

LEARNING IN ACTION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO KAREN RESETTLEMENT
VIA PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

by

DANIEL JOSEPH GILHOOLY

(Under the Direction of Ruth Harman)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study is informed by my three and a half years participant observation within one Karen community living in rural eastern Georgia and the result of a participatory action research (PAR) project performed alongside three adolescent Karen brothers from 2010 to 2012. Such a fusion of methodologies is what Nelson and Wright (1995) describe as ‘creative synthesis’ where research is done both with and on participants. The first findings chapter (Chapter Six) analyzes how three adolescent Sgaw Karen brothers use online digital literacies to cope with resettlement. This component of the study explores the digital literacy practices of three adolescent Karen brothers as they attempt to navigate multiple institutions like school. Findings from this study suggest that newly arrived immigrant youth benefit in many social, psychological, and academic ways as a result of their online presence. The study looks specifically at how they use online spaces to (a) maintain and build co-ethnic friendships, (b) connect to the wider Karen Diaspora community, (c) sustain and promote ethnic solidarity and, (d) create and disseminate digital productions. This component of the study offers insights that can help teachers better understand their students’ out-of-school

literacy practices and ways they can incorporate such digital literacies in more formal educational contexts.

This study also provides findings about Karen resettlement via the collaborative enactment of a participatory action research (PAR) project between these three Karen brothers and myself. The findings from that component of the study relate to the educational experiences of Karen youth in four Karen communities in the US, two in the Midwest and two in the Southeast. These findings specifically addresses Karen (a) educational experiences prior to resettlement; (b) English language learning; (c) parental involvement in their children's schooling; and (d) bullying and gangs. In aggregate, both methods provide teachers, community members, and service providers important insights into Karen resettlement experiences in the US.

INDEX WORDS: Refugee resettlement, Immigration/Migration, Community and families, Digital literacies, Qualitative research, Collaborative research, Participatory action research, Youth education

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DANIEL JOSEPH GILHOOLY

B.A., SAINT BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY, 1993

M.A., SAINT BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY, 1995

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by

DANIEL JOSEPH GILHOOLY

Major Professor: RUTH HARMAN
Committee: LINDA HARKLAU
MARTHA ALEXSAHT-
SNIDER

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2014

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Audrey Gilhooly; and the three brothers who made this dissertation possible; Samber Htoo, Hser Gay Htoo, and Hse Ku Htoo.

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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Since 2006 the United States has been resettling *Burmese* refugees from refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. This resettlement operation represents the worlds largest resettlement program with 12 receiving countries accepting refugees for third country resettlement (Harkins et al., 2012). According to the United States government's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), refugees from Burma represent the largest refugee group resettled to the US since the early 1990s, with nearly 110,000 refugees from Burma resettling in states across the US (Refugee Processing Center, 2014). Despite these increasing numbers, scant academic attention has been paid to this latest wave of refugees from Southeast Asia resettling in communities across the United States. In particular, few studies exist in the academic literature with regard to how Burmese refugees are coping with resettlement in the US. This study aims at bringing attention to the largest ethnic group resettling under the designation *Burmese*, the Karen people.

Moreover, although scholars are beginning to investigate Karen resettlement in the US (Isik-Ercan, 2011; Harkins, 2012; Harkins et al., 2012; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010; Mitschke et al., 2011; Ott, 201), Australia (Watkins et al., 2012) and Ireland (Kearns, 2012), no studies directly address educational experiences or provide ethnographic accounts of resettled families. In order for those working (i.e. teachers, tutors, case workers, and policy makers) with

and for resettled groups, more information is required to address their particular needs. Such insights can best be attained via the voices of those resettling. There are currently no studies that provide an ethnographic portrait through collaboration between those resettled and outside researchers.

There is also a dearth of literature exploring the ways newly arrived immigrant communities are using Web 2.0 applications to help cope with resettlement. Such an analysis can help those serving immigrant communities recognize the ways that newly arrived immigrants are using online resources to navigate life in their adopted county. Such insight can help inform new ways of working with communities as they adjust to life in U.S. schools and communities.

Background

I have been a tutor for the migrant education program since May 2010. This study is informed by my three and a half years participant observation (tutor) within one Karen community living in rural eastern Georgia. This study is also the result of my participatory action research (PAR) project performed alongside three adolescent Karen brothers, from 2010 to 2012. Such a fusion of methodologies is what Nelson and Wright (1995) describe as ‘creative synthesis,’ where research is done both with and on participants.¹ Accordingly, the findings section of this paper is divided into two manuscripts that reflect the findings of my longitudinal participant observations of the brothers’ digital literacy practices as well as the findings of our participatory action research (PAR) project.

The experience of refugee resettlement is complicated, conflicted, and transformative. The disruption of traditional social and cultural practices, preservation of heritage language and

¹ Separate Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was attained for both components of this study.

cultural practices, and the integration of new cultural attitudes, beliefs, and practices characterize resettlement experiences. Language, literacy, and education are at the center of many of these transformations as individuals and communities adopt and reject the language and cultural practices of the adoptive society. An examination of the literacy practices of three immigrant youth offers insight into the ways new immigrant youth are using literacy to meet their individual, community, and family needs.

Purposes of Study

The primary purpose of this study is to heighten awareness about the Karen people and their resettlement experiences. Simultaneously, this study looks at how Karen youth, as exemplified by the three Karen brothers who are at the center of this study, are using new digital literacies to navigate their new lives. In aggregate, the study hopes to fill three particular gaps in the literature.

First, the study aims to provide readers some background information on the Karen people. It is anticipated that those working with the Karen, such as teachers and tutors, will be better able to serve their Karen students once they have gained some understanding of their culture, history, and resettlement experiences. Chapter two provides readers a condensed history and cultural overview of the Karen people. Likewise, chapter four offers an ethnographic account of one Karen family's resettlement story.

A second purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which living in a bifurcated cultural and linguistic space both shapes Karen students' literacy practices and is shaped by their out-of-school literacy practices. This study specifically investigates how these three Karen brothers' used different Web 2.0 digital literacies to cope, contest, and ultimately persevere through the resettlement process. These findings are presented in chapter seven.

Third, the purpose of the participatory action research (PAR) component of this study is to offer an emic perspective on refugee resettlement. Therefore, the study also looks at issues related to Karen resettlement through the lens of the three Karen brothers who collaborated with me. As a language teacher/researcher, I envisioned our PAR study to be the kind of “tasked based learning” championed by John Dewey (1933) and later second language scholars like Krashen (1985), Ellis (2005), and Auerbach (1993). Informed by new literacies scholars and a critical conceptual framework, this study reveals the benefits and complexities surrounding participatory action research between immigrant youth and outside researchers. One distinct research question guided each component of the study. The first pertains to my participant observations of the brothers’ online literacy practices while the latter guided our PAR study.

Research Questions

- (1) What types of new digital literacies are being used by Karen adolescents, and how are they using them to cope with the challenges of resettlement?
- (2) What are the most important concerns expressed by resettled Karen in relation to education in the US?

A corollary question was later formed when I considered the pedagogical significance of our collaborative work.

- (3) How might a PAR project influence the English language acquisition and critical awareness of the three brothers?

Context of this Study

In May 2010, at the end of my first semester as a Ph.D. student, I had the great fortune to find much needed summer employment as a language tutor for the Georgia Migrant Consortium, a branch of the state's education department that provides services to immigrant students. For three months I taught 13 recently resettled Karen children living in rural northeastern Georgia, three of who are the brothers who are the primary focus, and collaborators, of this research study. Over the ensuing four years I have worked continuously with these children and assisted their parents. These experiences have provided me access and insight into one community's resettlement experiences.

Three Sgaw Karen brothers; Samber Htoo (Chit Poe), Hser Gay Htoo (Narko), and Hse Ku Htoo (Gola) collaborated with me on this project from May 2010 to June 2012. Due to the ongoing civil war between Karen resistance forces and the Burmese Army, their family fled Burma to Thailand, in 1989. The brothers were all born and grew up in Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand, until their resettlement to the United States. In September 2007, they were resettled in the U.S Southwest, where they lived for 16 months. In January 2009, the family relocated to rural northeastern Georgia where I was introduced to them. Throughout the duration of this study my primary role with the brothers was as their tutor and research collaborator. During our collaborative research I was the research team leader but made every effort toward inclusivity as described in the methods chapter.

Conceptual Framework

I drew on multiple conceptual constructs and theoretical frameworks to inform how I conceived of, enacted, and interpreted the findings of this study. These included Critical

Participatory Action Research (CPAR) (Fals Borda, 2001; Freire & Macedo, (1987) and New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Street, 2004; 1994), which subsumes a critical alignment to literacy research; Ethnography of Literacy (Street, 2004; Heath & Street, 2008) bridged critical theory, ethnography and literacy studies. This study was committed from the outset to collaboration and disruption of objectivist, positivist constructs that divide the researcher from participants. Rather, this study aimed at inclusivity and strived to incorporate the participants' own interpretations and understandings. Together, these theories provided a rich background through which to anchor and explore the complex circumstances of the lives and literacies of three Karen brothers.

Since I played a variety of roles beyond that of researcher/teacher (i.e. friend, advocate, cultural broker) throughout the duration of this study, I was keen on finding a conceptual framework that would disrupt the researcher-subject binary. As their teacher and friend I wanted the research process to be pedagogical, what Freire calls an "educational project". Like Dyrness (2008), I envisaged the research process itself to be a potentially transformative process. I also envisioned that we would learn from each other and that we would each transform through greater cross-cultural awareness. Fortunately, I was able to draw from a variety of scholars who had used CPAR with concomitant Diaspora communities (Auerbach, 1992; Cahill, 2010; Gardner, 2004; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; McGill & Brockbank, 2004; McIntyre, 2008; Willis et al., 2008).

New Literacy Studies (NLS) provided a basis for me to conceptualize my perception of literacy. NLS challenges traditional notions that conceive of literacy as a set of neutral practices devoid of social context (Gee, 2006; Street, 2008). NLS afforded me a more nuanced understanding where literacy is viewed as neither neutral but, rather, a practice that is always

contextual; situated in a complex set of cultural, historical, social, political and religious practices. Moreover, NLS conceived of literacy as a varied set of communication practices, multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), which exist in a variety of modes in a host of new “communication landscapes” (Kress, 2003). Youth today, including refugee youth, are actively engaged in these new communication spaces, which, as we shall see, are serving their unique psychosocial, social, and pragmatic needs as they cope with the challenges of resettlement.

These concomitant and complementary sociocritical perspectives provided me a means to conceptualize my understandings of literacy and the research process. These theoretical perspectives also provide a new means of representing a new culture such as the Karen. I contend that by examining their online literacy practices new understandings about Karen resettlement can be gleaned. And, moreover, teachers will be better positioned to meet their unique needs.

Potential Significance of the Study

This study is seen as potentially significant for four main reasons. First, this study draws attention to a minority group that is currently underrepresented in the literature. Chapter two offer readers an overview of Karen culture, history, and resettlement to the US. Chapter four provides a detailed account of one family’s resettlement experience to the US. Both chapters offer teachers, tutors, and others working with the Karen community important insights into this latest and largest resettled group.

Second, the findings of this study will also add to the literature on the role participatory action research (PAR) can play in bridging outside researchers and immigrant youth in creating informative research on issues related to resettlement. More specifically, this PAR project

investigates the language, socialization, and acculturation needs of newly arrived Karen refugees. Such participatory efforts are rare in the literature and offer a uniquely emic ethnographic perspective. Concurrently, this study will contribute to the literature on the role of PAR in minority/refugee education and language acquisition. Researchers have conducted PAR studies with minority adolescents (Cooper, 2005; Dyrness, 2008; Balcazar et al., 2009; Fine, 2009; Cahill, 2010; Franks, 2011), while others have addressed PAR and refugee adolescents (Cooper, 2005; Evans, 2013; Van der Velde, 2009; Rodriguez-Jimenez, 2010), but none have addressed the role of PAR and Karen resettlement experiences. This study will contribute to filling this gap.

Third, this study investigates how Web 2.0 technologies are impacting the resettlement experiences of diasporic, transnational communities like the Karen. The new literacy practices afforded by new Web 2.0 technologies (Lam & Warriner, 2012; Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Lam, 2006) are transforming traditional literacy practices as well as the resettlement process (Cho, 2011). In addition, this study offers unique insight into how three Karen brothers are using new digital literacies to cope with displacement, marginalization, loneliness, and socialization in the host culture. Such findings will inform teachers, school officials, and policy makers as they consider new ways to assist newly arrived immigrant groups like the Karen.

Finally, this study adds to concomitant studies on ethnography of literacy. In the tradition of ethnographic studies by Shirley Brice Heath (1988), Gail Weinstein (1988) and Brian Street (2004,) this study demonstrates how an investigation of out-of-school literacy practices can reveal much about a culture's unique values and beliefs, whilst also demonstrating how literacies affect, and are affected by the resettlement experience of this heretofore little known ethnic group from Southeast Asia.

Terminology

The Karen Diaspora story is singular. Unlike previous Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the Karen have a unique and long historical connection with Americans. The Karen-American story dates back 200 years with the arrival of American missionaries in 1813. However, despite these long ties between people, few Americans we met throughout this study knew anything about the Karen people. I have spoken with multiple teachers, administrators, and citizenry and have met few who have ever heard of this ethnic minority from Burma and Thailand. Therefore, many of the terms associated with Karen history, culture, and their flight from Burma necessitate some explanation from the outset. Furthermore, a separate chapter, Chapter two, provides the reader with some cultural and historical context to the Karen people.

Burma or Myanmar? The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta officially renamed the country to “Myanmar Naing-ngan” in 1989 (South, 2011). However, ethnic minority groups and some governments (including the United States) still use the old designation “Burma.” This study follows the traditional usage of “Burma” throughout, as it was the only appellation used by the Sgaw Karen participants in this study.

Importantly, the United States government (and many writers) specifically refers to refugees from Burma as *Burmese*. This appellation is somewhat misleading. Throughout this study the term *Burmese*² refers to all ethnic groups from Burma while the term *Burman* refers to the largest ethnic group from Burma. In fact, only three percent of those resettling to the US are ethnic Burman (or Bamar), the dominant ethnic group in Burma. Most are ethnic Karen (47%)

² The term *Burmese* will also be used to denote the national language of Burma.

or Chin (33%) (Refugee Processing Center, 2014). This study specifically relates to the largest Karen sub-group resettling, the Sgaw Karen.

While many studies identify those who have participated in the study as “participants,” I believe that the term “participants” expresses an impression of detachment between all participants and denotes a false sense of objectivity. This study is ethnography and, therefore, is very much subjective and personal as it involved multiple people and their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. The relationships formed within this study compel me to use a more informal term when considering the participants collectively: “the brothers.” Therefore, “the brothers,” while more casual than “participants,” more accurately represents those who invested 25 months of their lives to this study and is used in place of participants. When I use the word *participant(s)*, I am referring to other Karen contributors to our research.

“The brothers” specifically refers to the three Karen brothers whom I collaborated with on this study. When I refer to them individually I will refer to them by their nicknames as per their request. The eldest brother is nicknamed Chit Poe, the middle brother, Narko and the youngest is referred to as Gola. A more complete description of each of the brothers and our relationships is provided in Chapter four. Some additional terminology needs to be addressed so as to provide some context when reading the following chapters.

Writing any collaborative piece is inherently problematic when only one of the collaborators is writing. Hence, when I use the possessive pronoun *their*, as in *their father or their home*, I am referring to the brothers’ father and house. In chapter two’s discussion on Karen history I refer collectively to all Karen groups using the plural pronoun *their* as in *their insurgency or their cultural practices*. I try and differentiate each of our research teams members’ opinions by the use of our names but sometimes use the plural pronoun “we” to

describe opinions and beliefs that we shared. Careful consideration was taken when using these pronouns throughout this study.

Organization of Chapters

Since this dissertation is a hybrid text with the findings chapters presented in manuscript form, there is some redundancy. However, the organization of this dissertation was intended to help create more flow for the reader. This study is divided into four sections. The first section includes chapters one and two.

Following this introductory chapter, I will provide some background information on the Karen people in chapter two. Chapter two describes the Karen story from the arrival of early American missionaries in Burma through their resettlement to the US in 2006. I have made every attempt to set the brothers' personal story against the backdrop of more recent historical events. This chapter informs the reader on the culture and history of the Karen people so as to provide some histo-cultural context.

Section two includes chapters three, four, and five and each relates to the methodology. Chapter three provides a review of the literature related to PAR, with a focus on work related to refugee populations and language learning. Chapter four provides a more descriptive portrait of the research participants as well as the research setting. Chapter five specifically addresses the data collection methods as well as the data analysis tools used.

Chapters six and seven are findings chapters in the form of manuscripts. Chapter six presents some of the findings from our PAR project on Karen resettlement and the educational experiences of Karen adolescents. This chapter discusses some of the most salient topics related to Karen resettlement as identified by our team. Chapter seven looks specifically at the online

literacy practices of these three brothers and represents my participant observations as their tutor. Finally, chapter eight will address the conclusions and implications of this study and future studies that are warranted.

CHAPTER 2

THE PEOPLE CALLED KAREN

Unlike previous resettled refugees (i.e., The Lost Boys of Sudan, the Vietnamese boat people, and the Hmong) little public attention has been paid to the Karen. The Karen journey from the remote mountains of Burma, to Thai refugee camps, to the main streets of the United States, is sparsely documented. This review of the literature on Karen history, culture, language, religion, and diaspora provides the reader some sense of the background of the Karen people. This chapter provides background information on Karen traditional practices, culture, history, language, religion, and insurgency against the Burmese government that has, in part, led to their flight to Thailand and their resettlement to the US.

This chapter begins with an attempt at identifying the people known as Karen. I will differentiate the varying groups who have been identified as Karen and begin to focus my attention on one Karen subgroup, the Sgaw Karen. This is followed with a description of the cultural practices of the Sgaw Karen. This section specifically attempts to situate Karen cultural practices amidst the backdrop of my experiences with the focal Karen community under investigation in this study.

Identifying the People Called Karen

Significantly, the appellation *Karen* (Kuh REN or kā-rěn) refers to a diverse group that is neither bound by language or other traditional markers of ethnicity (Buadaeng, 2007; Cheesman, 2002; Falla; 1991; McMahon, 1876). Since it has been estimated that there are between 20 and

25 Karen dialects (Cheesman, 2002) it is critical to begin by identifying which group is under investigation in the current study. There are three main Karen groups: Pwo, Bghai, and the largest, Sgaw. The community that is the focus of this research study is Sgaw Karen and, consequently, the focus of this review is on Sgaw Karen culture and history. As much of the literature does not distinguish between Karen groups, I use the general appellation Karen most often but will use *Sgaw Karen* when the literature specifically refers to Sgaw Karen culture, history, language or religion.

Any attempts at verifying the etymology of the word Karen is not without controversy. The earliest recorded Western ethnographic classification of the Karen comes from accounts of Marco Polo who refers to Karen as *Carajan* (McMahon, 1876). Later, in the late 1700s, Father Vincentius Sangermano, an Italian Catholic missionary, offers the first detailed account of the Karen, referring to them as *Carians*. Later, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Siamese scholars (Laungaramsri, 2003; Thawngmung, 2008) categorized the Karen as *khon pa* or wild man. The origin is most probably Burman, who refer to the Karen collectively as *Kayin*.

The Burmans expressed contempt for the Karen, referring to them as “wild cattle of the hills” (Cady, 1958 as quoted in Hayami, 2004, p. 36). Others, like McMahon (1876), suggest that the word Karen originated in a Pali word, meaning ‘dirty feeders’ (p.47). Whatever its origins, the term Karen originates from outside any of the Karen dialects and is emblematic of the historical objectification of the Karen by neighbors, foes, and, more recently, by foreign missionaries and academics.

The Karen are less clear in their own ethnic classification. According to Moonieinda (2010), a Karen Buddhist monk in Australia, one only needs to self identify as Karen. He writes,

The Karen are unique in that it is not necessary to have Karen parents to be Karen.

