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Two Sides, Shared History: Comparing Salvadoran and Afghan Refugee Racialization
and Integration

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

by

Shayda Inés Hami

December 2023

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2023

The Thesis of Shayda Inés Hami is approved:

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the millions of refugees worldwide that risk their lives every day in search for a better tomorrow. And to Reynaldo and Asieh, who passed following my data collection, may your stories never cease to exist.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Two Sides, Shared History: Comparing Salvadoran and Afghan Refugee Racialization and Integration

by

Shayda Inés Hami

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, December 2023
Dr. Alfredo Mirandé, Chairperson

By the end of 2020, an astounding 26.4 million refugees were forced to leave their homes (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). Setting an all-time record for refugees across the globe, this number is sure to rise as these migrants confront arguably the most violent of circumstances that force them to flee. As they grapple with relocation, refugees must simultaneously navigate language barriers, financial hardship, potential deportation, and other various factors that may stifle their opportunities to integrate. As millions have drawn public eye to this international crisis, past literature has failed to assess these issues across various populations or from bottom-up perspectives. Although thousands of miles apart, Latin America and Southwest Asia North Africa (SWANA) share historically embedded political and social unrest that has altered the positions of current internal strife. Given the regions' historical and contemporary conditions, this study will comparatively analyze two disparate war refugee populations of Latin America and SWANA: Salvadorans and Afghans. Among these two groups I ask: 1) How does societal racialization impact their ability to integrate into southern California? 2) What commonalities of racialization and its outcomes can be understood through a comparative Critical Refugee framework? Employing flexible coding analyses, 26 semi-structured

interviews were conducted with 13 Salvadorans and 13 Afghan respondents residing in southern California. This study finds that there exists a perceived racialized binary of negative and positive racializations amongst both refugee populations. External attributions imposed on Salvadoran and Afghan refugees are highly attributed to the “negative” violent histories of their homeland while also being “positively” attributed to their resilience. With refugees at the center of knowledge production, this study cross-regionally ties diverse lived experiences as sites of juxtaposed societal racializations and foreign militarization.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Chronic global unrest has resulted in a massive migration crisis. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 26.4 million refugees were displaced from their homes by the end of 2020. This astonishing number set an all-time record high for refugees around the globe, yet it disregards the millions of others who seek asylum, are internally displaced, temporarily protected, or classified as ‘unlawful’ non-citizens (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). As the number of displaced people continues to rise, many are left wondering how to address this growing humanitarian emergency.

Some have regarded migration as an ancient, lifesaving reaction to changes in our environment, or a “biological imperative as necessary as breathing” (Shah 2021). Yet as political and social conflicts have made living conditions unbearable, the dire necessity to migrate has become unavoidable for many. Unlike our primal instincts that looked to adapt to our environments, refugees arguably confront the most violent situations that force them to leave their homeland, many times as a consequence of foreign interests unrelated to their existence. Global and institutional circumstances funnel down into a distinctly individualized decision, making departure an inevitable choice for human survival. As a result, millions of refugees have been pushed to relocate elsewhere such as the US, who has resettled more refugees than any other country in the world (Budiman 2020). However, these efforts have proven to not be as effective, as a 2020 report estimated that the global refugee population has doubled in the last 10 years while resettlement has shrunken by more than half (Solf and Rehberg 2021).

Although thousands of miles apart, Latin America and Southwest Asia North Africa (SWANA) share historically embedded political and social unrest that has altered the positions of current internal strife. Often with interests of economic or personal gain, Western intervention ultimately exacerbates previously unstable political relations, sparking civil turmoil and widening gaps of incoming inequality (Ages 2018; Baker 2019; Coll 2004; Thyne 2010). While contributing to the unlivable conditions abroad and failing to acknowledge their influence and displacement, the West, and particularly the US, makes it difficult for refugees to find security amidst conflict. Despite its widely recognized reputation as the ‘country of immigrants,’ the US paradoxically gatekeeps liberties for many once they arrive (Montes 2019; Taniguchi 2021). As waves of migrants begin to leave these regions, resettlement becomes a game of added advantage. Simultaneously grappling integration mechanisms of language, financial hardships, health, and legality, refugees bring internalized past trauma upon arrival to their new homes. Evaluating their experience as subjects of foreign militarism and imperialism, refugee racialization and integration processes become reliant on the war and conflict of their homelands.

This study will be comparatively analyzing the lived experience of two disparate war refugee populations of Latin America and SWANA—Salvadoran and Afghan migrants. Among these two groups, I pose the following questions: Among Salvadoran and Afghan refugees, how does societal racialization impact on their ability to integrate into southern California? What commonalities of racialization and its outcomes can be understood through a comparative Critical Refugee framework? Employing flexible

coding analyses, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 Salvadoran and 13 Afghan respondents residing in southern California. Utilizing a more nuanced interpretation of racial formation theory (García 2017; Selod 2018) and the Critical Refugee framework (Espiritu 2006, 2021), the stories shared from these populations reveal an underlying refugee experience as subjects navigating socially constructed labels while having faced displacement and collateral violence.

As millions from Latin America and SWANA have drawn the public eye to a growing international crisis, past literature has failed to address these issues head on from a bottom-up assessment. While being critical of US settlement and identifying integration patterns, the data extracted from this study will look to cross-regionally tie diverse refugee stories at the hands of immigrants themselves. Recognizing the experiences these groups endure bridges a gap that extends past nationality, ethnicity, or region—that is why they are two sides of a shared history.

II. BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

Push Factors and Interwoven Histories

Seeking to intertwine refugees under a shared lived experience, the cases of Latin America and Southwest Asia North Africa (SWANA) illustrate the indirect impacts of US militarism, imperialism, and neoliberal policy on the experiences of disparate populations in the United States. As Salvadorans and Afghans make part of a larger immigrant community, their migration patterns shed light on looming authoritarianism that has furthered the region's political instability. The US played an indirect role in the expatriation of these populations, as previous literature points to various policies, covert

actions, and invasions that reinforced white exceptionalism to maintain political control (Ages 2018; Baker 2019; Hardy 2022; Hudson 1996; Quan 2005). Critically analyzing refugee social locations in relation to their lived traumas helps to inform how Salvadorans and Afghans experience the impact of racialization on their integration in the US.

Considering the histories of El Salvador and Afghanistan, I identify two areas of political unrest and war that incited migratory waves from these countries to the US: the culminating war era (late 1970s – early 1990s) and the internal militarized threat (early 1990s – present day). For El Salvador, the war era took place during the Salvadoran civil war of 1979 through early 1992, in which over a million Salvadorans fled the country, representing a fifth of the nation's total population (Menjívar and Cervantes 2018). In Afghanistan, the war era began with the invasion of the Soviets in 1979, leading up to their retreat in 1989. At the end of this period alone, over 6 million Afghan refugees fled the country, constituting half of the total world refugee population at the time (Colville 1998).

Not only were these migrants victims of the tumultuous war period, both the Latin American and SWANA regions have endured histories of foreign intervention (Ages 2018; Altizer and Jilani 2005; Baker 2019; Quan 2005). Primarily motivated to resist communist influence within the region, the American CIA led various economic, paramilitary, and diplomatic actions to destabilize Latin American leaders—for example, Guatemala, Venezuela, Chile, and Bolivia (Thyne 2010). In the case of El Salvador, the US' acts of arming, training, and funding the Salvadoran government helped to combat

an increasingly communist-leaning insurgency (Baker 2019; Salvador and Rosenthal 1990). El Salvador endured more than a decade of what was estimated to be “the most expensive United States military intervention between the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars” (Baker 2019: 137). Furthermore, evaluated through a macro-oriented political economist perspective, the intervention has been deemed as supporting repressive military institutions while ineffectively dealing with the country’s social inequality (Quan 2005).

