

# Social Service Provider Perceptions of ‘Nepali-ness’ among Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Austin, Texas

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While united by a common language, those Nepalis who are currently in Austin pursuing asylum status as a result of violence during Nepal’s civil war and Bhutanese-Nepalis brought to Texas through the refugee system face very different concerns. This paper explores how these two groups are thrust together by the limitations of immigrant services organisations in the United States. While the asylum seekers are often better educated, speak English more fluently and have been in the US longer than the refugees, they often reside in the US in a more liminal legal status. This temporariness can last for many years, although not for as long as most refugees spent in the camps in Nepal. Conversely, refugees often are given a clearer path to documentation and greater support by formal government institutions, though these services are constricted by a six-month window during which time refugees are expected to adapt to life in the US, find housing, employment and navigate the bureaucracy. Yet this is as much a story of bureaucracy as refugees or asylees. Its ethnographic subjects are the school teachers, ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors and social service providers as much as those they serve. I ground this study in concerns particular to the city of Austin.

As the capital city of a large U.S. state with low unemployment and a large university, the city provides many conditions amenable to the resettlement of new populations, and as such was declared a ‘refugee resettlement city’, in 2013.<sup>1</sup> In 2012 Texas received the largest number of new refugee arrivals of any state in the US, with Austin receiving approximately 20 percent of those.<sup>2</sup> Although the US government, through the Department of State, nominally selects refugees and supports them through their initial six months of resettlement, much of the day-to-day

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1 This declaration was made at a 2013 conference held at the University of Texas, entitled ‘Resettlement City? Austin’s Refugee Communities’. Although appearing as a question in the title, many of the presenters restated this motto as a declaration of truth, rather than a query.

2 <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/fiscal-year-2012-refugee-arrivals>

work is delegated to private agencies or takes place in public institutions not expressly oriented towards refugee support, let alone the particular needs of Bhutanese-Nepali refugees. Thus, I wish to discuss the way in which service providers are restricted — by money, law, their own lack of knowledge and the bureaucracies that constrain them — in what support they can provide Bhutanese-Nepalis. The result is often well-intentioned service providers who must scramble to support a population that does not fit well into the programs that have been developed to serve Austin's large community of Spanish-speaking migrants. Agencies seek out whomever they can find to help them to understand, literally and figuratively, the experience of Bhutanese-Nepalis, sometimes with problematic results.

My own adventures as an under-informed supporter of the refugee services organisations in Austin began over a year ago, when the South Asia Institute at the University of Texas was contacted by the local public school system asking if the University had an expert on Bhutan who could help them with issues they were having with a rapidly expanding population of Bhutanese students in the school system. Teachers had reached out to both the school psychology staff for the district as well as their refugee coordinator with concerns about behavior problems, tensions between students and language problems. The teachers were sure that some of these must be cultural issues and hoped that someone at UT would be able to help them. The Institute staff noted that although there was no one who worked on Bhutan in particular, they did have someone who worked on Nepal and the Himalayan region who might be able to help them. After several phone calls and emails, I learned that many of the students they were concerned about were Bhutanese-Nepali refugees, but it took several weeks to help them understand why these people were refugees from Bhutan, but that they spoke Nepali, had lived in Nepal in refugee camps and traced their family histories to Nepal. Many of the service providers I spoke with in this period were unsure how to put these unfamiliar places, names, histories and *jats* into a story that would fit their narratives of difference and conflict, let alone how these people ended up in Texas, and they were still unsure if these descriptors attached to the refugees were countries, 'tribal groups', religions or Indian territories.

In this paper, I contextualise my own experience as an expert on Nepal within the configuration of migrant service and support organisations in Austin and the challenges and misunderstandings of those seeking

to provide help to Bhutanese-Nepalis in Texas. This is based mainly on my own work with refugees, asylees, undocumented migrants and those who want to provide them with resources to negotiate resettlement but are often hindered by both bureaucratic pressures and their own lack of knowledge about culture and history, despite valiant efforts and good intentions. The key tensions that I wish to highlight are linguistic, religious and temporal ones, as service providers find themselves exacerbating community problems, especially between different groups of Nepalis, without ever knowing that this is what is happening. The turn to culture as an explanatory framework, and how institutions engage refugees as cultural subjects, also encodes important lessons for what difference is allowed to make a difference in these settings. Finally, I want to suggest some of the ways in which Austin is both well-positioned, and poorly prepared, to be the refugee city it has been proclaimed to be.

