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DOES “GOOD” MEAN WHITE?:
UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITIES OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN
BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

Molly Shaddix

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CE/T Committee:

Dr. Tamara Van Dyken, Chair

Dr. Kate Hudepohl

Dr. Jennifer Walton-Hanley

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ABSTRACT

Bowling Green, Kentucky is a relatively small town comparable to its counterparts across the South. However, Bowling Green has a significant population of refugee inhabitants that have resettled in waves since the late 1970s. This paper describes the lived experience of refugees resettling by analyzing community action and troubles faced while working for independence in their new homes. Some factors explored are access to affordable housing, language barriers, and trouble in education. In addition, this paper contextualizes their lived experiences with other resettlement communities across the United States to understand how Bowling Green fits into patterns of societal xenophobia, racism, and religious prejudice that exist across communities and legal codes for new residents. This paper utilizes newspapers and oral histories, in addition to surveys conducted by other researchers of the resettled population of Bowling Green, to understand those experiences.

I dedicate this thesis to my mom and sister, for listening to every draft, letting me vent about my troubles, and helping me through every step of the way. There is no way I could have completed this without them.

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The product of this project could not have been completed without the help of my readers, especially Dr. Van Dyken, who helped me through all of the complications over the last year. I am grateful for the continued support, and flexibility, from all my readers and those in the Mahurin Honors College to help me complete this thesis. I would like to say thank you to Dr. Hudepohl, for your flexibility and helping me figure out how to continue my project. I would like to thank Dr. Hanley, who helped this project work with our class and help my emotional state.

VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY B.A. in History & Anthropology – Mahurin Honors College Graduate Honors CE/T: <i>Does “Good” Mean White?: Understanding the Complexities of Refugee Resettlement in Bowling Green, Kentucky</i>	May 2022
Warren East High School, Bowling Green, KY	May 2018

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Department of History, WKU Student Worker	Jan. 2021- Present
The Kentucky Museum, WKU Student Docent	Jan. 2019- Aug. 2021

AWARDS & HONORS

Summa Cum Laude, WKU, May 2022
A.M. Stickles History Award, WKU, April 2022
Mildred T. Hardcastle Scholarship, WKU, 2019

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Harlaxton College, Grantham, United Kingdom	Jan. 2020- Mar. 2020
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INTRODUCTION

Bowling Green is a small city in the South-Central part of Kentucky that is known for being the home of the Corvette, Western Kentucky University, and the rock band Cage the Elephant. The site of a former Confederate stronghold, with distinct Southern accents, and a propensity for Christianity, the city is entrenched with Southern values and history. However, unlike many similar Southern towns, Bowling Green has become a place of settlement for numerous refugees from around the world. From 2015 to 2019, over 13% of Bowling Green's population was foreign-born.¹ To understand the different communities that exist in Bowling Green. The difference between refugee, immigrant, and "native-born" as it is used in this paper is as follows. Refugee, as it is used in this paper, is defined as people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety.² That means that those who have been deemed "refugees" by the U.S. government have been granted asylum status and live within the U.S. because of that designation as a refugee. As well, this term is used to describe those with asylum status who have not become "naturalized" citizens, meaning they are not United States citizens. Immigrant, as it is used in this paper, denotes any person who lives in the United States from another country except those who are refugees. This definition includes both "legal" and "illegal" immigrants, who face a

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Bowling Green, Kentucky QuickFacts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/bowlinggreencitykentucky> (accessed April 4, 2022).

² "What is a refugee?" UNHCR, accessed May 4, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/what-is-a-refugee.html>

certain number of legal challenges that may not affect refugee communities. This paper also utilizes “native-born” populations, which means those communities who were born in the United States and do not have a strong connection to immigration or asylum. When this term is used, it is to discuss the difference between the southern American, normatively white and Christian, in comparison with these new communities settling into Bowling Green.

This population is ever-growing, as Bowling Green’s International Center of Kentucky is continually resettling, helping people into homes and jobs. The Bosnian refugee community is a vibrant and visible part of the city which helps Bowling Green maintain its identity as a place for refugees to settle and thrive. Other refugee communities, such as those from Mexico, El Salvador, Burma, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have not been similar in visibility with a place in Bowling Green’s culture, despite their similar longevity in the city. This paper, while focusing on the refugee communities primarily, will also touch on the issues faced by immigrants. The varied experiences of refugees other than Bosnians in this predominantly white, Christian southern city are obfuscated. This paper details the lived experience of Bowling Green’s refugee population through understanding their experience in the “good versus bad immigrant” racialized framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The local refugee communities in Bowling Green have been studied in a variety of academic disciplines, including demographic ecology, social psychology, sociology, human geography, and public health. For the past few decades, local media outlets have often reported on the new refugee populations arriving in Bowling Green. These sources focus on either analyzing the experiences of a particular community of refugees in Bowling Green or the work of a particular refugee organization. Nathan Jess Cary, in his master's thesis in Geography, discusses the impact of Bosnian Refugees on the cultural landscape of Bowling Green using surveys, interviews, and telephone directories, among other methods. His paper argues that because of Bowling Green's significant number of Bosnians, in comparison to relatively small numbers of other groups, Bosnians—geographically—take up the most space in the landscape.³ However, his paper argues that Bowling Green, because of the Bosnian experience alone, is a place of multicultural tolerance.⁴ While this could be true of the Bosnian refugee community, the acceptance of Bosnian people and their religion does not mean the experiences of refugees from other places, of different skin tones, and different religious beliefs have similar experiences of tolerance in their new home.

³ Nathan Jess Cary, "Bosnian Immigrants: An Analysis of the Bosnian Community's Influence on the Cultural Landscape of Bowling Green, KY" (2013). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 1235. <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1235> ix

⁴ Cary, 83.

Donna Schless Renaud, in her analysis of Burmese and Iraqi resettlement in Bowling Green, examines these two refugee groups within the resettlement community of Bowling Green to understand their distinct experiences based on their respective histories of coming to the United States.⁵ This in-depth study provides invaluable information about the specific hurdles these communities face in Bowling Green, and how resettlement organizations leave gaps for some communities while being adequate for others.