Political upheaval and sparked migration are also apparent in SWANA, as its geopolitical location and natural resources were vital to the US in upstaging the Soviet Union (Ages 2018). As nationalist upheavals took place during the Cold War, the Soviets attempted to assist Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon to advance their own interests (Hudson 1996). Afghanistan has also exemplified a longstanding proxy war conflict between the US and the USSR (Ages 2018; Altizer and Jilani 2005; Pentz 1988). The US expended over \$470 million in 1986, \$630 million the following year, and an estimated \$6 billion during the 1980s, as the CIA funneled billions into the Afghan mujahideen to fight the Soviet invasion in ‘Operation Cyclone’ (Altizer and Jilani 2005). Described as the “biggest bequest to any Third World insurgency,” Afghanistan was left in further disarray than when the war began (Ages 2018; Pentz 1988). As a result of turbulent foreign intervention, both El Salvador and Afghanistan’s histories rippled into permanent effects of political turmoil, economic ruin, and trauma for those who had been living there (Allodi 1989; Mghir and Raskin 1999).

Having endured the longstanding effects of war, El Salvador and Afghanistan enter in the second period of conflict: the internal militarized threat. Despite facing more than a decade of violence, these nations also shared an era of domestic rampage fomented from the ashes of American proxy wars. The rise of *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS 13), an evolving militarized and politically powerful gang, has threatened the safety and security of Salvadoran life in the early '90s up until the present day (Arana 2005; Van der Borgh 2019). Following the aftermath of the civil war, predominantly Salvadoran migrants in Los Angeles quickly began forming gangs as a response to marginalization experienced in the US. As US government officials began deporting MS 13 members in an effort to mitigate crime, waves of these deportees arrived to El Salvador, ultimately transforming the growing gang community (Arana 2005; Farah and Babineau 2017). With increasing ties to Mexican cartels, MS 13 gained financial resources, advanced weaponry, and eventual political power, as they were able to effectively instill fear in the state and public eye (Farah and Babineau 2017). Trends of violence carried out by MS 13 members continues to be the driving cause for Salvadoran migrants seeking refuge in the US, and in 2015, El Salvador was named Latin America's most violent country with over 103 homicides per 100,000 people (Van der Borgh 2019). As for Afghanistan, the second wave of migration roots back to the funding of the mujahideen, with the rise of the Taliban being the dominant force pushing refugees out of the country (Amnesty International 2022). From the early '90s to the present day, the CIA- trained and funded group pursued independent goals of reclaiming political power to prevent further Western interference in SWANA (Ages 2018; Rubin 2002). Deeply underestimated by American

officials and the CIA, the Taliban grew by instilling radical religious beliefs and successfully took political control in the Fall of 2021 (Ages 2018; Amnesty International 2022). For the fourth consecutive year, Afghanistan was named the most dangerous country in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace 2022). Similar to their Salvadoran counterparts, Afghans suffered great consequences due to the meddling of foreign powers on domestic soil. These shared histories reveal why these communities are seeking safety outside of their country of origin, connecting these groups along displacement of Western intervention.

In cross-historical evaluations of Latin America and SWANA, the literature is limited to their political movements, regimes, and willingness to democratize within these regions (Kamrava and Mora 1998; Lustick 2000; Posusney 2004; Szmolka 2017). The US' political and violent involvement in these regions uncover the monopolization of hegemonic initiatives that fuel internal conflict, not limited to El Salvador and Afghanistan. However, the analogous historical context of these two countries is precisely the reason why it is important to compare these immigrants' reception upon arrival in the US. Furthermore, explicit comparisons of El Salvador and Afghanistan have begun to take place, but focus on the allocation of humanitarian aid, reevaluation of history and political governance, and the erasure of the diasporas in the Global South (Alsultany and Shohat 2013; Greene 2017; Greentree 2021; Ikenberry and Terry 2003; Sandin et al. 2020). As American policymakers continue to neglect resolutions for their affairs abroad, they also struggle to address the influx of a growing refugee community in the US. In order to mitigate their reception, it is important to understand why the

positionality of these groups *reflect* and *embody* the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Thus, this study evaluates how these individuals simultaneously navigate imposed racializations that tie them back to their past traumas of El Salvador and Afghanistan.

III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Evolving Race Theory

To understand refugee experiences in the US, it is important to consider how the current literature on race may inform an individual's reception and integration into society. In its most elementary form, race has been generally examined along a Black and White binary, which presumes that only two constituent groups participate in the formation of racialized social policies (Perea 1997). The binary sought to understand racism as a system of exploitation and denial of resources to oppress Black people through White supremacy (Feagin and Ducey 2018). Although the Black/White binary was central to the introduction of racial politics, critical race theorists contend that the dichotomy failed to account for other minoritized groups that did not fit the binary, such as Latinos, Asians, or Natives (Aguirre 2017; Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Mirandé 2022; Omi and Winant 2014; Perea 1997).

In an effort to challenge this dichotomy, scholars began understanding race and racism along the stratification of perceivable qualities or physiological traits, ultimately ascribing 'meanings' to justify structures of inequality. This process of "making up people" through observed phenotypical traits is what Omi and Winant call 'racialization' (2014: 111). Whether it be at the micro, individualized levels of racial profiling, or the macro, global processes of colonization and enslavement of Africans, all examples

extend racial meaning across profound social terrains (Omi and Winant 2014). Across the intersectional identities that individuals occupy, race has embedded itself within varying inequalities such as gender, class, and politics (Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Omi and Winant 2014).

Despite expanding the narrow confines of the Black/White binary, Omi and Winant's theory of racialized stratification was solely dependent on meanings attached to perceivable phenotypical traits. As a result, a growing literature has pointed to how additional markers outside of biology also play significant roles in the subjugation of minority groups (Selod 2018). For example, women who wear hijabs, or hijabis, enable varying ascribed meanings such as them "in need of saving" while simultaneously being "a cultural aberration and threat to American core values" (Selod 2018: 5). In addition, scholars have pointed to the importance of acknowledging how these markers intersect and cooperate with policies, laws, and institutions in American society (García 2017; Maghbouleh 2017; Selod 2018). In the case of browner-skinned Latinxs, their darkness becomes a marker of illegality, suggesting how an individual has interacted with legal institutions and citizenship (García 2017). Moreover, a person's race has become a proxy for immigration status (Mirandé 2022). Not only are they hypercriminalized, but their existence is only welcomed if their arrival to the US is predicated on legal terms.

Acknowledging these nuanced interactions between individuals and institutions, scholars can more effectively apply Omi and Winant's (2014) public model of hierarchy and marginalization known as 'racist projects.' According to the authors, racist projects create or reproduce structures of domination along racial identification. In other words,

daily routines become enveloped by a dense matrix of invisible projects that have penetrated institutions, identities, and experiences on the basis of race (Omi and Winant 2014).

Explicit examples of these institutionalized racist projects can be seen in bureaucratic law restricting immigrants from entering the US. Following the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017, executive orders suspended resettlement of Syrian refugees in addition to barring immigrants from predominantly Muslim nations (Gillum 2018; Taniguchi 2021). In addition to growing xenophobic policy, Central American caravan refugees were treated similar to their SWANA counterparts as they arrived at the border. The Trump administration deemed this an act of “invasion,” sending over 5,000 active-duty troops to the US-Mexico border (Montes 2019). Despite the removal of Donald Trump, changes in administration have not solved the growing and seemingly interminable dehumanization of refugees seeking safety (Damaschke-Deitrick et al. 2021; Selod 2018; Utych 2018). This marginalization and policy ratification is created directly because of instilled racialization these minorities confront while in the US (García 2017; Garner and Selod 2015; Gowayed 2020; Menjívar et.al 2018; Selod 2018).

In the case of Salvadoran racialization, the ethnic group has been largely amalgamated with other Latinxs, especially Mexicans, due to the high concentrations of Mexicans residing in the US (Menjívar 2000). In some cases, this homogenization allowed Salvadorans to better integrate themselves and gain access to more resources, but also actively erased their existence (Bermudez 2008). Salvadoran marginalization is also contingent on Latinx hypercriminalization and illegality, which subjugates them to

exploitation in the workforce yet avoids revealing their undocumented status (García 2017; Menjívar et al. 2018; Osuna 2015). Representations in the media also contribute to a growing negative racialized trope, pinning Salvadorans to the MS 13 gang such as in ABC's *Nightline's Gangland Series* (Trujillo 2017). Despite the exhaustive studies that outline Salvadoran life, it is often limited to their ascribed hostile racializations or negative encounters they experience while living in the US (Chavez 2020; Menjívar 2000; Osuna 2015, among others). Some have evaluated the "positive" characterizations of Latinxs in the media (Brown, Jones, and Becker 2018), and only few have looked at Salvadoran work ethic in comparison to White Americans in the South (Hallett 2012).