To begin, I need to turn back to 2006, before Bhutanese-Nepalis started coming to Austin in any significant numbers, at a moment when there was a developing circuit of Nepalis seeking asylum from the Maoist conflict. At that point in time, I began getting calls from local supporters of asylum seekers through connections at the South Asia Institute: law offices doing pro-bono work and law schools in Texas were all calling looking for Nepal experts. While most had found Nepali translators, they needed people with the letters PhD behind their name and an outsider status to the community to do a different form of translation: to mediate between the stories of asylees, the U.S. legal system and craft a legible (to the bureaucracy) history of Nepal's stories of conflict and difference. These groups had received cases of Nepalis, often couples, seeking asylum in the U.S. and in need of expert witness testimony about their cases as well as general statements about the nature of the Maoist conflict in Nepal. Coming amidst the successful elections of the CPN-M and in the conservative state of Texas, I had difficulty explaining to lawyers and asylum advocates that although the Maoists were listed on the US State Department's list of terrorist organisations, that they had also won a popular vote in Nepal and were currently leaders of the country. I was initially unfamiliar with the expert witness system, and spent hours talking to lawyers and their associates about cases, eventually meeting the asylees themselves. After writing statements about the general history of politics in Nepal, often with very little attention to the particularities of

the individual cases, I was struck by the similarities in the cases. It became clear that although the journeys and struggles described in the official statements were undoubtedly real, and horrific, they were also shaped by the demands of the US asylum system. The changing political situation in Nepal and the arduous journey made crafting an asylum claim difficult. In Texas, many of those who arrived had travelled through as many five different countries—moving from Nepal to India, through South and Central America, eventually to Mexico and the US—thus requiring them to have the capacity to argue for their inability to settle in any of these intervening countries. Applicants needed to be prepared for many possibilities, including the changing US attitude toward the Nepali Maoist government. They prepared information that might prove claims of religious or gender-based threats. Through their travels, they carried large collections of the bureaucratic materials that might make such varied claims legitimate within the U.S. legal system including marriage certificates, SLC documents as well as police reports and notarised statements from relatives about threats received in their absence. Most had been coached before departure on what to bring and some knew people who were already in the asylum system in the US. Many were well-educated and wealthy, not inconsistent with potential targets of Maoist violence, and spoke excellent English. Several had received ‘plus 2’ degrees or more, and travelled abroad on work or education before seeking asylum.<sup>3</sup>

After a dozen or so cases in the mid-2000s, I let it be known that I would not be doing these statements any more (although I have made a few exceptions). I continue to get calls about these five to seven year old cases though, as many still linger in the US legal system, having been delayed and shifted around over the years. This has placed many of the would-be asylees in a difficult position. The US restricts the ability of asylum seekers to work legally in the US, and although after a period of delay in their case, asylum seekers can apply for work permits. Many find this difficult and remain in documentation limbo for years, without any official status other than waiting. This is in part a well-known migrant story, that of new arrivals to the US working in poorly paid, insecure jobs despite having held lucrative and respected positions in their home country. Yet, the

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3 This level of documentation has itself become a source of scepticism, in large part because of the case of Khagendra Khadka, a US asylum seeker from Nepal whose relative printed an article about his persecution in a newspaper he controlled.

story of how Nepali asylees became part of Austin's precariat has distinctive twists and turns; in part having to do with the abundance of undocumented workers in Texas, and the near monopoly on positions open to people without official status held by Spanish speakers. Furthermore, the predominance of Christian organisations that provide the social services and legal support for which state and national government agencies have curtailed funding generates pressures upon new arrivals of other religious traditions. Yet there is an unusual shift that occurred in the position of these liminal Nepali asylum applicants who found unexpected positions with the arrival of Bhutanese-Nepali refugees to Texas.

Texas is currently the second largest receiver of Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in the United States, and Bhutanese-Nepalis are the second largest population of refugees currently arriving to Austin.<sup>4</sup> The service provider community in Austin has been at a loss in how to address this influx because the stories of Bhutanese-Nepalis hold little similarity to those populations they are most used to supporting. In this section of the paper, I want to provide some background, not on the Bhutanese-Nepali refugee situation, which is addressed by others in this volume, but about how the pathway many Bhutanese-Nepali refugees (henceforth Refugees) have followed to the US intersects with the limitations on service agencies and US laws to create distinct problems for this population. I also want to talk about how 'culture' is a significant rhetoric for refugee service providers and the challenges in presenting Bhutanese-Nepali refugee culture in a way that is both palatable and usable by service providers.