Mia Jackson, in her honors thesis, details the specifics of one refugee organization in Bowling Green—the Center for Development, Acculturation, & Resolution Services (CEDARS)—and their involvement in helping different communities.⁶ Her discussion of this organization is preceded by giving both a brief history of organizations within the state that resettle refugees, mostly faith-based non-profits like Catholic Charities, and the history of resettlement within Bowling Green. Her thesis, written in 2013, documents the struggles these organizations have gone through in finding monetary support and using those funds effectively. CEDARS, and its founder, Jennifer Bell, are at the center of working to fill in the gaps of other organizations locally, like the International Center, and work holistically with the communities they serve. This honors thesis does a great job at getting information from the inside of the organization, and portraying the gaps the international center provides, and what these communities need. By emphasizing Bell's practices to reach communities based on individual needs, instead of general "refugee"

⁵ Renaud, Donna Schless, "An Analysis of Burmese and Iraqi Resettlement Location and Assimilation in a Midsized City: Implications for Educational and Other Community Leaders" (2011). *Dissertations*. Paper 17. <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/diss/17> xiii

⁶ Mia J. Jackson, "Refugee Services in Kentucky: A Case-Study of CEDARS in Bowling Green, KY" (2013). *Mahurin Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 405. https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/405 ii

needs, Jackson reveals the ways in which refugee communities need individualized support while resettling in Bowling Green.

This paper draws upon and extends the existing literature on refugee settlement in Bowling Green to frame it within broader patterns in U.S. immigration. The academic research and media narratives have explored the process of resettlement for particular communities in Bowling Green, especially the Bosnians. They have not analyzed what might be contributing to the varied refugee experiences and the singular visibility of the Bosnians. However, much of the research done on the community is without analysis or discussion of the consequences for the refugee communities, like differences in care, differences in education, and differences in prejudice. Refugees and immigrants across the United States face an uphill battle when resettling into a community that is not representative of their race, religious affiliation, or citizenship status. The way the native-born communities receive them, as well, becomes immutable from the programs and processes of resettlement itself, becoming embedded into the experiences refugee communities face. For Bowling Green, this dichotomy becomes more complex because resettlement communities interact with the greater, white, Christian majority, but also interact with refugee communities from across the world.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Bowling Green's various refugee populations face struggles, both from the community they move into and from systemic prejudices built into the American legal system. Since the beginning of the United States, as early as 1790, as the Pew research center points out, there has been strict legislation regarding the number and "quality" of those allowed stay in the United States. By 1875, these restrictive measures already worked to ensure that "good quality" foreign-born individuals are given access to live and work in the United States.⁷ In 1865, this meant that people who were deemed criminals or diseased, or those who did not fit into preconceived notions of what it meant to be an American citizen were not allowed into the country, and were not allowed to be a citizen.⁸ This "moral" or "quality" of *being* American, however, is explicitly racial. African Americans already living in the U.S. were not considered citizens, despite being "natural born" with the passage of the Naturalization Act of 1790.⁹ This act codified American citizenship as a racialized concept, and thus, created the pathway for creating racialized restrictions for entry into the United States. Laws restricting immigration, like that of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which outlawed Chinese immigration, as well as the

⁷ "How U.S. immigration laws and rules have changed through history," PEW Research Center, September 30, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/30/how-u-s-immigration-laws-and-rules-have-changed-through-history/>.

⁸ "How U.S. immigration law and rules have changed through history," PEW Research Center

⁹ Richard A. Boswell, Racism and U.S. Immigration Law: Prospects for Reform After "9/11?", *Journal of Gender* 7 (2003), 317.
https://repository.uchastings.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1057&context=faculty_scholarship

National Origin Quota of 1924, which limited the number of individuals allowed into the United States from certain countries—notably countries *outside* of the Western Hemisphere—were designed to limit the numbers of non-white groups settling into the United States and becoming American.¹⁰

While restrictions and quotas changed over time to reflect geopolitical trends, the racialization of refugee and asylum decisions has not been erased from legal decisions in U.S. refugee policy.¹¹ Former U.S. President Donald Trump’s 2017 “Muslim Ban” is reflective of how these racially motivated exclusions of refugees are still a part of American society.¹² These laws and practices establish a binary that sorts those who seek to enter the United States into “good” and “bad” immigrants. In this framework, it only a certain number of immigrants or refugees can exist within the United States, and only the “best,” those free from legal trouble, should become American citizens. Those who are deemed “criminal aliens,” however, are not worthy, and should not be allowed to enter the country.¹³ As Alina Das, a professor of law and Co-Director of the Immigrant Civil Rights Center at NYU, points out, even sympathizers of immigrants fall victim to using this language to pit refugees and immigrants against each other.¹⁴ In her book, *No Justice in the Shadows: How America Criminalizes Immigrants*, she states that, many times, the policies by which individuals are allowed to become Americans can create situations

¹⁰ Ibid, 318-324.

¹¹ Gabriela Q. Kahrl, “Racism in immigration asylum decisions,” *The Baltimore Sun*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-1015-racist-immigration-policies-20201014-bi3dufphnzfjzlsdimchnzz2jy-story.html>.

¹² Alina Das, *No Justice in the Shadows: How America Criminalizes Immigrants* (New York:Bold Type Books, 2020) prologue, Kindle.

¹³ Elizabeth Oh, “American Immigration Laws Have Always Been About Preserving Whiteness,” *New America*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/american-immigration-laws-have-always-been-about-preserving-whiteness/>.

¹⁴ Oh, “American Immigration Laws Have Always Been About Preserving Whiteness.”

where refugees are separated by their “moral” quality, determined by their interactions with the law. However, she points out that people rarely ask if the law is a good measure of the moral quality of a person.¹⁵ Often, the laws and “moral” aspect of this character determination are based on racial bias.