As for the Afghan experience in the US, Afghan racialization is all the more limiting. Only in more recent years have there been introductory efforts to understand how refugees navigate racialization as it pertains to larger derogatory narratives of SWANA migrants (Cainkar and Selod 2018; Garner and Selod 2015; Gowayed 2022). Stemming from historical relationships of Western and imperialist involvement, SWANA migrants generally experience racialization through origins of terrorism and needing to be 'saved' (Nojan 2022; Selod 2018). Few studies attempt to understand how Afghans navigate their racialization and focus more on how it intersects with their religious Muslim identities (Gowayed 2020; Nojan 2022).

While evaluating Salvadoran and Afghan refugee experiences, it is important to understand how the denial of resources and mistreatment of people of color is rooted in the Black/White binary's desire to perpetuate white supremacy (Feagin and Ducey 2018). Additionally, Omi and Winant's theory of racialization forged an important analytical

lens to examine the ‘making up’ of other racial and ethnic minority groups in the US (2014). However, the recent scholarship of these nuanced race theories helps conceptualize how immigrants of color must navigate their societal subjugation across interactions and institutions inside *and* outside of their phenotypes (García 2017; Maghbouleh 2017; Selod 2018). Not only will this study add to the current intersections of refugee racialization, but also it brings together seemingly different groups and connects them along a shared, lived experience.

Towards a Critical Refugee Study

While the race literature has provided a theoretical lens for evaluating minorities in America, Espiritu (2021) emphasizes the importance of a refugee framework that had not been depicted in other conceptualizations of race. In what Espiritu refers to as the ‘Critical Refugee Study,’ refugee accounts become the center of knowledge production, exposing a historically silenced experience of maneuvering racialization and foreign intervention (Espiritu 2021; Ghanayem, Mogannam, and Sharif 2021; Nguyen and Phu 2021). Espiritu highlights the anecdotes of Vietnamese refugees and how the population has been largely treated peripherally to more dominant Asian narratives in the US (2006, 2021). If refugee experience is acknowledged, it is mostly used to counter the misconceptions of Asians being a “model minority,” seldom acknowledging a refugee centered approach to shed light on their racializations (Espiritu 2021: 3). Refugee narratives only seem to be of importance when exploiting the traumas of war as being a racist “war aggression against [all] Asian people” (Espiritu 2021: 2).

This perpetuates viewing the refugee experience as a conglomerate of all immigrants in a region, reducing their accounts as only based on the racializations of their shared regional counterparts (Espiritu 2021; Schlund-Vials 2016; Vang 2020). To a similar end, amalgamating Salvadoran or Afghan refugees with other Latinx or SWANA immigrants reduces their migration histories as only seeking opportunities for a better life and discounting their need for survival. Instead, the Critical Refugee framework looks to understand the refugee as maneuvering a wider set of problems living in the US: they occupy a critical space forged by external politics and militarization while “simultaneously is a product of, is witness to, and a cite of critique of the gendered and racial violence of US wars” (Espiritu 2021: 4).

Although previous race theories present critical analyses of minority perspectives, they fall short in explaining how refugees internally navigate processes of displacement in relation to their racialized stances living in the US. By solely focusing on how these populations became racially formulated, there is no longer strong desires for liberating the Third World or criticizing US colonization and militarization abroad (Espiritu 2021). Thus, this study will utilize the race literature and Critical Refugee framework to: (a) look at the interactions of experiences across societal meanings and institutional barriers and (b) evaluate these experiences as an overlap of racialized identities and subjects of US militarization and occupation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study draws from 26 semi-structured interviews with Salvadoran and Afghan migrants: 13 Salvadorans and 13 Afghans. At the time of data collection, all participants

lived in southern California, were at least 18 years of age, and were born and/or raised in El Salvador or Afghanistan. Five Salvadorans and four Afghans arrived during the culminating war period, and eight Salvadorans and nine Afghans arrived during the internal militarized threat period. Out of all of the Salvadorans interviewed, only one migrated to the US before the age of five. All Afghans interviewed were born and raised in Afghanistan, with the exception of one who was born in a Pakistani refugee camp during the Soviet invasion and who returned to Afghanistan, only to leave again with the rising fear of the Taliban.

There is current debate about the label “refugee.” It is largely due to the negative associations and connotations of the term, in addition to the legal rights or resource allocations individuals are granted by those in power who bestow the label (Feuerherm and Ramanathan 2016; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008). In many cases, despite the geopolitics of refugees’ home countries, the US government has failed to recognize many immigrants as “refugees” and often withholds from them the legal status they deserve (Abrego and Lakhani 2015; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). As a result, many migrants who arrive seeking refuge without legal protection experience “liminal legality,” often impeding their access to resources and ability to live in the US comfortably (Menjívar 2006). Therefore, this study will be utilizing the term ‘refugee’ to label migrants who: (1) are forced to leave their homes because of persecution, war, or violence in their countries of origin (UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 2); and (2) arrive into the country of resettlement having survived traumatic experiences, often with limited or interrupted education, and suffer from mental and/or physical health issues as a result of their lives in

their home countries or refugee camps (Feuerherm and Ramanathan 2016). All respondents reported having left El Salvador or Afghanistan due to the current or previous political violence of their home country, among other factors. Additionally, all recalled either personally experiencing or having someone close to them experience trauma, which heavily contributed to the fear living in their country of origin and their ultimate motives for migration. Table 1 depicts the various pathways of legal status that these refugees have navigated given the complexities of US immigration institution. Salvadorans had an average age of 41 with a maximum of 63 and minimum of 22. Afghans had an average age of 36 with a maximum of 72 and a minimum of 18.

(insert Table 1 here)

In the initial stages of recruitment, I created physical and digital flyers to disperse around the community to create a convenience sample. However, due to the ongoing national surveillance that refugees experience, I sensed that many potential participants were hesitant to openly share past life experiences without the reassurance of established trust. As a result, I initiated snowball sampling using personal contacts in addition to various non-profit organizations that I had worked for in the past. From there, I was able to get into touch with other individuals and organizations throughout the Orange County, Los Angeles, and Inland Empire areas. Participants often referred other friends, coworkers, extended family members, or classmates to partake in the study. Additionally, I volunteered my time teaching English and babysitting at one of the refugee community organizations to ensure further trust. Participants were also incentivized by a raffle for a chance to win a \$100 Visa gift card. Nearly half of the participants opted out of the raffle,

giving those who chose to participate a higher chance of winning. Using a random number generator, one participant was identified as the winner of the prize money.

Interviews were collected between August 2022 and March 2023. They were conducted and audio recorded in person, over Zoom or the phone in accordance with the participant's preference. In-person interviews were conducted in a place of the participant's choosing, such as their home, a coffee shop, a library, or a park. Participants also chose the language of the interview. Out of the 13 Salvadorans, five chose to hold the interview in English, seven held it in Spanish, and one in Spanglish. Out of the 13 Afghans, 10 chose to hold the interview in English and three used a mix of English and Dari. For the Afghan respondents who spoke both languages, a family interpreter was present to aid the respondent with their communication. The interviews were later transcribed without identifiers and in English word for word with the help of an Afghan undergraduate student researcher.

Interviews lasted between 45 to 120 minutes, and participants discussed their identity, education, occupation, past encounters living in the US, migration and legal history, and their experiences in relation to other immigrants and refugees. Discussions of their reasons for migration often revealed sadness and frustration, as participants recalled past traumas and encounters of violence in their home countries. Due to these heavy conversations, I often had to console teary-eyed participants. Drawing from my "ethnographic toolkit" (Reyes 2020), I sympathized with the participants as they lamented their previous encounters of fear in their home country, eliciting my own family's story of fleeing Iran. Furthermore, I empathized with participant frustration as

they spoke about their grievances with the American immigration system, comparing current family struggles as we both navigate “liminal legality” (Menjívar 2006).

