

What is a Refugee: An Ontological Exploration

by

Daniela Zuzunaga Zegarra
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Supervisory Committee

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Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh, Department of Sociology
Supervisor

Dr. Karen Kobayashi, Department of Sociology
Departmental Member

Abstract

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh, Department of Sociology

Supervisor

Dr. Karen Kobayashi, Department of Sociology

Departmental Member

Refugee and migrant crises continue to make headlines, and media coverage of these events varies on the perceived legitimacy of the displacements. Displaced people are referred to as refugees, economic migrants, or illegal immigrants, and these labels are used interchangeably. The use of these labels begets the question: what is a “refugee”? In this thesis, the label of “refugee” gets unpacked outside of the boundaries of legal definitions. Migrant and refugee research point towards a core ontology and epistemology of belonging, sedentarism, that informs migration policy in the Global North. The adherence to sedentarism as a mode of belonging results in migration being constructed as inherently problematic and dangerous. The storytellers in this thesis express that being/becoming a “refugee” is not a universal experience, but a collection of feelings that are present in response to the phenomenon of being/becoming a refugee. The feelings the storytellers describe are based on sedentary conceptions of belonging, where citizenship and nationality are expressed as key concepts in the development of identity and belonging. This thesis argues that the value of this knowledge rests not within legal/political change, but within the social sphere. The “refugee” label, as a tool to create and drive policy, is a prescriptive tool that can only act given a specific representation of the world, therefore change needs to be located outside policy boundaries in order to transgress sedentary ontologies. Thus, I present alternatives for reshaping contemporary ontological conceptions of belonging and highlight the work of social justice movements in re-articulating the concept of citizenship and belonging.

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Introduction

Thousands of migrants make their way to the border between the United States and Mexico. Most of these migrants come from the “Northern Triangle of Central America”, an area that includes Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Cantor, 2016). These countries have held the dubious distinction of having the highest homicide rates of any part the world since the early 2000s. Fleeing from gang violence and government neglect, migrants travel to the Mexican-American border on the roof of “the Beast”, a cargo train. They embark on this long journey without food, water or shelter. Throughout the journey many are murdered, raped, and extorted by gangs that seek to take advantage of their precarious position. Many more are mutilated as they fall from the loaded train (The Guardian, 2016).

Meanwhile, as a result of the Syrian civil war that started as part of the 2011 Arab Spring (The BBC, 2016), millions of Syrian people fled their countries. Some made it into refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Others hired smugglers to take them across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe aboard rickety, overpacked boats not fit for such a journey. The boats capsized often, and many people died at sea (Dearden, 2017). Beginning in late 2013, thousands of people from Senegal, Niger, Nigeria, and the Gambia endured harsh conditions as they headed north towards Libya to try and find boats to take them to the European Union (Tinti, 2018). Along the way, many were captured and enslaved. Many more died crossing the Mediterranean as victims of capsized ships (Al Jazeera, 2017). What do these situations have in common? Or how are they conceptualized as being different from each other?

According to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), only some of the people in these scenarios qualify as “refugees”. Others are considered migrants, a category that implies that people move because they want to, rather than have to (Long, 2013). The different categories of “migrant” and “refugee” are neatly kept apart in international law; the UNHCR has stated several times that refugees are not migrants, and that these categories are separate and distinct. In reality, these categories are not so easily differentiated (Haddad, 2008). Economic need and government neglect often conflate to create a situation where life is untenable, and displacement inevitable. Whether this displacement is qualified as a choice versus an imperative is up to external assessors who must uphold adjudication guidelines that are not so clear-cut in real life. Although the UNHCR’s mandate to establish the “refugee” as a category separate from that of migrants can be construed as a humanitarian goal, in reality the maintenance of such rigid boundaries maintains a hierarchical scale where only some are considered/classified as deserving of humanitarian care. In this manner, narrow definitions of “refugee” will establish criteria that reflects only certain types of experience. Further, rigid definitional boundaries are upheld and modified by sovereign states according to their own political needs. This is a strategy of migrant control, and it results in the privileging of certain experiences over others (Haddad, 2008; Zetter, 2007).

The UNHCR’s position on the “refugee” label, with its mandate to resettle and provide services to displaced peoples, is focused on creating a category of displaced peoples that, when requesting asylum, will not be judged on the strength of their applications. In this sense, the UNHCR does not want refugees to be assessed on their economic capabilities or skills. Rather, it argues that refugees should be accepted into countries on a strictly humanitarian basis, regardless of ability or skill to contribute to the

place of their resettlement (Long, 2013). However, this position has been used by governments in the Global North to restrict entry and control migration (Zetter, 2007).

Outside the discussions regarding the definition of “refugee” or “migrant”, and the policies instituted by governments to control migratory practices, there are thousands of vulnerable people that exist in a space of legal limbo (Lacroix, 2004). The UNHCR created the definition of a refugee in 1951, and the unlucky people whose contemporary experiences do not fit within that definition are left to their fates in unjustifiable conditions. Like the youth from the Northern Triangle in Central America, or the African migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya, thousands of people attempt to cross borders that prevent them from accessing food and security for themselves and their families. Their ability to acquire protections granted to them by the UNHCR is dictated by a definition that privileges certain experiences over others. The term “refugee” has been defined by those who have never been in the position that refugees in the 21st Century find themselves. As expounded above, categories of migrants blend together to make an indistinguishable refugee category that no longer fits within the UNHCR’s 1951 Convention definition. Following Cameron (2014), Haddad (2008), and Rousseau et al. (2002), what is needed to improve the definition of “refugee” is more information about the first-hand experiences of refugees “as a conceptually distinct group of individuals” (Cameron, 2014, p. 11). This is an important first step in understanding the contemporary implications of being a refugee in that it may serve to help develop an inclusive definition of “refugee” that state agencies can use to adjudicate asylum seekers.

The purpose of this thesis is to determine what constitutes a refugee *outside* of the boundaries created by the UNHCR and governments. The “refugee” label, as a tool to create and drive policy, is a prescriptive tool that can only act given a specific

representation of the world. Thus, in prescribing what the definition of “refugee” is, the label is establishing its ontological boundaries. To mobilize this label into an effective policy tool, nation-states have had to develop criteria to be met and other actionable specifications that would allow it to be used in legal and administrative settings. These criteria and specifications constrain our understanding of “refugees” as a set of people, and of their experiences. Thus, by critically examining the “refugee” experience beyond the label we are able to expand the space of possible ontologies and thus enlarge the space of possible policy options (Pauly, 2016, p. 304). Expanding the ontological boundaries of the “refugee” label might not result in policy change, as that is dependent on political will. However, this expansion is important for understanding the conditions under which people become refugees, outside of the prescribed ontology. Are there certain experiences that make one a refugee? Is being a “refugee” an imposed identity or a transient mode of being? What makes “migrants” and “refugees” different? These are questions that are important for understanding how “refugees” come to exist.

In order to find out what constitutes a refugee, this project will be driven by the question: ‘Who/what is a refugee?’. To be able to understand what constitutes a refugee, it is necessary to start by examining how the experiences of refugees reflect in any way the criteria put forward in the 1951 Convention definition. In order to address the lack of knowledge regarding the definition of “refugee”, this research will study the refugee claimants’ interpretation of their experiences. The “refugee” label must be analyzed critically and outside of the rules of sovereignty in order to understand the transitions, trajectories, and processes that occur in the lives of displaced peoples. We come to understand the concepts of “migrant” or “refugee” vis-a-vis the concept of sovereignty, as it is through the processes of territorialization and delimitation that we come to

understand our identities and belonging. It is through this lens that the legal system categorizes people's experiences and makes decisions about their right to obtain humanitarian aid. Thus, to critically look at the definition of "refugee", it is important that the rules of sovereignty be challenged. Although the label of refugee is inherently a political and legal tool, this thesis posits that upholding this definition amounts to epistemic violence, where the definition of "refugee" is forced onto peoples' lived experiences with their "complicity", rather than letting their experiences dictate the definition.

Literature Review

In Canada, the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) handles all refugee claims. Its admission policies are based on the definition of “refugee”, established by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in the 1951 Convention

Relating to the Status of Refugees:

A refugee is a person who by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside each of their countries of nationality and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of each of those countries; or not having a country of nationality, is outside the country of their former habitual residence and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to return to that country. (Minister of Justice, 2017, p. 80)

This definition is open to interpretation by adjudicators, and sovereign nations choose how to apply and develop procedures to assess refugee claims in their own terms (Jastram & Achiron, 2001).

One of the biggest pitfalls of Canada’s refugee acceptance system is the use of the UNHCR’s 1951 definition of a refugee (Cameron, 2014; Rosseau et al, 2002). This definition emerged after WWII, a time when refugee flows were conceptualized as drastically different from the flows we observe today. To this end, the “refugee” was constructed as white, male, and anti-communist (Haddad, 2008). However, mass displacements have changed drastically since 1951, with the majority of refugee claimants coming from Third World countries, such as Nigeria, China, and Pakistan (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2016). The events that have caused refugee claimants to seek asylum in countries like Canada bear little resemblance to those on which the 1951 definition was created. As such, the result is that people are being judged according to a definition that does not and cannot fit their experiences. For example, the

difference between economic migrant, illegal immigrant, and refugee is blurred, as there is often a convergence between economic and forced migration (Haddad, 2008, p.24). The lack of a clear definition regarding migrant categories is detrimental to refugee determination processes, as refugee claimants no longer fit neatly into the UNHCR's definition and therefore may be excluded from the protection they seek (Aberman, 2014; Cameron, 2014).

It is theorized that this lack of clarity regarding the definition of a refugee is tacitly imperialistic, as Canada's immigration laws "deliberately [limit] the inclusion of migrant bodies into Western states through processes of criminalization and racialization that justify the commodification of their labour" (Walia, 2013, p. 39). In this sense, Canada's refugee process makes the border system an extension of imperialism, under which most mass displacements occur in the first place (Walia 2013). Atak, Hudson, and Nakache's (2018) review on the securitization of Canada's refugee system finds troubling consequences to the 2012 changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in Canada. Introduced after the arrival of nearly 600 Tamil asylum seekers aboard two boats, the changes to the Act introduced harsh measures to manage migrant access to Canada. Atak, Hudson, and Nakache (2018) state that these changes "contain a number of restrictive measures that apply to in-land asylum seekers and include: expedited refugee claim hearings, reduced procedural guarantees, growing use of socio-economic deterrents, and increased immigration detention" (p. 2). While these changes are relatively new, these migrant deterrent practices can be traced back to the 1990s. It is Canada's status as a settler state, or as a colonial society built on an expropriated land base (Wolfe, 2006), that makes it unsurprising that such a link between its border system and imperialism have been drawn. However, these exploitative processes of migrant

intake, as well as their relation to a settler colonial nation state need to be problematized. Engaging in active criticism of the current processes of displacement is crucial to social change.

Canada's refugee adjudication process is not an anomaly in the Global North. Rather, it is an example of ways in which the current definition of "refugee" does a disservice to displaced peoples (Arboleda and Hoy, 1993). A number of studies have found that the operational definition of "refugee" is not consistent across cases, with specific attention paid to the definition of the word 'persecution' (Arboleda, 1991; Zetter, 2007). Beside the myriad ways in which the convention definition of refugee can be interpreted, Zetter (2007) finds that currently the label of "refugee" has undergone a process of fractioning. By "fractioning" he means that the humanitarian discourses of the past "have been displaced by a fractioning of the (refugee) label which is driven by the need to manage globalized processes and patterns of migration and forced migration in particular" (p. 174). In this sense, the discourses surrounding the refugee label have been fragmented into several others, like migrant, Internally Displaced Peoples, asylum seeker, or even 'bogus refugee'. This fractioning of the label has occurred because "labels are now formed (and transformed and politicized) by government bureaucracies in the 'global north', not humanitarian agencies operating in the 'global south' as they have been in the past" (Zetter, 2007, p. 176). The shift of creation and mobilization of the "refugee" label from humanitarian agencies to government bureaucracies politicizes the use and enforcement of the label. Thus, the interpretation of the convention definition is subject to the political agendas of the Global North, where the fragmentation of the label is done in order to control migration and prevent access into it. These interpretations and ensuing fragmentations of the "refugee" label, as an implementation of border

imperialism, rely on nativist and identarian politics to limit access to those that are perceived as different. Through the institutionalization of these labels in immigration law, the state produces bodies that are “illegal” or “alien”, in which the migrant’s racialization is a silent but constitutive element of the label (DeGenova, 2013, p. 1191).

The results of this fractioning process are that several terms now are used to refer to displaced peoples, some of which are seen as legally legitimate, and others not. Indeed, Zetter (2007) states that “claiming the refugee label is no longer a right, but a highly prized status” (p. 189). Although the distinction between these labels, specifically between “refugee” and “migrant” can be seen as arbitrary, the goal of the UNHCR was for the refugee label to provide a safe legal space for those who fit within the definition. The most widely understood definition of refugee is that of someone who flees their country of origin due to being politically excluded, while a core dimension of the migrant label is socio-economic in nature (Long, 2013; Robertson, 2018; Zetter, 2007). However, this in turn has been used by governments in the Global North to further restrict policies (Long, 2013).

The adherence to strict definitional boundaries is a relatively new practice in the humanitarian sphere. According to Long (2013), the political refugee and impoverished migrant labels were used interchangeably before the institution of the 1951 convention definition. Further, she makes the case that the division of meaning between these two labels was “a politically crafted construction of Western states, intended to respond to the specific dynamics of the post-1945 European refugee crisis and shaped by Cold War rivalries” (p. 6). Thus, the strict definitional boundaries between “migrant” and “refugee” can be thought to be the result of a “mono culture of the mind” (Mignolo, 2012), where the label is modeled around one supreme idea of life. This is also referred to as ‘sedentary

bias' or 'sedentarism' (Castles, 2010; Malkki, 1992), whereby migration is seen as inherently problematic, and the attempts to control, manage, and rectify it start from a conception of sedentarism as the mode of being: "sedentary bias continues a long tradition which started with colonial policies and is continued by most contemporary development agencies: the poor constitute a threat to prosperity and public order if they move, and should therefore stay at home" (Castles, 2010, p. 1567). The construction of the refugee label, as well as other migratory labels around a sedentary bias is inherently problematic, as migrants (regardless of their lived experiences) are constructed to be a problem or a potential threat to their host society (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013).

The construction of refugees and migrants as problems to be solved creates a discourse surrounding them where they are always *victims* - political victims, economic victims, or victims of exile in general. This understanding of migratory processes as fundamentally problematic creates a discursive effect that results in certain conceptions of "refugee" or "migrant" becoming "hegemonic within a given era and as such tend paradigmatically to frame diverse experiences" (Vahabzadeh, 2006, p. 168). The hegemonic understanding of refugees and migrants results in an erasure of difference, whereby only certain experiences are prioritized. These hegemonic conceptions of "refugee" or "migrant" are understood through a sovereign notion of statehood, that of territorialization and mutually exclusive boundaries. Thus, it is the experiences that support sovereignty that are prioritized. While undoubtedly there are experiences of trauma and pain that are the impetus for the decision to leave one's place of birth, it would be myopic to assume that these feelings totalize the experience of migrating or fleeing. However, in the current literature, research carried out about the lives of refugees deals mostly with the experiences of pain of leaving one's country, and the hardships

encountered while trying to integrate into a new society, thereby “neglecting the perspectives of origins and transit countries, and of migrants” (Castles, 2010, p. 1571). It is this sovereignty-based narrative that needs to be disrupted.

