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“If you wanted me to speak your language then you should have stayed in your country”: a critical ethnography of linguistic identity and resiliency in the life of an Afghan refugee

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*“If you wanted me to speak your language then you should have stayed in your country”:*

A Critical Ethnography of Linguistic Identity and Resiliency in the Life of an Afghan Refugee

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

Teaching English as a Second Language

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By

Logan M. Amstadter

Spring 2018

THESIS APPROVED BY

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**Master's Thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Nasreen and her family had not wanted to leave their native Afghanistan, but when the Taliban's violence forced them to seek refuge in Iran, Nasreen found herself a teenager on the outskirts of Tehran. Discrimination, lack of opportunity, and an unwelcoming environment compelled her to make the dangerous overland journey from Iran to Turkey along with her husband, her brother, and her two sons. Now, they have asylum in the United States, where Nasreen is thriving—earning a degree at a community college and translating for other members of her community. Refusing to dwell on the past and enduringly optimistic about the future, Nasreen has demonstrated remarkable resilience despite the tremendously difficult circumstances of forced migration. Based on several interviews with Nasreen, I have come to believe that her decision to maintain her heritage language has been a stabilizing force in her life and a key component of her resilience as a refugee, as a stranger, and as a mother. Functioning as both a symbolic and actual means of transnational connection, Nasreen's use of her ethnic language is how she remains connected to her family back in Iran, who she desperately hopes will someday join her in the United States. In a life that has stretched across four countries and been dominated by circumstances beyond her control, her language choice is also how she claims agency over her identity. This stability, in turn, empowers Nasreen to cultivate a dual identity that allows her to acculturate into American society *and* maintain a cultural integrity that is coherent with her worldview and sense of self. Finally, Nasreen's use of her mother tongue with her children—even though they refuse to speak it back—enables her to mother them in her most authentic way and to remain connected with them as they grow up in a culture vastly different from her own. This study will hopefully engender empathy and admiration for Nasreen and the millions of refugees like her who, despite immense adversity, somehow manage to thrive as strangers in a strange land, spirits intact.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I wish to thank Dr. Tracey McHenry for her instruction during my graduate coursework and for her feedback and sense of perspective as the second committee member for my project. During my time at Eastern, I have also been privileged to take classes from a number of other professors who have enriched my graduate education, challenged me, and influenced my development as both a teacher and a scholar: Dr. Paul Lindholdt, Dr. Gina Petrie, Dr. Vince Aleccia, Dr. Justin Young, Dr. Terrance MacMullan, Dr. Dana Elder, Dr. Margaret Heady, and Dr. Kassahun Kebede. Dr. Kebede's anthropology course on transnationalism and migration greatly informed this thesis; it was in that course that I was exposed to the richness of ethnography as a methodological tool. I was honored when Dr. Kebede agreed to be the third member of my committee.

I am grateful to World Relief for the immensely important work they do in resettling refugees here in Spokane and across the country. I am also grateful to the volunteer coordinator who connected me with Latifah, another refugee woman from Afghanistan, who has become my friend as I've been her cultural broker and mentor for the last two years. It was Latifah who introduced me to Nasreen. Finally, I am so grateful to Nasreen for opening her heart to me and to all of us by telling her story. We have much to learn from her.

## Preface

### Teaching Philosophy

My earliest memories of the joys and intrigue of language learning involve my parents, not surprisingly. English was my home language, but there were other languages around in the early years, too. My father, having been a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, spoke French and Swahili with me and my siblings when we were small, and I was instilled with compassion and empathy for people from other cultures when my parents brought the world to us by opening our home to exchange students. I have my parents, exchange students, family friends, and wonderful teachers to thank for my love of and fascination with the workings of language.

As I write this, I am motivated to continue my language learning throughout my life. I want to be a language teacher because it is a field wherein my gifts, my passions, and my values coincide. In my own sustaining desire to learn more about the countries, languages, and cultures that my students come from, I hope to be a model of growth and enduring curiosity for my students. Daily contact with refugees, immigrants, and international students in an ESL classroom will help me remain engaged with a world wider than America and my own life; it is a wonderful antidote to the tendency we have to insulate and to the collective apathy that ensues when we are simply overwhelmed by the complexity of the world.

Teaching English as a Second Language is a profession in which I will feel competent at what I do, feel authentic in my life, and feel connected to others. Indeed, there are few fields that consist of meeting people's needs in such a basic, unambiguous way. To have a hand in facilitating a person's literacy is an incredibly meaningful thing to do for work. It is social work and it is also spiritual work: social, because a person must be able to read, write, speak and listen in the language of the people around them in order to work and live in society; and spiritual, in that literacy unlocks access to recorded human experiences across space and time. When what was unknown or confusing becomes clear, I know I've given an invaluable gift.

The diversity of cultures and languages that exist in American schools is a testament to its promise: it is one of our greatest challenges and our greatest strengths. If we hope to achieve not only equality but also equity for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, teachers must engage in continual and meaningful reflective practice. As to how we can serve students best, the single most significant idea I have been exposed to in my education and the most abiding principle in my approach to cultural and linguistic diversity in schools is the concept of cultural humility. Approximating inclusive environments in our classrooms by putting pictures of people in traditional dress on the walls or discussing holidays and foods is a step toward honoring those many different backgrounds. Yet these are aspects of shallow culture, and we celebrate our surface differences at the risk of thinking we have done our part when we have not. As teachers, in our position as cultural brokers, we are called to do more than that. As we strive to connect with and understand students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are different from our own—students with deep-seated beliefs and values different from our own—we must do so with humility, compassion, openness, and respect. Otherwise, we risk making damaging assumptions which can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and missed opportunities for connection. When we approach our students with cultural humility, the result is a profound understanding of the humanity that we have in common.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*After ten years, for example, my son might speak a different language from my parents. Even now, he speaks English and I say please speak Farsi with your grandmother she doesn't speak English and he says English is what comes to his tongue. He says, "Mom don't ask me to speak your language if I'm living here. I want to be like people here." Even at home he speaks English and I say please speak our language because we want to keep our language and it's a good skill to have different languages. If you don't speak our language you will forget it. He says, "If you think like that, it was better that you not bring me here. If you wanted to keep your language, you should have stayed in your country!"*

– Excerpt from interview with Nasreen, an Afghan refugee (2017)

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Nasreen and her family had not wanted to leave their native Afghanistan, but the Taliban's violence forced them to flee. Fearing death, they sought refuge in Iran, the nearest safe place, so Nasreen grew up on the outskirts of Tehran, an unwelcome Afghan refugee. Becoming a mother compelled her to make the impossible decision between leaving her parents and finding a way to give her children more opportunities than would be possible for them in Iran. Along with her husband, her brother, and her two young sons, Nasreen embarked on the dangerous overland journey from Iran to Turkey, crossing the Tabriz Mountains by horseback under the cover of night, stifling her baby's cries to avoid getting shot at by Turkish border guards. After three years in a refugee camp in Turkey, Nasreen and her family finally received notice that their file had been sent to the United States. In the spring of 2015, they were officially resettled here as refugees.

Surrounded by foreign people, foreign languages, and foreign cultures, forced to contend with difficult circumstances beyond their control, many refugees find life difficult in a new society, and there are a multitude of reasons that people facing similar challenges might falter.

Nasreen, however, has somehow found a way to survive—more than survive, she has found a way to thrive in this country and in each of the countries in which she has lived. By all measures, she has managed to integrate into her new society: she has acquired the language, attends school, works, and even translates for members of her community. And yet, through it all, she also remains connected with her family back in Iran, practices aspects of her heritage culture that are most important to her, and uses her heritage language with her children. Refusing to dwell on the past and enduringly optimistic about the future, Nasreen has demonstrated remarkable resiliency through the tremendously difficult circumstances of forced migration. The present study is a critical ethnography that explores the attitudes, qualities, and characteristics that make Nasreen so exceptionally resilient. How does she maintain her identity—a distinct sense of who she is—across the uncertainty and flux of a life which has stretched across four different countries? As a mother, a refugee, and a stranger, how does Nasreen navigate the competing and often conflicting values and priorities that emerge at the intersections of these identities? How does she remain resilient and manage to thrive despite the immense adversity of her life, her spirit intact?

I have come to believe that Nasreen's heritage language, her mother tongue, has been the stabilizing force in her life. It is a place in which to reside, an inextricable connection to home that evokes her parents and her essential self. Identity and resiliency, then, are the two themes in Nasreen's life that emerge as points of focus in this ethnographic study, and they pivot around Nasreen's decision to maintain her heritage language. The first of these major areas of exploration centers on cultural identity, manifest in Nasreen's desire and struggle to pass her heritage language on to her children. Why does Nasreen wish to maintain her heritage language, and why does her son refuse to speak it? What are her feelings toward her heritage language, and what are her children's feelings toward that language? How do ethnic identity and linguistic identity intersect? What connections might be drawn between the themes in Nasreen's life and the larger discussion about linguistic identity and the cultural survival of marginal populations in general? The second major theme of Nasreen's life that is analyzed in the present study is

resiliency. In order to acculturate to life in the United States, how has Nasreen navigated cultural adjustments? What are the attributes of resilience that have made her so successful relative to other refugees in similar situations? What essential lessons can teachers of English—and other cultural brokers who work with newcomers in the United States—glean from a close study of Nasreen’s life? What insights might we learn about our own culture and attitudes toward strangers from the experience of one refugee? What does it mean to be “American,” and how has the meaning of the term operated in the context of Nasreen’s life? The answers to these questions form the guiding focus for this critical ethnography.

### **Research Methodology**

This study draws on the foundations for qualitative research delineated by TESOL. It is a case study that focuses on the life of Nasreen, an exceptionally successful refugee from Afghanistan who has integrated into American society in many significant ways and has found a way to thrive here in the United States. The present study was conducted in a manner consistent with narrative inquiry, a life history approach that depends on deep listening, thoughtful reflection, and a reciprocal relationship between researcher and subject. Indeed, the relationship that Nasreen and I have is not limited to the present study. The multiple interviews that we did for this project were precipitated and followed by many other conversations; we knew each other prior and will continue to spend time together in the future.

The interpretive framework for this research is primarily phenomenological. The phenomena studied in this critical ethnography are:

- 1) the essence of being a refugee and a stranger in new lands,
- 2) the essence of being a mother who wants her children to learn her heritage language, and
- 3) the essence of being both of these at once.

In order to interpret these phenomena, I have chosen one paradigm that transcends and intersects with each of these phenomena in productive and interesting ways: language. *Language*, then, is the lens through which these essential phenomena of Nasreen’s life—her experiences of being a

refugee and of being a mother—are disclosed and interpreted in this thesis. This strategic contemplation, or careful reflection on a subject's life through application of an interpretive framework, ultimately leads me to conclusions about the attitudes and attributes of resilience that make Nasreen a successful newcomer.

In turn, I consider my own experience as a cultural broker for refugees and reflect on my society's attitude toward newcomers. In this discussion about assimilation, acculturation, and the maintenance of heritage cultures through heritage languages, I reflect on my own experiences as an American Jew as they relate to the value of heritage in general. What is the significance of maintaining continuity with the culture of one's ancestors? What do I know of the experience of being a stranger, of being on the margins, of pressure and resistance to assimilation? This spirit of reciprocity, of bi-directional reflection and introspection, is a key tenant of TESOL guidelines for qualitative research; if we ask our research subjects to open up their lives to us, we must also be ready to explore our own lives with them.

### **Significance of Language Choice**

Refugees have always stretched the mantle of what it means to be American. As others cope with and react to the notion of a dynamic American identity, newcomers and native members alike must grapple with complicated questions of authority, ownership, and power. Language choice in refugee families—the decision to maintain, reclaim, or abandon heritage languages across generations—provides an interesting flashpoint and an enlightening optic for exploring these questions. It is a fascinating area to explore because it intersects in profound ways with family identity, ethnic identity, and national identity. In our border-fluid world, in a time when more people than ever before are migrating and making new lives for themselves outside the country of their birth, the exigency of globalization demands an inquiry of the consequences of migration. Because language is at once an abstract concept and a concrete representation of worldview, language choice is an act that is political and rhetorical in nature. It is a rhetorical act because it consists of a composition of the self, an identity that is socially constructed from both

within and without. It is also a political act because linguistic identity signals chosen membership in a particular political community. Ethno-linguistic identity, the self-construction and self-representation that results from such choices, is thus a significant decision.

Few aspects of life and identity present such potentially fruitful explorations as the workings of language in the lives of refugees and members of host countries alike. To the extent that language, culture, and identity are interconnected, this project proposes that an exploration of the history and character of language choice in refugee families will provide valuable insight into the workings of meaning-making and identity construction in the lives of refugees as well as enduring questions of national identity in America.

Concomitantly, an examination of the historical, political, and social contexts influencing language choice decisions in refugee families living in the United States might enlighten teachers of English, volunteers, mentors, counselors, and social workers—anyone who works closely with refugees. The cultural brokers that we are, it is paramount that we approach our students with humility, compassion, respect, and open minds and hearts. I am convinced that the surest path towards deeper understanding and empathy is through personal relationships with individuals. Like teaching, ethnographic research is relational. Creating space for Nasreen to tell her story and listening closely to what she has to say is thus a powerful rhetorical act. I hope that the wisdom, depth, and nuance inherent in Nasreen's views will enlighten and engender empathy in us all.

### **Research Questions**

The following are the areas of inquiry for this research:

1. As Nasreen raises her children surrounded by a culture and a language different from her own, how important is it to her that she maintain her heritage language, and why?
2. What challenges does she face in passing on her heritage language to her sons?
3. How does she feel about the loss of that language in her children?

### **Researcher's Assumptions**

In ethnographic research, the field of TESOL requires researchers to disclose their assumptions about the subject, the culture being studied, and other experiences which may influence the research. In order to engage in the most open and honest discussion possible, I present the assumptions with which I entered this ethnographic research project. I will revisit these assumptions in the conclusion.

1. The first assumption I have about Nasreen is that she is exceptionally intelligent, capable, and motivated to succeed despite tremendously difficult circumstances.
2. Another assumption I have is that she is extremely resilient, flexible, and adaptable.
3. I assume that Nasreen's outlook—her enduring positivity toward the world and forgiveness of others—as well as her hopefulness, are major contributors to her resiliency.
4. I assume that the negative experiences that Nasreen and her family lived through in Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey would motivate her to forget those times of her life. Foregoing the use of the languages from those places might help her lose connections with those bad memories.