After data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using DeDoose qualitative research software. Using Deterding and Waters’ (2021) flexible coding approach, I configured “main stories” by using large chunks of text to develop insights of the data. To refine these larger stories, I applied a research question to identify the relevant emerging topics. As a result, many stories emerged regarding participant encounters with strangers or other people in the community when discussing their home country or their racial or ethnic group in the US. The ascribed meanings that these other people imposed on these participants led to the sub-themes of “Negative Attributions” and Positive Attributions,” encompassing the parent code of “Racialization.” These codes revealed the “perceived binary” that I will discuss in the findings: (a) Negative Racializations of Salvadorans being ‘violent’ in relation to MS 13, while Afghans were seen as ‘terrorist’ because of attributions to the Taliban; and (b) Positive Racializations of Salvadorans being ‘hardworking’ while Afghans were seen as being a ‘victim.’ Although each refugee had varied experiences and did not necessarily discuss each racialization category, there were no differences of imposed racialization for refugees who arrived at a different period of time (ie. Afghans who arrived during the culminating war period experienced the same racializations as Afghans who arrived during the internal militarized threat). Furthermore, the “Critical Refugee framework” was coded when refugee stories tied their experiences in the US to previous or ongoing violence in their home countries. This code enabled an in-depth analysis of the refugee experience in the

US as contingent upon the militarization and turmoil of El Salvador or Afghanistan.

Lastly, during the entirety of the coding process, I created memos for each transcript to supplement my analysis.

The stories recounted by the participants evoked insightful and reliable productions of knowledge regarding the Salvadoran and Afghan experiences in the US. Due to the nature of the semi-structured guide, I enabled participants to converse candidly about their experiences in a comfortable environment. Having established trust through other contacts or personal rapport, respondents reported that the interview allowed them to open up about their lived experiences and reflect on how far they have come.

V. FINDINGS

The participants revealed how people outside of their community view them as having either negative attributes or positive attributes. I argue that the ascribed meanings Salvadorans and Afghans experienced constitute a perceived racialized binary. On one hand, they can be “negatively” attributed to the violent histories of their homeland while also being “positively” attributed to their resilience. Thus, the refugee is a cite of both racialization and foreign militarization, simultaneously occupying juxtaposed societal meanings. For Salvadorans, they were negatively associated with the “violent” nature of MS 13 gang members and positively characterized as “hardworking.” On the other hand, Afghans were negatively associated with terrorism and the Taliban, while also positively characterized as “victims.” A visual representation of the perceived binary can be found in Table 2.

These attributions often impacted on ability for these refugees to integrate and feel accepted in southern California. For example, negative racializations led to both Salvadoran and Afghans experiencing xenophobic comments, negative portrayals in the media, a denial of or threat to resources, and an embedded societal obligation to ‘fit in.’ Conversely, positive racializations also impacted on refugee acceptance in American society through subjugation. In other words, although they often yielded added resources, positive racializations ultimately ostracized Salvadoran and Afghan refugees in a way that led to internal frustration.

These negative and positive attributions can be understood as commonalities of a comparative Critical Refugee framework; they render immigrant racialized experiences to characterizations only encountered by refugees. The ascribed societal meanings—whether intentional or not—bridge refugees back to their past traumas in El Salvador and Afghanistan as they live in the US having already endured the risks of migration.

(insert Table 2 here)

Negative Attributions and its Impacts: *los Marranos* and Uncle Osama

As others people learned of a participant’s country of origin, characterizations of being “violent” or a “terrorist” would shape Salvadoran or Afghan negative racializations. Outside of Omi and Winant’s (2014) phenotypical racialized process, negative attributions are often inflicted once participants engaged in conversation regarding their hometown, accents, and/or behaviors. Both Salvadorans and Afghans believe that the media plays a strong role in perpetuating these negative attributions. Not only do these characterizations provide false pretenses of the larger communities,

negative racializations frequently lead to hostile reactions toward these refugees.

Although both groups are frequently homogenized amongst their regional counterparts (ie. Latinx and SWANA immigrants), societal perception of Salvadorans and Afghans would shift once they disclosed their national roots.

The negative racializations of Salvadorans as “violent” is congruent with a larger pattern of hypercriminalization of Latinxs (Chavez 2013; Menjivar et al. 2018). For example, Miguel, a 33-year-old historian, recalled when City of Los Angeles officials had just finished constructing a new bridge on 6th Street. Regarded as an architectural marvel, the bridge was discussed on the broadcasted news because people were found graffitiing or parading along its arches. Because of the bridge’s proximity to Boyle Heights, there were rising concerns that the communities living there were responsible for low-rider “takeovers” and “plaguing” the bridge with vandalism (KCAL News 2022b, 2022a). Known for its large concentration of Latinxs, Boyle Heights and East LA saw a sudden influx of security to monitor these “vandals” and prevent them from committing crime. Frustrated, Miguel expressed how he feels the media constantly criminalizes his community for “misbehaving”:

“You’re [showing] the Hispanics to making the bridge horrible? They pass the video with the guy doing like a barbershop, that guy walking [on the bridge] and so then what do we bring? Oh, *pinche Latino que anda allí arriba en el puente*. So then that’s how it starts! The news brings negative. Then they keep saying, Oh yeah, this person, because [he] is Hispanic, look what he’s doing. Have no study, no education.”

Although Miguel is hinting at an encompassing negative racialization for Latinxs, he also believes that the particularly “bad” media depiction of El Salvador always “tells us they can kill you. They could rob you” given the current politics with MS 13. Therefore, the

“violent” racialization directly ties refugees back to the *pandillas*, or gangs, in El Salvador. Danny, an undocumented 39-year-old, shares how there exists an inherent societal perception just by someone referring to “El Salvador”:

“There are some people that just mentioning, or just hearing the words ‘El Salvador,’ automatically they think of the *pandillas*. Just like if someone says Mexico, automatically they think of *narcotraficantes*. Just because there’s a plague in your country of origin. That doesn’t mean we’re all bad, right? But in their heads, automatically they think *pandillas* when you mention bad El Salvador...Even my coworkers, they know that I’m Salvadoran. And when we’re having a conversation, the first thing they would ask me was, ‘In your hometown were there *Maras*?’”

As mentioned, this ingrained affiliation of Salvadorans with gang members was not arbitrarily created. Like Miguel and Danny, many Salvadorans believe that because of these negative portrayals of their homeland, other people often associate the violence occurring abroad with the migrants. José, a 26-year-old Amazon, Inc. worker, also discusses how because of the “bad rep” El Salvador has in the media, there is an embedded feeling that the people who are arriving from the country are tied to the gangs and MS 13: “[The media] kind of makes everybody feel like everybody from El Salvador is like that...and their viewers are going to believe that these people shouldn’t be coming here since they’re just going to bring violence.” Some would even go so far as to call Salvadorans “*pandilleros*,” like in the case of Ángel, a disabled 62-year-old. Even though Ángel arrived in the late 1970s during the culminating war era, other people would still label him as a gang member simply because he came from El Salvador: “They would say, where you from? El Salvador. They say, *pandillero*! They would call you a gangster. And that’s how they would know us as, that we were problematic.” According to Salvadoran lived experiences, the more people consume media that villainize Latinxs—especially El

Salvador for its violence and instability—the more its migrants will suffer consequences of these negative labels.

However, if Salvadorans did not ‘fit’ the negative archetype, other people expressed how pleasantly surprised they were because the refugee did not live up to their expectations. Roberto, a 32-year-old PhD student, recalls a time when a Mexican woman was astonished to find that he was “different from other Salvadorans.” Naturally, this prompted Roberto to question what “other Salvadorans” were inherently like, to which she responded: “Well, I haven’t met any. But my father says that Salvadorans only come to Mexico to steal. They’re dirty. They’re violent. And that they’re really bad spoken.” Not only was Roberto’s uncomfortable encounter degrading, it exposed how the negative portrayals of Salvadorans have affected the perceptions of other Latinxs.

