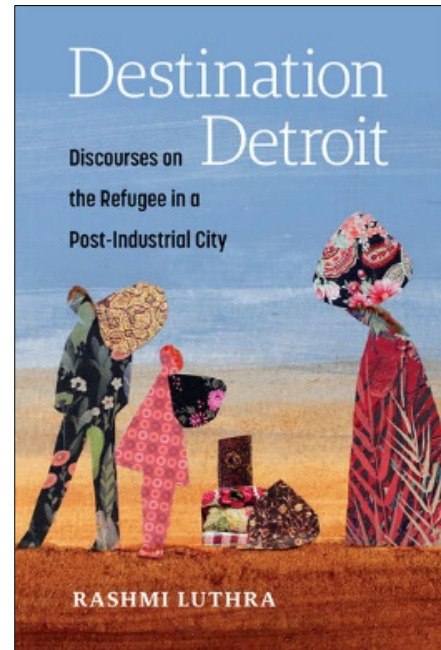


Rashmi Luthra, **Destination Detroit: Discourses on the Refugee in a Post-Industrial City**, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024, 199 pp., \$29.95 (paperback); \$70.00 (hardcover).

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Destination Detroit: Discourses on the Refugee in a Post-Industrial City by Rashmi Luthra examines a variety of discourses originating from the pro- and anti-immigrant/refugee sources in the United States, with special emphasis on the city of Detroit, nearby urban centers, and the state of Michigan. It analyzes the perceptions of civil society and a range of agencies and offices—from political offices to refugee resettlement agencies—toward refugees from the Middle East, but also examines the changes in these perceptions in the aftermath of key events like the Syrian War of the 2010s and the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. The change in perceptions has also been examined against the backdrop of an industrial slowdown that the city of Detroit and nearby urban centers have witnessed in the last few decades.



Changing international scenarios have been interpreted differently by agencies, offices, media, and civil society, conjuring up a refugee image that is often far removed from reality. Differences in terms of the region and religion of the refugees also enter the discourses, influencing the political rhetoric, resettlement agency agendas, and civil society attitudes. By juxtaposing these discourses, and by highlighting how refugees are either “othered” (as in the case of discourses from the far right groups), or denuded of political agency (as in the case of resettlement agencies’ portrayal of refugees and immigrants), the author calls for a more realistic portrayal of the refugees situated in the historical and political contexts of the regions they hail from.

According to the author, what is missing in the debates about the refugees, especially from the Middle East, is a political understanding, a failure to situate the issue “within the larger historical context of US military invasions of Iraq, which created a domino effect leading to the Syrian refugee crisis” (p. 25). Refugees have history and political and individual agency, the author argues. The book makes a thorough criticism against using the refugee as a site for inscribing the political agenda of the right wing, which is outrightly anti-immigrant/refugee, or the organizational agenda of resettlement agencies, which is pro-refugee but with limited attention to the political and historical reasons behind the refugees’ plight. Responding to the “material turn” in discourse studies, the book demonstrates the effects of discourse on practices, policies, and everything pertaining to the day-to-day life of refugees.

The data for the analyses from chapters 1 to 5 are drawn from local news media reports on Middle East refugees in Michigan, and reports in national media on Muslim immigrants to the country in

general. Data also include speeches by political leaders and website content of pro- and anti-immigration groups and resettlement agencies. Chapter 6 analyzes content on Iraqi and Syrian refugees from a museum exhibit and other visual presentations, along with interviews with members of the general public and artists at art exhibitions held in Michigan.

The book's analysis takes place against the backdrop of stronger-than-ever anti-immigration/refugee sentiment among a large section of the public in the United States and right-wing politics that fuels the sentiment. The refugee resettlement issue became a national topic following then-President Barack Obama's proposal to accommodate 10,000 Syrian refugees in the country. This became a key issue in the campaign for 2016 presidential elections. Websites like Breitbart and Rescue Michigan actively broadcast news stories that raised concerns about admitting Syrian refugees to the Detroit metropolitan area. Not only was the issue of refugee resettlement politicized, it was also racialized when Republican candidate Donald Trump argued for providing jobs to African Americans in Michigan rather than bringing in Syrian refugees from outside to meet the region's labor demand. Right-wing groups also stoked fear by invoking real and perceived threats (e.g., the cultural incompatibility of Muslim law structure [the Sharia] with Western ideals and the stealth invasion of the Sharia into the nation).

