

Refugees and Advocates: Bhutanese refugees, resettlement NGOs and the co-construction of a social memory of victimhood

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It might not normally occur to us that a past in which someone suffered could be something worth remembering. However, when that past becomes an important part of a person's identity, or the way in which they narrate themselves, it is quite possible to look back upon it and utilise it as a significant resource. This past of suffering has achieved just such a status for the community of Bhutanese refugees in Erie, Pennsylvania I have been working with since late 2010. In 2008, the United States began a resettlement process that would see at least 60,000 Bhutanese refugees enter the country as permanent residents, with a view to citizenship in five-years time. Erie, Pennsylvania, a small rust belt city with a population of around 100,000, has, to this date, received roughly 5,000 Bhutanese refugees.

Bhutanese refugees have brought with them to Erie memories of religious and linguistic persecution, the loss of citizenship, mental and physical torture, and two decades of refugee camp living. These memories stretch across several generations of Bhutanese refugees that now call Erie home and inform their current community projects as well as their presentation of self. Implicated in their projects and self-presentations is the work of NGOs who have been a ubiquitous presence and major factor in their lives for the past twenty-plus years, both in exile and in resettlement. A further factor of major importance to Bhutanese refugees in Erie is the way in which their new community has welcomed them.

Here, I analyse the uses of memory by resettled Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in Erie, Pennsylvania. Through human rights discourses surrounding refugees, propagated both by NGOs and others who advocate on their behalf, Bhutanese refugees construct social memories that both inform their current projects and allow them to foster stability in resettlement. A social memory of victimhood, which integrally points to religious and linguistic persecution as a violation of their human rights to remain culturally distinct, echoes and reflects multicultural notions of citizenship

celebrated by those persons and institutions most vital to the wellbeing of their community. Bhutanese refugee community leaders in Erie are utilising this co-constructed social memory of victimhood and persecution along linguistic and religious lines to fuel two complementary projects: a 'Bhutanese Community Centre' and a 'Bhutanese Cultural Centre'. The aims of each of these projects are different: the former seeks to ease social integration to the new American environment while the latter looks to preserve cultural heritage. While their aims differ, however, these projects are complementary for Bhutanese refugees and the resettlement NGOs, as we will see in what follows.

Locality: Erie and the Bhutanese refugees

Bhutanese refugees' memories—or, at least, the stories they tell about their past—and political projects in Erie are produced within an environment of advocacy. This environment of advocacy has taken root in a city that has lost its traditional economic base in manufacturing and nearly thirty percent of its population since 1960. And, unlike larger gateway cities, Erie does not attract many economic immigrants. Refugee immigrants have, thus, become potentially valuable assets to the city, albeit projects. The city in which they now reside is fashioning itself more and more as a multicultural place. The Bhutanese refugee boom has been facilitated by a large sector of charitable organisations, many of which have been in existence for close to a century, originating when the city experienced its first major influx of immigrants. These organisations have been expanding their services, especially since the 1990s, to serve refugee populations. Since the 1960s, Erie has experienced a 27% drop in its total population. However, after sizable numbers of refugees began arriving in the 1990s, the population loss has slowed. If refugee arrival trends continue, Erie may in the 2020 census post its first increase in population since 1960.

At the same time, the Nepali-Bhutanese community in Erie has concerns about the preservation of cultural heritage that mirror those expressed by other Asian immigrant groups in the United States, such as Vietnamese and Korean populations in other cities with predominantly Black and White populations (Lee 2005, 2009). The 'Americanness' that this newly arrived population encounters can appear quite monolithic and establishing links with other refugee or immigrant populations from

countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Iraq or Bosnia proves difficult because of language barriers.

With as many as 5,000 currently residing in the city, the Nepali-Bhutanese now make up almost 5% of the city's population. Erie's Asian population in the 2000 census was only 776 individuals, or 0.75% of the population. At the time of the 2010 census, the city's total Asian population was only 1,115 or 1.5% of the total population (US Census Bureau). With the rapid influx of Bhutanese refugees in the past few years, the Asian population could be estimated at around 6,000 people, or around 6% of the total population. The rapidly growing Bhutanese community has not only surpassed the representation of any other Asian population in the city, they are quite literally the most visible Asian population, as many people in the community do not drive and are conspicuously present, walking the streets of the eastern part of town. There have been, perhaps as a result of this suddenly omnipresent appearance of the 'other', a number of random assaults against Nepali-Bhutanese in the city.

