



They Made Us Homeless: The Search for Place among Refugee Youth Born in Refugee Camps in Nepal

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Introduction

It is pretty amazing the things that we remember. Moments that seem so small become so important for no other reason than the fact that they stuck with us. For me, one of those moments was when my mother, my brother and I were driving to Paraty, a historical coastal city in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I remember a particular point of the road, where it overlooks the Ilha Grande Bay. We were listening to one of my mom's favorite cassette tapes Caetano Veloso's *Circuladô*. In the 1991 album, Veloso sings a beautiful version of *Disseram que Voltei Americanizada* (They said I came back Americanized), a samba written by Luiz Peixoto and Vicente Paiva for Carmen Miranda. In the song, Miranda defends her "Brazilianess" after having left the country for Hollywood. It was one of my favorite songs on the album. If you had asked me then why I loved the song, I would not have been able to tell you, but if life was like one of Miranda's big Hollywood movies, that moment in the car would foreshadow much of my adult life. Having lived in the United States for almost a decade now, this song has a special place in my heart. It reminds me of where I belong, or better yet, where I do not. For my friends and family and I am a "gringa" now, they say I lost my distinct "carioca" accent and I lost touch with Brazilian culture. In the U.S I know I will never be considered American, no matter what my passport says; my accent will always give me away.

Borderlands

No matter the reason that has led people to move to another country, immigration or asylum-seeking, a feeling of "in-betweenness" is shared by most (Rosaldo, 1999; Anthias, 2001; Lam, 2004; Thompson, 2002). "In-betweenness" can be described as a place of not belonging; a purgatory of sorts, in which immigrants are no longer accepted as a full member of their native culture, nor granted full membership to the culture in which they have resettled. Chicana Theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa, describes these spaces of "insider's outsideness" (Bhabha, 1994, p.20) as

“borderlands”, places that “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrink with intimacy” (p.19).

Borderland can be understood as “a place of incommensurable contradiction. The term does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales...but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p.18). The borderland creates a contradictory world in which the subject inhabits two spaces and none at the same time; a place in which one can be a citizen and an alien.

My own struggles with finding my place in both my native land and my new home made me question the notions of citizenship and belonging that are commonly accepted. Are identities connected to nationality or cultural belonging? Are identities marked by the language one speaks or their clothing? These questions have led me to work with immigrant populations, particularly with refugee communities in a mid-size city in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States.

As refugee communities continue to grow across the US, but in the city of the study in particular, it is important to understand how living a space of negative belonging can affect social interactions as well as cultural and economic involvement. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how this experience of simultaneous inclusion/exclusion impacts adolescent refugees. Navigating through the borderlands can be difficult, due to its paradoxical nature. Anzaldúa (1999) describes this space as a “place of contradictions” (p.19); a place populated by “hatred, anger and exploitation” (p.19). It is a place of negation, of not being good enough, and growing up in such place can certainly generate a lot of frustration. In this article, I will argue that for some of the adolescents born in the refugee camps of Nepal, no matter how far they travel, the borderland never leaves them.

This Study

For this research I chose to work with a group of nine refugee youth born in the camps in Nepal, seven males and two females, to develop a digital story project. The participants’ ages ranged from 14 to 19 years and each has been living in the United States from six months to three years. In partnership with a community center located in an apartment complex in a peripheral town around a mid-size Rocky Mountain city, and conducted during December 2012 and March 2013, this research intended to explore media production as a way to understand how/if this population became racialized upon their arrival in the United States. In my research I have found that the participants’ main concern was related to citizenship and national belonging.

The digital stories completed by the four participants gave me good information about their personalities and life story, but, the main objective of the medium was to engage participants (Young and Barrett, 2001). Using the digital stories as a reason to meet with participants both at the center and at their homes, I was able to learn more about their experiences in the United States and at the refugee camps in Nepal (Anthias, 2012). Despite the change in the project, my experience developing digital stories with adolescents corroborate the findings of others. This method is a great tool to engage participants, due to its accessibility and ability to develop critical thinking among younger participants (Kajder, 2004; Meadows, 2003; Ohler, 2008).