Against this backdrop, a pro-refugee stance was adopted by the local media in Detroit and refugee resettlement agencies. They portrayed the refugee as being capable of and willing to contribute to the community. More specifically to Detroit, Pontiac, and nearby urban centers, the earlier waves of refugee influx from the Middle East have brought in benefits to the region that was reeling under industrial slowdown. Redefining their identities as refugees, the newcomers and their successive generations eventually naturalized to the country and helped build the local economy while making a strong presence in administrative positions as well as in the public sphere.

From a critical perspective, the author notes that the positive stories in local media were indeed helpful in countering the "Muslim refugees as threat" rhetoric of the right-wing and the national media. However, while framing refugee issues from an economic and humanitarian perspective, the political and historical reasons behind their uprooting are downplayed. For example, the broader connection between U.S. involvement in events and conflicts that create refugees, especially from the Middle East, is not generally invoked by the media. Refugee relocation and settlement are portrayed as an act of charity, not as an act of responsibility and reparation. Against the backdrop of widespread opposition to refugees from the Middle East, due to real and perceived reasons, the author calls for a historical and political contextualizing of the refugees and recognition of their individual agency. The author also points to a contradiction with politicization—with newer developments the world over, more specifically since September 11, the refugee issue has been increasingly politicized. Whereas, in order to facilitate their resettlement, refugee agencies like the Samaritas, which work with the U.S. State department to resettle refugees in Michigan, depoliticize and dehistoricize them.

The author also brings in some nuance in the analysis of discourses from the resettlement agencies. In order to highlight the differences in agencies' portrayal of the refugee, three such organizations were examined: one faith-based, one government-supported, and one run by Syrian Americans. Drawing on data from website content, the author observes that the discourses of the first and

second organizations showed less sensitivity toward the political agency of the incoming refugees compared to that shown by the third organization. Syrian Americans, due to their shared history and cultural roots with the new refugees, expectedly understood the problems of the new refugees better than others.

Regionwide differences also resulted in discursive variations, calling for further nuance in the analysis. While discussing Burmese and Congolese refugees, the media and resettlement agencies highlighted the challenges they faced on arrival. On the other hand, when Syrian refugees were discussed, the emphasis was on normalizing their identities and diluting any possible perceptions of threat among the host society. Similarly, comparing the two types of deportation programs—the proposed deportation of Chaldean Christian refugees from Iraq and the deportation related to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)—the author argues that the citizenry and media approached these deportations differently. The Chaldean deportations, which had greater implications for Detroit in view of the city's settled Chaldean community, were protested against mostly on narrow grounds. President Trump, who proposed the deportations, was accused of going back on his promise to a constituency that voted for him in 2016. Further, the proposed deportations were protested against along religious lines—the Chaldean Christians faced an uncertain future in a Muslim-dominated and war-torn country if they returned home. Whereas, when the DACA-related deportations were protested against by organizations like Michigan United, they were not confined to narrow frames like Christian-Muslim conflict but were based on broad appeals to the American society to be more sympathetic toward refugees and immigrants in general, irrespective of their region of origin or religion.

Going beyond the conventional data sources, the last chapter of the book focuses on artistic discourse on refugees and immigrants, including a museum exhibit, photography collection, and documentary. The discourses produced by the artistic works have been juxtaposed with the discourses produced by the refugee resettlement organizations, political sources, and media. Although artistic discourse shares a few commonalities with the discourse from other sources, a major point of departure is that the former is less instrumental toward refugees: They “are seen as something more, as beings unto themselves with their own life trajectories, their own intense nostalgia, and their own journeys” (p. 136). In this section also, the author differentiates between those artistic expressions that objectify the refugee situation from those expressions that follow a participatory and empathetic approach toward giving agency to the refugee.

By engaging thoroughly with the discourses on refugees, the author successfully highlights the contingency of discursive truths and demonstrates discourse's close connection with “materiality.” The juxtapositions and comparative analyses also bring to the fore an important feature of discourse—what is said in discourse rests on what is unsaid as well, by a play of absence/presence of meaning in language. Well-structured content, engaging prose, and analyses based on locally relevant and historically important events are only a few among the positives of the book. The title is good to be included in the readings for graduate courses on international migration and refugee studies, communication, political science, and other related disciplines in social science.