### **Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the subject and the researcher, contextualizes the situation by stating the problem and providing brief histories and definitions of terms relevant to the discussion, and explains the motivations for this research. It also bounds the scope of the project by defining research questions, assumptions, and methodologies and presenting an overview of the thesis. Chapter 2 is a review of literature that further contextualizes the present study. It is a synopsis of relevant research on language choice in refugee families and the definitions of and relationships among ethnic identity, linguistic identity, national identity, language policy in the United States, and resiliency among refugees.

Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the research methodology and the research itself. Chapter 3 is an expository analysis of the qualitative research methods used in this ethnographic study. Chapter 4 presents findings from my interviews with Nasreen. Consistent with a life history approach to

ethnographic research, this section of the thesis is intentionally dominated by Nasreen's voice. She tells her own story, emphasizing and modulating, respectively, the parts she did and did not want to focus on. Through narrative inquiry, Nasreen's story is interwoven by my own reflections and discussion on those findings, connecting experiences in the subject's life to the author's own life.

Chapter 5 is an application of theory and interpretive frameworks to the life experience of one refugee, as told by the subject herself. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the thesis, revisiting research questions and assumptions, reflecting on limitations of the study, suggesting implications for teaching, and providing recommendations for further research. The thesis ends with final reflections, references, and appendices.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature contextualizes the present study around existing research on linguistic identity and language choice in refugee families—understood in this discussion as the maintenance or attrition of heritage languages (HL). The review is organized thematically around the following questions: How are family and ethnic community relations affected by decisions about the maintenance or attrition of heritage languages? What is the relationship between language, culture, and family cohesiveness? How do linguistic identity and ethnic identity intersect? What do we know about the interplay between bilingualism, second language acquisition, and integration? How have we formed public policy to approach linguistic diversity in the United States? Finally, how might we apply burgeoning research on transnationalism as an optic for interpreting heritage language maintenance/attrition decisions in the lives of migrants? While this discussion hinges on the meanings of many contested and overlapping concepts, this review of literature is an attempt to clarify and limit the scope of the present study.

#### **Heritage Language Maintenance and Family Relations**

The general consensus among the research on language choice in refugee families is a clear preference for HL maintenance: parents prefer to continue speaking their heritage languages and want their children to possess those languages while also adapting to their new societies (Medvedeva, 2012; Mu, 2015; Park, 2008). There are three main reasons for the preference for HL maintenance: they are a way to maintain cultural identity, they present better economic opportunities, and they are a way to communicate with grandparents. Migrant families who have been able to adapt to a new society and learn English while also preserving cultural roots and the ability to speak their ethnic languages generally reported better—more cohesive—family relations (Park, 2008). Moreover, there seems to be a link between heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem in refugee and immigrant families, and the link is evidenced across ethnic groups. Among Chinese children attending Chinese school on the weekends, for

example, the link was statistically significant (Mu, 2015). Another interesting aspect of the discussion about language choice in refugee families is the phenomenon of convergence: speakers attempt to converge with, or become more like, the speakers they are talking with. In refugee families, research shows that children tend to converge with their mothers (Medvedeva, 2012). Fascinatingly, children tend to consider the proficiencies of their mothers when choosing which language to speak in the home. When mothers are less proficient in English, children tend to choose their ethnic language (their mother tongue) to communicate with them. When mothers are more proficient, children tend to choose English (ibid). Empathy thus seems to be a guiding factor in language decisions for the second generation.

The reasons that children choose to speak English over their heritage languages are multifaceted and complex, but Lily Wong Fillmore (1991) suggested a few reasons. One reason that children prefer to speak English rather than their HL may be the perceived inferiority of the status of that language. The social status of the HL—viz. the ethnic group that speaks it—seems to influence attitudes toward the HL and consequent motivations for maintenance/attrition. Research suggests that the HL is more often maintained when it is regarded as higher status in society, but when minority languages are lower status, attrition seems to be more common. Attitudes toward HL maintenance or attrition have been studied extensively in sociolinguistics. Wallace Lambert's (1963) landmark study of a French immersion program in Canada remains an enormous contribution to the influence of attitudes toward language speakers and corresponding motivations on second language acquisition and the cultural integration of newcomers. A clear correlation emerged between empathy with speakers of the target language and levels of proficiency attained: Lambert found that when students could identify with at least one member of a target culture or language, they were far more motivated to learn. "Depending upon the compatibility of the two cultures, the learner may experience feelings of chagrin or regret as he loses ties in one group, mixed with the fearful anticipation of entering a relatively new group"

(Lambert, 1963, p. 114). The greater the social distance, or relation of the language learner's social group to that of the target culture, the more difficult it is to acculturate.

Lambert went on to theorize two different kinds of bilingualism: additive and subtractive. Additive bilingualism refers to the acquisition of a target language along with the maintenance of heritage languages, while subtractive bilingualism is the loss or attrition of heritage language upon the acquisition of the dominant language. Those language learners who successfully use both languages in different contexts are referred to in the literature as balanced bilinguals (Ortega, 2009). Wong Fillmore (1991), in her research on early childhood education, set out to interrogate the phenomenon of Lambert's subtractive bilingualism. She found that language use in the home changes as language-minority children attend school. Influenced by the "assimilative effects" of the "attractive American school," children begin to speak English at home shortly after beginning to attend American schools—even when their parents do not—and in many cases they do actually lose their primary languages. The younger the child, the stronger the effect (p. 341). Of the pressure in U.S. society to abandon heritage languages in favor of English, Portes and Hao (1998) wrote, "The United States is a veritable cemetery of foreign languages . . . the mother tongue of hundreds of immigrant groups has rarely lasted past the third generation" (p. 269). Fishman (1966) referred to this phenomenon as language shift: over three generations, the HL gradually loses ground to English. The second generation (children of refugees and immigrants) uses more English than their HL, and by the third generation, English becomes the dominant language of family and community. 6 out of 10 second-generation refugees think of themselves as "typical Americans," though they still have connections to ancestral roots, whereas about 3 out of 10 first-generation refugees feel this way (Brettell & Nibbs, 2009).

This three-generation language shift from the HL to the dominant language presents emotional challenges for many parents, who report wishing that their children would speak their HL. While parents lament their lack of control with respect to the language choices of their

children, they are not without influence. Indeed, parental language choice seems to play an outsized role on that of the children:

Familial language shift to the majority language is a major, if not the major, contributor to children's later loss of their heritage language with its attendant social, emotional, educational, and political consequences. When children begin to exhibit a preference for the culturally dominant language after beginning to speak it at school, parents sometimes respond by shifting to English themselves. (Kouritzin, 2000, p. 313)

De Houwer (2015) asserted that good relationships at home are one of the most determinant factors in the development of bilingualism. The following home circumstances may hinder positive language development:

1) When parents and children speak different languages in the same conversation, 2) when children who are raised with two languages early on speak just a single language (and thus are not actively bilingual), and 3) when actively bilingual children speak one language far better than the other one. (De Houwer, 2015, p. 172)

Children translating for parents can further disintegrate family structure. "Researchers have found a positive correlation between parental ethnic identity and ethnic language proficiency" (Umana-Taylor et al, 2006, p. 395). Parental attitudes toward the HL thus play a significant role in the construction of children's linguistic identities, which seem to be intimately connected with cultural identities.

Tied closely to the social status of ethnic groups, another major factor influencing attitudes toward heritage languages among children in refugee and immigrant families is ethnic identity, or the sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. Many scholars (Phinney, 1989; Tse, 1998; Umana-Taylor et al, 2006) have devoted their attention to the process of identity formation among ethnic minority children and adolescents. Moreover, it is not as if all scholars agree as to what the term "ethnic identity" actually means. Jean Phinney (1996) clarified the issue by outlining four different aspects of the term: ethnic awareness, self-identification, attitudes, and

behavior. Ethnic identity refers to the extent to which members of ethnic groups have explored the meaning of their membership in that group. Tse (1998) theorized four stages of ethnic identity formation: 1) ethnic unawareness; 2) ethnic ambivalence/evasion; 3) ethnic emergence; and 4) ethnic incorporation. Similarly, Umana-Taylor et al (2014) proposed “three components of ethnic identity: exploration, resolution (similar to commitment), and affirmation. Affirmation is how positively one feels about one’s membership in an ethnic group” (p. 94). Ethnic identity and personal identity are separate but overlapping concepts that reciprocally influence each other. Vertovec summarized several anthropological perspectives on this “slippery concept”:

identities are seen to be generated in, and constructed through, a kind of internal (self-attributed) and external (other-ascribed) dialectic conditioned within specific social worlds. This holds true for both personal and collective identities, which should be understood as always closely entangled with each other. (Vertovec, 2009, pp. 76-77).

*Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* by Margaret Mead (1970) looked at three kinds of cultures: post-figurative, wherein children learn primarily from their forbearers; co-figurative, wherein both children and adults learn from their peers; and pre-figurative, wherein adults also learn from children.

### **Language and Identity**

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1940) is the foundational concept in linguistics that underlies any discussion about the extent to which language and worldview are interconnected. More than interconnected, the strong version of the hypothesis is that worldview is wholly informed by the language in which one learns to conceive of it. Language and culture are essential in creating meaning; at least, perception is filtered through a prism of language and culture. While the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that we see the world in ways that are *influenced* by our language, the strong version holds that we are *prisoners* of our language. As we study another language, we see the world differently. The ability to take on the mantle of a new language and culture—at its most extreme, to move ahead with a new self and leave the past behind—is an

unimaginable challenge confronting any individual who endeavors to make a life for him or herself in a new place.

Sandra G. Kouritzin (2000) recounts her feelings as a mother raising children in her L2, Japanese. For the first five years of her children's lives, Kouritzin spoke to her son and daughter only in Japanese, her husband's first language, and used no English with them at all. *A Mother's Tongue* is her moving reflection on that experience. She laments her perceived inability to mother her children without the use of her own mother tongue. In her second language, Kouritzin sometimes worried that she was an incompetent mother. She felt this most keenly when observing native Japanese mothers discipline their children: Kouritzin felt that she could not communicate with her children in the subtly nuanced ways that other mothers could. She admits her constant doubts about whether her children would learn incorrect grammar from her, and she even reveals feeling alienated from them. In effect, Kouritzin worried that she was not the authentic mother in her L2 that she might have been in her L1. She empathizes with mothers like Nasreen:

What is it like to be a Farsi-speaking mother who has felt pressure to speak English to her child at home? Whom can she ask for mothering-language guidance in the way that I can turn to my husband or my mother-in-law? How does she resolve the conflict between speaking English at home, often recommended by a well-meaning teacher, and wanting to share with her children the most intimate possession of all—a language? (p. 315)

Wong Fillmore echoes this sentiment:

Talk is a crucial link between parents and children: It is how parents impart their cultures to their children and enable them to become the kind of men and women they want them to be. (Wong Fillmore, 1991, p. 343)

If heritage languages bear culture and value, and children refuse to speak that heritage language, then there is a break in the transmission of values from generation to generation. As De Houwer (2015) put it, “language choice patterns within the family have great symbolic meaning” (p. 172). To the extent that language bears identity, De Houwer went so far as to say that when parents do

not speak their HL with their children, “part of their identity is being lost when their children do not share their language” (p. 173).

In this context, refugees experience anomie as a feeling of “social uncertainty or dissatisfaction,” as Kristen Jarnes (2002) wrote in *The Impact of Anomie on Adolescent and Adult Second Language Acquisition*. Jarnes adapted Emile Durkheim’s concept of *anomie*, normlessness in societies or in individuals, as a condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals. She connected anomie to heritage language attrition: the loss of language is a loss of self, an unmooring. William Gudykunst, Stella Ting-Toomey, and Elizabeth Chua (1988), in considering the role of ethnic identity in interpersonal communication, also discussed ethnolinguistic identity as a sort of compass, something one is lost and aimless without. Concomitantly, then, a loss of language is tantamount to a loss of culture and worldview.

### **Language Attrition as Alienation from Parents**

Richard Rodriguez attempted to square the consequences of language attrition in his own life. In *Aria: Memory of a Bilingual Childhood* (1982), Rodriguez lamented the loss of his private language, and he also reflected on the cultural and linguistic separation that emerged between himself and his parents. He wrote of the loss of that intimate home language and connection:

Intimacy is not trapped within words. It passes through words. It passes. The truth is that intimates leave the room. Doors close. Faces move away from the window. Time passes. Voices recede into the dark. Death finally quiets the voice. And there is no way to deny it. No way to stand in the crowd, uttering one’s family language.

He views that private loss of language and culture as a trade-off that was necessary for the public gain of inclusion and education; in other words, giving up Spanish was worth it in order to become fully integrated into American society.

But there were more consequences to this “private loss for a public gain” in Rodriguez’s life than the attrition of Spanish: as Rodriguez learned English and acculturated, he began to feel

a separation between himself and his parents. “If, because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents, my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about that fact,” he wrote (p. 24). It was a separation in the way that society viewed him, a fluent English speaker who had grown up in America, and the way society viewed them, as perpetual strangers incapable of being complete persons. This view of non-English speakers as incomplete persons is pervasive. It is as if we assume that people who cannot express themselves in English are incapable of expressing themselves in any language. Our institutions reflect this bias:

Of all the institutions in their lives, only the Catholic Church has seemed aware of the fact that my mother and father are thinkers—persons aware of the experience of their lives. Other institutions—the nation’s political parties, the industries of mass entertainment and communications, the companies that employed them—have all treated my parents with condescension. (Rodriguez, 1982)

In her evocative analysis of the stranger, *Etrangères à Nous-Même (Strangers to Ourselves)*, Julia Kristeva also wrote about a chronic pain that the foreigner experiences: the inherent foreignness of his or her parents. Not only are the stranger’s parents unknown to natives of the host country, but they are also ineffable. Unable to speak her mother’s tongue, they cannot possibly evoke her mother:

You then experience as murderous those natives who never speak of your close relatives—sure, they were close in the past and elsewhere, unmentionable, buried in another language. Or else they allude to them in such absent-minded way, with such off handed scorn that you end up wondering if those parents truly exist, and in what ghostly world of an underground hell. The pain you feel facing those empty eyes that have never seen *them*. Loss of self in the presence of those distant mounts that do not weigh the artifice of the speech that evokes *them*. (Kristeva, 1991, p. 22)



Kristeva asserted that the stranger's parents are effectively non-entities in the eyes of host country natives who are indifferent to their existence. Our incapacity to see the stranger's parents when we see the stranger belies our failure to see the stranger as a whole person with a history, hopes, dreams, and worries.

