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From a "Limited Space" to a Much Wider Future: Meaning-Making Practices of Young Refugee Women Pursuing Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

This article analyzes the diverse migratory experiences that inform the narratives of refugee women from Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Iraq while these women navigate higher education as refugees in a small city in the U.S. It is important to contextualize that these women's experiences take place in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, especially given Lancaster's unique relationship to refugees. While refugee numbers have lagged more recently due to restrictions placed by the Trump administration, the longstanding commitment on the part of organizations like Church World Services and Bethany Christian Services to provide support to refugees signifies, to a certain degree, that Lancaster is different than the rest of the U.S. when it comes to welcoming refugees (Lancaster Online Staff Writer, 2019). To analyze our informants' migratory experiences which resulted in their pursuit of higher education in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the article explores informant participation in a wide range of meaning-making practices. In doing so, the article analyzes our informants' varying levels of struggle with imposed narratives. These imposed narratives have to do with refugees as they resettle in the U.S. The perception of refugees as victimized, impoverished, and destitute informs some of these refugee women's sense of being pitied in their new social structure. Grappling with these perceptions also challenges the informants' ability to construct their own narratives. The powerful yet nuanced influence of imagery on social discourses is pivotal in terms of shaping the narratives of refugees. In turn, this imposed imagery and imposed narratives render authentic narratives all the more necessary.

Keywords: Democratic Republic of Congo; Iraq; Lancaster; Nepal; refugees

Publication Type: research article

Introduction

This article analyzes the diverse migratory experiences that inform the narratives of refugee women from Nepal, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Iraq as these women navigate higher education in the U.S. The article illustrates how these women view themselves as moving "from a limited space" of their past and present as refugees to "a much wider future" that is informed but not defined by their refugee status. While the local context of Lancaster, Pennsylvania (PA), and the broader context of being refugees in the U.S. are essential to our study, it is also important to note that wider trends of contemporary forced migration are applicable to our informants' experiences. As delineated by de Haas et al. (2020, pp. 9-11), "[d]omestic politics, bilateral and regional relationships and national security policies

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of states around the world are increasingly affected by international migration" (p. 10). As in other parts of the world, our informants find themselves at the center of a polemic between humanitarian and religious groups advocating for their protection, and groups who see their large-scale arrival as a threat to the state. We examine these tensions in the context of Lancaster, PA.

Between 2013 and 2017, Lancaster welcomed 1,300 refugees, a fact that earned it the moniker "the refugee capital" from the BBC (Strasser, 2017). In turn, those refugees have found long-term support through refugee agencies such as Lancaster's local office of Church World Services. A key player in refugee services in Lancaster, Church World Services was founded in 1946 by bringing together several religious groups in an effort to assist with a range of global humanitarian efforts. As verified by S. Gromek, the Development and Communications Coordinator at Church World Services in Lancaster, the fact of the matter is that Lancaster has been uniquely poised to provide for refugees for the nearly 33 years that her outpost of Church World Services has been supporting refugees in the city (personal communication, January 22, 2020).

Understanding Lancaster's unique context in relation to refugees assists in contrasting our informants' experiences with that of refugees in other parts of the U.S. Notwithstanding this uniqueness, refugees in Lancaster and refugee agencies in the city have been deeply affected by the broader historical forces at play in the U.S. Since being elected in 2016, the U.S. president, Donald Trump, has rolled out several executive actions designed to cut down on the total number of refugees, tightening that figure every year since 2017. According to S. Gromek, at this point, the number has been cut down to 18,000, with refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo starting to be affected by the restrictions (personal communication, January 22, 2020). In contrast, Muslim refugees from selected countries were swiftly and initially targeted by such measures as the 2017 Travel Ban, Executive Order 13769, entitled, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States" (Rogers, 2020, p. 18), with these restrictions have intensified in 2020. Even though Lancaster's more tolerant context is critical to understanding our informants' narratives, this broader national and historical moment must also be contextualized as a variable in their narrative experiences.

To analyze our informants' migratory experiences, which resulted in their pursuit of higher education in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the article explores informants' participation in a wide range of meaning-making practices. In doing so, the article analyzes our informants' varying levels of struggle with imposed narratives. The article's focus on narrative is grounded in its use of the ethnographic methodology from the discipline of anthropology. An ethnographic narrative method is believed to be the closest one can get to the experience itself from a retrospective viewpoint (Wong, 1991). The approach enables the individual to portray a multilayered experience, which uses facts from outer and inner reality—objective occurrences together with emotional states and attitudes towards what happened and what one did or felt at the event, or when one recounts it. All is controlled and chosen, "edited", as Rosenthal (1991) put it, by the narrator, which in this case are the refugees themselves (p. 39).

Thus, making use of ethnography as the article's methodology allows for multiple truths associated with each woman's story and meaning-making practices to be articulated in her own words. These sentiments regarding "truths" are further echoed by Moore (1994), who asserted that "there are no transcendental truths, no absolute grounds on which one can stand to make judgment, no metanarratives" (p. 348). As Geertz (1983) asserts, all ethnographic knowledge is

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subjective, context-bound, and partial; it is committed to personal perspectives and starting points of the researchers, readers (and participants), and has to be accepted or rejected as such. Hence, in search of multiple "truths," ethnography, particularly interactive ethnographic storytelling, offers a fruitful method through which to express the journeys of these women. When speaking of journeys, we emphasize not just the spatial migration, but also their journeys of constructing their narrative identities through ongoing negotiation/updating of their meaning-making systems.