This lack of understanding or apathy towards the lived experiences of refugees also translates to their experiences during and post resettlement. Malkki (1995) speaks of an international refugee regime that “produces the social, political, and legal constructions that we now recognize as refugeeness” (p. 506). This refugee regime is responsible for shaping the definition of “refugee” and directing social research to answer certain kinds of questions. “Refugeeness” is a construction that heavily relies on “the particular subjective experience in relation to existing refugee policies” (Lacroix, 2004, p. 163). Lacroix’s (2004) research on the subjectivity of refugees in Canada shows that the participants’ experience of “refugeeness”, specifically with regards to immigration practices, is that of feeling like their immigration status is precarious. The precariousness of their status is due to the anxiety and apprehension that is experienced when having to deal with immigration officials, as “it is at this moment that the refugee determination process begins and forces the realization of the contradiction between considering themselves to be refugees and having to prove it” (Lacroix, 2004, p. 160).

The experience of “refugeeness”, which is deeply grounded in social, political, and legal constructions, adds a layer of meaning to the experience of becoming an asylum seeker. “Refugeeness”, as found by Lacroix (2004), is not a positive experience for recently resettled refugees. Wayland (2006) also finds that “settlement experiences for many newcomers are characterized by isolation, vulnerability, and lack of civic engagement” (p. vi), and that the legal limbo in which refugees find themselves while awaiting adjudication adds to these feelings. This limbo, which Goldring, Berinstein, and

Bernhard (2009) term “precarious status”, is not only shared by refugees but also by other types of migrants. Goldring et al (2009) argue that a “precarious status”, which is characterized by a lack of social and civil rights “in particular means that migratory legal status is becoming a salient dimension of social exclusion and inequality – in Canada and elsewhere” (p. 257).

The term “precarious status” alludes to a lack of security or predictability in one’s life. The precarity of one’s life is related to the ability of a person to feel belonging. The sense of belonging is crucial to a person’s psychological well-being and social development. Thus, this basic need for predictability of social order and biographical continuity is an important aspect of refugee and migrant experience, both during and after the migration process. This sense of belonging or sense of place can be referred to as ontological security. Giddens states that ontological security is “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (1990, p. 92). This constancy and continuity are disrupted by migration processes, which are often characterized by a sense of powerlessness and acute anxiety about new circumstances (Kinnvall, 2004).

The sense of ontological security is intrinsically tied to identity formation. The search of a stable identity goes hand in hand with an ontologically secure existence, as this stability allows for identity development that is able to be legitimized by external material and social objects. However, identity is never stable but rather fluid, mobile, and always contingent on external objects (Blumer, 1969; Kinnvall, 2004; Malkki, 1992). In contemporary portrayals of “refugee” and “refugee identity”, the focus is on narratives that highlight the responses to a refugee crisis. In this manner, refugees are reported on with regards to the aid they need, the pain they have gone through, and the objects they

have lost. These representations of refugees as victims totalizes the extent of their identity: to be a refugee is to be a victim (Rajaram, 2002, p. 248). In this context, identity formation in refugees is domineered by a narrative that is not centered on them as subjects, but as objectified bodies. This narrative is only but a moment in time for people that have been displaced, but it is reported on as a totalizing experience. The disruption of ontological security, whereby people are not secure in the reality they have created, results in an existential anxiety that might modify their understandings of the Self and others. However, from the literature available on the topic, the processes through which people deal with this insecurity are not widely reported on.

Thus, ontological security becomes an important concept in the development of refugee and migration theory. This is due to the prescriptive nature of legal migrant labels. Pauly (2016) argues: “when we view a legal or administrative text prescribing certain actions to be taken, it becomes clear that a policy can only intervene in the world given a certain representation of the world. In this sense a policy’s ontology is logically prior to the actions it prescribes” (Pauly, p. 304). To be able to recognize the ways in which prescriptive labels impose their ontology onto their subjects, it is important to understand the ontological framework upon which social actors intersubjectively create their identities.

In this manner, *a deeper understanding of the category of “refugee” may be useful in that it could provide an empirical framework to reassess the legal, political, and social processes that dictate immigration policy and refugee resettlement.* This in turn might benefit asylum seekers as they settle in Canada. Although legal and political decisions do create change based on available research, there is a need to acknowledge that the kind of change stated here also depends on the political appetite of the time.

Haddad (2008) states that the UNHCR has attempted to revise the defining elements of the “refugee” concept, however nation states have often protested and favoured definitions that “treat the whole (refugee) complex as an anachronistic system irrelevant to the modern age [...] ignoring the changing international structure within which the “refugee” moves for the sake of keeping ideas of territorial sovereignty intact” (p. 26). Territorial sovereignty can be considered the other side of the coin of sedentary bias, where ideas of sovereignty must be privileged in order to deviantize those who find themselves without a territory to call home. Thus, it becomes important to localize knowledge development within the social, whereby a different understanding of migration and sedentarism can shift attitudes and influence the legal and political realms.

With this in mind, it becomes necessary to problematize the current migration paradigm, which suffers from a sedentary bias. This is needed in order to create a framework that does not privilege certain experiences over others and does not create migrant classes where people in need of protection are criminalized and deviantized. The current conceptualizations of refugees and refugee policy need reevaluation by “critically examining a priori concepts and placing them appropriately within a particular political-social-historical context” (Cameron, 2014, p. 8). In this manner, a priori concepts such as “refugee” need to be stripped of their pre-constructions; there is a need to instill a radical doubt into a term that so far appears monolithic and unchanged despite significant social change over historical time (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Theoretical Considerations

As this project is exploratory in nature, in that it wishes to uncover the epistemologies of subaltern bodies that have been neglected so far, it does not have any projected conclusions regarding the findings. However, theoretically I have many expectations as to what the data might uncover. As a starting point, the current research is being conducted in an ontological and epistemological framework that Mignolo (2017) calls the modern/colonial world system. This framework is contingent on the idea that modernity as it exists today - as a result of the cartesian subject/object duality, is completely dependent on coloniality. Coloniality comes to represent the “most general mode of domination in the contemporary world, after colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed” (Quijano, 1992, p. 14). In this sense, modernity/rationality as a universal epistemology depended on colonialism (and later depends on coloniality) to create the colonial difference, that which places Western epistemology as hierarchically superior to other epistemologies (Quijano, 1992).

This has practical implications for this project, as the object of study—that is, the actual experiences of refugees outside of a priori labels—is what can be considered subaltern knowledge. As the storytellers are all from geographical locations that are considered to be part of the global periphery, it is their knowledge that is underserved and neglected in favour of a universal epistemology and ontology that places their lived experiences within a hegemonic paradigm. By placing the Other as the locus of knowledge, I seek to transgress the subject/object duality that privileges certain subjectivities over others. Focusing on the Other as the locus of knowledge is a decolonial activity, insofar as “thinking and doing decolonially means unveiling the logic of coloniality and delinking from the rhetoric of modernity” (Mignolo, 2012, p. xviii).

It is this action of privileging subaltern knowledge that engages I, the researcher, in a theoretical process that dwells in the border of the modern/colonial world system: it does not seek to explain a phenomena in hegemonic terms, nor does it seek to ‘solve’ a perceived social problem. Dwelling in the border, or border-thinking is “a critical reflection on knowledge production from both the interior borders of the modern/colonial world system and its exterior borders” (Mignolo, 2012, p. 11). By dwelling in the border, I wish to understand the experiences and knowledge contained by those who have been given the “refugee” label.

In this manner, the theoretical expectations of this project align with the framework of understanding laid out: are the experiences of refugees a representation of the modern/colonial system in which we exist, and therefore an example of “the role of Western imperialism in dispossessing communities in order to secure land and resources for state and capitalist interests”? (Walia, 2013, p. 39). Walia (2013) terms this correlation as border imperialism, where it “represents the extension and imposition of Western rule, with the current dynamics of global empire maintaining unequal relationships of political, economic, cultural, and social dominance of the West over its colonies” (p. 42). Although one could argue that the experiences of refugees are certainly a consequence of border imperialism, this project aims to explore the real-life implications of the term.

Another theoretical expectation from this project is the ways in which people speak of their struggle in the decision to flee their countries, their perspectives on the process of becoming a refugee, and the ways in which their story was perceived as legitimate of the refugee label or not. Struggle comes to be “the theoretical tool for understanding agency and social change, for making sense of power relations and for interpreting the tension between academic views of political action and activist views of the academy” (Tuhiwai

Smith, 2012, p. 200). This locates struggle as the epicenter of social change, and the ways in which struggle is mediated and enacted a key area of study. Thus, the thesis explores how refugees mediate between the prescriptive labels they are assigned and their lived experience.

These are questions and concerns that guided the analysis of the data collected. These expectations provided starting points for the analysis; however, they did not drive the data collection nor the analysis. The main purpose of this thesis is to uncover the ontological essences - “the a priori of the lifeworld” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 130) - that have been buried under objectivist criteria that qualifies one as refugee or not. The purpose of this probing is to test out the project’s main research question: is the “refugee” 1951 Convention definition applicable to contemporary refugees? As the storytellers in this thesis will be refugees, it is expected that their lived experiences do fit within the 1951 Convention definition in one way or another. After all, they had to prove to the adjudicators that they were in fact refugees, as the definition stands. Thus, in this thesis I wish to understand which parts of themselves they had to alter and/or negate in order to fit within the definition, or how their lived experience extends beyond this historical definition. This is important, as it may highlight the many ways in which migrants’ experiences are fragmented in order to fit within this category.

Methods

a. Rationale for Methods

For this project, a phenomenological tradition was used to guide the research and provide a framework for action. The research question, “what is a refugee?” lends itself well to phenomenological theory, as this question is concerned with “understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved” (Welman and Kruger, 1999, as cited in Groenewald, 2004, p. 5). In this manner, the factors and processes that collide to make a person a “refugee” (individual experiences), and the act of becoming a “refugee” as a bureaucratic process of recognition (objective reality) are the phenomena to be studied (Creswell, 2007). Through a phenomenological orientation, this thesis seeks to use methods that will capture people’s experiences of the world by isolating what it means to become a refugee, according to the participant’s experiences (Patton, 2002). This will be achieved by exploring the subjective experiences of storytellers through an analytic process of social verification or co-construction, which in turn allows that experience to achieve the status of objective reality (Harding & Higgins, 1996). This process of social verification is important to the validity of the data analysis process, as it adds rigour to the data analysis.

In addition to phenomenology, this project also utilizes a theoretical framework that problematizes the contemporary definition of “refugee”. In this manner, the project’s aim is to challenge the contemporary definition of “refugee”, a word that carries with it the weight of imperial and colonial practices (Walia, 2013). This word is used as a tool, deeply embedded in the current legal-rational tradition. Thus, the methodology utilized will start out with a theoretical framework that seeks to disentangle the established modern/colonial implications of the word “refugee”. As the research process for this

project is inductive, the use of this framework aids in developing empirical generalizations and identifying preliminary relationships as the research progresses (Dudovskiy, 2016). This theoretical framework is well complemented by a phenomenological methodology. In this manner, with a phenomenological approach I seek to uncover the lifeworld, or “the world of situated, relative truths” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 126), that has been buried under the objective world under which we have been taught to develop our knowledge. The use of both of these theoretical frameworks will aid in the analysis of the data, insofar as they will provide guidelines to understand how the storytellers’ experiences fit within the contemporary definition of “refugee”, and how their lived experiences expand beyond the categorical box into which they have been placed.

In this sense, the analysis of data is driven by investigation that looks beyond what is commonly accepted as constitutive of the definition of “refugee”. While this definition partly captures the experiences of refugees, the application of these frameworks seeks to identify the underlying assumptions, feelings, affects and social norms that allow a person to identify with the refugee label. This identification is done through textual analysis of interview transcripts and memoirs. Thus, it is important to use an interpretative approach to this analysis. The textual interpretation of the data follows a phenomenological hermeneutical method, where “to understand a text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says to what it talks about” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 87). In this sense, following from sense to reference does not imply linking together material observations, but discerning the intention that is a part of the text but not readily available as so.

b. Research Design

The objective of this exploratory project was to gather information about what a refugee is from people that have undergone the refugee adjudication process, in attempting to answer the research question, “what is a refugee?”. This project contributes knowledge to the field of refugee and migration studies, which is important in developing new understandings of social phenomena. Further, this research could also help policy and law makers, as well as refugee adjudicators and humanitarian organizations insofar as it will provide salient knowledge to understand the multidimensional nature of the refugee identity. As this research project is exploratory in nature, I do not have any formal hypotheses as to the outcome of the project. There are expectations and initial questions that guided this research project. When talking about refugees and their life course experiences, I wish to understand the connections or disconnections between people’s experiences and the refugee determination process. This general inquiry guided the project.

c. Data Collection

There were two phases of data collection for this project. Five storytellers were selected in total. The sample size of five storytellers is adequate for this project, as the data collected is expansive. Further, the time constraints of this project place limits on the scope of data collection; five storytellers are considered an adequate number of storytellers for an exploratory phenomenological project such as this one (Creswell, 2007).

For the first round of data collection, data was collected via a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. This round of data collection included one participant. This participant was selected using specific guidelines. The guidelines were to recruit

storytellers that had been adjudicated through the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board. Further, I only planned to select storytellers that were adjudicated before 2012. I chose this qualification because, in order to reflect on the experiences of becoming a refugee, I posit that a distance from the experience itself will provide reflexivity that is not available to people that have undergone the process recently. In addition, this qualification also serves the purpose of ameliorating the position of vulnerability that the storytellers might have. Competence is an important consideration when assessing the vulnerability of any population, where “competence refers to the ability of prospective subjects to give informed consent in accord to their own fundamental values” (Abbott, Bergeron, Hoddnott, O’Neill, Sampson, Singer, Sykes, & Abdel-Akher, 2008, p. 2). Thus, to guarantee the competence of the storytellers, the qualification stated above is put in place for three reasons: first, refugees that have been resettled recently and still have obligations towards their sponsors might feel they are under duress to volunteer and provide an unreliable account of their experiences; second, a refugee’s recent resettlement to Canada cannot guarantee that they have fluent use of English or French, which would preclude them from giving free consent; and third, recently resettled refugees might not have been able to process their possibly traumatic experiences yet, which would put them at risk of being re-traumatized by the researcher’s questions. As vulnerability is not a static state, the qualification presented here is in place in order to safeguard the participant’s ability to give informed consent, and to ensure that the circumstances under which the storytellers will be selected safeguards their vulnerable position (Abbott et al, 2008).