Many Karen say that to be Karen a person must identify as Karen; know Karen culture and customs; and speak a Karen language. (p.5)

Such an attitude exemplifies the confusion involved in identifying who is and who is not Karen. During this study, I was constantly astounded at the variety of people I met who self-identified as Karen, despite their physical differences. I have interviewed *Karen* men and women in the US with radically different physical features, ranging from those with dark complexions resembling South Indians, to those much paler, resembling Caucasians or Latinos. The majority exhibit more traditional Sinitic features. It seems that many identify as Karen because of their ability to speak the Sgaw Karen language.

Interestingly, the Sgaw Karen self identify as *pga k' nyau* or human being (Hayami, 2004, p.78) and the word Karen does not exist in any of the Karen dialects. Today, the Karens are estimated to be either the second or third largest ethnic group in Burma. Due to the protracted civil war in Burma, it has been difficult to estimate with any degree of accuracy populations of each ethnic group residing in Burma. The Karen are the largest ethnic minority in Thailand (Thawngmung, 2012).

It has been well established that those referred to as *Karen* are found throughout the plains of southern Burma to the hills along the Thai-Burmese border. Cusano (2001) contends, “Karen is a blanket term that covers several people inhabiting a large area of mainland Southeast Asia between Burma’s Irrawaddy River and Thailand’s Chao Phraya [River]” (p.140). As the map in Figure 2.1 illustrates, the majority of Karen live on both sides of the central Thailand/Burmese border.

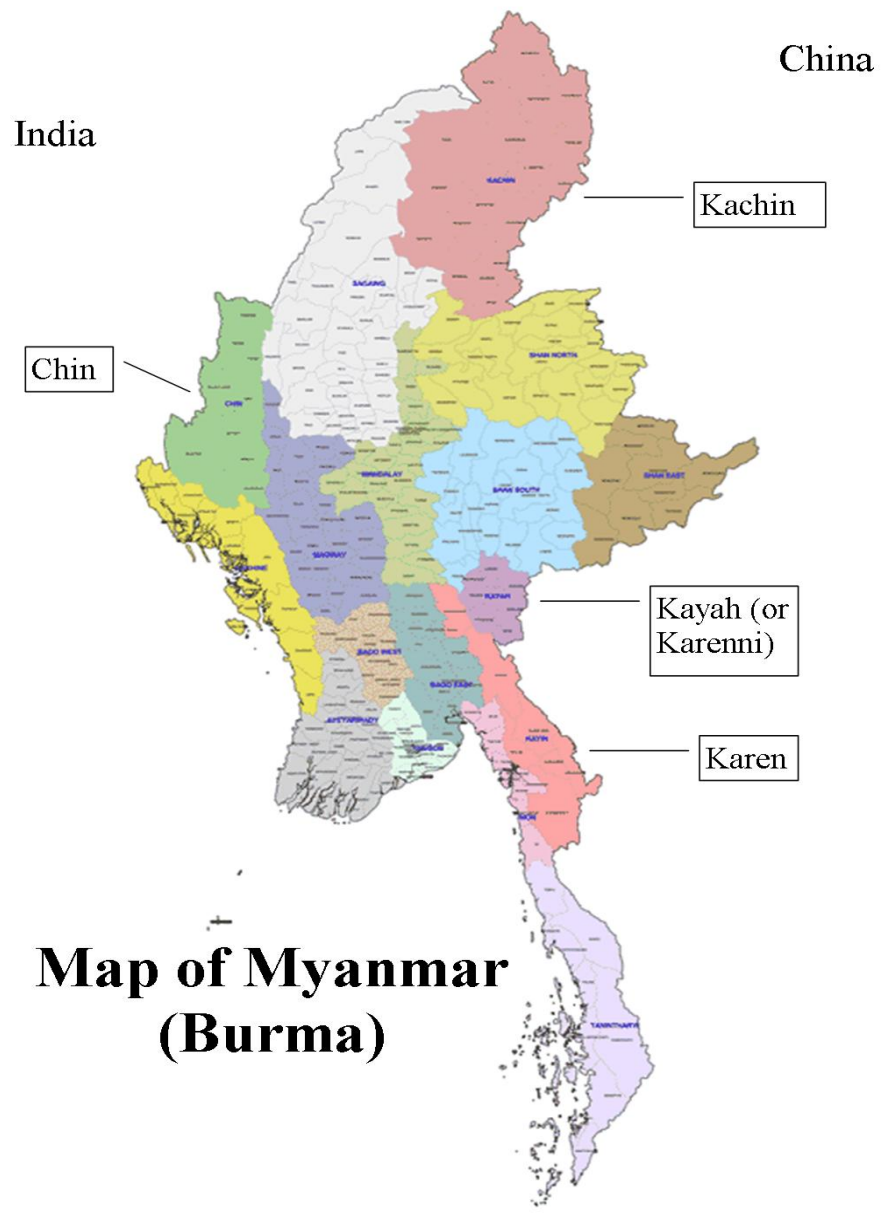


Figure 2.1

Map of Burma by Ethnicity

The Karen are the largest group resettling to the USA under the designation Burmese. In fact, nearly half of those resettling (approximately 60,000 as of December 2013) are Karen

(Refugee Processing Center, 2012) and the majority are Sgaw (Christian) Karen. Despite linguistic and religious differences the various Karen groups share many cultural practices.

Karen Traditional Practices

The traditional practices of the Karen have not changed in centuries. Most Karen in Burma continue to harvest rice as they have since they settled in both the plains and hills (Cusano, 2001). They practice both wet rice and dry rice cultivation depending on their geographical location. They are also noted for their skills in farming, hunting, lumbering, and soldiering (Falla, 1991; Marshall, 1918; Pedersen, 2011; Smeaton, 1887). Their adeptness at using elephants in the valuable teak trade was long renowned in the region (Cusano, 2001; Falla, 1991). Interestingly, the brothers' rural Karen community in Georgia still maintains many of their traditional farming, hunting, cooking, and living practices described in 19th century accounts of the Karen.

Karen Society

Though the brothers' lived experiences differ from that of both their parents, much of where and how they lived in the refugee camps and in the US is representative of traditional Sgaw Karen social life. Village life, according to Marshall (1970), was synonymous with family life as the Karen traditionally lived in close proximity to their nuclear and affinal kin. Nuclear families as well as affinal relationships were, and are, highly esteemed among the Karen and it was common for extended families to live together in a village long house or in closely situated bamboo homes (Marshall, 1970; Smeaton, 1887). This pattern of living continued after displacement and relocation to refugee camps where families often lived next to or in the same

zone as extended family members (field notes, June 6, 2012). Such patterns also continue post-resettlement as was revealed in my focal community.

The brothers' Karen community in rural Georgia consisted of over 30 extended family members living within three miles of the brothers' home. The brothers' secondary migration in the US is indicative of other Karen in the US (Ott, 2011) and previous Southeast Asian refugee groups (Hein, 1993). Interestingly, the entire Karen populations of my focal Karen community migrated to eastern Georgia after their initial resettlements in Arizona, New York, Kentucky, and North Carolina. Such secondary migration was noted in other Karen communities visited.

Community Elders and the Oral Tradition

Traditionally, elders played the important role of maintaining and preserving the village's history by relating oral narratives documenting the village's history (Cusano, 2001; Marshall, 1970). The stories were passed down orally to ensure that the ancient legends and histories were retained by future generations (Marshall, p.128). As we shall see, these *htas* (oral stories) were, and remain, an important means of preserving traditional narratives. Interestingly, I observed many similar narrative events where the brothers' father and other Karen elders spoke unabated for between 30 and 40 minutes on a variety of myths, legends, and parables. Such monologues also served to pass on various traditional beliefs, reiterated the importance of maintaining Karen identity, related warnings about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, and, most often, reiterated the importance of religion (field notes, June 4, 2011).

Traditionally, Karen elders were responsible for electing a village chief who acted as the patriarch of the village (Cusano, 2001; Marshall, 1970). Analogously, such a tradition continues within Karen communities in the United States who rely on elders for guidance, support, and the

maintenance of cultural practices. Today, Karen preachers and other elders hold similar positions within the Diaspora community and offer cultural, spiritual, and moral leadership. Brown Htoo, the brothers' father, was one such leader in their community and was a major source of political information, religious teaching, and cultural maintenance (see Research Context section for a more complete description of his role within the Sgaw Karen community in Sandville). Interestingly, Karen missionaries from Thai refugee camps, Burma, and the US keep US-Karen communities connected by their frequent visits to ethnic enclaves across the country. These visitors were usually representatives from various Karen Baptist organizations. They shared information and apprised communities of issues pertaining to citizenship, latest events from Thailand and Burma, as well as a host of other secular and religious issues.

According to Falla (1991) and Marshall (1970), traditional community life was egalitarian with all village members sharing in the tasks of ordinary life while little differences in class existed. The land was considered free and belonged to the community (p. 129). Every family was at liberty to work as much land as they could tend and the village worked cooperatively in harvesting and threshing (Cusano, 2001). Marshall's (1970) observations of the high regard Karen had for community over individuality is an important consideration when examining Karen resettlement in the United States. He writes,

There was little occasion for individual initiative among the Karen on account of the important part played by the communal activity amongst them. One could claim no particular credit for his deeds of blood on a raid. That belonged rather to the organizer and leader of the foray. One never set out on a journey or attempted any special work alone. In some sections it was the custom for the chiefs to blow a horn or beat a gong as a signal to go the fields. Every one went on that signal. None would go without it (p.130).

Such observations are particularly striking when considering Karen resettlement in the United States, where individualism typically takes precedence over collectivism. In our investigation of Karen communities, I have noted the same focus on collective action and living as noted by Marshall (1970). Such attitudes, I later argue, have both helped and hindered Karen resettlement, from finding employment to succeeding in US schools.

Karen Relations with the West

Notwithstanding the dearth of literature related to the Karen in the United States, Karen-American relations are longstanding, dating back to 1813 and the arrival of the first American missionaries, Adoniram and Anne Judson. A large corpus of ethnographic, missionary, and British civil servant accounts offer insight into nineteenth century Karen-Western relations. An understanding of the long history between the Karen and the West helps to better clarify why the Karen are currently resettling in the US, and situates the Karen in a globalized, historical context.

Western Depiction of the Karen

A common portrayal in all early western accounts of the Karen depicts a savage hill tribe that was most commonly depicted as shy, fearful, and alternately savage and peaceful. The account of V.W Wallace (in Po, 1928), British Commissioner of the Irrawaddy Division, is typical of early nineteenth century Western accounts.

The fact is the Karens are a shy race, suffering from a sort of desire to keep aloof from all other people, and seldom showing any wish to interview officials unless they have proved their friendliness by learning their language and customs and moving amongst them. Even then, to many persons, the Karen may appear to be surly and ungrateful, but

this is only due to his natural shyness and the repression of all outward signs of his feelings. (As quoted in Po, 1928, p.35)

Similar accounts of the Karen are found today. One White American neighbor of a Karen family in Milwaukee had this to say about her reticent neighbors.

They are nice, yes. But they are all so shy. We're a friendly family, always were really and try to be neighborly. The mother, or at least I think she is, the tiny one there with baby, I don't think she's ever raised her eyes above my knees. The kids will talk with me all right but the parents, not a word in over two years. Just smiles. (Interview transcript, June 27, 2011)

After nearly four years working with the same Karen families, there are still members, namely women, who shy away from any interaction with me. While visiting a Karen village in Shan State, Burma in 2001 I was struck with their weariness of outsiders. Interestingly, only a few weeks ago (January, 2014) a newly resettled Karen family hurried into their home upon my approach.

Other descriptors of the Karen focus on Karen allegiances to both the British and American missionaries. The Karen are often portrayed by missionaries as loyal and peaceful but prone to heavy drinking (Harris, 1920; McMahon, 1887). In my experience I have only witnessed a few Karen men openly drinking. However, the brothers have expressed their concern about the drinking habits of many Karen men who “never drink with you [author] because they want to keep it secret” (Chit Poe, personal correspondence, August, 2013). Such revelations were hallmarks of the study and speak to the importance of collaboration.

Karen and the West: The Colonial and Missionary Enterprise

Religion has long set the Karen apart in the region and is one of the unifying ethnic characteristics of the Sgaw Karen. Traditionally animist, today most Karen are Buddhist, Animist-Buddhist, or Christian (Baron et al., 2007). The role of religion on the Sgaw Karen people and the wider Karen community is critically important to understanding modern Karen identity (Ananda, 2002; Horstmann, 2011; South, 2011). Christianity, namely Baptist Protestantism, represents one of the primary “institutions” (Heath & Street, 2010) within the Sgaw Karen community and has, according to Renard (2003), helped create a modern Karen identity. As we shall see, the discourse promoted by the Christian Sgaw Karen has attempted to project a pan-Karen identity and politic (South, 2011) that is neither inclusive nor representative of all those labeled Karen.

The failure of Judson and later missionaries to convert the majority Burman population was overshadowed by the success of missionaries with the Karen people (Anderson, 1956; Horstmann, 2011; 2010; Keenan, 2005; Smith, 1999). The sustained and successful efforts of American missionaries created an indelible link between the two peoples that continues until this day. Interestingly, Karen university student Theodore Thanbya, graduated from the University of Rochester in New York as early as 1871.

Karen-Western relations were also further solidified with the British annexation of Burma in 1885. Interestingly, many of the earliest English accounts by American missionaries and British civil servants contend that Karen traditions foretold the arrival of White emancipators. The British civil servant, Alexander McMahon (1887), writes of this prognostication.

Their traditions taught them that they were to look to the West for their deliverers –The White foreigners who were to come by the ocean, bringing with them the Book, once theirs, which was to make them acquainted with the true God, and free them from the yoke of oppression. The advent of the English was accordingly hailed by the Karens with a delight that was intensified by the fact that the American missionaries brought with them the Book for which they had so long yearned. An opening was accordingly made and eagerly taken advantage of by the Karens, their new rulers.... (p.43)

Interestingly, this opening McMahon describes was also taken advantage of by the missionaries who earnestly began baptizing willing Karen. The White brother had seemingly returned to the Karen in the form of both American missionaries and British colonial administrators. The missionaries brought them the lost book and the British helped relieve the “yoke of oppression.”

British expansion east from India led to three Anglo-Burmese wars pitting the Anglo-Indian Army against the Burman King. The Karen found in the British an unexpected “deliverer” against their historical foes, the Burmans, and they supported the British throughout the colonial era in Burma (Cusano, 2011; Falla, 1991; McMahon, 1876; Smith, 1999). The Karen first served alongside the British in their efforts against the Burmese in the Anglo-Burmese wars and later fought alongside the British against the Japanese during World War II. Such an alliance provided a century-long reprieve from their longstanding subjugation under the Burmans. Moreover, Karen relations with Western missionaries and the British colonial enterprise heightened animosity between the two ethnicities pre- and post-independence from the British (Hayami, 2004; Smith, 1999).

In addition to serving the British in a military capacity, the Karen also served in administrative positions under colonial rule and provided the Karen material and other benefits (Po, 1928; Smeaton, 1877). Moreover, the British and missionary enterprises established the first organized network of schools for the Karen and promoted Karen literacy in both Sgaw Karen and English (Po, 1928). Some earnest students were able to win scholarships to England and the United States for postsecondary education. Many American and British educated Karen became teachers, nurses and came to hold other civil servant positions under the British (Po, 1928; South, 2011). These foreign-educated and Christian Karen later became the leaders of nationalist movements that began in the late nineteenth century. On the eve of independence in 1948, many Sgaw Christian intellectuals became vocal supporters of British rule and were weary of an independent Burma (Cusano, 2001; Smith, 1999; South, 2011). Their foreboding was later justified as battles between Karen and Burmese troops ensued soon after independence.

Many of the earliest nationalist leaders, such as Saw Baw Oo Gyi and Sir San Crombie Po, were educated in Great Britain and the US, respectively. American educated medical doctor and Karen intellectual, Sir San Crombie Po (1928), offers some insight into Westernized Karen attitudes toward the British and the Americans.

The Karens are not ashamed or afraid to proclaim to the world publicly or in private that they owe what progress and advancement they have made, to the missionaries whom they affectionately call their 'Mother,' under the protection of the British who they rightly call their 'Father.' (Po, 1928, p.58)

It is clear that Karen relations with both Western nations furthered the divide between the Karen and the majority Burman population. It is also clear from the accounts of Harris (1920), McMahon (1876), Po (1928), and Smeaton (1887) that Burman kings had long persecuted the

Karen for centuries. Up until independence in 1948, tensions were directly a result of Karen empowerment under British rule and American missionary efforts.

In short, British involvement in Burma left a mark on the nation and no more so than with the Karen people. As illustrates, nineteenth century Karen history is marked by colonial and missionary enterprises. The table also illustrates how quickly the American missionary enterprise was able to help develop Karen religion, literacy (i.e. printing press), US-Karen relations (i.e. Karen students in the US), and nationalism (i.e. the establishment of nationalist groups like the KNU).

Table 2.1

Nineteenth Century Karen History: Karen-Western Relations

Year	Event
1813	American Baptist Missionary Adoniram Judson arrives in Burma
1824-26	First Anglo-Burmese War (Karen assist British)
1829	First Karen Converts to Christianity (Ko Tha Byu)
1832	Printing press arrives for Karen mission
1842	“The Morning Star,” Sgaw Karen language newspaper is established and runs until 1962
1843	First Sgaw Karen Bible published
1845	Karen Baptist Theological Seminary established
1852	Second Anglo-Burmese War
1853	First Pwo Karen Bible published
1858	First Karen student attends Bucknell University
1865	Burma Baptist Convention Founded
1881	Karen National Association established (predecessor of the KNU)
1885	Third Anglo-Burmese War, Final Annexation of Burma by British

The Legend of Toh Meh Pah (Father Boar tusk)

Christian conversion of the Karen began in 1824 with the baptism of Ko Tha Byu by American Baptist missionaries (Po, 1928). As noted earlier, Karen conversion has been attributed to the traditional Karen prophecy that foretold the return of the “White brother from across the sea” (Smeaton, 1887). The story is an interesting and important insight into how and why the Karen so readily adopted Christianity.

The Karen legend of Toh Meh Pah (Father Boar Tusk) suggests that “long ago” the Karen were separated from their White brother. The story tells how Toh Meh Pah, the Karen progenitor, had left the Karen, carrying with him a golden book of knowledge. It was predicted that one day Toh Meh Pah would return with the book and help emancipate the Karen (Dun, 1980). When news reached the Karen that “White” men (i.e. missionaries) had arrived, they eagerly came down from the hills requesting the lost book of knowledge. The missionaries quickly obliged and presented the Karen with the Bible. Today, most Sgaw Karen are Christian and nearly 30% of all Karen are Christian, primarily Baptist or Seventh Day Adventist (Thawngmung, 2012). The legacy of such a story has had a lasting effect on Sgaw Karen culture, history, identity, and language.

Christianity and Sgaw Karen Literacy

Traditionally, the Karen were an oral culture who spoke a variety of dialects that had no corresponding writing system (Delang, 2001; Hayami, 2004; Renard, 2003; Smith, 1999). The Karen relied on *htas* (oral poems) to pass down laws and maintain traditional practices (Marshall, 1970). Like other nineteenth century missionary efforts in Africa, the South Pacific, and Asia, American Christian missionaries introduced written language to the Sgaw Karen. Within 17

years of their arrival in Burma, Christian missionaries had translated sections of the New Testament into a Sgaw Karen script they devised using Burmese characters (Anderson, 1956; Cheesman, 2002; Hayami, 2004; Marshall, 1970; South, 2011). Interestingly, later missionaries devised competing orthographies for various Karen dialects and other Christianized ethnic groups like the Chin and Karenni. Pwo Karen have a Thai-based orthography and the Karenni have a Romanized script, both were created by Christian missionaries.