Similar understandings of searching for "truth" concerning the "refugee experience" have been articulated in Fontanari's (2019) work *Lives in Transit: An Ethnographic Study of Refugees' Subjectivity across European Borders*. Her use of multisided ethnography concerning the multiple lived journeys (or implicit "truths") associated with the migration of several "protagonists" (p. 10) in part situated her participants as a constant authoritative voice at the foreground of an ever-changing physical landscape. In the case of our informants, they must grapple with several kinds of imposed narratives as they resettle in the U.S. The perception of refugees as victimized, impoverished, and destitute informs some of these refugee women's impressions and experiences in their new social structure. Grappling with these perceptions also challenges the informants' abilities to construct their own narratives, from the ethnographic perspective of how narrative is shaped as a negotiation between objective occurrences and subjective truths.

Thus, our informants' meaning-making is vital in terms of deconstructing the metanarrative of how a refugee woman is viewed through the contemporary discourse of migration. While prior depictions of "heroic" refugees focused on European individuals fleeing World War II, another discourse emerged in the sixties and seventies regarding the developing world and its flight to the global North: one of floods of women and children fleeing the violence of volatile regions (Johnson, 2011, p. 1030). The question must be raised regarding the stark historical romanticism of the past and the stigmatized depiction in the contemporary moment: where does the present-day refugee woman situate herself?

More specifically, the article poses the following questions: how can the meaning-making found in narrative practices assist these women refugees in making sense of their past and present experiences as they pursue higher education in the U.S.? Furthermore, how can creating these narrative identities for themselves help these young refugee women find ways to reconfigure their pasts and project themselves into meaningful futures? In this article, we will argue that this creation of narrative identity through meaning-making processes is a source of empowerment for our informants and that their storytelling includes several common themes. These themes include our informants' experiences with trauma, their evolving understandings of their roles as women, and their experiences with English acquisition. For one informant, the trauma continues to be in the foreground of the present moment while for others, trauma is much less conspicuous. Making sense of their roles as women in their home cultures and in their new cultural context is an important element in terms of creating narrative identities. Finally, analyzing how the informants learned English and their current relationship to the language reveals a lot about their narrative identities and their sense of what the future holds for them.

Literature Review

Refugees, Labels and Dominant Narratives

While there is significant evidence that shaping their narratives can assist refugees in making

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positive sense of their experiences and shaping new identities, it is also important to note that the refugee label itself creates various complications. As Zetter (2007) pointed out, "label" works better for refugees than the word "category" given the complex way that the word "label" implies both a process of identifying with an identity and as a mark of identity. Zetter preferred to use the word "label" because it can be "independently applied" to someone and it is also a word that can be meaningfully chosen and amended. Finally, Zetter argued for the refugee label given how it functions in very concrete, real-world ways, as well as metaphorical and symbolic ones. As is clearly the case with our informants, there is a way that the refugee label plays a critical role for them in "forming, transforming, and politicizing an identity" (p. 172).

Shifts in the politicizing of the refugee label have occurred in a few distinct ways relevant to our informant context. According to Johnson (2011), one such significant shift can be tracked from the much earlier depiction of refugees as respectably European to the nameless masses or "floods" coming from the "third" or developing world (p. 1023). "Floods" of women and children were and have been portrayed as fleeing the violence of volatile regions. As Johnson (2011) argued, this type of discourse "constructs victims" to mobilize donations and more poignantly, to mobilize discourses surrounding refugees with very real sociopolitical consequences. For Johnson (2011), "[w]hile the European victims of persecution who initially embodied the figure of the refugee were political and angry, the current victims are instead vulnerable and destitute" (p. 1030). For Martone (2006), the politicizing of the label on the part of refugee aid agencies to mobilize assistance through the deployment of "hopeless images" constitutes a failure to treat refugees with dignity, a provision that is an integral part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (p. 133). With the refugee crisis in the global south, the image of the refugee mother began to be deployed and then was further cemented in its use in the 1980s by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Ultimately, Johnson (2011) noted that within a changing political context in the global North, there has been an increased push to send aid "over there" and to draw firmer boundaries to prevent refugees from coming in, rather than asylum "here" (p. 1033).

Refugees and Narrative Processes

While Martone (2006) and Johnson (2011) have focused on sympathy-provoking images that frame refugees as victims, other scholars have drawn attention to how sympathetic responses from the media have transformed to hostility (Georgiou & Zabrowski, 2017, pg. 3). In the case of our article, as is the case in Bonini Baldini's (2019) "Narrative Capability: Self-Recognition and Mutual Recognition in Refugees' Storytelling," critical reflection upon these media-generated polarizing representations of refugees "brings attention to the need to view the process of recognizing the refugee in relation to the act of narration" (p. 133). Furthermore, Bonini Baldini (2019) goes on to elaborate upon why the act of narration becomes so pivotal to refugee identity:

> The concept of recognition becomes central in media studies when one considers that the way the subject is narrated shapes the way we are able to think of it, and the way we narrate it shows who we are. Consequently, the way refugees imagine themselves operates on two levels. The first is symbolic, where the refugee has already been portrayed by the person chosen to speak for them. The second is juridical normative, related to the possibility of being considered a social and political subject. (p. 133)

To even be designated a "refugee" from a legal perspective, potential refugees must provide a cohesive and viable narrative; it is this storytelling that stands in as their evidence rather than

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any other type of legal document (Vogl, 2013, p. 64). Aside from narration being inextricably implicated in the seeking of refugee status, our article also proposes that narratives are the sites where refugees can craft and convey alternative visions of what it means to be a refugee in the U.S.

For several researchers focusing on refugee youth who have resettled in the U.S., a focus on narrative provides a way to discuss their subjects' abilities to develop a sense of agency around their lives or a sense of empowerment (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018; Shapiro, 2018). For Ryu and Tuvilla (2018), who interviewed Burmese adolescents resettled in a Midwest city in the U.S., the ability to author their own narratives signifies being able to "contest marginalizing narratives" by demonstrating themselves to be "valuable members of local communities and change agents for a more equitable society" (p. 539). In doing so, these Burmese adolescents are also projecting themselves into a meaningful future that offers them more space in which to realize their aspirations.

