013; Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020; Hynie et al., 2019; Khan & Hyndman, 2015; Sherrell & Hyndman, 2006) beginning in the 1990s as a graduate student. I later served as an editorial board member, and as champion of the journal from 2013 to 2019 in my role as Director of York University's Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS), during which time I contributed to funding submissions and editorial searches to support *Refuge*.

While I have witnessed *Refuge's* impact factor soar in the last decade (Clark-Kazak

et al., 2022), that has never been my motivation to publish in the journal. *Refuge* stands out for other reasons, in many ways leading the modest pack of periodicals in the field by addressing forced migration issues with an open-access, peer-reviewed, bilingual approach, making new research findings and insights easier to access and share in regions of the Global South and among academics who may not have subscriptions that transcend the paywalls that characterize so many periodicals today. With more than 85% of refugees in Global South locations and many scholarly refugee and forced migration research centres based there (UNHCR, 2022), this open access enables much wider and more inclusive participation in conversations with scholars from across the world.

Understanding the founding of the interdisciplinary field known loosely as Refugee Studies, or Forced Migration Studies, is inseparable from the foundation of *Refuge* in 1981 and underscores its fundamental role in translating interdisciplinary knowledge, while also being produced by it. Both the interdisciplinary field of refugee studies and the journal can be traced back to the 1980s and massive human displacement in Southeast Asia. They are scholarly legacies of global human displacement generated

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by the Cold War, and specifically by the end of the U.S. war in Vietnam in the late 1970s. Molloy & Madokoro (2017) underscored the generous Canadian resettlement response to very large numbers of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, arriving in their new space of refuge. The United States accepted unprecedented numbers and proportionally more refugees, as well, given its direct ties to allies from these countries who supported the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. Since then, so much more has been written in the realm of fiction, non-fiction, and more diasporic infused 'refugee studies', depicting the fraught reception, racialized social exclusion, and economic struggles so many faced upon arriving in North America. Viet Thanh Nguyen's amazing book, *The Sympathizer* (2015), won the Pulitzer Prize for its fictionalized account of rupture and displacement-in-resettlement when people from these Southeast Asian countries came to North America. I see such work as a kind of literary complement in fiction in relation to the scholarly work of *Refuge*.

*Refuge* - established in Toronto in 1981 - was the first journal in the field of refugee studies and in an unsigned editorial in the periodical traces the emergence of the field this way:

In the late 1970s, coinciding with the large-scale resettlement of Indo-Chinese refugees in Canada, a literature began to emerge concerning the origin and dynamics of refugee movements and the policies related to the reception and integration of refugees in Canada. *Refuge* was founded at York University in 1981 to serve as a communications medium for this new interdisciplinary field of enquiry (*Refuge*, 2021).

*Refuge* was followed by *The Journal of Refugee Studies (JRS)* in 1988 and by *The International Journal of Refugee Law* (1989) at the University of Oxford, as well as many others throughout the years.

Geographer Richard Black (2001, p. 59) noted that an array of research centres affiliated with universities emerged alongside these journals. In 1981, the Refugee Documentation Project began at York University in Toronto, tracing what would become the two decades-long exodus of refugees from Southeast Asia and their resettlement across Canada and North America. In 1988, the Refugee Documentation Project led by Howard Adelman morphed into the current Centre for Refugee Studies at York (Adelman, 2022).

In 1983, the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of Oxford was established, later becoming the Refugee Studies Centre. In 1992 and 1993 respectively, Moi University in Kenya and Makerere University in Uganda founded their own refugee-related research centres, signalling the importance of conflict in generating human displacement in Sub-Saharan Africa. The 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention added additional grounds for defining refugees under international law. Many more refugee-related research hubs, labs and graduate programs have also emerged in this time. There are possibly too many to count without missing one, yet this proliferation of interest in Forced Migration and Refugee Studies signals that the field remains alive and well.

After the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev in the early 1990s, the Cold War 'warmed', signalling a dramatic shift in the meaning and decline in the valence of refugees as indicative of ideological superiority. Yet there was no reduction in the number of violent conflicts and people displaced by geopolitical war, resource conflicts, and/or competing nationalisms. The scholarly, critical field of Forced Migration/Refugee Studies flourished with new work, questions, and insights (Black, 2001; Adelman, 2022).

At the time of writing, the number of forcibly displaced people on the move, including but certainly not limited to officially recognized refugees, has reached unprecedented levels. New flows of human displacement, such as from the Russian war on Ukraine or the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, may be top of mind, yet most dislocated people are in Global South regions and experience protracted displacement for years, if not decades. Borders are very selectively open and often violently reproduced, especially for uninvited asylum seekers. Countries like Canada may have a reputation for welcoming *resettled* refugees, but as *Refuge* authors have long illustrated, this country is a difficult place to reach as an *asylum seeker*. Bordered by three expansive oceans, Canada's cold-water geography serves to deter most maritime asylum seekers, but its biometric visa regime for non-preferred visitors serves to further seal its borders from the uninvited. The Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA), currently being challenged in Canadian courts, aims to ward off asylum seekers coming through the United States. All these dynamics of forced migration, and the tacit policies that undergird them – the geopolitics of displacement, the externalization of asylum, the extended exile for those living in camps or settlements, refugee determination and resettlement – are taken up by the authors of *Refuge* in nuanced and challenging ways. I am but one curious and excitable scholar, always provoked by the incisive debates, questions, and revelations of the journal's scholarship, the quality of which has been enhanced greatly as successive editors fine-tune its review processes and streamline open access online digital production.

This brings me back to my original question: why would I publish in the same journal more than a dozen times? Long be-

fore it became a normal practice in publishing, *Refuge* was open access and a welcoming venue for early career researchers from across the world. The premise of democratized knowledge-sharing is vital in this interdisciplinary and globally relevant field. *Refuge* is also a community of practice and venue for scholars who may not find disciplinary belonging elsewhere; its knowledge production can be more relevant, innovative, and frankly more interesting to those of us stirred by global geopolitics, competing nationalisms, and the human rights atrocities of rogue governments, all of which create people on the move under conditions not of their own making. As a scholarly forum, *Refuge* has been receptive to the work of early career researchers and Global South scholars who challenge the Occident-centric notion of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and of Refugee Studies and forced migration scholarship more generally. It engages, provokes, and produces vital new knowledge based on original scholarship, often steeped in lived experiences of displaced persons who are racialized and attuned to marginalized groups affected by violence at home. It has long analyzed the statecraft, conflict and violence that produces human displacement in all its forms.

As governments grapple with how to engage the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and scholars debate the political stakes of refugee-versus-migrant in a context where all tallies of forced migration across world regions are surging (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020), analyzing and re-imagining protection strategies through scholarly research and debate are more important than ever. *Refuge* continues to be a central and vital place for all to access and create new knowledge produced in all parts of the globe.

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