The missionaries made literacy a major goal of their enterprise. As Lewis (1924) contends, "...writing down the language was the primal effort in the evangelization of the Karens" (p. 204). In addition to translating the Bible, the missionaries established a very active printing press, which allowed for the mass dissemination of mostly Christian texts, school primers and Sgaw Karen newspapers (Po, 1928). The missionaries' establishment of a Karen printing press enabled western and later Sgaw Karen missionaries to spread the gospel while propagating a new Christian identity (Harriden, 2002). The first Sgaw Karen publication in the mid-nineteenth century and the longest run newspaper in the country, *The Morning Star Today*, became "a mouthpiece for Christian ideas" (Harriden, 2002, pp. 96-97) and ran until 1962 (Hayami, 2004). According to Keyes (1995),

The missionaries initiated the development of a Karen literate tradition, beginning with the translation of the Bible into Karen but also including, from a very early time, publication of folklore supportive of Christian ideas. The construction of printing presses to serve both religious and educational needs also stimulated the emergence of a Karen press and a tradition of secular literature. The Karen Christian churches (which are mainly Baptist) have provided a network of connections and an organization that is more

than local. Missionaries have also attracted support from non-Karen circles in Burma, India, England, and the United States. (p.96)

Today, cell phones, digital video (pirated DVDs), YouTube postings, and websites have become the major means of dissemination of Karen religious, secular, and nationalist literature. Christian publications continue to serve Karen communities in Burma, the refugee camps, and the Diaspora community in third countries like the United States. This trend is anticipated to continue with the ever-increasing interconnectivity between regions afforded by the Internet.

Later, missionaries established mission schools, which aimed to spread the gospel by teaching the Karen to read and write. Importantly, Dr. Wade's introduction of a Sgaw Karen script provided the Karen *literacy* and also enhanced the divide between Karens and Burmans. As Dun (1980) reports, "...if any Karen in Burmese territory was found to have learned the art of reading and writing, the penalty was death by crucifixion" (p. 65). Though literacy further polarized Karen-Burman relations, literacy provided the Karen more social, economic, and cultural capital.

Initially, the Karen were able to use their new literacy to hold positions within the British colonial enterprise. Po (1928) writes, "...the Karens recognized an association between literacy and power, and the missionaries' emphasis on imparting literacy skills served as an important draw to Karens determined to improve their status" (p. xii). Later, Karens would use literacy as a means of disseminating nationalist literature and help establish a Karen identity (Harris, 1920).

Literacy, the White man (Americans and British), and Christianity are all intricately interconnected for Christian Sgaw Karen. I leave it to my reader to consider the full scope of the epistemological and ontological implications Christianity has had on the Karen people as it is beyond the scope of this study. However, this study does explore how Christianity continues to

influence the literacy practices and, by extension, the lived experiences of the Sgaw Karen living in the United States. The efforts of early missionaries to foster Sgaw Karen literacy were eminently important in establishing an actively literate culture (Cusano, 2001; Fall, 1991; Hayami, 2004). Missionaries were also responsible for establishing a means for disseminating the written word and making the Christian Karen highly literate.

Finally, it is important to note that Christian Karen have long been in control of their own churches, creating a self-sufficient Karen Baptist church network (Harris, 1920). As early as 1887, Smeaton writes of how the Karen had become active in creating a uniquely Karen Christian church and how early on they had assumed the responsibility for the spread of the gospel amongst their people. This autonomy, Harris (1920) argues, was a direct result of the Karen having their own script, which allowed them to organize and promote their own Christian missions. Such autonomy is evidenced today in every Karen community. In only four years the Karen church in the brothers' community has their own Karen pastor, youth group, Bible study, and is preparing to open a Karen mission school to commemorate the arrival of the first American missionary in Burma in 1813.

The Karen Diaspora

Flight is a recurrent theme in Karen history and culture. They originally fled to the mountains to avoid the ruling Burman and Mon rulers (Buadaeng, 2007). Then, with the arrival of the Americans and British, many Karen came down from the hills and settled in the Delta region, reassured by their connections to missionaries and the British. Since independence many of these "delta" Karen have fled back to the relative security of the Karen State because of the civil war.

Although Karen and other ethnic minorities have been fleeing to Thailand to escape persecution since independence, it wasn't until the late 1970s that mass migrations of Karen have flowed into neighboring Thailand (Falla, 1991; Zan, 2010). That first wave of displacement was due in large part to the concerted efforts on the part of the Burmese Army, the Tatmadaw, to crush all insurgency efforts (Brees, 2010; Malseed, 2010; Smith, 1999; South, 2011). The largest wave of displaced Karen came between the late 1980s and late 1990s.

The failed 8888 (August 8, 1988) Uprising (also known as the People Power Uprising) of 1988 saw a large wave of ethnic minorities fleeing the country via the Karen state. A larger wave of Karen migrated later, in early 1995, when the Burmese Army took control of the KNU's capital city Manerplaw. Since the fall of their capital steady waves of Karen and other ethnic minorities have sought shelter in one of the camps along the Thai-Burma border. Interestingly, since third country³ resettlement from these camps began in 2006 a new multi-ethnic flow has sought sanctuary in the hopes of registering for third country resettlement.

The Burmese Army has been accused by the Karen as well as the international community of human rights violations such as forced labor, rape, torture, burning villages, forced military conscription of men and children⁴, using humans as shields and minesweepers, and genocide (Amnesty International, 1992; Brees, 2010; Malseed, 2010; Milbrandt, 2012; Pedersen, 2011; Rogers, 2004; South, 2011; Smith, 1999; TBBC, 2008). The civil war has led to the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of Karen and other ethnic minorities (South,

³ Third country resettlement refers to resettling refugees from Thailand (the second country) to third countries like the US.

⁴ The Karen have also been accused of human rights violations, including the conscription of child-soldiers (South, 2011)

2011). As Table 2.2 illustrates, the brothers' family history parallels the major historical events of modern Burma.

It wasn't until the 1990s that formal camps were established by the United Nations High Command for Refugees (UNHCR) to protect the growing number of displaced people living along the porous and often-blurred Thai-Burma border (Rogers, 2004). Currently (late 2013), an estimated 100,000 refugees live in UNHCR camps along the Thai-Burmese border with the majority being Karen (Thawngmung, 2012). Notwithstanding the establishment of refugee camps, most of the ethnic minorities who cross into Thailand are never acknowledged as refugees and live precariously in the shadows of Thai society (Moonieinda, 2010; South, 2011).

As we shall see, the personal and family histories of the brothers and their family are characteristic of the Sgaw Karen Diaspora. They represent the fortunate few who were first able find sanctuary and register as refugees in the camps. Their flight from Burma in 1989, subsequent move to various refugee camps, and final resettlement to the United States signifies a story shared by many Sgaw and Pwo Karen and other ethnic minorities now resettling in US communities. It is important to note that due to the protracted nature of the Karen refugee situation, many Karen youth were born and raised in one of the camps and have little experience with their *native* country (Burma).

The Refugee Crisis

According to Cusano (2001), from 1984 until 1998 the camps along the border resembled villages and were relatively self-sufficient. International Non Governmental Organizations (INGOs) were severely restricted by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) from these early camps. During this period these "displaced persons" were able to maintain their ethnic identity and lived

Table 2.2

Parallels Between 20th Century Burmese History and One Karen Family

Burma and the Karen	The Brother's Family
1948 Burmese Independence from Britain	1953 Brown Htoo born in Pathein, Burma
1954 Karen state of Kawthoolei established	
1960 Buddhism named state religion of Burma	
1962 Military coup sees Ne Win rise to power and the established of Four Cuts policy to eradicate insurgency groups and end “civil war”	1962 Eh Ser born In Kawthoolei (Karen State)
	1983 Brown Htoo and Eh Ser marry
1984 Mae La Camp established	1986 Sa Rah (sister) born in Burma
	1988 Moo Thaw Wah (brother) born in Burma
1988 8888 Uprising violently suppressed by Burmese Army	
1989 The country's name officially changed from Burma to Myanmar	1989 Family flees Burma into Thailand and settles in Bornho Refugee camp
	1990 Samber Htoo born in Bornho Refugee Camp
	1991 family relocates to Tha Lah Taw Refugee Camp, Thailand
	1992 Hser Gay Htoo born in Tha Lah Taw Refugee Camp, Thailand
	1994 Family relocates to Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand
	1995 Hse Ku Htoo born Mae la Refugee Camp, Thailand
2006 Bush administration allows for “Burmese” resettlement to USA from camps in Thailand.	2007 Family leaves Mae La Camp for Phoenix Arizona
2012 President Obama visits Myanmar/ Karen Burmese government sign Peace Treaty	2009 Family relocates to Georgia
2014 US halts Burmese refugee resettlement	2012 (Hser Gay Htoo first in family to graduate high school. Family relocates to Iowa

much as they did in Burma (Bowles, 1998). However, when these camps became the targets of the Burmese Army, the Thai government began to consolidate camps into more organized yet confined encampments. Since 1998, the UNHCR has helped in administering the nine camps alongside ethnic Community Based Organizations (CBO) and International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

As of January 2005, the last time any official census was conducted, the nine Thai camps house approximately 140,000 refugees. The majority was ethnic Karen (Rogers, 2004; TBBC, 2011; Thawngmung, 2012). Mae La Refugee Camp, the oldest and largest of the camps, established in 1984, houses over 46,000 refugees and was the home of the brothers for over 14 years. Mae La Camp and the other camps have periodically been mortared and set afire by the Burmese Army and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization (DKBA) over the years. The brothers often related stories how Burmese spies lived within the camps and how occasional assassinations were perpetuated. Their paternal aunt related the story of how her family had to flee two camps after shelling from the Burmese Army.

Mae La Camp houses a majority Karen population and is run primarily by Karen community based organizations (CBOs) including the Karen Women Organization (KWO), Karen Education Department (KED), the Karen Teachers Group (KTG), Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), and the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG). Sgaw Christian Karen leadership heavily influences each of these CBOs (South, 2011). The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) is a consortium of 10 international NGOs from eight countries that together are responsible for a range of services within the camps.

In Mae La Camp, families live in bamboo huts with no running water or electricity, not far from the Burmese border. The camp is divided into sections that each supports a school, a

church, some private shops, and some administrative buildings. Chit Poe's artistic rendering of the Mae La Camp in figure 2.2 provides some sense of the camp's layout. However, his portrayal does not reflect the cramped conditions or the deprivation of living conditions. Camps today are provided security from Thai military and civilian police. The UNCHR is responsible for registration and works alongside the TBBC in supervising and coordinating operations within the camp.



Figure 2.2

Chit Poe's Artistic Rendering of Mae La Camp

Refugees receive food rations of rice, salt and fish paste and have access to medical care, and clothing (Martin, 2011; TBBC, 2008; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010). Some families are

allowed small plots of land for raising a few pigs or chickens. For example, the brothers' family had one pig and several chickens.

Education in the camps

In Mae La Camp, the Karen Education Department (KED) and the Karen Teachers Group (KTG) have created a relatively 'good and diverse' education system, according to Karen scholar Ardeth Thawngmung (2012). Education is provided until grade 10 but no vocational training is offered. As of 2012, "Mae La Camp supports 18 nursery schools, 13 elementary schools, three middle schools, four high schools, two Bible schools, and a continuing education program" (Thawngmung, 2012, p.81). Other camps have less educational opportunities (Baron et al., 2007). For a glimpse into a typical camp classroom visit <http://youtu.be/wAih5HTPpRE> and for a look into ad hoc Karen education efforts back in Karen State, Burma visit <http://youtu.be/L96-F6ln22s>.

Employment in Camps

Due to tense relations between the Thai government and refugees, employment opportunities are extremely limited. A refugee could face deportation if found working illegally in Thailand (South, 2008). However, many residents work in local Thai fields and many also cross into Burma regularly to harvest bamboo, hunt, or make charcoal for sale and/or personal use (field notes, June 2011). Despite the safety and basic provisions provided, life in the camps offers few employment or higher education opportunities. More worryingly, domestic violence, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and rape continue to be reported at alarmingly high levels (Karen Women's Organization, 2006 as quoted in Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011).

Despite the obvious hardships associated with being born and raised within a refugee camp, the brothers have only spoken disparagingly about the lack of food and the hardship of

lugging water from one of the public taps. In fact, they most often spoke fondly of their memories of life in Mae La Camp. They recounted fond memories of their friendships, play, and their “illegal” forays beyond the borders of the camp. The only picture ever taken of the family in the camps offers a glimpse of three smiling brothers (see Figure 2.3). As we shall see in the findings chapter, many of those friendships and bonds created in the camps have been sustained post-resettlement via new technologies (Cho, 2011). Such friendship ties are a major source of material support and may provide adolescent resettled refugees much needed psychological support (Montgomery, 2011).



Figure 2.3 *The Brothers in Mae La Camp* (from right to left: Back row) Chit Poe and Narko, Moo Wah (elder brother), and Gola.

The Karen National Union: Nationalism, Insurgency, and the Diaspora

The decision of the Bush administration in 2005 to allow for Karen resettlement to the US was made in large part because of the administration's change of heart toward the Karen National Union (KNU). Prior to 2005, the US government viewed the KNU as a terrorist organization and thus determined that refugees linked to the KNU were ineligible for resettlement for materially supporting a terrorist organization (Calabia, 2007). The majority of those interviewed for this paper, including the members of the focal community in Georgia, were proponents of the KNU and had actively supported its military insurgency and call for an independent state. Others interviewed had served as soldiers in the KNU's military wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Therefore, I present some account of the KNU.

For over a century (from 1881 to 1994) the KNU acted unilaterally and, periodically, in concert with other ethnic insurgency groups against the central government in Yangon. Prior to 1994 and the fall of its capital, Mannerplaw, the KNU had great autonomy in Karen state and prospered by controlling lucrative teak and gem trades and was self-supporting by levying taxes on trade from Burma into Thailand (Falla, 1991). They also set up a proxy independent state with a well-organized bureaucratic and military system (Falla, 1991). The KNU was the most formidable paramilitary group and at its height in the 1970s and 1980s claimed 10,000 soldiers.

The fall of the KNU's capital, Mannerplaw, marked a major shift in the ongoing civil war (Pedersen, 2011; South, 2010; Smith, 1999) and the decline of the KNU as a viable military insurgency group. The fall of Mannerplaw in 1994 also saw a steep escalation in Karen fleeing into Thailand and the camps. Many foot soldiers and military leaders fled into neighboring Thailand.

The leadership of the KNU has historically been Baptist Sgaw Karen, despite the fact that the majority of foot soldiers were Buddhist (Harriden, 2002; Horstmann, 2011; Keenan, 2005; Smith, 1999; South, 2010). Christian hegemony within the KNU eventually led to the formation of the aforementioned Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which was formed by disgruntled Buddhist and some Christian defectors from the KNU in 1994. Cusano (2001) Harriden (2002), Smith (2011) and Horstmann (2011) all argue that this schism within the Karen insurgency has led to the KNU's greatly diminished power and, more importantly, the escalation in human rights violations against all Karen people by the DKBA and Tatmadaw (Burmese Army).

After its breakaway from the KNU, the DKBA fought in collaboration with the Burmese Army and helped all but eliminate the once formidable KNU forces. However, despite the loss of military control of much of the Karen State, the organizational structure of the KNU has been able to continue to play a major role in Karen affairs in the refugee camps as well as in the Karen Diaspora (Harriden, 2002; Horstmann, 2011; South, 2011;). According to South (2007),

A decade ago, a study of Karen refugee communities (Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced People in Thailand in 1995) indicates that access to services and other opportunities is much easier for Christians and KNU families than for Buddhists or Muslims (that is, among the refugees, religion is a more important factor in structuring inequality than is gender. (p. 61)

The Royal Thai Government (RTG) and later the United Nations High Command for Refugees (UNHCR) have allowed the KNU great autonomy in how they manage the camps (Harriden, 2002). Until 1994, the KNU was the most organized and effective minority ethno-

political Karen organization. It oversaw a vast system of churches, schools, health care facilities, and other bureaucratic institutions serving the Karen State (Smith, 2011). As a result, the KNU, which is still a Christian dominated organization, has been responsible for the maintenance and day-to-day operations of the camps since their inception in the 1990s. This has led to what South (2011) refers to as the *Sgawitization* of the camps where elite Sgaw Karen leaders dominate camp life. As a result, the Baptist membership holds privileged status (Horstmann, 2011; South, 2011).

Sgaw Karen is the *lingua franca* within many of the camps where all official business and schooling are conducted in Sgaw Karen (Horstmann, 2011; Oh & Van der Stouwe, 2008). Significantly, Christian Sgaw Karen leadership not only manages the operations of the camps but is also a central player when it comes to determining who has access to the camps. Moonieinda (2010), a Karen Buddhist monk resettled in Australia, skeptically refers to some Karen Christian converts as “rice Christians” due to the rice rations afforded those who convert. He writes, “Aid for refugees is often channeled through Christian aid agencies or through local Karen and also increase their chances of being resettled in a Western country” (p.29). Thus, conversion to Christianity offers material benefits as well as opportunities.

In short, when we consider who is being resettled to the United States it is important to recognize that most are Sgaw Christian despite the reality that most Karen are non-Christian. Moreover, many, including the family that is the focus of this case study, are proponents of the KNU and, therefore, are in support of the KNU's avowed commitment to fight the Burmese government. My key participants spent 18 years in KNU dominated camps where their allegiance to the KNU and to the Baptist church was cemented. Their Sgaw Christian identity has afforded them security, education, medical services, and the opportunity to resettle in third

countries like the United States. More research is warranted that looks at how the KNU operates and how culpable they are in the humanitarian violations⁵.

The KNU in the US

The KNU is very much a part of the Karen Diaspora community in the United States. A popular t-shirt worn in Karen communities in the US best exemplifies its continued popularity and continued status of the KNU. The front of the t-shirt features Saw Ba U GI, celebrated founder of the KNU (See figure 2.4). Such propaganda for the KNU is indicative of the ubiquity of Sgaw Karen support for the KNU as well as the extent of their organizational structure. The back of the t-shirt (below) clearly states the unambiguous principles of the KNU:

1. FOR US SURRENDER IS OUT OF THE QUESTION.
2. THE RECOGNITION OF THE KAREN STATE MUST BE COMPLETE.
3. WE SHALL RETAIN OUR ARMS.
4. WE SHALL DECIDE OUR OWN POLITICAL DESTINY.

Finally, as peace negotiations in Burma continue between the KNU and Burmese government, the fate of the refugees remains in the balance. The hope of the Karen people to return to their native villages within Burma is predicated on the cooperation of the party's negotiating their fate. It behooves the United States and its regional partners to recognize the full scope of the complexities surrounding peace in Burma and to not rely solely on those who purport to represent all Karen voices.

⁵ According to Ashley South (2011), the Karens have been involved in crimes against humanity, including the recruitment of child soldiers.

Figure 2.4
Saw Ba U Gyi's Four Principles



Resettlement to the United States

The resettlement process from Thailand to the US is long and uncertain. First, families interested in third country resettlement must be registered with the United Nations High Command for Refugees (UNHCR) at one of the Thai refugee camps (Barron et al., 2007; Harkins et al., 2012). Most apply for resettlement in the US, as it accepts the vast majority of all applicants and processes application expeditiously (Bruno, 2012). However, Burmese refugees are being resettled in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands (Harkins et al., 2012) and Ireland (Kearns, 2012). Thus, many Karen youth will have relatives in other resettlement countries that they keep in touch with via the Internet.

If refugees elect to apply for resettlement to the US they will be referred to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which processes applications for the U.S government (Bruno, 2012; Harkins et al., 2012). The applying family will then be interviewed and a background check will be performed. That information is then provided to the U.S Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which conducts a final interview (Barron et al., 2007; Harkins et al., 2012). Refugees with a criminal record or contagious disease are refused by the DHS.

Once an application is accepted for resettlement, families prepare for departure. They will receive brief cultural orientation that includes information about the western style amenities and other issues related to weather, work, and housing. They are also provided some ‘survival’ English classes (Nezer, 2013). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) handles all travel arrangements for the U.S government and is responsible for the safe transfer of refugees to their final destination (Barron et al., 2007; Bruno, 2012; Harkins et al., 2012).