Refugees' Meaning-Making, Global and Situational

In order to make sense of repeating patterns in our informants' transcripts, the article combines an attention to how informants craft their resettlement narratives with an analysis of how meaning-making plays a role in the crafting of those narratives. When it comes to refugees and meaning-making practices, most of the literature focuses on the role of trauma, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) documented as the main psychopathology among refugees (Fazel et al., 2005). Aside from scholarship focused on trauma-informed meaning-making, there has also been increased attention to positive psychological adjustment on the part of refugees (Levine et al., 2018). That said, regardless of whether or not a refugee is able to make a positive adjustment and experience posttraumatic growth, it is important to explain how psychological meaning-making occurs, particularly given how these meaning-making practices figure in the informant narratives featured in this article.

Broadly speaking, humans make meaning of their life experiences at global and situational levels. As Park (2013) articulated in her article on the meaning-making model, the global level refers to an overall worldview comprised of beliefs, goals, and a sense of purpose. Together, these beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose inform an individual's orientation to the world. In contrast to this holistic outlook, situational meaning-making has to do with appraisals of individual situations. For meaning-making to undergo a more radical shift than might ordinarily be experienced, an individual must experience a significant change that does not jibe with either their global or situational meaning-making. To put it in a slightly different way, discrepancy provides the catalyst for the meaning-making practices that this article focuses on when analyzing our informant narratives. When situations are incongruent with an individual's global sense of meaning, meaning-making occurs to reduce that discrepancy. When global meaning-making shifts, individuals can experience growth in terms of a new identity, a new way of looking at the world.

Another way of thinking about discrepancy as part of the meaning-making process is to consider how it can lead to shattering an individual's core assumptions about themselves and their place in the world, thus providing a powerful need for meaning-making. When meaning-making leads to growth or post-traumatic growth, it is frequently likely that certain factors have affected the likelihood of this happening, amongst them: demographics, social support, religion, coping styles, and trauma. In the case of refugee populations, there are other powerful factors to

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consider, such as culture and the refugee's agency as experienced within their migratory experience. It is important to note in the case of refugees that the complicated landscape of resettlement in camps, and different phases of displacement, mark different phases in meaning-making.

The Nepali Context for the Refugee Experience

For those who have argued for a unique context that refugee experiences bring to meaning-making practices, the role of culture and the specificity of migratory experience are paramount. In the case of our informants, the specific contexts that inform their accounts are frequently evident in their narratives and quite different from one another. In terms of the Nepalese context, it is critical to note that ethnicity in Nepal cannot be understood apart from the external political factors that have made themselves inescapably palpable on villagers' lives (Levine, 1987, p. 86). Nepal's restrictive citizenship regulations have resulted in a complicated holding pattern of statelessness for many populations displaced to Nepal, such as the Bhutanese, or even for Nepali who have been internally displaced.

When gender is factored into this complex political situation, Nepali women have and continue to be discriminated against when it comes to citizenship. In the 1990s, a new constitution restricted granting of citizenship by descent to Nepali men. Currently, married women cannot obtain a citizenship certificate "without the approval of their husband or father-in-law" (White, 2009, p. 29). On top of these restrictions placed upon women, White (2009) also notes "discriminatory and patriarchal practices in some communities which discourage women and girls from applying" for citizenship certificates (p. 28).

The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Refugee Experience

In the case of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who resettled in South Africa first, as is the case with our DRC informant, this South African resettlement posed unique problems. In one study with adult refugees from Zimbabwe and DRC, common themes that emerged were issues with work, xenophobia/racism, mental health, physical safety, housing, healthcare, and quality of life (Labys et al., 2017). DRC refugees in South Africa frequently encounter xenophobia that covers a broad range of behaviors, from verbal hostility to physical violence. In 2008, the xenophobia reached an all-time high with widespread attacks that left 62 people dead and many others fleeing the country; once again, in 2015, a similar pattern emerged with a death count of seven people and a resulting displacement of thousands of refugees.

These outbursts were marked by violence which drew the attention of the *Los Angeles Times*. On May 20, 2008, the newspaper's headline read "Migrants Burned Alive in S. Africa." The trauma of these experiences on the refugee consciousness cannot be downplayed. Moreover, once the transition is made to the U.S., there is a documented loss of social support that impacts DRC refugee women's well-being (Wachter & Gulbas, 2018, p. 107). While Wachter and Gulbas (2018) were able to pinpoint how their DRC study participants come to "learn how to stand alone," they were simultaneously able to illustrate the price at which this self-sufficiency comes, with "implications for health, mental health, and overall well-being" (p. 112).

Iraqi Context for Refugee Experience

It is important to note that much research on Iraqi refugees in the U.S. has focused on groups

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that would have been displaced to refugee camps in conflicts that predated 2003. For the purposes of contextualizing our Iraqi informants' experiences, it is important to examine 2003 onwards. For those displaced due to the period of war between the U.S. and Saddam Hussein's regime, their experience would not have included refugee camps and instead would have meant living in other urban areas in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, prior to Syria's internal conflicts, which began in 2011 (Gangamma, 2018, p. 325). It is important to note the significance of resettling in the country that "led the war against Iraq" amidst "a current climate of religious and ethnic hostilities" that are different from what has been faced by other waves of Iraqi refugees (Gangamma, 2018; Campbell, 2016).

Methods

This ethnographic study blends an anthropological approach to interviewing informants with a more dialogic approach drawn from oral history methodology. In adapting the oral history approach to question-asking, we aimed to encourage our informants to feel as if the stories that they were telling were their own. The data collection consisted of in-depth interviews with three informants and took place over the course of two years between April 2017 and May 2019 at a medium-sized university in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The interviews were completed by the first author. The first author also completed the transcription of the interviews. An initial questionnaire was drafted that was tested and refined subsequently. We provide more details about the methodology below, including a discussion of the setting, the recruitment of informants, and the analytical lens that was employed.