Background

The Lhotsampa people constitute the vast majority of Bhutanese refugees. From Nepali descent, the community is the only one in the country that practices Hinduism. Their Hindi tradition and culture, as well as their large population numbers were considered a threat to the powerful Buddhist ethnic

minority, Druka-Kargupa. Slowly, the Lhotsampa had their citizenship rights taken away from them. They were forced to learn the Druka-Kargupa language and prohibited from teaching Nepali to their children. They were forced to adhere to the political elite rituals and traditions, and lost land rights. After a peaceful protest in 1989 that demanded equal rights, the Lhotsampa were persecuted and fled Bhutan fearing for their lives (Rizal, 2004). At the peak of the exodus, Nepal was host to 100,000 Bhutanese, who were divided into 7 refugee camps in the "Jhapa and Morang districts in eastern Nepal" (Ikram, 2005, p.110). The population lived in limbo since 1989, without knowing if they were going to be able to go home or be helped by the United Nations.

At the center of their uncertainty was the very definition of refugee. The government of Bhutan insisted, on the negotiation tables with Nepal and India that the Lhotsampa people left Bhutan voluntarily and therefore could neither qualify for humanitarian help nor for refugee status (Ikram, 2005). Political and economic reasons kept the other Asian states from pushing for a resolution of the issue with Bhutan (Ikram, 2005). It took 17 years for the United Nations to finally intervene. It was not until January 2008 that the first group of refugees left to be resettled by international aid organizations (*Gurung, 2007*). The families of the participants in this study lived in the camps for close to 20 years and all of the adolescents were born in Nepal.

The Negative Diaspora

The concept of borderlands was developed by Anzaldúa (1999) to describe the experience of Tejano/as and undocumented immigrants on the Mexico-United States border. Anzaldúa (1999) elucidates on her own experiences, divided between the border culture and the American mainstream, describing it as "no, not comfortable but home" (p.19). Bhabha (1994) and Durham (2004) argue that the border is a place of hybridization, a place of possibilities and new beginnings. In the case of the Bhutanese community in this Rocky Mountain city, the borderland can be best characterized as "the opposite to hybridity" (Anthias, 2001, p.68). This geographical and social space suffers "a ghettoization and enclavization process, a living in a 'time warp,' a mythologizing of tradition" (Anthias, 2001, p.628). Anthias (2001) argued that these "new identities" still operate in mainstream hierarchical terms, therefore maintaining the marginalized status of hybrid individuals. According to Anthias, hybridization does not elevate cultural acceptance of minorities in mainstream settings.

With regard to the refugees from Bhutan, both the move to Nepal and the move to the United States can be classified as negative Diaspora. According to Dayal (1996), negative Diaspora occurs when the Diasporic people are

(1) excluded from true citizenship ...; or (2) they are 'included' within a larger collectivity only to be subsumed and neutralized ...; or (3) they themselves capitulate to an impoverished identity politics so that precisely at the moment when it is acknowledged that the 'identity' and composition of Diasporic imagined communities are constantly transformed, they are homogenized, reified as collectivities, and thus contained (p.52).

Negative Diaspora is the main component in the creation of borderlands. It is the exclusion and neutralization that Dayal describes that creates a marginalized space, but also assures that this space will separate the "aliens" from the rest of society. While living in Nepal, the Bhutanese population was not included in the society at large; they were denied citizenship rights and forced to live in degrading conditions; they lived in make shift bamboo homes for their whole stay, at high risk of fire and flood.

For more than a decade, governments from Nepal, India and Bhutan tried to define what they were - immigrants or refugees (Ikram, 2005). The very nature of their migration was questioned and never were the migrants involved in the discussions; they had no say in the direction their lives were going to take (Ikram, 2005). Caught in between politics and international negotiations, the Lhotsampa people

inhabited a timeless border, trapped between their past in Nepal and their present in Bhutan, with no ability to move into their future. Bhabha (1994) has described this time warp as:

an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living" (p.10).