### **Language Policy in the United States**

The experience of German-speaking immigrants in the United States provides an illuminating context with respect to the English-only movement in American schools. There were once public non-English or mixed language and culture schools: at the end of the nineteenth century, there were as many schools using German as the primary language of instruction as there were using English (Grohsgal, 2014). Prior to WWI, German Americans led successful, influential, American lives with a distinct ethnic identity intact. They spoke the German language, read German newspapers, and carried on German cultural practices in robust institutions of their own and in public spaces, as well. When suddenly Germany became the enemy of the United States, it became extremely unpopular—even dangerous, in many cases—to identify as German.

The experience of Germans in the U.S. in the early twentieth century further supports the impact of language choice on group identity—from both within and without. Germans were white, about half Roman Catholic and half Protestant, and well-established in large numbers. Racially, religiously, and in many ways culturally, German Americans were not distinct from the rest of the country. And yet they must have kept their identity intact enough that Americans were able to see them as Germans more clearly than as Americans when their fatherland became the enemy of the United States. The anti-German fervor during and after the world wars was the beginning of the English-only movement in American schools; within a generation, German Americans stopped speaking German and became just “American” (Grohsgal, 2014). There are still pockets of German-speaking communities in some parts of the United States today, but the numbers are nothing like they were at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Promoting an additive view with respect to the acquisition of the dominant language along with the maintenance of minority languages, TESOL and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have long grappled with citizens' and students' rights to their own languages and dialects. Washington State is one of several English Plus states which governs language diversity policies by additive views of bilingualism. In the 1923 Supreme Court case, *Meyer v. Nebraska*, the court ruled that "the protection of the Constitution extends to all; to those who speak other languages as well as to those born with English on the tongue" (Serrano). The TESOL International Association (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), which was founded in 1966, advocates the educational policy called Students' Rights to their Own Language (SRTOL), which asserts that students have the right to use their home language, to own it, to keep their identity and connection to their family through it. At the 4 C's conference in 1986, Geneva Smitherman advocated three tenets of formal policy:

- 1) English literacy for all.
- 2) Retention of and respect for home languages and dialects.
- 3) Foreign languages for all Americans.

With the Washington House Bill 2129 (1989), it became official policy "to welcome and encourage the presence of diverse cultures and the use of diverse languages in business, government, and private affairs in this state." Interestingly, Oregon also has the word "protect" in their legislation. The NCTE National Language Policy says that students' rights to their own languages are owed them; indeed, they are their identity.

A. Suresh Canagarajah, in *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* (1999), suggests that we transcend the narrow-minded one language/one nation ideology and "realize that rather than developing mastery in a single 'target language,' students should strive for competence in a repertoire of codes and discourses" (p. 592). He goes on:

But this practice has been questioned lately, as the orientation to language rights based on the nation-state has become outmoded, just as the borders of countries have become porous under the influence of globalization. (p. 596)

### **Transnationalism and Symbolic Identity**

Emerging literature on transnationalism—the interconnected identities, attitudes, and lifestyles of migrants who straddle the lines which define where one nation ends and another begins—is highly relevant to this discussion about refugees and the decision to maintain/abandon heritage languages. Migrants today are staying in contact with friends and family back home, and these maintained connections help to build not only imagined communities but also real ones—across oceans. Indeed, the “degrees to and ways in which today’s migrants maintain identities, activities and connections linking them with to communities outside their places of settlement are unprecedented” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 78). Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc define transnationalism: “The process by which refugees forge and sustain multi-stranded relationships that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (1995). It is a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities, “create social fields that cross national boundaries” (ibid.). As time goes on and connections fade, many second-generation refugees experience a symbolic transnationalism.

In his seminal 1979 article on the topic, Herbert J. Gans wrote about symbolic identity and ethnicity in the third and fourth generations of immigrants in the United States. Recent articles also discuss refugee connections to home through what they refer to as a cultural transnationalism. In their 2018 article, “‘I should not forget!’: Qualitative evidence of social and cultural transnationalism among refugees who are disconnected from home,” Myers & Nelson suggest that Karen and Karenni refugees in the U.S. West remain symbolically connected to home through dress, language, and self-identification. Among other visible symbols of belonging to a particular ethnic group, heritage language proficiency—the ability to speak and understand one’s ethnic language—is one of the most potent symbols of a coherent connection between

oneself and a distant homeland or other members of the group. Indeed, heritage language maintenance is a key aspect of being a transnational villager (Levitt, 2001). Along with Nina Glick Schiller, Peggy Levitt went on to put forward the idea that “assimilation and enduring transnational ties are neither incompatible nor binary opposites” (2004, p. 1003). Most of the research in this area has been done on second-generation Italians. Vertovec expanded, “In addition to realizing that the relationship between transnationalism and integration is not a zero-sum game, it is important to understand that neither concept is of a piece; that is, various modes or components can be selectively combined by migrants” (2009, p. 80).

Successful people tend to come from close-knit families and cultural traditions wherein they have the emotional support of loved ones, the care and protection of other members of the family, a sense of purpose and responsibility, and friends of the same culture nearby. Sara Aymerich Leiva (2014), in her interviews with two particularly successful Latino students who became college presidents, found that students must have a strong sense of self and identity in order to learn best. Empirical research confirms that the most well-adjusted newcomers enjoy the support of close-knit, cohesive communities. “When immigrants feel thoroughly engaged in a field of interactions whether in the UK or spanning a place of origin, this may well provide a sense of confidence to engage yet other people and spaces” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 82). Thanks to the construction of stable, cultural-root bound identities, they are confident enough to selectively acculturate into their new societies. Gonzales-Bäcken (2013) explained that Erikson “emphasized the importance of healthy identity development resulting in an integrated, consistent identity. Individuals who have achieved identity integration will show stable identity commitments across context and identity domains” (p. 94). The most successful learners will have a diffuse or permeable ethnic identity: that is, they are open to several different ways of seeing the world and ways of seeing themselves in it. Individuals will accept or reject aspects of the target culture that work for them—which thoughts, beliefs, emotions, or communication styles they feel

comfortable taking on. Less successful learners, with foreclosed rather than permeable egos, will resist such fundamental changes to who they are.

However, the closeness of ethnic communities can present challenges to integration, as well. In insulated ethnic enclaves, refugees are less likely to have American friends to work with and learn from; consequently there is less acculturation or integration and a growing social distance from American peers. “Sustained transnational activity,” Cohen and Sirkeci (2005) suggested of their research on Oaxacans in the U.S. and Kurds in Germany, “can lead to concentrated and segmented communities in settlement societies, and such ethnic enclaves may mitigate integration through limiting interaction with non-community members” (qtd. in Vertovec, 2009, pg. 81). People tend to assimilate more when they do not concentrate. Indeed, research on bullying confirms a correlation between diversity and acceptance of refugees. That is, there seem to be fewer instances of refugee bullying in schools that are more ethnically and racially diverse than in rural, homogenous classrooms (Caravita, 2016).

Vertovec (2009) suggested that one approach to understanding the intersecting processes of transnational affiliations and consciousness can be through the concept of *habitus*, or the cultural repertoires conditioned by local systems of structured relationships. As migrants maintain connections that span the cultural norms specific to one locality, they inhabit multiple systems of meaning-making at once. This transnational habitus, as Vertovec put it, has a:

substantial impact on individual and family life course and strategies, individuals’ sense of self and collective belonging, the ordering of personal and group memories, patterns of consumption, collective socio-cultural practices, approaches to child-rearing and other modes of cultural reproduction. These latter functions particularly concern ways in which the re-orienting of first generation habitus conditions that of second and subsequent generations. (2009, p. 83)

Transnational habitus, then, could be understood as a double life inhabiting structures of meaning that span more than one locality. As refugees integrate into American society, they might choose

to assimilate by, as quickly as possible, rejecting their HL and becoming monolingual English speakers. Many refugees ultimately decide that the path of least resistance is to act American in mainstream, public spheres and “ethnic” in private.

In *Beyond Expectations* (2017), Dr. Onoso Imoagene explores the social distance between recent refugees from Africa and their “proximal hosts” (African Americans who are descended from slaves). Imoagene’s exploration of this social distance sheds a fascinating light on identity at the intersections of race, culture, language, and class. She concludes that second-generation Nigerians in both the United States and Britain share a complex, multi-faceted identity which includes: a diasporic Nigerian identity, an African identity, a black racial identity which they cannot escape, and a middle-class identity (to which they attribute cultural values). The second generation of Nigerian ancestry in both countries finds that they are ethnic hybrids, influenced heavily by the culture of their parents yet indelibly marked by the culture in which they are living, as well. It is also fascinating that no such ethnic “Nigerian identity” exists in Nigeria, where cultural groups tend to be tribal, religious, or regional. The ethnic identity shared by Nigerian refugees abroad is representative of an imagined unity formed in the diaspora.

As newcomers are confronted with the challenge of constructing new selves in new lands, they must navigate profound questions of identity. Language choice, or the decision to maintain a heritage language across generations, is a significant aspect of that identity construction.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter functions as a further review of literature on the history and philosophy of the mixed qualitative research methods used in this study, which is a critical ethnography conducted as an interview/dialogue with a single case study, Nasreen. Strategic contemplation and phenomenological research were the methods employed in the interpretation of the interview, which was conducted in a manner consistent with narrative inquiry.

#### **Convenience Sample**

I met Nasreen in the summer of 2016 when, one Saturday morning, Latifah and I knocked on the door to her apartment to borrow the keys to the laundry room of her apartment complex. It was the first of many mornings that I would drive Latifah, another refugee from Afghanistan, to Nasreen's to do laundry. As a volunteer for World Relief, a refugee resettlement organization, I became Latifah's friend and cultural broker, a position in which I did what I could to help her transition to life in the United States. While waiting for Latifah to do her laundry, Nasreen would generously invite me into her home. We would spend hours together drinking tea, eating baklava, talking, doing homework, and having lunch. Her sons, after sleeping late, would say hello and then play video games in the living room while we talked. Mehran, Nasreen's husband, would usually be out working. So for a few hours about once a month, it would be the two of us in her warm and cozy apartment. After many casual conversations with Nasreen, it occurred to me that her exceptional experience and articulate way of speaking about that experience would make for a fascinating subject for my graduate research. I asked her if she would be comfortable with me interviewing her about her life, recording it, and writing about it for school. She said yes. I initially interviewed her in the spring of 2017 for an anthropology course on migration and transnationalism and conducted a follow-up interview with her in the fall of 2017 for a course on second language acquisition. I received IRB approval and Nasreen's consent before interviewing her again, more formally this time, and making her ethnography the subject of my graduate thesis.

## A Case Study

When I initially conceived of this research project, I had planned to interview between three and five refugees, who had been living in the United States for at least one year, about the circumstances surrounding language choice in their families. I wanted to interview several men and women in similar life situations and synthesize my reflections and whatever patterns emerged. My tentative title: *Attitudes toward Assimilation and Heritage Language Maintenance in Refugee and Refugee Families: A Multiple Case Study of Ethno-Linguistic-Cultural Identity*. I planned to use those reflections as a lens for viewing attitudes toward assimilation and heritage language maintenance as refugees take on life in a new country. Encouraged at that germinal stage by the significant and meaningful insights afforded by my preliminary interview with Nasreen, I submitted my plans to the IRB and was approved to do human subjects research through contacts at World Relief and the Community Colleges of Spokane.

My designs for this project changed, however, when Dr. Kassahun Kebede, one of the members of my committee, suggested that instead of a multiple case study, I focus more deeply, instead, on the life of a single subject. A mutually respectful and beneficial relationship with a single subject with whom the researcher has a personal connection is more in line with TESOL guidelines for qualitative research, as well. The field of TESOL cautions against “snatch-and-grab” research, in which researchers swoop in for a moment to gather data and then exit without forming any personal, reciprocal relationships with the subject. Because I already had a personal relationship with Nasreen and had casually interviewed her once before, she of course came to mind as an ideal subject for this ethnographic project.

Dr. Kebede also directed me to Robert Atkinson’s *The Life Story Interview*, part of the SAGE research guides for qualitative research, which makes a compelling case for the merit of ethnographic research that focuses closely on one person’s life. When I decided to do a single case study with Nasreen as my subject, I asked her if she would be willing to let me interview her again, this time recording and transcribing her responses, and to reflect on those responses



together in a work that would be published as a Master's thesis at EWU. I explained that her name and other identifying information would be protected, and I was thrilled when she responded that she would be more than willing to do this with me.

I applied to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval for human subjects research and was approved in early 2018. I gave Nasreen a consent form to read and sign (see Appendix A) along with a list of open-ended questions that had been approved by the IRB (see Appendix B), making sure that she understood that she could read the questions ahead of time and refuse to answer anything she felt uncomfortable about or would rather not. I then proceeded to interview her in the manner described below.

### **Data Collection**

Both interviews took place on Saturday mornings in Nasreen's apartment. I recorded our conversations with an audio tool on my iPhone, and the files can be uploaded anywhere. I had prepared some research questions in advance of our interview, but our discussion progressed more as a conversation than as a formal interview. We talked, sometimes in blocks of questions and sometimes more conversationally, for about three hours over the course of both interviews. After accounting for the breaks when her husband or boys came and went, I have about 3.5 hours of recorded interview with Nasreen that I transcribed.

The interviews were conducted entirely in English. Reflecting on my research methods now, I realize that I could have hired a translator to help clarify some of the questions—a few times, Nasreen responded to my questions in ways that indicated she had either not heard me, not understood the question, or preferred not to answer. In those instances, I sometimes rephrased the question and sometimes moved on. I do not believe that hiring a translator would have enabled Nasreen and me to delve deeper into our reflections; her proficiency in English, our existing relationship, and our understandings of each other have been forged in English. Having a translator would have, I believe, detracted from the intimacy of our conversations. Moreover, whatever language barrier we might have come against is probably fitting in this study. If she

feels that cannot express her fullest self in English, then it is up to me as a researcher to hear and understand that in her words.

### **Critical Ethnography**

In ethnographic research, TESOL asks us to approach data analysis and findings through an inductive and recursive process. Patterns and themes emerge and evolve as data collection proceeds:

Emphasize emic—or participant—attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and practices, as the objective of ethnography is to come to a deeper understanding of how people in particular contexts experience their social and cultural worlds.

Practice reflexivity, a process of self-examination and self-disclosure about aspects of your own background, identities or subjectivities, and assumptions that influence data collection and interpretation.