Setting

Lancaster, and its surrounding area, is considered a major refugee resettlement hub in Pennsylvania (Jeffries, 2017). Located about 125 kilometers west of the city of Philadelphia, (the largest city in Pennsylvania), Lancaster is one of the oldest inland cities in the U.S. (City of Lancaster, n.d.) and one of the most populated cities in South Central Pennsylvania (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The selected university for this study, Millersville University, is classified by U.S. standards as a "predominantly white institution" (or PWI). However, located just three kilometers from the city of Lancaster, the number of refugee students at Millersville, in comparison to other universities in the south central Pennsylvania area, is relatively high.

Millersville University functions as a mid-size comprehensive undergraduate institution, with some graduate programs. Interviews for this research were conducted with women who had enrolled as undergraduate students at Millersville University. Millersville, Pennsylvania, provides the setting for most of the interactions described by informants unless they are specifically describing off-campus interactions. Thus, it is important to note that Lancaster's cultural attitudes toward refugees are arguably distinct from those at Millersville, which attracts students from all over the state of Pennsylvania.

Table 1 introduces the study participants. They ranged in age from 19 to 24 and came from Nepal, the DRC, and Iraq. Two of our informants had been forced to resettle more than once; these were our informants from the DRC and Nepal. We used the pseudonyms Flower, Sarah, and Leyla to distinguish between our informants. All were in various stages of their undergraduate degrees at the time of the study. Sarah and Flower had just begun their undergraduate careers, each attending the same summer bridge program at the university prior to starting their fall semester term. In the U.S., summer bridge programs are designed to help students from

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underrepresented groups get a head start on their academic careers. In contrast, Leyla was finishing up her last semester at Millersville University before graduating.

Table 1. Overview of Study Informants

Pseudonym	Birth Country	Country of Resettlement	Number of Years in U.S.	Languages	Year in College
Flower Johnson	Democratic Republic of Congo	South Africa; U.S.	Four years	English, French & Swahili	2nd semester First Year Student
Sarah Khan	Nepal	U.S. (Lancaster, PA)	Eight years	English & Nepali	2nd semester First Year Student
Leyla Al-fayed	Iraq	U.S. (Lancaster, PA)	Eight years	English & Arabic	2nd semester Junior (third year)

Each woman had come to the U.S. at a different age, and for different reasons. When Sarah was 11 years old, her parents applied for resettlement while living in a refugee camp in rural Nepal. In the case of Flower, her family had fled the ongoing conflict in the DRC, temporarily resettling in South Africa for most of her teenage years. At age 19, Flower and her family were resettled in Philadelphia prior to her attending university in the Lancaster area. Leyla, in comparison to Flower and Sarah, migrated with her family to the central Pennsylvania area because of family health concerns. Thus, Leyla's family had moved to the U.S. temporarily so that her father could undergo a medical operation. Due to the conflict happening in Iraq at the time, Leyla and her family stayed in the U.S., and established a second home in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E).

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a convenience sample. University programs that support students of color were contacted. In the U.S., the term "person of color" is used to designate anyone not considered white in order to highlight these groups' experiences with systemic racism (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). The significance of contacting this program lies in the fact that refugee students are frequently put in the same educational cohorts as U.S. minorities despite the label "students of color" more readily applying to the U.S. groups. Both Flower and Sarah were part of a summer bridge program that focused on college readiness. In contrast, Leyla and the co-author who conducted interviews were both members of the same student organization that focused on civic engagement and social change.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Concerning researcher self-reflexivity, the co-authors of this article situate themselves with the claim that we all embody multiple selves (Darling-Wolf, 2003). In the case of co-author Luck, his position as an African American black cis-gendered man, coming from a marginalized community that has also been painted with a broad brush of uniformity, assisted him in empathizing with certain struggles expressed by each woman — in particular, Flower, with whom he shared a sense

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of Black identity. Nonetheless, Luck finds it important to note that he was cautious in terms of how he drew conclusions about findings, instead attempting to identify how our informants make meaning of their experiences.

In the case of the other co-author, Santamaria interacted with several of these students during the context of their summer bridge experience. Thus, she had met the informants known as Sarah and Flower. Sarah's Nepali nationality was something that she discussed and shared during a writing exercise, although her status as a refugee was not. Flower did not disclose her nationality or her prior refugee status. Thus, as someone who served as an educator to some of our informants, embarking upon this study underscored the need to view these students from a three-dimensional perspective rather than simply lumping them together with American minorities attending a summer bridge program.

Instrument

Interview questions were drawn up to elicit informant narratives with encouragement for informants to voice their stories in ways that felt true to their personalities. Occasionally, questions were amended in the moment. The semiformal interview consisted of 15 questions that were meant to explore respondents' re-resettlement experiences, present realities, and imagined futures. Depending on their responses to various questions, the investigators would follow up with other questions to better understand each woman's narrative. The full questionnaire is included in the Appendix.

Procedure

The study was reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board. With the informants' consent, interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed by hand. Names were anonymized in consultation with the participants. Participants were asked if they preferred any pseudonym; otherwise they were assigned one by the researchers, based on some relationship to their personas.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically, then iteratively analyzed based on the thematic codes generated with our research questions in mind: how can the meaning-making that takes place during narrative practices assist our informants in making sense of their past, present, and future? To what degree will the current national context of the U.S. impact their sense of identity? To what degree will informants be able to imagine a less restrictive, more ample future for themselves?

While the second author conducted and transcribed the interviews, both authors engaged collaboratively on the thematic analysis. Our aim was to optimize intercoder reliability, i.e., to increase "the degree to which coders agree with each other about how themes are to be applied to qualitative data" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 104). We focused on repetitions in our informants' transcripts, as well as to how metaphors framed their narratives and experiences of transition and resettlement. By doing so, we arrived at the claim that narrating their pasts and presents helped these young women arrive at an amplified sense of space in their projected futures.