The negative racializations of Afghans being “terrorists” are congruent with the hypercriminalization of Muslims and predominantly Muslim nations after 9/11 (Garner and Selod 2015; Maghbouleh 2017; Selod 2018). For example, Esra, a 20-year-old student, believes that her wearing a hijab—an obvious marker of her religion—contributes to the negative attributions of terrorism, as people connect religious garb with Osama bin Laden’s Muslim identity: “Because of the way we dress, like we’re Muslim and we put the scarf on, because of what happened on 9/11, they have that [idea]. And that also [Osama bin Laden] usually specify it with Afghanistan...they would think that the reason would be Afghanistan for 9/11 and in general, Muslims.” Esra’s conclusions confirms the past scholarly literature that, despite the fact that she is a woman, being Muslim connects her to the ongoing Islamophobic War on Terror (Gillum 2018; Selod

2018). Although Esra describes the significance of this label for Muslims, the blanket generalization is exacerbated as it specifically relates to Muslims *who are also* Afghan. Thus, the negative racialization of “terrorist” directly ties refugees back to the Taliban and the ongoing occupation in Afghanistan.

Analogous to the negative treatment of Salvadorans, Afghans experience acts of degradation because of the racialized implications of their national roots. Having gotten a flat tire on the highway, Jay, a 22-year-old athlete, recounts how he politely asked a stranger to borrow his phone. After making a phone call to the American Automobile Association, Jay chatted with the stranger revealing some details about his Afghan identity:

“I was like ‘I’m from Afghanistan,’ and soon as I say that he goes like, with his finger, *choo choo choo*, die! Like pointing a gun. Then he was like, ‘If I knew you were from Afghanistan, I would not have given you my phone.’ That was in probably September of last year, right after the Taliban takeover. Because they’ve been seeing shit on the news... As I was explaining it to him, I was like, punching my car. (*Hits table*) This is not why, this is what’s going on! Why are you gonna say that? ...I got so emotional. I called my best friend. I was actually crying.”

Given the violence and political turmoil in Afghanistan, Jay believes his racist encounter was fueled by how strangers, due to the media, ignorantly conflate the Taliban with the larger Afghan population. Recalling his story, Jay was visibly frustrated with how these negative racializations translated to how people viewed him. Just as others imposed hostile labels onto Jay, Halima, a 58-year-old hairstylist, recalls her fear of a manager at her salon who made her feel unwanted. The validity of Halima’s work at the salon was questioned “as soon as [the manager] knew [Halima was] Afghan.” Even after other coworkers tried to assist, Halima described the manager as “constantly coming to fire me,

fire me, fire me.” Coincidentally, this sentiment only arose following the attacks on 9/11. In addition to baring the harsh treatment of her manager, Halima’s ascribed racialization put her at risk of losing her job.

Despite the Taliban’s exposure in the media, Afghanistan’s militarization is not something new to Americans. However, Osman, a 72-year-old retired store manager, discusses how although Afghanistan befriended the American government during the Russian invasion, people “forgot everything” because of the attack on 9/11:

“Oh! Now because of 9/11 and the Muslims and Afghans, and then they went to Afghanistan for 20 years, it is different. At that time, Afghanistan was their friend because they did lots of favor to Americans. They destroyed Russia. And now, you know, people forget everything...I was working somewhere in San Bernardino. He wasn’t even American. He was Arab. He said, where is bin Laden? And I said, ‘he’s in your mother’s house. Go ask your mother!’...And bin Laden was Arab from his country maybe! Not my country.”

Osman’s explanation of the past and present relationship between Afghanistan and the US highlights two important points about the ‘terrorist’ racialization. Even though 9/11 was an attack carried out by al-Qaeda, people conflate its previous founder (Osama bin Laden) as the organizer of all terrorist groups in SWANA, especially the Afghan Taliban. Additionally, despite America’s past, the negative association of the 9/11 attacks obscures any memory of the previous alliance with the US that Afghans held during the fight against communist Russia. The urging of Americans to ‘never forget’ the attacks on 9/11 promotes these racialized generalizations of Osama bin Laden and terrorist groups as a whole. According to Osman, these associations also drove Trump, when he became US President, to implement policies that banned immigrants from predominantly Muslim nations from entering the US.

Similar to the intra-Latinx group tensions that Roberto experienced with a Mexican person, Osman's altercation with an Arab person reveals how negative racializations can permeate communities. Other Americans who are not part of the SWANA community could easily pin Osman's Arab customer as encompassing the 'terrorist' racialization; however, the customer made it evident to specifically connect bin Laden to Osman's Afghan identity. Although it is unknown how the customer drew this conclusion, the generalization he conceived may result from the false belief that bin Laden is Afghan. Lastly, similar to Ángel's experience of being labeled a *'pandillero,'* Osman was also associated with bin Laden despite arriving during the culminating war period. This case shows that regardless of the era of arrival, negative racializations were consistent amongst all Salvadoran and Afghan refugees.

"I am salvadoreña and I'm not a gang member"

"They make everybody look bad...And it's not our fault"

Aside from the hostile treatment the participants endured, negative racialization made it difficult for some Salvadorans and Afghans to accept their national identities. Using the media portrayal of El Salvador and Afghanistan, the public often equated the violence abroad to its communities. As a result, many Salvadoran and Afghan refugees felt that evading these negative racializations would help them integrate better in society.

Unable to alter their physical traits, Salvadorans and Afghans would 'blend in' in different ways to avoid the negative racializations of their respective groups. For example, Ángel describes how he worked hard to change his strong Salvadoran accent. Amongst Chicanxs who would pin him as a *pandillero*, he felt that he could only achieve

a sense of belongingness if he participated in Chicano low-rider culture. However, changing his Spanish accent didn't do much for Ángel when he encountered law enforcement or other Americans while driving:

“We would go *choleando* down [the street], listening to music in English. No one would listen in Spanish...We didn't want them to know that we spoke Spanish, that we were Hispanic...And we would give them that reason by listening in English, and we were American. So they wouldn't point us out and say, 'those are the wetbacks.' You get me? There are *los mojados*...”

In addition to feeling excluded from the larger Latinx community, Ángel was also seen as a threat to other Americans living in the US. Thus, he forced himself to learn English and listened to American music to try to avoid negative racializations. By ‘blending in’ and consuming American culture, Ángel slowly detached himself from the *pandillero* narrative that tied him to the violence of El Salvador.

Whereas many refugees used language as a tactic to mitigate their racialization, Abdul recalls how when he first moved to America, he ‘blended in’ by taking on other nationalities. Having moved to the US during high school, Abdul experienced a lot of bullying post 9/11 because he was Afghan. After a student from his class asked where he was from, they promptly responded with “Oh, so you're from the land where Osama bin Laden's from.” Abdul felt his heart drop, and from this moment forward, he completely stopped talking about his home country with other strangers:

“Ever since then, I actually, to be honest, I never told people I'm from Afghanistan. For the first five or six years of my life. I couldn't do it...When they said where is my family from, I would name different countries. I would say Pakistan, I would say India, I would say Mexico. Yeah, I couldn't ...because again my clothing was different, I looked very different than people.”

Even after Abdul had learned English, any mention of Afghanistan ultimately tied him back to the violence perpetuated by the Taliban. Whereas Omi and Winant (2014) would argue that only phenotypical differences would create damaging racializations, in Abdul's case, his racial ambiguities actually allowed him to avoid the "terrorist" label. Rather than carrying the burden of being 'Afghan,' he became more accepted by his community as he adopted other nationalities.