This is a systemic issue, from the early history of the United States to recent decisions from both Donald Trump and Barack Obama, and pervades all places where refugees and immigrants are a part of the community.¹⁶ President Obama, during his presidency, defended DACA recipients as they entered the United States “through no fault of their own.”¹⁷ In this defense of children of undocumented immigrants, he is incriminating their parents or guardians who chose to immigrate by any means necessary, thus indicating those who chose to illegally immigrate by indicating they are undeserving of stay in the United States. During the Obama era, over three million people were deported during his presidency.¹⁸ President Trump espoused an openly racist message against refugees and immigrants and vowed to make it harder for them to live in the United States. His archived official White House website communicates his “victories” in deporting immigrants and preventing refugees from entry by removing federal funding for sanctuary cities, ending “asylum fraud,” and increasing the vetting process for those seeking entrance.¹⁹ He created a platform of anti-refugee and immigrant promises and worked to ensure these policies were followed through.

¹⁵ Alina Das, *No Justice in the Shadows*, prologue.

¹⁶ Alina Das, *No Justice in the Shadows*, prologue.

¹⁷ Alina Das, *No Justice in the Shadows*, prologue.

¹⁸ Jean Guerrero, “3 Million People Were Deported Under Obama. What Will Biden Do About It?” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/23/opinion/sunday/immigration-reform-biden.html>

¹⁹ National Archives and Records Administration, “Immigration.”, 2019. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/immigration/>.

Bowling Green's refugee residents are also subjected to these judgments because of the embedded acceptance of these moral and racial judgments about refugees and immigrants. The limited resources available, too, becomes racialized and a means for prejudice as the choice for refugees to take these resources becomes a judgment for *all* refugees when accepting the help given to them. What follows is a description and analysis of the troubles faced by refugee populations of Bowling Green because of this "good" versus "bad" ideological framework embedded within community and legal systems.

ANALYSIS

Resettlement and organization of Bowling Green’s refugee population have been handled by a couple of non-governmental organizations (with government support) that work in conjunction with the city to provide new homes and resources for refugees from various parts of the world. The City of Bowling Green offers a number of programs and services like transportation, translation, and job training services, while also doing some work to showcase the cultures of those settling in Bowling Green with periodic festivals and demonstrations.²⁰ The city’s focus is on local government and commerce, to help “New Americans” become financially stable. In their efforts to bring refugees into the community, the city’s programs clearly prioritize immigrants’ integration into the local economy rather than sustaining their culture and identities.

These communities, however, exist differently in Bowling Green in several ways. They vary in size, time in Bowling Green, and similarity to Southern American culture. The international community of Bowling Green is very diverse and represents communities from across the globe. From 2016-2020, over 13.3% of Bowling Green residents were foreign-born.²¹ Attempting to break down which communities make up Bowling Green can be a challenge, as nationality or country of birth is not something measured by the census. However, there exists some information about the demographic

²⁰ “Neighborhood & Community Services,” Official Municipal Website, City of Bowling Green, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.bgky.org/ncs/icl>.

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Bowling Green, Kentucky QuickFacts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/bowlinggreencitykentucky> (accessed April 4, 2022).

breakdown. As of 2016, Warren County had 11,274 immigrants.²² From 2011-2016, the immigrant population grew by over 86%.²³ This number of immigrants is inclusive of refugees, citing that at the time frame, 3,689 individuals had refugee status.²⁴ In this study, conducted by the Bowling Green Chamber of Commerce in conjunction with Gateways for Growth and other local organizations, they cite the most populous immigrants came from Bosnia, with 14.7% of the immigrants originating from there; then Mexico, with 11.3%; then Myanmar (also known as Burma), with 10.3%; then “Sub-Saharan Africa” (including Ghana, Zaire, and Kenya), with 6.8%; then Iraq, with 5.6%; and El Salvador, with 5.5%.²⁵ While the Bosnian community is the most populous, their numbers are only marginally greater than the second biggest community represented in Bowling Green. The difference in demographics for the different communities, however, does not explain the vastly different experiences and visibility each.

One might think the disparities in visibility and integration into the community might stem from time in Bowling Green. Bosnians first started coming into the United States in 1992.²⁶ When Cary wrote his dissertation, he stated there were around 7,000 Bosnians living in Bowling Green in 2013, and that there had been 2,600 “primary” Bosnian refugees hosted.²⁷ Other communities have been a part of Bowling Green’s history for a considerable amount of time, as well. Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, has had significant numbers of resettled refugees in the U.S. since 1999.²⁸ From the years

²² “New Americans in Warren County,” New American Economy, <https://www.bgky.org/files/G0YTBSOn.pdf>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “New Americans in Warren County,” New American Economy, <https://www.bgky.org/files/G0YTBSOn.pdf>.

²⁶ Cary, 37.

²⁷ Cary, 37.

²⁸ Refugee Data Finder, UNCHR, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=5qdyAL>.

of 2015-2019 alone, Bowling Green has hosted 849 Burmese refugees.²⁹ The UNCHR reports that there have significant numbers of Congolese refugees entering into the U.S. since the 90s.³⁰ Bowling Green, too, has a significant amount of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and hosted 1,108 from 2015-2019.³¹ These different communities, who are statistically significant to the international population of Bowling Green, have been a part of Bowling Green for approximately the same amount of time. The argument cannot be posed that the differences in community experience stem from wildly different demographics or time in Bowling Green. These communities, however, experience resettlement very differently locally. What follows is an attempt to understand why these communities have such different experiences in Bowling Green.

To understand the varied experiences of Bowling Green's refugee communities, it is imperative to understand how the Bowling Green community contours its "good" and "bad" immigrants. Within the framework of Das's works, the "bad immigrants" are those not welcome, the "criminal aliens" of society who have not "earned" their place in the United States, either from coming to the United States illegally or committing crimes after arrival.³² In Bowling Green, however, the specifics of this dichotomy are also based on community memory and racial prejudice. Bosnian refugees have formed the local idea of what it means to be a refugee, that of the "good" immigrant (or, in Bowling Green, refugee) ideology. The Bosnian community in Bowling Green is the most visible refugee community and certainly the most widely known. This is in part because of the

²⁹ Bowling Green Kentucky Arrival Data by City, Kentucky for Refugees, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.kentuckyrefugees.org/refugees-in-kentucky/bowling-green/>.