Data analysis may begin informally during interviews or observations and continue during transcription, when recurring themes, patterns, and categories become evident.

(TESOL.org, 2015)

According to TESOL guidelines for qualitative research, the author's relationship with the subject is important. As such, the research is iterative, recursive, and reflective. A major part of ethnographic work is continuing to see it in new eyes, to go back and revisit assumptions, to work together, over time, to more deeply understand.

### **Phenomenological Research**

In order to limit the scope of this study, this analysis focuses on a few phenomena, or essences, of Nasreen's life experience. This is an "inductive, descriptive research approach developed from phenomenological philosophy; its aim is to describe an experience as it is actually lived by the person" (Mligo, 2013). The assumption goes that there is "an essence [meaning] or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people

are analyzed . . . for example, the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother” (2002).

The phenomena studied in this critical ethnography are:

- 1) the essence of being a refugee and a stranger in a new land,
- 3) the essence of being a mother, and
- 4) the essence of being all of these at once.

Questions about how newcomers make decisions about assimilation, acculturation, and deculturation with respect to language, culture, and religion dominate the discussion about the essence of being a refugee and a stranger in a new land.

### **Strategic Contemplation**

Strategic contemplation is defined by Hitt as a way of thinking and reflecting on life that “reclaims meditation” and which requires “taking the time, space, and resources to think about, through, and around our work as an important meditative dimension of scholarly productivity” (2012). It is a humanistic, co-contemplation that, when practiced along with narrative inquiry, creates space for both the researcher and the subject to reflect on what might otherwise go unexamined. The contemplation is also reciprocal and relational: though I cannot yet relate to Nasreen as a mother, I can relate to her as a daughter who is devoted to her parents.

### **Narrative Inquiry/Agency**

Trahar (2009) defines this method: “Narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the method and the phenomena of study” (Pinnegar & Danes, 2007, p. 4). Narrative inquiry is also a method of creating epistemic space. The very act of talking and writing about Nasreen’s experiences—and my own in relation to hers—creates knowledge and understanding. The conversations that Nasreen and I had about her life, her languages, and her experiences raising children in different countries were new to us both. It was not until our interviews, according to Nasreen, that she had really talked about those events. By creating space for Nasreen’s story to be the focus of my work, I practice narrative inquiry and encourage Nasreen to explore subjects she otherwise might not have spent time reflecting upon. For example, Nasreen realized, through our

conversations, that her son has now gotten old enough to ask her questions to which she does not know the answers. The research and writing of this thesis, then, is epistemic in that knowledge and insight are created through the process of reflection on the life story.

The following ethnographic interview is a narrative about identity development. In this sense, my interviews with Nasreen might be interpreted as a literacy narrative, a biography that foregrounds issues of language acquisition and literacy. Mary Soliday (1994) is one of the most definitive voices on the genre. In “Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives,” she wrote that these narratives:

portray passages between language worlds in order to consider the relevance of such passages to a writing pedagogy, particularly to a pedagogy for basic writing classes. . . . They are places where writers explore what Victor Turner calls ‘liminal’ crossings between worlds. In focusing on those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds. (Soliday, 1994)

Furthermore, they are an exploration of the “profound cultural force language exerts in their students’ everyday lives.”

Ethnographic research shows that telling stories at home is a rich and complex social practice through which family members establish their identities as language users in culturally specific ways. (Heath; Labov; Scollon & Scollon)

Significantly, literacy narratives provide an opportunity for developing “narrative agency” because narrators find their experiences interpretable. An expanded narrative agency, in turn, leads to an expanded sense of personal agency. This concept of agency gained through narrative writing and telling is explored in the 2018 article by Bethany Mannon, published in the journal *College English*, “Spectators, Sponsors, or World Travelers? Engaging with Personal Narratives of Others through the Afghan Women’s Writing Project.” As women decide which

parts of their stories to tell, they exert agency over their own narratives and lives. This act of giving epistemic space to Nasreen by encouraging her to reflect on and answer questions about her life is also feminist. Giving epistemic space to voices of historically marginalized groups is the purview of feminist rhetoric (hooks, 2016).

Transnational rhetoric also comes into play (Hesford & Schell, 2008) in the discussion of the deficiency of non-Western rhetorical traditions and the potential richness of crossing borders to weave wider, more interrelated webs. Michael MacDonald (2015), in his article about the Lost Boys of Sudan as emissaries of literacy who exert agency in their rhetorical choices, discussed the assumptions that are often made in our approach to stories about refugees:

These practices are expressed and communicated through an awareness of at least two important matters: the potential audiences for their stories and the complex material realities that shape their learning. In these ways, they model for sponsors the kinds of self-reflexivity that should be practiced during acts of literacy sponsorship as well as in the wider consumption of narratives of refugee experience and human suffering. (p. 419)

Thus, we engender empathy through understanding and engaging with the stories of refugees. The telling of literacy narratives, or the telling of life stories in ethnographic interviews, is an opportunity for speakers to articulate aspects of their lives they would perhaps otherwise be unaware of. In so doing, they can determine for themselves who they would like to be, gain self-agency, self-representation, and even self-transformation.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### **Data Analysis: Interpretation and Response**

The following is a selection of the most salient parts of my interview with Nasreen. In the spirit of narrative inquiry, I thought it fitting to present our conversation in the form of a narrative, with my commentary and my reactions mixed in. Here is the story that Nasreen shared with me.

#### **Pre-Immigration**

Nasreen's father did not want to leave Afghanistan. Of her father's love for his country, she told me:

He loved there. He always said that he would never leave his country. Then that happened.

At that time he said he couldn't think about the country, he could only think about us. How to keep my family safe. He was saying that he didn't want to lose any of us. That would be enough. When you are not safe, you just look for some way to escape.

The impetus to leave was the Taliban killing several of her family members. Scouting for new headquarters on the outskirts of Kabul, they had knocked on her relatives' door. When they were refused entry, they murdered her uncle and her grandmother. It was time to go.

I asked her about the decision process around leaving, and she told me it was clear. "You don't think about anything. You don't think about where you will live or what you will miss because you just think about taking care of your family, staying alive." Striving toward safety in numbers, Nasreen left her homeland in 2001 with her parents, seven siblings, and ten other families—a group of around 200 people in all. At the age of 15, she was suddenly a refugee.

They headed toward Iran, the nearest safe place. There were several compelling reasons to go to Iran: as Shia Muslims, they would not have to hide their practices there, and Dari, the language of Afghanistan that Nasreen's family speaks, is not so dissimilar to Farsi, the national language in Iran. But the priority was simply to get out of Afghanistan.

## **Life in Iran**

Although the government in Tehran was not accepting refugees at the time—was even actively sending them back to their countries of origin—Nasreen and her family found a place to live on the outskirts of the capital, a neighborhood intermixed with both Afghan refugees and Iranian families. It was there that she met Mehran, her husband-to-be, who was also Afghan and living in the same neighborhood. He and his sister were the only members of their family who had not been killed by the Taliban. They married when she was 18, he 28.

Because they did not have Iranian citizenship, Nasreen and her siblings were not allowed to attend school with the Iranian children. Instead, they attended a run-down school on the margins of town that was privately funded by whatever resources the Afghan refugee community could scrape together. With no official status and no papers, they paid heavy fees in order to stay each year and were not legally allowed to work. In Tehran, perhaps because the government did not wish to sully the capital, unregistered refugees were a little safer. Nasreen explained, “In other cities, they would go to people’s houses and ask about their I.D.’s. If they didn’t have I.D.’s they would get sent back. Sometimes children would come home and see their families gone. It happened a lot.”

Both Nasreen and her husband were taken in by good-hearted Iranians, in work and at school, respectively. She learned English at a private institute in Iran. “I told you there were a lot of good people there,” she says. “When I think about those things that happened, that causes me to hate Iran. But when I talk about Iran and their bad behaviors, it’s not about all of them.” Unable to go to school or earn an official certificate, teachers at a private institution let her attend and learn, nonetheless. Despite his nationality, Mehran was able to find work in a factory as a welder. It was his boss who taught him how to weld, and he became such a valuable employee that:

His boss had paid a lot of fines because of having him as a worker. But he was fine with that because he said he could never find somebody else who would work for him like that.

He would be able to just leave the factory and Mehran would manage things for him. Every year he had to pay a lot of money for that, but that was fine with him.

When Mehran and Nasreen left Tehran, his boss closed the factory.

Afghan families like Nasreen's suffered heavy discrimination from Iranians, as well. They would get made fun of for speaking Dari on the street, so they made a habit of speaking only Farsi in public. Iranian people called them "Afi," an ethnic slur. As a consequence, Nasreen and Mehran decided not to teach their sons Dari, so while they speak it together and their children can understand, their boys, both born in Iran, never learned to speak the language of their parents' homeland. The government and the people of Tehran made it very clear that Afghan refugees were not welcome there.

They told us—like in the media—that we had to go back. For example, if you are in somebody's house and they act or behave in a way that you feel that you need to go. So you will never feel like belonging to that place. You will be always on the side of being there. She also observed that discrimination toward refugees was worse in poorer neighborhoods while acceptance was higher in areas with more wealth. As she astutely puts it, "They think their poor situation is because of the refugees." Here in America, it is the areas where times are hard that one finds the most vehement anti-newcomer sentiments, as well.

The turning point for Nasreen and her husband came when it was time to send their eldest son to school. In Iran, a child of Afghan refugees could only go to a school for refugees.

But it wasn't a nice place. It was far from the city, and there was less equipment. I didn't want to send my son there – I didn't want him to have that feeling that I had, feeling different from normal people. Or feeling less, like feeling less valuable in the society. . . . You know, you can tolerate everything when it's toward you, but you cannot tolerate it when it's toward your children. That feels worse.

If it had not been for the lack of opportunity for her children, they might have stayed in Tehran. Both Nasreen and Mehran had been able to find work, and life had been tolerable. But having



children—and constantly living in fear of being separated from them—made it intolerable. Either she or her husband might go to work and get sent back to Afghanistan any day. “And we were just thinking maybe—because they were unpredictable—maybe we get sent back without our children. So that helped us make this decision.”

The family came together and tried to decide what to do. Nasreen sat with her mother and father, brothers and sisters, and considered their options. Ultimately, they reached a decision: Nasreen, Mehran, their two boys, and her younger brother Arash would pay a smuggler to help them make the dangerous overland journey from Iran to Turkey. “Arash was kind of confused about leaving family. He said he couldn’t make a decision. Leaving you or leaving my family. Finally he thought, my family are together but you are alone. So he decided to come with us.”

Because Nasreen’s motherhood was the determining factor, her own mother’s words weighed most heavily on the decision:

She said I really don’t like to miss you. But I do whatever I can for you, so you should do whatever you can for your children. So I don’t say you stay with me because that way I will destroy your children’s future.

### **Journey to Turkey**

Decision made, the six of them said goodbye to their family. Over the course of eight nights, the group traveled by bus, by foot, by horse, and by car through the mountains from Tehran to Ankara. Nasreen describes walking the nightmarish mountain passes in the night: She suffers from night blindness, which is fortunate in some respects – because she couldn’t see the bodies piled below – but at some point she heard about a boy and a man sharing a horse which had fallen down the steep slope. She was sure they were her brother and son. They stifled her shriek and made her walk on. “I don’t remember that night. I remember the sounds, but I didn’t see anything! Because it was the mountains, dark.” Later, when her brother and son came to her to show her they were alive, she didn’t believe them. Eventually, they were cramped into an

apartment in Turkey, then, waiting for their staggered turn to take a trip to the UNHCR office in the capital. Finally registered as refugees, they waited.

They didn't know Turkish and were unable to work, but life in Turkey was better. Although they had to hide their Shia Islam in Sunni-dominated Turkey and were not allowed to leave the area they were living in, "Because we were registered, we knew there was something that would protect us. Our children could go to school. We didn't have a good situation there because of being refugees: not any help from anywhere, hard life, no rights." Ever adaptable, they learned Turkish, found work, made friends. The boys did well in school. Because of her refugee status, Nasreen was paid only 500 liras per month instead of 2000 to work as an interpreter for a hotel, but she took the job anyway. Nonetheless, the temporary nature of their life in Turkey, the uncertainty about the future—these facts compounded to make refugees less comfortable in a host country like Turkey than "home." Though they were safe and things were going well there, she had a persistent feeling that they were just passing through. "I felt like I was a guest. We couldn't make a plan because we didn't know how long we would stay there. For example, I like to buy good furniture but I didn't know how long I would be there, so I just got something simple for one year or two." They waited for three years until one day when Nasreen checked her phone, as was her habit, and noticed a sudden change in status: her file had been sent to the United States.

### **Arrival**

I asked her about her feelings in that moment. Would she have been just as excited to go to one of the other countries her file might have been sent to (Canada, Australia, somewhere in Europe)? "I didn't have anything in my mind. I just wanted to go somewhere. There wasn't any difference for me," she told me. In discussing her impressions of the U.S. prior to coming here, she said:

It was better when I came here. I had a better feeling than I thought. Because I hadn't heard good things about the U.S. when I lived in Iran. It's completely different being here or hearing about here. I heard that if I go to the U.S. I would not be free in practicing my

religion. I might have to uncover, not have my hijab. Or maybe people would look at me differently as a Muslim women. Those kinds of things. But when I came here it was completely different. Everything was different than I thought.

She has felt comfortable wearing her hijab. People don't stare at her for being different.

She told me that people in Iran and Turkey tended to have negative views of the U.S., and I asked her why she thought this was the case:

Maybe it's because of the relation between Iran and U.S. They don't have a good relation. For example, if me and you don't have a good relationship with each other, I might talk about you with my family, "She's not good." And you might talk about me. And that makes a bad impression about me and you in our children's mind. Something like that."

Her friends in Turkey even told her that she would be "wasting her life" by living in the United States. "Now when I talk to my friends and explain to them how people are here it's kind of surprising. They say, 'Oh I didn't know that.' And I have a lot of American friends. Nice, friendly, warm."

What was the biggest shock in coming here? "I never thought I will be comfortable between the men. [The men in Turkey] look at you like they want to eat you." I wasn't sure exactly what she meant by "eat," but I understood from the context that Nasreen was referring to, in her perception, a clear and present threat of sexual assault. "When I came here, I found that the men were very nice. When I talk with my classmates, we sit next to each other, we have conversations, group working. I really feel comfortable with them, like they are my brother." Once, for instance, she got an A on her exam along with the American man sitting next to her. He turned to her and said, "High five!" and she took a moment to evaluate. It was her first high five with a man.