It was while living in Baluwatar in the summer of 2012 that I learned more about the pathways that bring many Refugees to Austin. Nearly every day, on the partially dismantled streets around the Prime Minister's house, large blue buses would struggle to find a space between the road construction equipment, the high rise buildings paused by economic circumstance and the normal chaos of Kathmandu traffic. The buses, filled with Bhutanese-Nepali refugees recently picked up from the camps,

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4 This is according to the United State Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Pennsylvania currently receives more Bhutanese-Nepalis and Burmese refugees are currently the largest incoming refugee population in Texas. Most direct services to refugees are administered through public-private partnerships, the organisations that are providing services beyond the moment of immediate arrival in Austin are nearly exclusively Christian-affiliated.

were on their way to a UNHCR office where they were prepared for their journey to another country. Most were given little notice that they were to be taken from the camps and their time in Kathmandu was brief as well. The temporal and spatial experience of the typical Refugee has been one of the most difficult things to explain to service providers in Austin. The Refugees in Austin, like most, have spent many years in the camps, and for most school-aged children, camp life had been the only life they knew. What I was asked to share with service providers was not ethnographic stories or personal journeys, but the life of a typical Refugee, which was assumed to be outside the camps. While such narratives likely did not do justice to the complexity of experiences that Refugees endured and often seemed contrary to my own impulses as an anthropologist, it was the format given, and the dearth of knowledge that service providers and school teachers had justified my hope that any information was better than what they had at present.

Through the auspices of the South Asia Institute, using a format that we had deployed in the past to lead required continuing education seminars for teachers, we held a day-long event that included presentations by Austin service providers, a UT professor (myself, assisted by a colleague from a nearby university)<sup>5</sup> and school officials, all of whom sought to provide information to teachers about the Bhutatese-Nepali refugee community, refugee services and historical and cultural background. In collecting questions from participants before the seminar, many of the queries were quite basic, 'Why are these people both Bhutanese and Nepali?' 'What language do they speak?', 'Can we try some Nepali food?'. There were inquiries about phenotypes and bodily gestures, 'How close do people like to be when they talk?'. Also, there were many inquiries about what schooling had been like in the camps and in Nepal (or did they mean Bhutan) in general. Many teachers were curious about religion, a topic that turned out to be more contentious than I anticipated, as well as gender and family relationships. Refugee services agencies also had their own confusions, ones that they frequently disseminated to other support providers as well as the public, as is seen in the City of Austin website on refugees that states, 'In the last few years, most of the refugees

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5 Many thanks to Dr. Andrew Nelson of the University of North Texas for his support in this seminar. Any inaccuracies and offences are my own, but the event would not have happened without his wisdom.

who settled in Austin hail from Burma, Bhutan, Cuba, Iraq, and Africa (DR Congo, Nepal, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritea [sic!]).<sup>6</sup>

The day of the seminar began with a school administrator passing out to the attendees forms that had been created with dual English/Nepali information about key Austin Independent School District (AISD) policies. These included lists of vaccinations required before the first day of school, school trip permission slips, absence notices and invitations to parents' day at the school. Translated by a local Nepali Asylee who worked on-and-off for the district on an informal basis, the documents, to my eyes, were clear and accurately translated, if unnecessarily precise and often utilising more Sanskritised words. When these were passed out to teachers, my colleague and I raised the issue of the likelihood that some parents, particularly mothers, may not read Nepali, which I had found to be the case among some of those I had met thus far. This had not occurred to the school staff, who chastised the asylee in the midst of the presentation for not discussing this possibility with them. The school administrative staff also offered posters, albeit in English, Spanish and Arabic, on domestic violence for teachers to post, which included information about a hotline for victims. Family violence had been an issue that the school district had found with previous refugee families and thus was a regular part of their presentations to teachers about this student population. As teachers asked questions of the two administrative staffers, they learned that there was no official Nepali language support, but the district hoped to be able to provide some soon. One teacher was particularly focused on this issue, as she worked with English as a Second Language programmes, and was having difficulty with the Refugee students in her course. She noted that they were vastly outnumbered by Spanish speakers in her class and that she worried that in explaining things in Spanish she further confused the few students in her class who spoke other languages at home, yet she had few good alternatives.