In other cases, when asked if they identify with the label "Salvadoran" or "Afghan," some participants believed that it would just be better to avoid using the labels altogether. Simonet, a 55-year-old woman, shares that she prefers the term "Latina" and is "hesitant" to say she is Salvadoran because of the ongoing gang violence back home. In an experience she had at work, another White co-worker was discussing the politics of Latin America when the subject of El Salvador arose. Simonet was quick to challenge the negative racialization that ascribed all Salvadorans as being violent: "Somebody was talking in regard to the gangs in El Salvador, and at that point I said, 'I am *salvadoreña* and I'm not a gang member.' She just looked at me...they were like you know, the Salvadorans...I said (*shakes head*) Nuh-uh. No. Not everyone." Although gang members are often depicted as men, a *Washington Post* article noted a rising involvement of women participating in MS 13's gang violence. In response, ICE members began scrutinizing girls and young women equally as much as they do with males for MS 13 involvement (Miller and Jouvenal 2018). In any case, Simonet was still subject to Salvadoran generalization, as she was forced to justify her existence as not being connected to the violence in El Salvador. Had she not interjected, the conversation would

have snowballed into false accusations about her community. Despite her act of defiance, this uncomfortable situation led Simonet to refrain over time from using the term Salvadoran openly among other people. In her eyes, avoiding the term around people she feels uncertain with detaches her from the gang violence of her home country.

Similarly to Simonet, Jay discusses how media depiction of the Taliban makes it difficult for him to personally accept the ‘Afghan’ label. As an ethnic minority, Jay mentions how his Tajik identity already made it difficult for him to be seen growing up in Afghanistan. When he arrived in the US, navigating his identity became more complicated because he was labeled only as ‘Afghan.’ As more demonizing media coverage on the Taliban took place, he began avoiding the label: “I wouldn’t say I’m Afghan, no. I used to be okay with it. But not anymore. Because of the Taliban. They make everybody look bad. They make the whole people of the country look bad, and they make the religion look bad. And it’s not our fault.” According to Jay, the Taliban has essentially become the ‘face’ of the country. Therefore, Jay and other refugees often have to deal with how violence abroad translates to interpersonal acts of racism in the US. By avoiding the label ‘Afghan,’ Jay attempts to rid himself of the burdens negative racializations bring.

Positive Attributions: *trabajadores* and *sorrys*

Although xenophobic attitudes form their racialization, Salvadorans and Afghans also experience alternative racialized characterizations. The second half of the perceived racialized binary involves “positive” racializations for being “hardworking” or a “victim.” Similar to negative racializations, positive racializations derive from ideas

about the refugee's country of origin and gain validity through the media. However, in this alternative perspective, Salvadorans and Afghans are viewed as embodying resilience against the violence abroad. Having experienced the hardships of extreme conflict, refugees arrive to the US seeking safety and survival. Thus, "positive" attributions form Salvadoran and Afghan racialization in a way that ties their existence to enduring their pasts.

The positive racialization of Salvadorans as "hardworking" is congruent with the stereotype that Latinxs have a good work ethic (Brown et al. 2018; Hallett 2012). When asked how other communities see Salvadorans outside of their negative characterizations, participants shared how people viewed their willingness to work hard regardless of the struggles they have faced. For example, Saúl, a 45-year-old pastor, described the praise he's received from bosses of different ethnic backgrounds: "Salvadorans in general are characterized as people who don't give up, in the work sense...Salvadorans are hard workers. It doesn't matter the hours; it doesn't matter how much time. They will always prevail. That I've heard from Asian bosses, White bosses, and even Mexican bosses." Almost all Salvadoran respondents came to this similar conclusion, using words like "*luchadores*" or "fighters" that "never say no" to the work put in front of them. Mauricio, a 37-year-old journalist, describes how even when we think of people on the street asking for money, Salvadorans or other Latinxs are always seen instead at corners selling flowers or fruit trying to live their day to day: "We don't ask; we try to work instead."

But when asked to explain these narratives, Saúl tied these racializations to El Salvador's violent history:

“My country, we had a war from the 70s, 80s. It was very strong for us, where it made us mature and wake up...it served as an experience for us to learn where we come from. We come from war...So I think we got up, we fought, and we don't turn our backs to any work, no? ...Our parents taught us that and well now I'm trying to teach that to my kids. We have to work, and we can't turn the other cheek.”

From Saúl's perspective, the stress of war helped push Salvadorans toward a common goal to work hard and succeed.

Although their previous struggles play a role in their work ethic, refugees' past was sometimes regarded through a normalization of violence. Vicenta, a 22-year-old DACA recipient, laughed when remembering how her father would recount stories of his time in El Salvador as “character developments.” Having suffered trauma, like “see[ing] somebody killed in front of him,” her father would use his violent past as “lessons” for Vicenta to learn from. Whether or not these stories normalize the violence, the Salvadoran experience is built off of the hardships they experienced before arriving to the US. As indicated by Saúl's analysis, Salvadorans look to pass down a good work ethic to their children, like Vicenta, setting the example for future generations to come.

Conversely, positive racializations of Afghans as “victims” is consistent with views of Afghans as in need of “saving” (Nojan 2022; Selod 2018). In contrast to narratives of Afghans as agents of violence, this alternative racialized label makes Afghans out to be subjects of their suffering. Ava, an 18-year-old hijabi student, recalls how even before the Taliban's takeover in 2021, when she would tell other people she was Afghan, it was always met with a “I'm so sorry.” After hearing it so much, Ava was annoyed for always being painted as a figure of her presumed trauma: “I think, why? Why?! Why would you feel sorry?”

Ahmad, a 19-year-old grocery store employee, explains that because of the violence Americans think he has endured, they often view him and his community as being “depressed” and “damaged.” While Ahmad was living in Afghanistan, he graduated from high school and completed the university entrance exam, the *konkooor*. However, because of the threat the Taliban posed in his hometown of Herat, he was forced to leave with his family. As opposed to the “in your face” violence that Americans believe Afghans endure, Ahmad explains that his trauma stems more from being “scared all the time” even before the Taliban took Herat.

Similarly, Zubaida, a 24-year-old hijabi cashier, describes that her American friends tend to view her in awe because of what they see on the news:

“They know about [the Taliban] and they watch the news, everything. And they are torturing [people]...When they know about the Afghani woman’s life, they say ‘we cannot imagine.’ They see an Afghani woman is very strong woman. Because after [everything that’s happened] why they should do that? ...it’s very hard, in Afghanistan for women to go outside and do shopping. Don’t do this, don’t do this...and when they think about [it], ‘but it’s so hard, I cannot imagine them.’”

Zubaida’s experience with her racialization is two dimensional. On one hand, Americans make her out to be “strong” knowing the trauma she may have endured encountering the Taliban. On the other hand, she is further commended given the extreme depictions of Islam as rescinding and oppressing the agency of women. Although she shares Ahmad’s lived realities of being labelled a “victim,” she and other Afghan women—and especially hijabis—are positively regarded for their resilience to the patriarchy. As a result, other people express their ‘sorrys’ to Afghans, feeling as though they are providing sympathy for an unreversible history.

“Es por cheap labor. Por responsable, por trabajador, y por no problemático”

“Like as if I’m a beggar and they’re giving donation”

What makes these racializations part of a “perceived” racialized binary is how society and its institutions use these narratives in a way that subjugates these refugees. Although the attributions of being “hardworking” or a “victim” have perceivable benefits (i.e., work, sympathy, etc.), they end up working against Salvadorans and Afghans. Positive racializations belittle these refugees, in ways that are concealed through added resources. For example, because of the strong work ethic ascribed to Salvadorans and Latinxs, they may be more likely to be hired for employment because they are seen as being best fit for the job. Ángel, who is a retired mechanic, recounts how his White ex-boss would hire Latinxs on the spot. Even if they didn’t speak English, his boss preferred Latinxs to other applicants of different racial-ethnic backgrounds: “Why? Because the *indito*, among others, came to work to get a better life...The one who barely spoke English? ‘Tell him to come tomorrow. He starts tomorrow.’ This is happening for a number of reasons. They hire him because of cheap labor. For being responsible, for being a hard worker, and for not being problematic.” Despite the racialization leading to opportunities for work, the employment is contingent on the fact that employers can exploit them. In comparison to other people who may complain about their rights, Salvadorans or Latinxs with a language barrier face greater challenges to communicating any grievances they may have as workers. Therefore, the refugees are being perceived as good enough to do the work, but not good enough to receive its benefits.

