EDUCAÇÃO
& realidade

Transworlding: navigating spaces and negotiating the self in online schooling

Jill Koyama[I]

[I]University of Arizona (UA), Tucson/AZ – United States of America

ABSTRACT – *Transworlding*: **navigating spaces and negotiating the self in online schooling.** Drawing on data from a 42-month ethnography of refugee networks in Arizona, I explore refugee youth forging hybrid identities and spaces in US educational contexts. Utilizing the notion of *space-making* (Das Gupta, 2006), I demonstrate how they simultaneously stream webcam video from a refugee camp or music from their home countries while completing lessons in an online credit recovery program or high school course. They engage in what I refer to as *transworlding*, or the practice of mediating emergent identities and navigating *figured worlds* (Holland; Lachicotte; Skinner; Cain, 1998) of refugee learning while challenging normative and marginalizing educational practices.
Keywords: **Refugees. Figured Worlds. Online Credit Recovery. Space-Making. *Transworlding*.**

RESUMO – *Transmundificar*: **encontrar seu caminho nos espaços e negociar o eu no ensino *on line*.** Com base em dados de uma etnografia com duração de quarenta e dois meses acerca de redes de refugiados no Arizona, exploro a questão de jovens refugiados forjando identidades e espaços híbridos em contextos educacionais dos Estados Unidos. Ao utilizar a noção de *abrir espaço* (Das Gupta, 2006), demonstro como eles captam vídeos em webcam de um campo de refugiados ou música de seu país natal enquanto realizam tarefas de aula em um programa *on line* de recuperação de créditos ou disciplinas de Ensino Médio. Eles se envolvem naquilo que refiro como *transmundificar*, ou a prática de mediar identidades emergentes e encontrar seu caminho em *mundos figurados* (Holland; Lachicotte; Skinner; Cain, 1998) de aprendizagem de refugiado ao enfrentar práticas educacionais normativas e marginalizantes.
Palavras-chave: **Refugiados. Mundos Figurados. Recuperação *on Line* de Créditos. Abrir Espaço. *Transmundificar*.**

1

Introduction

By the start of 2019, nearly 70.8 million people were displaced from their homelands. Of these, 25.9 million were designated as refugees[1]. The number of refugees aged 18 and younger – or those who are considered school-aged – has risen to nearly one half of all refugees (UNHCR, 2019). In the United States (US), an estimated 1.2 million refugee students attend US schools, and while some states, like California and New York, host the most refugee students, all fifty states and Washington DC currently have refugee students attending schools (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Refugee Council USA, 2017). Refugees, as a group, comprise a unique subset of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in the US education system. Most refugee youth tend to have less overall education and more interrupted formal schooling (Birman; Tran, 2017). Upon their arrival in the US, they have had less English language training than other immigrant groups (Dooley, 2009), yet many speak multiple languages and are eager to learn English and continue their educations (Koyama, 2015).

While schools have long had programs for English language learners (ELLs), the home languages of refugees are often unfamiliar to school staff (Koyama, 2015). Compounding the challenges in communication between refugee students, families, and schools, some of the children have endured traumatic displacement and violence and are referred by school counselors for mental and physical health attention (McBrien, 2005; Patel et al., 2017). Yet, school districts are rarely equipped to meet the specialized educational and social needs of refugee students, and most do not draw upon the cultural wealth and transnational experiences of the refugee students and their extended kin.

Refugee students who enter the US education for the first time as high school students face the additional challenge of learning English while simultaneously earning the required number of credits in key subjects, such as mathematics and science, required to graduate with a high school diploma. In Arizona, this challenge is further complicated by the state's policy of having English taught to newcomers in four-hour blocks, which limits the other courses the students can take to fulfill their graduation requirements. Increasingly, students who, in addition to taking their daily classes needed to earn high school credits for graduation, are advised to enroll in school districts' online self-paced credit recovery program or required online courses. Refugee high school students are among those often enrolled in these programs.

In this paper, I examine refugee high school students taking online courses in one Arizona school district. Although the online credit recovery is presented by teachers and school counselors as a normal and natural way for students who are behind (and at risk of not graduating) to earn needed high school credits, there is actually nothing natural about such lessons, which the refugee students are to complete alone in front of a screen. Rather than documenting how these students do, and do not, learn in the prescribed online courses, I instead explore how

these youth create and engage with online spaces in which they can simultaneously stream webcam video from a refugee camp or music from their homeland while also completing the required exercises in an online credit recovery program or required online course. They employ what I call *transworlding* behavior not to be disrespectful or disruptive, but to make sense of their current positionality, to be who they are, and to work back against the regulated, reductive, and rote online lessons employed by the school district. They alternate between two or more worlds on and offline, and in the US and beyond. As they move between the worlds, they make and mediate emergent identities and *figured world* (Holland; Lachicotte; Skinner; Cain, 1998) of refugee learning.

Drawing on forty-two months of ethnographic data on newcomer and refugee networks in Arizona, which includes an 18 month case study of one school district's response to refugee students, I show how the youth exert and insert themselves to create new sociospatial forms, new combinations of online and offline contexts, to combat the monotony of perfunctory online lessons. I utilize the notion of *space-making* (Das Gupta, 2006) to demonstrate how the youth configure hybrid identities, inclusive of the multiple geographic, symbolic, political, and cultural worlds they have inhabited or in which they are currently living. And, I argue that their actions not only challenge ineffective and marginalizing educational practices and policies, but also demonstrate a creative form of refugee integration and learning.