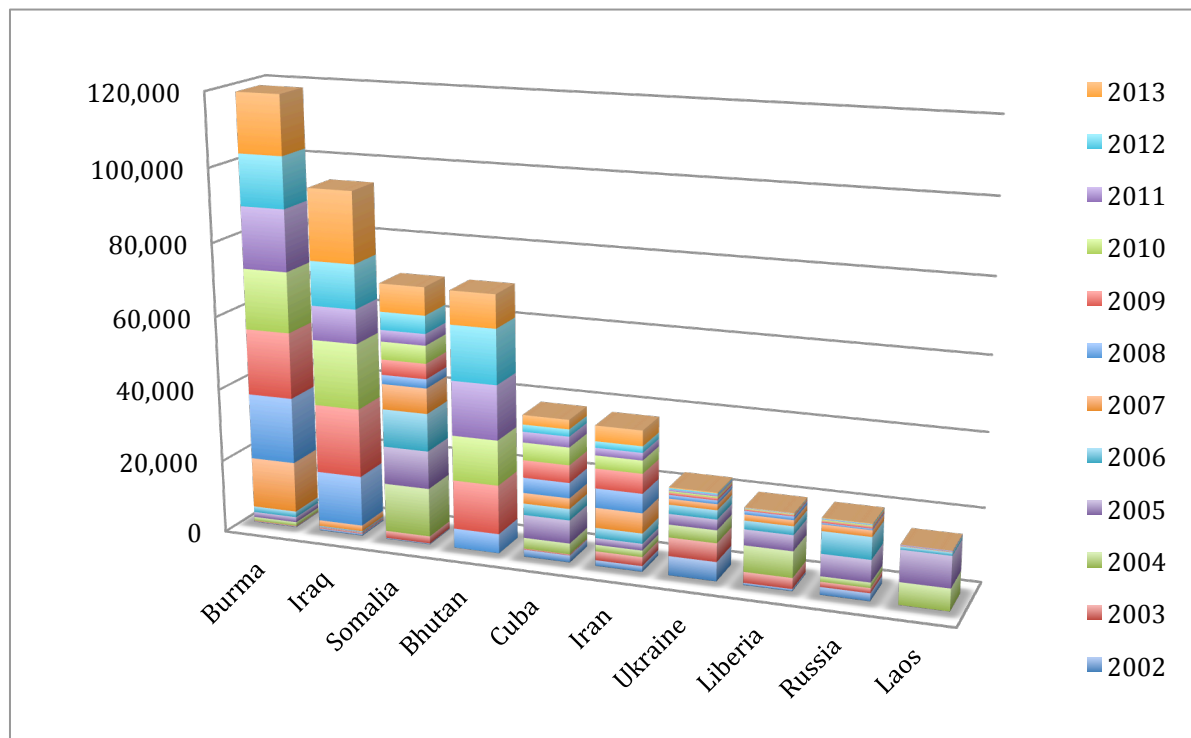
Upon arrival in the US, the refugee(s) are greeted at the airport by a representative of the sponsoring agency for that region and settled into a fully furnished apartment with some food supplies (Harkins et al., 2012). It is unclear how the government determines the placement of each refugee and there has been much controversy surrounding the programs efficacy for both refugees and the host communities (see Lugar, 2010 and Nezer, 2013). The reality is that most refugees, including the Karen, are resettled in low-income inner cities (Jacobsen, 2006; Lugar, 2010; Nezer, 2013; Smalley, 1985). However, like the focal members of this community, many Karen opt to move from their original resettlement location. This *secondary migration* may lead to the loss of services and support (Ott, 2011). In the case of this Karen community, all families lost the support of a caseworker. However, most of the families continued to receive services

such as food stamps. They also gained from the support of an active Baptist church in the area and the kindness of neighbors.

As of January 2014 the U.S government has stopped processing group resettlement applications from Thai and Malay camps housing *Burmese* refugees (Tan & McClelland, 2014). The program is terminating because the UNHCR has concluded that there is no longer interest in third country resettlement (Tan & McClelland, 2014). However, Karen resettlement will continue until all applications received prior to the deadline are processed. As we can see from Figure 2.3, the Karen represent the largest resettled group to the US over the past decade (Refugee Processing Center, 2014). As of November 2013, over 110,000 Burmese have resettled in the US, roughly 50% of whom are Karen. To date, a paucity of studies addresses Karen resettlement. This research study and other publications stemming from my participant observations and our collaborative efforts are attempts to provide some context to this latest wave of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States.

Figure 2.5

Refugee Resettlement to the US, 2002-2013



The Karen represent the latest wave of Southeast Asians but, as we have seen, their story is singular. Teachers, administrators, and others working with the Karen may benefit from learning more about the Karen story so as to meet their needs. It is my belief that such awareness will lead to a more respectful and informed understanding of this unique culture. I conclude with the words of Paulo Freire from *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994). He writes of the respect the progressive educator must have for their students.

Their speech, their way of counting and calculating, their ideas about the so-called other world, their religiousness, their knowledge about health, the body, sexuality, life, death, the power of the saints, magic spells, must all be respected. (p.85)

I contend that such respect begins with awareness. This overview hopes to have provided the reader a starting point to that awareness.

SECTION II: METHODOLOGY
CHAPTER 3
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Early on in my research work with the brothers I was committed to finding a research method and theoretical framework that would suit my anticipated goal of bringing to light the issues facing Karen communities in the US. I also hoped for the process of research to be transformative for all participants, including myself. In participatory action research (PAR) I found both. Impatient by nature, I wanted a research project that would help transform my participants' lives, as it was clear to me that they needed immediate assistance with a host of issues pertaining to their resettlement. Equally, I wanted to learn more about the Karen resettlement experience while the brothers learned about the US. I hoped that by doing research alongside the brothers, we would each transform our understandings of each other's culture. As their teacher and friend I felt that I was unable to separate *helping* and *doing* research. However, in my eagerness to "help," I was not attending to the problems as they saw them, nor did I consider that they might be the source of their own solutions.

I came upon participatory action research (PAR) by chance while reviewing an article that utilized PAR (Balcazar et al., 2009). This led to my initial investigation of PAR as a possible method for my own research. Throughout my investigation of PAR, one name continually emerged, Paulo Freire. His work on adult literacy in South America, Europe, Africa and the US has become the model from which many practitioners of action research and later participatory action research were derived (Auerbach, 1992; Cahill, 2010; Gardner, 2004;

Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; McGill, 2004; McIntyre, 2008; Willis et al, 2008). I found in Paulo Freire a theorist/educator who offered an alternative to both the how and why of research and pedagogy.

The tenets of PAR fit with my original aspirations of creating a project that would situate me alongside the brothers as collaborators. Moreover, PAR provided me a framework that has guided the way I collaborated. I have continually strived for inclusivity, dialogue, reflection, debate, and collaboration.

This review of the literature begins with an account of PAR's evolution as a research method. More specifically, I will focus on studies involving out-of-school minority populations. I continue with a review of how PAR has been specifically used with refugee communities in various countries. Then, I discuss the various methods employed under the PAR banner. Next, I offer some criticism of PAR and some possible responses. I conclude this review of the literature with a description of concomitant work that is being done with English language learners.

PAR as a Qualitative Methodology

There has been a call within some education circles toward new methods of education research (Hoffman et al., 2005). PAR offers one variant of qualitative research. This review of the research literature investigates the potential of PAR as a legitimate form of educational research. Furthermore, this review explores the potential of PAR as a research practice in addressing new immigrant youth as they adjust to their new lives in the United States.

Criteria for Inclusion

Initially, I intended to focus only on peer-reviewed journals addressing studies using PAR with minority students in out-of school-contexts. However, because of the paucity of

studies on PAR and refugees, I expanded the search to include conference papers, book chapters, and several key books. With an expanded pool of potential sources, I devised the following criteria: (a) had to specifically address action/research/; (b) had to address ethnic minority groups; (c) had to include data of some form; (d) had to appear in a peer-reviewed journal, refereed conference proposal, book chapter or book; (e) had to deal with out-of-school educational contexts (after school programs, community centers, refugee camps).

During the accumulation and initial evaluation of abstracts and texts, I came across exceptional pieces that contained some, but not all, of the aforementioned criteria. Initially, in order to gain a basic understanding of PAR, I turned to articles, books, handbooks and book chapters that provided an introduction to PAR. After gaining some understanding of PAR and because of my future research intentions of investigating how a PAR project may influence minority adolescents' second language development, I then focused my searches using the search terms "participatory action research" AND "second language acquisition." Very few studies incorporating PAR and second language acquisition were available, so I broadened my search to include Critical participatory action research (CPAR) studies addressing minority youth more generally. This led me to studies self-identifying as YPAR (youth participatory action research) where I located some studies linking YPAR and refugee youth. I then focused on those studies addressing YPAR, which specifically addressed refugee youth via the search terms "youth participatory action research" and "refugees." Only a limited number of studies addressing refugee youth were found so I settled on those PAR or YPAR studies that addressed minority youth in out-of-school contexts. These became major foci of this review of the literature.

Several computer searches were performed to gather the best possible pool of studies on out-of-school participatory action research projects with minority students. Computerized searches were conducted using two major databases for educational articles-ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Education Full Text. Other search engines such as Google Scholar.com and the University of Georgia's multi-search were used. I also sought additional studies by key authors whose names appeared repeatedly in the searches and bibliographies. In the end I compiled over 30 studies self-identifying as YPAR or PAR that dealt with out-of-school minority youth.

I downloaded the long citations into separate Word documents, one for each of the searches. I then used the search function to identify articles and papers that were available electronically as PDF files and downloaded each of those texts. Those texts that were salient but not available electronically were searched for using Google Scholar.com or ordered through my university's interlibrary loan. All retrievable papers, articles and books were organized in files using the bibliographic manager RefWorks Web Based Bibliographic Management Software.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR follows within the wider tradition of action research developed in the social sciences (Burns, 2005; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Gardner, 2004). The action research performed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s is often credited as the foundation of the action approach to research (Gardner, 2004; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; McIntyre, 2008; Morrel, 2006; Stoudt, 2009). Today, PAR is most commonly practiced in the fields of social psychology, public health, feminist studies, professional development, and environmental studies (Gardner, 2004; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; McIntyre, 2008; Morrell, 2006; Stoudt, 2009). Although there is considerable debate on

when, where and who introduced the methodology known as PAR to the world, most PAR practitioners credit sociologist Orlando Fals Borda and Brazilian activist Paulo Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1998; Gardner, 2004; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009) for being the methodologies founders and leading proponents. Their work and implementation of action research oriented models have forever linked PAR with the grass roots, critical, social activism of Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s (Auerbach, 1992; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; McIntyre, 2008).

Orlando Fals Borda's (2001) contributing chapter to the *Handbook of Action Research* offers a compelling glimpse into the early days of participatory action research in Latin America. Fals Borda views the various social movements in his native Colombia as part of a larger global movement of social activism of the 1970s. These movements shared a commitment to social action with and for the oppressed and underrepresented in civil society. Reflecting on the early inspirations for PAR, Fals Borda (2001) writes:

Thus academic accumulation plus people's wisdom became an important theoretical guideline for our movement. This rule did not imply to give blanket recognition to any infallibility for the people's wisdom. We rather tried to make a critical recovery of the popular and not to fall into the trap of populism. (p. 29)

Such a stance that places possible solutions in the hands of the people resonates in all PAR studies and has been a hallmark of participatory action research. In describing the growing activist mood of the 1960s and 1970s in Colombia, a decade marked by anti-establishment rhetoric and a variety of social Marxist movements, Fals Borda describes how he personally sought a research method that would be inclusive and collaborative in nature. As a sociologist,

he began to question long held assumptions about the nature of the research process. The following excerpt reflects how PAR is a response to the positivist approach that dominated the field of sociology.

Scientism and technology, if left to themselves, could produce a mass of redundant information as happened in the USA with positivists, functionalists, and empiricists gone berserk accumulating data to explain social integration. We tried instead to theorize and obtain knowledge enriched through direct involvement, intervention or insertion in processes of social action. (p. 29)

Fals Borda's rendering of the early stages of participatory research is replete with examples of the movement's critical commitment to conducting research *with* and *for* oppressed people. His emotional appeal to altruism, empathy, common sense, liberty, and a genuine desire to affect the lives of those most in need have become the hallmarks of PAR studies since. Such emotionalism appealed to me as I considered how best to incorporate the brothers' voices into this study. Though critics like Jarvis (1991) dismiss such emotionalism, they are at the center of many PAR studies.

Nearly every PAR study located pays homage to Paulo Freire in some fashion. His concepts of dialogic learning, problem-posing learning, conscientization, praxis, and his stance toward critical literacy have become key conceptual frameworks of participatory action research projects worldwide. His notions about literacy and pedagogy have influenced and validated my own conceptions of teaching, learning, and research.

For this particular study, Freire offered a theoretical and pedagogical framework that influenced my dual role as research practitioner and teacher. Freire's critique of traditional

education as authoritarian, paternalistic, and inauthentic resonated with me as a teacher. I was often frustrated with my own teaching, as it seemed to focus more on content than the process of learning. I saw myself trying to implant knowledge into the boys through the use of the study guides supplied to me by the school district that hired me. These activities consisted of vocabulary and math worksheets that were intended to help prepare the brothers for their respective *graduation*⁶ exams but did little to promote dialogue. In fact, these worksheets were not intended for ELLs and were often well beyond the language ability of all the brothers. I was, as Freire contends, partaking in the traditional banking system of education as the authoritarian teacher. Like many teachers, I desired to provide the brothers *authentic* (see Wong, 2006) language situations that would help them build their language repertoires and help them attain some English language speaking confidence.

The critical pedagogy proposed by Freire influenced me in three distinct ways. First, I wanted to appropriate Freire's notion about the importance of literacy in helping humanize the oppressed. His notions about creating authentic dialogues between students and educators matched my own conception of sound educational practices. Like Freire, I wanted to dismantle traditional notions of student-teacher relations with a new paradigm built on mutual trust, mutual respect, love, and a shared commitment to enacting change. As their English language teacher I hoped that such *dialogicity* would lead to more language confidence and second language growth.

Second, I wanted to appropriate Freire's notion of critical consciousness, or *conscientização*. It seemed central to my critical goals that the brothers become aware of their new positions within the dominant society. In their complaints about the difficulties in school, housing, finding employment, and learning English I saw the seeds of consciousness that was

⁶ In 2012, Georgia required all seniors to pass state graduation exams in order to graduate.

recognizing their own condition, what Freire might call *oppression*. As generation 1.25 and 1.5 young men (see Rumbaut, 1997 for a description of 1.25), those resettled as adolescents or early adolescents, they were struggling on multiple fronts: language, poverty, school, bi-cultural worlds of school and home, discrimination, limited post-secondary education opportunities, and their responsibilities within their family. Through the enactment of our PAR project I hoped we would become critically aware of what was happening in their Karen community as well as the wider Karen Diaspora.

Finally, Freire proposes a new teacher-student relation that has influenced many of the PAR studies. His *problem posing* pedagogy appealed to my intentions of working alongside the brothers' to address issues they deemed important. I wanted the research to be a bottom-up approach, where the brothers' guided how, why, who, and where we researched. Our PAR project was intended to be a joint, collaborative ethnography. Freire eloquently sums up what have become foundational tenets of PAR in the following passage from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects, which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher. (Freire, 1998, p. 74)

Such a change in the student-teacher was part of my own transformation and took time. I, too, was committed to challenging the teacher-student binary. As collaborators we worked together to present an ethnography on the Karen that included an emic perspective. Though Freire never established a protocol for participatory research, he laid the groundwork for others to appropriate his ideas and practices in their own ways.

The Many Forms of Action Research

Some studies describe themselves as Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and address issues focusing on culture, gender, race, ethnicity, and power (McIntyre, 2008; Morrell, 2006;). However, there seems to be little distinction between PAR and CPAR and many of the other participatory approaches such as: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), Collaborative Action Research, Video Action Research (VAR), and Community Action Research (CAR). A principle tenet shared by all is the unique conception of the research process. For action research practitioners the research serves a dual function; (1) the research aims to address an issue or problem identified by a community or group; (2) the research process is a means of transforming participants in the investigation (Auerbach, 1993; Burns, 2005; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fals Borda, 2001). In this case, as the brothers' tutor and collaborator, I anticipated that such a collective research project would transform them as students, community members, immigrants, and English language speakers. I also anticipated that the process of learning from the brothers', their family, and the Karen community would transform me. As we shall see our individual and collective transformations were multidimensional.

Practitioners of PAR have applied these tenets to their projects. They each share the view the process of research as a means of empowerment and, moreover, an active political statement (Auerbach, 1992; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2006). Thus, many PAR projects are likely

to focus on minority groups, indigenous rights, and issues related to the disenfranchised (McIntyre, 2008; Morrell, 2006). A review of the literature suggests that PAR is embedded in the critical tradition and is activist by nature and emancipatory in purpose.

Though many scholars offer varying definitions of PAR, McIntyre (2008) offers five distinct characteristics that are most commonly associated with PAR. These include: (a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under consideration, (c) a joint reliance on indigenous knowledge to recognize and better understand the problem, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1).

Other proponents of PAR offer compatible definitions and each share McIntyre's focus on collective reflection, collective knowledge, collective action, and cooperative implementation (Auerbach, 1993; Burns, 2000; Gardner, 2004; Miskovic & Hoop, 2006; Willis, 2008). Each of the studies under review adheres to these four tenets. In addition, each PAR study located was explicitly committed to challenging traditionalist notions about what research is and who and how it is meant to serve. In our own study, I have made every attempt to adhere to these principles as they apply to our collaborative work. As such, the brothers and I worked on all stages of this research project as described in chapter five.

PAR and Critical Theory

As we have seen, PAR falls within the wider "critical" movement of which Freire and Fals Borda were major contributors. Although different scholars have appropriated the term critical in differing ways, researchers share some basic tenets (Harman, 2012; Peirce, 1995).

Bonnie Norton Peirce (1995) offers five tenets of critical theory that reflect the most common elements of critical research. These critical tenets were also found to be major influences of the studies under review.

Critical researchers reject the claim that research is objective or unbiased, which is a characteristic of all PAR studies reviewed. Drawing on Giroux, Miskovic and Hoop's (2006) PAR study provides the most comprehensive review of the links between PAR and critical theory/critical pedagogy. They, like many PAR practitioners, view their projects as pedagogically motivated and discuss the need for outside researchers to act as active collaborators. They conclude, like most PAR practitioners, that "outside" researchers must maintain vigilance and work in collaboration with stakeholders and recognize their own subjectivities. Likewise, Van der Velde, Williamson, and Ogilvie's (2009) PAR research addressing refugees' health care needs in the US stress the importance of "equal collaboration" and respecting the skills and abilities of both the stakeholders and the outside researchers. Otherwise, outside researchers can and do become, as Freire (2000) warns, "pseudo critical educators" (p.10).

Second, critical researchers investigate the complex relationship between social structure and human agency (Peirce, 1995, p.570). This is especially true in the case of PAR studies that focus on immigrant and minority communities such as those focused in this review. Payne and Hamdi's (2008) study of homeless Black men's experiences and attitudes toward their fellow homeless, explores the disconnect between social structures within the community and how these men are able to express some agency through their acts of "street love." The authors argue that the social agencies meant to help these homeless men often do not recognize the men's' resiliency and personal agency.

The third tenet proposed by Peirce (1995) relates to the recognition by critical researchers that inequalities exist due to the unequal power relations that exist in society because of race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, and language spoken. Stoudt's (2009) work with students from an affluent White school challenges students to recognize the inherent inequities that exist in school. In the process of investigating bullying issues, the students learn to recognize and consider these inequities. Likewise, Dyrness (2008), drawing on feminist theories, works alongside Latina mothers for school reform in Oakland. Throughout the project she continually challenges these mothers to reflect on the inequities they and their children face in the community and schools. Such recognition or consciousness is seen as a step toward change.