The next section of the presentation focused on resources available to refugees in Austin. US law provides three to six months of financial support for new refugee arrivals, in the form of health care, education, legal guidance and other assistance. Yet the US Department of State's Reception and Placement programme concretely consists of nine private agencies,

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6 <http://austintexas.gov/department/refugee-services>. Accessed September 23, 2013.

delegated to select which refugees their regional agencies will settle and to directly administer services and support using State Department funds, often supplemented by their own. With official Reception and Placement services and many state resources limited to a ninety day period, refugees were left to seek help from private agencies and non-profits after this period. This was a system that was particularly confusing to many Bhutanese-Nepali refugees I spoke with as the organisations that the State Department outsourced Reception and Placement services to were the same organisations that helped a wide range of refugees and migrants after the formal period. Thus, Refugees who became used to the help and support of not only a particular agency but a particular individual became confused when after three to six months that person was less available to them and began to withdraw support. For example, one woman feared that she had failed her English as a Second Language Programme, as despite her friends' continued attendance, she was told that she could not participate anymore. This short cut-off period was a particular problem with health care concerns—including mental health issues—as it often took Refugees several months to gain enough stability to seek medical care for what were, for many, long-standing issues. Several Refugees described stories of receiving diagnoses for their own or their children's health problems in their fifth or sixth month of residency, at a time when their medical costs were no longer paid for.

Presentations by myself as well as local service agency leaders and refugees who now worked for one of the two resettlement programs (in this case a Somali) described the complexity faced by refugees in navigating the opportunities available to them and doing so in a timely manner. In what was initially a side-discussion between myself and a colleague, but became part of the central conversation, we mentioned the unpleasant irony that what had caused difficulty for many Refugees in Bhutan was a paperwork regime that seemed always trying to take away their status, rights and land. Amassing papers that might give one's presence in Bhutan legitimacy by documenting their landholdings and history was one that many refugees had chased as the rules changed or were applied unevenly in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Bhutan (see Hutt 2003). Now in the US, collecting papers similarly proved a full-time job for both Nepali asylees and Bhutanese-Nepali refugees; both populations came to this investment in paper with different appreciations of the grammar of documentation

and traumas about having the right status (see Riles ed. 2006, Hull 2012, Cabot 2012). That filling out forms might have traumatic implications for Refugees came as a surprise for nearly all those present. Although at this point, there were no Nepali Asylees or Refugees present, the Somali interjected that this was an important issue to highlight to the school teachers. He described his own difficulties hiding his identity and avoiding the same formal paperwork that had been a survival mechanism for him before coming to the US. Once there, his first six months seemed to consist of nothing but people asking him questions, and recording his answers, the very questions that would have gotten him killed in his homeland. He also found keeping track of this new form of documentation a constant challenge and remembered his own struggles, ones he had seen Bhutanese-Nepalis experience as well, when he travelled for hours on the bus to an appointment only to find that he was missing some document or form and would have to return another day.

As we were discussing the various service providers—a section of the day's events that was intended to be merely informational—what was to be one of the most difficult topics of the day came to the fore. The two refugee services agencies in Austin that are officially sanctioned to provide services in the initial six months resettlement are both Christian-affiliated, one more explicitly than the other, furthermore, many of the agencies that actually provide services are directly administered through churches.<sup>7</sup> This led to a cacophony of discussion among the teachers: 'I thought most Nepalis were Hindu' 'Yes, but most of my Refugee students belong to the same Christian Church'. My colleague and I chimed in that we would be talking about religion in Nepal amongst the Refugee population in a later portion of the event.

Yet, the collective concerns had erupted, soon many of the teachers were comparing notes about a local lay minister who was Nepali and had provided translation support to many Refugees, coming with parents to conferences or to discuss student issues. 'I don't think he is telling me what they are really saying', noted one teacher. She was concerned that this man was dominating the visiting parents and directing the conversation,

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7 The Department of State notes that although the majority of the 'voluntary agencies' charged with the actual resettlement program 'have religious affiliations, they are not allowed to proselytize'. <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm> Accessed September 23, 2013.