Throughout the paper, I highlight how anthropology as an approach, and a set of lenses, to the study of education is unique in its ability to bring to the fore the disruption of the norm. As an example of a serious and prolonged examination in the field of what is taken for granted as education practice, this paper highlights the strength of ethnography. It shows how refugee students position themselves as knowledge makers and how they take what is given – online credit recovery courses – which are, without evidence, adopted by school districts across the US as best practices, and make something new out of them. In doing so, they construct and traverse figured worlds as cultural actors.

Educating Refugee Students in the US

Some studies show how programmatic and school-wide curricula and responsive pedagogy help support the learning and academic achievement of refugee students. Others note how school staff do – and do not – create safe, engaging, and culturally-responsive settings for refugee students, as well as how they interact – or do not interact – with refugee families and communities. Still, considering the increasing numbers of refugees worldwide, there exists scant literature on the educational experiences of refugee youth and their families. Of the available studies (Betancourt et al., 2012; Halcón et al., 2004; Patel et al., 2017), those that investigate the education of refugees in US schools often focus on how education programs can attend to the refugees' post-migration stress and trauma. Some refugees, like the 338 eighteen to

twenty-five year old Somali and Oromo migrants in Halcón et al. (2004) survey based study continue to suffer after resettlement in the US from issues associated with violence and war, while others are adapting more easily to education and to their lives in the U.S. In their quantitative study of 184 newcomer immigrant and refugee youth, Patel et al. (2017) find that the youth who were exposed to war experienced greater self-reported anxiety, behavior issues, and lower academic achievement in schools than those who were not exposed. Based on the survey findings, the exposure to trauma may have mediated some youth's ability to navigate school-related acculturation stressors.

A recent body of literature (Bajaj; Bartlett, 2017; Bajaj; Suresh, 2018; Bartlett; Mendenhall; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2017; McBrien; Dooley; Birtman, 2017; Mendenhall; Bartlett, 2018) draws attention to how international schools in New York City and Oakland, California educate refugee youth and other newcomers. This scholarship calls for curricular, pedagogical, and assessment approaches that avoid tracking and segregating refugee students, and that also utilize the students' experiences and languages as resources that can be integrated throughout the school day and in related out of school learning. Bajaj and Suresh (2018), for instance, demonstrate how Oakland International High School excels at leveraging community collaborations, creating meaningful family engagement, and enacting a flexible curriculum to meet the refugee students' and their families' needs. Mendenhall and Bartlett (2018) also argue that refugee students benefit from a critical transnational curriculum and note that afterschool and extracurricular programs provide important academic, language, and social supports to refugee youth. Similarly, in their qualitative study examining the needs of refugee students in New York City, Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher (2017) argue that international schools are effective in meeting the students' needs in part because they use assets-based pedagogy and a curriculum centered on heterogeneous student groups. Informed by their findings, Bartlett, Mendenhall, and Ghaffar-Kucher (2017) recommend that other schools adopt a more fluid understanding of *culture* to avoid the inaccurate and damaging discourses, which assert that refugees' home and school cultures are at odds.

Unfortunately, little is empirically known about how refugee families and schools interact. There is no indication in the published literature that the parents and extended adult kin of refugee students have much choice about the students' plans of study or courses. We do know that refugee parents place a high value on their children's education and some, when given the chance to participate on committees and groups, become engaged with the decision-making processes in schools (Koyama; Bakuza, 2017; Koyama; Chang, 2018). Yet more commonly, refugee parents do not have many opportunities to become more than minimally involved in their children's schooling (Koyama; Kasper, forthcoming). McBrien (2011), in her mixed methods study of Vietnamese, Somali, and Iranian refugee mothers, finds that while the mothers' interactions with the schools increased the longer they lived in

the U.S., they held general concerns that the schools did not necessarily understand their children's refugee experiences. One common practice in which this becomes obvious is the parent-teacher meeting, in which refugee and other newcomer parents often receive superficial and general communications about their children's progress in parent-teacher meetings. Such meetings are of little benefit to immigrant parents since communication in these meetings positions teachers as the experts and parents as subordinates.

Online Credit Recovery Programs

High school students in the US who fail required academic courses must recover the credits in those courses for graduation. In fact, credit recovery is, according to Bolkan (2013), the fastest growing area of online learning. More than ½ of high schools across the US offer online courses for students who need to retake failed classes or who need to get "[...] back on track and graduate," but there exists limited evidence that these courses work (Rickles et al., 2018, p. 481). Online courses are often seen by districts as efficient, cost-effective, and flexible enough as to be taken by students (Picciano; Seman, 2009; Powell; Roberts; Patrick, 2015). Picciano, Seamn and Day (2011) report that the majority of principals surveyed see credit recovery as the best reason to offer online courses and Finn (2012) adds that some teachers believe that online credit recovery programs can be effective in improving graduation rates. In his study of eight South Texas urban high school counselors' perceptions of the district's online recovery program, Lieberman (2016, p. 4) finds that the counselors do not see the program as a "[...] valid educational tool" but do see how it motivates students to graduate from high schools. Similarly, the educators in Finn's (2012) study argue that students who pass online credit recovery courses do not necessarily have mastery over the subject matter. Several scholars (Bolkan, 2013; Jones, 2011) suggest that blended – f2f and online combinations – credit recovery programs are best.