The fourth tenets is particularly important for this research study and is a main element of most PAR projects and harkens back to the works of Freire and Fals Borda. This tenet focuses on the ways individuals "make sense of their own experience" (Peirce, 1995, p.571). As with most PAR projects, this study aims to explore how the brothers' are making sense of the new experiences that mark their resettlement lives. Collie, Liu, Podsiadlowski, and Kindon's (2009) PAR project with Assyrian women in New Zealand reveals the tensions that often exist when outsiders impose research goals. In their study, the outside academic researchers who facilitated the study realized that they needed to allow for participants to lead the investigation based on their lived experiences. Their PAR project offers an authentic portrayal of how many PAR projects evolve. In the end, the Assyrian women were able to guide the research in "culturally grounded ways" that were meaningful to them. This was also the case with the Save the Children (2001) PAR project with refugee children from Burma in China and Thailand. A major guiding principle was that these youth would make sense of the data according to their own understandings.

Likewise, the fifth tenet stresses the importance within critical theory for locating research within a historical context. This was the case with the Save the Children (2001) PAR project with refugee children. A major guiding principle was that these youth would make sense of the data according to their own understandings based on the historical conditions that led to their flight from Burma. Similarly, in this study the brothers and me often discussed and challenged each other's understanding of culture, history, and religion. Moreover, in our study we opted to use culturally appropriate ways to doing research with the Karen by incorporating the Karen concept of *tapotaethakot* as described in chapter five.

Finally, Peirce's sixth tenet refers to the notion that critical research is intended to promote social change. This final tenet is a cornerstone to all PAR projects reviewed. This notion that research is *transformative* by nature is the basic premise from which all PAR studies are founded and is the foundation of this study. Auerbach's (1992) work on participatory curriculum development draws directly from Freire's call for transformative pedagogy. Her curriculum for adult ELLs is predicated on the belief that the work adult learners do in classes should be guided by the goal of transformation as they attempt to meet the linguistic challenges of work, school, and the bureaucratic system of the host country. Likewise, Cooper's (2005) work with refugees in Kenya aims at transforming both the individuals involved in the project as well as the wider camp community. Her work in a Kenyan refugee camp was founded on the belief that the research should be instituted so as to address the needs of camps residents. By teaching the refugees how to conduct interviews and gather data she was placing the research process in the hands of the stakeholders. Our current study was predicated on such transformative goals for the brothers', the wider Karen community, and me.

PAR as Collaborative Action

Notions of collaborative research and PAR are used concurrently in this dissertation because a review of literature revealed great similarities in defining the terms. Both are predicated on cooperation between outside researchers and stakeholders. A key to understanding the conceptual framework of both is the recognition that the traditional divide between researcher and participant/subject are eradicated. Fals Borda (2001) describes the research goal of PAR as follows: "Without denying immanent dissimilarities in social structures, it seemed counterproductive for our work to regard the researcher and the researched, the 'experts' and the 'clients' or 'targets' as two discrete, discordant or antagonistic poles" (p.30). For me, an outsider of the Karen community, it seemed implausible that I could provide any meaningful ethnography on the Karen without the cooperation of the Karen community. Importantly, as a methodology PAR centers on the belief that the people who engage in the research should be those most affected by an issue or concern and that those participants should be agents or stakeholders rather than objects of the research (Cooper, 2005; Dyrness, 2008; Fals Borda, 2011; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009).

Fals Borda (1979) also sees the inherent value of cooperation between academics and stakeholders. Canella (2008), too, asserts that PAR offers a counter-narrative to traditional research that is both warranted and needed. Likewise, Dyrness (2009) sees PAR as unique in its purpose of contesting the "essentializing views of social change movements and activist research methods that leave change in the hands of specially trained 'experts'" (p. 24). Cooper (2005), too, sees PAR as a means of "countering the heritage of extractive, inequitable research practices" (p. 468). Her work in Kenya exemplifies the PAR commitment to both cooperation as

well as empowerment. The youth researchers in her study became responsible for all stages of research and were active in promoting solutions to problems and issues they identified. For example, the youth researchers became active voices both locally and globally as they advocated for change with politicians and within the camp community. In short, PAR is intended to conceptualize what it means to do research as well as to redefine the normative roles of researchers and participants. As a novice researcher and tutor I thought that such a project could help alleviate the divide between us while simultaneously offering the brothers' authentic language experiences.

PAR as Transformative

As a research methodology steeped in the critical theoretical tradition, PAR is founded on the belief that the research process itself is *transformative* and *emancipatory* (Auerbach, 2003; Fals Borda, 2001; Fine et al., 2008). Whereas traditional quantitative and qualitative research aims to “objectively” inform a particular investigation in order to promote change, PAR is seen as a “living praxis” (Kapoor & Jordan, 2008) implemented as a means of change. Analogously, Carson and Sumara (1997) conceived of action research as a living practice that attends to the way investigator and investigated *conmerge*. Action research occurs when “one becomes completely caught up with what one knows and does” (p.xvii; italics in original). This longitudinal study has tried to both reconceptualize the subject-object relationship as well as the purpose of research. The purposes for the present study were to use the research process as a means for our team to explore issue pertaining to Karen resettlement as well as the transformative nature of the action research process as a pedagogical tool.

Another of the tenets shared by PAR and critical theorists is the contestation of normalized epistemological and ontological beliefs that often deny other forms of knowing and being (Dyrness, 2008; Fals Borda, 2001; Kapoor & Jordan, 2009). For many PAR practitioners, especially those dealing with issues related to immigrants or refugees, participatory action research is a means to contest and reflect on the legacy of Western hegemony and colonial enterprises so as to better understand the current realities and to provide solutions to local solutions (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kapoor & Jordan, 2008). PAR studies performed in the West tend to focus on issues related to inner city youth (Cahill, 2010; Fine, 2005; McIntyre, 2008, Morrell, 2004; Tuck, 2009), social justice community action projects (Borsheim & Petrone, 2006; Dyrness, 2008; Romero et al., 2008), pedagogy and curriculum issues (Auerbach, 1993; McIntyre, 2000), and refugee and immigrant issues (Cahill, 2010; Collie et al., 2009; Cooper, 2005). Like the PAR work being practiced abroad, those practicing PAR in the United States are doing projects that contest normalized views on immigration, education, minority rights, and other social issues.

In Borsheim and Patrone's (2006) study with high school students in the US, they merge a writing unit with PAR in anticipation of developing students' writing skills. As students become more sophisticated researchers they also are able to develop their critical awareness about larger issues like race and gender. Likewise, Dyrness' (2008) collaborative work with Latina mothers (Madres Unidas) engages the stakeholders by questioning and reevaluating their role as women and as mothers. Dyrness incorporates a feminist view of PAR that is centered on social critique. Therefore, the mothers gain agency by enacting their own research project that utilizes their unique cultural resources to question and, ultimately, enact change in their and their children's' lives.

PAR as a Method for Collecting Data

There was some discrepancy in how different PAR practitioners address PAR as a methodology for collecting data. At one end of the spectrum is Van der Velde and Williamson's (2009) PAR study, which explicitly addresses methodology as a separate section of their paper. They provide detailed information on the participants' backgrounds, consent procedures, and a detailed account of how interviews and focus groups were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. Likewise, McIntyre (2000; 2008) explicitly identifies Grounded Theory as their group's method for collecting and analyzing data. She also offers a detailed account of how data was collected and analyzed. In both these studies the "outside" researcher had a more active role in facilitating data analysis. In both studies the outside researcher performed transcription but little attention is paid to describing how the data analysis workload was apportioned.

In contrast, Cooper's (2005) work with refugees places the entire research process in the hands of the youth researchers. In her study with Kenyan refugees, the youth researchers were responsible for creating research questions, constructing interviews, analyzing their data, and writing up their results. Like many PAR practitioners, Cooper provided her team with an introductory workshop on all phases of the research process. Such workshops were a common starting point for most of the studies reviewed (see Cahill, 2010; Collie et al., 2010; Dryness, 2008; McIntyre, 2000; Morrell, 2006; Sandoval & Bernstein, 2002; and Tuck, 2009). In most PAR studies the outside researcher was the impetus behind the planned project, providing stakeholders tutorials on videography (Evans, 2009), conducting research (Dryness, 2008; Torre, 2009) and social activism (Fine, 2009; Morel, 2008).

The degree of influence of the "outsider" researcher had on the process was a point of consideration for all studies reviewed and marked one of the major differences in how PAR has

been appropriated by different researchers. Many PAR studies were far less descriptive of their methodology and/or participants and were focused more on the research work and final products. These studies tended to focus more attention on the process of identifying and carrying out the intended projects as a collaborative team and focused less on the methods employed. Only one study (Balcazar, 2008) addressed the use of specific software for data organization and analysis. Most studies focused on discussion and reflection of the data as their sole means for analysis of findings.

Studies identified as PAR share many common methodological features. As a method for collecting data most PAR projects use standard qualitative methods relying on formal and informal interviews, questionnaires, field notes, audio and video data, transcriptions, focus groups, and informal discussions (Cahill, 2010; Cooper, 2005; Dyrness, 2008; Gardner, 2004; McIntyre, 2000; Morrell, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2008; Sandoval, 2002; Torre, 2009). A PAR study is also marked by the use of the first person plural “we” and the possessive “our,” creating a narrative style commensurate with practitioners call for solidarity between all members of the research team. Importantly, the pronoun “we” was used even in cases where the student participants did not participate in the final writing.

PAR studies also tend to be longitudinal in duration (Burns, 2000). Many projects often morph into new projects and are continually evolving, as are the needs of the stakeholder communities. Also, most PAR projects use case studies of a single community or group. A final commonality relates to the priority placed on reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process.

Reflexivity

Like most PAR practitioners McIntyre (2008) sees reflexivity as an important practice when doing PAR as it allows all practitioners an opportunity to evaluate, share, and contest their own biases and preconceptions. Again, many PAR practitioners draw directly from Freire's notion of critical dialogue and the importance of dialectic. Such a process influences all members of the team in how they learn to "listen, question, synthesize, analyze, and interpret knowledge throughout the PAR process" (p. 8). McGill and Brockbank (2004) view reflexivity as a means for practitioners to engage more intentionally in a process so as to engage with new meanings and forms of action. When a PAR project involves ethnicities, genders, languages, and races, that are different from the outsider academic, reflexivity can afford all participants the opportunity to consider and challenge other forms of knowing and action. Such reflexivity should then lead to what Moll (2008) refers to as 'dialogic authoring' (p. 153).

Many of the studies under review (Cahill, 2010; Collie et al., 2010; Cooper, 2005; Dyrness, 2008; Fine et al., 2008; McIntyre, 2008; Stoudt, 2009; and Tuck, 2009) considered discussion groups, dialogue sessions, or reflection sessions as key components of their studies. Likewise, a hallmark of our study has been the dialogic/dialectic process. In both our collaborative work and my participant observations I continually conducted "member checks (Stake, 1995). Throughout our time together I would engage the brothers' in discussions about my findings and my questions and confusions.

Reflexivity was a major consideration in the Collie, Liu, Podsiadlowski, and Kindon (2010) study with Assyrian refugee women in New Zealand. In their paper they discuss how they, as researchers, struggled with balancing their academic goals with the goals of the Assyrian women collaborators. Reflexivity on the part of the outside researchers led to their realization that they were not collaborating as much as dictating the research. Therefore, reflexivity led to

the researchers reassessing their roles and the direction of their project. In the end, the Assyrian women participants became much more active in the research.

Likewise, Evans (2013) work with Bhutanese refugees also calls into question the ethical responsibility of outside collaborators and concludes the necessity for reflexivity. She considers her role working in a highly politicized environment in the refugee camps and the need for her to refrain from imposing her beliefs on her collaborators. This restraint was particularly important because she was working with young refugees who could be influenced by her subjectivity.

Reflexivity is also a primary focus of Miskovic and Hoop's (2006) paper, which explores their critical reflections about two PAR projects with students in Chicago. Their paper examines the limits, failures, and successes of their respective PAR projects. They conclude that all PAR participants, including outside academics, must be reflexive in order to "critically examine their own role in research" (p. 271). Like the dialogues that were a hallmark of so much of our time together I became more reflexive throughout the research process. In field notes and audio diaries I was continually questioning my role in the research process. Like other PAR practitioners I gained insight into how my own beliefs, values and prejudices were influencing my and our research and the importance of reflexivity in keeping these beliefs, values, and prejudices from undermining the collaborative goals of the project. Moreover, over time I realized the critical importance of challenging my own assumptions through dialogue.

"A" Stands for Action

In addition to the action involved in collecting and analyzing data, a major consideration for many PAR projects was the finished project. Fals Borda's (2001) reflections on the various forms of reporting taken in early PAR projects such as; art and photography exhibits, musical performances, letter writing campaigns, and multi-modal texts in the form of brochures,

performances and posters were most commonly associated with PAR projects. The key in each study was the active involvement of participants in the final form of representation of their findings. Fals Borda was a particularly strong advocate for finished products created by stakeholders in modalities suited to their preferences and abilities, as many participants who were often illiterate (p. 30), or in the case of my students, lacking language proficiency. From the outset, our team anticipated using video as a means of not only collecting data but as a format to reveal our findings. However, like concomitant PAR projects ours took multiple forms for different purposes. The brothers' praxis took multiple forms from a letters writing campaign, posters, video productions, PowerPoint presentations, and music videos.

Likewise, most of the studies reviewed involved multiple final products that included some form of written report and/or presentation (see Balcazar, 2009; Cahill, 2010; Collie et al., 2010; Cooper, 2005; Dyrness, 2008; McIntyre, 2008; Morrell, 2006; Sandoval & Bernstein, 2002; and Tuck, 2009). Others were more focused on a single project, such as those created in video action research projects. Often the final products were realized via collaborative discussion with stakeholder participants having a final say in how the final product would be realized. Again, there was great variety in the PAR projects reviewed regarding the distribution of tasks in creating and or disseminating these final products.

McIntyre's (2008) work with minority students in Bridgeport, CT resulted in a manuscript reporting the team's findings as well as a presentation to local school officials. Collie et al.'s work with Assyrian refugee woman in Australia (2009) represents a study where final products were discussed and re-framed multiple times based on the expressed desire of the women to remain anonymous. The original idea of a photography exhibit was later scrapped in

favor of an anonymously written report. Cahill's (2009) study resulted in a variety of artistic forms such as spoken word performances, photography exhibits, songs, and visual-art making projects (Cahill, 2009, p. 159). Cahill et al.'s (2008) work with inner city youth led to a sticker campaign designed by student collaborators. Ginwright's (2011) study culminated in a Youth Bill of Rights that was written and presented by their youth research team. Borsheim and Petrone's (2006) work with people with disabilities resulted in a letter writing campaign to government officials. They also made subversive t-shirts and distributed them in Wal-Mart stores as a form of protest against the multinational corporation.

As we can see, a unique characteristic of a participatory approach is that it is tailor-made by the stakeholders and is expressed according to their representational preferences. PAR is not limited to any single medium or genre. It is no wonder that a growing number of arts based YPAR teams are enacting hip-hop inspired projects, and online forms of protest and reporting via blogs and social networking. The new modes of communication and meaning making afforded by new technologies will surely spawn a new generation of projects in PAR.

PAR Projects with Refugee Youth

As the current study addresses refugee youth, similar studies were sought in the PAR literature. Although YPAR studies focused on marginalized communities, few of the PAR studies located dealt specifically with refugee populations. However, three studies were found regarding work with refugees at refugee camps (Cooper, 2005; Evans, 2012; Save the Children, 2001), while two other studies described PAR projects with refugee youth post-resettlement in third countries (Rodriquez-Jimenez & Gifford, 2010; Van der Velde, 2009).

Rodriquez-Jimenez and Gifford's (2010) media project was not explicitly labeled as PAR but does represent a critically motivated project aimed at providing new Afghan immigrants a

means to expressing their personal stories. The youth in their project were organized around telling personal stories via videography. Students produced short films from their vantage point and some explicitly addressed the challenges and frustrations associated with their flight and resettlement. Similarly, Van Der Velde et al.'s (2009) PAR projects addresses issues pertaining to the mental health of immigrants and refugee youth. Their research findings suggest that newcomers' motivations to participate in a PAR-oriented project might vary across ethno-cultural groups. This was also the case in the Save the Children (2001) study, which concluded that outside researchers must consider the often complex and traumatic experiences of their collaborating youth. Importantly, they conclude that practitioners working on community-based projects would do well to appeal to the diversity of motivational factors, while endorsing individual and group strengths. For example, children who had faced the traumatic loss of family members were offered counseling with other youth with similar stories. Their shared experiences led to the development of a very tight knit research team who went on to investigate issues pertaining to refugee children's loss of a parent. Thus, their research team provided a unique emic perspective on the traumas associated with parental loss but, more importantly, provided them an affinity group that proved very therapeutic. Other approaches were used at refugee camps.

The two studies performed at refugee camps both addressed issues germane to camp residents. Evans' (2013) work with Bhutanese refugees in Nepal offers a compelling example of how PAR may work as a complimentary research method alongside participant observation. She argues that PAR can be an important means toward inclusivity. Uniquely, Evans incorporates her own interpretations while allowing her youth participants to conduct their own research. She, like Cooper (2005), works with youth in order to train them on qualitative research

techniques. They gain knowledge and experience about interviewing, writing field notes, organizing data, and writing up final reports.

Cooper's (2005) study with refugee youth in Kenya offers a compelling example of how PAR can be instituted within camps to implement change rooted in the experiences of camp youth. The youth researchers in Cooper's (2005) study were instrumental in implementing material change in the camps. For example, they were able to organize their data on camp conditions and present their findings to NGO representatives and secured commitments from them to address particular issues. Moreover, she believes her youth researchers gained in more significant ways. She concludes that youth in particular can gain agency, self-confidence, pride, and a belief that they promote change in spite of the deprivations and hopelessness of their surroundings.

Criticisms of PAR and Some Response

The major criticism of PAR centers on whether or not it can be considered a research method. Jarvis (1991) voiced early doubts about who has the capacity to do research and suggests that research should be left to the specialists (as quoted in Burns, 2005). For PAR proponents such a view is both elitist and prejudicial. For the purposes of my study, the collaborative research between me, the lead researcher, and the brothers' is complex and thus warrants a fully developed subjectivity statement and a well articulated description of the research context, both of which are provided in a separate chapter.

For other PAR practitioners like Elizabeth Cooper (2005), removing or limiting the role of the outside researcher is seen as advantageous. She writes of her work in a Kenyan refugee camp; "...removing the outsider researcher as much as possible from the actual data collection

may provide opportunities for more accurate, relevant, and complete information to emerge among refugee populations” (468). Such was the case in our study, where I found that the brothers’ interviews were gleaning more information from participants than my interviews. However, unlike Cooper I was a major actor in the brothers’ lives as their tutor and friend. The recursive, dialogic nature of our relationship was seen as a major source of data and played an important part in the enactment of our research project. Like other PAR practitioners (Cooper, 2005; Evans, 2012; Fals Borda, 2001; Kapoor & Jordon, 2009) I view research as a process that can be enriched by the participation of novice researchers.

Miskovic and Hoop (2006) question their own ability to adhere to the tenets of PAR and offer insight into the methods potential pitfalls. They discuss how their initial attempts to build a research team failed because of their inability to build rapport with prospective participants. PAR projects demand both time and a commitment by both outside researchers and stakeholder participants. Moreover, they discuss a pragmatic consideration for all research practitioners, funding. They discuss how they wrongfully chose quantitative methods in order to gain IRB approval and to find funding support. This speaks to the broader issue of whether or not qualitative methods are valid research techniques and how funding is “not a neutral act.” (p.283). These particular authors conclude that their research would have been much richer if they had used qualitative methods and had spent more time building rapport and listening to participant voices. However, these authors bring up a very important critique of PAR that deserves more attention.

Miskovic and Hoop (2006) highlight their own “drive to end with a final product” due to the obligation and responsibilities that were put on them because of funding and professional demands. This drive for a final project may undermine the goals of any PAR project. The

authors discuss at great length the ethical dilemma they faced as they tried to balance often-competing goals and obligations. Such was a major consideration for me as I worked on this research project. I was continually asking myself whether or not this project was self-serving my goals to attain a PhD or, as I claimed, whether it was serving the brothers' and the wider resettled Karen community. I have concluded that simultaneous goals can be addressed through dialogue and a recognition and admission on the part of all collaborators that research is a very fluid and unstable process. Researchers must also recognize and respect the knowledge, values, and beliefs of their collaborators.