I said he's my friend. He doesn't mean anything by it. But if there was an Afghan man there, I wouldn't do it because it would become a story. Or if it was an Afghan man doing that I wouldn't do it because it would have a different meaning. Different actions have

different meanings in different cultures. Here, I shake hands with any American man that I meet, but I never shake hands with Afghan men. And they never ask me.

Shaking hands was one cultural norm, for example, that Nasreen decided to adjust to. In Afghan culture, women do not shake hands with men. “In our country or in Iran people don’t do it because if they do it means they have broken their religion law. But here it means respect. So I think when you live somewhere you should try to adopt what people do there.” She balances her own cultural values with those of the one she is living in.

When I first came here I didn’t do it and I found it was kind of rude. I would explain everybody my religion. Then I sat and thought about and I thought I’m doing okay, I’m practicing my religion the way God asked and he will not punish me for that because it will not hurt anybody.

She felt rude but also guilty—deciding to shake hands with men and shifting her attitude about it so as not to feel guilty is a poignant example of her successful integration into the culture in which she finds herself.

### **Integration**

I asked Nasreen if she was familiar with the concept of assimilation—she wasn’t—and these were the words I used to explain it: It’s when you become so much a part of the society that you’re living in that the people around you don’t feel like you’re different from them. You assimilate. You’re the same. When I mentioned the lack of integration in some European countries—especially in France and Denmark and Germany, refugees from Muslim countries live in their own neighborhoods—she interrupted:

I don’t like that. When I go to a new place I like to get familiar as much as I can. Even if it’s not my first home or real home, it will be my home, and I like to get to know it. For example, here, if we can find a better life situation, we will travel all around the U.S.

Because of that, when I see somebody who is interested to talk, I try to talk to that person to know him or her better. I think that way I will feel more comfortable.

Her take on bridging the cultural divides between people is unique and inspiring:

We are all from the same parent, just raised in different places. Now, for example, my sister lives in Iran. She can have a baby; I can have a baby here. They will be raised in different places, but they are matched. I think people around the world are like that. They are from the same root, just raised in different places with different beliefs. Even my son can have different beliefs from me, so that cannot separate us from each other. Because of that, I don't see any big difference between me and other people.

Perhaps because she is fluent in four languages (Dari, Farsi, Turkish, and English), swimming like a fish in whatever body of water she finds herself, Nasreen sees language as no border or barrier between people. "But I think the most reason is that if you feel yourself being different from others, you will want to stay different. Maybe we speak different languages, but that doesn't mean we should be apart." Her language is her connection to her home and her family, and the prospect of language attrition that she observes in her children reveals a difference in attitude between first- and second-generation refugees.

After ten years, for example, my son might speak a different language from my parents. Even now, he speaks English and I say please speak Farsi with your grandmother she doesn't speak English and he says English is what comes to his tongue. He says, "Mom don't ask me to speak your language if I'm living here. I want to be like people here." Even at home he speaks English and I say please speak our language because we want to keep our language and it's a good skill to have different languages. If you don't speak our language you will forget it. He says, "If you think like that, it was better that you not bring me here. If you wanted to keep your language, you should have stayed in your country!"

Nasreen confided in me that she feels hurt by these words from her son. She does not understand why he feels this way. She certainly does not feel this way. She loves to learn different languages, "It's kind of a connection to everywhere." Nonetheless, she says, "I like to speak my language at

home. It's the only thing I can keep from my country. But the other things, no. But I never like to forget my language."

### **Missing Home**

Nasreen desperately misses her family. As she told me about her brother, Arash, who made the trip with her, she started laughing at the memory of his weight gain here in America. "His name is Fat Arash. He got a lot of weight since he came here. I always make fun of him and he makes fun of me because we both got a lot of weight." Searching through her phone, she showed me pictures of her father and mother, her older brother, her sisters. "Can you imagine how different it would be if you didn't have your phone? Or the internet? Do you think it makes it easier to be far away, when you can message and call?" I asked her.

Yeah. I'd be depressed. My doctor told me I am depressed now. She wants me to go to therapy, but I don't go because I know what's wrong. I know the reason why. So I don't have extra time to go to talk to them because they can't help me. We all need the same medicine. Therapy cannot help us. We just have to take our time.

Our mutual friend Latifah is depressed, as well. The instant messaging makes connecting with home easier, but she says, "It's still kind of sad. Because after that I wish I was with them. Especially ceremonies and things. Or sometimes when my mom is sick I say oh I wish I were there so I could help her." She continued scrolling for a while, absent from the room. "If I could find this picture of Arash, you would laugh like for some minutes."

Saving for a house, Nasreen and her husband are not able to send money home right now, but she says that if they were in a different situation they would. When someone in the Afghan community in Spokane goes back to Iran, they always send gifts. Her dream is to have her parents and siblings here with her, and she thinks about it every day.

When my husband says, 'What kind of house do you want to buy?' I say maybe one with more bedrooms because one day I will bring my parents and I will keep them with me. I

will need some extra bedrooms for that. I think we will get whatever we wish. Maybe in a longer time, but it will happen.

Her other siblings are still unmarried, and Nasreen tells them to stay that way so it will be easier to get them here.

So even if I can buy a big house here, have a good job, have everything, I still wish to have a simple life being with my family. Or being in my country but in a safe situation. Not because of the people—I don't have any problem with the people—just the feeling. I wish I have a country like this. Because of that, even if it's hard for me to talk about my past, I just talk to people to tell them that people don't wish to leave their country. It's hard.

The feeling of being a stranger is pervasive. Watching the news and listening to the leaders of the United States speak, it would seem that refugees like Nasreen are not welcome in America. She wishes that members of the host countries in which she has lived—people in the United States, Iran, and Turkey—would understand that refugees do not choose to be refugees. Like Nasreen, many would rather have remained in their homes. Circumstances compelled them to move; in Nasreen's case, the deaths of two close family members at the hands of the Taliban were the exigency behind her family's sudden departure from Afghanistan. Nasreen would give anything to be with her family again. Ideally, it would be back home where they could be safe and together. If that is not possible, then she would long for them to be safe and together in this country.

### **Hope for the Future**

Right now, Nasreen is a full-time student at Spokane Community College pursuing an Associate of Arts degree along with a certificate as an EFDA (Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary). A counselor at the community college helped her find the EFDA program: it fit her criteria in that it was related to medicine but would not take too long on account of her children. She told me that she doesn't want to be so busy as a student during too much of their childhood,

and she also has some vision problems which impede studying. And what does she envision her boys doing with their lives?

I say they can do whatever they want. My older son always looks at me when I get good grades. He says, "I am like you." He's always getting A's. He says, "Mom you are always A, I am always A, so I might be like you." When we talk to each other, when I talk about my past, or when I talk about my dreams, I tell him that I want him to be whatever I wanted to be but I couldn't. And I am glad that he can do it. And I like to make it happen for my siblings.

Nasreen's hope for the future is almost tangible. Her love and support for her children, and her hard-won ability to make opportunities that were impossible for her possible for them, is where her present makes daily contact with that future.

History is not one of Nasreen's prerequisites for the dental hygienist program, and she likes it that way. "Somehow I'm kind of sick of history. I feel like I've had enough of it. Like, I'm kind of history," she says. Characteristic of that indomitable optimism, she goes on, "I don't like to study about politics, what happened where. I just like to think about future. I don't like to think about past. I hate past. So maybe that's the reason I don't like to study history." Nasreen does not dwell on the past because nothing good would come of it. Besides being apart from her family, she could not think of one negative thing about being in the United States.

There was something, but I don't remember it now. It must not have been very important, because if it was, I would remember it now. I'm really the kind of person who likes to think about positive things. Nowhere is like heaven. Everything has something good and something bad. Totally, it's fine and good. Each person, each place has some negative points and positive points. If positive points are more, I don't think about negative things. Nasreen is magnanimous, buoyant. In her refusal to dwell on the negative or the past, optimism about the future, adaptability, and enduring hope, she is a model of the resiliency of the human spirit.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Having listened closely to Nasreen's life story in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 serves as a deeper analysis of identity and resiliency, key themes of Nasreen's life experience, and how those phenomena might be understood through one decision on Nasreen's part: namely, the decision to maintain her heritage language. In her heritage language, the language of the home in which she was a child, Nasreen carries her parents and her siblings, and the home to which she can never return. She can only go back symbolically, and her language serves that function. Her heritage language is a key feature of her resiliency because it represents the survival of a continuity with and connection to her family, to her ancestry, to the self that she has known throughout her life. Crucially, Nasreen's decision to maintain her heritage language also serves as a rare opportunity for her to exert agency over her identity. Unable to determine the nation in which she lives and so many other identity-making circumstances of her life, she can at least exert agency over one key aspect of her identity: the language that she speaks. Though she wishes that her children would also speak her heritage language, Nasreen demonstrates even more resiliency through her enactment of non-domination with respect to her children's decision to choose a language for themselves.

Consistent with participant-observer methods in ethnographic research, I approach this discussion on linguistic identity and resiliency by looking inward and reflecting on my own culture. In elucidating the link between language and cultural identity for the Jewish people, I connect my own experience of marginality and membership in a diasporic community to Nasreen's motivations for maintaining her heritage language. I suggest that the decision to promote one's heritage language, as Nasreen has done, is an empowering act of resistance to assimilation and language attrition as well as an enactment of non-domination. I also connect Nasreen's decision to maintain her heritage language to the efforts of other marginalized and colonized groups to maintain and reclaim their heritage languages. The chapter concludes with a

discussion about the resulting duality as an advantage rather than a deficiency, a more rich and nuanced perspective than the one available to the monolingual majority in the United States. This discussion ultimately comes to the conclusion that Nasreen's decision to maintain her heritage language has been key to her success as a refugee in the United States. Her intact identity and resiliency have been co-constitutive and served to reinforce each other: Nasreen's heritage language maintenance and selective acculturation inform a dual yet stable identity that enables her remarkable resiliency.

### **Heritage Language as Home, a Continuity of the Self**

Nasreen's heritage language serves as a connection to home, but it is even more than that: in an essential sense, Nasreen's heritage language *is* her home. It is the home that she carries through the migrations of her life. Where is home for Nasreen? Her home is her language, her mother tongue, the language of her childhood, the language in which she first developed consciousness. In her earliest years in Afghanistan, when she first became self-aware, it was the language that her parents used to teach her about the world—it was the structure that made up her understanding of it. Through the many iterations of the self that Nasreen has been inhabiting in different countries and languages, the self that she first knew was the self that she was as a child in her mother's arms. Her very first perceptions of the world were framed by the language in which her mother explained it to her. She had no concepts of the concrete or the abstract before her first language; thus, her first sense of herself in the world was canaled in the words and customs of Dari, one of the languages of Afghanistan. To the extent that language and thought-processes are co-constructive, and to the extent that thought-processes make up the self, the language one speaks is a manifestation of one's self. When Nasreen speaks and thinks in Dari, she is the stable self that she has known since her earliest years. The poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote only in his mother tongue for this reason. "Poetry must be written in the language of childhood," he asserted. Refusing to write or read his poems in English was "his way of insisting on his Polishness, of being true to himself," recalled one of his translators and U.S. poet laureate Robert

Haas. Nasreen's continuity with respect to her *self* thus comes from her ability to reside in her heritage language, even now that she has made the permanent move to the United States.

Speaking it is a way to maintain continuity and stability—to achieve a more focused, intact, less fragmented self than she might otherwise live through.

### **Heritage Language Maintenance as an Act of Agency and Empowerment**

Nasreen's desire to maintain her heritage language is not only essential to her connection with her family, her culture, and her very identity. Her desire to continue speaking her heritage language and to pass it on to her children is also a profound act of empowerment. In the experience of a refugee who has been forced to live a life outside of her control, the decision to maintain her heritage language represents one instance where she can exert some control on her life. Lacking agency in so many other aspects, compelled by circumstances to live thousands of miles away from her loved ones, Nasreen can at least control one aspect of who she is: namely, the language that she speaks. It is at once a resistance to the dominating forces of assimilation that would have her forget it. Indeed, as we ostracize the foreigner, it would be easier to become indistinguishable as quickly as possible.

Dropping one's heritage language seems to be an obvious corollary to the most efficient integration into a new society. While making cultural accommodations to smooth her integration into American society, Nasreen, however, does what she can to prevent the attrition of her mother tongue. Her decision to maintain her heritage language with her children—or at least to try—is thus an act of empowerment as it embraces her marginal, dual position as a source of strength rather than weakness. This decision represents one of her most profound attributes of resiliency. She has the insight and the aptitude to understand that acquiring English is a key feature of life in the United States. By appropriating the language of the majority, then, she empowers herself with the agency to negotiate in the dominant discourse. Facility in English is thus a tool with which to advocate for oneself, a key to agency. Her heritage language maintenance is a manifestation of this discursive resistance. It is a method of protecting her own cultural identity in an increasingly

globalized world. She wields it as an effective tool to resist oppression, which might be viewed as the push from the dominant majority to abandon one's heritage language and culture and embrace English and American culture. In short, it is her resistance to assimilate.

The connectedness between ability and agency is evidenced by their overlap in the French lexicon: "pouvoir" means "to be able to," and it is also the word for "power." Embedded in the same word, a French thinker immediately connects being *able* to do something with having some kind of *power*. Being able to speak and understand the language of the dominant majority, the, means refugees like Nasreen can use that language to advocate for themselves; they have power because of it and are empowered by it. Refugees like Nasreen who refuse to let their heritage languages attrite, however, are challenging that status quo. By speaking her heritage language at home, even though her boys do not speak it back, Nasreen keeps her mother tongue from being rubbed away. This sense of being rubbed away is the root of the word attrition (*terere* – to rub). Maintaining her heritage language has thus been a major aspect of Nasreen's resiliency because it represents her agency over her identity. Unable to control the country she is living in or the job, she can at least control her speech. Her heritage language maintenance is her attempt to resist disappearing, to remain visible.

### **Motherhood and Enactment of Non-Domination**

Nasreen's attitude toward the maintenance of her heritage language does not match the attitude of her children. Tragically, they are in conflict. Nasreen wishes her boys would speak Dari or Farsi, their heritage languages, but she understands that they think they have no use for them. Although she feels pain at their rejection and wishes it were otherwise, she is realistic and empathetic in this regard.