Once ethics approval was granted, both purposive sampling and later snowball sampling was used to obtain the sample. I recruited storytellers using posters and

advertised the project via email listservs. The posters were placed around organizations that provide immigration and refugee resettlement services around the Capital Regional District, and the email listservs were accessed through the same organizations. I also posted information about the project on social media sites where possible storytellers would congregate, such as refugee groups on Facebook. The method of data collection for storytellers recruited in this manner was to interview them through a semi-structured interview. I created an interview schedule that contained open ended questions. Two general questions guided the development of this interview schedule: “What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The questions were used as guiding tools and probes, as there was no specific answer expected from each question. The interview schedule was designed to elicit evocative responses that provided feelings, thoughts, and sensations about how the phenomenon was experienced. Therefore, the questions developed in the interview schedule were used as probes when necessary; not all questions were asked. Although some context mattered, the main objective of the questions was to allow the participant to provide an existential overview of how the experience presented itself to them.

One participant was selected for this phase of data collection, which occurred in November 2017. The data collected was transcribed and analyzed by I, the researcher. Pursuant to the sampling strategy, I asked the participant to forward the project’s information to other possible participants. The participant agreed; however, potential participants that contacted me did not meet the eligibility requirements for the project. Other methods of recruitment did not come to fruition. In hindsight, the recruitment strategy utilized proved to have important flaws. To begin, the parameter that participants

had to be settled in Canada for 5 years or more, which was put in place in order to provide distance from the experience in order to develop reflexivity, did not match with the recruitment strategy. The recruitment strategy was to obtain access through participants via organizations that provide services to immigrants and refugees to Canada. This strategy was not adequate because the services offered by these organizations are mostly targeted towards recent immigrants and refugees that require assistance in settling in Canada. Thus, my targeted participant group would likely not be served by these services. In addition, I underestimated the stigma and pain that is attached to the label of refugee. In informal conversations with potential participants, I found that when the subject of refugee experience was brought up as the focus of the project, potential participants showed reticence about speaking about their personal experiences.

The flaws in the recruitment strategy were not fatal and could have been changed to reach my intended participant group. However, due to the time frame of this project, I decided to seek alternative ways of collecting data. The second phase of data collection was created in order to represent the new data collection strategy I devised.

The second phase of data collection included four stories. This phase of data collection was done via the use of memoirs from refugees that have been published in the English language. There were several parameters in place for the selection of these memoirs: the autobiographical experiences that the authors relayed had to have taken place post World War II, the text had to be written in English, the text had to have had a prestigious background, and each experience had to vary in its geographic and cultural origin.

The autobiographical experiences had to have taken place after World War II because I believe they would represent the experience of a contemporary refugee better.

Since the UNHCR was created and developed its policies as a response to the events following the end of the Holocaust, using experience from that time would not adequately fulfill the ethos of this project (Haddad, 2008). In this manner, seeking experiences on which the policies I seek to subvert were created would only add to the literature that bases its refugee research on subjects that come from the core rather than the periphery.

The prestigious element of the parameters was put in place in order to select books that had secondary sources explain the content and depth of the experiences. The objective of this parameter was to reduce the pool of possible texts. In this manner, conceptualizing a prestigious element allowed me to vet out works that would not have provided me with quality data. This parameter was operationalized as any memoir that was (a) written by an author that became a refugee, (b) had a prestigious background by either receiving an award for outstanding literary work or by becoming a bestseller, and/or (c) had an author that received accolades for his/her writings in general.

The memoirs were selected based on their differences to each other in lived experiences and identities. This heterogenous sampling strategy would ensure that the results of this project represent a plethora of views, which would allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon as it varies from experience to experience. The last parameter, that the memoirs were written in English, was selected because the language being used to write this thesis is English.

With these parameters in mind, four memoirs were chosen: *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, by Carlos Eire (2003), *The Book of my Lives*, by Aleksandar Hemon (2013), *First They Killed my Father*, by Loung Ung (2000), and *The Story of my Life, An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky*, by Farah Ahmed (2005)¹.

¹ See Appendix A for a table containing further information about the memoirs.

In order to collect data via these memoirs, I created a data collection strategy. The strategy I devised was created with two objectives in mind: to make myself familiar with the text in depth, and to analyze fragments of the text that pertained directly to the phenomenon. In order to achieve this, I read the texts two times. The first time, I read the texts with the story in mind. I wanted to get acquainted with each story's context and chronology. For the second reading, I placed my attention on the fragments of the text that spoke directly about the authors' experiences with the phenomenon. I selected these fragments with two questions in mind: What has the writer experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected the writer's experiences of the phenomenon? (Creswell, 2007).

These two questions follow phenomenological methodologies, but their close application falls into a hermeneutical method of interpretation, whereby "interpretation is the process by which disclosure of new modes of being - or new forms of life- gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 94). In this sense, the act of narrating or storytelling is an act of sensemaking for the author. Through the process of storytelling, narrators make themselves knowable and cohesive by placing themselves within a temporality (Cunliffe, 2012). Operationalizing the first question, what has the writer experienced in terms of the phenomenon?, was done by selecting fragments that spoke directly of *how* the writer experienced the phenomenon in an existential way. In this sense, fragments were selected if they contained feelings, emotions, or any clues as to what the writer was thinking or feeling during the phenomenon.

The second question - What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected the writer's experiences of the phenomenon? - was harder to operationalize. This

was due to the fact that these memoirs are mostly recollections of the contexts and situations that the writer experienced. However, I found that there was a type of writer's objectivity that the writers engaged in, whereby they retold the stories they lived through as fact or immovable truth. While I do not claim that these retellings are not factual, the objective of my analysis was to infer, *through a deep reading, the lifeworld through which the writers experienced the phenomenon*. While fragments detailing historical facts are important for context, I did not select these fragments for analysis. Uncovering the lifeworld requires that these retellings be peeled back to reveal the structure of experience through which the writers have interpreted their experiences of the phenomena. This strategy is part of a phenomenological reduction, where the description of the phenomenon is done by selecting fragments using textural language, or "just what one sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90).

Thus, I selected fragments basing them on the hermeneutical idea that "interpretation is not an isolated activity but the basic structure of experience" (Gadamer, 1984, p. 58 as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 10). In this way, for the second question, I selected fragments that appeared to present some sort of interpretation of the context or situation. This interpretation presented itself as an affective cue, a question that was left unanswered, or sometimes a call for meaning. The fragments selected were compiled into one document per memoir and were considered the invariant constituents of the experience. These fragments were used for thematic coding as part of data analysis.

d. Data Analysis and Limitations

Once the fragments of each memoir had been compiled into one document each, they were ready to be analyzed for meaning. The interview transcript and the text compilations were analyzed using the same analysis strategy. Analysis of data went ahead with five texts, which was in accord with the original sampling strategy.

The strategy for data analysis was to consider each text a single unit of data. This means that each text was analyzed individually for the first steps of data analysis and were later compared to each other once each text had been distilled to its invariant constituents. For each text, I read the texts several times to acquaint myself with the content. After reading through the texts, I started coding them manually. The codes were developed as clusters of meaning; the fragments were categorized together based content that spoke of the same meaning constructions. As each text was analyzed individually, the codes developed for each text varied in meaning and in number. The codes developed for each text ranged from 21 codes to 13 codes.

The codes were refined through axial coding, and later categorized into overarching clusters and sub-themes. I performed a validity check with my supervisor to ensure the validity of the codes. After gaining approval of the coding structure, I further categorized the codes into textural or structural descriptions of the experience. Once this process was done, I synthesized and constructed an individual textural description and an individual structural description for each of the texts. According to Creswell (2007), textural description is “a description of what the participants experienced” (p. 61), and structural description is “a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 61). From these categories, I was able to write up a *thick description* of what the authors experienced and the context that influenced how the authors experienced the phenomenon. Once these descriptions were

finished and the experiences had been isolated, I looked for similarities between stories. Cross-referencing the descriptions resulted in 10 themes, with five conceptual clusters that organized the themes. The authors and participants are referred as storytellers to facilitate analysis.

Although the heterogeneous sampling strategy was used in order to find diverse experiences, there were some commonalities between all storytellers. Four out of five storytellers were children when they experienced the phenomenon. The age at which the storytellers experienced the phenomenon ranged from 6 years old to 27 years old. Their ages spanned through their narratives as well. According to the UNHCR Global Trends (2017), 52% of the refugee population in the world are children under the age of 18. This number has steadily increased through the years, with a 41% growth since 2009.

Although my sample is not representative of the current refugee population, the viewpoint of the storytellers is that of perhaps the most vulnerable refugee populations. This viewpoint is important in understanding the experience of those who are at a highest risk in these situations. Three of the storytellers identified themselves as male, while two identified as female. All storytellers came from countries that are in the periphery; two storytellers came from countries instituting communist practices, while three storytellers came from situations of general war and instability. The countries the storytellers came from are: Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Cuba, and Cambodia. All of the storytellers ended up in the United States or Canada, which is not a common experience. The UNHCR Global Trends (2017) reports that 85% of the world's refugees are hosted by developing regions, which are often the countries adjacent to the original country of conflict.

Because of the heterogenous sampling strategy used to select cases, the results presented in this project cannot be generalized. By choosing 4 texts with diverse origin stories, I sought information-rich cases that allowed for a purposeful inquiry into and understanding of the phenomenon in depth (Patton, 1990). The use of the texts as well as interview data allowed for a diverse account of experiences. This provided insight into the phenomenon, as well as allowed for triangulation of the data. The use of different types of data allows to test for consistency in the accounts, but it does not allow for empirical generalizations.

It should be noted that 3 of the authors were relocated to the United States, while one author received asylum from the United States but frequently visited his family that was relocated in Canada. The participant that provided the interview data was eventually relocated to Canada after living in several countries as an asylum seeker. Thus, the refugee trajectories in these accounts are varied, and therefore cannot be used comparatively or as a typography of refugee experience. The receiving countries in these stories are also different due to geography as well as time; the experiences used for this project happened between 1963 and 2003. Therefore interpretations as to the current state of refugee practices and welcoming behaviours cannot be extrapolated from the data.

In addition to these limitations, it should also be noted that the four memoirs used have been edited by professional editors. Editors correct written material in order to improve it for clarity, as well as modify it in order to suit the needs of its audience. Although the memoirs used have been established as non-fictional accounts of the writer's personal experience, the extent of the editorial work is unknown. Therefore, while we can trust that the experiences related have been experienced by the authors, we cannot maintain the validity of the texts as factual accounts. However, since one of the

roles of a professional editor is to make sure that the text suits its audience, this provides us with an extra lens through which to understand the accounts studied here. The audience that would consume these memoirs, English-speaking people in North America, would require a narrative that is culturally available to them. Thus, we can come to understand the role of the editor as a further application of an a priori “refugee experience” that would make the text digestible to North American audiences. In this manner, the findings and analysis of this project are not limited to the experiences of the authors per se, but to the frameworks of experience that allow the researcher and the audience to consume and understand these texts. Thus, the editor plays an important role in applying a cultural lens that reveals the lifeworld, or underlying social structure, of our understanding of “refugee”.

Findings

The findings are organized in 10 themes, which are categorized in 5 clusters. The clusters are categorized according to a common concept. The clusters are: loss, the mundane, agency, sensemaking, and ontological insecurity. Each of the 10 themes was developed texturally and structurally. This means that descriptions of both the storytellers' understanding of their experiences as well as the structural components that facilitated this understanding were identified. Each theme is presented and described.

a. Loss

The theme of loss was very pronounced in all of the participants' experiences. The losses described were material and social objects, such as places, objects, and symbols of social interaction (such as friendship). However, in their description of these losses, the storytellers described an underlying *experience of loss*. Thus, loss is not about losing a *thing*, it is about the implications that losing has on the Self. In this manner, the loss is highly contextual; the loss is experienced as a distress on the Self only because of the circumstances under which it was experienced. This theme had three distinct sub-themes: loss of geography, loss of family/community, and loss of identity.

i. *Loss of geography*

The experience of loss was grounded in material objects that were lost to the participant. These objects were points of identity, of deep symbolic meaning. The cities the storytellers inhabited were lost to them. Hemon (2013) describes the city as a living entity, and as a "personal infrastructure" (p. 117). The city is a map of landmarks and connections that facilitate one storyteller ability to situate themselves and see themselves reflected back: "your sense of who you were, your deepest identity, was determined by

your position in a human network, whose physical corollary was the architecture of the city” (Hemon, 2013, p. 117). Identity development was intricately tied to the physical structures of a city. In this manner, the city is the geographical embodiment of a world that contains social relations and relationships to familiar material objects. It is through the interpellation of these social relations and material relationships, facilitated by the physical structures of a city, that a continued sense of existential direction is produced, both collectively and individually.

The identity development that is intricately tied to the city is contextual. Thus, the city lost to a particular participant is not the same as other’s experiences of a city. In this sense, the physicality of the loss of place is exclusive, as it only pertains to the specific context through which the storytellers experienced the city. Eire explains how he came to understand his social status through the spaces he occupied:

One stain had been missed, though. Forgiven, of course, under the rubric of ‘any other sins I have overlooked’. It was the stain of pride. I remember thinking how nice it was to be at the Yacht Club, how well it suited me, my classmates, and our families. I knew at that age that I was lucky and thought God owed me that luck simply because I richly deserved it. Deserved it more than others. I would have Fidel to thank for pointing out this pride to me, and “stinkin’ mitts” Curtis too, who made me realize for the first time in my life that I was a Cuban (2003, p. 130).

In this manner, geographical loss has several layers to it: the place itself, the degree of access to it, and the social connection within it. While loss to the place may or may not happen overnight, the loss of relations is always delayed. In the experience of the storytellers, it was a slow disintegration of the place they used to know, until the moment they had to leave it forever. The result of this disruption of place is a disruption

of the Self. The gap created with this schism is filled with a new identity that reflects that of the new location, often times that of an Other.

ii. Loss of Family / Social Bonds / Community

The loss of geography created fissures in the social connections of the storytellers. At first, the phenomenon looms over the lives of the storytellers, with hearsay and subtle changes in their lives. However, at a certain point, the phenomenon fully expresses itself, creating sudden change in the lives of the storytellers. This happens at varying levels depending on the connection the storytellers have to their meso structures and the scale of the phenomenon itself. For example, Ahmed (2005) spent most of her life inside the walls of her compound in Kabul. It wasn't until a bomb fell on her compound, killing most of her male relatives, that her life changed considerably and suddenly. For Ung (2000), the change precipitated itself in a quicker way: the Khmer Rouge forced all inhabitants of Phnom Penh to vacate the city in three days.