Cooper's (2005) PAR study also reveals an interesting juxtaposition of research styles and provides further justification for PAR approaches. She discusses the 'research fatigue' she witnessed when organizing her study. The refugees she worked with in Kenya had undergone so many research projects that resulted in so little change that they had lost trust in the research process and those looking to "extract" information (p. 467). Hence, she was committed to using PAR in such a way as to position the refugees to become researchers and not simply contributors. Cooper's own explanation of why she chose to use PAR explains this best: "Before beginning this research I committed to choosing PAR for its emancipatory values and potential rather than its anticipated efficiency as a methodology to answer an established research question" (p. 469). Such was the case as we progressed in our research on Karen resettlement. Throughout the duration of our work together our roles changed, as we became more savvy researchers. This is best exemplified in the ways we evolved in conducting interviews within the Karen community.

Initially, I conducted interviews with the brothers and the families I worked with as a tutor. Our rapport made for rich conversations on a host of topics. The brothers would observe me interviewing a neighbor or relative and would then practice their own interview style. Later, when I began trying to interview other Karen youth and adults who were less familiar with me, the interviews became stilted and less compelling. In response, the brothers became much more actively involved in interviewing. As I observed their interviews I learned how to interview in culturally appropriate ways. This recursive process was a powerful means for us to learn from one another and become partners. In time I was able to interview many Karen by creating the kind of casual environment most conducive to their cultural preferences.

Each PAR research project is singular and demands cooperation and communication between all participants in order to achieve its aims. The above example from our experience demonstrates why PAR advocates must be attuned to the primary PAR tenet, which places priority on the process and emancipatory purposes of the research process. In our case, the research process, from interviewing to creating and collecting surveys, was pedagogically rich for everyone involved and speaks to the richness and singularity of the PAR experience.

Ethics and PAR

When beginning research, researchers establish ground rules, promote participant involvement, organize meetings and engage in consciousness raising (Healy, 2001, p.97). However, Franks (2011) finds that a lack of acknowledgement of researcher power is a form of “closet power” (Franks, 2011, p.16). When power is acknowledged it can be subjected to “mechanisms of democratic control” whereas power that is denied can be “unlimited and capricious” (Healy, 2001).

Such power is potentially exploitative despite the outside researchers best intentions. PAR practitioners are aware of the potential ethical hazards when using PAR. Franks (2011) insists that practitioners of PAR be vigilant of the unintended exploitation that may arise when working with young vulnerable populations such as refugees. Other internal criticisms center on the relationships between outside researcher(s) and the community they are working with to promote change. Evans et al. (2009) report multiple instances where some differences in agenda challenged the participatory aims of the project. However, these differences in expectations were addressed through dialogue and vigilance on the part of the outside researchers.

Issues of status and power vary within cultures for people of all ages in relation to the degree of esteem accorded to teachers and/or elders. In Karen culture, students are taught to defer to teachers. To have children conduct the interviews may seem to overcome the potential pitfalls but France (1996) points out that child interviewers may become “substitute adults” in the eyes of interviewees, identified with authority and no longer seen as a peers. Furthermore, young people may doubt the confidentiality when responding to interview questions from a peer, for instance when the subjects are bullying or racism.

Extent of Participation

Another potential criticism of PAR is the degree to which “participants” actually participate in the research. Arnstein (2009) suggested that different levels of control and participation can be compared to rungs on a ladder and Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) applied this model to children’s participation. At the lowest rung there is some shared work, with increasing levels of involvement towards the top of the ladder. A low level might consist of interviews by adults where the children can choose from a menu of research instruments, which allows ‘them to some extent to direct the course of their interviews,’ (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998, p. 339). Since

Thomas and O’Kane are explicit about the degree and form of participation it helps the reader better understand the methodology and make their own judgments of the research process and findings.

Further, although critical researchers take a position of advocating for the oppressed, David (2002) suggests that critiques of universities and their ‘complicity with power may be well founded’ David, 2002, p. 11). Such warnings can be traced back to Freire. Freire also warns of the dangers inherent in cooperative work between outside researchers and stakeholders. He writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* of the paternalistic social action apparatus that can undermine the aims of critical liberation. He also warns of the false generosity that is often wrapped in the guise of critical theory. This sentiment is expressed in the introduction to *The Paulo Freire Reader* (1998) by Freire’s second wife, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and his long time activist partner, Donalddo Macedo. They offer the following critique of what Freire described as pseudocritical educators.

By refusing to deal with the issue of class privilege, the pseudocritical educator dogmatically pronounces the need to empower students, to give them voices. These educators are even betrayed by their own language. Instead of creating pedagogical structures that would enable oppressed students to empower themselves, they paternalistically proclaim, ‘We need to empower students.’ This position often leads to the creation of what we would call literacy and poverty pimps to the extent that, while proclaiming the need to empower students, they are in fact strengthening their own privileged position. (Freire, 1998)

Like the Freires and Macedo, I believe that PAR can be a means to student empowerment. However, such high-minded purposes are inherently problematic when we consider the outside researcher as the emancipator. Rather, a critical practitioner must help facilitate the participants' transformation and empowerment through dialogue, respect, and a shared commitment to addressing inequity. Moreover, transformation takes place for all participants, outside researcher and stakeholders. A fundamental principle of PAR maintains that local voices from within effected communities must be acknowledged as viable sources of solutions (Fals Borda, 1991). Therefore, PAR practitioners have the ethical responsibility to fulfilling the foundational principles of PAR, which stipulate "a collective process of inquiry, reflection, and action (Dyrness, 2008). This does not deny outside researchers a voice or opinion, rather, demands that outsiders refrain from over valuing and imposing their perceptions and solutions. Such a process is inherently fragile and open to misuse and misrepresentation and, therefore, offers a valuable criticism of the approach or stands as a precautionary warning for those considering using PAR.

Stoudt (2009) offers one possible solution to the ethical dilemma. Like other PAR practitioners (Gutierrez, 2008) he addresses critical theory and power relations directly with students. He challenges his students to consider issues of power and marginalization head on so as to get them to respond in personal ways. Likewise, Cammarota & Romero (2009) delve into epistemological issues with their students so as to provide them a more critical perspective of their own schooling. Such explicitness was a model for the current study.

Finally, PAR is deeply embedded in the critical tradition and therefore must be judged by the standards established within critical theory. PAR represents an alternative means of conducting research but also attempts to offer a new purpose for research. Each of the studies

reviewed purports to have worked with youth to address issues of everyday life for communities and individuals, who have been marginalized, disenfranchised, exploited, or simply ignored by the wiser society. In the case of studies conducted with immigrant students (Cammarota & Dyrness, 2008; Gutiérrez, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Romero, 2009; Torre et al., 2008) the goal is to go beyond calling attention to a particular issue or offering potential solutions but finding real solutions to everyday realities. In the case of Cahill (2010) PAR can and should rigorously uphold its own standards of collaboration at every stage of research.

In this study, PAR provided me, the outsider, with a framework for creating a collaborative project that was inclusive and, more importantly, continually guided me as a researcher. For the brothers, it provided a means to developing various language, technology, and research skills, which have raised their awareness about their rights and exposed them to a variety of authentic communication experiences.

PAR and Language Learning

Although there is a paucity of studies that explicitly address PAR and language learning, I was very much interested in how a PAR project might influence the brothers' language development. As researchers, I anticipated that the brothers would be exposed to a variety of authentic language opportunities from which they would acquire new words, improve their listening and speaking skills, develop their writing skills, and gain language confidence. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of language appropriation, I envisioned the brothers engaging in English as they carried out this research. Bakhtin eloquently describes the nature of language appropriation in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981).

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that a speaker gets his words!) but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other peoples contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (pp. 293-294).

Similarly, one of the anticipated goals of this research project was to expose the brothers to new words that they could appropriate through our discussions, readings, and interviews with others. Equally, I would appropriate new words, Karen words, and new understandings of their culture. Collectively and individually, we would appropriate new words and new understandings. Despite the lack of literature found using the search terms *language acquisition* and *action research*, I located some studies that were incorporating PAR tenets to language learning.

Elsa Auerbach's (1992; 1990) work on adult ESL curricula offers the most comprehensive synthesis of PAR and English language learning. Like Bakhtin, at the core of her approach is the conviction that language learning must be contextually situated. Drawing on Wallerstein (1992) and Freire she argues for language learning that can and should lead to critical consciousness. As such, in the findings section I discuss the ways in which language learning and critical consciousness can be a bi-product of an effective PAR project. Auerbach also views the more pragmatic social ramifications that can result from language learning through PAR.

In *Making Meaning, Making Change (1992)* Auerbach draws from multiple examples from her adult ELL students. She describes how her adult learners gained more agency and empowerment through language learning. Students became more socially active within their community and were able to build relationships with others. Auerbach found her adult ELL parents to be marginalized from their children's education. Language learning also empowered parents as they became more involved in their children's education. They were able to interact with teachers and became more aware of their role as parents in the American education system. Therefore, the political commitment implicit in PAR was achieved through language learning. Likewise, this study will also address how language learning empowered the brothers as they gained language confidence and more active voice in their own schooling. This issue will be addressed in chapter eight.

A Dialogic Approach to TESOL

Shelly Wong (2006) offered a conceptual framework for a dialogic approach to TESOL that helped frame this study. Her four features of the dialogic approach to TESOL aligned well with the tenets of PAR. The following offers a brief overview of how I incorporated dialogic features as presented by Wong (2006) within this project.

First, our project involved what Wong refers to as *learning in community*, where “teachers learn from and with their students” (p. xix). Such an approach parallels the tenets of PAR. I envisioned this learning community to extend beyond our research group and into the wider Karen and American community. I wanted the brothers to incorporate their own voices as well as those of their family and community. Likewise, I anticipated that I would learn directly from my experiences within the Karen community. Other participatory ethnographies offer similar experiences.

Similarly, in Patrick, Budach, and Muckpaloo's (2013) investigation into the literacy practices of a community of Inuit in Ottawa, Canada they found that such community learning was important to the maintenance of the Inuit language. They found that indigenous language maintenance helped assure that traditional cultural practices would be preserved and continue. Like refugee communities, indigenous Canadian peoples often live in urban areas where traditional customs, practices, and beliefs are lost as children acculturate. Their study concludes that home language practices in their native Inuit are key in sustaining their cultural identity. This investigation into the online literacy practices of the brothers offers a similar account of how Karen youth are using new media to communicate and maintain traditional practices (See Findings chapter 7). This study also adheres to the type of pedagogical project proposed by Freire.

Second, I envisioned our research to be a *problem-posing* endeavor (Freire, 2000; Wong, 2006). Wong views such problem-posing pedagogy as an important means for students to find voice on those topics most important to them. Similarly, our investigation of Karen resettlement would be guided by the questions rooted in the brothers' lived experiences. These questions continually changed and developed over time as we became more and more aware of various issues facing the Karen communities we visited. Following Wong, I drew on the brothers' own linguistic and cultural awareness as resources (Wong, 2006, p. xix). Such an approach was commensurate with Auerbach's (1992) work with adult ELLs. Her students were able to draw on their own lived experiences to direct their learning.

Third, the project was predicated on the notion that we would all *learn by doing*. I envisioned our research to follow in the tradition of Freire and Dewey, both proponents of experiential learning. The boys would develop their research skills and language abilities while

actively engaged in research while I would learn to become a better researcher/ethnographer and teacher. This approach is similar to an apprenticeship model where students learn from an expert. Martin Andrew (2011) investigates how ELLs in Australia gained important, authentic, language experiences through community placements. Andrew found that these internships provided ELLs both lexical and procedural knowledge that helped them develop language confidence.

The final feature proposed by Wong relates to the importance of the overarching question, *Knowledge for whom?* (p. xix). This element was important in terms of staying committed to the project's critical goals of learning about Karen resettlement so as to create change from within. The knowledge gleaned from our research would provide the brothers and me, and, by extension the wider Karen community, some voice in identifying and then addressing the issues that were most important us. Therefore, we would appropriate knowledge, like language, individually and collectively.

The importance of each of these tenets of dialogic teaching and learning is that they are focused on the interaction of all participants. In the case of our collaborative work for this research our team gained both individual and well as collective knowledge. What was most important was the process of dialoguing and contesting about all the phenomena we encountered in our research.

Conclusion

PAR has been utilized in a variety of educational and other qualitative research contexts. Though different approaches to PAR are found in the literature, those research studies that self-identify as PAR share a similar commitment to social justice and help to promote the voices of those that are traditionally voiceless. This study has attempted to follow in the traditions of

activist research and the tenets of PAR have guides the conception and enactment of the current study. The following chapter provides a rich ethnographic description of the actors who worked collaboratively on this project.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH CONTEXT: SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The Karen experience in the United States is singular, as is the setting of this research study. Therefore, a separate chapter has been dedicated to a description of the people that populate the following chapters. I begin with an autobiographical narrative or subjectivity statement that provides the reader some insight into my personal background, teaching philosophy, and 13-year relationship with the Karen. I follow this with a description of the places where most of the research took place in the Karen community of Sandville, Georgia. I begin this section with a description of Sandville where I visited over 350 times as a tutor to the Karen. I then provide a description of the home where the majority of my participant observations took place. This is followed by a description of the family that is the focus of this study and concludes with a description of each of the brothers. Chapter five will provide a complete description of the setting of the research road trip, which represents the PAR component of this research.

Subjectivity Statement: Researcher Autobiography

According to Heath & Street (2008), ethnography is inherently “interpretive, subjective and partial (p.73). As a participant observer in this project, I am the “ultimate instrument of fieldwork” (Heath & Street, 2008, p.93) and have an ethical responsibility to afford my audience some insight into my background and experiences as well as my potential biases and/or

prejudices. By better acquainting the reader with my background, I hope to better describe the person behind the interpretations. My “ethnographic imagination” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992) has been influenced by my lived experiences as a White man, son, uncle, academic, student, teacher, traveller, researcher, and friend of the Sgaw Karen. This is my story.

My Role with the Brothers and their Community

I was recently asked what the brothers thought of me. My immediate response was “crazy uncle.” The more I thought about it the more I realized how nuanced and multidimensional my role was in relation to the life of the brothers and their community. I was more than just the crazy uncle (a job I relish and have experience with as an uncle to 16 nieces and nephews). I was, first and foremost, Mr. Dan, or Thera Dan (Teacher Dan). Over time, I was also an advisor, advocate, collaborator, cultural broker, driver, friend, older/younger brother⁷, coach, and student of Karen culture.

My relationship with each of the brothers was singular. Like any human relationship I got on better with some more than others. Chit Poe was the person I could turn to talk about the Karen people and their history and culture. He, as the family spokesman, had the unenviable task of asking for my help to call the phone company or help drive someone to the hospital. With Narko and Gola, things were more casual and affable. With Narko I could talk candidly about his interest in girls, and with Gola I shared inside jokes and a similar sense of humor and laidback attitude toward life. In all, we built unique relationships that I believe were founded on the kind of mutual trust necessitated in this kind of ethnography. Our time together was also, though infrequently, less affable.

⁷ Interestingly, Chit Poe would address me as younger brother in reference to the ancient legend, which predicted the return of the younger White brother to help emancipate their Karen brothers.

There were times, as their teacher that I expressed my anger and frustration about their perceived lack of effort doing homework and my assignments. Other times I was astonished at their seeming lack of appreciation for my efforts. I continually struggled with my multiple roles and these struggles became part of my own reflexivity.

Author Autobiography

The following biographical sketch aims to provide the reader a look at various stages in my life that led up to the moment when I met the boys and became active in their lives. The following autobiographical sketch attempts to reveal some personal information that seems salient to this particular study. I will focus on five major aspects of my life: family background, international experience, my history with the Karen, and, finally, my teaching background and philosophy.

I was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1971, the youngest of eleven children. Two very devout and active Roman Catholic parents raised me, but I was the only child not to attend Catholic elementary or secondary schools. I am only the second in my family to attain a bachelor's degree and the only child to receive an advanced degree. At the outset of this study, I was 39 years old, single-White-male who had just completed the first year of doctoral studies in the Language and Literacy Department (LLED) at the University of Georgia.

I am a classic American amalgamation in that I have English, Irish, Quebecois, and Native American blood. Despite my diverse family genealogy, my father promoted a decidedly Irish-Catholic-American family identity. To the outside world we were the typical Irish-American family, the union of Gilhooly and O'Brien. My mother, of Quebecois and English

decent, used the pseudonym O'Brien until her early 60s so as to keep our Irish-American image intact. This pro-Irish Catholic sentiment came to influence my own prejudices toward Protestants whom I associated with oppressing the Irish in Northern Ireland. We were, according to my father, Fenians, and a large wooden plaque emblazoned with Sinn Féin adorned the front entranceway to our house. Such an act is analogous to the Karen who proudly display their Karen flag in their homes, at celebrations, and on the bumpers of their cars.

Interestingly, during the initial months working with the Karen in Georgia, I was very much sympathetic with the Karen cause and their nationalistic intentions. I, quite wrongfully, assumed the Karen to be a homogenous group with the same political aspirations. However, as I read the literature on the Karen insurrection I began to realize the complexities surrounding the Karen National Union's (KNU) 60-year war. I soon realized that the majority of Karen coming to the United States were not representative of all Karen in terms of religion and their avowed commitment to fight until an independent state was achieved within Burma. I realized that most Karen live in peace with their Burman neighbors and that many Karen thrive in contemporary Burma (see Thawngmung, 2012). Moreover, such a realization informed how I now perceived other inter-ethnic conflicts and made me consider issues of power and propaganda in a new light. In the end, I became highly critical of the Karen insurgency, which became rich sources of dialogue with the brothers (see Chapter 5 on fieldwork dialogues).

Throughout this study religion was a major consideration due to the Karen family's strong Christian beliefs. In the earliest stages of this research, conflicts over religion and our varying interpretations of the Bible surfaced repeatedly between the family and me. Brown Htoo, the father, continually questioned me about my religious beliefs and it became a source of frustration and, infrequently, conflict. He was nonplussed as to why I was not more expressive

in my religious beliefs when teaching his children. Though religion was a major consideration I will return to my autobiography.

Both my maternal and paternal grandmothers were bilingual first generation immigrants, having emigrated as children with their families from Canada. I fondly remember my grandmother's sister entertaining me with stories about how they crossed into the United States on a horse-pulled sleigh. My father was also bilingual French (Quebecois and English). Despite our immigrant history, I would classify most of my siblings as vocally xenophobic.

Until age 13, I grew up in an exclusively White middle class neighborhood, where I attended public elementary school and 1.5 years of junior high. Although I was the only child to attend a non-parochial public elementary school, all of my closest friends at school and in the neighborhood were Catholic. I have no recollection of any minorities during my early schooling in Connecticut, except for one black boy in elementary school, Vinnie, who was a close friend.

As mentioned above, my family is anti-immigration and I would classify some of my older siblings as overtly racist. The discourse around the latest Gilhooly holiday meal (2012) included the usual diatribe against Martin Luther King Day, lazy Puerto Ricans, and job-stealing Mexicans. For my older siblings, immigration amounts to people coming to this country to live off the taxes of hardworking Americans. How I ended up working with and empathizing with immigrants may come from a decision that set my personal life course on a very different transnational trajectory than my siblings.

At the age of 13, my world was transformed when my parents informed me that we, that is, my next older brother, parents, and me were moving to Israel, a country I had never heard of and initially confused with India. The trauma of moving from my boyhood home cannot be understated. It not only led to my more liberal attitudes toward race and *others* but also exposed

me to a worldview and lifestyle that would forever set me apart from my siblings and fellow countrymen. The following provides some description of my transnational experiences.

My Transnational Experiences

Although I do not claim to compare my transnational experience to that of the Karen brothers who are at the heart of this research, I am confident that my own *displacement* during adolescence influenced the empathy and camaraderie I felt with each of them. We share the similar experience of being uprooted at formative ages and having to recreate ourselves in an attempt to fit in amongst strange and unfamiliar faces, languages, places, and ways of being. This move marked the most profound change in my life and began my peripatetic life journey.