Nasreen's decision not to dominate her children with respect to their choice of language echoes bell hooks' rhetorical theories of non-domination. "Parent-child interactions offer another opportunity to enact non-dominant ways of living," she writes (282). As a refugee mother who wishes but does not force her children to speak her language, Nasreen models "an enactment of

non-domination” as a member of an oppressed group; she practices “speaking in a loving and caring manner” (Elias, 2012). The “primary means of creating non-dominating alternatives is the best way to overcome obstacles,” and “interactions with family members create an important arena for enactment” (hooks, 2016, p. 282). In recognizing and asserting that her son has a right to his own language—a decision that is different from the one Nasreen would wish—she gives her children a profound gift: the gift of agency.

And yet while she accepts that she cannot control her children’s tongues, Nasreen and her husband still speak Dari to their boys and with each other. The boys respond in English, but Nasreen still speaks to them in her mother tongue. She doesn’t want them to forget it. She is surrounded by pressure to say goodbye to her heritage language and culture, and her children want no part in it. It is the past, and she has told me many times that she chooses not to dwell on that past. But Nasreen is defiant and resilient in this regard. In a daily act of resistance to the impending language attrition that she fears, she hangs on to her heritage culture by continuing to speak it in her home, even if she is met with resistance by the very people to whom she wants to give it.

Nasreen’s own mother also practiced a profound enactment of non-domination by not only allowing but also encouraging Nasreen to go. A devoted daughter and the eldest female child, Nasreen felt immense pressure to remain with her family in order to care for her parents. She considered it her duty. When her sons reached school age and it became clear to Nasreen that she could not bear to see them fail to realize full lives in the oppressive conditions of being Afghan refugees in Iran—to say nothing of the constant threat of separation due to deportation—Nasreen was torn in the most tragic way: would she choose to be the best daughter or to be the best mother? She could not be both. By staying, she would fail to provide for her children, in her view. By leaving, she would say goodbye to her parents, unable to care for them in their old age and responsible for a perpetual, gaping hole of absence in her mother’s heart. Saying goodbye would

mean a likely potential of never seeing them again. Because Nasreen's motherhood was the determining factor, her own mother's words weighed most heavily on the decision:

She said I really don't like to miss you. But I do whatever I can for you, so you should do whatever you can for your children. So I don't say you stay with me because that way I will destroy your children's future.

Motherhood requires and inspires resilience. Nasreen's mother sacrificed what was most dear to her in order to free her daughter to make the sacrifices required of her as a mother herself.

In *Changing Minds*, Julia Kristeva writes about the *chora*, or the mother's heartbeat. In the first six months of life, Kristeva writes that mother and child are on a continuum: for the child, the "Real" is the mother, and everything else is an extension of her. In the pre-lingual stage of life, which is pre-symbolic and therefore pre-signifying, subject and object are undistinguished. There is no end of "me" and beginning of "you"; no subject (me, the child) and object (you, the mother).

### **Heritage Language Maintenance as Resistance to Assimilation**

As a Jew in America, I have some sense of the experience of being a stranger, in Julia Kristeva's sense of the term. At least, I know something of being a member of a culture within a culture. Ever the strangers, the Jewish people have remained on the margins of most societies they have lived in, with few exceptions.

The essential connection between language and identity is on full display in my lived experience as a Jew. Learning the language of the Torah is an essential aspect of education in the Jewish community. Through the Diaspora, Jewish people have maintained a vital connection to each other and a sense of peoplehood through Torah study, ritual, and prayer. Hebrew is the lifeblood of all three. Trying to parse the extent to which the Hebrew language and Jewish culture go together would be like trying to separate wetness from water. This is why Jewish people living in the Diaspora (anywhere outside of Israel) send their children to Hebrew school. Language has certainly been a tool to maintain identity and remain resilient for the Jewish people. Moving from

place to place, never welcome, without a land to call home, the Torah and Hebrew became home, an anchor, a unifying force across distance and generations. For non-dominant groups on the margins of society, maintaining heritage languages has become a way to survive, to remain here, to exist as they are, to refuse to assimilate, to function within society but to maintain a distinct identity, an intact sense of self and peoplehood.

In the Diaspora, Jews have historically understood a clear choice: fiercely protect the traditions of Judaism and the Jewish people or assimilate. Forced to emigrate frequently in flight of pogroms and inquisitions, Jews developed transferrable skills that could provide livelihoods without land in one country or another. Understanding money to be “one of the only solid forms of security,” many worked in trade and finance sectors. Kicked from nation to nation, “they wanted, above all, to preserve their identity intact and unaltered” (Hoffman, 2007, p. 46). Among their fellow Jews, “They entered another universe, in which their most important task was to maintain the continuum of their laws and beliefs, to uphold the faith that made them who they were, that constituted their very selves” (p. 85). Their separateness was largely intentional: Jews have famously refused to assimilate into the societies in which they have lived for several thousand years, which is how they have managed to maintain a distinct ethnic and linguistic identity as a people for so long. Heritage language maintenance is, for the Jewish people, a key method of resistance and empowerment. This very existence and survival is reflected in the Yiddish song we sing to commemorate the Holocaust. “*Mir zaynen do!*” We proclaim on Yom HaShoah, the Day of Remembrance. “We are here. We are here. We are here!” It is a refusal to disappear as a people.

Hebrew school and the long preparation for my Bat Mitzvah are pillars of my literacy story. We learned how to read and write Hebrew, liturgical vocabulary, how to sing the prayers, and how to read the Torah. For five years, from third-grade through seventh-grade, I attended Hebrew school at Temple Beth Shalom every Wednesday from 4pm-6pm. For that, I had to miss soccer practice, basketball, cross-country meets, rehearsals . . . When I missed practice and games,

everyone knew I was going to Hebrew school, and I was the only one. When in third grade we were to write letters to Santa Claus, my teacher pulled me aside, asked me if that was alright, and offered a different assignment if I wanted it. When in sixth grade I wanted to surprise my teacher and my peers, I casually left my Hebrew homework on my desk so people would see it, using my public school classroom as a contact zone between my two worlds and seeing how my peers would react to my difference.

In addition to literacy in American English and Hebrew liturgy, I acquired cultural literacy in the norms of my society at some early point, as well. To delve into when and how I acquired that literacy would require a deeper, more complex analysis than the scope of this narrative. Nonetheless, I do have memories of becoming aware that *I had a cultural literacy that was different from others*. Growing up in Spokane, I did not appear different: I am a white person who speaks English with an American accent. Inside, though, there is something that separates me from most of my peers: I am not Christian. My Jewishness was and is a defining feature of my identity. My membership in both majority and minority groups in America informs my understanding of marginality, liminality, double-consciousness, and the contact zone between worlds.

### **Reclamation of Indigenous Languages**

The reclamation of indigenous languages is also closely connected to this discussion. Warriors like Winona LaDuke seek to reclaim and revitalize the indigenous languages once spoken by their peoples. The languages themselves are a link to their ancestors; reclaiming them is a way to maintain connection with the people who came before and to live by the values and worldviews laden in the words they spoke. Edmunds (1995) articulates the consequences of the Dawes Act of 1887 which treated Native Americans as individuals rather than as tribes with respect to the allotment of lands:

Proponents of the act assured the American public that after the reservations were allotted, Indian people would accept their individual land holdings and would be completely



assimilated. Native Americans, as a separate and unique ethnic minority group, would essentially disappear. (p. 718)

By endeavoring to attain literacy in the English language, Cherokee women “sought and used literacy for self-determination” (Moulder, p. 78). A. Suresh Canagarajah puts it thus: “Everything from language socialization approaches and Bakhtinian theories of discourse to poststructuralist linguistics teaches us that to use a language meaningfully is to appropriate it and make it one’s own” (p. 597).

### **Resistance**

Refugees like Nasreen who maintain their heritage languages in addition to becoming proficient in the dominant language thus manage to maintain their own identities in the face of assimilation and other powerful forces working against marginality. By refusing to revoke an essential aspect of their identity in favor of conforming to hegemonic norms, Nasreen is making the same bold move as postcolonial writers like Canagarajah and code-meshers like Gloria Smitherman and Gloria Anzaldúa who dare to bring their whole selves into realms that have historically excluded them. Although Nasreen has plenty of reasons to leave the past behind her, her language is an essential part of who she is. Keeping it and attempting to pass it on to her children is an act of empowerment and agency. The promotion of one’s heritage language might be viewed as a method of resistance to the dominating forces that would have refugees abandon their past lives in favor of something new.

In so doing, Nasreen also uses her marginality as a site of resistance, to use bell hooks’ concept. From the margins, newcomers like Nasreen are in a position to see both from the outside in and the inside out. “Their vantage point or structural position provides a bifurcated or double vision of both their own knowledge and knowledge of the dominant culture” (hooks, 2016, p. 276). Rather than a deficit, Nasreen is in a position to view her minority language and “outsider” status as a source of power and perspective not available to the monolingual majority at the center. Keenly perceptive, Nasreen is aware that languages other than English are not valued in

American society. Despite this fact, she nonetheless chooses to maintain her heritage language with her children, and she guards against the dreaded language attrition that she has noticed among her peers. Making the choice to maintain her heritage language is thus a powerful rhetorical move.

### **Attributes of Resilience**

Nasreen's resiliency is the second major theme of this discussion. Mary Pipher outlines twelve attributes of resilience in *The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community* (2002). They are:

Future orientation: the ability to look to the future rather than dwell on the past.

Energy and good health: feeling strong and well.

The ability to pay attention: being aware of one's surroundings.

Ambition and initiative: motivation and stamina, ability to work with others, time management.

Verbal expressiveness.

Positive mental health: optimistic nature, sense of humor, appreciate and enjoy in sorrow.

The ability to calm down: optimism, emotional intelligence, stoicism.

Flexibility: learning to behave differently in different situations.

Intentionality: being thoughtful about choices.

Lovability: making others want to be with you, to be happy around you.

The ability to love new people.

Good moral character: honesty, responsibility, loyalty.

Nasreen, like all successful newcomers, exemplifies most of these. Above all, Nasreen's hope, optimism, and future orientation carry her.

### **Selective Acculturation**

In stark relief against the backdrop of a new culture, aspects of deep culture like social constructs of race and gender roles become a focal point. Of all the strategies that Nasreen has

used in her adjustments to life in radically different environments, she has consistently made cultural accommodations in order to get along. She weighs her values in each situation, and she makes conscious decisions with respect to which values are more important.

For example, when her American male classmate offered her a high five for getting an “A” on her exam, she took a brief moment to decide what to do. It would have been against custom in Islam for her to make physical contact with this man who was not her husband, but he was not a Muslim and she was not in a Muslim country. There were no other Muslims—men or women—in the class, so Nasreen decided to high-five the man. “God will forgive me,” she said of the encounter. In that moment, her commitment to her religious custom was outweighed by her desire to interact with her classmate in a manner that would be culturally appropriate to her situational context. Here in the U.S., men and women high-five. Nasreen made a considered decision to choose the path of least resistance by high-fiving her male classmate. Another consideration was her desire to save face: had she refused his offer, her male classmate would likely have felt awkward and perhaps embarrassed. This instance is a good example of Nasreen’s go-along-to-get-along strategy, a willingness to adapt to a new culture.

Selective acculturation in order to function can be understood as a kind of duality in the sense that she is taking on aspects of her new culture but also maintaining aspects of her own culture. She weighs what is most important to her as she makes each decision. Which values are more central? Which matter more? The religious custom which tells me not to make physical contact with a man, or my desire to get along with my classmates who have different ideas about what is acceptable? Which is more important to me in that moment? In these decisions, Nasreen displays remarkable flexibility, key traits that have enabled her resilience. It is further evidence of the multifaceted, integrated self that Nasreen has managed to fashion. Refugees like her who carefully consider which aspects of their new societies they wish to opt in and opt out of, maintaining flexibility with respect to their own identities, are the most successful and most fully integrated newcomers. By making compromises like shaking hands and high-fiving American

men, Nasreen is able to remain true to her stable, authentic self, and get along in the society in which she lives. In effect, Nasreen's stability and willingness to accommodate yields a coherent, consistent, and carefully considered dual identity that enables her to both integrate into her new society and maintain her cultural integrity.

Nasreen has also thrived by connecting with members of the community in each of the places she has lived, rather than insulating among the group of people who are more like her. In reaching out, she has acquired the language more easily, she has been able to find work, and she has made friends. This adaptability has served her well in the many different situational contexts in which she has lived, and the connections she has made with Iranian, Turkish, and American people have closed the social distance between her and them. Concomitantly, she feels positively, for the most part, toward the people living around her and has befriended quite a few.

Her ability to forgive, too, is an important quality that is not mentioned. Amazingly, Nasreen has not hardened her heart toward the Iranian people. She stubbornly sees the good in people and refuses to cast judgment on an entire nation in spite of the discrimination and hostility she experienced—and that her family is still experiencing—in Iran. Nasreen's ability to forgive is one of her most admirable qualities, in my view. Her generosity of spirit has enabled her to move on, to assume the best, to give the benefit of the doubt, to remain open to making new connections. Nasreen's ability to refrain from generalizing nations and to remain open to personal connections with individuals is another essential quality of her resilience.

Pipher also stresses a sense of humor in coping with difficult situations. When “we cope with loss and adjust to new situations, we will do better if we have a sense of humor, if we are hardworking and honest, and if we know how to stay calm” (p.285). Nasreen has this, too. She started smiling as she told me about how much weight her brother Arash had put on since coming to the United States. As she scrolled for a picture of him on her phone, she was laughing. “If I could find this picture, you would laugh like for some minutes,” she teased. In a way, she seems to view her life almost as if it were a theater of the absurd. Somehow Nasreen has survived all

these years by moving around rather than through. It is almost as if she has been through so much that she has the ability to zoom out, to see the world from 30,000 feet as if she were outside of it or above it rather than drowning in it. Such is her indomitable optimism at work: her refusal to dwell on the past and instead stay focused on the future keeps her buoyant.

A final trait of resilience that Nasreen possesses would be a negative capability: an ability to remain open to not knowing, mystery. I have no doubt that Nasreen's attitude toward her journey would be in keeping with the existentialist words of Jean-Paul Sartre, "On devient toujours." Nasreen's willingness to see herself as more than one kind of person—her ego-permeability—is one of the traits that has enabled her resiliency as her life has woven through several different cultures. This flexibility with respect to her identity is one of her coping mechanisms. It is evident in the acculturation decisions she makes, and it no doubt contributes to the success she has had in adapting to a new culture and language and making a life here in the United States. In the process of becoming American, she has already adapted in significant ways, and she certainly faces many challenges to come. Incredibly, she seems comfortable with this uncertainty. In the words of Dr. Maxine Greene:

Freedom—the capacity to begin, to posit open possibility—usually only makes its appearance when we name what presses down on us and seems to determine in us an obstacle, a resistance to our own becoming. We can only choose ourselves and enable others to choose themselves.