neglecting the concerns of the parents or the teachers. Soon, questions were being asked about how many people in Nepal were Christian, and if the Refugees had converted before arriving to the US or after. Based upon the information I had at the time, which I have now been able to confirm a bit more strongly, about half of the Refugees who self-described as Christian had converted in the camps, often at the behest of religious organisations providing services, especially English instruction, in the camps in Nepal. The other half had converted in Austin, often all belonging to the same church. Those I spoke to noted that they liked the church, but were not deeply invested in the religion. More important was the community of Nepali speakers and the services they received through the church. One woman mentioned how she really appreciated the church for the things that church members were willing to do that were often lacking from the system of Refugee services, especially when she was able to get a ride to a doctor's appointment or training class that would have otherwise meant hours on the bus. For the teachers, the issue of when and why Refugees converted was of concern, as well as the role of this one particular church leader, who it took their presence in the same room to discover that many of them had encountered. Yet, it was necessary to curtail these speculations, both as they were merely speculations and due to our schedule, furthermore the representatives of the Christian service providers had to leave at this point, and they seemed eager to do so after this debate.

The majority of the day was to be focused on understanding the conditions of Bhutanese-Nepali Refugees themselves—a project that entailed everything from finding Nepal and Bhutan on a map to much more detailed information about how 'Nepalis' came to live in Bhutan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and what precipitated their departure in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Culture was what the teachers most wanted to learn about, over history and politics (distinct categories in their estimation), as many of the teachers hoped that 'culture' would unlock many of their confusions and misunderstandings, as well as to feed a general fascination and exoticism about the Himalayas that is quite familiar to most who work in the area. The turn to culture, especially novel and fetishised aspects of culture, as an explanatory frame was seen in a conversation one of the South Asia Institute staff members had when fielding questions from an Austin school system official, who was questioning the content of the seminar

and attempting to direct our presentation to concerns that were pertinent to the teachers. She has received early training in Southeast Asian religions and cultures as an undergraduate and was initially determined that she and her Burmese co-worker in the school system would have no problem understanding the experience of Bhutanese-Nepalis - as they are all Buddhist. She needed outside help though with one parent who was being particularly difficult to deal with and was hassling teachers and berating other parents publicly. The school administrator asked my SAI colleague: 'Do you think this is a caste issue?', pointing out that she had recently learned that Nepal had a caste system. The SAI staffer's response, coming at the end of a long day and a conversation she had wanted to end some time ago, was both flippant and yet in the end more accurate than she knew at the time: 'Did you ever think he might just be a jerk?'

With the outside presentations out of the way, my colleague and I turned to address the cultural information that had been requested as the central focus of this educational program. During an hour long session, we presented information about the history of Nepal focusing particularly on Central and Eastern Nepal. While trying to provide some basic information about Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous religions in the area, we also discussed communities like the Rais and Gurungs, groups that made up the majority of those who moved, at least initially, to Bhutan. Much of the information that teachers desired seemed to stem as much from their curiosity as from classroom-based challenges. The presentation covered vary basic material, as requested by the school administration, on everyday diet, kinds of labour, gender relations and the like. With copious visual aids and slides, what we were able to offer was likely little more than a National Geographic-style introduction, but most seemed happy with this, and the presentation was well-received, with questions mainly asking for more information. Such tourbook-like information was similar to seminars that had been conducted on other geographic areas, but participants had not yet begun to connect this demographic data and visual display to the troubled students and parents in their classes.

After a brief break, which we had hoped would include momos, but were disappointed by a last minute cancellation by the caterer, the presentation shifted to a history of how Nepalis were recruited to Bhutan as part of British labour needs, the agricultural conditions of Southern Bhutan and the long, troubled and ever-shifting relationship between Nepali

migrants living in Bhutan and the Bhutanese government and people. This discussion proved far more difficult—in part as the story is a complex one—but also because many of the teachers seemed to distrust that what we were telling them was possible. That Nepalis had been more or less isolated from other populations, that they were given limited rights which changed over time, that the Bhutanese government would be so harsh, etc., all seemed unbelievable. The Gross National Happiness policies of Bhutan were well-known to many and that the same government could be responsible for expelling and discriminating against a non-violent population was not plausible, ‘after all, they are Buddhist!’ proclaimed one teacher about Bhutan. This session left the teachers unsettled, and it was the intervention of a Bhutanese-Nepali student of mine who was helping with the session that enabled some of the teachers to be convinced by our narratives. While they had been provided with readings in advance detailing the basic chronology of Nepali movement to Bhutan and then their flight to Nepal, both the trauma of the story and the complexity of ethnic interaction seemed to be unbelievable to them, to be chalked up merely to the overanalysis and politicisation of University faculty. With a team of us now gathering, including two professors, a student Refugee, a current Refugee community leader and an Asylee who had arrived early for the lunch, we were able to field many of the questions and continue the workshop to describe the long period that many Refugees spent in the camps. Our agenda was tossed aside in favour of a back and forth of questions, with different forms of authority supporting others when needed.