These sudden changes create a disconnection between the production of the Self and social and geographical places that facilitate such production. D, during their interview with me, stated:

I've lived alone for so long, you know, and people talk about family and relatives. I've lost all of that. I was alone and raised myself for so many years. I've left in terms of family, identity, the community and my family would have raised me (sic). Sometimes I have a fear of attachment, and that's what I'm working on right now. Leaving from country to country and moving I've left behind any chance to have a normal childhood, to live normally, to belong to my country. Attachment to where I was born, to where my bellybutton is buried.

The loss of family, social bonds, and community compounds to further disrupt a person's identity formation process. This situation creates existential feelings; a person's

identity cannot be verified if it cannot be legitimized by its milieu. Eire explains this existential feeling by comparing it to death:

And I'm sitting there in that living room, with these nice people, and I look around, and I stare at the Picasso print with the three musicians and at the babies and at the dog out on the patio, and I listen to the English being spoken, and I notice that the sunlight outside is just slightly duller than the light I had grown up with, just a fraction of a fraction less bright. And I realize that I'm not the same anymore, and that I never ever will be. I miss my mother. I miss my father, even. I miss everyone so much. I miss the sunlight. I miss my model Viking ship and my comic books. I'm not the same. I'm not the same. Maybe I'm dead! All of this sweeps over me like a tidal wave, wordlessly (2003, p. 346).

Without being able to verify an identity, the person experiencing the phenomenon has to find new ways of creating a valid identity that is reflected in their milieu. This has to be done while undergoing situations of distress, which cause psychological strain. The psychological strain of having to survive while being torn from support networks and familiar places forces Ung (2000) to redirect her emotions and use anger as a way to have a purpose. The idea of loss, coupled with hate, gave Ung (2000) the strength to live day by day when there was no hope left or nothing to live for. However, once safe, she understands that these memories cannot serve her in that way any longer: "for a long time I needed to hold on to the memories because they made me angry. My rage made me strong and resilient. Now, however, enclosing the memories in my heart and mind is unendurable" (p. 212).

The loss of social connection happens also as a result of the sudden geographical displacement. The uprooting of a life suddenly, without a clear sense of how things came to happen (a tangible meaning as to why the phenomenon happened) creates a chasm between people. Without the geographical place grounding a family to meaning, all senses of Self become adrift. The displacement itself becomes the loss of relationships.

Displacement transforms the Self to the point where the place where it stands metaphysically is not compatible with the physical space one is inhabiting. Hemon describes this experience with his family: “we missed each other, even while we were together, because the decaying elephant in the room was the loss of our previous life - absolutely nothing was the way it used to be” (2013, p. 168).

iii. Loss of Identity

From the accounts collected, the loss of identity was a result of losing a geographical place as well as family and social connection/belonging. The phenomenon created a situation where any markers to who they are were disrupted suddenly. Without the ability to legitimize their identity, storytellers needed to create a new one based on their current environment. Hemon explains this experience as understanding his identity as a point of difference: “differences are thus essentially required for the sense of belonging: as long as we know who we are and who we are not, we are as good as they are” (2013, p.16). Having to adapt in a new environment, away from the milieu upon which he legitimized his identity, Hemon (2013) understands that in order to belong he has to accept himself as different. Eire employs this same method, but also capitulates to the new norms of his host society, and submits to his new social order: “We were spoiled brats , ninos bitongos, who thought we’d never have to worry about cleaning out pool filters. Served us right, it did, to be hurled down to the bottom of the heap when we reached the States” (2003, p. 352).

These coping techniques allowed the storytellers to continue on with an outline of an identity. This new identity was created from the looking glass self of a different society that found them different and sometimes inferior. Although the creation of the new identity was done in order to be able to navigate their new life, there were still

feelings of sudden rupture, or as Eire (2003) put it, “unfinished business”. For him, this loss of continuity is experienced as lack of growth: “I didn’t get to grow up with my scary things, so they remain scary, embedded as they are in childhood memories” (p. 107). The storytellers were unable to merge their identities together, as there was no continuity in their lives. This created dichotomous identities.

These paragraphs have described the general feelings of loss that the storytellers experienced while going through the phenomenon. They describe loss of their spatial domain, loss of social relations and material objects, and finally the loss of their identity. This is a progression that illustrates how, by the act of displacement, the phenomenon disrupts any connections to a person’s sense of Self.

Through their descriptions of the objects of loss and their feelings surrounding them, we begin to understand one of the key experiences of being/becoming a refugee. Thus, loss is a significant experience in going through displacement. This loss is centered on objects of the surrounding world, or “umwelt”. These are objects that “exercise a motivating force on us and present themselves to us under egocentric aspects” (Beyer, 2018, np). In this sense, the storytellers’ experience of loss is contextual to the meaning they attributed to the symbolic objects they lost. For example, the loss of spatial domain had different meanings for each of the accounts collected. For Eire (2003), Havana symbolized his privileged life; for Ahmedi (2005), life in her compound in Kabul represented the safety and cohesiveness of her family life. In the same manner, the loss described throughout is only experienced as loss with respect to the storytellers’ intersubjective processes that constitute them as whole. It is through understanding the objects of loss for each participant that we can begin to uncover the lifeworld of the phenomenon.

b. The Mundane

During their descriptions of the phenomenon, storytellers described at length situations of their day-to-day. These descriptions of quotidian or mundane activities served an important role in the experience of the phenomenon, as they kept the storytellers grounded while at the same time experiencing sudden and radical changes in their lives. These mundane activities and experiences served to normalize the events in the storytellers' lives, and they also served as a way to express the ambiguity and lack of rules that preceded and followed the phenomenon. These day-to-day experiences presented themselves in two types. First, there were experiences that normalized and routinized the storytellers' day-to-day while dealing with the uncertainty of the phenomenon. Second, there were experiences that were described as a way for the storytellers to liberate themselves from social norms and from the general environment of unease in their social world. In this manner, observing their social worlds crumble down, and norms and routines disrupted allowed the storytellers to engage in behaviour that was reckless and gave them reprieve from the insecurity they were facing.

i. The Mundane as Normalization

Storytellers described mundane activities in the context of the phenomenon. These mundane activities normalized the experience of the phenomenon for the storytellers. The descriptions talked about how storytellers found activities to love and look forward to, even when their lives as they knew them were ending. Eire explains:

To this day, as I am drifting to sleep I often expect to hear a bomb or two going off in the distance. It was an almost comforting sound, a lullaby of sorts. And if it was a bomb followed by a shoot-out, then it was even more oddly soothing. You knew, at least, that the world hadn't changed (2003, p. 63).

Other storytellers engaged in activities that reminded them of their previous life, creating a connection with their pre-phenomenon selves. D, in their interview, explains that: “it was beautiful, in the camp we played soccer. We didn’t have a ball and made a ball with newspapers, rags and leaves and bamboo leaves. It was fun, and the girls would have dancing and challenging and zone A would challenge zone C...”. Enjoying mundane activities and incorporating them into their daily lives allowed the storytellers to feel secure and retain an ontological grounding that was familiar and decipherable.

ii. The Mundane as a Liberating Force

Mundane activities were also described as a form of freedom. In this sense, freedom comes to be interpreted as the ways in which storytellers let go of social norms. This activity of “letting go” comes at the point in which the phenomenon looms closely into the future. The expectation of the phenomenon happening, along with the implications it carries (war, destruction of material and social objects), drives the storytellers to find solace in mundane activities. Hemon states:

Those happy days before everything collapsed, when anything at all went far in inducing lifesaving oblivion! We did it all: staying up all night to close and lay out an issue of the magazine, subsisting on coffee and cigarettes and trance; consuming pornography and writing poetry; participating in passionate soccer-related discussions and endless, manic debates prompted by questions like: “Would you fuck a horse for a million deutschmarks?” or “Does the grandmaster Anatoly Karpov own a superfast speedboat? (2013, p. 64)

This “lifesaving oblivion” is necessary to deal with the knowledge that the phenomenon will change lives forever. The freedom or oblivion described by Hemon (2013) speaks of a liberating force over social norms and customs, which is caused by

knowledge that his social world has been disrupted. This knowledge and experience show that a world can be completely changed- rules that were seen as natural and unchanging were disrupted overnight. This sudden change in social structure creates chaos —internal and external— but it also creates a feeling of liberation, of ecstasy:

The five of us knew our world had come to an end. The Apocalypse had arrived. We all knew that our parents were making plans to send us to the United States. We knew our days under the breadfruit tree were numbered. So we threw those smelly, gooey breadfruits, hurled them with absolute abandon, with fury. We tried to inflict as much damage as possible. We laughed our heads off, even when we got hit. Those breadfruits hurt, but we didn't feel pain. We laughed and kept throwing, more and more (Eire, 2003, p. 325).

The chaos created by the phenomenon results in stress to the storytellers.

However, these chaotic changes are not totalizing. There are moments of fun, laughter, and happiness. This joy and happiness in engaging in mundane activities with other people is community building. Even when the large social structures that organize social life are destroyed or changed overnight, at the community level storytellers still replicate patterns of social engagement that are the foundation of community building.

c. Agency

The storytellers spoke of their experiences using their agency while experiencing the phenomenon. The use of agency is described in positive and negative ways, with the storytellers attributing meaning to their choices based on their interpretations of the event. In this manner, the interpretation of the experience either made the storytellers aware of their ability to exercise their agency or made them feel there was no agency to exercise. Although the contexts every participant experienced were different, all storytellers describe their interpretation of the event, and their own understanding of their

ability to enforce their agency. This ability to enforce their agency was not a static experience, as storytellers described both the actions they took in an empowering way, and also feelings of powerlessness when faced with the phenomenon.

Storytellers describe the phenomenon as a chaotic experience that fragments social life. In response to this chaos, some storytellers describe the way they used their agency to survive or resist. Ahmedi describes making a decision to apply for refugee status in the USA while in conversation with her mother:

I'm missing a leg, Mama! Who will take me? In America it's different. There, if I'm alone, I can survive, I can live. No one will look down on me for being single. No one will attack me—the law won't allow it. There, I can go to school, learn something, build a future for myself. Here? If a girl lives alone in Pakistan, it's a defect, a disgrace. They will never let me live my life here. Nor am I healthy, you know! I can't go out and labor for my bread. We have to do this. I don't care what anyone says! I will do it. In your name and mine, I will go apply (2005, p. 137).

On the other hand, there are times where storytellers feel like they have no control over their lives, and there are no actions they can take to remediate the situation:

My father, however, advised me to stay away. Nothing good was going to happen at home, he said. I was supposed to fly back from Chicago on May 1, and as things got progressively worse in Sarajevo, I was torn between guilt and fear for my parents' and friends' lives, kept awake by worries about my previously unimagined and presently unimaginable future in America (Hemon, 2013, p. 114).

Although Hemon (2013) describes his experience as one where he was unable to do anything about the situation developing in Sarajevo, his decision to stay reflects his ability to choose. The ability to choose, whether the choice was positive or negative, was something that storytellers continually referenced throughout their accounts of the experience. In this sense, agency is value neutral; to have agency does not equate to

making positive or empowering choices. Agency is the ability to act; and that ability to act is influenced by structural forces. If we assume this understanding of agency, then it follows that people are never without agency at its core. While the ability to make choices can be constrained significantly by structural forces, a person's ability to make choices about their life is never taken away. For example, in a prison inmates make choices to go on hunger strike or submit to the rules. In the example above, Hemon (2013) speaks of his choice to stay as disempowering; however, his choice to stay and survive rather than return to Sarajevo to an uncertain future reflects his agency. D explains his choice to leave Somalia in a boat, even when previous boats had capsized:

It kind of reminds me (of my experience) and I'm not surprised that people are still taking risks, because we took that risk when we knew that the boats before us that were going to Mombasa had collapsed. Lives have been lost but people... and I want to read poet Warsan Shire; "you have to understand, no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land". That means when you're not safe it doesn't matter that the previous boats capsized. So I left in 92 and landed in Mombasa, Kenya.

When faced with uncertainty and chaos in their social lives, storytellers described their feelings of being unable to control their destiny. However, at certain points in their narratives, storytellers explain that they submitted to external forces. Eire explains his understanding of how the revolution changed his life overnight without his knowledge or input, and how he came to terms with it:

God willed that Fidel and his army be close to victory that night, and that the rebels would take over Cuba a few days later, destroying our world. God didn't ask my permission for any of these things. Should He have asked? God willed that I should have no clue whatsoever about the way in which He runs His universe, or any say in how He chooses to redeem us, or not. God willed it, even, that I should still be asking Him impertinent questions and that I should still be doubting the wisdom of his plans, brooding over the logic of the Virgin's womb

and the Word. God wills it all. And it's our job, our very purpose in existing, to submit graciously (2003, p. 191).

The process of submitting, sometimes to a belief system, explains the way in which storytellers make choices to deal with the sudden insecurity they are faced. In this manner, actively deciding to submit to a force greater than them allows them to face the chaos in their lives. This is due to the force or belief system providing them with rules and security that their physical and social world currently lacks.

Thus, although these choices are powered by survival, they are still choices. These choices are important to recognize, but not with the intention of disregarding the structural forces that constrain one's ability to choose or to attribute control to a person in a difficult situation. It is important because these are incredibly difficult choices that deserve recognition. The choice to submit to an external force even when it goes against a person's sense of Self, or the choice to put themselves in danger for the sake of their survival or other's survival is a feat. It is a feat that is damaging as well, because it tears a person's life away from them. As such, this feat should be recognized for its significance. However, contemporary narratives about agency and exile frame these experiences paradigmatically as a withdrawal of agency. This is based on "a world obtusely unable to perceive human persons free of imposed national identities" (Vahabzadeh, 2006, p. 165), which posits the stateless as bodies without agency.

d. Sensemaking

When describing their experiences, storytellers tried to create meaning. The storytellers created meaning between their personal experiences, and what they knew about the phenomenon at large. In this sense, through the meaning making, the storytellers tried to create meaning between their experiences and their knowledge. The theme of

sensemaking had two sub-themes: the gap in understanding, and the fragility of social structures.

The theme of the gap in understanding relates to how storytellers tried to link the micro with the macro. This linkage was important for the storytellers, as it allowed them to create a narrative to their personal experiences. However, knowledge of the causes and consequences of the phenomenon was not sufficient for them to understand the existential meaning of their own experiences. Linking together the micro and macro does not account for how each storytellers' meso structures were affected by the phenomenon. This creates a gap in understanding, where the participant is unable to articulate the how and why of how their lives were disrupted and destroyed. By "gap in understanding", I come to understand the lack of coherence that storytellers describe between their personal experiences and the macro level explanations that account for them. In this sense, although there is a large-scale narrative that explains the events happening, the experience of the storytellers evades this narrative. It evades it in that specific *individualized* experiences escape collective narratives, as the narrative does not account for their individuality. Here, we can see the struggle between structure and agency as storytellers come to grips with their situation.