³⁰ Refugee Data Finder, UNCHR <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=JS45cj>

³¹ Bowling Green Kentucky Arrival Data by City, Kentucky for Refugees, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.kentuckyrefugees.org/refugees-in-kentucky/bowling-green/>.

³² Alina Das, *No Justice in the Shadows*, prologue.

significant number of Bosnian refugees and Bosnian Americans living in Bowling Green, as well as their successful integration into the Bowling Green community.

While Bosnians have been inhabitants of Bowling Green for a significant amount of time, their hurdles to integration into Bowling Green's community are much different than others. Because Bosnians are both European and white, they have not had to struggle with the racialized barriers to resettlement that many other communities must overcome to be incorporated into greater society. While their acceptance into the community should be celebrated, refugee groups who do not align racially or religiously with the Bosnians do not experience the same level of acceptance. As Cary points out, the Bosnian community has become an embedded part of the Bowling Green landscape, both in residential separation and in their business ventures.³³ Additionally, the city of Bowling Green and Western Kentucky University have recorded, celebrated, and remembered Bosnian culture and history as part of their own. Other groups, such as Burmese, Congolese, and Mexicans, however, are not as embedded and accepted into the community and do not get a chance to combine their history with Bowling Green's.

Bosnian Americans living in Bowling Green, as well, have been able to become a part of the local economy by creating businesses and restaurants that cement their influence on the landscape.³⁴ This acceptance, and later celebration, of the Bosnian model of incorporation allows for this community to live in relative harmony with the greater native-born population of Bowling Green. However, these same opportunities are not afforded to other smaller communities within Bowling Green, namely those communities

³³ Nathan Jess Cary, "Bosnian Immigrants: An Analysis of the Bosnian Community's Influence on the Cultural Landscape of Bowling Green, KY," MA diss., (Western Kentucky University, 2013), 59.

³⁴ Cary, "Bosnian Immigrants: An Analysis of the Bosnian Community's Influence on the Cultural Landscape of Bowling Green, KY," 59.

that have been unfairly defined in competition with the Bosnian community, or the “bad” refugees of Bowling Green.

Bowling Green’s efforts to create a place for refugees to live and work are clear. However, many of the programs offered are not individualized to the particular culture and needs of each refugee group. Mia Jackson, in her honors thesis centered around the CEDARS organization in Bowling Green, mentions the International Center’s treatment of refugees in the past.³⁵ Jennifer Bell’s efforts with the CEDARS program were originally designed to fill in the gaps in services and create relationships with specific communities that were missing from actions from the International Center.³⁶ Bell worked individually with refugee communities, like the Karen and Karenni communities of Burma, and specific families to develop more personalized care, such as visiting their homes and creating community partnerships with local businesses to provide for these communities. Burmese refugees face more struggles than other refugees groups in becoming accustomed to life outside of the refugee camps in which many of them have spent their entire lives.³⁷

Many new refugee communities are settled into clusters of other newly-settled refugee communities. In her educational leadership Ph.D. dissertation, Donna Renaud, a professor of communication, traces the places where Iraqi and Burmese refugees are settled within Bowling Green and the conditions of these dwellings. Her findings conclude that these communities are settled into neighborhoods with high population

³⁵ Mia J. Jackson, "Refugee Services in Kentucky: A Case-Study of CEDARS in Bowling Green, KY," 28.

³⁶ Mia J. Jackson, 28.

³⁷ Renaud, 119.

density, high crime rates, and surrounded almost entirely by other settled refugees.³⁸ Her research shows how these communities are separated from other parts of Bowling Green society, sequestered in low-income neighborhoods among other recently resettled refugee communities. These neighborhoods that the Burmese and Iraqi communities were settled in were the same ones populated by the Bosnians fairly recently.³⁹ In December 2021, a tornado tore through these communities, devastating the same locations that have been home to refugees for decades.⁴⁰ Burmese residents, however, are not often able to move on from these locations, and sometimes have to relocate to places with cheaper rents or move in with another family.⁴¹ Because of the particular struggles of the Burmese communities and the extra barriers they face, they are not often afforded the chance to move into high-income neighborhoods. Other immigrant communities, like the Mexican community that lives “across the tracks” in a community called Little Mexico, have faced similar issues of segregation into more impoverished and highly patrolled areas on the outskirts of the city.⁴² This community, one of those targeted by Trump’s attacks on immigrants and refugees in 2017, faced more scrutiny than ever with active ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents set up within their own backyard.⁴³ This community faces troubles, societally and socio-economically, and lives in close quarters in a low-income neighborhood “across the tracks.” Again, this community is separated

³⁸ Renaud, Donna Schiess, "An Analysis of Burmese and Iraqi Resettlement Location and Assimilation in a Midsized City: Implications for Educational and Other Community Leaders," chapter IV, 65.

³⁹ Cary, 70.

⁴⁰ Gerrit De Vynck, Tim Craig, Angela Hill, and Griff Witte. “A Kentucky neighborhood was a haven for refugees. Then the tornado struck.” *The Washington Post*. December 15, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/tornado-refugee-neighborhood/2021/12/15/3b821890-5ccc-11ec-8665-aed48580f911_story.html.

⁴¹ Renaud, 85.

⁴² Megan McCormick, Hayley Robb, Julianna Lowe, and Ali Shackelford. “The World across the Tracks.” *Talisman*, January 26, 2018. <https://wkutalisman.com/the-world-across-the-tracks/>.