Remembering and forgetting in refugee communities

For many refugee communities, and certainly for the Nepali-Bhutanese, social memory begins with a politicisation of cultural heritage. Nepali-Bhutanese refugees, who have been made refugees through the enactment of ethnonationalist policies by the Bhutanese government, find the very foundations of their identity as a community in this moment. The states, organisations, and actors who control refugees' destinies also powerfully shape their social memories.

According to Halbwachs (1992: 47), memories are preserved through their continual reproduction. And through this continual social relationship a sense of identity is perpetuated. The production of social memory, however, is not only repetitive; it is also highly selective. In fact, those events purged from social memory may have the most to reveal about the constructive process of social memory. Paul Ricoeur sees forgetting, or perhaps suppression, as inhering in the construction of plots, or, rather, the elaboration of narratives concerning identity. He asserts, 'We cannot tell a story without eliminating or dropping some important event according to the kind of plot we intend to build' (Ricoeur 1999: 9).

Adding to these insights, David C. Harvey contends that researchers should look to understand 'the meaning and nature of what people tell

each other about their past; about what they forget, remember, memorialise and/or fake' in order to more usefully analyse heritage—and, for our purposes, we could also say memory—processes (Harvey 2001: 320). Graham also echoes Harvey in saying that the importance of what is selected from the past as being worthy of preservation does not lie in the object itself but within the interpretation of the object (Graham 1994: 135).

Boyarin describes memory as 'a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past' (Boyarin 1994: 22). Stuart Hall further emphasises the creative aspects of memory work and memory's relation to identity. In his words, 'identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being.... Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation' (Hall 1996: 4). Malkki's analysis of the processes through which refugees construct a national past, as a people with a moral attachment to a particular motherland (Malkki 1995), provides insight into refugees' production and representation of collective memories. Malkki refers to refugees' oral narratives as 'mythico-history' since they 'cannot accurately be described as history or myth', but rather as a 'subversive recasting and re-interpretation of it in fundamentally moral terms' (Malkki 1995: 54).

The symbolic contents of refugee identities are not static by any means. The meaning of their past, how it speaks, constantly changes within an unfolding present—a process of becoming, rather than simply being. Social memories are the products of interpretive, creative and moralistic social processes. Moreover, I want to draw attention to the practical nature of social memory. Participating in discussing the past—'our past'—is foundational in producing communal identity. Refugees must make a substantial investment in the past, if we consider the immediacy and relative weight of the past along with their vulnerable subject positions. Refugees construct social memories and identities in environments in which find they find themselves subject to the whims of more powerful actors—the stories refugees tell about themselves are never solely theirs.

Remembering exile in resettlement

The primary story narrated by Nepali-Bhutanese refugees is of a people who experienced not only an attack on their cultural traditions, but were also expelled from their homes by an immoral government. There is no

room in this mythico-history for the violence perpetrated by the Nepali-Bhutanese and political parties such as the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) against the Bhutanese Government or other Nepali-Bhutanese (Evans 2009: 130). The refugees' desire to return to Bhutan or to become citizens in places such as the United States has influenced their representations of the past, given that publicising the violence perpetrated by the Nepali-Bhutanese would not further these goals. Evans points out that, in Nepal, many accounts of the refugee exodus are also authored by human rights organisations, which 'tend to focus on the refugees' victimhood and political innocence, as they attempt to exert moral pressure on the Bhutanese Government to take the refugees back' (Evans 2009: 130-1). I contend that this mythico-history, aided by NGOs and refugee advocates, imagining Bhutanese refugee subjects as innocent victims, is a crucial aspect of their construction of social memory and representation of self. I understand, moreover, this aspect of Bhutanese refugees' practices of representation to be crucial not just in the sense that it constructs a marketable population to receiving countries and communities; it is also crucial for grounding the refugees themselves in a foundational origin, for constructing themselves as moral subjects, and for producing a replicable representation of themselves, supplying a singular national identity to a stateless population.