The theme of the fragility of social structures speaks of how exposure to the phenomenon revealed the socially constructed nature of human structure to the storytellers. In this sense, exposure to events that turned their lives, communities, and institutions upside down created a moment of slippage of meaning. This slippage allowed the storytellers to see that structures are not natural or immovable.

i. Sensemaking and the Gap in Understanding

All storytellers described their experience as set of events that were unconnected or disjointed. This type of description was most common when storytellers tried to explain how large structural forces such as ideology, armed conflict, and en-masse family separation affected their daily lives. Their descriptions attempted to create a causal relationship between the micro and the meso, but ultimately they described their lack of understanding as to how these large forces are to blame specifically for the pain and loss experienced. Ung describes how her lived experience of losing her family does not mesh with the knowledge she has of Pol Pot's strategies to revolutionize Cambodia:

My legs hurt and my body aches from the walk, but physical pain does not matter anymore. My mind wanders to my family, and I become deaf to the conversations around me. Pa cared about politics. I am too young to understand Pol Pot's strategies for creating a classless pure agrarian society. I do not know why Pol Pot did what he did when he made us leave Phnom Penh, gave us very little food, or took Pa away from me. All I know is if the Youns invading Kampuchea could have saved Pa, Ma, Keav, and Geak, I wished they would have come sooner (2000, p. 169).

In the accounts collected, the authors tried to put together, like a puzzle, the pieces of their lived experience as they intersected with society at large. Ahmedi correlates her life in her family's sheltered compound with the events happening outside the walls of the compound, in an attempt to understand why things happened the way they did:

Only in retrospect do I understand that my father's death was just one part of a momentous event that befell Afghanistan in that last week of September 1996. Three or four days after the rocket killed my family, the mujahideen slipped out of Kabul and retreated north, leaving the capital city to the Taliban, that terrible army of big-bearded boys. It was all part of the same cluster of events, the

Taliban's final battle for Kabul. I knew of this event only dimly. Certainly, I knew nothing of its significance (2005, p. 92).

In this way, storytellers linked their personal experiences to wider social, political, and economic ramifications. This allowed them to place themselves in that specific milieu and derive meaning from it.

These linkages between the micro experiences and the macro milieu provided a narrative foundation in the storytellers' lives. While this type of meaning making was useful to the storytellers' narratives, it still was not sufficient to explain how the magnitude of these events shattered their lives. Through their descriptions of the context of the phenomenon, and their explanations of how it affected their lives, storytellers were unable to envision how those macro scale events have the power to disrupt their lives so much. Hemon explains this lack of understanding, when the possibility of war in Bosnia became a real expectation for the future:

When I wandered the city, I found myself speculating with troubling frequency as to which buildings would provide good sniper positions. Even as I envisioned myself ducking under fire, I took those visions to be simply paranoid symptoms of the stress induced by the ubiquitous warmongering politics. I understand now that I was imagining incidents, as it was hard for me to imagine war in all its force, much the way a young person can imagine the symptoms of an illness but find it hard to imagine death: life seems so continuously, intensely, and undeniably present (2013, p. 111).

This lack of understanding created a gap between Hemon's (2013) understanding of the experience, and the knowledge of macro events that were involved in the phenomenon.

This gap in understanding is felt in the meso. Death, abandonment, destruction of communities, those are the events that appeared senseless and incoherent to storytellers because they signify the loss of a world that appeared solid. Narrative strategies linking

the micro with the macro do not fill the gap in understanding, as there are unanswered questions, like Eire facing the dissolution of his family after his father declined leaving Cuba with him, his brother and mother:

Father, Father, why did you abandon me? On good days, I cut my dad some slack. I think that maybe he convinced himself he was doing the best he could. He listened to my mom and her very persuasive voice and chose to spare us the decapitation this time around. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette hid me in the ruins and threw me out the window before Fidel's militiamen could get to me. They threw me as far as they could, and so it was that I was driven into exile, along with my older brother. Threw me across the turquoise sea, all the way to our own Egypt, all the way to the United States, the vault of everlasting illusion (2003, p. 87).

Some storytellers attributed supernatural explanations to the gap in understanding. Unable to bridge the experience and knowledge together, storytellers describe how they come to understand the events as signs from their God, or as ways in which their God was speaking to them.

ii. Sensemaking and the Fragility of Social Structures

Exposure to the phenomenon made the storytellers aware of how the institutions and structures they believed were natural and solid were in reality social constructions. The storytellers' world, as a set of social relations, was experienced as pregiven. As their worlds – with regards to both social relations and physical structures – disappear, they stop making sense. The pregiveness of the world presupposes an element of facticity, and this facticity can no longer be corroborated when the phenomenon is in full force (Zahavi, 2003). This knowledge is developed after witnessing the breakdown of their lives as they knew them, in a sudden way. This understanding comes as a byproduct of their search for answers as to why the phenomenon comes to happen.

Storytellers observed how war and instability destroyed social structures. These social structures, which can be physical and mental (such as religion, architecture, community), appeared solid and concrete previous to the phenomenon. Their destruction creates knowledge within the participant that challenges their previously held assumptions about social life. Ung reflects on the phenomenon:

Balancing the rice pot on my head, I turn around and look one last time at Pursat City. My eyes linger on the mountains, thinking of Pa, Ma, Keav and Geak. The mountain peaks majestically jut into the sky as large clouds cast dark shadows on them. It all looks so calm and normal, as if the hell we have lived through for the past four years has never happened. Four years ago, on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Pehn, a course that eventually brought us here to Pursat. Up somewhere in the mountains, Pa, Ma, Keav, and Geak are still trapped and unable to go home with us. 'Pa, Ma, Keav, Geak', I call out to them, 'I am taking you all home now. I will not say good-bye. I will never say good-bye' (2000, p. 210).

This rupture in the perceived stability of social structures has impacts on the storytellers' understanding of themselves, of others, and of social life in general. Experiencing the phenomenon leads the storytellers to understand their geography, and all the invisible, unwritten rules that rule it, as fragile. The sense of fragility follows storytellers after the phenomenon, as they come to understand that social structures, as the creations of humans, are not impervious to human whims. Eire, who as a child woke up one day to find that the banks in Cuba had seized all the money in Cubans' bank accounts, recounts how that event changed his understanding of social life:

Four decades later, I am staring at my troubled bank account, meditating on the numbers I see before me. Suddenly I see them all turn to zero. I am back in line that Sunday morning and I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I still expect all the money in America to disappear someday, the same way. It's all an illusion, mere figures on paper. Retirement account? Stocks? Bonds? Savings accounts? Forget it. I don't put away one cent. I don't have any money in any bank, save for

the little I have in my checking account, which is always fully depleted by the end of every month. I spend every cent I earn and then some. I'm always in debt, always ready for the day when everyone else will lose their money. On that day, thanks to my advance planning, I won't have any to lose. I'll only have debts to wipe out, like my uncle's customers, come the Revolution. Ha (2003, p. 273).

Thus, the knowledge that social structure is fragile stays with this participant well after the phenomenon has ended. This knowledge haunts him, as he understands that the physical and social structures in which he relies and carries out his life can be destroyed suddenly.

In this theme, the storytellers engaged in sensemaking as a way to create a coherent narrative that would tie together their experiences. However, the phenomenon leaves marks in the storytellers' self-narrative. First, there is a disconnect between the individual and the structure. The storytellers' try to explain how their personal experiences fit in the puzzle of the large-scale narratives that happened in their countries; for example, how war resulted in their homes being bombed, or how a communist government resulted in them starving. However, there are cracks in how the storytellers explain these connections, as the large-scale narratives cannot account for their personal lives. In this sense, these large-scale narratives are not part of the pre-given world that they have learned to trust in and mechanically reproduce in their day to day. This rupture in their social world produces loss, but it also produces insecurity. As a result of this gap in understanding, the storytellers come to understand their world, social and physical, as fragile. Going through the phenomenon gives the storytellers the forced ability to observe their lifeworlds not as objective and pre-given, but as a subjective reality.

e. Ontological Insecurity

Ontological security is maintained when “home is able to provide a site of constancy in the social and material environment” (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 747). I named this theme “ontological insecurity” in order to encapsulate the opposite. This theme describes the ways in which the storytellers explain their sense of Self being shaken and then fragmented as a result of the phenomenon. The storytellers experience significant social and material losses during and after the phenomenon. These losses, which come to be the reflective mirror that makes up a storyteller’s identity, leave the participant unable to articulate who they are. Without the material and social milieu, the participant does not know how to place themselves, or make meaning out of those experiences. The theme of ontological insecurity had two sub-themes: crisis and banishment, and coping with the insecurity.

i. Crisis and Banishment

The experience of the phenomenon, with sudden structural and social changes, created discontinuity in the storytellers’ self-identity. This *discontinuity* is experienced as a crisis in identity, as the milieu where the identity sees itself reflected is no longer accessible. The discontinuity is a result of the displacement the participant experiences. Hemon describes his forced immigration as an existential condition: “you are forced to negotiate the conditions of your selfhood under perpetually changing existential circumstances. The displaced person strives for narrative stability” (2013, p. 17). The narrative stability the participant mentions is hard to accomplish once the reality one has built their identity on changes drastically.

This drastic change also creates knowledge within the participant that the reality they experienced is no longer available to them. The discontinuity between their previous

life and their new one does not allow for a transition in the perceptions of the participant; one day they are *something* and the next that something no longer exists. Ahmedi describes her mother's difficulties in adjusting to a life in America that was very foreign to her:

Deep down, I always knew we were among good people here in America and that no one meant us any harm, yet even I frequently felt lost and confused. And my mother found America ever so much more befuddling than I. She had seen nothing of the world except the compounds of Afghanistan and the camps in Pakistan. She had no frame of reference by which to judge what was safe here in the United States and what was dangerous. All the bustle, noise, and spectacle swamped her senses, so she hovered on the edge of panic all the time, especially when we were out in public (2005, p. 188).

Eire's account is situated within one moment in his refugee journey, when he is on a flight taking him away from his country and his family:

Want to know what it's like to die? The kind of death I'm talking about has no oceans of time in which your memories swim eternally. No.[...] In the wink of an eye—in a fraction of that, really—you pass through the burning silence, and you emerge in exactly the same spot, in the very same body, gloriously transformed, a glowing blank slate. It might not seem glorious at first, the transfiguration. But glorious it is, and glowing, and as blistering white as the whitest of clouds. And as painful as all hell (2003, p. 380)

Eire (2003) describes his experience as a type of death; the death of his previous life and the death of his identity. This death is the culmination of a series of events that leave him stripped of his lifeworld.

Thus, the phenomenon leaves the storytellers unable to revisit spaces where their identity can be legitimized and where they can feel safe in their surrounding social structures. This inaccessibility creates feelings of exile or banishment. When the storytellers are no longer proprietors of the place they created their reality in (their

lifeworld), they develop alternative ways of conceptualizing their lives and identities in order to cope with the death of their past lives. The banishment is double edged, as in order to survive the psychic losses of the phenomenon they have to banish their own memories. In this sense, it becomes imperative to create a new reality that does not count on the previous one. Eire recounts his coping mechanism when he left Cuba at 8 years old, separated from his family and all he knew:

I sacrifice painful truths constantly, especially about myself, and bury them without reading their entrails first. It's a means of survival I learned on the fly, when my world was stripped away, bit by bit. Somehow I learned to cling to one piece of fiction that floated calmly above the wreckage, undisturbed: I am still the same. I'm still the same even though my friends have all vanished. I'm still the same even though my favorite school will never exist again. I'm still the same[...]. I'll always be who I am (2003, p. 342).

ii. *Coping with the Insecurity*

The denial Eire (2003) mentions is one of the coping techniques that were described by storytellers when faced with ontological insecurity. Denial is the way Eire (2003) makes meaning of his new life, establishing the stability of his own Self over the social and structural ties that were destroyed. Ung describes how she made meaning of her experiences by turning to hate:

I am going to kill him. I do not know what he looks like, but if Pol Pot is the leader of the Angkar then he is the one responsible for all the miseries in our lives. I hate him for destroying my family. My hate is so strong it feels alive. It slithers and moves around in the pit of my stomach, growing bigger and bigger. I hate the gods for not bringing Pa back to us. I am a kid, not even seven years old, but somehow I will kill Pol Pot. I don't know him, yet I am certain he is the fattest, slimiest snake on earth. I am convinced that there is a monster living inside his body. He will die a painful, agonizing death, and I pray that I will play a part in it. I despise Pol Pot for making me hate so deeply. My hate empowers and scares me, for with hate in my heart I have no room for sadness. Sadness makes

me want to die inside. Sadness makes me want to kill myself to escape the hopelessness of my life. Rage makes me want to survive and live so that I may kill (2000, p. 108).

The hopelessness Ung (2000) mentions alludes to her new life, and all the loss that came along with it. The hopelessness can be equated with anomie, where life for the participant changed so radically that nothing in this new social order makes sense. Thus, by focusing her affect on a culturally tangible framework of feeling, she finds the will to survive.

These coping techniques result in a radical identity shift. This radical identity shift has to rely on existing social and physical structures, as it cannot be created purely out of imagination. Because their previous form of life is no longer available, the storytellers need to reconstruct their identities based on a set of social relations that are different, or unknown to them. Thus, the a priori structure that allows for the mutual translation of their respective experiences is gone. As a response, the storytellers find structures through which they can create intersubjectivity with their new social world. For Eire, this meant capitulating to new social orders:

Those pools spoke to me of the privileged life that I knew was mine. I knew that I had pools to choose from and that the boys in Regla only had their stinking wharf. I knew it, and I loved knowing it. I loved it up to the last fraction of a second that I stood on my country's soil, even though by then I'd lost my pools. God bless the roaches behind the wallpaper, and the screws at the factory, and the broken dishes at the Conrad Hilton Hotel. God bless especially the freckle-faced girls who leaned on the chain-link fence and shouted "spic!" my first day at the refugee camp in Homestead. Thanks to them I became a Regla boy, and that pride turned quickly into a burning shame—a shame that still hangs around my neck like a festering dead iguana. So those Regla boys are in there, in my mind, swimming away, diving for coins in their underwear. They swim infinitely, eternally (2003, p. 353).

Here, Eire (2003) describes his experience of realizing his social status in his new country, juxtaposed to his previous social status. However, when unable to access his

privileged life he comes to accept his new status and even sees it as a lesson to be learned. The symbolic violence that Eire (2003) subjects himself to is a survival mechanism. Accepting a new social order, even at the expense of the Self, becomes important for creating meaning and maintaining an identity.

The desire to be part of a world – as a set of social relations – is more important than maintaining status or a specific version of the Self. This is because of the importance placed on the idea of *home* as a geographical location or membership to a nation. D, as he relates his 20 years as a refugee in search of a home, elucidates on this search:

D: I had to look for stability and of all the countries I've been I haven't been accepted.

Daniela: So, this search for stability, what does it mean to you?

D: Stability means belonging to somewhere. For now, I can travel and come back, I can speak freely. I have a responsibility as a citizen, and also rights and privileges. To me home and stability means belonging somewhere and having responsibilities and rights. Having the ability to leave, and speak my mind and dream and belong. And I can go back and come back.