Two things troubled teachers about our stories of UNHCR camps; first, that although undoubtedly unpleasant, the conditions described in the camp were at times better than those in proximate places in Nepal. That education, food and even recreation were available within the camps was unbelievable to many, yet what they were more shocked by is that many Refugees spent a decade or more in the camps and that many of their students were born in the camps, having never known life in either Bhutan or Nepal outside the camps. One Refusee had been a teacher in the camps and was able to offer up the required authority of authenticity, of both the good and the bad of camp life, that placated the teachers. Rather than continue to rehearse what shocked the teachers, I want to turn now to what I learned from this culture clash of service providers and academia as well as to the structures of US refugee programs

and their implementation in Austin, which has led to some challenging conversations.

Austin's Nepali community contains a diverse population: from a 20-something internet millionaire whose company recently went public, to a former Tribhuvan University professor now working illegally as a taxi driver, to the burgeoning Bhutanese-Nepali refugee population. In working with Austin agencies who are seeking to provide support to the incoming Refugees, I have learned a great deal about how little I knew about the structure of refugee support and how little they knew about Nepal. One of the greatest challenges has been to explain an issue that is familiar to all of us who work on Nepal. The oft-sited claims about Nepal's 100+ languages and similarly astounding number of different ethnic groups provides fodder for contemporary political tension in Nepal as well as a challenge to service providers in the US to seeking to understand the country. Even beyond these Wikipedia-able distinctions, I have been surprised by how important it has been to introduce that classic of social science—class—as a element in the negotiations of difference that service providers often misunderstand. Nepal's status as one of the world's poorest countries leaves many presuming that everyone coming to the US, particularly under refugee and asylum tracks, shares similar economic and social conditions. This has certainly not be the case in Austin.

While the Asylees in Austin are by and large well-educated, often English-speaking and having had (and in some cases still have) significant wealth in Nepal, their legal status in the US is extremely problematic. Most face a many-year long battle to attain any sort of conclusion to their application and as a result are often stuck in Austin, and have difficulty finding work. Refugees, on the other hand, have had their long period of liminality in the camps and are quickly rushed through legal and adaptation systems in Kathmandu and the US, only to be 'set free' after six months. They are encouraged, even required, to find work as soon as possible and given support (which also is pressure) to assimilate into 'normal' life in Austin as soon as possible. In Austin, the dominant focus of service providers is on support for Spanish-speaking refugees and migrants, and the commonality of Nepali provides a reason for bringing Asylees and Refugees together, with the former often having an upper hand in seeming more adapted to American life through their English skills, while the latter has stronger legal standing. In Austin, the language issue can

prove a barrier to getting outside of small networks, such as the Christian Church discussed above, or other social circles and networks.

I want to end with one more ethnographic anecdote, in part because as an anthropologist it is where I feel my strengths are, but also because the stakes of this case and the inability to find space within the system for this crisis makes clear the importance of understanding the structures that confine and codify Bhutanese-Nepali refugees (and Nepali asylees) in the US and likely beyond. In March 2013, I received an email from the frantic director of a San Antonio school system, which is a city just one hour from Austin. She could not contain her emotion about this case and asked that I speak with her supervisor. I eventually spoke for more than an hour on the phone to one of the heads of school psychology in the district about a situation she did not know how to address and in which she had taken a personal interest. A young Bhutanese-Nepali refugee girl was being threatened with being kicked out of the school system just a few months before her graduation. The young woman faced numerous medical, behavioural, language problems and most of all, domestic tensions. While her younger siblings had been adapting to life in San Antonio with moderate success, Sophie, a pseudonym by which the psychologist referred to her, was constantly in trouble. In part, the administrator confessed, the problem was the emphasis in Texas on testing. Sophie had consistently done poorly on the standardised tests that are the main means of evaluating students (as well as teachers and schools) and the repercussions for having a substantial number of students score poorly impacts on the school budget and teacher salaries. As a result, no teacher wanted to have Sophie in their class and she had been bounced around, not only to different teachers but through different special programs, some ESL, some remedial, some behavioural or alternative schooling. No one seemed to have a grasp on her problem or her personality, as occasionally she showed signs of intelligence, if not brilliance, and yet by and large seemed uncommitted to the entire challenge of education. Her teachers were quick to conclude that the problem must be cultural; the analysis that had been passed around was that in her culture education was not expected or encouraged in girls. The woman who called me was unsatisfied with this analysis, especially as her sister was a good student. We spoke for a brief period about gender and education in Nepal, and she revealed that Sophie's mother had been a school teacher in the camps. Thus, we both doubted this being a cultural