By focusing on repetitions, we were drawing from one of the qualitative methods for discerning

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themes described by Ryan and Bernard (2003) as being one of the best ways to determine what seems uppermost in an informant's mind (p. 89). Paying attention to repetition as a way of discerning themes then allows a researcher to make the most of the fact that people tend to circle through the same network of ideas (D'Andrade, 1991). In our search for this network of ideas, we found that our informants frequently came back to the themes of how refugees are perceived, how they processed trauma in their past, and what part English had played in their lives since resettlement. In the end, these themes began to add up to an answer about how our informants could envision a more spacious future in comparison to the past and present that they described.

Making Meaning Around Perceptions of Refugees

In the case of our Nepali informant, Sarah, there is a different sense in which the refugee label has become more ingrained in her identity than that of the other narrators. Unlike Leyla and Flower, Sarah grew up in a refugee camp. That experience was so normalized for Sarah that she was in fact unaware of what it really meant. In fact, Sarah pointed out that she had not really come to understand until recently that she was even from Nepal and that they were living in a refugee camp when she was very young. In sharp contrast, as a refugee in the U.S. context, Sarah did feel a sense of stigma attached to the label. So did Leyla and Flower. Sarah spoke about the issue of "poverty," of being "uneducated" and "unhappy" as negative depictions often associated with refugees. Her and others' comments strongly evoked Johnson's (2011) argument about the portrayal of refugees who are often constructed as categories (the "destitute mothers and children") in such a way as to mobilize aid, and making them less threatening, but along the way taking away their agency.

Ultimately, Sarah exhorted people to pay attention to the voices and choices of the refugees themselves. In doing so, she claimed refugees like her can gain a better sense of empowerment, and even downplay elements of forced displacement that they may reject or resist. When she stated that "it was not like they were forced to leave their country, or they had to leave their country; they just wanted to make their future better," Sarah framed refugees as more akin to immigrants. Indeed, as part of her meaning-making practices, Sarah has arguably redefined the term "refugee" because the meaning does not align with how she views herself (or her family situation). She seemingly found it empowering to choose whether or not the "refugee" label accurately described her journey and her current identity. In doing so, Sarah appeared to be partaking in a narrative strategy of reframing (and empowerment), which finds resonance in Ryu and Tuvilla's (2018) study of Burmese refugee adolescents. In their study, the adolescents also opted to reinterpret their refugee status as voluntary migration instead as an agentive act (p. 549).

Leyla seemed to regard the term "refugee" as a technicality rather than something that directly informed her reality. She explained that the term applied to her given that her "country of origin is in war" but simultaneously emphasized that her family moved primarily to address some health issues that her father was experiencing (i.e., seeking out medical care in the U.S.). This difference in Leyla's attitude toward the refugee label could perhaps also be ascribed to the fact that the Iraqi refugee experience in the U.S. has been distinctly different from many other refugee populations. Generalizations about Iraqi refugees from 2003 onward also appear to apply to Leyla. These generalizations include this group having been less likely to have experienced resettlement camps, and their having demographic and income profiles matching those of middle-income countries (Gangamma, 2018).

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Given her longer-term experiences in living in the U.S., it might not be surprising that Leyla refers to Donald Trump as "our president." Thus, even though she affirms early on during the interview that she is not quite American, Leyla seems to strike a more tenuous balance in terms of her sense of identity than the other informants, tending to sound more like someone with a hybrid identity rather than aligning with the label "refugee." However, when speaking about what she would like for people to know about refugees, Leyla affirms that she would like for people to realize that "none of us wanted to come here."

Besides affirming her status as a refugee in this sense, Leyla also differentiates between her situation and that of other refugees in terms of her social class. In commenting upon the refugee label, Leyla believes that there is a clear connection in people's minds between refugees and poverty and expresses the hope that more Americans would understand that professional people, such as her parents, could be a part of this population. In contrast to Leyla, Flower, our informant from the DRC, was much more acutely aware of how the refugee label had affected her life, particularly in terms of other people's perceptions of her based upon that label. Flower experienced the refugee label not only in the context of being a refugee in the U.S., but also in terms of having been a refugee in South Africa at the age of nine.

For Flower, a resurgence of what she herself characterized as "xenophobia" in South Africa meant needing to go into hiding after nearly four years of living there peacefully. It is interesting to note that both Flower's and Leyla's accounts consider xenophobia to be an integral part of what it means to be a refugee. For Flower, the term "refugee" also signified leaving one's country of origin due to war in order to find a "better life," but it also implied a necessary transience since her family needed to end up migrating once again to the U.S. In contrast to Leyla, Flower expressed a detailed understanding of the paperwork involved in applying for refugee status. Flower was able to describe the bureaucratic processes involved when it came to moving to South Africa and then to the U.S. The stigma attached to her refugee status seemed to motivate Flower to argue against the use of the term, instead opting for the term "immigrants." Thus, at one point in her interview, she asked rhetorically, "why can't you call me your sister instead of calling me a refugee?" Thus, like Sarah, Flower turned a questioning lens on the label as part of her meaning-making. Unlike Sarah, Flower's request was a more universalized exhortation for unity. What Sarah seemed to be looking for through her meaning-making regarding the refugee label was using the chosen migration label instead to emphasize more empowerment than what is implied by the phenomenon of forced migration. For Ryu and Tuvilla (2018), who studied Burmese refugee youth in a Midwestern city, engaging in this type of meaning-making entails challenging the dominant narratives about refugees (p. 549).

