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From Refugee to Citizen: Rhizomes and Roots in the Digital Age

Julia Nett
Portland State University

Michele Ruth Gamburd
Portland State University

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From Refugee to Citizen: Rhizomes and Roots in the Digital Age

Julia Nett, Anthropology
Advisor: Michele Gamburd, PhD

Abstract

This study examines digital media as platforms for current and former refugees to reaffirm and create themselves and to learn to be American. To think of refugees as "uprooted" with "roots that threaten to wither" (Malkki 1992, 32) is misguided. This study utilizes Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the rhizome (1987) to rethink current and former refugee experiences post-resettlement in the US. With the rising ubiquity of digital media and digital technologies, increasing numbers of refugees resettle with smartphones and other technologies. These technologies provide current and former refugees opportunities to maintain hybridized self-conceptions and to feel they are both "here" and "there."

Doing Digital Anthropology

- Investigating what happens in "the virtual" to understand its relationship to the actual (Boellstorff 2012: 40). This sheds light onto refugee resettlement experiences in general.

Theorists


The Project

- Exploring post-resettlement identity and belonging through a digital anthropology lens.
- How are citizenship and belonging constructed and experienced in digital resources?
- Facebook/Social Media and the Refugee Center Online

Questions

- How do people use the RCO and Facebook/social media to learn about being 'American'?
- How do resettled refugees use social media to build community and maintain a rhizomatic experience?
- How does the RCO construct American culture for refugee internalization?

Key Terms

- Rhizomes vs Roots
- Cultural Orientation
- Social Media
- Hybridized Self-Conceptions
- Becoming American

Research

- Design
- Compare Facebook and RCO
- Methods
- Participant Observation
- Interviews
- Convenience Sample
  - Mostly former refugees.
  - From DRC, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Somalia, Kurdistan, Syria, Laos, Myanmar, Latvia.
- Analysis
- Grounded Theory
- Discourse Analysis

Significance

- Myth of being uprooted → rhizomatic, hybridized identities
  - Iraq as mother, America as wife
  - "We have roots here, but we always look in the rearview mirror"
- Social Media
  - Everyday mundane habit "to be both 'here' and 'there'"
- Social Media platforms as 'place'
  - Place to reaffirm self
  - Place to 'inhabit'
  - 'Meta best-friend'
- Cultural Resource Center
- RCO as Place too
  - "Mini Google"
  - Cultural Resource Center
  - 'Transplanting' one's roots
- To become American
- Facebook as spontaneous performance of self // RCO one-way shift of identity

From an informant, Ieva, Instagram story: “These wildflowers remind me of Latvia every single time.”
Ieva resettled to the United States from Latvia about ten years ago. She repeatedly mentioned her hybrid identity as Latvian-American woman who feels she belongs both ‘here’ and ‘there’.