Empirical studies of the effectiveness of online learning, in general, and online recovery programs specifically, have yielded mixed results. Some studies (see, for example, Butrymowicz, 2010) suggest that online learning has slightly better student success rates than face-to-face (f2f) instruction, while others (see Dexter, 2011; Getwood, 2012) report that online learning has a substantially lower success and pass rate. A meta-analysis by Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess and Blomeyer (2004), in contrast, finds that there is no statistically significant difference between effectiveness of online education compared to f2f learning. Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia and Jones (2009) analyzed a larger number of studies and report that online learning can be more effective than f2f learning.

Two related empirical studies focus specifically on online v. f2f credit recovery programs (Heppen et al. 2017; Rickles et al., 2018). The initial study conducted by Heppen et al. (2017) compared online and f2f

credit recovery for 1,224 students in seventeen Chicago Public School's Algebra I course. After the students had failed Algebra I during their first years in high school, they were randomly assigned to recover the Algebra I credits in either an online or a f2f course. The online courses had an in-class mentor and the f2f classes were taught by district teachers. The researchers assert that by the end of the recovery courses, the students enrolled in the online course were significantly less likely than the students in the f2f course to earn the Algebra I credit. Using the same data, Rickles et al. (2018) then probed to see if the short-term differences in the online v. the f2f courses had longer term consequences for the students' high school graduation. Following the students through their third and fourth years of high school, Rickles et al. (2018) find no statistically significant difference between the students who took the online and f2f Algebra credit recovery courses. By the end of their fourth year of high school, both groups were, on average, still short one or two semesters of the required six semester math credits required for graduation.

I know of no empirical studies that specifically examine the experiences of refugee students taking online courses; however, a few studies (Jones, 2011; Zinth, 2011) note that online courses that match a learner' style foster a sense of flexibility and independence that students who are challenged in f2f classrooms want. I can imagine that refugee and other newcomer students who are in the process of learning English, discovering their place in a new culture, and who have yet to feel a sense of belonging in US schools, might also be drawn to take the online courses. In this study, however, the refugee students enrolled in the online programs or specific courses were required, by schoolteachers and counselors, to enroll in the courses to specifically recover credits toward graduation. All of the students in the study were also taking f2f courses throughout part of the school day.

Theoretical Resources: space making in figured worlds through transworliding

In her work, Das Gupta (2006) contrasts the activities of place-taking with space-making. Place takers, according to Das Gupta (2006, p. 57) "[...] do the work of conservation while space makers do that of redefinition". In this study, the creators of online courses, the school district administration who have had a hand in adopting the online credit recovery programs, and the teachers and counselors who advise the refugee students to enroll in the online courses are place-takers. Together, they move forward the persistent notions about what must be learned, in what time frame, and by whom. Space-makers, in contrast, "[...] create structures and resources that transform daily life into an arena of political contest" (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 9). Space-making can be best understood as the creation of alternative structures for collective action, in which the norms and convention of place-taking are challenged. Space-making simultaneously refers to the literal creation of spaces in which the subaltern can exert, and insert, themselves into

institutionalized processes. Within these spaces, they can stake their developing identities.

Similar to Das Gupta's place taking is the notion of *worlding* set forth by Spivak (1985). Summarized by Daza (2013, p. 610), who applies Spivak's theory to the study of education:

> Worlding is the power to inscribe the world and to cover up its practices of colonizing even in its expansion. Worlding determines how one conceives of the world and one's relationships in it. Worlding shapes values and how subjects think, act, and reason. Worlding is to appropriate and reappropriate what is – knowledge, power, norms, common sense, and nonsense.

Worlding is normative and aims to go unnoticed as it becomes naturalized, normalized, and prescriptive. In this study, the online courses are part of worlding in education in which two assumptions are made, and acted upon: the first is that earning credits by whatever means is paramount for graduation, and second that earning credits in online high schools courses is preferable to students earning an equivalent degree such as a GED (General Education Degree).

In contrast, transworlding, is a traversing, a disruption of worlding in which the refugee students reject, in favor of something more fluid, more possible – a combination of the imagined, the actual – as knowledge and learning. This is the combining and recombining anew across spatial and temporal dimensions to make sense of learning in a new context, in the U.S., unregulated, variedly represented and multiply enacted. It is shaped by one's position within and outside of particular contexts – in this case, formal and formulaic online lessons – to challenge them. The refugees are, reappropriating and reconstructing the online courses which are already a narrow and particular reappropriation and reconstruction of high school face to face classes. They are developing and moving across figured worlds.

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998, p. 40-41) define figured worlds as "[...] socially produced, culturally constituted activities" where people conceptually and materially produce and make sense of the self in a particular setting – i.e. where they, in Das Gupta's terms, they make space and stake identity as part of their production of and engagement with, these figured worlds. In his introduction to a special issue of *The Urban Review* devoted to figured worlds, Urrieta (2007, p. 107) discusses the ways in which identities are developed through daily actions. He writes: "Identity is also very much about how people come to understand themselves, how they come to 'figure' who they are, through the 'worlds' that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds". Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) note that figured worlds are sites where identities are constructed, produced, and enacted. "People 'figure' who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who

perform these worlds. People develop new understandings of self in figured world" (Urrieta, 2007, p. 108). They stake identity.