I lived in Israel for 4.5 years and attended a private international school, the Walworth Barbour American International School of Israel (WBAIS). WBAIS was a K-12 school catering to over 40 nationalities with an excellent and decidedly progressive academic tradition. Notwithstanding the initial difficulty I had adjusting, by the end of my freshman year of high school I had begun to adapt to living abroad. I was fortunate that I did not have to adjust linguistically as English was the language of instruction for all my classes. My time in Israel afforded me many opportunities to meet and befriend people of different ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds.

While attending WBAIS I was first exposed to non-Catholics. In addition to meeting and befriending many of my Jewish classmates, I was able to make lasting friendships with non-Catholic Christians, including Southern Baptists, for the first time. However, some experiences with the more evangelical Baptist students only reconfirmed my long held prejudice and misunderstanding. I could never quite understand their insistence on accepting Jesus as my

savior in order to be saved eternally. I was also unable to accept the belief that those not baptized were condemned to eternal damnation. My parents had always encouraged me to be active in my faith by doing things in my community. Throughout high school I was active in a variety of Catholic-sponsored social activist projects. Such work instilled in me a regard for action over words, which became an important talking point between the brothers and me. Overall, the years spent living in Israel solidified my own religious conceptions that make social action a profession of faith.

Furthermore, living in Israel gave me the unique opportunity to travel throughout the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and Africa during my formative years. I gained a desire to travel and also began to learn how to communicate cross-culturally. These years also informed my choice of career as an English as a second language (ESOL) teacher. I have always felt an affinity for students who, like me, have to face the difficult challenges associated with living in a foreign place. Moreover, it was during these years that my mother became involved in many social activist campaigns surrounding the Palestinian “issue” in Israel and sparked my own interest in social activism. Ironically, it was during this period that I first met, unknowingly, the Karen people in Thailand.

My History with the Karen

In the spring of 1989, the year the brothers’ family fled Burma, I visited Thailand with my parents. While in Chang Mai we visited a border community of “hill tribes” that were the “liberated zones” that preceded the establishment of officially recognized camps (the Thai government still refers to these camps as temporary shelters!). The conditions of those makeshift villages made an impression on me and provided a glimpse into the people who years later are

the focus of this study. What I remember most are the smiling faces of children begging for candy.

I next became acquainted with the Karen many years later while travelling in Thailand. From 1997 to 2003 I lived and taught in South Korea and would often vacation in Southeast Asia. During my winter holidays I traveled alone or with friends to tour Thailand and Laos by bicycle. Each trip ended with a weeklong stay at a small, not so glamorous, beach resort on Ko Samet Island, Thailand -an hour's bus ride from Bangkok. Like most tourist spots in Thailand, illegal Khmer and Burmese immigrants worked as gardeners and housekeepers. On one of my earliest trips in 1999 I met Chi, a 17 year-old Pwo Karen Buddhist youth working at the resort. Like so many Karen, Chi had escaped Burma for employment opportunities in Thailand after the death of his mother and his father's ordination as a Buddhist monk. Despite the fact that we shared no common language, Chi and I became buddies. As the resort was almost always empty, he and a Thai manager became my closest companions. Over the next four years I visited Thailand once or twice a year and always made an effort to see Chi. With the help of Jeab, the Thai manager, we were able to communicate and together spent many an evening playing cards, squidding (fishing for squid), and talking about our families and life experiences. When I returned to Korea, I began investigating the Karen and their complicated and tragic circumstances. Meeting Chi also inspired me investigate more about the Karen people.

I first read about the Karen in an article in the Bangkok Post about a band of Karen child soldiers notoriously named *God's Army* who had taken over a Thai hospital. That story, like much that has been written about the Karen, was only partially correct. The story was baffling and intriguing. Therefore, a friend and me began planning a trip to Burma.

Due to the ongoing civil war much of Burma was off limits to foreign travellers in 2001. Despite these limitations, we, two friends and me, were able to visit on a three-week tourist visa. On the trip we were able to meet the Karen of Burma. During a three-day trek outside Kalaw, Shan Province, we stayed in Pa'O (Black Karen) villages. Three things stand out in my memories of that trip that have informed my own views on the Karen and my current work with the Karen in the US.

The first night we were hosted in a Buddhist monastery. With no more than a word from our guide we were instructed to lie out our sleeping bags on the bamboo floor. After a long day trekking we decided, at around 8 pm, to try and sleep when, while ensconcing ourselves in our sleeping bags, we were greeted by a large group of middle-aged, cheroot-smoking men and a sole diminutive young lady. We had little idea what was happening but it was clear that she was undergoing some sort of interview only feet away from three sleeping bag-clad Americans. I chuckle to think what she made of the scene. However, she was undaunted and demurely responded to all inquiries. The interview lasted for about 30 minutes. Later, it was explained to us that she was the new candidate for village teacher and that we had witnessed her formal interview by the village elders. At that moment, in the seemingly forgotten hills of Kalaw, Shan Province, I was impressed with this little village's regard for education and the dignity of that lone schoolteacher. Lesson one, the Karen have a high regard for education. The next day, I was to realize a second important lesson about the Karen people.

The following day we stopped at another Pa'O village for the night. We arrived early and had time to explore the village. To my amazement, none of the village children would approach me no matter what comic stunt I tried or enticement I could offer. Not only did they not approach but their eyes were filled with fear, not wonder. Candy and pens were no match for

those children who eyed us with complete and utter foreboding. Surprisingly, just three days ago (November 2013) I saw a similar sight as a Karen brother and sister (new to the area) ran frantically from my approaching car! Lesson two, the Karen people are decidedly shy and do not take kindly to strangers. Interestingly, the descriptors shy and timid seem to be the most commonly used adjectives used to describe the Karen, from early missionary or British colonial accounts to more contemporary accounts (see Marshall, 1970; McClelland, 2010; Po, 1928). Lesson three came on our final day as we hiked back to Kalaw.

In the waning hours of our trek we came upon an old British-made railway line tucked in a narrow valley. As we stopped to buy water at a local store that doubles as the train station, a dilapidated old train pulled up to the platform. Immediately, the local villagers bombarded the train plying snacks to the passengers, and we followed. I will not soon forget the faces that greeted us. I can best describe them as having an air of wildness about them. They resembled images I have seen of Amazonian or Bornean tribesmen who don western dress when they go down to town to trade or sell at the market. And they looked on us with equal astonishment. I called over our guide Don Don and asked where the train was bound and if we could board. He immediately declined and no amount of *present* (a common euphemism for a bribe in Burma) could persuade him. He later explained that no foreigners were allowed in Karen State. Lesson three; the Karen state was off limits.

Walking the trails between villages, eating their food and sleeping within their bamboo homes and monasteries, provided me an experience that has colored my readings about the Karen people and provided me some insights into the brothers' lives back in Thailand and Burma. Upon my return to South Korea, I wrote an article for the Catholic University of Korea entitled, *Myanmar, Anyone? (Gilhooly, 2002)* detailing my trip.

Rapport with the *Other*

For nearly all of my adult life, I have either lived abroad or worked with international students studying in the United States. Moreover, the majority of my adult friendships have been with non-Americans since high school and all of my romantic relationships have been with non-Americans for over 15 years. Such experiences have taught me valuable lessons about cross-cultural relationships and have made me empathetic to the challenges faced when living in a foreign land. Importantly, my life experiences enabled me a level of comfort and respect in spaces that were foreign to me. I felt more “at-home” with the Karen community in Sandville, Georgia than I ever did on the University of Georgia campus with my American peers. Thus, this community provided me a sense of community I had not had for many years. I cannot underestimate the emotional impact this community has had on me. They have become a surrogate family for me as a single man and their affection, hospitality, and trust in me has provided me a unique perspective that is necessary in such collaborative work (see Miskovic & Hoop, 2006 for their reflections on the necessity of building such rapport).

My background also allowed me some sense of what the Karen were experiencing as they adjusted to their new lives. I know, from experience, what it is like to not be understood, to look different, and the unease that comes with being the center of public attention. I am also familiar with the loneliness associated with being away from friends and family. Such experiences have made me comfortable with the unfamiliar and, I believe, helped me become a better ethnographer.

Working with the Karen also made me keenly aware of how “American” I really am. While interviewing other Americans working with the Karen, I realized how I shared in many of their beliefs and prejudices toward the Karen. I was often frustrated with the brothers when it

came to studying and later looking for jobs. I come from a family that believes that hard work is the primary ingredient for self-respect. My early field notes often include the descriptors “lazy” and “apathetic.” I also found myself making generalizations about the Karen that ignored the variety and dynamic scope of the individuals who represent the culture. As noted earlier, my exchanges with the brothers were not only sources of rich data for this study but also enabled me to see beyond my own cultural perspectives and individual prejudices. This project, as aligned with critical theory, forced me to challenge some of my own certitudes. I have learned through this process what Heath and Street (2010) mean when they refer to the need of ethnographers to treat culture as unbounded, kaleidoscopic, and dynamic (p. 11). Moreover, I had to continually remind myself of Freire’s words in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), “Their speech, their way of counting and calculating, their ideas about the so-called other world, their religiousness, their knowledge about health, the body, sexuality, life, death, the power of the saints, magic spells, must all be respected” (p.85).

Finally, my relations with the Karen community were complex. As we saw in Chapter Two, the history between the Karen people and White missionaries and British officials is unique. Traditional Karen beliefs that set White foreigners on high as their saviors and redeemers still influences Karen perceptions of White Americans today. Brown Htoo, the brothers’ father, often compared me to the oft prophesized White brother, Toh Meh Pah. Consequently, throughout my research and tutoring I consciously tried to represent myself as a whole person in order to dispel the notion that I was in any way superior because of the color of my skin and place of birth. Following Miskovic and Hoop’s (2012) recommendation, I tried to mitigate these differences by building rapport.

I appreciated and respected the deference I was afforded, as a “White” teacher but was always mindful of the responsibilities associated with such esteem. As such, in an attempt to eliminate such unwarranted veneration, I always felt compelled to show that I was flawed and fallible. Ironically, I believe I gained their trust and acceptance as much for my shortcomings than my skills as either a researcher or teacher. In the end, I believe that I earned their respect through my dedication to teaching, reliability, and the genuine interest and respect I showed for their culture and them as individuals.

However, I came to realize that no matter how hard I tried to balance the scales I was, by the very nature of the language I spoke and culture affiliation, in a position to be the helper. I have learned that the relationship between giver and receiver is complex and fraught with misunderstanding and imbalances of power. In my attempts to help, I unconsciously normalized the capable and incapable divide. In response, I tried throughout our time together to show respect for their customs and ways of being so as to limit their perceived deficiencies. In the end, I realized that I could only be mindful of the path I treaded and tried to treat everyone with respect, trust, and kindness. Importantly, the input from classmates, friends, family, and committee members helped me as I learned to critically reflect on my role.

Researcher Limitations

I do not want to leave my reader with the impression that I was the perfect, culturally sensitive researcher, human being, or tutor. There were many times when I lost my intended objectivity and became judgmental, indignant, frustrated, and outright angry. I like to think that such lapses are testament to the rapport that we built that allowed us to express all the emotions

that enter into human relationships. The intimacy I achieved with the brothers and the wider community broke barriers but also made me accountable for all my actions and conduct.

As I look back at my experiences with the Karen community in question, I often rebuke myself for the ways that I often portrayed the Karen during those early days. I realized quite early on that my participants represented a unique and exotic dissertation topic. People were genuinely interested in my stories and I began to focus on those stories with the greatest wow factor. I believe that over time I have grown as a researcher of the Karen and have gained more understanding and respect for their culture and the challenges they face.

Finally, during my time in the Karen community I became a somewhat polarizing character. At a recent community-wide event (January 2014), some adults met me with unfriendly glances. When I asked one of my students why, they inferred that some parents were angry because I no longer taught their children. In short, like all human relations my entry within this community was ever changing and manifold.

I believe that I could have done multiple things that would have made this a more compelling research project. First, I wish I had learned more of the Karen language, as it would have allowed me to engage with more participants and to better understand their culture. Next, I wish I had been more forceful in having the brothers take field notes, which we could have discussed periodically. More limitations pertaining to this study are listed at the conclusion of Chapter six. Now, I will provide a description of the setting of my participant observations and our collaborative work.

The Karen Community of Sandville, GA

I met the brothers on a cloudless spring day at their home in rural Sandville, Georgia in the northeastern part of the state. I was introduced to them as their tutor by the caseworker that had hired me. The wife of a university classmate, she had been working with them for the previous two months and had offered me the position of in-home tutor for the summer of 2010. After 20 minutes discussing our summer study schedule, I bade the brothers farewell, knowing that I had stumbled upon my doctoral dissertation topic. I was fascinated that the Karen had returned to my life in such unusual circumstances and I wanted to know more about their story.

The Karen of Sandville, GA: An Ethnographic Portrait

From May 2010 until the brothers' family moved to Iowa in May 2012, I was a bi-weekly visitor to the brothers' and other Karen family homes. Although I primarily visited as a tutor, I was also present at family functions and helped with a variety of needs. Over that time I visited the brothers' home over 150 times and as of December 2013 I have visited the community as a tutor over 350 times. My visits lasted between three and six hours.

Sandville is a rural community located amongst the rolling hills of eastern Georgia. The town is home to a dilapidated volunteer fire department, a Baptist church, and a small granite quarry, but no businesses; the nearest business is a rural gas station located six miles from the brothers' home. The nearest town with a grocery store is 11 miles from their home, as are the county's elementary, middle, and high schools. We met each week in their rented home, which had no immediate neighbors and is located across the street from Sandville Baptist Church.

The Karen originally migrated to Sandville due to its proximity to Festivity Partners (pseudonym), an intentional Christian service community working with resettled refugees. The

first Karen to live in the area, a cousin of the brothers, moved to the area to work for Festivity Partners as a translator in 2007. His relocation to the area sparked the growth of the Sgaw Karen community.

Their house resembled a southern style shotgun house with a front porch and a narrow body that extended away from the road. The seven-room house consisted of a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room while all other four rooms had been converted into makeshift bedrooms. The three oldest boys had their own bedrooms in the back of the house and another brother slept in the family TV room, while the youngest brother slept with his parents.

The house was sparsely furnished with very few decorations besides a calendar from a Thai grocery, a few printed pictures of the boys (including one with me and Chit Poe), and a large laminated U.S. map taped to the living room wall. The living room had a table holding a desktop computer and a heavily used sofa that was rarely sat upon, as most everyone opted to sit or lie on the wooden floor. The house had neither air-conditioning nor heat. In the summer we escaped and studied in the relative cool of their living room or on the porch if there was a breeze. In the winter, we studied bundled in layers of jackets and winter hats.

The parents expressed great satisfaction with the house and often asked me whether I thought they should buy it. Since I had never been a homeowner I cautiously advised them to make sure it was a home they would stay in for some time and to see if they could afford the mortgage payments. Such inquiries from them usually developed into ad hoc lessons on home economics, personal finance, mortgages, loans, and interest rates.

The house had other imperfections that caused the family mild inconvenience. The family spent over a month without running water due to a burst pipe. Later, during the preparations for the eldest brother's wedding the septic tank overflowed and they had no working toilet for over a month. Yet, these and other problems were invariably addressed by an American "friend" from church and the family never seemed overly put out by the lack of water, electricity, or plumbing.

The kitchen had a gas stove and a round dining room table with five chairs. These chairs were carried to the living room or front porch for our study sessions. A stone mortar and pestle and a variety of spices, namely cumin and red pepper, sat upon the counter. The smell of cumin always hung in the air.

On the kitchen counter there was a large homemade machete, which was the primary tool used for cutting everything from vegetables to large sides of goat and pig. A sharpening stone was also readily available. The kitchen also housed an old refrigerator, a microwave, and a wall mounted telephone. The kitchen was always kept clean; everyone was responsible for cleaning his or her own dishes after every meal. The kitchen floor always contained at least three fifty-pound sacks of rice stacked neatly in the corner.

The front porch, where we often studied, faced the road and housed an assortment of shoes. Some shoes were organized on a makeshift shoe rack while others lay scattered; the only external sign of the *inhabitants* within. Their acre of property housed a garden, which, when in season, primarily consisted of red pepper and tobacco plants. A row of sunflowers blocked the view of the tobacco plants from the road. When I commented one day about the beauty of the

sunflowers, the boys smiled sheepishly and said they were planted to “hide” the tobacco from the church. Beside the house a dirt parking lot was home to two freestanding portable basketball hoops. A large fenced-in backyard was home to roughly 20-30 free-range chickens, three roosters, and two geese. Prior to weddings or festivals, two or three goats could be found tethered to a fence in their backyard awaiting slaughter.

The backyard consisted primarily of hardened dirt with a few small patches of grass that spoke of greener days. The yard was untidy and was usually littered with scraps of paper and other bits of debris. There were two homemade wooden tables made from old doors used for butchering animals. The chickens were periodically slaughtered and eaten but were primarily kept as sources of fresh eggs and as a reminder of home. The geese were kept because the Eh Ser “like to look at them” (from field notes January 2011).

The Karen community is very active in their local church and Sandville Baptist has become the center of Sgaw Karen life in Sandville. The proximity of their home to the church provided me access to the entire Karen community who often visited before or after church services and on special occasions. The entire Sgaw Karen population of Sandville is members of Sandville Baptist Church and has come to rely on the church community for a variety of services and opportunities. Sandville Baptist’s pastor acts as an ad hoc caseworker and is one of the spiritual leaders of the community. Beyond his religious duties, he has helped each of the families buy land, procure housing, acquire food stamps, access medical assistance, and negotiate loans. Brown Htoo, the brothers’ father, was a spiritual leader and respected elder in the community.

The following narrative offers some account of the brothers' parents story as told to me over countless interviews and talks. It offers a typical account of the experiences of many Karen families who fled Burma in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The Family



Figure 4.1

The Family (photographed by Daniel Gilhooly, **Back Row from left to Right: Ler Moo, Narko, Chit Poe, Gola. Front: Brown Htoo, Eh Ser**)

Unlike most western cultures, the Karen do not have surnames so there is no way to refer to the family collectively as, for example, “the Smiths.” Therefore, I will refer to them collectively as “the family.” The parents, Brown Htoo (father) and Eh Ser (mother), were both born in Burma as were only their two eldest children (the firstborn a daughter, Sa Ra and the eldest son, Moo Tha Wah), peripheral figures in this research. The four youngest children were born in refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border.

From Burma to Thailand: The Story of Brown Htoo and Eh Ser

The life of Brown Htoo and his wife Eh Ser represents one of the many Karen diaspora stories. Their flight from Burma and their subsequent decision to apply for resettlement to the USA have forever changed the course of their and their children’s lives. They are part of a much larger Diaspora story of the Karen people and their journey west to communities across Australia, Norway, Canada, and the United States. Like most Karen refugees arriving in the US, the brothers’ family story begins in Burma, a land they (the brothers) have never lived in and have only visited on forays out of the camps across the Moei River.

Brown Htoo (Brown Gold) was born in 1958 in the Irrawaddy delta of lower Burma in Patheingyi (Bassein). Like most Karen from the Delta, his family farmed rice and lived peaceably side-by-side with ethnic Burmans, the nation’s largest (nearly 60%) ethnicity. Brown Htoo grew up speaking the language of his neighbors, Burmese, in school and his native Sgaw Karen at home. By the time of his birth in 1958 much had changed for their family, the Karen, and the nascent nation of Burma.

In 1958, the nation was in its infancy, having only gained independence from the British ten years earlier in 1948. Independence from Great Britain was far from a seamless or peaceful

transition. In the run up to independence, Aung Sahn, father of pro-democracy leader and Noble Peace Prize winner, Aung Saan Suu Kyi, was assassinated and with his death came the end of any hope of a multiethnic coalition rule. The Karen, along with other ethnic minorities, began fighting the government soon after independence. For those Karen who took up arms, the goal was an independent state run by Karens, a state that was promised them by their British benefactors.