⁴³ Ibid.

from the rest of Bowling Green’s white community, with active federal agents patrolling everything they do to ensure those in the U.S. illegally will be forced to return to their home country. This isn’t the case for Bosnian immigrants, who often are able to move into other parts of Bowling Green, as shown in the Cary work.⁴⁴

Another important frame of reference for these newer refugee communities is the way they are educated in Bowling Green. Education, for both young refugees and adults and creating an environment for sustained interest and accessible learning, has been a great challenge to the Bowling Green and Warren County school districts. Since 2017, Bowling Green has had an International High School that works to help students who do not speak very much English to accelerate learning and share experiences with other refugee students to help foster cross-cultural communication and learning.⁴⁵ This school operates on the campus of Warren Central High School, which is in the area with the highest population of refugee residents. The communities represented at this school in the 2018-2019 school year were students who spoke: Swahili, Spanish, Burmese, and other specific geographic languages, Kinyarwanda of Rwanda, Nepali, and Arabic.⁴⁶ The students admitted to the school must have lived in the U.S. for less than four years and must score in the bottom 25% of English standardized tests.⁴⁷ This school separates these refugee students away from the greater English-speaking school environment to focus

⁴⁴ Cary, 55.

⁴⁵ Linda Hitchcock, “Geo International High School,” *Bowling Green Living*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.bgkyliving.com/features/geo-international-high-school/>.

⁴⁶ Kentucky Department of Education. “GEO International High School.” Kentucky School Report Card, 2019. https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/154849/school_overview/students/student_groups?year=2019.

⁴⁷ Linda Hitchcock, “Geo International High School,” *Bowling Green Living*, December 14, 2017.

their attention and help acculturation into Bowling Green.⁴⁸ The students in this school, then, are cut off from peers their own age to meet the English requirements for school. This isolation, much like housing patterns in Bowling Green, especially for communities that resettled more recently, works to keep these resettling refugees at a distance from native-born populations. Deciding to take the opportunity to learn in this specialized environment is one with societal implications due to the way people perceive different refugee communities.

The city's creation of this specialized school to help refugees learn English is sometimes seen as refugee needs "overstepping" into Bowling Green, and the wasting of tax dollars on people who "aren't from here." The "needy" immigrant or refugee, especially when they are non-white, become representative of the overreaching welfare state.⁴⁹ The creation and use, then, of the International School may create resentment about the city's use of tax money on an institution that is invisible to native-born citizens who they perceive as being needy. This separation, because these refugees are not able to mingle with native-born populations, adds to the "othering" of these groups that restrict them within the "bad immigrant" framework. Additionally, when these communities are separated and have little opportunity for communication, the varied refugee narratives are invisible to the dominant community. With their struggles obfuscated, understanding what each community needs to survive and thrive in Bowling Green is impossible for most white communities to recognize. Bosnians, however, because they are white and

⁴⁸ "Here's How Kentucky's First International High School Impacted Students in Its First Year," *WKU Public Radio*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.wkyufm.org/education/2017-05-23/heres-how-kentuckys-first-international-high-school-impacted-students-in-its-first-year>.

⁴⁹ Garand, James C., Ping Xu, and Belinda C. Davis. "Immigration Attitudes and Support for the Welfare State in the American Mass Public." *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (2017): 151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26379498>.

have been given the opportunity to blend their culture with that of Bowling Green, are clearly visible.

These new refugee communities are also coming from a variety of different contexts than the Bosnian refugees settled. This means that their experiences of settling into Bowling Green require different levels of care and different resources. As stated earlier, the Burmese population were often living in terrible conditions in refugee camps across the world before their arrival in the United States. These refugee camps often did not have adequate schools, running water, or electricity.⁵⁰ Myanmar (previously and commonly known as Burma) has faced significant political and human rights troubles since the mid-1960s when it gained independence from the United Kingdom. Since then, there have been many changes in governance, with protests from the various ethnic groups within the country. Many of the ethnic minorities, like the Rohingya Muslims and Karenni, are extremely persecuted and have found refuge in Bangladesh, Nepal, and India in refugee camps.⁵¹

Arrival in the United States for the Burmese community is a much different change than those who have interacted with other Western nations before. Bosnian refugees come from Europe. Their “Western-ness” is, then, incomparable to other communities from societies much different than the U.S.⁵² Those communities that deal with culture shock and take longer to become accustomed to life in the United States, like the Burmese community, are assigned this “bad” refugee title because their life before

⁵⁰ Renaud, 37.

⁵¹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/>

⁵² Sadeta Hodzic, interviewed by Kate Horigan, January 29, 2016, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, transcript, Folklife Archives & Manuscripts, “Interview with Sadeta Hodzic (FA 1137)” (2016). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 254.
https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/254

living in the United States was vastly different, and the arbitrary rules and regulations that exist take longer to learn. Communities, like the Burmese or Iraqi, because of their race, are subjected to further prejudice because they, in leaving their home country, fit into racist constructs about the inherent inferiority of these countries, needing “saving” from their home country by entering the U.S. In contrast, the white, European Bosnians fleeing their country did not have to deal with these perceived shortcomings of their “people,” but were allowed to be judged in singularity without speaking for the greater white community.

A significant number of refugee communities have also moved into Nashville, where there are similar issues with a “one-size-fits-all approach” to resettlement and providing resources.⁵³ Geographer Jamie Winders provides a case study detailing how Nashville’s refugee communities, including Mexicans, Cubans, Kurds, Sudanese, Somalis, and Bosnians, are often flattened by legislation by being labeled all together as “New Americans.”⁵⁴ These “New Americans” have very different needs and need individualized support. Many city initiatives, like the Nashville New Americans Coalition (NNAC), focus on creating jobs for both Latinos and refugee “New Americans;” however, the legal status of many Latino residents and refugee immigrants are different, leading to these initiatives primarily benefitting just the latter group.⁵⁵ As a result, diverse communities of people are often competing for the same limited pool of jobs within the same neighborhoods.⁵⁶ Winder’s study of the flattening of difference between different

⁵³ Jamie Winders, “‘New Americans’ in a ‘New South’ city? Immigrant and refugee politics in the Music City,” *Social & Cultural Geography* Vol 7, No. 3, (June 2006): 421.

⁵⁴ Winders, 428.