The racialization also assumes that Salvadorans are willing and able to take on labor other Americans *don't want* to do. More specifically, people, like Danny, who are undocumented and living under the radar to avoid detection by immigration authorities, end up taking these jobs because they know other Americans believe themselves to be 'unfit' for laborious work:

"I am going to be the person that the US wants me to be in order for them to give me the opportunity and right to stay here... Yes, they have an image of Salvadorans being *pandilleros*. So, do you think if I come here, and my mentality is to do what the *pandilleros* do. The US is not going to give any opportunities to me.... For them, if you know a job is going to provoke a lot of fatigue and is very heavy, you're going to put the person who needs the money. Let's put the Latinos to do the hard labor because they're the ones that come here with the mentality of making money and don't quit."

Danny's predicament sheds light on a number of important aspects. He, like Ángel, mentions that people view "the Latinos" as coming here with the goal of making money regardless of the job they do. Thus, Salvadorans are likely to be praised for their determination to achieve their goals; yet, they are also more susceptible to exploitation. Notably, people like Danny, who do not have the security of legal immigration status, are more likely to play the part by "be[ing] the person the US wants [them] to be" if it means they could eventually get citizenship. Lastly, leaning into his positive racialization of being "hardworking" allows Danny and other people like him to avoid being racialized as a "*pandillero*," or his negative racialization. Therefore, in the event he is exploited for his labor, at least he can say he deserves to get his papers because he worked hard to contribute to society as opposed to being a burden.

Meanwhile, due to the way other people pity refugees, Afghans are somewhat rewarded with resources because they are seen as worthy. Sadaf, a 68-year-old banker,

recalls when she had just arrived in the US. After moving from country to country, she was agitated, having found out that they were transferring her family again to another state with the US:

“So then they said, ‘okay, all the refugees in one room.’ And this is the feeling! The kind of discriminating and feeling like we are animals. My dad feeling like insulted because we didn’t have that kind of life back then, we have comfortable, luxury life. Why they treat us like that? ...[we] were going to Virginia and Virginia was cold... they have those kind of coats and jackets for people to take... So I felt like as if I’m a beggar and they’re giving donation. It was kind of insulting... it was a kind of pride. The pride didn’t allow us to take [the jackets].”

Despite the possibility of gaining resources from the US government, Sadaf and other Afghans feel like charity cases, knowing they are capable of providing for themselves. Furthermore, Sadaf felt patronized for receiving resources from the US military, considering how her family never worried about money back in Afghanistan. Halima recalls a similar sentiment when she first moved to the US, noting that her family “hated” receiving money from the government. As soon as they got a permit to work, her entire family was quick to get jobs, despite her younger sister only being 16 years old. Given the gravity of their past, refugees who were racialized “positively” were also given aid because they were perceived as being “good.” Thus, similar to the Salvadoran experience, some Afghans were granted access to resources that enabled a sense of security. Yet, the material security came with a sense of subjugation.

Because of the ways in which these resources are awarded, Salvadoran and Afghan participants report frustration with a system that belittles them. Although positive racializations ascribe “positive” traits, they do not always translate to a positive self-view. This creates an internalized struggle because refugees feel they are not always recognized

for the struggles they have endured while in the US. For instance, Ana, a 42-year-old housekeeper, does not always feel good about being a “hard worker” because she is not always rewarded for it. She feels that other people discourage her from excelling or getting a more lucrative job because they believe she will not amount to something more:

“[We] are seen as always trying to improve our lives or become educated to get a better job...[but] if someone wanted a better job or worked harder, there’s always someone that’s gonna tell them no, you won’t be able to, or negative things...What I see in Latinos is more envy, right? Like, why is he able to have that and I don’t? When it should be the opposite, like, oh good job, work hard. Or give each other words of encouragement...For example, if someone wanted to excel, it’s as if they’re intentionally tripping them so they don’t succeed. Why him and not me.”

Because America makes it difficult for everyone succeed, the competitive nature makes it so that people are pitted against each other. As a result, Ana believes that her environment impedes possibilities for her to thrive, as opposed to having a community that supports her endeavors. Therefore, even though she is viewed as wanting or attempting to “work hard,” she believes she may be unable to reap the full benefits of her labor.

Mauricio explains that before he became a well-known journalist, he worked several service jobs that would repeatedly deny him opportunities for him to work on his studies. Like Ana, Mauricio has struggled and worked hard, given the amount of “[in]flexibility” or “obstacles” that have thwarted his growth. Even while he was fighting to become a journalist, many people denied his shot on television because he is “*morenito*,” or too dark, or because he “isn’t a pretty boy.” His initial inability to overcome these barriers reflect a larger battle that have painted him, Ana, other Salvadorans, and in general people of color as being utilitarian, or working and servicing

for people in power (Hardy 2022). Thus, he believes that he was given a rare chance at achieving his goals, because most of the time “in our community the problem is that those opportunities aren’t always there.”

The perceived “benefit” of gaining other people’s sympathy also engendered internal frustrations for many Afghans. Liz, a 50-year-old medical technician, was forever scarred when her family barely escaped death as the Taliban burned down their home. Now living undocumented in the US, she has worked hard to get a job and has been waiting several years to be granted asylum. Despite her extreme hardships, Liz is frustrated and tearfully exclaims how she is tired of being patronized. Instead, she would rather be regarded for her accomplishments:

“Everyone says to me now, ‘Oh, how did you manage it?’ And ‘how did you live there, is it hard for you? I am so sorry about you.’ It hurts me, you know. (*Gets emotional*) ...I don’t like sorry about. I’m proud of myself, I’m proud of my kids, I’m proud of my husband. Without nothing support we stand on our feet. We proud of that. With nothing, with no donations, we do it ourselves, we are proud, I don’t want sorry.”

Although the positive racializations invoke pity from strangers, Liz like other Afghans does not feel pride for the reasons others praise her for. Liz would rather be acknowledged for the effort she put into building her life in the US, including “start[ing] from zero” three times and contemplating but avoiding suicide.

Similar to Liz, Mahmood, a 38-year-old security guard, escaped one night when the Taliban had kidnapped and nearly beaten him to death. Coming from a life of luxury, Mahmood never imagined being forced to leave Afghanistan. Now as he awaits asylum in the US, Mahmood struggles to understand his liminal legality; he receives benefits from the government but simultaneously lacks proper documents: “If I’m not refugee,

why I'm here? ...I lost my everything." In addition to his frustrations with the US immigration system, Mahmood believes that the rewards he gets from the government emasculate him. As opposed to other Americans—especially men—who can “give back” to US society, he feels that people pity him instead: “A man, really, he would never accept this life. A man. Not all men, but a man. I'm really a man. I want to do some job. I want to do some business here. I want to pay tax. I want to. I want to give back all benefits for American. Really. Because they are helping me. And I want to help, too...But right now I'm not happy because I can't.” For Mahmood, being “a man” means not accepting pity or charity from the government. As a result, he is frustrated with how people view him, knowing that he could change their perception of him if he were given the opportunity.

Productos de las guerras

The negative and positive racializations of Salvadorans and Afghans reveal an experience embedded within a deeper consequence of turmoil and violent conflict. Under the lens of the Critical Refugee framework, one can evaluate these important narratives and compare groups along a shared history. Although each refugee reported different means of arrival to the US, one common denominator persists in their departure: their migration comes as a result of a growing instability and fear within their home country. Furthermore, the involvement of Western powers, specifically the US within El Salvador and Afghanistan, indirectly exacerbates the local conditions that made life unstable.

Had efforts been made to mitigate conditions abroad, millions of families would have not otherwise been forced to leave. Saúl echoes this sense of instability as he

explains how the quality of life in El Salvador made it difficult for people to feel safe: “the US brought its weapons into my country and armed peasants...[also] recruiting children of 12, 13, or 14 years so they can fight in war. Psychologically that affects us, right? A country in war, the traumas, the problems. Many of these families that migrated lost their families in their country, El Salvador.” The longstanding effects of US militarism ultimately fuel current situations within these nations, pushing these migrants to find refuge elsewhere. In change, the pain these people bear result from the violence they have then had to endure. In some cases, it has created a sense of resentment. When reflecting upon her migration, Esra responds with grim demeanor as she explains her rejection of an American identity: “No. Here, it would never be my home...[the US] they invaded my country. They used my country for their own sake, for their war. And if they didn’t, my country wouldn’t be like that now. It would be much safer.” Unable to resist the political affairs of her home country, Esra, like many Afghans, is left feeling helpless with little options for survival. In the words of Saúl, a refugee then becomes “*producto de la guerra*” or a product of war, that embodies tangible, breathing consequences for war and violence abroad.