Roles of Women

The destitute, fleeing image of the contemporary refugee woman stands in stark contrast with the earlier image of the European refugee, a heroic figure stepping off a plane. Most notable is the fact that the latter is acknowledged as a powerful political figure with a sense of agency and voice. The perceived vulnerability that defines the image of the female refugee in much of the literature asserts her position as a contradiction: it means being vulnerable and having to show this vulnerability in order to receive protection, while, on the other hand, having to show resilience to be respected (Vigil & Abidi, 2018). In a sense, this required performance of vulnerability was best typified by the image of the drowned Syrian refugee child, Alan Kurdi, which circulated in 2015 on a global scale and became emblematic of a certain kind of refugee representation.

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To further investigate the narratives of our informants, there is a need to problematize the label of "refugee woman" and provide textual accounts of how each woman interprets the term in their meaning-making process. Johnson (2011) argued that traditional gender assumptions about women's inherent vulnerabilities and innocence have been mobilized to inform refugee policy, in addition to informing perceived social attitudes towards refugees. In their contemporary colonial contexts, traditional sociocultural norms that informed much of our participants' roles as women prior to resettlement are in the present moment being deconstructed/reconstructed in a way that each woman sees as meaningful to them. In these reconstructions, roles of self-perception, self-efficacy, and self-worth are investigated, transforming their self-definitions in their present moment. These transformations and the subsequent journeys of self-discovery that take place are indicative of the unique experiences of each woman, while all touch on common themes of gender-based expectations, marriage, and otherness. Each woman pulls from experiences of her past and reconstructs these experiences to be used in her present to make sense of her situation. The application and interpretation of each topic in the meaning-making systems of each woman furthermore offers insight into how these complex narrative identities take shape. Sarah, Leyla, and Flower have all found themselves in both imaginative and physical spaces of otherness. In these spaces, each woman grapples with how to challenge problematic traditional cultural values and reductive contemporary labels. Doing so allows our informants to move past the perceived imaginative and physical limits imparted on them. In Sarah's context, she recounted her experiences with gender discrimination as a product of patriarchal Nepali cultural norms and how, in part, these experiences have influenced her self-efficacy as a woman.

Explaining her perception of the positionality of women in Nepali Hindu culture, Sarah mentioned how spatial distance has offered some degree of "open-mindedness" on the part of the Hindu Nepali community in the U.S. At the same time, Sarah also commented upon the expectations placed upon her as a woman by the family structure:

> So it's like a culture thing since everybody [who] has come to the U.S., their minds have opened up a little bit, I guess. Being introduced or exposed to new stuff that happens here. But in Nepal most people are Hindu and, in the Hindu religion, husbands are treated as Gods, I guess, like some of the culture is not about religion some of it is just culture. Like giving food to husband before the wives eat. Those kinds of things, so basically the guys are the sole provider while the girls are supposed to be housewives. Those kinds of set ups, those kind of mindset. Basically, at home and stuff too, like I'm supposed to be the girl who is just in my parents' house as a guest. I'm gonna marry someone and leave so I shouldn't be someone to depend on, that kind of mindset and stuff.

Sarah's critique of traditional Nepali cultural practices continued to include gender discrimination when it came to education, briefly mentioning her mother's experience and how gender norms have been reinforced through other relatives:

> So most part of Nepal or India, yeah even it's till now, they have this mindset of taking the boys to school while the girls stay at home and help with the chores. That's what happened to my mom too. I know it was because she was the eldest but at the same time she was the girl so she had to send her brothers and little sisters to school while she stayed at home and helped mom, so it was like that. So, most of my parents and my grandparents had this mindset that I would [pause] that my education is useless because I would just marry someone and be a housewife. So like what's the point of education for them, but I feel like, now that I'm going to college, my cousins are going to college,

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> like more girls are going to college, that their minds are I guess being exposed to that. But most of their mindset is some of that stuff, like guys should be treated… for example, they would say they guys get the good food, girls you can eat whatever's left over. Like that kind of mindset use to be like in our family but I guess now we are separated from that.

Sarah's analysis illustrates the prescriptive norms that are imparted on her by her gender and how "marriage" and "education" separate her, thereby preventing her from being fully integrated into the family structure. Sarah further mentioned, "yeah I don't feel appreciated basically or that I belong anywhere because at home you're just there because you are going to get married and as the daughter, you're like is this my home or not? For example, they put that in my mindset that yeah." To contextualize Sarah's mention of "limited space," she was referring to her childhood, growing up until age 11 in a refugee camp in rural Nepal. Sarah's conceptualization of a physical space as being limited maps onto the sense of traditional Nepali gender role restrictions and how she felt those gender role restrictions loosening and even "opening up" the more time she spent in the U.S. More strikingly in terms of challenging limitations, Sarah elaborated:

> Basically I say I am independent I guess, because I used to think I should have my limits, like I should follow whatever my parents want. I should know where I am going or shouldn't do this or do that, this is for them this is not for me. I felt like I had too many limitations to even like go out, that's why I feel like that's why I'm too in. But like coming to college, like being in ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]. I know helped a lot, being in a dense group stuff like that that made me open up to a new world that makes me feel more comfortable to be "I can be whoever I want" so stuff like that.

Speaking to how the refugee label impacts her perception of herself as a woman, Flower stated:

> I'm still African, for me I don't know but the people who are my friends they identify me as African and a tough woman a very tough and very ambitious I don't let people walk over and I'm very friendly but don't get on my bad side.

In contrast to Flower's meaning-making associated with the refugee woman label and how it applies to her, Sarah looked at the label as informing her trajectory into an imagined future:

> Whenever I think about refugee, how when someone asks me that question they are thinking about something poor or poverty or unhappy people, I know like that's what comes to their minds because when I ask them the same question they say those, but for me being a refugee I would never trade that for anything to be honest. Because if I didn't have that experience I wouldn't be who I am today.