As the author so coherently puts, residents of borderlands cannot escape this timeless space in which the future, the present and the past become one continuous holistic space. They lived on the border of cities and villages and as some of the participants have told me, were not allowed to become citizens, but were not allowed to leave either. Once they migrated to Nepal, they were not allowed back in Bhutan and yet had no free access to Nepalese territory. Lhotsampa individuals could not pack up and try a new life in Katmandu, for instance. Ravi, a 19 year old participant, expressed that there were no paths to citizenship for people in the refugee camps in Nepal. "I was there for more than 8 years and they never told me I could become a citizen," he said. He is very aware of the division between his people and the Nepalese people. Even though Ravi reminisces about his time in Nepal, where he said most of his friends are, he knows there was always a barrier between them. "They are still in Nepal, they are citizens not refugees," he told me. He also articulated in different occasions that leaving Nepal was not his first choice; if he could, he would have stayed with his friends. He wanted to be a part of the same community as his friends, but was denied this right.

Another of the participants, Vanita, a 17-year-old participant in the study, remembered that when the United Nations started the resettlement process in 2007, the Nepalese population staged a protest demanding that all people from Nepal be given a chance to resettle in the United States. I asked her why she thought they were protesting and she said "because they made money off of us." She went on to say that the people living in the camps bought products at the shops in the surrounding villages and provided cheap labor for corn farms. She remembered that every time she would go to the village, people would call her "names."

Life in the camp as described by Ravi and Vanita was hard. Besides the precarious nature of their residences, refugees had access to a limited amount of food and clean water. "The biggest issue in the camps," Vanita's dad told me, "is that people get bored. They don't have jobs and they can't really go anywhere." Ravi mentioned that children and young adults faced the same reality. Without much distraction they turn to alcohol and cigarettes early on in life. Ravi's and Vanita's descriptions of life in the camp corroborate Chambers' (1994) description of borderlands that "enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity" (p.2). Bhutanese people living in the camps were kept in an enclosed space and allowed out only when being out served interests other than their own – to shop or work for cheap. Despite having experienced exclusion in Nepal, the participants are quick to link their national identity with the country (Anthias, 2002). All of the participants interviewed for this study identified as Nepalese and not Bhutanese like their parents. During the research process, the participants reminisced about Nepal and expressed missing the people they left behind as well as the place. The paradoxical aspect of the borderland appears in the participants' discourse when they talk about national affiliation. Even though they were excluded from civic rights in Nepal they still identify as Nepalese.

The adolescents participating in this study were born and raised in the camps, having never set foot in Bhutan. They self-identify as Nepalese (Anthias, 2002), but were also never allowed to wander too far from the camps in Nepal. In terms of identity, they are in a place in which "social distance; or human practices can be re-analyzed in terms of not culture, but power" (Lindgren, 2010, p.76). They are Nepalese in the eyes of the Bhutanese government and Bhutanese to the Nepalese authorities. The identity of these adolescents was not constructed by their cultural heritage, but instead their identities in their new home

are defined by what they are not (Anthias, 2002). It is possible to conclude then, that the concept of negative Diaspora has to exist in conjunction with the “in-betweenness” (Bhabha, 1994) space present in the borderland; they are inseparable. It is the negation of rights and the forced homogeneity of minorities that is responsible for the “hatred, anger and exploitation” described by Anzaldúa (1999, p.19).

Borderlands USA

Borderlands, like the camps the refugees lived in Nepal and the apartment complexes like the one where the Community Center is located, allow for their population to develop a double consciousness as described by W.E.B. DuBois (2006). Double consciousness is described by the author as the ability to define oneself not only according to one’s own culture but also according to the dominant culture. DuBois presents double consciousness as a defense mechanism developed by cultural, racial and ethnic minorities to cope with the restraints of discrimination. Double consciousness allows for individuals to navigate, not only their own culture, but also the oppressive culture that surrounds them. Living in the camps, the Bhutanese refugees learned to see themselves through the eyes of the Nepalese population. Even as children, the participants were aware of the discrepancy in treatment they received where they were born. In the United States they also see their condition as refugees through the eyes of White America. According to Dayal (1996), this ability does not always work in favor of those who have it; “its negative value is that it denies the subject’s sovereignty and stresses the performativity of the subject. For *this* doubleness, there could hardly be a richer figure than ‘diaspora” (p. 48). According to Dayal, this ability to navigate multiple cultures can exacerbate the lack of belonging, because whereas double consciousness permits persons to exist in between two cultures, it denies full participation in both.