By considering her values and being willing to make compromises, Nasreen negotiates a dual identity. She selectively acculturates to American society, clearly successfully, and yet she decidedly maintains aspects of her heritage culture and endeavors to pass her language on to her children. This dual identity represents both her flexibility and stability with respect to who she is and is a daily act of resistance to the dominant cultural hegemony that would have all Americans speak English only. Her duality is thus a key component of her resiliency.

Gloria Anzaldúa, the pioneer and master code-mesher that she was, employed this mixing of discourses to represent her dual identity. Growing up in the Spanish-Mestizo-American borderlands of the Rio Grande valley, at the physical intersection of Mexican and American culture, inhabiting a body flowing with Mexican and American blood, Anzaldúa spoke and wrote volumes on this notion of a literal littoral. She interpreted her occupation of the in-between space as a duality, a *mestizaje*. Brilliantly, she represented her intertwined ethnic and linguistic identities in her writing by meshing the discourse codes themselves. “If you want to really hurt me,” she wrote, “talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to my linguistic identity. I am my language” (1990, p. 39). Separating the two would be like separating wetness from water. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa views her marginality, her bilingualism, her inhabitation of the contact zone, as a profound asset. The either/or conflict (tragedy) is reframed as a both/and.

This both/and duality with respect to language and identity is once again echoed in the emerging body of literature on transnationalism. As Vertovec so eloquently puts it, “Belonging, loyalty and sense of attachment are not parts of a zero-sum game based on a single space. That is, the ‘more transnational’ a person is does not automatically mean he or she is ‘less integrated’, and the ‘less integrated’ one is does not necessarily prompt or strengthen ‘more transnational’ patterns of association” (2009, p. 78). Transnationalism and integration, rather than mutually exclusive, are in fact interconnected, overlapping, and mutually constitutive. Refugees like Nasreen who choose to inhabit that liminal space have the potential to create and negotiate dual identities that are empowering and greater than the sum of their parts.

## **Conclusion**

As a stranger, a refugee, and a mother, Nasreen’s decision to maintain her heritage language has been her way of maintaining an intact identity—an intact and continuous sense of self—through the many different contexts in which she has lived. It is her connection to her family back in Iran, a cultural and familial continuity that she can pass on to her children to

remain connected to them as they Americanize and to mother them in her most authentic way. At her deepest core, one continuous self runs through. There is a thread to pull, and it sounds like the rhythm and cadence of Dari. She is still Nasreen, the Nasreen she knew as a girl in Afghanistan. The Nasreen she knew as a teenager in Tehran. The Nasreen she knew as a young refugee mother in Turkey, separated from her parents for the first time but there because her own mother sacrificed so that Nasreen could be a mother herself and make sacrifices for her own children. The Nasreen she is now, becoming a professional in the United States, raising two boys who are rapidly becoming American.

Her language is her home. Like the Jewish people who have maintained a distinct cultural identity by preserving the Hebrew language which signifies their peoplehood, and like the indigenous peoples who are refusing to let their cultural identities die by reclaiming their languages, heritage language maintenance by marginalized groups is an act of empowerment and resistance to assimilation. The intact sense of self and connection to home that Nasreen maintains by speaking her heritage language has enabled her resiliency. It is how she survives. It is how she does not lose herself. Identity, duality, and resiliency are thus mutually reinforcing in Nasreen's life.

Based on several interviews with Nasreen, I have come to believe that her decision to maintain her heritage language has been a stabilizing force in her life. Functioning as both a symbolic and actual transnationalism, Nasreen's use of her ethnic language is how she remains connected to her family back in Iran, who she desperately hopes will someday join her in the United States. In a life that has stretched across four countries and been dominated by circumstances beyond her control, her language choice is also how she claims agency over her identity. This stability, in turn, enables her to selectively acculturate into American society by forming a duality that allows her to integrate and maintain a cultural integrity that is coherent with her worldview and sense of self. Nasreen has resisted the pressure to lose herself to the forces of assimilation and anomie that plague many in the tremendously difficult circumstances

of forced migration. The use of her mother tongue is how she remains connected to her children, who are growing up in a culture vastly different from her own. By speaking her heritage language with her children even though they refuse to speak it back, Nasreen mothers them in her most authentic way and practices an enactment of non-domination. A close study of her life will hopefully engender empathy, understanding, and admiration for Nasreen and the millions of refugees like her who, despite immense adversity, somehow manage to survive, spirits intact.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Chapter 6 concludes the present study by revisiting research questions and assumptions, reflecting on limitations of the study, suggesting implications for teaching, and providing recommendations for further research. The thesis ends with final reflections, references, and appendices.

#### **Researchers' Assumptions Revisited**

For the most part, my assumptions about Nasreen's successes as a language learner and as a newcomer integrating into American culture were correct. To be more specific, they were either correct or inconclusive, but none of my assumptions were directly challenged by Nasreen's responses to my questions. This probably had something to do with the fact that I wrote the assumptions after several conversations with Nasreen but prior to doing a formal interview. Nonetheless, here are my assumptions revisited:

1. The first assumption I had about Nasreen is that she is exceptionally intelligent, capable, and motivated to succeed despite tremendously difficult circumstances.

Nasreen's L1 is Dari, one of the majority languages of Afghanistan. At age fifteen, when her family suddenly decided to move to Iran in order to flee the Taliban, she learned Farsi. Years later, when she and her husband decided to leave Iran in search of a better situation for their sons, they spent three years in Turkey and learned Turkish. Nasreen studied English at a school in Iran, and now, having been in the U.S. for two years, she is a nearly fluent speaker of English, her fourth language. Her husband speaks some English while her sons are rapidly becoming fluent speakers. Her motivation

2. Another assumption I had was that she is extremely resilient, flexible, and adaptable.

Nasreen has cultivated many attributes of resilience and has decided that she will find a way to make a good life for herself and her family wherever she is. She seems to swim like a fish in whatever body of whatever she finds herself. Unlike other refugees, Nasreen is not insulated in

her community of people with similar backgrounds, cultures, and languages. Along with the cultural accommodations that she makes—like high-fiving American men in class—her daily interactions with American people close the social distance and motivate her to learn the target language and culture much more quickly. The smaller the social distance, the more likely learners are to feel motivated to connect with and ultimately acquire a target language and culture.

Nasreen's ethnic identity is open and her ego permeable: her sense of self, who she is and what her values are, is flexible and yet stable because of her maintained connection to her heritage.

3. I assumed that Nasreen's outlook—her enduring positivity toward the world and forgiveness of others—as well as her hopefulness, are major contributors to her resiliency.

While I do think that Nasreen's optimism plays a large role in her resiliency, I have come to believe that it is her sustained connection to home—and the stable identity therewith—that underlies Nasreen's remarkable spirit and ability to persevere through such difficult circumstances. Her positivity is certainly helpful and most likely makes things easier, but I still think that she would be doing well absent such a positive outlook.

4. I assumed that the negative experiences that Nasreen and her family lived through in Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey would motivate her to forget those times of her life. Foregoing the use of the languages from those places might help her lose connections with those bad memories.

As she has often commented about putting the past behind her, I had assumed that this is something she would like to do. However, her heritage language does not function in this way. Yes, it is the language that was used in the places where bad things happened—things she would wish to forget—but it is also the language that was used when she formed her first consciousness, her first self in the world, her first bonds with her parents. Because she wishes to maintain connections with her family and because her heritage language grounds her in a familiar identity, Nasreen does not wish to eradicate her former life. Her heritage language is indeed representative of her past, but she is able to dwell in that language without dwelling on the past.

### Research Questions Revisited

1. As Nasreen raises her children surrounded by a culture and a language different from her own, how important is it to her that she maintain her heritage language, and why?

The maintenance of her heritage language is so important to Nasreen because it is a major aspect of her very identity. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, one sees the world through his or her primary language. If the role of a parent is to impart his or her values and worldview onto the next generation, and language is the bearer of those values and that worldview, then the inability to pass one's heritage language on to one's children is a break in the transmission of those values. If Nasreen and her husband see the world through Dari, it would make sense that they want their children to see the world the way they see it, even though their boys are growing up in such a dramatically different culture. Nasreen's use of her heritage language as a mother is also her way of raising her boys in a manner that is true to her most authentic self, the self she is when she speaks her L1 (Kouritzin, 2000).

2. What challenges does she face in passing on her heritage language to her sons?

Nasreen's sons have explicitly told her that they do not want to speak Dari. They do not want to speak Farsi or Turkish either. Now that they are living in the United States and attending school with Americans, they want to speak English. Nasreen and her husband speak Dari with each other in the home, and while their children understand Dari, they do not speak it very often. Nasreen says they are able to, but they usually respond in English. While she could make and enforce language rules in her home (e.g., no English allowed), Nasreen accepts that she cannot control any of this, and she understands her sons' desires to quickly learn English and become like their classmates. To maintain Dari in her family, all she can do is continue speaking it herself, with her husband, and with her boys—when they let her. They sometimes tell her that they wish she would just speak English. "English is what comes to his tongue," she says of her eldest.

3. How does she feel about the loss of that language in her children?

Her sons' refusals to speak anything but English, even at home, sadden Nasreen. She fears that they will not be able to have conversations with their grandparents or aunts, uncles, and cousins back home. She worries that her children will have fundamentally different views of the world than she and her husband do. And, perhaps most anxiety-inducing of all, she wonders with apprehension whether her boys' rejection of their heritage language is a phase and that when they get older they will wish they had it and will regret their attrition.

Because the move to the United States is permanent, Nasreen understands that her boys do not feel motivated to maintain Dari. They will not be going back to Iran, and they can communicate with their grandparents, aunts, and uncles through their mother or in the English that their relatives are currently studying. For Nasreen's sons, Dari is their mother's language. While it is technically their mother tongue, it does not carry the same weight of identity for them that it does for her. Perhaps this is because they were so young when they left, or perhaps it is because they are still so young now. They are forging their essential linguistic and cultural identities here, now, in America, as English speakers. Perhaps the reason that they seem to effortlessly leave the past behind is because it is not their past, in their view. Their story effectively begins in America.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Nasreen is one very exceptional individual. To the extent that she is not representative of others in similar life situations because she is so exceptional, it is difficult to apply lessons from her life to others. Had I been able to allocate more time to this project, I would have conducted several more follow-up interviews with Nasreen. I would also consider interviewing her with a translator, if that would allow us to go even deeper into her narrative and her reflections on that narrative. However, as I mentioned in the introduction, a third party might detract from the intimacy of our conversation—which, more than a formal interview between researcher and subject, is an ongoing dialogue between two people who have a relationship with each other

beyond the research-gathering encounter. Thus, a translator would perhaps change the dynamic of the reciprocal relationship between me and Nasreen, and that might alter the telling of her story.

### **Implications of Findings for Teachers**

I anticipate that thoughtful reflection on the life of one refugee, and the understandings and insights that hopefully come from that reflection, will inform teachers of English as a Second Language. The cultural brokers that we are, it is paramount that we approach our students with humility, compassion, respect, and open minds and hearts. As we listen to Nasreen tell us about her life and endeavor to imagine what it must have been like to experience the things that she has, we expand our ability to empathize with her and other refugees like her. I am convinced that the surest path towards deeper understanding and empathy is through personal relationships with individuals. I hope that the wisdom, depth, and nuance inherent in Nasreen's views and imbricated in a close study of her life can be an inspiration for researchers and for teachers who aspire to work with and serve refugees like Nasreen and her family. To dive deep into the personal experiences of someone who has lived a life so different from our own, to open ourselves up to the possibility of being moved by her experiences and motivated to act by those understandings, is to develop compassion. More compassion and empathy are desperately needed in this world, especially in our treatment toward the most vulnerable amongst us, those who have made the impossibly difficult decision to leave their homes and their families in search of a better life.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

If this ethnographic study feels incomplete, it is because I have just barely begun what I hope will be a lifelong relationship with Nasreen. I would like to do a follow-up interview with her to ask her more about everything. She is such a fascinating person; I believe she is one of those people who is wiser than most. Her exceptionality itself could perhaps be an area for future research.

It would also be illuminating, in future projects, to interview Nasreen's sons themselves about their attitudes toward the maintenance of their mother's heritage language. Their status as minors presented too many challenges for IRB approval for the present study. If I were to interview them, it would also be very interesting to do so over a long period of time; a longitudinal study that could somehow capture snapshots of their attitudes at different ages would have the potential to contribute much to our understandings about attitudes toward heritage language maintenance or attrition across generations, family cohesiveness, and evolving ethnic and linguistic identities in the second generation and beyond. Right now, Nasreen's sons seem to exhibit a strong preference for English. Will their views on the value of keeping Dari or Farsi change as they age? Will they feel differently when the time comes to make decisions about language with their own children? The subjects explored herein and the wisdom with which Nasreen alludes to them merit a much longer, deeper report, beyond the scope of this thesis. I also intend to spend more time reflecting on my own cultural heritage, my parents' decisions with respect to the passing on of that heritage, and the decisions I will need to make for my own children. Do we mold our own identities? Part of ethnographic work is continuing to see a subject with new eyes; as such, it is iterative, recursive, reflective. As I analyze Nasreen's responses and revisit my assumptions and research questions, I find that I have many more questions to ask her. I feel that the research and reflective work begun here will be the beginning of much more research and writing to come. I hope that my relationship with Nasreen and others in her community continues and that I will have the opportunity to do so.

### **Final Reflections**

We talk about migration not because of numbers but because of impact. The actual percent of the population that is foreign-born matters less than the perceived influence of their presence, as "the contradiction between welcoming foreign workers and demonizing their languages and cultures has been more apparent than real" (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006, p. 2). Many boundaries shifted here in the United States as newly-arrived groups took the mantle of "alien" from other,

already present groups. It seems as if the arrival of new ethnicities—viz. new groups of cheap, unskilled workers—is the one force that can be counted on to consolidate the interests of those already present (the solidarity of the labor movements in the early twentieth century, for example). WASPS were the only kind of “Americans” until other whites were incorporated into the whole, as well. Catholic Irish and Italians, for instance, became “American” over time—no doubt aided by their white skin—and Portes and Rumbaut write of the Catholic and later Jewish incorporation into the American polity and national identity. The United States was first a Protestant nation, then a Christian nation, then a Judeo-Christian nation. Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (2008) details the assimilation of a group that had been unequivocally perceived as “un-American” and a threat to the nation. History shows that those xenophobic views can change.