VI. DISCUSSION

Salvadoran and Afghan refugees in Southern California must negotiate the racializations linking them to “negative” and “positive” attributions. Negative racializations involve the attributes of being “violent” or a “terrorist” that are particular to the extreme gang violence and terrorism of El Salvador and Afghanistan. These hostile formations may be realized once people outside of their community are informed of the

refugees' roots, and as a result, believe that the refugees are undeserving of security, resources, or a sense of belonging. To avoid these negative racializations, many Salvadorans and Afghans find themselves attempting to blend-in with other immigrants or abandoning their national identities altogether. As these refugees grapple with negative attributions, they believe that the ongoing portrayal of violence of their home countries in the media exacerbate these narratives. Unable to shape the uncontrollable situations abroad, Salvadorans and Afghans must then bear the responsibilities of foreign affairs while continuously suffering its consequences.

Positive racializations involve sympathetic attributions such as “hardworking” or a “victim.” Comparable to negative racializations, positive racializations are formed from the ongoing violence occurring in the countries of origin. Salvadorans and Afghans are painted as the victims rather than the perpetrators of the chaos abroad. People outside of their community view these refugees as being resilient for enduring their pasts and as deserving of support and resources. For example, Salvadorans who are viewed as being “hardworking” tend to gain more access to employment and being a “victim” might entail more aid to Afghans. However, job opportunities might only exist because of the perceivable benefits an employer could gain and distributing resources may come in the form of patronization. The impact of positive racialization results in internal frustrations for both of these refugees, in that the traits that are seen as “good” are not necessarily what they hope to be acknowledged for. As a result, “hardworking” and “victim” racializations ultimately make up the “perceived” binary, in that both the racializations themselves and its impacts subjugate refugees on an individual and institutional level.

“Negative” and “positive” racializations can be evaluated using the Critical Refugee framework. The characterizations that socially construct these refugees only exist because of the political unrest of El Salvador and Afghanistan: (a) negative societal labels tie Salvadorans and Afghans back to the ongoing militarization of MS 13 and the Taliban; and (b) positive societal labels emanate from resilience despite their endured trauma. It is crucial to evaluate the treatment of these refugees in relation to their socially constructed labels. These racializations would cease to exist if not for the consequences of foreign intervention and US militarism in these nations.

The findings of this study suggest refugees share an interwoven lived experience that racializes them in the context of ongoing trauma and war of Latin American and SWANA. Rather than treating displacement as mutually exclusive incidents, this research weaves together the strong implications of immigrant migration out of Latin America and SWANA to their life in the US. The longstanding effects caused by colonialism and imperialism ultimately derive from extraction of resources, profit over humanity, and exclusion as they navigate US society. Without recognizing the Western actors that manipulated foreign political and economic structures, we ignore the stronger hegemonic implications that drove these groups to migrate. Thus, acknowledging these stories as interconnected creates a more profound refugee experience by accentuating immigrant struggles in relation to their conflict abroad. The ability to intertwine these two narratives together is what makes this research a unique, keen production of knowledge that uplifts immigrant stories from a bottom-up perspective.

This study has implications for the use of the Critical Refugee framework and future research in migration studies. First, these findings add to the current empirical and theoretical research that examines the Latinx and SWANA migrant experiences, namely as it concerns their racialization (Brown et al. 2018; Chavez 2013; García 2017; Hallett 2012; Nojan 2022; Selod 2018; Trujillo 2017). Furthermore, it expands the current work that evaluates refugees from a critical perspective (Espiritu 2006, 2021; Ghanayem et al. 2021; Schlund-Vials 2016; Vang 2020), but does so by looking at two unexplored groups in relation to each other. By examining the data with nuanced approaches of racialization and a Critical Refugee lens, this work broadens how scholars can critically assess immigrant stories under an intersectional, theoretical lens.

In addition to the findings presented in this thesis, the data suggests that immigration status influences refugee integration and access to resources in the US (i.e., financial stipends, work permits, medical care, housing, pathway to citizenship, etc.). The next steps in exploring this data could be used toward writing effective policy measures that take into consideration historical issues in order to mitigate refugee citizenship. Future studies should evaluate how immigration status exacerbates the already racialized conditions refugees endure while living in the US, so as to better address their needs for integration.

Although this study aimed to understand Salvadoran and Afghan racialization in southern California, it cannot make claims as to how these communities experience racialization in other parts of the US. For example, Salvadorans and/or Afghans in the South may have different racialized archetypes that encompass or are mutually exclusive

to the perceived binary. Therefore, future research could examine these populations outside of California to evaluate whether these commonalities exist under a shared Critical Refugee perspective. The refugee plight in the US context can be used to inform how these communities navigate interpersonal exchanges as well as the larger immigration institutions. Although this study evaluated the implications for Salvadoran and Afghan experience in California, future research could also look to apply these methods across various groups, tying experiences along commonalities of racialization and displacement.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Salvadorans

Name	Age	Period Arrived	Status Pathway
Rosario	56	Culminating War Period	Naturalized Citizen (Declined to answer)
Pablo	63	Culminating War Period	Undocumented → Naturalized Citizen (marriage)
Ángel	62	Culminating War Period	Undocumented → Asylum → Naturalized Citizen
Cristiano	52	Culminating War Period	Temporary Protected Status → Naturalized Citizen
Simonet	55	Culminating War Period	Permanent Residency → Naturalized Citizen
Miguel	33	Internal Militarized Threat	Temporary Protected Status → Naturalized Citizen
Mauricio	37	Internal Militarized Threat	Temporary Protected Status → Naturalized Citizen
Danny	39	Internal Militarized Threat	Undocumented
Roberto	32	Internal Militarized Threat	Amnesty → Naturalized Citizen
Vicenta	22	Internal Militarized Threat	DACA
Ana	42	Internal Militarized Threat	Travel Visa → Undocumented → Naturalized Citizen
Saúl	45	Internal Militarized Threat	Religious Visa
Jose	26	Internal Militarized Threat	Permanent Residency → Naturalized Citizen

Afghans

Name	Age	Period Arrived	Status Pathway
Halima	58	Culminating War Period	Refugee Status → Naturalized Citizen
Sadaf	68	Culminating War Period	Refugee Status → Naturalized Citizen
Osman	72	Culminating War Period	Refugee Status → Naturalized Citizen
Abdul	32	Culminating War Period	Refugee Status → Naturalized Citizen
Jay	22	Internal Militarized Threat	Refugee Status → Naturalized Citizen
Liz	50	Internal Militarized Threat	Travel Visa → Undocumented → Asylum Seeker
Eman	29	Internal Militarized Threat	Refugee Status
Ahmad	19	Internal Militarized Threat	Refugee Status
Mahmood	38	Internal Militarized Threat	Asylum Seeker
Esra	20	Internal Militarized Threat	Refugee Status
Ava	18	Internal Militarized Threat	Travel Visa → Undocumented → Asylum Seeker
Mohammad	25	Internal Militarized Threat	Refugee Status
Zubaida	24	Internal Militarized Threat	Asylum Seeker

Table 2: Racialization as a Perceived Binary

	Salvadorans	Afghan
Negative Attribution	<p>“Violent”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xenophobic attributions of MS 13 gang conflict in El Salvador as influencing Salvadoran behavior 	<p>“Terrorist”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamophobic attributions of the War on Terror/the Taliban in Afghanistan to Afghan behavior
Positive Attribution	<p>“Hardworking”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectation of Salvadoran work ethic that they work hard for survival and money 	<p>“Victim”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patronizing view that because Afghans are victims of war, they are worthy of ‘saving’