I asked 'Aditya', a Bhutanese community leader and employee at a local resettlement NGO in Erie, about his father, who, as he had previously mentioned to me, had been imprisoned in Bhutan. Aditya explained to me that his father was arrested because the Bhutanese government wanted to 'forcefully evict' Nepali ethnics, and 'compel' them to leave Bhutan. Describing how his family came to leave Bhutan after his father's detainment by the Royal Army, Aditya said:

'My father knew neither how to read English nor Dzongkha. There was a paper in Dzongkha, and my father signed it. My father didn't know how to sign, so he just gave a thumbprint. That paper said that my father and his family would leave Bhutan willingly, voluntarily. But, the army personnel had said, "If you want to leave, you'll sign this paper. If you want to die, you will go to the ground, and I will shoot you with this bullet". He signed the paper. After signing the paper, they said, "Oh. Good! You are willing to leave Bhutan!"' [He laughs].

Regarding the reasoning for this abhorrent treatment by the Bhutanese state, Aditya said:

‘The Bhutanese government adopted this “One Nation, One People” policy. So, we were two types of people: Nepali people and Drukpa people.¹ The King wanted a single nation. Though, we were different... We spoke out, but the government didn’t want that. They didn’t want diversified cultures, only one! The government wanted to make our country Drukpa only.’

This was one of my first encounters with the quite graphic, animated stories Bhutanese refugees tell about their experience of exile. I was struck by the one-sided violence, on the part of the Bhutanese state, contained within his tale. While the violent actions contained within his story are completely inexcusable, the events that led to this brutal treatment of Nepali-Bhutanese citizens were not as one-sided as his narration might make them out to be. Aditya, for instance, glosses over the sometimes-violent public demonstrations organised by Nepali-Bhutanese citizens in the early 1990s.² As we will see later, he is, however, not alone in this.

‘Tirtha’, a 25-year-old recent college graduate who is currently studying for his MCATs, related to me his own, slightly different, narrative of Bhutanese exile. He explained that until ‘the revolution started’, the King was actually quite good to the southerners. However, when his people wanted democracy, started rallies and staged demonstrations, ‘the government decided to get rid of the people causing the problem’. Although, he says, the southerners were ‘trying to get democracy for all people and trying to make the country more open’, the government felt it was ‘a challenge to the regime and tried to get rid of the southerners’. Tirtha, who was only a small child when he and his family left Bhutan, does not feel the need to downplay his people’s politics in the lead-up to their exile. He openly refers to his people’s actions as a ‘revolution’. Statements like this, from the often more politically outspoken youth, are not found in the discourse of their elders. It is telling that I have never

1 The term ‘Drukpa’ is used by Nepali-Bhutanese to refer collectively to the ruling Ngalong ethnic group. The Ngalong and Bhutanese state subscribe to the Drukpa Kagyu school of Buddhism.

2 See Hutt (2003: 200-210) for a discussion of Nepali-Bhutanese demonstrations.

heard anyone else use the word revolution to describe the protests and demonstrations that led to Nepali-Bhutanese exile.

As pointed out earlier, politics have been noticeably absent from narratives of Nepali-Bhutanese exile. Similar to what Evans (2009) found in Nepal, in Erie, Bhutanese refugees' stories are largely authored by their advocates. The myriad resettlement NGOs and refugee assistance services in this small city of around 100,000 people have proven excellent ambassadors and publicists for the Bhutanese community. The presence of the Bhutanese community in the local paper certainly cannot be ignored, as community members have graced the front page of several Sunday editions. And, the Bhutanese never appear without at least one quote from a higher-level employee of one of the local NGOs.

The fostering of compassion from the community is perhaps the broad aim of the vast majority of articles written about the Bhutanese community in Erie. No story about the Bhutanese forgoes mentioning the story of their exile. In an article entitled 'Refugee relates to royals', which details the story of Nar Sapkota, a former malaria inspector in Bhutan who claims to have shaken hands with Princess Diana during a visit to the Nepalese refugee camps in 1993,³ the author asks her readers to empathise with Bhutanese refugees in Erie (Allen 2011: 1B). The author says, 'It's easy to fantasize about becoming a princess and living happily ever after. It's much harder to think about trading places with Nar or his classmates at the Multicultural Community Resource Center...' (Allen 2011: 1B). Allen says of the exile of Nepali-Bhutanese: 'Because of violence against members of their ethnic group and crackdowns on their dress and language', the Nepali-Bhutanese could no longer live within Bhutanese culture, so Nar's family was 'forced into a refugee camp in Nepal. For 18 years, they lived in a building resembling a military barracks' (Allen 2011: 1B).