In her study of the figured world of smartness in the special issue of *The Urban Review*, Hatt (2007, p. 149-150) describes figured worlds "[...] represent the 'rules,' 'guidelines,' or social forces that influence (but do not completely dictate), the way people speak, behave, and 'practice' within social spaces". They are sites of possibility, of emergence, and they can be useful interrogating taken for granted pedagogies, policies, and practices. Figured worlds, according to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) are composed of artifacts or material objects, discourses, and identities. In these worlds, attention is paid to the ways that culture influence thinking and behavior, but also the ways in which one can appropriate, improvise, and challenge this through everyday actions, such as working through a geometry lesson online, to reconfigure identities and spaces. Framing her study with figured worlds, Rubin (2007) demonstrates how learning at an urban California high school is formed not only through participation but also through exclusion and isolation. She points to how students' identities as learners emerge and take shape within and in relation to the figured world of *deficient* urban schooling. In particular, of all the articles in the special issue of *The Urban Review*, Rubin interrogates how learning contexts, or particular figured worlds in formal education, become so very consequential for learner identity and enactment. I extend her analysis in this study of online courses as a particularly configured world for refugee students needing to make up high school credits. I utilize the word *transworlding* to describe how the students juxtapose and integrate learning online in the US with knowing and learning in the spaces and cultures – other figured worlds – in which they have previously inhabited, and continue to access, even from across the globe.

Detailing Methods

This paper draws on data collected during a 42-month ethnography in Arizona. Within that ethnography, I, along with three other researchers, conducted an 18-month case study of Desert Unified School District (DUSD) between 2014 and 2016[2].

Site(s)

Desert Unified School District (DUSD) has approximately 48,000 students, 62 percent of whom are identified as *Hispanic*. During the first academic year of the case study, 771 refugee students were enrolled, and during the second year, 1104 refugee students were enrolled in DUSD. An average of 350 refugees became first time DUSD students each year of the study. The refugee students originated from 52 different countries, with the majority hailing from either Bhutan, Somalia, or Iraq. Of the 89 schools in the district, all but 10 had at least one refugee student. Two high schools had the greatest percentage of refugee students; 22

percent of the total refugee students attended one high school and 10 percent attended the other. At the time the study began, 38 percent of the total population of DUSD refugee students had been attending a school in DUSD for three years or less.

DUSD had enrolled refugees since the 1970s, but in 2005, it opened what became the Department of Refugee Services to address the needs of the refugee population, which had risen to more than 200 students, and also in anticipation of hundreds of refugee children enrolling in the district over the next few years. The Department was charged with integrating refugee youth into schools and helping refugee families' transition to living in the US. During the study period, the Department was comprised of a director, 10-11 full-time mentors, and one part-time administrative assistant. Together, they provided a range of educational and social supports. According to the Department's website, the mentors were responsible for: helping with initial school registration; monitoring academic progress, attendance, and discipline; attending Individual Education Planning (IEP) meetings; providing tutoring and interventions; interacting with refugee resettlement agencies and other refugee support agencies; conducting home visits and providing direct assistance to families so that they could communicate with the schools; working with school staff to ensure students' academic needs were met; and translating for refugee parents and school staff during parent/teacher conferences, disciplinary meetings, student evaluation meetings, and additional parent workshops.

DUSD students have multiple opportunities – in specific classes, in particular programs, and through supplementary lessons done at home – to engage in online learning. Here, I include data collected in the DUSD combined middle and high school that only offers online credit recovery courses, in the two DUSD online credit recovery high school program in computer labs at two high schools, and in DUSD-sponsored afterschool tutoring/support programs in which some students would work on their online classwork. The middle and high school, which is situated on a f2f high school campus, offers courses in 6th to 12th grade and has an enrollment of close to 500 students, although many students enroll for only one or two courses. The two other specific online credit program recovery programs are located in two different high schools. To qualify for these two programs held in computer labs, students must be between the ages of 17 and 21 and have at least 15 credits toward high school graduation. Because it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the online programs and courses, I do not differentiate between them in the data.

Participants and Data Collection

Data from the case study include: a survey taken by 10 mentors and director of the DUSD Refugee Services Department, semi-structured interviews of the mentors and director, and observations across 10 different schools. In total, nearly 50 pages of observational fieldnotes

were collected in DUSD. Five teachers and five principals who worked directly with refugee students in their DUSD schools and ten refugee parents whose children attended these same schools were also interviewed. Additional interviews in the ethnography include: 15 staff members of organizations and agencies that provide services to refugee youth and their families in Arizona, 12 staff members of three refugee resettlement agencies in Southern Arizona, 7 administrators directing state refugee programs, and 5 Southern Arizona community activists. Forty-five adult refugees and 20 refugee youth were also interviewed, with the aid of interpreters All of the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. During the ethnographic study, the author volunteered as a tutor at two different refugee support organizations and participated on the Arizona strategic planning board for refugee education.

Data Analysis

For data collected in the case study, the author engaged in what Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, and Schneider (2008) refer to as *emergent methods.* Along with a second researcher in the ethnography, I created initial codes – words and short phrases – using key concepts from the research questions, the theoretical frame, and the reviewed studies on refugee education. In what Saldaña (2013) describes as *First Cycle* coding, we applied these initial codes to the data. We then reread that coded data, revised the codes, deleted some codes that could be consolidated with others, and added new codes based on what emerged in the interview transcripts, the observational fieldnotes, and the surveys. We then performed *Second Cycle* coding, which included some *subcodes* under certain codes. Both coders coded two of the same interviews, compared the coding, and reached an 83 percent intercoder reliability prior to separately coding the rest of the data. After this round of coding was completed, we searched for patterns among the coded materials and created a higher level of categories, which included several additional codes and sub codes.