⁵⁵ Winders, 428

⁵⁶ Winders, 429

groups of non-Americans into an American space, especially that of those in need of help to get on their feet, is analogous to Bowling Green's own population and an issue that persists in the equity for different groups. The many different refugee populations of Bowling Green experience different specific struggles on an individual community basis, and over-reaching policies, like those discussed in Winder's work, are not enough to ensure the stability of these resettling communities.

Racism is central to the moral framework used to implicitly generalize, judge, and compare immigrants entering the U.S., and it is evident in the varied refugee experiences in Bowling Green. Because the Bosnians are often lighter-skinned and are, in some ways, racially ambiguous, racial prejudice was not as central in their resettlement as it is for other communities.⁵⁷ However, communities that are perceived as being non-white in an area that is predominantly white, where whiteness is the implicit basis for good citizenship, create new layers of struggles for their settlement in Bowling Green. Their other-ascribed racial identification, whether "correct" or "incorrect," cannot be understood separately from their resettlement experience as a whole. Race has always been central in U.S. legal codes and is true of codes about immigration and refugee decisions. Quotas, bans, and restrictions on these are a reflection of the racism embedded within the asylum and immigration system in the United States.⁵⁸ However, when discussing local refugee settlement patterns and attempting to understand the variation of experience, race comes up very little.

⁵⁷ Denis Hodzic, interviewed by Brent Bjorkman, November 6, 2015, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, transcript, Folklife Archives & Manuscripts, "Interview with Denis Hodzic (FA 1137)" (2015). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 272.

https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/272

⁵⁸ Oh, "American Immigration Laws Have Always Been About Preserving Whiteness."

In Cary's interviews with Bosnian Americans, most informants say they have never had an experience with racism.⁵⁹ There is a local understanding of acceptance and tolerance of "all neighbors," regardless of race or country of origin. However, the Bowling Green Human Rights Commission (BGHRC) tells a different story and provides instances where individuals are persecuted because of their race or their ability to speak English.⁶⁰ In a 2005 article, the BGHRC—which deals with housing, employment, and public accommodations discrimination—reported 71 complaints in 2003, 118 in 2004, and 40 by June of 2005.⁶¹ They discussed examples after 9/11 of instances where veiled Muslim women were harassed in the street because of their religious affiliation. Bowling Green city officials are very quick to brush off indicators of trouble in the city, and prolonged discussions about racial tensions are few and far between. Perceived race, from the community and from law codes, is clearly a hurdle in the way of peaceful resettlement for refugees, but often its severity is lost in reporting.

Many refugee communities are also afraid of the local police because of their past experiences both in their home country and the U.S., and are cautious about reporting incidents that happened to them because of this fear of authority.⁶² The Latino communities, especially those in "Little Mexico," have an uneasy relationship with local police because an ICE office is located directly in their neighborhood to watch them.⁶³

⁵⁹ Cary, 55.

⁶⁰ Rachel Adams, "Immigrants add to BG's diversity," *Bowling Green Daily News*, June 12, 2005, https://www.bgdailynews.com/immigrants-add-to-bg-s-diversity/article_3fd1fd98-1dbe-542f-8a69-49c8058b6d6c.html

⁶¹ Rachel Adams, "Immigrants add to BG's diversity," *Bowling Green Daily News*, June 12, 2005,

⁶² Justin Story, "Multicultural Worship in Bowling Green," *Bowling Green Daily News*, June 6, 2008, https://www.bgdailynews.com/community/multicultural-worship-in-bowling-green/article_0424cda1-05ea-51d1-977d-9909700221cf.html.

⁶³ Megan McCormick, Hayley Robb, Julianna Lowe, and Ali Shackelford. "The World across the Tracks." *Talisman*, January 26, 2018.

Negative interactions with local law enforcement have even been experienced when attempting to go to their church services.⁶⁴ Racialized policing makes successful and comfortable integration into the community nearly impossible. Fear from law enforcement, especially in contexts of language barriers, creates power dynamics over some refugee groups who do not speak English fluently. This fear of police and, for some, deportation keeps these communities from being comfortable and from joyfully integrating their culture with Bowling Green's. Afghan refugees, who began arriving in Bowling Green at the end of 2021, had to face a myriad of both racial and religious notions about who they are and how they came to the United States. There exists a fundamental belief held by many that Islam is uniquely violent and a breeding ground for terrorism.⁶⁵ Khaled Beydoun, a professor of law at the Detroit School of Law, discusses how Islamophobia has become ingrained in the United State's legal system and embedded in the minds of the American people, who think Islam is an oppressive and inherently violent religion.⁶⁶ He, too, points out that these religious perceptions are racialized. The Naturalization Act of 1790, as discussed previously, based citizenship on whiteness. Immigrants from countries perceived as other, "the Orient," they had to prove their whiteness to be considered citizens. Therefore, individuals coming from places in "the Orient," where Islamic identity was assumed, had to prove their Christianity and, therefore, whiteness under the law to become citizens.⁶⁷ In the same way Islam was

⁶⁴ Story, "Multicultural Worship in Bowling Green."

⁶⁵ Mariam Elba, "How Islamophobia was Ingrained in America's Legal System Long Before the War on Terror," *The Intercept*, May 6, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/06/american-islamophobia-khaled-beydoun-interview/>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Mariam Elba, "How Islamophobia was Ingrained in America's Legal System Long Before the War on Terror," *The Intercept*, May 6, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/06/american-islamophobia-khaled-beydoun-interview/>.

synonymous with “Orientalism” and non-whiteness, specific Muslim practices in Bowling Green are racialized on how different communities are perceived as being non-white or other.