One article, advertising World Refugee Day celebrations in Erie mentions how 'everything changed' for Nepali-Bhutanese in the late 1980s when an

3 I can find no proof that Princess Diana actually visited the camps while in Nepal in 1993. Perhaps there was a miscommunication here. This meeting may have taken place elsewhere, as many Bhutanese refugees found it relatively easy to move around within Nepal.

anti-Nepali campaign, which had been years in the making, erupted. The Bhutanese government shunned the parts of society it didn't control, and among the unacceptable was the Subedis' (a prominent Bhutanese family in town, with two brothers who are both caseworkers and community leaders) practice of Hindu religion. People of their culture were arrested, beaten and sometimes killed. (Smith 2009: 1-2B)

Devi, one of my collaborators and the Bhutanese Community Association of Erie's president-to-be, is quoted as saying, 'We requested, "Please King, allow us to live as we are living. Allow us to follow our culture, our dress, speak our language."... We were not able to live there. Some of the families started to run away from there'. 'If they didn't run', Smith explains, 'they were exiled' (Smith 2009: 2B). As is evident in the co-authoring of this tale of exile, both Devi and Smith, the author—along with a community services coordinator from a local NGO, who also appears throughout—construct a vision of Bhutanese refugees as the helpless, powerless, and voiceless victims of a tyrannical king. The story Devi tells fits neatly into the narrative the author—as a refugee advocate—and the community services coordinator wish to tell about refugees. As the community services coordinator explains later in the article: 'They were driven out like cattle' (2009: 2B).

As we saw earlier, Aditya's and Tirtha's memories of exile made mention of the unwillingness of the Nepali-Bhutanese to passively accept, and their open opposition to, the Bhutanese government's ethnonationalist policies which led to their refugeehood. Thus, there is, at least in the privacy of their homes, an intimate knowledge of their own people's role in their story. In public, however, as it may be obvious from the exile stories shared by refugees and others in the local newspaper, it may be detrimental for a refugee to present themselves as responsible for their own fate. It is of utmost importance to resettlement NGOs and refugees that narratives of exile appear as one-sided tales of victimhood, as this legitimises refugees' presence in their new locale and constructs, for locals, a non-threatening population.

The same self-censorship appears in refugees' narratives of camp life. Recently, I was discussing the state of camp life with Aditya and Devi, together in Devi's office at a local NGO. Both Aditya and Devi lamented to

me that Bhutanese refugees in Nepal have no rights to work and cannot leave the camp. When I replied—knowing that both Aditya and Devi lived and worked outside of the camps as teachers—‘Except for you!’ Aditya and Devi together burst out into laughter. Devi then admitted that he only ever lived in the camp for a short period of time and spent years living at the school where he taught, even bringing his son to live with him and attend the school. The everyday lives of these two men were hardly as harsh as the more ‘official’ narrative they had initially given to me.

The reality remains, however, that Bhutanese refugees are refugees. And, from a vulnerable subject position such as that, there are only certain avenues available to them to make claims. To receive the aid they desperately need, as stateless persons, they must prove themselves as refugees. As refugees, subject to the support provided to them by NGOs and other refugee advocates, they must negotiate and frame their narratives within the boundaries that are set by these other, more powerful actors. Even in resettlement, their stories must not falter, as this could have detrimental effects for those still living in the camps. Further, if those in resettlement are unable to adapt, they, themselves, risk losing everything once again. The work of Bhutanese community leaders in Erie seeks to ensure that this does not happen.