Findings: *remaking me again and more*

As refugee students encounter the place-taking practices in the online courses, they enter zones of awkward engagement in which they repeatedly encounter institutionalized segregation and marginalization. The refugee students in this study knew that they were *behind* in credits and *below* their grade level in particular required subjects. They were aware they were taking online courses in computer labs or rooms – in some cases, even an online school within a school – separated from other students and classes. However, as the following examples of three students makes clear, in these *alternative* spaces, they exert the fluidity of their emergent and hybrid identities and reposition themselves as refugees living and actively learning in the US. They make/reshape/appropriate the online learning space into something that allows for the

investigation not only of subject content, but of themselves and their positions relative to other high school students, to displaced persons in their home countries and resettlement camps, and to multiple cultures to which they are connected. Matthiesen (2015, p. 322), who utilizes positioning theory in her study of refugee-school interactions, notes:

> In each context, there is an array of possible positions which a person can take up on their own, be offered, or have imposed upon them. The practice [of positioning] is always politically, historically, and socially produce[d], reproduced, and changed, hence the available positions in the practice are likewise politically, historically and socially (re)produced and changed.

Here, although the refugees aiming to earn credits through online courses were positioned by the school district as behind, and often in danger of not graduating high school, the youth, seemed to view themselves from far less deficit perspectives. They were, in their accounts, learning subject content and perhaps more importantly, becoming learners in a mostly unfamiliar US education system.

I sat behind a row of five high school students, all refugees who had lived in the US for less than three years. They were completing Algebra II lessons – and three of them were alternating between the lessons and videos opened, but minimized in size, on their screens. Only ten minutes had passed when one of the students who I knew from a f2f class I had observed several times, Johnny, leaned back, pointed to a video, and said: *Look Miss, my brother*. He quickly explained to me that his older brother played football (soccer) in Kenya while waiting to be resettled in Germany, the brother hoped. Johnny explained: *I want to be American. My brother Germany…My mother says America is home. Me too…She is happy, me remaking me again and more.* When I questioned about what *remaking himself more* might mean to him, he responded that it meant *different* to him (Observation, March 5, 2015). When I interviewed Johnny two weeks later, with Leonidis, one of the DUSD mentors, who like Johnny speaks fluent Kiswahili, I learned that *more* and *different* were terms Johnny used to talk about becoming American, while still remaining Somali. He sees himself *as both or even more now*, Leonidis explained to me (Interview, March 21, 2015).

Being both or *more* was a theme that emerged in several other observations and interviews throughout the study. One student, An, told me that she tried to complete her online Geography lessons while checking for glimpses of her friends in Youtube videos created in a Nepal neighborhood where she lived with her family for twelve years before being resettled in Arizona. Through Batsa, an interpreter, she told me:

> When I see them [her friends] I feel better. I feel alone, no not alone…No friends left in Bhutan, but Nepal, yes. Home too. Arizona is home. Nepal home. Bhutan home for father, for uncle… [I was a] baby there…. (Interview, April 14, 2015).

When I said I wanted to know about the videos, Batsa asked An several questions and then told me:

> She [An] doesn't remember much from Bhutan. Her family left when she was young. But, she remembers so much about Nepal. She learned to read and write there and she had friends for the first time. The first time she remembers…Her friends make videos of themselves singing and playing and when An watches them she feels close to them and also feels more big.

More big? I asked. After consulting with An, Batsa tells me that An feels more complete, more herself. That the two sides – the American and the Nepali come alive together for her on the screen. So much so, he explained that she some time forgets she is a in a new country with a new language. Later, after the interview, he tells me that An struggles in the f2f classes because English limits her participation, but that he sees her happiest in the computer lab, when she is completing lessons and watching the videos. He confesses that he should probably discourage her from watching the videos, but he doesn't think they distract too much from the lessons. *They*, he tells me, *make her belong here*. Batsa's insights about the restrictions in the f2f classes and, in contrast, the flexibility in the online courses point to the ways in which some refugee students, like An, can rebuild and reposition themselves as learners and students in the US. An, like other students in the study, try on and stake new identities as US school students. They meld what is familiar with that which is new but required. Unlike f2f courses which An described, according to Batsa, as *scary* and in which she said she was *unsure* and *ashamed* [of her English skills] in the online course, An could take more time with the math lessons, looking up English words in the lesson in an online language translator and being *comforted* by the familiarity of *home* in the videos and music.

Similarly, Adam, a high school student who had been in Arizona for five years explicitly connected notions of being a learner and having a transnational identity. In one of the computer labs, Adam points to the left-hand corner of the computer screen and says, *Miss, see here, my friends* (Observation, February 17, 2016) I watch a group of five young Somali males singing on a YouTube video. The video has been minimized so that Adam could still see the Geometry I lesson he was attempting. Later, after he has completed the lesson, I interviewed Adam and ask him to talk about the video. He excitedly explains: *My friends [in the video] and I used to sing, Miss. We sang in [the resettlement] camp. All the time…We sing …We learn English and sing*. It is only then that I realize that one of the five males singing on the video is a younger version of the Adam now sitting with me. He explains that when he knew his family was being resettled in the US, he and his friends made as many videos of themselves singing Karaoke as they could so that they would remember each other and so that they could watch them when apart. When I told Adam that I had noticed that he often pulled up such videos when he was doing work in his online courses, he replied:

> Oh yes, Miss. I learn with them. We learn [English] in camp…We sing. We sing English…At first, we sing English. Then we talk English. We learn together…. All of them are me when I do lessons…I want to graduate with friends here, new America friends, but I will graduate with them too. Yes [make sense]? (Interview, March 8, 2016).