All the participants expressed the perception of America as a meritocracy, where “you are allowed to dream” or that “you can become a doctor.” However, these idealized views of life in this country are proving to be difficult to achieve once participants realize that no matter what they do, they cannot be freed from the refugee/immigrant label. Upon their arrival in the United States, they realize that the marginalized position which they occupy does not allow for agency against the structure of society. The structures are defined here as “constituted by mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action” (Sewell, 1992, p.27). Similarly, Sewell (1992) defines agency as

an ability to coordinate one’s actions with others and against others, to form collective projects, to persuade, to coerce, and to monitor the simultaneous effects of one’s own and others’ activities. Moreover, the extent of the agency exercised by individual persons depends profoundly on their positions in collective organizations (p 21).

The permanence of the refugee/immigrant label demonstrates the lack of agency that these individuals have in America. They are swallowed by the structures that surround them. With no power to fight them, refugees and immigrants have no choice but to resign to the marginalized status they are given.

Further exploring the persistence of the refugee label after resettlement and the lack of agency of these communities, Haines (2010) argues that its durability in the United States helps reinforce the ideas Americans have of their own country. According to Haines, “the notion of refugee, links America as a sword and shield, and America as a land of opportunity” (p.72). By accepting refugees, Americans “not only validate the refugee and the refugee experience for which they stand, but simultaneously self-validate themselves as perfectly Americans” (p.72). After being resettled in the United States, refugees are constantly reminded of the fragility of their condition (Anthias, 2012, 2002). For the first year of their stay in the country, the only proof of their allowed presence in the United States is a stamped piece of paper, given to them as they enter the country (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). The piece of paper, a form called I-94, is also a reminder of outsidership. It is a constant reminder of permission granted to inhabit a foreign land. The sense of isolation is not exclusive to refugees living in North

America. Fangen (2007), in her study with Somalis in Norway, states that all of her participants also felt like outsiders in both Somalia and Norway.

Instead, these youth get trapped in the process of hybridization that transforms their identity in such ways that they become too American (or Norwegian) for their native land, and not American enough for their new country. This unique situation gives them a singular position, what Anthias (2001) describes "as the voice that speaks from two places at once, and inhabits neither" (p.626).

Physical separation not only occurs in the classroom, but also in other lived spaces. Once these communities arrive in the United States, they are physically separated from the rest of the community they are joining. Refugees are clustered in apartment complexes in lower income neighborhoods

These clusters create what Anthias (2011) called ghettoization. Refugees live at the margin of the community, joining the mainstream society only for work. The separation also accentuates cultural differences that Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue are "produced and maintained in a field of power relations, in a world always already spatially interconnected, then the restriction of immigration becomes visible as one of the main means through which disempowerment are kept that way" (p.17).

The apartment complex functions as a borderland space, a frontier that separates the refugee camp from urban America, delineating where the community is allowed to be. "It is a zone of separation and junction, helping to define the identities of the places and people on either side of the imaginary of real border through the negotiation that takes place in the frontier" (Naum, 2010 p.103). The apartment complex in which the refugee youth in the study were resettled in, then, became "a place of alienating solitude" (Hilton, 2011 p.109). This "alienating solitude" is not only felt by the adolescents in the complex; in fact the staff member of the community center that served as my liaison to the community stated in multiple occasions that there was a big drug problem with the Bhutanese and the Burmese men living in the complex. The staff of the community center attributes the drug usage to the lack of jobs and dental care. According to them, without jobs, the possibility of education, and treatment for their many health issues, the men felt cornered and hopeless (Smith, Dodge, Dishion and McCord, 2005).