The work of the Bhutanese Community Association of Erie (BCAE)

According to Halbwachs ‘memories occur in the form of systems’ (1992: 53). Nepali-Bhutanese memory work is shaped in engagement with a very powerful system: the human rights-centred discourses and practices of resettlement NGOs and local refugee advocates. Erie’s resettlement NGOs employ dozens of Bhutanese refugees as caseworkers, job developers, instructors, and interpreters, among other positions. The BCAE bylaws, seen in this context, reveal reveal two complimentary sets of goals. First, the BCAE looks to ‘conserve promote and protect cultural heritage, social and traditional values within a dynamic environment’. Second, they hope to ‘orient the community on the policies and system of the United States’ and ‘facilitate and promote unity, and a sense of belonging to the United States’. The narratives in the previous section depicted Bhutanese refugees in Erie as passive, gentle people, victims of malevolent forces beyond their control. Their cultural difference—or, their ethnic difference—is presented and understood as essential in why they became refugees. This

clearly resonates with resettlement NGOs and other advocates in Erie, and it finds certain expression in the projects of the BCAE which, in seeking the preservation of cultural heritage, also fix a narrative of exile. Because the projects of the BCAE take, as a foundational starting point, the unjust one-sided violation of Nepali-Bhutanese cultural heritage, they may also serve to fix a social memory in which not only historical particularities, but the voices of the Nepali-Bhutanese, themselves, are lost.

The BCAE, essentially set up as an NGO, is currently focused on case management and empowerment. With the community centre, BCAE leaders, of whom several are employed at local NGOs, hope to serve these aims both by facilitating integration to the host society and preserving Nepali-Bhutanese cultural heritage. The community centre will act, for case management purposes, as an NGO office. Having a permanent office people in the Bhutanese community can locate will allow the BCAE to better handle the needs of their community. By helping with formalities, ranging from registering changes of address with the Department of Homeland Security to helping elderly Bhutanese refill their prescriptions at local pharmacies, the BCAE figures their case management focus to fill an important void left by their community when the resettlement NGO assistance dries up after six months. The case management focus of the Bhutanese Community Centre allows BCAE leaders to utilise the practical knowledge they have gained, as caseworkers and job developers at local NGOs, to service their community, exclusively.

The BCAE's focus on empowerment incorporates the aims of social integration and cultural preservation by looking to teach a variety of classes and by helping community members access new forms of cultural and social capital. The classes the BCAE intends to teach in the community centre range from English and Nepali language classes to computer skills classes. Regarding the classes, one BCAE leader said their intent is to teach children Nepali in order to preserve 'our Nepali language; and impart our customs, social values, ethics, language, traditions and culture'. The English classes, he said, will be offered to the 'older folks', who 'need English'. BCAE leaders also want to utilise the centre to facilitate educational opportunities, especially for those members of their community aged 18-25 who have the language skills and education to succeed in the US. These young people have entered the country with a high school diploma that will go unrecognised and are too old to be admitted to high

schools. In assisting them in attaining a GED and applying for colleges or trade schools, BCAE leaders reason that these young people can help the community achieve more, and 'reap the market benefits in the future'.

The goals of the BCAE, regarding the building of a Bhutanese Cultural Centre that will function as a locus of cultural heritage preservation, follow from a social memory in which they see a politicisation of their heritage. However, BCAE leaders' definitions of their cultural heritage have shifted within the past few years. In addition to adopting the platform of local resettlement NGOs, focusing on case management and the empowerment of their community through a Bhutanese Community Centre, BCAE leaders have expanded their definition of culture.

As one BCAE leader related to me, the BCAE is no longer looking to build a 'temple', because by that word, he says, his people will only understand the place as Hindu. They have opted, instead, to call the building a 'Bhutanese Cultural Centre'. They are now using 'the broader definition of Omkar Family'. This signifies a more inclusive community where Hindu, Kirat, and Buddhist religious and ethnic groups can belong as equal members to the Bhutanese refugee community. The Bhutanese Cultural Centre project will, as I am told, include separate religious rooms for Hindus, Kiratis, and Buddhists. The small group of Christians in the Bhutanese community has already established its own church. What the transformation from temple to cultural centre also signifies is the concretion of a Bhutanese refugee social memory of exile in which their loosely Nepali ethnic group has come to be seen as more cohesive and unified.