For Adam, learning is a collective act, which brings the past into the present as he constructs his hybrid identity in Arizona. Adam, An, and Johnny locate or carve out spaces in which they can act and challenge the linear and often *boring* lessons in the online courses, they try out positions of engaged multilingual/multi-world learner. As space makers, they are adept at resituating themselves, a process referred to Das Gupta (2006) as *identity-staking*. These refugee youth demonstrate how they can construct themselves as leaners in an "[...] ongoing negotiation, a navigation replete with contestations and conflicts, between being constructed and constructing" (Koyama, 2014, p. 6). The refugee students engage in identity-staking by drawing on cultural resources to develop their own identities as students in the US education system. The schooling is unfamiliar to them, but using online resources to connect to the people, places, and activities they have traversed is familiar. Joining the two on one screen, into one figured learning context, allows them to persist with their studies with a different sense of themselves as learners.

Findings: *things matter, miss*

The important work done by everyday material things _ videos, music, photos, etc. – in not so everyday circumstances – or at least in new educational settings – demonstrates how the refugee students put things to work as they reinvent and redefine themselves as students in their newly and emergent figured worlds of learning in the US education system. The things come to mean something, whether symbolically or otherwise, when they are imbued with practical insinuations by the students as they make space and stake their identities. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998, p. 62) state that material objects bring "[...] developmental histories" of past activities to the present. In figured worlds, these objects, which the authors refer to as *artifacts* help mediate the thoughts and feelings of individual participants and through this means, people acquire the ability to position themselves. In this study, the videos, music, and photos incorporated into the online lessons offer the possibilities for becoming, possibilities for expanding who they are and how they are positioned.

Two refugee students and siblings, Von and Ba, talked with me, through an interpreter, about the things they chose to access online during their lessons. They explained how they both liked to watch a livestream feed from an area in which they lived in Nepal while waiting to be resettled. Although the area viewed in the video was a bit at the edge of the official resettlement camp, they could still catch glimpses of their friends visiting, studying, and playing basketball in a dirt field

adjacent to the edge of camp. I watched the video with them as they pointed out landmarks, explained the rules of the game, and pointed out the youth they recognized. *I study there, see…I study Nepali and English, more Nepali…I was there eleven years, two months and three days…I studied all my studies there…I went to school like here, but not like here,* Von told me (Interview, November 5, 2015). Ba added:

> We first had a teacher there [pointing to the left of the screen to a large tent]. We learned letters and writing and reading. I learned counting and time…I was a student. I learned good and got top grades. Better than Von. Here, Von better than me.

When I asked, Von and Ba, why they watched the video when they were doing their Economics lessons, they told me that they liked seeing their friends study and play. They missed them and they missed learning in a language they knew, Nepali. Ba said it helped her learn by giving her memories of learning, of how much she had studied to continue being a student when she resettled in Arizona. They concurred that having the videos made them *try harder to do better* because they were grateful of being in an *American school* now.

Not everyone, though, saw the positive effects of the music videos, photos, and livestreamed feeds on learning. According to Stan, one of the teachers in the online credit recovery lab, the refugee students, in particular, often have small windows of music or videos opened while doing their coursework. He wishes they would not have *these distractions on the screen*, and several times I observed him asking refugee students to close the videos, music, or livestreaming. More often though, he said nothing. When I asked him about this, he explained:

> Oh, them [pointing at three refugee students sitting at computers along one edge of the computer lab], they are so behind. They came here with big holes in their learning and schooling. It's not their fault, but its what is… They're here because teachers don't want them sitting in the back of their rooms, just staring out into space or talking to each other. Here, at least, they are mostly quiet, but I'm pretty sure they aren't going to make it. They're way too far behind and they get too districted with all those videos… Those videos make them happy, I guess, but it doesn't help them get their work done. And it's totally against the rules. I like to watch the videos, some, so I just don't say much. It wouldn't help anyway (Interview, January 30, 2015).

Stan's stance draws our attention to the way in which Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1988) show how people are socially identified by others who offered limited positions that they must accept, reject, or negotiate. According to Stan, who acts as a place taker, An and Von wouldn't likely graduate whether or not they had the video *distractions*, so he allowed it. But, students like An and Von negotiated the positions, pushing against the notions of being *behind* and *slow* learners in favor of situating themselves as students, whose learning spanned multiple forming learning contexts, including those in the refugee camp in Nepal and the online DUSD computer labs. The computer lab, or at least

the computer screens on which An and Von completed lessons, became spacing of self-authoring/situating/making. Urrieta (2007, p. 110) explains:

> As people's subjectivity(ies) becomes better organized around certain issues important to the figured world, their behavior manifests the ascription of new meaning and the favoring certain activities and practices over others. Materially, people enact everyday performances of these senses of self and these performances in turn constantiate relative positions of influence and prestige in and across figured worlds.