There is reason to be optimistic that the notion of what it means to be “American” can yet evolve. The final chapter of Imoagene’s *Beyond Expectations* (2017) is an exploration of national myths—origin stories and culture—and the extent to which those myths have made their way into the immigrant psyche. The title of the chapter, “Feeling American in America, Not Feeling British in Britain,” neatly sums up her findings. The story in America is that we are a nation of immigrants, founded upon an idea, a land of opportunity, freedom, and participatory democracy where the American Dream is available to anyone who works hard enough. Based on Imoagene’s interviews, it seems that the Nigerian second generation in America has largely bought in to this national story. Crucially, they include themselves in it. The story in the United Kingdom, meanwhile, is not nearly as inclusive nor emotive. Although the British government has made “multiculturalism”—a nebulous and questionable term—national policy in school curricula and public spaces, respondents reported feeling no such love from the British people. There is an overriding optimism in America that immigrants can fashion the country in their image while this optimism does not seem to exist in Britain. Perhaps the meaning of the term “American identity” is uniquely flexible.

On a final note, we might look to the past to inform policy on language choice today. Governor of Pennsylvania, William C. Sproul, had the following to say when he vetoed the anti-German bill that had just passed the legislature in 1919. “We must not be hysterical in our patriotism and we surely must not pursue the policy of cutting off our noses to spite our faces,” he wrote with a calm wisdom that was rare for his time. “Rather must we view these questions in a broad, liberal manner and try to give facility in education which will . . . prepare them for the eventualities of these times when we are taking, more than ever before, a hand in international affairs” (*Hoosier State Chronicles*). Like Governor Sproul, I believe that if America is to play a leading role in world affairs, especially in the face of global challenges like climate change and nuclear war, we handicap ourselves by failing to understand as much as we could about the world and the people we share it with. When bilingual/bicultural people and monolingual Americans alike learn to see a plurality of worldviews as a source of pride rather than shame, we move toward that greater understanding. Additive language policies that view bilingualism/biculturalism as a strength rather than a deficit are one way to progress in light of this insight. Diverse home languages and cultures are a testament to America’s promise: they are our greatest challenge and our greatest strength.

Elizabeth Wong’s essay, “The Struggle to be an All-American Girl,” is a powerful reflection on the profound consequences of language choice in refugee families. It also provides a useful distinction between the terms assimilation and acculturation, which overlap but are often conflated. In her efforts to learn English, Elizabeth Wong’s mother attempted to acculturate—to build bridges between herself and the majority culture she lived in. Others in Chinatown, who commented on Wong’s “fast-moving lips” as a sign that she would do well, also encouraged Wong’s acculturation into American ways of living. What her mother and others tried to prevent by sending their children to Chinese school, however, was assimilation into American life at the price of losing their heritage. Embarrassed by her mother and grandmother for speaking “unbeautiful” Chinese, resenting the time spent learning irrelevant Chinese characters, finding the



Chinese flag an unwelcome symbol of difference, Wong and her brother went kicking and screaming to Chinese school. Preferring everything American to anything Chinese, not only did Wong and her brother assimilate/Americanize, they rejected their heritage language and culture. This deculturation was evident in Wong's relief at no longer having to attend the dreaded Chinese school and in her brother's aggressive correction of their mother's English. In the face of all the pressures in American society telling kids like Wong and her brother to be like everyone else, her preference to be an "All American Girl" to the exclusion of being a Chinese girl was perfectly understandable. Wong wrote, later in life, that she regretted her negative attitude toward her Chinese heritage and the consequent loss of that heritage. Had she not been embarrassed by her difference and somehow been directed to see the value in her Chinese heritage, she might have grown up carrying *both* cultures throughout her life.

For non-English speaking refugees, the choice has been binary: is it better to assimilate or resist? Americanize or remain ethnic? To the extent that language is a key indicator of ethnicity, the former might be read as heritage language attrition and the latter as heritage language maintenance. This scenario, however, presumes an either/or relationship, a mutual exclusivity, which is a fallacy informed by xenophobia and the warped perception that bilingualism/biculturalism is a deficiency, an impurity, a dreaded marker of difference. But the relationship between integration and transnationalism is not a zero-sum game. While I do think that it is necessary to learn English in order to function well in the United States, I do not believe that the maintenance of heritage languages detracts from the cohesive society in which we want to live. To the contrary, a society made up of a plurality of cultural and linguistic identities has the potential to be a more rich and peaceful place. Perhaps, with a change in attitude, it could be possible for newcomers to both Americanize—that is, fit into the fold of the American body politic—and maintain a distinct ethnic identity.

Nasreen certainly sees language as no border or barrier between people. "But I think the most reason is that if you feel yourself being different from others, you will want to stay different.

Maybe we speak different languages, but that doesn't mean we should be apart," she says. If the life experience of Nasreen is any indication, it would seem that an expansive and feminist both/and approach to the problem of conflicting cultural and linguistic identities can be a powerful strategy for strangers making new lives for themselves in new lands. With remarkable dexterity, Nasreen's successful integration into American society and simultaneous connection with her family, her heritage, and her home demonstrates a functioning duality—a stable and flexible identity that enables her resilience. Perhaps refugees and their children, like Nasreen, can find ways to develop and cherish more fluid, multifaceted, transnational selves that transcend both host countries and places of origin. Perhaps the rest of us can find ways to let them.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Consent Form for Graduate Thesis Research

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by:

#### **Principal Investigator**

Logan Amstadter  
 Graduate Student  
 M.A. English: Teaching English as a Second Language  
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#### **Responsible Project Investigator**

Dr. LaVona Reeves  
 Professor of English  
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#### **Purpose and Benefits**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and attitudes of first-generation refugees as they adjust to life in the United States. Responses to interview questions will contribute to the larger discussion surrounding how refugees navigate questions of assimilation, acculturation, heritage language maintenance, and language learning, and this research will be of particular interest and use to teachers of English who work with first-generation refugee populations and their children. This project is being done for a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements toward the degree Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in Teaching English as a Second Language.

#### **Procedures**

If you consent to participate in this study, you will be part of a recorded in-person interview during which I will ask you questions pertaining to your experience as a refugee and your attitudes toward language and culture. Recorded interviews will be transcribed, included in, and discussed in my thesis, which will eventually be published. Please note: Washington State law provides that private conversations may not be recorded, intercepted, or divulged without permission of the individual(s) involved. Your name and all identifying information will remain confidential. Interviews should take no longer than 45-60 minutes. You will be free to refrain from answering any questions which you are not comfortable answering. Also, you will be given an opportunity to listen to the recording and read the transcription to let me know if there is anything that you desire to be edited or cut out before it is discussed and published in my thesis. Your responses will appear in the thesis only with your written consent.

#### **Risk, Stress or Discomfort**

Minimal risks may be associated with this study. A possible risk is a violation of privacy, as the principal investigator is asking questions about personal/sensitive information of the interviewee's life. The principal investigator will manage this possible risk by keeping all identifying information confidential and by allowing the individual to see questions in advance, to refrain from answering any of the questions, and to edit or omit information from the transcript before it is published. Any other risks of participating in this study are not expected to exceed those encountered in daily life.

#### **Other Information**

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential. If you feel uncomfortable responding to any of the questions during the interview, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty and you may omit any question you prefer not to answer.



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Principal Investigator Signature

Date

**Subject's Statement**

The study described above has been explained to me, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this research. I have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. I give permission to record the conversation in which I participate for this research and I understand that the interview will be transcribed, discussed, and included in the published thesis. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form.

---

Your name printed in English

Signature

Date

If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this research or for any complaints you wish to make, you may contact Ruth Galm, Human Protection Administrator, Office of Grant and Research Development, at (509) 359-6567/7971 or [rgalm@ewu.edu](mailto:rgalm@ewu.edu).

### Interview Introduction

My name is Logan Amstadter, and I am doing research on the experiences and attitudes of first-generation immigrants and refugees as part of my thesis requirements for a Master of Arts in English at Eastern Washington University. I am interviewing people who were born in another country, raised in another culture and language, and, for one reason or another, have moved to the U.S. to start a new life here. I'd like to ask some interview questions about your background and personal experiences in order to find insights about how people in such life situations navigate questions of assimilation, acculturation, heritage language maintenance, and language learning. I anticipate that the implications of my research will be of use to teachers of English who work with first-generation immigrant and refugee populations and their children.

Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and that your responses are confidential as they do not require you to disclose any identifying information. Also, you may skip any interview questions that you are not comfortable answering and you may opt out of the survey at any time. Your consent to participate in this study is implied when you sign this consent form and participate in an interview. I will make the interview questions available to you prior to the time that we meet so that you can consider your responses and see whether there are any questions you would rather not answer.

If you have any questions about the interview or the research, please contact me by phone at (509) 869-1814 or by email at lamstadter74@ewu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research or for any complaints you wish to make, please contact Ruth Galm, Human Protections Administrator, Office of Grant and Research Development (509) 359-7971/6567 or rgalm@mail.ewu.edu.

### Appendix B: Proposed Interview Questions for Graduate Thesis Research

1. Can you tell me about your background? Where are you from and when did you move here? What was your life like back in your home country? You can say as much or as little as you like.
2. What was the decision process about leaving? Had you been thinking about leaving for a while? What was the impetus to go when you did? Did you travel with your family?
3. Where did you end up, and what was that like? What was your official status at the time? Was there any pathway to citizenship? What did you and your family do for work? If it were possible to stay there, would you have?
4. What was your attitude toward the people there, and how did they feel about you? Did you feel welcome there? For example, were you able to celebrate your holidays there? Why did you decide to leave?
5. Are you married or do you have children? Is any of your family here with you? Do you work or go to school here?
6. When you found out you were coming to the United States, what did you think? Did you have any feelings or expectations about the U.S. in particular? From movies or the news, for instance?
7. What was your attitude or perception toward Americans before coming here? Has your perception changed since you first arrived?
8. What were your first impressions about life in America? Was there anything you really were not expecting – what would you say was the biggest shock?
9. What would you say is the most negative thing you've observed or experienced here? Have you experienced any discrimination as a refugee?
10. How, when, and where did you learn English? What was your motivation for doing so?
11. Do you feel that you are more comfortable day to day than other refugees in your situation because you speak English? Has it been easier to make connections with American people?

12. Do you have any close American friends or anyone to help you understand the culture?

Would you say you feel more motivated to learn English and adopt aspects of American culture because of personal relationships you have with people here?

13. Is there a community of people here who share a similar cultural background? Do you think that makes it easier or harder to feel comfortable and to make a life here – to learn the language and the culture and to integrate into American society?

14. Do you have the impression that most refugees tend to keep to themselves, or are they learning English and making connections with American people?

15. Day to day, do you feel separate or different from the people around you? Have you felt Alienated since being here? If you do feel some distance, why do you think that is?

16. Do you feel like you are a welcome, important part of this society, or have you had the feeling of being a guest, like you can't make a life here? Do you feel like you belong here or like you "fit in"?

As far as you can tell, do your children feel like they "fit in"? Or do they feel different? Do you think you will always feel different?

17. What are some examples of adjustments you have had to make since being here? Can you tell me why you decided to make those adjustments?

18. What are some examples of cultural practices that you maintain here in the U.S.? Do you feel like you switch back and forth between your home culture and American culture every day when you leave and return home?

19. Have you felt comfortable wearing a hijab here in the U.S.? Have you felt comfortable practicing your religion here? Will you continue to do so? Do you think your children will?

20. What are some things you miss about your home culture, in particular? Is there anything about American culture that you would refuse to adopt?

21. Tell me about your languages. What language or languages do you speak? What languages does your husband or wife speak?

22. What languages do your children speak? Do they understand but not speak any of the languages that you speak? How old were they when they came here?
23. What language or languages do you speak at home? Do you and your spouse have different feelings about the language your children should speak? Did the two of you make a conscious decision about which language would be spoken in the home? What was your process?
24. Do you encourage your children to speak your heritage language? How does your family feel about them learning English or about not speaking the language back home?
25. How would you describe your children's attitudes toward speaking your heritage language? Do they resent that you make them speak a language other than English at home, if you do?
26. Do your children speak English with an accent, and do they ever get mad at you or feel embarrassed about your English? How are they doing in school? Do they ever translate for you?
27. Do you accept that your children might not grow up speaking the language you spoke? Do you fear that if they don't speak your language, they won't know who they are or that they will not understand the culture they came from? If you were to never speak your language again, or if your children could not understand or speak it, would you feel as if you had lost something irreplaceable? Do you think your children would give the same answer?
28. Do you worry that your values have changed or will change now that you are living in another country, or do you feel like you are able to keep the same values here as you had back home? Do you feel like your children will grow up with the same values? Because they're growing up in a different country than the one you grew up in, do you feel that your children have a fundamentally different perspective than you do? How do you feel about that?
29. Do you think you can separate yourself from your language? As you learn a new language and forget your old one, are you a new self? Or can you be made up of several different cultures at once? Do you feel like you can express yourself in English? Does your self-image in your L1 match your self-image in your L2?

30. Would you say that the way you see yourself is flexible? Do you feel that you have changed since coming here? Do you think that you see the world differently now that you are living in another country and speaking another language?
31. Do you feel like you have an American identity? Do you feel that your children are “Americanized”? What does that mean to you?
32. Can you tell me about your family back in your home country? Are your family members trying to come here? Are they studying English?
33. Do you ever send money back to them? Do you know if other refugees do the same? How do you stay connected?
34. Are you planning to ever go back? If you were planning to go back, do you think your attitude toward the people, language, and culture here would be different?
35. Where is home for you, now? What is your dream life situation? What do you envision your children doing for their lives?
36. Anything else you’d like to share?

## VITA

Author: Logan M. Amstadter

Place of Birth: Washington, D.C.

Undergraduate Schools Attended: Carroll College, North Seattle College, University of Washington

Degrees Awarded: Bachelor of Arts, 2014, University of Washington

Honors and Awards: Graduate Service Award, English Department, 2017-2018, Eastern Washington University

Professional Experience: Instructor, Eastern Washington University, English 101 and 201