Learning from the past

As noted earlier, it is clear that the BCAE has taken on the human-rights-centred rhetorical platform of resettlement NGOs. One feature of global human rights discourses since the early 1990s has been a focus on a right to culture (Irina 2011). This is not without problems for Nepali-Bhutanese refugees. The BCAE's objective of conserving, promoting and protecting cultural heritage, social and traditional values within a 'dynamic environment' is both product of NGO interaction and a past in which the Nepali-Bhutanese felt alien cultural heritage, social and traditional values imposed upon them. Further these are the types of culturalist (Bayart 2005) configurations put into action by the Bhutanese

government that the Nepali-Bhutanese so vehemently opposed.⁴ The Bhutanese government's policies, as well its rationales, which led to their exodus mirror well exactly those things the BCAE is looking to do.

We saw above how the BCAE wishes to instill Nepali-Bhutanese customs, social values, ethics, language, traditions and culture into the youth in order to preserve their unique cultural heritage. The Bhutanese government had similarly stressed inculcating the meaning and significance of Bhutan's national heritage. The cultural classes that the BCAE wishes to teach, as has been observed, are based around the preservation of the Nepali language. A similar promotion of Dzongkha was seen in the late 1980s in Bhutan. The proceedings from the 68th National Assembly of Bhutan, held in 1989, reveal a similar project. The proceedings show that the government felt the promotion of national identity, inculcating Bhutanese-ness through Dzongkha, Driglam Namzha and national dress, was vital in securing the health and longevity of the nation. Trying to avoid the fates of Sikkim or Tibet, it was said that 'a small country such as Bhutan should have a distinct national identity that would always stand as a proud and common symbol of strength to promote and safeguard the wellbeing of the people and sovereignty of the nation'.

The irony deepens when we take into account a pamphlet entitled 'Bhutan: We Want Justice'. This pamphlet, cited by Hutt (2003: 178), was written in 1989 by The People's Forum For Human Rights, founded by Nepali-Bhutanese activist Tek Nath Rizal, who, within a month, was imprisoned on charges of treason:

Another great lie turns around the word 'national identity'. ...The dress, the language, the religion are the part of every man's identity. Bakhu (gho/kira)⁵ does not make a Bhutanese.... Identity is primarily the core, the soul of a person or nation. It is sheer ignorance to identify it with dress or language.... Identity is something deeper than a piece of cloth....

4 Bayart (2011: 65) understands culturalism to be 'the explanation of social phenomena as the products of... a homogeneous "culture".' Bayart notes that it 'always ratifies a relationship of power and inequality'. Worse, he says, 'it contributes to...reproducing this relationship, assigning an identity ...to the person whom it designates' and attributes or refuses 'material and symbolic resources to him or her' (Bayart 2011: 67).

5 *Bakhu* is a Nepali term for the Bhutanese national costume.

Here, the authors of the pamphlet deny importance to the very things that the BCAE promotes for the protection of Nepali-Bhutanese cultural heritage in resettlement.

In the following passage from the same pamphlet, we can see just how ambivalent Nepali-Bhutanese feelings have been, concerning cultural heritage, and just how much the revolutionary fervor of the past has been silenced in their narratives of exile. It is cited in Hutt (1996: 405):

The hour has struck for the historic conflict. We the Bhutanese Nepalese have a culture we cherish, a language we speak, a dress we wear, a religion we follow. They are all ours. They are part of our identity. We shall not allow any power to take them away from us. We shall resist, we shall fight to the last man of our race all repressive laws intended to wipe out our racial identity.

As we saw in the exile narratives both given to me and printed in the local paper, there is a lack of open aggression on the part of the Nepali-Bhutanese—though we can perceive the refugees' lingering anger and frustration, especially in the memories narrated to me by Aditya and Tirtha.

The BCAE, however, as the representative body for Bhutanese refugees in Erie, has not formulated its goals in terms of this anger and frustration. Nor is their formulation of cultural heritage quite as exclusivist as that which they had experienced in Bhutan. As we saw in the shift from 'temple' to 'community centre'—from 'Hindu' to the more general 'Omkar Family'—BCAE leaders are attempting a more progressive, inclusive approach. Determined not to repeat the past, they aim to strike a balance between cultural preservation and social integration.