What D is relaying here is that for him, to be stable he needs to belong not socially, but legally. Stability is equated with the responsibilities of citizenship, and the privileges that come with belonging to a recognized sovereign state. Thus, we can see that ontological security, in the case of refugees, is intimately tied to stability as citizenship.

From these accounts, we can see that the insecurity that comes with not being sure of one's own reality is a key element of the refugee experience. Through the loss of their lifeworlds, the storytellers are unable to believe in the reality they have relied upon to maintain their daily lives. The idea of nationhood, or membership to a specific geographically bound area, is seen inherently as part of existing. For, who/what is a person that does not have a state to belong to? Through their banishment, the storytellers

face their eviction from their homes – homes where physical and social structures appeared as facts – and the ensuing statelessness. Their world ejected them, defying their beliefs in the continuity of their social relations. Eire (2003) explains this as a type of death, where he comes out exactly the same but radically changed on the inside.

These experiences are incredibly hard to cope with, and storytellers describe how they deal with the consuming feelings of *not existing*. Some storytellers turn their feelings to an object of hate, others capitulate to social norms that posit them as inferior. These feeling of non-existence are intricately tied to hegemonic conceptions of social belonging and social reproduction from a state-centered perspective. It is in this way that nationhood is conceived as a precondition to social existence, and the loss of it precipitates an existential crisis.

Discussion

Part of a phenomenological investigation is the perspective that consciousness is intentional. In this manner, consciousness is always directed towards an object, insofar as the “reality of an object, then, is inextricably related to one’s consciousness of it” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Thus reality is relational to one’s concern about it, in the sense that the reality of an object can only be perceived through the lens of an individual’s experience (Creswell, 2007). The findings, which were found through a process of phenomenological selection and analysis, provide us with thick descriptions of material and social objects, as experienced by the storytellers. By objects I refer to material objects such as cities, buildings, or material possessions as well as social experiences that are normalized and accessible to all, such as soccer games, parties, or eating dinner with family.

The findings presented show the personal relationship of the storytellers to the objects of their lives. This relationship is coloured by the storytellers’ age, their gender, their class, and their religion, amongst other identity-based intersections. Through the descriptions of their experiences, and their perception of the reality of their objects, the storytellers revealed their lifeworld, or their prescientific experience, where “the world is given concretely, sensuously, and intuitively” (Zahavi, 2003, p. 126). This lifeworld becomes visible through interpretative work, as it is the interpretation of the properties of objects that reveals the lifeworld of the storytellers. Within these interpretations we find the stories, experiences, and affects that are excluded from a mainstream narrative of what it means to be a refugee or what it means to become a refugee.

In my findings, these exclusions were very present. Moreover, the exclusions, with their unended silences and unanswerable questions, pointed towards more than just a lifeworld not tainted by scientific and objective ideals. The findings pointed towards structures of feelings that were evasive but laden with meaning. Gordon (2008) refers to these structures as “hauntings”. Hauntings, as a concept, describe a mediation or a process that links an institution and an individual, or a social structure and a subject. In a haunting, “organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves” (Gordon, 2008, p. 19). Hauntings then identify and name the disjuncture between social structures and their articulation in everyday life.

Throughout the analysis of the data, I kept coming across what I understood as a gap in understanding. I conceptualized it as a gap in understanding because the storytellers described their personal experience, and juxtaposed it to what they knew was happening politically and socially. However, this juxtaposition did not create neatly correlatable narratives:

A few weeks ago, Kim told me that maybe the Angkar isn't to blame. He says the name Pol Pot is passing through many lips in the rice fields and village. Many are saying that Pol Pot is the leader of the Angkar but still no one knows who he is. They whisper that he is a soldier, that he is brilliant, and that he is the father of the country. They also say he is fat. They say he has kept his identity a secret to guard against assassins. They say that he liberated us from foreign domination and gave us independence. They tell us Pol Pot makes us work hard because he wants to purify our spirit and help us achieve beyond our potential as farmers. They say he has a round face, full lips, and kind eyes. I wonder if his kind eyes can see us starving (Ung, 2000, p. 88).

Ung (2000) simply expresses the disjuncture between the social structure, that is government policies and actions, and direct experience, that is lack of food. She is describing a gap in how the general's vision for his country fits within her experience of starvation. While we can consider this experience as a moment in time, or as an experience that leaves without a trace once the problem is remedied, the concept of a haunting forces us to reckon with this experience as something that leaves a mark. How does such an experience change a person? What kinds of understandings and perceptions are created as a result of such an experience? Dean explains:

Hauntings draw our attention to the social and psychic remainders of injustice, violence, disappearance, trauma, and loss – in other words, to the past's ongoing claims on the present. Following ghosts, then, is in part about a different way of understanding what knowledge is and how we might recognize it, since those of us engaging in this practice are tasked with looking not for what is there but instead for the seething presence of what appears to be not there (2015, p. 59).

Using the concept of hauntings as an analytical tool to understand the findings will help pinpoint the exclusions and underlying structures of feeling. Further, it helps link together concepts such as border imperialism, or the modern/colonial world system. In this sense, these structures of feeling can be understood as generative structures, which are ongoing and constantly implicated in the way our reality is perceived, and in the way in which we constitute our spaces, identities, and relations to each other. If we posit these hauntings as generative, they become important in understanding how such phenomena comes to happen repeatedly, how our responses to phenomena constitute and structure our lives, and therefore how modes of domination are repeated over and over again.

The themes show the experience of the storytellers, and they answer the questions: what did the participant experience in terms of the phenomenon, and what

contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected the storytellers' experience of the phenomenon? The findings themselves show us a particular composition, or a gestalt, of the experience of being and becoming a refugee. Within these themes, in the gaps of understanding we can find the hauntings, the ghostly stories that do not fit neatly within a narrative of revolution, of war, of tribalism, or of persecution. It is in the contradictions of experience and understanding that the ghostly stories surface. Why is it important to focus on these stories? Brown (2001, p. 150) explains: "the specter begins by coming back, by repeating itself, by recurring in the present. It is not traceable to an origin nor to a founding event, it does not have an objective or 'comprehensive' history, yet it operates as a *force*" (original emphasis). Thus, to understand what a refugee is, we need to understand the generative structures that give rise to these historically bound socialities. The following pages will explain the themes with regards to the hauntings they give rise to, as well as their theoretical implications in a larger context.

a. Loss, Agency, and Routine

Throughout the themes of loss, storytellers described material objects that they lost as a result of the phenomenon. The losses they described were moored in their spatial and temporal realities. In this manner, the losses described were relational to the storytellers' concern about them. In this context, the storytellers' description of their losses was in reference to themselves, as owners of these objects as well as constituents of them. The objects of loss were reflections of the storytellers' lifeworld, and their loss resulted in a fragmentation of the storytellers' identity.

The storytellers' identity, as a constituting and constitutive by-product of these objects, can be considered an assemblage. The concept of assemblage can be succinctly explained as "wholes characterized by relations of exteriority" (DeLanda, 2006, p, 10). In

this manner, an assemblage is a whole that emerges from external interactions. Thus, identity can be seen as contingent on external objects such as place, community, family, or social class, which can only emerge as an interplay of these objects with the subject. The “identity” as a whole is contingent on whether the material realities and interactions, such as walking down a familiar street to your favourite cafe, can be linked to the expression of meaning that this walk signifies for one. This link between materiality and expression is disrupted if there is no way to match them up, or if this link is destabilized. The link between materiality and expression is a fluid exchange that objectifies social relations and structures. In this interplay, the pre-givenness of the world is called upon and reified, thus appearing factual. In the storytellers, when they see their world changed overnight and unable to be accessed, the link between materiality and expression is broken and their identities are destabilized.

The destabilization of identity is what storytellers describe as loss. The storytellers experience an inability to access the material and social structures that legitimated their identities. Identity is relational to the specific world of social relations within which it is conceived and maintained; when this specific world loses its matter of fact status, one loses their notion of home and identity. However, identities are not fixed and are negotiated continuously under different and changing material conditions. Bauman explains that: “Identities exist today solely in the process of continuous renegotiation. ‘Identity formation’, or more correctly it’s ‘re-formation’, turns into a lifelong task, never complete; at no moment is the identity ‘final’” (2011, p. 431). Although identities are never ‘final’, the storytellers’ experiences create a crisis in their sense of Self and place. The sudden disruption triggers radical reactions in their internal mechanisms of being.

These radical reactions are culturally facilitated by a framework of being and place that privileges attachment to a specific location. This attachment to place is a result of the sedentary bias whereby displacement is seen as pathological. In this sense, “sedentarism is not inert. It actively territorializes our identities, whether cultural or national” (Malkki, 1992, p. 31). Thus, the process of loss that the storytellers experience is facilitated by epistemologies of spatial territorialization and attachment, which are rooted in sedentary conceptions of becoming and belonging. Malkki’s (1992) study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania found that the Hutu’s conception of belonging, which is not based on sedentarism, informed their own process of being and becoming a refugee: “Far from being a ‘spoiled identity’, refugee status was valued and protected as a sign of the ultimate temporariness of exile and of the refusal to become naturalized, to put down roots in a place to which one did not belong” (p. 35).

Thus, when people that come from sovereign nation-states experience the phenomenon of becoming a refugee, they will develop frameworks of meaning that are in accord to sovereignty-based epistemologies of being, becoming, and belonging. This means that attachments to place, family units, and other social markers that are culturally bound will be privileged, and that their losses will result in a crisis for the storytellers. However, “identity finds in society the conditions (resources) for its existence” (Vahabzadeh, 2003, p. 33), and the storytellers find new ways of constructing their identities based on social systems that are new and foreign to them. This ability to put together new identities is radical in that it shows incredible adaptability to make a place their own even through crisis.

This incredible adaptability is shown in the ways in which the storytellers are able to turn to mundane activities in times of crisis. These mundane activities served the

purpose of routinizing or normalizing the day-to-day while experiencing the phenomenon. In addition, the storytellers described their engagement in collective activities that served as a ‘liberating force’ during the times of crisis. In this sense, the storytellers momentarily let go of social norms as to what is proper, normal, or social.

Both of these ways of engaging with the mundane show us that strong social connection and production happens at the level of the micro/meso. In this manner, although the storytellers’ macro social world is crumbling down, they are still creating meaning for themselves from interactions in their closest spheres. Blumer (1969) argues that “the essence of a society lies in an ongoing process of action - not in a posited structure of relations” (p. 71). Thus, in taking part of daily activities, and exercising their agency, the storytellers continue to co-create a society in the ruins of their old one.

Refugee research and theory has focused “refugees” as stateless and without agency. This conceptualization of refugees as “bare life”, or those excluded from the boundaries of sovereignty posits refugees as bodies that exist outside the boundaries of action, social existence, and power (Agamben, 1998). However, from a symbolic interactionist point of view, the storytellers are able to interact and create meaning even when their existence is contested or uncertain. It is not the experience of the phenomenon that creates bare life. Rather, bare life is created by adhering to structures of relations that privilege certain ways of life over others, and by recognizing that such ways of life are natural or essential.

And herein lies the flaw with the “refugee” label, as defined and used by the UNHCR. The “refugee” label is used as a life jacket; it is used to salvage a person from the cruel fate of being stateless. The label allows a person to *exist* within the sovereign. It is an in-between legal state that interpellates those who find themselves stateless into

social existence. However, this label is only granted insofar as it meets the specifications of a legitimate “refugee” experience. Thus, the label rescues one from “bare life” - as the counterpart and target of sovereign violence and therefore its biggest threat. The label is an exercise of turning bodies from social ghosts into objects of protection. The transformation, from social ghosts to be feared to objects of protection, allows us to tell stories about refugees and their experiences, and classify them within culturally available frameworks. Because our sense of social existence is so intricately tied to our nationhood, we cannot understand those bodies that do not “belong” to a nation, and whose narratives do not prescribe to those we have learned to accept as legitimate reasons for becoming stateless (and therefore assumed nationless). In this way, the UNHCR label is a soothing practice for Western minds, as people’s inclusion into the label makes them knowable to us.

However, by conceptualizing refugees as “bare life”, and creating frameworks through which we can salvage them from this faith, we are enforcing and perpetuating that same violence. The creation of a specific definition of refugee thus allows certain people to be lifted out of their stateless state of being, where their experiences become digestible and are synthesized into different narratives. But it is those excluded by this definition that are seen as the biggest threat, those who “choose” to leave their countries, and do it through ways that are not legal or perceived as legitimate. It is those who “choose” to become stateless that are feared; because becoming stateless is seen as an aberration and threat (DeGenova, 2013). By creating the privilege of awarding humanitarian help to some that meet certain conditions, the UNHCR has contributed to creating the discourse and rhetoric around legitimate and illegitimate migration. In this

way, the “refugee” label acts as a tool in the toolbox of exclusionary practices that sovereign nation-states use to prevent entry to those they deem unworthy of it.

b. Sensemaking and Ontological Insecurity

In my findings I describe how the storytellers experience a type of existential angst that is termed ontological insecurity. Ontological security is maintained by mutuality of experience, thus it is not a state that can be unilaterally maintained. When this mutuality is destroyed through mechanisms of the phenomenon, such as displacement and war, the storytellers experience ontological insecurity. Ontological security can be considered a metanarrative build on trust; trust with each other, trust in social norms, and trust in institutions and social structures. However, ontological security is an emotional, rather than a cognitive phenomenon (Giddens, 1990), therefore it is a metanarrative that is embodied and affectively replicated. Once the trust that is the building block of ontological security is breached, what happens to the emotional and unconscious processes that facilitate our understanding of our realities?

The storytellers describe how they suddenly felt that their material reality no longer belonged to them. This precipitated a crisis, where they were banished from their material reality. The storytellers coped with this instability by creating meaning out of the existential anxiety. Some storytellers turned to hate, some to denial. However, the coping techniques necessitated that the storytellers create a new identity that did not rely on their previous material realities. The storytellers created new identities that were able to be supported in their new milieus. In all cases, this resulted in the storytellers being marked by their difference, or being Othered. Since their material reality was no longer available, they had to capitulate to the new reality that posited them as Others. This was necessary in order to be able to put together an identity that was not based on the previous lost life,

and to create routines that felt familiar and safe. By adopting a status or a role in their new society, they are able to see themselves reflected back in it.

These mechanisms of control are reactions to ontological insecurity; they are manifestations of this insecurity in discursive and practical consciousnesses. The existential angst triggers reactions in the storytellers to act, such as using coping techniques. However, the ontological insecurity is never named, or pinpointed as such because it is an unconscious anxiety. Even though storytellers try to go on with their lives and capitulate to their new social world, the insecurity created is not fully gone: “Some days the pressure comes upon me and the world grows stormy. My past rises inside me, and I remember things that make me angry, or I grow lonely or sullen or sad, or I brim with unbearable feelings that I cannot name or express” (Ahmedi, 2005, p. 210).

It is precisely those feelings that cannot be named or expressed that are the manifestation of a haunting. The experience of having one’s ontological framework fragmented and reconstituted according to different norms leaves storytellers with an unconscious awareness that the reality they experience is unstable, fallible, and mutable. This awareness is relegated to the bodily and the affective realms.