These assumptions create an environment where Muslims in the U.S. must “prove” themselves as non-terrorists to ensure they are one of the “safe” ones. In a Bowling Green Daily News Article discussing the 2021 arrival of Afghan refugees following the U.S. exit from the area, the article attempts to “prove” to the reader that the immigrants coming to Bowling Green have “earned” their spot in this country.⁶⁸ The article, by showing the Afghans who are coming to Bowling Green have access only because of their earlier work with the U.S. government, highlights exactly the good/bad immigrant dichotomy in Bowling Green. By proving to the reader that these Afghans have shown their “worthiness,” the article is implicitly saying those who don’t reject the culture and values of their native country in favor of Western/American culture and values don’t deserve asylum. Because many of these Muslim refugees are non-white, their visual marker of different means many individuals will never be deemed “true” Americans, regardless of legal status. Unlike Bosnians, Afghans must reject their home country and culture, which is seen in opposition to Southern American values.

This cultural rejection, particularly for immigrants and refugees from Middle Eastern and Asian nations, is connected to Islam. In an article from WBKO, two students from Muslim-majority countries discuss, “but as terrorism becomes more of an everyday

⁶⁸ Aaron Mudd, “Bowling Green to get 200 Afghan refugees,” *Bowling Green Daily News*, August 28, 2021, https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/bowling-green-to-get-200-afghan-refugees/article_8a83e8f3-2fda-514c-a7fd-8a9b504550f6.html.

issue, according to them, they're being called names and being profiled.”⁶⁹ As the oppression of Muslims became more accepted in the Trump era, so did local experiences of religious prejudice and xenophobia. Their last names, race, and faith practices set them apart from others in the greater community and set them as an antagonist to Bowling Green’s Anglo-Christian culture. These experiences do not affect all of Bowling Green’s Muslims the same way, however. St. Louis, another hub for Bosnian refugees, experiences a similar divide in the Muslim communities. Ajlina Karamehic-Muratovic, a professor and Bosnian Muslim living in St. Louis, says “I think it helps that we are white,” and she goes on, “We look like we fit in until you notice the accent.”⁷⁰

Many Bosnian women do not wear the more traditional head covering, like a hijab, which is a visual indicator of religious affiliation.⁷¹ This public religious identity, as opposed to the more common private identity of Christianity, becomes a marker of difference. However, other refugee communities with a Muslim background often will distinguish them visually from these Bosnian Muslims. This difference, while seemingly small, is integral to understanding how these subtle differences in practice greatly affect the way these communities are treated within Bowling Green. Bosnian Muslims, who may also experience religious prejudice, are often not identified in public as being a part of that community. However, when other Muslim women are in public with hijabs, they represent an other, not only to the greater Judeo-Christian society that exists with the native-born population of Bowling Green, but also against the mode of Islam that

⁶⁹ Jake Boswell, “Being a Muslim in Bowling Green,” *WBKO*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.wbko.com/content/news/Being-a-Muslim-in-Bowling-Green-360971551.html>.

⁷⁰ Anthony Zurcher, “America’s ‘invisible’ Muslims,” *BBC News*, October 30, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37663226>.

⁷¹ Anthony Zurcher, “America’s ‘invisible’ Muslims,” *BBC News*, October 30, 2016.

Bowling Green has already deemed acceptable. Because of the incorrect connotations people may have about Islam, especially toward individuals from Middle Eastern countries, non-white Muslims also have to deal with prejudice about their national origin and their religious beliefs.⁷² These stereotypes that white Americans have about those who practice religions they are unfamiliar with, especially those practicing in ways they do not expect, cause them to treat non-white Muslims as permanent aliens and unassimilable. Muslims in Bowling Green, while having two mosques, still have to contend with how their perceived race and religious practices will affect the treatment they receive as refugees.

Bowling Green, beginning in the 1980s, has changed demographically with the arrival of refugees from across the world, with the biggest numbers from Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma (Myanmar), Cuba, Iraq, among others.⁷³ Each group comes with different experiences of trauma, varied interactions with Western culture and imperialism, and their own culture and identity. Upon their arrival, refugees are given support from the International Center and expected to fit their lives within the economic structure and cultural norms of Bowling Green. However, this acculturation is harder for some than it is for others because of the broader American norms regarding assumptions about race, religion, and the ability to become “American.” For example, many Bosnians coming to Bowling Green at the tail end of the 20th century understood their identity as Muslims as part of their ethnic identity. Because of this, after years of settling in Bowling Green and working with the financial resources they had, they built

⁷² Jake Boswell, “Being a Muslim in Bowling Green,” *WBKO*, December 8, 2015,

⁷³ Bowling Green Kentucky Arrival Data by City, Kentucky for Refugees, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.kentuckyrefugees.org/refugees-in-kentucky/bowling-green/>.

the Islamic Center in Bowling Green to suit their needs in religious practice.⁷⁴ The importance of their religion, and the community built around the mosque, is not true for other groups of refugees that settled in Bowling Green. When communities' needs are not met, like the Burmese populations who are unable to leave the homes they were brought into by the International Center, these communities are unable to become a part of the accepted and visible community of Bowling Green.

In 2017, Western Kentucky University named Bosnia and Herzegovina as the focus of their “International Year of” series, which highlights nations important to the makeup of the university.⁷⁵ This celebration allowed professors to take time to research this community, both locally and internationally. This celebration of Bosnia and Herzegovina is representative of the opportunity Bosnians living in Bowling Green have to share their stories and cultures in an academic setting. The privilege to share their story, as a part of WKU, incorporates the Bosnian experience as a part of Bowling Green’s great history. The shared history gives validation and acceptance to the Bosnian community as new Bowling Green residents. The Kentucky Museum, located in Bowling Green, also had an exhibit entitled “A Culture Carried: Bosnians in Bowling Green,” which centered around the Bosnian American community.⁷⁶ The exhibit discusses their history, their religious practices, and how their community manifests itself in Bowling Green. The “carrying” of their culture has become a part of Bowling Green, setting these

⁷⁴ Amir Husić, interview by Brent Bjorkman, February 23, 2016, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, transcript, Folklife Archives & Manuscripts, "Interview with Azmir Husić (FA 1137)" (2016). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 257.

https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/257.