Conclusion

Malkki, referring to memory work in the refugee camp experience, says, 'The experiential reality of the refugee camp was powerfully shaped by the narrative memory of relationships and antagonisms located in the past' (Malkki 1996: 383). Perhaps, in light of the memory work done by the BCAE, we can turn this statement on its head. It seems that the narrative memory of relationships and antagonisms located in the past are powerfully shaped by the experiential reality of the resettlement

community. As we have seen, BCAE leaders have been profoundly affected by working with resettlement NGOs. First, their empowerment and case management goals epitomise the practices of resettlement NGOs. Second, their aims to preserve cultural heritage and the ways in which they narrate their exile also mirror the concerns and practices of resettlement NGOs. 'Even at the moment of reproducing the past', Halbwachs says, 'our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu' (Halbwachs 1992: 49). BCAE memory work is, in essence, a product of practical knowledge gained through constant association with NGOs and a long-term dependence on NGOs in their present social milieu.

In the co-constructed memory work of the BCAE we find that Nepali-Bhutanese political action is absent from the ways they narrate their past. This, to me, reflects silencing measures in the Bhutanese refugee community. According to McGranahan (2005: 571), 'unofficial bans' on telling a history of violent resistance arise because of 'issues of internal difference and national dissent in the exile...community'. There are a few reasons for this. First, exile politics are greatly affected by relations of power, both inside and outside the community. Regarding outside power relations, the organisations and government actors who support the exile community do so on the basis of a human rights discourse. To tell a violent version of the past, in which the refugees were also major actors in their history, is to deny them the role of victim—a designation, whose importance cannot be underestimated; their livelihood very much depends on it.

Second, infra-group power relations serve to preserve this telling of exile history as one of victimisation. McGranahan notes, '[...]events, arrested histories [of the violent resistance] would challenge the order of things [for Tibetans in exile], if not change them. Hence, the defusing of resistance history into the category of "nonevent" means that the national past remains a simplified version of history with room only for external and not internal conflict' (McGranahan 2005: 582). For McGranahan, Tibetan exile government actors and the Dalai Lama, whose powers have only increased in exile, exert their influence on members of the Tibetan diaspora in everyday life by authorising a single, non-violent, history and asking that the alternative tellings wait (McGranahan 2005: 582).

In the case of Bhutanese refugees in Erie, this direct relationship between refugee leaders and the unofficial bans on highlighting resistance in their social memory of exile is not so clear for several reasons.

First, infra-group power relations take a different form in the Bhutanese community. There is no government in exile to which Bhutanese refugees must acquiesce. Thus, social pressures from within the Bhutanese community are, in a sense, more diffuse. The BCAE, after all, is not a governing body, but a representative body. Second, outside power relations, namely those with resettlement NGOs, have a much greater effect upon how Bhutanese refugees narrate their pasts. Only a few years into their resettlement, their lives are still intimately intertwined with the much-needed assistance of NGOs. As we have seen in the BCAE's practices and in the ways Bhutanese refugees' pasts are narrated in the local media, the NGOs are not merely entities which lurk in the shadows: they are inescapable and their constant presence is impossible to miss.

Ricoeur says that we have a 'duty to remember'. He describes this duty to remember as an 'ethico-political' problem, because it has to do with the relating of the meaning of the past to future generations. This duty, an 'imperative' to Ricoeur, is the opposite of the 'traumatic character of the humiliations and wounds of history' (Ricoeur 1999: 10). The duty to remember is thus, for him, a 'duty to tell' (Ricoeur 1999: 10). However, Ricoeur does not give attention to the ambivalent, often conflicting versions of the past within a community; he does not recognise the disconnect between the duty to tell and the problem of constructing a coherent narrative. In other words, he forgets about power. Ricoeur says the duty to remember should be cherished for the sake of the subjugated—that we need a parallel history of victimisation—so that, along with forgetting, we may construct a 'just memory' (Ricoeur 1999: 10). As noble as this idea is, it is not without its problems. As McGranahan (2005) showed in her study of the politics of memory in the Tibetan diaspora, constructing a history of victimisation—one that Ricoeur might consider just—causes its own subjugated memories. The same can be said for Bhutanese refugees in Erie. It remains to be seen whether the subjugated memories of resistance are only temporarily set aside or if the post-memories of the next generation will be fully dissociated from the muddy ambivalence of the past.

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