For Leyla, the refugee label was much less contentious. In her interview, Leyla only mentioned her status as a refugee as a footnote in her overall narrative and said the term when talking about her family's migration from Iraq. Thus, she said, "we are considered as refugees because our country of origin is in war so we are considered as refugees, but as I said we were lucky enough for my dad to leave before there was any serious damage or anything would have happened." When asked during our interview what she thinks life would be like if her family did not leave before the situation happened in Iraq, Leyla stated, "I hate to say this but, I would probably not be outspoken, especially because I feel like women are treated as if they're

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diamonds back home." She further contextualized her response by referencing her extended family in the United Arab Emirates. For Leyla, her imagined future is informed by a sense of autonomous independence in the U.S., in contrast to what she imagines her future would look like had she not been forced to move to the U.S.:

> The thing is, girls over there they don't see it, they don't want that [independence]. Like when I tell them I want to work, over here you are independent, I think every society likes the way they live, so I don't blame girls back there that like that lifestyle it's just I don't think it's for me I could never depend on anybody I want to be able to do what I want, like leave the house whenever I want, like little things like that.

By transforming the refugee label from one that marks Sarah, Flower, and Leyla as vulnerable and powerless, they expand and perhaps arguably transform the label into a unique marker of their experiences as individuals. Whether the label in the contemporary moment is perceived as "not a good term," not "who I am today," or simply a neutral part of a larger experience, it is under the rightful ownership of each woman to interpret for herself. Furthermore, as Vigil and Abidi (2018) state, refugees must seek an inclusive participatory sociocultural and political process to dissolve the distinctions that separate them from those who are normative in the nation state (p. 54). Even given these restrictions, it is important to note that both the refugee label and the labels attached to women offer Sarah, Leyla, and Flower a range of meaning-making opportunities in relation to their past, present, and future.

Role of English

Language acquisition has been strongly related to the acculturation of refugee and migrant groups. As such, language acquisition has strongly influenced a sense of belonging and legitimacy. While speaking about their relationship with the English language, Flower, Sarah, and Leyla each positioned the importance and validity of English alongside, rather than above, their native languages. This is critical given the article's argument that our informants engaged in meaning-making practices that yielded empowering narratives. At the same time, all three informants still perceive English as important in their new context. As such, they each emphasized that English shapes some part of their imagined futures. Furthermore, English was established in each woman's reconstructed past as relational memories to larger experiences that inform how they perceive and use English in the present moment. In these narrative reconstructions, each woman recounted what her relationship with English was prior to resettling in the U.S., and how the language was introduced. For Sarah and Leyla, English was less conspicuous in their pre-resettlement experiences, while Flower explicitly associated English with trauma experienced through bullying and xenophobic attitudes while in South Africa.

Flower mentioned her experiences regarding the interplay of English language learning and otherness during her time in South Africa:

> When we migrated to South Africa, they had to put me back, because I was nine years old and was supposed to be in grade four. Yeah, so they had to put me all the way back to grade three and so that I can learn English. They told me that I need to know English to be in their schools 'cause [sic] English is their first language there. That would change every aspect of my life because I was the tallest in the class, [pause] it was cause the school I was in was a private school it was not a lot of people that looked like me, like every person was white and I was bullied; me and my brother we were bullied.

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Flower's experience offers insight into how the place of a language can create a sense of unbelonging and of not being "legitimate" in certain educational and social spaces. Thereafter, these educational and social spaces where English is the mode of currency can become transformed into spaces where notions of otherness are reinforced. Flower further mentioned how these events in her past influenced her fear of public speaking and her relatively shy persona in her university classes:

> In my speech class, my fundamentals of Speech I find it very difficult and very hard to get in front of and do speech. Like the last speech I did I got very nervous and then my accent became very strong and I cried after it. I was like I hate my accent like I don't want to have this accent. And I always sit by myself in every, all my classes I sit in the front by myself and when they ever say to get in groups, I find it very difficult to talk to someone. I be like if I talk to this person they might make fun of me. So I wait for the professor to put me into a group.

While Flower's formative introduction to English was fraught, Prendergast (2008) observed that the currency of English can act as a "lubricant" for the mobility of people (p. 127). This mobility can be understood in terms of informants being able to view their futures as more expansive and filled with more possibilities. This new space is one of reconciliation and identification that is constructed in and by each person. Moreover, this space is also shaped by mundane struggles throughout the sociocultural and political processes that go hand-in-hand with the refugee label, including the struggles involving English language acquisition. These spaces of mobility are evident in Flower's account as she uses English and her other spoken languages (Swahili, Lingala, French, and English) to transform and create new spaces of empowerment.

One powerful example for Flower includes using her multilingualism to interpret on behalf of her family ("[laughter] I'm always their interpreter"). Similarly, she uses language to co-create new spaces with other refugee/immigrant and local students at her university: "I'm very close to Moussa, he is from Ivory Coast, I even call him my best friend because we really get each other. I'm close to Wilky who is from Haiti… [Further mentioning other relationships] he became my friend then that led to a relationship. Yes he's white and he's been very supportive [Referencing her romantic relationship]." In positioning themselves in shifting situations, and sometimes in new spaces, English becomes de-territorialized as a means of exclusion in each woman's narrative. Particularly in their sense of future plans, the language is framed more as a positive and empowering tool.

Unlike Flower and Leyla, who resettled in the U.S. late in their teenage and young adult years, Sarah resettled in Lancaster at age 11. Thus, Sarah presented English language learning as being pivotal to much of her formative adolescent years, as she had been placed in English as a second language (ESL) classes until age 15, then continued to navigate secondary and post-secondary educational institutions [high school and university]. The role of English is therefore more salient and integral to her imagined future than that of our other participants.