The statelessness, in which these adolescents have lived most of their lives, creates in them a need to belong, a need to be accepted and to become a citizen of somewhere. Vanita and Ravi expressed their desire to become American citizens as soon as the 5-year waiting period expires. Nevertheless, they understand, even if subconsciously, that they will never become fully American; the process is never complete. No matter how hard these youth try to become 100% like their American peers, they are always seen as outsiders (Smedly, 1998). "In making the transition to life here, newcomers face tremendous pressure to adopt racial identities that limit them. For most immigrants, Americanization means leaving behind their fuller national, cultural, and language identities, and abandoning hope that others will see and accept them in their full humanness" (Olsen, 2007, p.11). Ravi, who used to make and sell jewelry with his dad in Nepal, mentioned that in this country "people don't care for that kind of stuff." He knows that even though he will finally be considered a citizen of a country, there is no space here for his talents and professional ambitions. Because he was not able to finish high-school, Ravi has not been able to find a job.

The desire to be able to claim citizenship to a land was very present in the interviews with all the participants. Vanita and Ravi, the oldest participants, were able to express their frustrations with not having a place to call home most clearly. In one of our conversations, upon being asked about how she answers questions of nationality, Vanita laughed and answered "Nepal. But I don't even wanna answer that question anymore" (Field Notes, 2012). When asked to elaborate on her answer she proceeded to tell me that though geographically she was born in Nepal, she never experienced full citizenship rights there (Anthias, 2002). "Sometimes I say I am from Bhutan. I am supposed to say I am from Bhutan. My parents are from Bhutan and I am supposed to say I am Bhutanese but I kinda hate Bhutan" (Field Notes, 2012), she continued.

Surprised with such a strong statement, I wondered aloud why she would say such a thing about the country her father speaks so fondly of. She took a deep breath, sighed and looked straight at me and said "because they made us homeless" (Field Notes, 2012). Ravi also expressed his hatred for Bhutan when asked about his origins. When asked if he considers himself a Bhutanese he answered "no man, I hate Bhutan." I asked him why, to which he responded: "they kicked us out. If I go to Bhutan, I want to kick their ass."

All of the other participants made a distinction between their place of origin and their parents. They were clearly differentiating themselves from Bhutan. Bala told me that he is from "the Bhutanese refugee camp in Nepal." Maina assertively told me that her parents are from Bhutan but she is from Nepal. Though she was the only one who clearly and undoubtedly claimed her Nepalese citizenship, she understands that the Nepal she came from is almost an unreal place, a place that now only exists in her memories. When asked about her desire to return to her homeland she responded she would only go back "if everybody [she] knew was back there again." She talked about friends and relatives that were resettled in far way places like Australia and Europe and recognized the fact they will never be together again (Wilding, 2012). In realizing her inability to return but also her lack of possibilities at home, she embodies the sentiment that Anzaldúa (1999) described in the borderland "[b]locked, immobilized, we can't move forward, we can't move backwards" (p.43).

Conclusion

For the participants in this research, moving to the United States did not solve their issues of belonging and isolation. The same patterns that existed in their camps in Nepal are being repeated here. Even though they did not experience the takeover of citizenship rights in Bhutan, a lot of the same issues parents faced in their native country happen here as well. When preparing for her digital story, Vanita mentioned that she would rather record her narration in English because she has forgotten a lot of words in Nepali. Like in Bhutan, students here are forced to learn a foreign language and not their own, and little by little, the culture that her parents fought so hard to preserve will slowly dissolve into the American melting pot.

The many borderlands experienced by the youth that I worked with do represent the place of hatred and oppression described by Anzaldúa. It is a place of confusion and doubt. This article argued that, just like in Nepal, the youth born in the camps will never have rights to full citizenship despite their desire and need to have identification with a State. Members of developed countries like to think that lives for resettled refugees are better than they used to be. Though material conditions might improve with the change of location, for these participants little has changed with respect to inclusion and social support. Drastic changes such as the ones these adolescents went through need to be better planned; their testimonies attest to the fact that the systems in place are not giving them the necessary tools to make the transition smoothly.

The digital stories produced during the course of this research project gave them a chance to articulate the difficulties they are facing in the United States, for some, for the first time. Due to the small sample size of participants heard for this project, it is not possible to make suggestions on how to address those issues. However, a similar project with a larger pool of participants could provide the data necessary for the creation of a less segregated process. This less segregated process, it is earnestly hoped, will allow refugees to participate in the mainstream society without demanding the abandonment of their traditions.

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They Made Us Homeless: The Search for Place among Refugee Youth Born in Refugee Camps in Nepal

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