devaluation of female education. The question of why this young Refugee was not doing well in school was one of considerable temporal crisis. She was about to age out of the school system, which would give the district the right to let her go without a diploma or additional support, whereas if some cause could be found for her difficulties, she would be retained in the schools continuing to receive support, inside and outside the classroom, until she graduated, regardless of age.

In speaking to Sophie, the school psychologist, whom I'll call Judy, found her a nice young woman, most of the time. When they would interact in ways that did not require linguistic communication, working on puzzles together or on some math homework, Sophie would often become quite engaged. At other moments she became quite truculent and standoffish, a behaviour that Judy was quick to attribute to normal teen behaviour. We had an inconclusive conversation about if teen rebellion was a relevant category in Nepal in general, let alone something that this young woman might be exhibiting as part of her assimilation to American culture.

Then we came to the event that was at the crux of Judy's concern. She was deeply invested in keeping Sophie in some form of schooling and had visited her parents, something she did not do regularly but had found often illuminates where a student's problems lie. Sophie's father appeared visibly inebriated when she visited the house, and her mother was quite shy and reserved. She had brought the translator used by the school system to talk to the parents, the siblings and Sophie in their home environment and in Nepali. The mother quickly vanished from the room and the two men sat down as Judy stood near by asking questions about family life. She was concerned that her questions were not being conveyed correctly but could do little but persist with the investigation she normally conducted. The men seemed engrossed in a conversation that had little to do with her questions. Later, Sophie's sister was brought into the room and asked about her school life. She responded to some questions in English and others in Nepali. Judy stopped short though at one word, Sophie's sister had mentioned something about 'aama', and the translator's interpretation had mentioned nothing about mother. Thanks to *Nepali Aama* and *Aama in America* (Coburn 1991, 1995), the conversation had hit upon the one word of Nepali that Judy knew. When she queried the translator, he noted that many Nepalis use aama to mean

any female relative, and Judy responded that his translation had not mentioned female relatives, only her father. Judy continued her interview, although with a great deal of scepticism about what she was learning, which was very little. Later, Judy sought more information about the translator and was told that he and Sophie's father were drinking buddies. She learned that Sophie's father was unemployed and that the translator would sometimes help him get work at the auto repair shop he worked at, although that was rare. The rumour that was going around the community was that Sophie's father was abusing the family, particularly Sophie, and she suspected she would find out little about this with his best friend as translator. I was able to put Judy together with other translators in the area, as well as some community groups but have no happy ending to share to this story, as of yet.

Like Sophie's story, this paper does not have a conclusion. Yet, what I want to bring attention to are the structures that bring Bhutanese-Nepalis to their resettlement homes, and the way those structures interact with distinctly local bureaucracies, histories and institutions. In Austin, service providers press Nepali Asylees into hierarchical relationships with Bhutanese-Nepali Refugees that threaten to replicate caste and class-based anxieties from Nepal as well as ones particular to the US. Yet the legal and temporal experience of the two groups give them very different experiences of the transition to life in the US, differences that often undercut the presumed cultural and linguistic similarities perceived by school and private sector service providers. All this is juxtaposed by a state system that suffers under testing based performance schools, attempts to turn public services over to private, preferably religious, organisations and finally the divergence of experience and opportunity between Bhutanese-Nepali refugees and Nepali asylees, within a system that cannot decide what continent Nepal is in. The numerical domination of Central and South American migrants coming to the region, many of whom have endured months if not years of travel, presents one set of challenges to service providers with which they are struggling to cope. The idea of a few thousand refugees from a country they have difficulty finding on a map, and at times can't figure out which country they are dealing with, is providing an entirely different challenge. While well-intentioned supporters such as Judy are eager to try and understand the Refugee experience and how to provide support, the resources they have in the area are limited.

All they can look to are an overworked and under-informed University professor, a local drinking buddy, a Nepali lay preacher and an undocumented PhD taxi driver, all of whom have their own difficulties to discern motives.

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