We can see this awareness in the findings, where the storytellers tried to make sense of their experiences by trying to fit in their personal stories within larger stories of what was happening around them. The theme of “gap in understanding” illustrates how both discursive and practical consciousness try to grapple with the events that the participant is going through. Practical consciousness is “tacit knowledge about how to ‘go on’ without a need to express [actions] discursively”, while discursive consciousness is the ability to express ourselves discursively (Ejdus, 2017, p. 5). However, when ‘how

to go on' is unclear or completely disrupted, the storytellers are unable to discursively express it or create meaning around it.

Once the storytellers' life has settled into a routine, post-phenomenon, they are left with embodied knowledge of the effects of the phenomenon. In this sense, the practical consciousness acquires the tacit knowledge needed as to how to 'go on' if this phenomenon were to happen again. This is discussed in the theme of "fragility of social structure". Making it through the phenomenon implies developing tools and frameworks of understanding that allow the participant to transcend the critical experience. Once life is routine again, this knowledge is able to be expressed discursively. In the descriptions provided, this discursive expression is stated as an anxiety that the social structures in the storytellers' lives are fragile and unstable.

It is in sensemaking that the storytellers find a coherent story to tell, and through this exercise they make their own lives sensible as a result of it. Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) argue that, "in the moment, legitimacy, coherence and closure can be elusive and contested because different meanings are multiply constructed across different moments of time and space. Thus, coherence, legitimacy and causality are often attributed retrospectively as we look back and try to make sense of events" (p. 67-68).

Through the exercise of telling their stories, stringing a narrative together, and fitting their own experiences in the events that came to happen, they come to understand their position in this narrative, and what it means for their own sense of Self.

The storytellers in this thesis described two ways in which they tried to make sense of their experience. First, by putting together the events like a piece in a puzzle: the warnings and red flags they ignored, the random events that did not make any sense at the time. Eire explains:

I shouldn't have been surprised that New Year's morning. There had been plenty of signs of trouble brewing, of changes to come. Even a sheltered child should have known something was about to snap. Later in life I would think back to that morning and try to link it to earlier events, just to make sense of what had gone wrong with all our lives (2003, p. 6).

Second, through narration and explanation, the storytellers try to come to grips with the results of the phenomenon and the experiences they had as a result of it. It is in this exercise that the storytellers show gaps in their understanding of how the phenomenon came to impact them in the way that it did. This is because there is an incomprehensible relationship between how large-scale events come to impact us in the specific way they did. Innumerable variables and choices come into play to create an outcome that is partly due to agency, and partly due to structure; it becomes impossible to attribute results to either. Thus, through this narration the storytellers draw a line between the past and the present, in attempts to create causal connections that would lead one to believe that our social world is ontologically secure.

The experiences the storytellers describe are traumatic and hard to grasp for someone that has not gone through it. However, going through such an experience results in *building a toolkit of sociological survival that is revolutionary*: understanding the fragility of social structures, capitulating to new ones, losing your identity to later fragment it back. The existential angst that the storytellers experienced is harrowing, without a doubt. Not everyone is able to bounce back from such an experience. Ahmedi explains:

I had no one except my mother, and my mother was not herself, not the mother I recognized. Her difficulties still bristled. It wasn't just her asthma. She had mental problems, too. She had trouble making connections or answering simple questions. She could not put two or three sentences together. She paced about our apartment with dazed eyes. Ailing, frightened, and driven into herself, she lived almost entirely inside her own head. When I came home from my English classes,

she never said, How was your day? or What did you learn? She just sat silently, lost in her nightmares. I felt so alone” (2005, p. 191).

However, the storytellers all described the ways in which they had to build back their life and their identity. Gordon states that “being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” (2008, p. 8). Thus, the existential angst can be conceptualized as a *transformative recognition* that the security and trust we place on our reality is not based on ahistorical immovable structures but on ongoing social relations that can be disrupted at any time. This knowledge, along with the trauma and pain of going through such a phenomenon, can be very damaging. It is important to consider the differing levels that this recognition can transform social actors, and whether this recognition can be mobilized to effect change.

c. Mobilization of Knowledge: What Now?

So far, in the analysis of the findings I have shown that the loss of material and social objects is of crucial importance to the storytellers insofar as it fragments and disrupts their identity. However, the objects that are the focus of loss represent symbols of living that are ontologically and epistemologically available to the storytellers. In other words, the focus on the objects as loss is due to what the storytellers consider living as, which is based on a sedentary conception of life. Although the storytellers describe the losses in harrowing terms, they also describe their ability to continue on and enforce their agency on the day to day.

On the one hand, the storytellers describe going through the crisis of losing everything that was familiar and on the other hand, they describe how they were able to move on with their lives. Of course, storytellers describe how crisis and loss left

“unfinished business”, and that the lack of continuity caused by the phenomenon caused significant distress and suffering. However, these two positions can be thought of as opposing forces affecting the life of the storytellers. On one side, large scale structural forces disrupt the storytellers’ sense of continuity and security, and their sense of being and of belonging . Opposing this force is the storytellers’ ability to enforce their agency and to continue with social production in order to make meaning. The clash between these macro-micro forces creates the gap in understanding, or haunting. This haunting is knowledge and an emotional toolkit that social life can exist outside of the epistemological and ontological boundaries we believe are natural, given, and legitimate. This knowledge - which can be discursive, pragmatic, or embodied (unconscious) is radical and revolutionary to the production of subjectivities outside the norm.

Since this thesis has concerned itself with the definition of “refugee” in a legal context, it is necessary to ask: how does this knowledge affect the definition? In simple words, it does not change it at all. Since the refugee definition that is currently used internationally is based on a conception of human settlement as sedentary, and on the right of nation-states to sovereignty, any modification to this definition will still establish sedentarism as the only way to have a human settlement. To modify the definition in order to expand on the types of experiences that are considered “refugee experiences” would be to enforce epistemic violence and erase many potential forms of experience and perpetuate border imperialism. In addition, the findings are likely applicable to migrant populations that do not fit within the UNHCR definition of “refugee”. Migrants leaving their countries due to violence and fear, or economic hardship will have hauntings as a result of living through the experience of leaving everything behind and undertaking a journey with an uncertain future. These experiences and the resulting hauntings will have

a different structure, much like how the circumstances that the storytellers in this thesis experienced varied according to nationality, culture, gender, race, age, and class.

However, the ghost of sedentarism and its implications for belonging will likely be present across the board. The use of this project, then, is to mobilize knowledge to disrupt these sedentarist ontological assumptions.

Although there are many ways to use this knowledge to disrupt sedentarist conceptions of life, and coalesce to create different ontologies of being, I will identify two. First, the private sponsorship program that Canada uses as a form of resettlement provides an excellent opportunity to help bridge the gap between refugees and non-refugees. This bridging allows for a sharing of subjectivities that can result in a re-conceptualization of our current ways of being. Second, currently there are several grassroots movements across North America that are advocating for the elimination of borders and the free movement of peoples. These movements vary in their arguments, from positing that human beings cannot be categorized as “illegal”, to making economic cases as to why free movement is desirable.

i. Emancipatory Potential within the Current System: The Private Sponsorship Program

The private sponsorship refugee resettlement program that Canada employs has been in use since the late 1970s, when the Canadian government advertised that they would match every refugee that was privately sponsored as a response to the war events in Vietnam and neighbouring South East Asian countries (Beiser, 2009; Hyndman, Payne, & Jimenez, 2017). Since then, and especially in response to the war in Syria, the program has been lauded as an effective way to resettle refugees. The program has received much praise as it allows communities and individuals to feel and be engaged with the people

they are sponsoring. Further, the private sponsors' responsibility to the refugees is not only financial, they are also meant to provide some emotional support and help the refugees adapt to Canadian society. Australia and the United Kingdom are looking into implementing similar programs, and at the UN summit in September 2016 "Canada pledged to 'export' the private sponsorship model to other interested states" (Hyndman et al, 2017, p. 59).

The private sponsorship program is an excellent opportunity to transgress ontological boundaries in which we exist. This is so because it provides a space for people- refugees and sponsors, to provide new ways of knowing and being to the constantly generated entity that comprises social human life, or lifeworld. This program is also transgressive in that it creates direct links between refugees and their new host society, as often refugees sponsored through government channels are not in direct contact with their host society. Kumin (2015) states: "Very often, refugees' main contacts with the host society, especially during the initial period after arrival, are with government offices and service providers, and they have little social contact with the host population" (p. 19).

The private sponsorship program changes that, as from the get-go the sponsors are implicated in the refugees' lives and well-being. This process of integration that can be accelerated with the private sponsorship program is two sided. Treviranus and Casasola (2003) state, "The direct personal interaction with refugees affords sponsoring groups the opportunity to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by refugees, and has made many of them advocates not only for the refugees they have resettled, but for refugees in general" (p. 183).

Thus, the interaction between different groups allows for possibilities of interchange, which are the starting point in re-imagining a different ontology and epistemology. The interaction of peoples of different economic, social, cultural, ethnic, geographic, and religious backgrounds results in a re-evaluation of our distinctions and hierarchies, which “undo the certainties of liberal subject hood and upset or neglect some of the rules of conduct that cohere our social order” (Vrasti & Dayal, 2016, p. 1001). Thus, new knowledge can emerge dialectically from the interaction between different subjectivities.

While this program has the capacity to blur the lines between the “Others” and us, and possibly create new ontologies and epistemologies, its development must be planned thoughtfully and with these possibilities in mind. The private sponsorship model shifts the burden of cost onto the sponsors rather than the government. Shifting the financial burden of supporting refugees onto individuals instead of the government can be seen as an implementation of neoliberal politics, which aims to privatize the public sector and to reduce government spending. This shift of the financial burden away from the wealth holding class onto the middle class is problematic, and could signal a new way of doing government. Thus, for this program to create the emancipatory potential that it has, it will have to aim for balance between these two contrasting forces - that of a creation of community between newly settled refugees and their sponsors, and the structural forces of shifting the responsibility of refugee resettlement away from the government.

How might we conceive of the private sponsorship program as a project of revolutionary social change? First, we need to talk about the political environment under which this project operates and has recently resurfaced as an object of interest in Canadian politics. The Syrian civil war has left millions. This has resulted in an influx of

asylum seekers in Europe mostly, as well as North America. The influx of people, coupled with heightened terrorist activity in the Global North has created a xenophobic moral panic that, I believe, is partly the cause for the rise of right wing extremism in the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as its incipient forms in France, the Netherlands, Germany, among other European nations. Of course, this assessment of the current rise of populism and right-wing extremism is reductionist, as there are several factors that are implicated in this global event. However, it is undeniable that the Syrian crisis and the Global North's response to it is a reflection of the fears and desires of the countries that feel most threatened by it. The moral panic regarding the influx of majority Muslim refugees has resulted in raging islamophobia, as observed by the overt acts of racism to which Muslim people are objected in cities across Europe and North America, as well as the burning of mosques.

This is a historical rupture that challenges the idea of a linear progression of society. The events happening in the United States, after the election of Donald Trump, are making people revisit their fears about events that were thought to be a thing of the past. The rise of fascism and the genocide of Jewish people in the 1930s and 1940s are no longer events we must learn from, but rather rational possibilities that are on the verge of being realized.² These forms of identitarian and unificatory love are corruptions that create division and fear. The use of the word love here is meant to signify love as ontologically constitutive, or “simply as love that produces the common” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 181). We can begin to understand our current political and social condition not as a regression of ‘progress’ (one of the big myths of the Enlightenment) but rather as a common that has been corrupted by its biopolitical production. Hardt and Negri (2009)

² See: child “migrants” being separated from their parents and kept in cages, or Hungary’s treatment of refugees, or the eviction of a refugee settlement in France. Examples of dehumanization abound.

speak of corruptions of love as “the shift from the production of the common to a repetition of the same or a process or unification” (p. 182). This repetition of the same, or process of unification refer to the ways of being that privilege love amongst those who are like us: those who are from the same race, same blood lineage, same nation, same religion, etc. Thus, the current political and social conditions under which we fear the reoccurrence of events such as the Holocaust is explained through a deep love of that which represents normalized ontologies. This in itself contains a deep hatred or fear of ontologies that are not intelligible to us, which establishes some as abject bodies outside of our schemes of being.

To go back to the question posed at the beginning of this section, how might we conceptualize the private sponsorship program as a tool of alterity or subversion in the face of this love gone corrupt? The common is (re)produced incessantly as singularities engage in social production, and it is the interplay between the common and singularities that produces either a common that is corrupt or a common that represents alterity or subversion (Hardt & Negri, 2009). Of course, this dichotomy breaks down under close inspection; it is not so much a dichotomy but a spectrum of potentiality. Thus the common is never either or, but rather as it is constantly recreated it is both and neither at the same time. Singularities, or a set “of social subjects whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 99), have the capability of creating a common radically different to the one they currently exist in by disrupting social production. This disruption “translates to an intervention in the field of subjectivity, with its accumulation of norms and modes of life, by a force of subjectification, a new production of subjectivity” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 59).

Therefore, the creation of a lifeworld that is different than the one we currently live in is

contingent on the transformation of subjectivities from an identitarian-based subjectivity to a pluriversal subjectivity.

Singularities intervene in the production of the common by creating new forms of being and thinking that alter that which is normative. The private sponsorship program has the capability to transgress the ontological boundaries in which we exist, as it is based on love that is not corrupt, not based on love of sameness, but rather on love of difference. The private sponsorship program changes that, as from the get-go the sponsors are implicated in the refugees' lives and well-being. This process of integration that can be accelerated with the private sponsorship program is two sided. The interaction of peoples of different economic, social, cultural, ethnic, geographic, and religious backgrounds results in a re-evaluation of our distinctions and hierarchies, which "undo the certainties of liberal subjecthood and upset or neglect some of the rules of conduct that cohere our social order" (Vrasti & Dayal, 2016, p. 1001). Thus, from this clash of singularities emerges the possibility of love that does not rely on sameness.

The private sponsorship program has the capacity to blur the lines between the Others and us, and possibly create a different society, an altermodernity, that would result in an exodus from our current hegemonic ways of being. By creating links between different subjectivities, and therefore building bridges that allow for an epistemological flow between different peoples, this program provides the space for the composition of a community that is based on difference. Through these exchanges, the disjointed local/global understanding of ourselves in the world can be challenged, as we learn to see Others as constitutive of our communities. However, this program is but an opportunity, a single event that could foster the kinds of love that would allow us to challenge these hegemonic notions of being.