⁷⁵ WKU launches International Year of Bosnia and Herzegovina, WKU News, Western Kentucky University, August 23, 2017, <https://www.wku.edu/news/articles/?view=article&articleid=5374>

⁷⁶ “A Culture Carried: Bosnians in Bowling Green” WKU Kentucky Museum, Last modified April 9, 2019, https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html#cg-website.

narratives together for the future of the city. Moreover, there are ceremonies in Bowling Green dedicated to the memory of the trauma faced by the Bosnian community, like the Walk of Srebrenica, that commiserate the devastation that the Srebrenica genocide had on this community.⁷⁷ These numerous, public occasions dedicated to the existence and memory of the Bosnian culture and people signify not only that Bosnians have successfully become part of the community, but also that their history and culture have been accepted as Bowling Green's history and culture. Such a consistent, visible, and public acknowledgment has not been evident in the history and culture of Iraqis, Mexicans, and Salvadorans.

⁷⁷ Drake Kizer, "Bosnian remember genocide with fifth annual walk," *Bowling Green Daily News*, July 13, 2019, https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/bosnians-remember-genocide-with-fifth-annual-walk/article_bc9aab49-4aa8-5368-9e3d-0e2393c068af.html#:~:text=Bowling%20Green's%20Bosnian%20community%20held,Muslims%20beginning%20July%2011%2C%201995.

CONCLUSIONS

The “good” and “bad” immigrant framework that functions in Bowling Green makes it harder for non-white refugees to embed themselves within the community. The false assumptions and perceptions created by this framework also pushes the communities not seen as fitting into the “good” category out of view and outside the city’s public spaces. Bowling Green Bosnian communities have been studied extensively by local researchers. Local Bosnian Americans have also been able to participate in events hosted by the city and university alike to share their stories.⁷⁸ These important moments for Bosnians, however, do not have many counterparts for other refugee communities. This lack of celebration, aside from events like the International Festival, which celebrates all communities at one event—not individually—does not allow these other resettled communities to have their culture shared or remembered in ways that measure up to the Bosnian community in Bowling Green.⁷⁹

The lack of individualized help from the city and the flattening of policies that do not help all refugee communities equally create gaps and struggles that refugee communities have to deal with. When specific groups of refugees are struggling, and especially when they struggle as a result of policy and community shortcomings, it creates an uncomfortable reality for Bowling Green’s residents and leaders who either

⁷⁸ Liz Switzer, “Bosnian refugees share experiences,” *Bowling Green Daily News*, November 18, 2009, https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/bosnian-refugees-share-experiences/article_ebeae41a-b62b-58b0-8a93-cb6ead7d4210.html.

⁷⁹ Aaron Mudd, “International Festival makes colorful return after pandemic setback,” *Bowling Green Daily News*, September 25, 2021, https://www.bgdailynews.com/news/international-festival-makes-colorful-return-after-pandemic-setback/article_f1dac545-80c5-5a26-a9b2-a163e93c868e.html.

have to accept that the city has unaddressed issues, or blame those particular refugee communities for their problems.

These struggles also push the narrative that those communities that are struggling are *not* representative of the true nature of Bowling Green's diversity and are, therefore, obfuscated from narratives of diversity and inclusions. The many visual representations of Bosnian American success in Bowling Green reflect that community's success and is rewarded by being allowed to practice their faith, as well as share their community trauma publicly in forums and informational events with the local university. Burmese, Cubans, and Afghans difference, however, is hidden from the bigger narratives of Bowling Green refugees; therefore, they are not allowed to display their culture and trauma in the ways Bosnian Americans are.

This paper has taken what is written about the refugee resettlement experience in Bowling Green and analyzed it within the context of broader racialized assumptions about "good" and "bad" immigrants in the U.S. These assumptions force individuals, who are seeking a home—temporary or permanent—away from their home due to conflict or danger, into racial and religious categories that are implicitly understood as "American" or "alien." This troubling paradigm has been affecting the lived experiences of refugees resettling in Bowling Green. In the city of Bowling Green, it has led to the establishment of Bosnians as the "model refugees," not only in terms of resettlement, but also in terms of the integration of their culture and history into the culture and history of the city. Successive refugee communities arriving not long after the Bosnians (including Congolese, Burmese, and Mexicans), who represent different races and religions and who have varied experiences with American and Western imperialism, have not been given

the ability to settle on their own terms or have their own culture and history become recognized as that of Bowling Green. Communities, such as the Burmese and Iraqi, are assumed to be not “worthy” of specialized support for resettlement and remain largely segregated and invisible within the city’s public space and cultural narrative.

This research and analytical framework are clearly present and continually relevant within the ever-changing demographics of Bowling Green. Continuing research into the core of these communities, especially with additional analysis of oral histories and the use of cultural liaisons, would allow for a bottom-up examination of the varied experiences of refugee communities in the city.

Further research will also be required to understand how particular refugee communities who encounter restrictions based on their perceived differences tackle the complications of navigating life in Bowling Green without adequate support. The scope of this study did not permit further research into mutual aid organizations. However, there is research that suggests these organizations exist. For instance, after the devastating December 2021 tornado that affected refugees communities, the Owensboro Burmese Church reached out to help their community.⁸⁰ The Islamic Center of Bowling Green holds support sessions for both members of the community to deal with resettlement and those outside to help both communities foster cross-cultural understandings.⁸¹ Further research should be conducted to see how specific refugee communities who encounter barriers based on racial assumptions work to bridge gaps in support from institutions in order to build up and sustain themselves.

⁸⁰ Tessa Redmond, “Burmese church reaches out to Bowling Green immigrant community,” *Kentucky Today*, December 23, 2021, https://www.kentuckytoday.com/baptist_life/burmese-church-reaches-out-to-bowling-green-immigrant-community/article_85535cf0-6392-11ec-bf9a-b748d1661f01.html.

⁸¹ Cary, 72.

This paper has shown Bowling Green as an interesting place with many different peoples and practices, but that is often hidden from view because of location and circumstance. With the proper changes in policy and advocacy for a holistic understanding of communities, there is hope these communities can all become as embedded and visible with the Bowling Green mosaic as the Bosnian population has.

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