Sarah mentioned her aspirations of teaching and doing advocacy work, and cited the link between her language learning experience and her background as a refugee:

> Basically, I don't know if you know but my major is ESL as well because my first ESL teacher she was an old lady who retired the next year after I took her class but she was like the best teacher I had. She knew that I didn't know anything at all about the language

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> or about the culture, so adjusting-wise, she helped a lot. So to give you an example she would set up appointments for me because I didn't know how to do that. She helped me with my personal life as well as like teaching so yeah . . . So, for now I'm doing social work and ESL communication so my plan is to go to those countries that do not have a good education system and teach English in that system and if I do that for long then that what I want to do but if that doesn't work then my main goal is to help refugees and be an advocate for them.

English for Sarah has been negotiated and integrated into her present identity, which allows her to project herself into the future and away from the present limited social and cultural spaces. In that future space, she can become a refugee who uses English to advocate for other refugees.

Aside from considering how English serves to transform our informants' sense of the future, it is interesting to examine how meaning-making practices can involve choosing when to engage with English. Throughout Leyla's narrative, experiences with preconceived notions of her spoken English language ability and experiences with ESL courses during her secondary education informed her desire or need to speak English. Leyla candidly critiqued the ESL courses she was subjected to, and clearly stated her relationship to her native language when asked "Have you ever felt like you couldn't speak your mother tongue in public spaces?"

> My mom had to teach it to us, there was this thing called ESL, but it honestly was a bunch of crap. It was teaching a bunch of 14-, 15-, and 16-year-olds ABCs it was a joke, it was infuriating because they're teaching us as if we were first graders, you can't teach 16-year-olds ABCs like that like you have to take a different approach. It was so bad, I hated it because for the most part I was not paying attention, but my mom and dad taught me. Well let me tell you something, I'm not a good representation of that question because I don't really care, I'm less sensitized to people's opinions I didn't know if it's because of education or just because, It's because at a certain point in your life you've seen it so much, you . . ., it's just like whatever.

Leyla's choice not to engage or be concerned regarding opinions about her English could perhaps be indicative of her class standing, which offers a more readily apparent option of living outside of the U.S.in the United Arab Emirates, where she does not view English as necessary. In comparison, choosing to engage in English was and is not optional for Flower and Sarah. In their cases, there is no readily available alternative that would allow them to disregard English and engage in another spoken language. Because of this, there is more of a push on the part of Sarah and Flower to integrate English in their meaning-making systems than in Leyla's case. As Sarah and Flower have found their senses of where they fit in and how they envision their futures, their use of English and other languages has also changed. For Flower, this has meant actively forming fictive kinships with other immigrant/refugee students, as well as acting as a translator for her family. For Sarah, her relationship to English has been deep enough to shape her educational interests.

Conclusion

While trauma inevitably figures in refugee narratives, the informants featured in this article demonstrate a range of meaning-making practices that include traumatic elements, but also include a strong sense of hope and of moving forward in a way that would allow them to grow as women and to imagine themselves into a projected future. In terms of that movement from a

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"limited space" to a "wider future," we see the greatest change in Sarah and Flower, in contrast to Leyla whose refugee past and present were distinct from that of the others in a number of ways. As a wealthy Iraqi refugee, Leyla did not have the same sense of needing more space to become the woman she wanted to become. She had not lived in a cramped refugee camp or relocated from one location to another, seeking refugee status in both.

For Sarah and Flower, there is a sense that the meaning-making in which they engaged provided them a way to push against the constraints in their lives towards a wider future. In Flower's case, the dominant culture of where she resettled functioned as a constraint. For Sarah, the constraints were more internally oriented toward her culture of origin. But both found ways to push against those constraints and present narratives where they emerged as more empowered women than the girls whom they presented grappling with the harsh realities of forced migration.

Thus, the most significant meaning-making practices that were featured in our informants' narrative strategies, those that pushed into "a much wider future," were marked by a sense of empowerment. This was especially the case in terms of how they presented their refugee identities. Through their narratives, our informants shared what it means to be a refugee woman, and what it means to negotiate this identity in a variety of ways. By engaging with meaning-making practices to reconcile situational discrepancies with their global understandings, our informants found space for becoming who they want to be in an imagined future. For Sarah, that imagined future has been shaped to a large degree by English, while the same could not be argued for Flower and Leyla. Nonetheless, Flower's command of various languages due to her resettlement path meant the opportunity to create new communities that further allowed her to see herself as a "strong woman" while continuing to grapple with the legacy of "xenophobia" and racism from her time in South Africa. For Leyla, English does not figure as strongly in her narrative, perhaps in the same way that the refugee label does not resonate as strongly with her given that she has had more options around language use and around resettlement.

It is through their unique approaches to meaning-making that our informants create new narratives, challenging the very word "refugee," and what that label means about the spaces that they can occupy. Despite the depth and detail of these interviews, Flower's question ("you didn't know that did you?") seems apt given how much these women have had to do and process in their relatively young lives. In that moment, she was referring to a lack of understanding on the part of her parents to her experiences with trauma. Thus, the statement seems to imply layers of intimacy as well as a sense of distance. Despite our informants' willingness to share vulnerable aspects of their lives, we as researchers have not lived those experiences, and there is so much that we cannot know. That these young women have found ways to communicate their stories so as to empower themselves and find more space to become who they would like to be seems to be a testament both to them and to the power of constructing narratives that can reconcile what would otherwise seem irreconcilable.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. What was your childhood like?
4. What was the reason for your migration/resettlement?
5. What languages do you speak?
6. What was your relationship with English before resettling in the United States?
7. When did you and your family resettle in the United States before coming?
8. What were your thoughts about the United States before coming?
9. Did your thoughts change once you and your family arrived?
10. Why did you come to Millersville? How did that process happen?
11. How do you identify yourself?
12. What does the term "refugee" mean to you?
13. If you had a chance to return to your home country, would you?
14. Did you have any issues when you came to the United States?

Did you take an ESL (English as a second language) course/courses? Do you feel like they helped with your understanding of English?

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