For Ba and Von, the figured world on their online learning brought together their learning, across time, geographic space, and languages to make sense of themselves in their current educational context. They did not talk about being behind in their studies or failing. They spoke of merging what they knew *from before and now* in ways that some teachers, like Stan, did not seem accept as viable.

In my research, I've seen refugees and things come together in all kinds of ways – sometimes out of necessity, other times out of convenience, and often, out of chance. Some of the items accessed by the refugee students in the online settings highlighted here are intended to be shared and were often circulated between groups of refugee students. Others transform and alter the meaning and identity of the refugee in possession of them. It is not difficult to see through the refugee students' views how the importance of material objects can be "[...] specified by what they do and with, through, or about whom and what they interact" (Cerulo, 2009, p. 534). For the students in this study, the things are integral to who they are, and who they are becoming, as learners. The transworlding supports them in locating themselves as multilingual and multicultural learners with ties to other languages, people, and places other than their English-dominant schooling in the US.

Concluding Thoughts

The focus of this piece emerged only after a sustained ethnographic engagement with refugees in schools. I did not set out to study online learning, but this paper is what anthropological and ethnographic approaches afford us – the possibility, if not the high likelihood, that an important aspect of research will emerge once the researchers is immersed in the field or fields. Just as the online credit recovery world for the refugee high school students in this study seemed to lend itself to an unexpected, but much needed, space for making oneself anew, ethnography can do this for the researcher willing to follow where the human participants, discourses, and material objects of the study lead us. For me, in my research with refugees, this has provided a way in which to focus on what these newcomers can do, what they can construct, and what they accomplish. Studying the ways in which refugee youth, in particular, creatively and selectively create and negotiate hy-

brid identities as refugee students in US schooling, also provides some sort of particular insights to the challenges in education practices and policy that confront them upon their arrival. So, too, does it draw attention to the ways in which these practices and policies might, when informed but what the refugee students are doing, be changed to better serve newcomers.

Notes

1 A refugee is defined by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) as *someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence…[and] has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.* <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

2 Pseudonyms for people and places have been used throughout this paper. Generic titles for job positions have also been used.

References

ALTHEIDE, David; COYLE, Michael; DEVRIESE, Katie; SCHNEIDER, Christopher. Emergent Qualitative Document Analysis. In: HESSE-BIBER, Sharlene Nagy; LEAVY, Patricia. **Handbook of Emergent Methods**. New York: Guilford Press, 2008. P. 127-151.

BAJAJ, Monisha; BARTLETT, Lesley. Critical Transnational Curricular Approaches with Refugee and Immigrant Students. **Curriculum Inquiry**, Toronto, v. 47, n. 1, p. 25-35, 2017.

BAJAJ, Monisha; SURESH, Sailaja. The "Warm Embrace" of a Newcomer School for Immigrant and Refugee Youth. **Theory Into Practice**, Columbus, v. 57, n. 2, p. 91-98, 2018.

BARTLETT, Lesley; MENDENHALL, Mary; GHAFFAR-KUCHER, Amina. Culture in Acculturation: refugee youth's schooling experiences in international schools in New York City. **International Journal of Intercultural Relations**, Amsterdam, v. 60, p. 109-119, 2017.

BETANCOURT, Theresa et al. Trauma History and Psychopathology in War-Affected Refugee Children Referred for Trauma-Related Mental Health Services in the United States. **Journal of Traumatic Stress**, Hoboken, v. 25, n. 6, p. 682-690, 2012.

BIRMAN, Dina; TRAN Nellie. When Worlds Collide: academic adjustment of Somali Bantu students with limited formal education in a US elementary school. **International Journal of Intercultural Relations**, Amsterdam, v. 60, p. 132-144, 2017.

BOLKAN, Joshua. Report: credit recovery most common use of K-12 online learning. **The Journal**, Los Angeles, Dec. 18, 2013. Retrieved from: <https://thejournal.com/articles/2013/12/18/report-credit-recovery-most-common-use-of-k12-online-programs.aspx>. Accessed on: 02 Feb. 2019.

BUTRYMOWICZ, Sarah. Are Education Credit Recovery Programs Really Effective? **The Washington Post**, Washington, 2010. Retrieved from: <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/guest-bloggers/are-ed-credit-recovery-program.html>. Accessed on: 02 Feb. 2019.

CERULO, Karen A. Nonhumans in Social Interaction. **Annual Review of Sociology**, Palo Alto, v. 35, p. 531-552, 2009.

DAS GUPTA, Monisha. **Unruly Immigrants**: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

DAZA, Stephanie L. Putting Spivakian Theorizing to Work: decolonizing neoliberal scientism in education. **Educational Theory**, Oxford, v. 63, n. 6, p. 601-619, 2013.

DEXTER, Kamala. **Addressing the High School Dropout Crisis: at-risk students and education 2020 online credit recovery**. 2011. 93 p. Dissertation (Doctorate in Education) – Faculty of the USC Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 2011.

DOOLEY, Karen T. Re-Thinking Pedagogy for Middle School Students with Little, No or Severely Interrupted Schooling. **English Teaching Practice and Critique**, Hamilton, v. 8, n. 1, p. 5-22, 2009.

DRYDEN-PETERSON, Sarah. Refugee Education: the crossroads of globalization. **Educational Researcher**, Washington, v. 45, n. 9, p. 473-482, 2016.