Although there is generally a consensus in the literature on the subject as to the benefits of such a program for refugees, there is little research on the experiences of sponsors and refugees (Kumin, 2015). To truly understand how this program can be effectively maintained further research needs to be done to assess the many ways in which this program is helpful to refugees and society at large. Beyond looking at the “success” of refugees as measured by economic output, there needs to be an understanding of the social relations that contribute to the adaptation of refugees. Beiser (2003), who conducted a longitudinal study of the South East Asian refugees (both privately sponsored, and government sponsored) who arrived in Vancouver in the late 1970s, states that “although the data suggest that private sponsorship helps refugees adapt, they do not explain how this type of support helps” (p. 213). To understand the impact that this program, we need to start looking at them outside of their value to society, as “their singularity disappears when they are seen only in terms of value” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 35). Future research should explore the extent to which this program aids refugees, and the ways in which it impacts the process of resettlement, the communities they enter, and the ways in which their presence *transforms* the communities they touch.

ii. Creating New Ontologies and Epistemologies: Activism and Local Politics

While the private sponsorship program provides a space for blurring the lines between Others and us, it still operates under the exclusionary logic of sovereignty. Its strength lies in creating communities that are different and diverse. However, a more critical position is needed in order to bypass the sovereign state, and undermine its centralized power. Currently, there is social action being taken against this kind of centralized power. These are a social movement against border imperialism and the dehumanization of

migrants. The movement is not a unified, monolithic group, but rather a collection of grassroots organizing, municipal-level policy actions, and theoretical knowledge developments across North America. These distinct groups promote values of decriminalization of migration, free movement of people, and reconceptualization of citizenship and the nation-state as sovereign.

Currently, there is a small movement called #AbolishICE. This movement started as a hashtag on Twitter, as a response to the family separation crisis ongoing in the United States. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency came to the public's attention in July 2018 after an Executive Order was signed by the president of the USA, pushing forward a policy that criminally charged migrants crossing into the American border illegally (McMahon, 2018). Although at first created as a way to criticize immigration enforcement in the current political climate, it has become a political platform for several politicians (Godfrey, 2018). The abolishice.org website states its mission as:

For too long in the American immigration debate, the right-wing position is the center and the left has no voice. There has been disturbing word fatigue around “mass deportation,” and the threat of deportation is so often taken lightly that many have lost the ability to conceptualize what it means. Next to death, being stripped from your home, family, and community is the worst fate that can be inflicted on a human. It's time to rein in the greatest threat we face: an unaccountable strike force executing a campaign of ethnic cleansing. For the first time in American history, we have an opportunity to create an immigration system where immigrants are not seen merely as national security threats or units of economic activity, but human beings worthy of respect (McElwee, 2018, np).

The mission statement speaks of deportation as effectively a type of exile, not unlike the experiences that have been discussed so far. This type of description is similar in other movements. The Free Migration Project states that they “advocate for freedom of movement to be recognized as a basic human right” (freemigrationproject.org, 2016).

While these movements are based in the US, Canada also has grassroots movements that do similar work. No One Is Illegal is an organization with several chapters across Canada, and their work is:

to strive and struggle for the right to remain, the freedom to move, and the right to return. As a movement for self-determination that challenges the ideology of immigration controls, we combat racial profiling, detention and deportation, the national security apparatus, law enforcement brutality, and exploitative working conditions of migrants (About us, noii-van.resist.ca, np).

Finally, many cities adopt sanctuary policies in order to counteract federal legislation that criminalizes and restricts migration. Sanctuary cities started existing in the 1980s, cities in the US started adopting sanctuary city motions as a response to federal regulations that were deemed restrictive. A sanctuary city “is one that grants people ‘access without fear’ to municipal services regardless of their status, and also pledges to not use municipal funds to enforce federal immigration law” (Vrasti & Dayal, 2016, p. 996). Vrasti and Dayal (2016) estimate that 30 cities across the US have adopted sanctuary city motions, and well as Canadian cities of Toronto and Hamilton.

Through the work of activists and municipal-level politics, we can see that the most immediate actions that can be taken to ameliorate the conditions resulting from the exertion of sovereign power are those actions taken at the local level. Localizing action within a spatial and temporal scope serves to sever the bonds of sovereignty over its subjects. Challenging the rules of Federal governments and actively advocating for a space that includes those who *inhabit it*, regardless of legal status, asserts the autonomy of local sites such as cities to determine their conditions for existence and production of social relations. By breaking down the scale of belonging/citizenship from the nation-state to the city or locale, the ontology of citizenship changes radically. This would be so in that it remakes the concept of citizenship to be one that is not based on a legal

entitlement granted by a sovereign power. Rather, it would be based on “the experiential and relational substance of a place [...] through practices of egalitarian and malleable place-making” (Vrasti & Dayal, 2016, p. 1009).

These movements are actively fighting for change in the existing immigration laws, practices, and narratives, which develops and asserts new forms of being and becoming. Their focus on local politics, and change within their own communities reflects the other side of refugee crisis'. This is the side that fears migrants, and presents them as deviant. Thus, by working from the inside- with those who are most marginalized and without access to legal status- they are changing ideas about what it means to be a “migrant” or “refugee”.

Conclusion

In this thesis, my objective was to understand what a refugee is, outside the boundaries of the legal definition used by the UNHCR. The search for understanding was catalyzed by a desire to strip the label of refugee of a priori concepts and pre-constructions. This was done in order to create a framework that does not privilege certain experiences over others and does not create migrant classes where people in need of protections are criminalized and deviantized. Migrant and refugee research and theory point towards a core ontology and epistemology of being, sedentarism, that informs migration policy in the Global North. The adherence to sedentarism as a mode of being results in migration being constructed as inherently problematic and dangerous.

If we look directly at the experience of the refugees whose stories were retold here, we can begin to understand *what* a refugee is. Ontologically, a refugee is a person who has lost a lot, very quickly. A refugee is also a person that, because of this loss, had to reconstruct their social environment while displaced. The reconstruction under duress is a challenge to contemporary conceptions of being and becoming. Through the research undertaken in this thesis, I found that refugees are characterized by loss of social and material objects, insofar as this loss is a representation of their own identity and sense of Self. At the crux of the matter, refugees are people who have lost their identity and any material or social markers used to legitimize that identity. Some refugees are able to reconstruct their identity, some have a harder time. The storytellers in this thesis described their experiences and struggle reconstructing their identity, and finding their sense of place. However, I have argued that the strength to piece one's social being back together disrupts the ontology of sedentarism. Negotiating the conditions of the Self in

unstable and fragile ground creates embodied and discursive knowledge within the participant that other ways of being are available, although they are painful to pursue. It is this pain that brings out the ghosts of sedentarism, as it is the unconscious and conscious belief that sedentarism is the only mode of life that are part of the cause for the distress and pain the storytellers suffer. It would be remiss not to point out that refugees also go through traumatic experiences and harrowing suffering; however, the findings in this thesis are situated within a sociological scope.

The findings in this thesis, which are not empirical in nature, show that there is no one experience but rather a collection of feelings that are present in response to the phenomenon of being/becoming a refugee. These feelings are triggered to the extent that they do because they are based on sedentarist conceptions of being. The emphasis on citizenship, statehood, and nationality is a key factor in the creation of refugees; the loss of these factors is one of its main conditions. Sedentarism, as a concept, seeks to uncover the ontological and epistemological assumptions we collectively make about modes of being. The ghost of sedentarism makes its presence known in the way that it influences collective behaviours and actions towards migration. It is the disruption of sedentarism that comes about from experiencing the phenomenon that highlights other ways of creating identity and social life. This creates knowledge that is radical and revolutionary to our current modes of being.

The value of this knowledge rests not within legal/political change, but rather within the social sphere. Because policy has to be explicit, to advocate to change the legal definition of “refugee” or “migrant” would bring about epistemic violence. To limit the “refugee” label to a laundry list of socio-historically contingent experiences would be to exclude those whose experiences are at the limits of available ontologies and

epistemologies. Since sedentarism and sovereign rule are the culprits for the need of a refugee label to begin with, a more productive task would be to disrupt these metanarratives.

Through grass-roots organizing and municipal level politics, we are seeing a surge in anti-sovereign politics in the social sphere. This shows a resistance to these sedentarist concepts that inform our modes of being. Further, programs such as the private refugee sponsorship program bridge boundaries between us and them, the others who we fear because of their experiences and revolutionary knowledge.

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem011>

Appendices

Appendix A –Information from Memoirs

Title	Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy	The Book of My Lives	First They Killed My Father: a Daughter of Cambodia Remembers	The Story of my Life: An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky
Publisher and Date of Publication	Free Press, 2003	Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013	Harper Perennial, 2000	Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2005
Name of Author	Carlos Eire	Aleksander Hemon	Loung Ung	Farah Ahmed
Country of Birth	Cuba	Bosnia (under Yugoslavia)	Cambodia	Afghanistan
Country of Settlement	United States	United States/Canada	United States	United States
Age at time of displacement	8-11 years old	27 years old	5-8 years old	12-14 years old
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic White	White	Chinese-Cambodian	Afghan

Appendix B - UVic HREB Certificate of Approval



Office of Research Services | Human Research Ethics Board
 Michael Williams Building Rm. 8202 PO Box 1700 STN CSC Victoria BC V8W 2Y2 Canada
 T 250-472-4545 | F 250-721-8960 | uvic.ca/research | ethics@uvic.ca

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Daniela Zuzunaga Zegarra	ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17-330
UVic STATUS: Master's Student	Minimal Risk Review - Delegated
UVic DEPARTMENT: SOCI	ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: 22-Sep-17
SUPERVISOR: Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh	APPROVED ON: 22-Sep-17
	APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE: 21-Sep-18
PROJECT TITLE: What is a Refugee? An Exploration	
RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS: None	
DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: None	
CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL	
<p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.</p> <p>Modifications To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.</p> <p>Renewals Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.</p> <p>Project Closures When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.</p>	
Certification	
This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.	
_____ Dr. Rachael Scarth Associate Vice-President Research Operations	

Certificate issued On: 22-Sep-17

17-330 Zuzunaga Zegarra, Daniela



Appendix C – Interview Guide

The following questions will not be asked in the order presented, unless noted.

- Can you tell me about why you chose to participate in this study?
- *Probes: what, in your experience, has made you want to participate in this study*
 - *What made you decide to be here today?*

- To you, what does it mean to be a refugee?
- *Probes: what experiences make you a refugee?*

- Tell me about becoming a refugee:

- Can you describe, in detail, the process of leaving your country?
- *Probes: can you describe in detail how you left?*
 - *What did you experience when you left your country?*

- Can you describe, in detail, about deciding to leave your country?
- *Probes: did something happen to make you decide to leave? If yes, what happened?*
 - *How did you make up your mind to leave?*
 - *What did you experience that made you decide to leave?*
 - *How did you respond to these experiences?*

- Can you describe, in detail, the events leading up to your decision to leave?
- *Probes: walk me through the experience of leaving, what happened first?*
 - *How did you find out about the process of leaving?*
 - *How did you tell the people close to you about your decision?*
 - *What did you experience when you went through this process?*

- Can you describe, in detail, the steps you had to take to be resettled in Canada?
- *Probes: what did you have to do to be considered for resettlement?*
 - *How do you feel about this process? Why?*
 - *What did you experience when you went through this process?*

Demographic questions (at the end of the interview)

- Age
- Gender
- Country of Origin
- Marital and Family status
 - Did they get resettled with their family? Alone?
- Level of education

Appendix D – Recruitment Letter



**University
of Victoria**

Letter of Recruitment

Date:

Dear _____:

My name is Daniela Zuzunaga, I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology, at the University of Victoria (UVIC), in British Columbia, Canada.

This letter is a request for your assistance with a project I am conducting as part of my Master's degree thesis requirement, under the supervision of Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh. The title of my research project is "What is a Refugee? An Exploration." What follows is some information about this project which explores the lived experience of refugees previous to their resettlement in Canada.

The purpose of this research is to understand the shared experiences that refugees have, and whether this shared experience is something that is currently described in the definitions for "refugee" in legal and political domains.

I am hoping that you will help me connect with people that have been adjudicated as refugees before 2012. During the course of this study, I will be conducting interviews with people that have refugee status to gather their experiences and reflections of their journey as asylum seekers. I believe that refugees have important information to add to refugee policy, and that their voices are necessary to understand the impact of these policies in their lives.

I am hoping you will pass along my contact information, and this letter to anyone you believe might be interested in participating in this study. If they are interested, please ask them to contact me to set up an interview. Alternatively, they can give you permission to provide me with their contact information, and I will contact them directly.

I am looking for four to five refugees in the Capital Regional District (Victoria and municipalities). The ideal candidate is a person that was resettled in Canada anytime before or in 2012.

Participation in this study will require: one interview, of approximately of two hours, at a day and time that is convenient to the participant. Storytellers may be asked to meet again to provide further information, however they can decline this request without any explanation. Interviews will be held at the University of Victoria campus. I will provide transportation/parking reimbursements.

Participation is completely voluntary; each person will make their own decision as to whether or not they want to be involved. All storytellers will be informed and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time, before the interview begins.

Participation in this study is confidential, all names will be changed to pseudonyms.

There are no known or anticipated risks to the storytellers in this study. All data will be kept on a password protected flash drive for the duration of the study, and all identifiable materials will be deleted at the end of this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you know a willing candidate, please have them contact me to set up an interview.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board. You can contact them with any questions regarding the ethics approval process at ethics@uvic.ca.

I hope that the results of my study will be beneficial to asylum seekers and the people that work with them everywhere. I thank you in advance for your assistance with this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Daniela Zuzunaga
Master's Candidate
Department of Sociology
University of Victoria

Appendix E – Consent Form



**University
of Victoria**

Participant Consent Form

What is a Refugee? An Exploration

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “What is a Refugee? An Exploration,” being conducted by Daniela Zuzunaga at the University of Victoria (UVIC). Daniela is a Graduate Student in the Department of Sociology at UVIC and can be contacted by email at any time with questions: danielazuzunaga@uvic.ca.

This research is for Daniela’s Thesis which is part of the requirements for a Master’s degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh.

General Information

Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me to talk about your experiences that led to you becoming a refugee. The purpose of this research is to learn more about the lived experience of people that have been accepted as refugees in Canada. I am interested in understanding the shared experiences that refugees of different countries, ages, and genders have.

Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks to this research, and no immediate benefits. However, the knowledge produced from this research study can benefit the area of refugee studies, as well as policy on refugees in Canada.

Procedure

Your participation will consist of one interview, which will take any time from 1 hour to 2 hours. The questions I will ask you will focus on your experiences before you were resettled to Canada, and during the duration of your resettlement process. Your participation is completely voluntary: you can skip any question you like, you can stop the interview at any time, at your discretion, for any reason, and you may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, without explanation or consequences. This interview will be audio-recorded; the audio recording will be transcribed by myself. I will also take notes during the interview. I may contact you in the future if I need clarification or more information; you can decline this request without explanation or consequences. Should you withdraw from the study, all data from this interview will be destroyed and removed from the final paper unless you give additional consent otherwise.

Private Information

To maintain your confidentiality, I will be the only person listening to the audio recording of your interview, and I will be the only person transcribing the interviews. In the transcripts, I will replace your name with a pseudonym. This step will anonymize the data, which means that no one that has access to my work will know your name. To