FINN, Chester E. The Credit Recovery Scam. **EducationNext**, Cambridge, MA, Sept. 27, 2012. Retrieved from: <https://www.educationnext.org/the-credit-recovery-scam/>. Accessed on: 02 Feb. 2019.

GETWOOD, Melvin. **Effects of a Credit-Recovery Program on At-Risk Ninth-Grade Students in a Southeast Texas School District**. 2012. (Doctoral Dissertation) – Lamar University-Beaumont, Beaumont, 2012.

HALCÓN, Linda et al. Trauma and Coping in Somali and Oromo Refugee Youth. **Journal of Adolescent Health**, New York, v. 35, n. 1, p. 17-25, 2004.

HATT, Beth. Street Smarts vs. Book Smarts: The Figured World of Smartness in the Lives of Marginalized, Urban Youth. **Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education**, v. 39, n. 2, p. 145-166, Jun. 2007.

HEPPEN, Jessica et al. The Struggle to Pass Algebra: online vs. face-to-face credit recovery for at-risk urban students. **Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness**, Mahway, v. 10, n.2, p. 272-296, 2017.

HOLLAND, Dorothy; LACHICOTTE, William; SKINNER, Debra; CAIN, Carole. *Figured Worlds*: identity and agency in cultural worlds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

JONES, Eric L. **A Second Chance to Graduate on Time**: high school students' perceptions on participation in an online credit recovery program. 2011. Dissertation (Doctorate in Philosophy) – Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2011.

KOYAMA, Jill. Learning English, Working Hard, and Challenging Risk Discourses. **Policy Futures in Education**, Oxford, v. 13, n. 15, p. 608-620, 2015.

KOYAMA, Jill; BAKUZA, Fortidas. Change is Possible: increasing refugee parental involvement in US schools. **Journal of Educational Change**, Amsterdam, v. 18, n. 3, p. 311-335, 2017.

KOYAMA, Jill; CHANG, Ethan. Schools as Refuge? The Politics and Policy of Educating Refugees in Arizona. **Educational Policy**, Los Altos, v. 33, n. 1, p. 136-157, 2018.

KOYAMA, Jill; KASPER, Julie. Pushing the Boundaries: Education Leaders, Mentors, and Refugee Students. **Educational Administration Quarterly**. Forthcoming.

LIEBERMAN, Evan M. A **Phenomenological Narrative Study**: high school counselors' perceptions of online credit recovery programs. Beaumont: Lamar University, 2016.

MCBRIEN Jody L. Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States: a review of the literature. **Review of Educational Research**, Washington, v. 75, n. 3, p. 329-364, 2005.

MCBRIEN, Jody L. The Importance of Context: Vietnamese, Somali, and Iranian refugee mothers discuss their resettled lives and involvement in their children's schools. **Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education**, London, v. 41, n. 1, p. 75-90, 2011

MCBRIEN, Jody; DOOLEY, Karen; BIRMAN, Dina. Cultural and Academic Adjustment of Refugee Youth: Introduction to the special issue. **International Journal of Intercultural Relations**, Amsterdam, v. 60, p. 104-108, 2017.

MENDENHALL, Mary; BARTLETT, Lesley. Academic and Extracurricular Support for Refugee Students in the US: Lessons Learned. **Theory Into Practice**, v. 57, n. 2, p. 109-118, 2018.

PATEL, Sita et al. War-exposed newcomer adolescent immigrants facing daily life stressors in the United States. **International Journal of Intercultural Relations**, Amsterdam, v. 60, p. 120-131, 2017.

PICCIANO, Anthony G.; SEAMN, Jeff; DAY, Scott. **Online Learning in Illinois High Schools**: has the time come? (Babson Survey Research Group). Wellesley: Babson College, 2011.

PICCIANO, Anthony; SEAMAN, Jeff. **K-12 online learning**: a 2008 follow-up survey of the US school district administrators. Needham: The Sloan Consortium, 2009. Retrieved from: <http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survy/pdf/k-12_online_learning_2008.pdf>. Accessed on: 02 Feb. 2019.

POWELL, Allison; ROBERTS, Verena; PATRICK, Susan. Using online learning for credit recovery: getting back on track to graduation, Vienna: iNaACOL, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.inacol.org/resource/using-online-learning-for-credit-recovery-getting-back-on-track-to-graduation/>. Accessed on: 02 Feb. 2019.

RICKLES, Jordan et al. Online Credit Recovery and the Path to On-Time High School Graduation. **Educational Researcher**, Washington, v. 47, n. 8, p. 481-491, 2018.

SALDAÑA, Johnny. **The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers**. 2. ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2013.

SPIVAK, Gayarti Chakravorty. Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism. **Critical Inquiry, Race, Writing, and Difference**, Chicago, v. 12, n. 1, p. 243-261, 1985.

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSION ON REFUGEES (UNHC). **Global Trends**: forced displacement in 2018. UNHCR: Geneva, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf>. Accessed on: 02 Feb. 2019.

URRIETA, Luis Junior. Figured Worlds and Education: an introduction to the special issue. **The Urban Review**, New York, v. 39, n. 2, p. 107-116, 2007.

ZINTH, Jennifer Dounay. Credit Recovery and Proficiency-Based Credit: maintaining high expectations while providing flexibility: the progress of education reform. **Education Commission of the States**, New Jersey, v. 12, n. 3, p. 1-6, 2011.

Jill Koyama is Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona.
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0990-4930
E-mail: jkoyama@email.arizona.edu