However, Brown Htoo's family, like most Karen (Thawngmung, 2012), did not take up arms and, though they supported the insurgency in principle, stayed out of the fight. The family stayed in Bassein, free to worship Christ as they had for over a century. Bassein was one of the first and most developed missionary settlements in Burma and by the time Brown Htoo was born, over three generations of his family had heeded the call to Christianity, renounced their Animist beliefs, and chosen Christ as their Savior. It was in Bassein that the American missionaries had set up their base to spread the gospel and, though still a minority religion, Christianity was tolerated by the majority Buddhist Burman neighbors. It was here that Brown Htoo was baptized and determined to spread the gospel in areas far less peaceful.

By the time Brown Htoo was 10 years old, in 1968, the country had changed. Ne Win's military coup in 1962 began an era of military rule in Burma that would continue for the next half century. However, for much of the first three decades of independence the Karen, though not officially, had control of much of the Karen State. They had created a de facto government and infrastructure replete with schools, hospitals, a tax system, trade organizations, and a working government. The Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) ruled with relative autonomy until the late 1980s. This state known to the Karen as *Kawthoohlei* (Land of flowers) functioned like an independent state

largely supported by the illegal teak trade controlled by the KNU. Kawthoohlei was also where the brothers' mother Eh Ser (named after the biblical Esther) was born.

Eh Ser was born in Kawthoohlei in 1962 and, unlike her future husband, was surrounded by the insurgency. She watched as her brother left to join the KNLA as a child soldier and she experienced firsthand the terror of New Win's "Four Cuts" campaign, intended to eradicate ethnic insurgent groups like the KNU.

Weary of the endless civil wars on multiple fronts, General Ne Win decided once and for all to put an end to the insurgents. He was able to sign peace treaties with some but his greatest foe, the KNU, would not negotiate. The KNU persistently held on to the four founding principles established by the Che Guevera-like revolutionary and British-educated leader, Saw Ba OO Gyi.

In response to the KNU and other ethnic insurgencies, the junta under New Win aimed to eliminate (cut) the four elements sustaining the insurgency: food, funds, recruits, and information (Baron et al, 2007, p.7). This campaign began by dividing the country into zones: black (insurgent-controlled), brown (contested areas) and White zones (government-controlled).

Like her husband, Eh Ser was Baptist Christian, yet unlike her husband she was brought up within a *black zone* or *free-fire zone* where villagers spotted outside designated areas could be shot without warning (Smith, 1991). By the late 1970s the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) had eliminated many of their former foes but the KNU stubbornly resisted and held onto many continued areas within Kawthoolei. Amidst this turmoil Eh Ser attended school until age 16, an unusually high level of education for her generation. After finishing school she continued to help her parents plant and harvest rice and care for her younger siblings.

Meanwhile, Brown Htoo watched as childhood friends left the Delta to join the resistance movement, usually with the KNU or KNLA. Brown Htoo stayed and worked with his father, attended school until about the fourth grade and studied the Bible with his mother. By his late teens he was studying at a Bible college and training to become a missionary. In his early 20s he left home and headed for the dwindling black zones of the Karen state to preach the gospel. Unlike some of his peers he left Bassein with a Bible instead of a gun.

For over five years he traveled amongst the villages of the many hill tribes of Karen State. He lived off the land and hunted and fished for his sustenance. He preached in his native Sgaw Karen language and in Burmese to villagers who spoke one of 12 mutually unintelligible Karen dialects (Chessman, 2002). Although he worked mainly with Sgaw villages he also preached to Pwo and Bgu Karen villagers. He was responsible for helping convert Animist, Muslim, and Buddhist Karen.

After nearly five years of mission work he arrived in a non-descript village where he met Eh Ser. They courted but had little time as Brown Htoo was always on the move and needed permission from the mission society to settle down. He promised to return and after seven months away he kept his word and returned to Eh Ser. They were married the following day.

Within thirty months they had a daughter, Sa Ra and later had a son, Moo Tha Wah. Moo Tha Wah was born amidst the near collapse of the nation in 1988. The uprisings of the late 1980s in Burma led Brown Htoo and his pregnant wife (pregnant with their third child Samber) to flee their homeland. They and their two children boarded a bus that took them within a day's walk of the porous border with neighboring Thailand. In the fall of 1989 they crossed into Thailand and began anew.

Soon after their arrival their third child Samber Htoo (nicknamed Chit Poe) was born in December 1990. The family moved from camp to camp to avoid the periodic assaults by Burmese military and found permanent shelter in Mae La Refugee camp in 1993. They resided in section B-4, house number 39, in Mae La Camp until they were approved for resettlement. They departed from Thailand's Don Mueang Airport for the US on September 7, 2007.

Despite limited employment opportunities Eh Ser taught elementary school in a border town on the Burmese side of the border. Brown Htoo hunted, fished, worked illegally in Thailand harvesting corn, collected bamboo, and made charcoal to support his family. In 2006, after the US announced a resettlement program the family discussed the possibility of resettlement. The prospects of freedom and education for their children lead Brown Htoo and Eh Ser to decide to resettle to the US.

They arrived in Phoenix, Arizona with little but a bag of clothing each, two Bibles, a machete, a hammer, a Karen dictionary, some music cassettes, some medicine, and a few photos from life in the camps. Their family's arrival in the US represents the first wave of Karen and other Burmese refugees arriving in communities across the United States. The family was initially resettled in an apartment complex in Phoenix with other Burmese, Iraqi, and Sudanese refugees. They were the first in their extended family to resettle in the United States, Brown's nephew having resettled the year before in Norway. They lived in Phoenix for one year and five months before moving to Georgia.

Their relocation to Georgia was spurred on by the prospect of finding full time employment. Through a kinship network, Brown Htoo was first able to find seasonal employment planting sunflowers and other crops. He drove with his sister's son from Phoenix and began working immediately upon arrival in Georgia. They lived with another of his

nephews who had originally resettled in Georgia in 2007.

In the following pages, I offer a description of each of the brothers. In addition, in an attempt to incorporate the brothers' individual narratives, I provide some of the brothers' own autobiographical writing.

The Brothers



Figure 4.2

The Author and the Brothers, Spring 2012

Chit Poe and Narko are considered “1.25” generation immigrants as they arrived in the US between the ages of 13 and 17 (Rumbaut, 1997). Hse Ku (Gola) is a “1.5 generation” immigrant as he arrived in the U.S. when he was 12 years old (Rumbaut, 1997). As such,

according to Rumbaut and Ima (1988), they inhabit a middle space between the host culture and home culture. However, unlike many 1.5 or 1.25 immigrants, they have had no direct experience with their homeland, in this case, Burma. Therefore, they are not altogether typical *1.5 or 1.25 generationers*, but share some characteristics of second generation immigrants “for whom the homeland mainly exists as a representation consisting of parental memories and memorabilia...” (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988, p. 22). The distinction between Gola’s 1.5 experience and his older brothers’ 1.25 experiences is revealing. Gola knew less about the Karen insurgency, history, and language, and cultural practices than his brothers. Importantly, Gola gained new understandings about his native culture via this PAR project.

Samber Htoo- Chit Poe



Figure 4.3

Chit Poe, 2012

In line with the critical conviction toward inclusivity, I begin with a short autobiographic essay.

Samber wrote the following during our first meeting, May 1, 2010.

My name is Sam Ber Htoo. I was born in Thailand. I speak Karen language. I have Four brothers and one sister. I am 3rd person. I live in Thai mae la refugee camp. A lot of people live in Thai mae la refugee camp. I went to school when I was seven years old. It's very hard to go to the school. You have to pay money For school. It's really hard to find money in the camp. You can't allow to go outside the camp. If you go outside the camp, the police will catch you. Because, I don't have a picture card. I saw many people escaped to find money outside the camp. Some people went to Bangkok and border of Burma to find money. I live in Thailand 17 year. It's was really hard to live in the camp.

Then, I never know and I never thought I came to American I heard the government say, if you want to go to America, you can apply to go. Then you have to introduce about your self. After that, we pass everything about the Question. Then I came to American when, September 7, 2007 in Phoenix, Az. I live in Arizona one year. Then I came moving to Georgia. I like here better than when I lived in Thailand. I very happy to be with my family and the other people. I thought God planned wonderful for us.

Samber Htoo (named after his birth-month December, thus “December Gold”) or, as he is most often referred to, Chit Poe (Little One because of his diminutive frame), is the third oldest child and the eldest of my primary participants. Chit Poe was 16 years old upon resettlement to the United States. He was 19 years old and had just completed his junior year at the outset of this study. He is able to read, speak, and write Sgaw Karen and English.

Chit Poe Htoo was born in Bornho Refugee Camp (now defunct) in 1990, shortly after

his parents' flight from Burma. He lived most of his life in Mae La Refugee Camp, where he attended school until 8th grade. When he arrived in Phoenix, he was placed in the 9th grade at an urban Phoenix high school. Chit Poe was placed in the 10th grade upon arriving in Georgia in January 2010. Therefore, he was moved along the normal grade trajectory despite his limitations in spoken and written English. My first impressions of Chit Poe are reflected in the following field note entry after our first lesson.

Comments: Samber's willingness and desire to speak English bode well for his future development. Although his writing is sound, he needs to work on grammar, punctuation and needs to develop vocabulary. Samber would benefit from SAT preparation in anticipation of taking the exam. He was the only one to speak with me and expressed an interest in sports, music and movies. He suggested I watch Rambo as it is his favorite movie and about the Karen (Field notes, May 1, 2010)

Chit Poe is the spokesman for the family due to his willingness to engage with Americans and his relative proficiency in spoken English. Chit Poe is easygoing and always ready to talk and ask questions. He demonstrates the best Sgaw Karen language skills and writes the Sgaw Karen script beautifully. Despite his diminutive frame, he is an excellent athlete. He is noted nationally within the Karen community and other Southeast Asian communities in the US for his skill in cane ball.

He is also a very talented soccer player and played one season for his high school JV soccer team. Chit Poe is also an artist who enjoys drawing and is a self-taught guitarist who enjoys writing and singing love songs. He is very interested in Karen history, proverbs, and myths. He was an excellent source of information about the Karen and was a storehouse of

fascinating information passed down from his father.

Despite poverty, his difficulties in school, and lack of friends, Chit Poe was always remarkably upbeat and never had a discouraging word about life in the refugee camps, school, his struggles in the United States, or the many obstacles he faced. Though noticeably upset with the state's decision not to grant him a waiver⁸ and, therefore, not able to graduate high school, he handled the situation with great poise and maturity. Although Chit Poe often expressed an interest in becoming a translator or preacher, he has not made any decisions about his future career or the next chapter in his life.

Chit Poe is undeniably religious and a Karen nationalist. He often expressed his religious belief and his support for the Karen National Union's (KNU) 60-year insurgency against the Burmese Army. He often expressed his Karen-pride by wearing traditional Karen clothing and always carried a traditional Karen-style bag. He frequently wore a t-shirt with the image of the Sgaw Karen independence leader, and British-educated KNU founder Sa Ba O Gyi, emblazoned on the front. Chit Poe regularly spoke about his desire to return to Thailand to help at the refugee camps. The following YouTube post offers some insight into his interests, beliefs, and American experience: <http://youtu.be/74ra6L7P7-U>.

As the family spokesman Chit Poe took on many responsibilities within the family. He often scolded his brothers for their lack of effort in school. He was the language and cultural broker between all his family members and school, work, and American officialdom.

Interestingly, Chit Poe was very savvy at aligning himself with Americans who could help. He maintained relationships with his first English tutor in Phoenix as well as his caseworker from

⁸ In 2012, Georgia required all high school seniors (including ELLs) to pass all sections (English language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science and writing) of the Georgia High School Graduate Test (GHS GT).

Arizona. In Sandville, he often turned to me, the pastor at Sandville Baptist, his ESOL teacher, or willing congregation members to procure information and services, read mail, make phone calls, and find solutions to all and sundry.

Hser Gay Htoo- Narko



Figure 4.4

Narko's graduation

Hser Gay Htoo wrote the following autobiographical short essay during our first lesson.

My name is Hser Gray. I was born in Thailand. I had lived in Thai Refugee camp For along times. There is nothing change in my life. When I was a kid my parents sent me to school. I was happy that I have met nice teachers and many good Friends.

I'm boring in the camp and we have no way to go out of the gate. All my feel is, this is very hard life in a long time in the camp.

After I was born in Thai border came new place. Than because of Burmese soldier conquer us and for our village so my parents our move us Mae la camp. When I arrive in Mae la camp I went to school. I have met good friends and I play, studyed and I have alot of fun. OPE [overseas Processing Entity] opened the way to go to US so we came move United States. I had took a plane to Phoenix, AZ and I have go to school. My school names Central High School. I had made alot friends. I have live about 1 year in Az, after than I know and to Georgia. I go to church every Sunday, have good neighborhood. I never I live is gonna be like this. (May 1, 2010)

Hser Gay Htoo (Sweet Good Gold), also known as Narko, was born in Tah Lah Thaw Refugee Camp, Thailand, in 1992. He attended school in Mae La Refugee Camp until 2006, when he moved to a boarding school outside Ma La Refugee Camp, a move he pursued independent from his parents in order to receive a better education. He was 15 years old upon resettlement in Phoenix and 17 years old at the outset of this study. He is able to read, speak, and write Sgaw Karen and English. My first account of Hser Gray reads as follows:

Comments: Gray Ser lacks confidence when speaking English. His listening comprehension and writing are good. However, his limited vocabulary is limiting his ability to communicate. He demonstrates knowledge of many grammar structures but still needs improvement in word choice and verb tenses. His most pressing need is improved pronunciation and intonation. He also needs to increase his volume, he mumbles. I had major difficulties understanding his responses and he is notably shy. (Field notes, May 1, 2010)

When Narko arrived in Phoenix, he was placed in the 9th grade. He, like his brother Chit Poe, was also placed in the 10th grade upon arriving in Georgia in January 2010. Throughout the duration of this study, Narko took the state's high school graduation test over 12 times. He passed all sections of the exam except for English Language Arts (ELA). Despite failing the ELA section of the exam, he was granted a hardship waiver from the State Board of Education. In May 2012 he graduated from Sandville High School [pseudonym] with a 100% attendance record and an 84% overall GPA (Unofficial transcript, Spring 2012). He plans on working and attending technical college after the family relocates to Iowa.

Narko was so shy that for the first months he never spoke above an incoherent murmur and was wont to look down at his shoes rather than in my eyes. If asked to repeat something, he would smile sheepishly, appearing deaf to my appeals. Nevertheless, over time Narko changed the most by the end of the study (August 2010) and was more open and demonstrated the widest language repertoire of anyone in the family.

Narko seemed to transform the most as a result of our research trip and expressed a new confidence after his experience as a researcher. In addition to being the first in his family, and

the Karen community in Sandville, to graduate from high school, Narko continually demonstrated to be an intelligent and opinionated young man. He often complained about his schooling, life in the United States, his disdain for their rural isolation, and often expressed a wish to return to Thailand. Like his older brother, he shared in their father's mistrust of the Burmese and supported the insurgency efforts of the KNU. He often expressed a wish to return to Burma to join the fighting or start a business.

Narko is an ingenious builder, musician, and self-taught master of the computer. He spent many afternoons turning quarters into rings (a process involving a rusted metal spike and a dumbbell), writing and recording his own hip-hop music, and patiently figuring out video editing software. He is also a self-taught guitarist. He spent many hours each day and late into the night chatting with new and old friends alike via his laptop computer. He has expressed interest in becoming a mechanic, translator, or businessman.

Unlike his older brother Chit Poe, Narko became very independent and over time was willing and able to solve his own problems. Narko was able to procure his own driver's license, disconnect the family's Internet service by phone, and order his own food when we went out to a restaurant together. Narko was the only brother who did not defer to Chit Poe and over time began to take on more of the family responsibilities.

Hse Ku Htoo- Gola



Figure 4.5

Gola, spring 2012

Unfortunately, Hse Ku Htoo (Calm Gold Blessing) did not write an essay on our first meeting and neither of us can recall why. Fortunately, he offers some autobiographical account in the following letter he wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton upon her visit to Burma in 2011.

I am Karen were I from Burma. Now I live in _____, GA. I liked telling you, it's in the condition in Burma and my researches in USA about Karen. We are Karen people who like to live in peacefully and Freedly in our Karen State. The SPDC took over our state and make a flee to other country. The Burmese soldiers came to the Karen village brothel. They force men to be as a slave. My dad got forced to be slave one time. He got

to carry heavy stuff he got kicked to the soldiers. People in village have to live with fearness and there is no protection. They have to play it on to survive. If they heard the Burmese soldier arrived in the village all people run to the juggle and high. Because of this condition my family can't live in Burma and we flee to Thailand. We shelter in the refugee camp, live in the camp as a safe place but sometime with your. Living in the camp for me is just like living in jail. We can't go outside the camp and there is no way to make money and lower education and less aid.

I am so excited to hear that you're going see the Burmese government. In this case I would like you to ask him to give back Karen State, no more killing people, no more burning the village include; who, crop and farm. I have a suggestion which is to give back our Karen State, free all ethnic group in Burma, no more worse the people as a slave and to make Burma become democracy country I hope that you can carry this objection to the Burmese government and help real people in Burma. (November 27, 2011)

Hse Ku Htoo, A.K.A Gola (his nickname stems from his darker complexion; *Gola Thu* is the Karen word for Black Muslim), was born in Mae La Refugee Camp in 1995. He was 12 years old upon resettlement to the US and 15 years old at the outset of this study. He attended school in Mae La Camp until the 4th grade. He is able to read, speak, and write in Sgaw Karen although with less proficiency than his older siblings. He speaks and writes English with major grammar and pronunciation mistakes but demonstrates excellent listening skills. My first account of Hse Ku reads as follows:

Comments –Hser Ku demonstrates an unwillingness to speak English. He demonstrates severe pronunciation problems. He tends to mumble and does not enunciate. He also seems reticent and uninterested in studying. He seemed least interested in my arrival as tutor! Like HG, he is very shy. (Field notes, May 1, 2010)

Gola was the only child placed in a sheltered ESOL class upon arrival in Arizona. He remained in a sheltered ESOL class for one semester. He was placed in the 8th grade for one semester in Phoenix prior to relocating to Sandville. Upon arrival in Georgia he was placed in another 8th grade class. Gola never attended the 5th, 6th, or 7th grades. He recently finished his junior year at Sandville High School with an overall GPA of 84% and 100% attendance. He anticipates attending his senior year in Iowa and has expressed an interest in becoming a chef.

As the youngest of the brothers, Gola was near silent for the first months we worked together. Within our little group, he chose to defer to his brothers on most topics and points of discussion. In time, I would learn that Gola was the family comedian and could lighten any mood.

As a 1.5 *generationer* (he resettled at age 12), Gola was less embedded in Karen culture and showed less awareness of Sgaw Karen history, culture, language, the insurgency, or Karen nationalism. While his brothers or father related stories about Burma or Karen mythology, he remained silent but attentive. I believe he learned much about Karen culture via our research

Gola enjoyed cooking, fashion, soccer, and Facebook. Although he lacks the natural athleticism of his brothers, he sometimes played with a tenacity that belied his usual lackadaisical style. At other times, he was wont to simply walk away in the middle of a match. He was often the butt of jokes on the part of his father and brothers and ridiculed for his lack of athletic prowess. Despite his silence and occasional one-liners, he is a very considerate young

man who was always attentive to my needs and preferences. He served me drinks and lunch without prompting. When our lessons concluded, Gola silently packed my bags, organized the video gear, and lugged everything out to my car.

Of all the brothers, I developed the closest relationship with Gola. Whenever we had the opportunity to interact independently I was always impressed with his intelligence, consideration, and sense of humor. We often had deep discussions about girls, school, religion, parents, and the challenges of adolescents and life. He was clearly a young man caught between two cultures but demonstrated a maturity that encouraged me that he was up for the challenge. Out of all the brothers, he was the only one to embrace American food, television, and popular music. Over time he became like a younger brother for whom I always felt a special fondness.

Postscript

In May 2012, the brothers moved to Des Moines, Iowa to reunite with their sister and her family. The family bought a new home in the suburbs in late 2012. I have continued to keep in contact with Chit Poe, as he is the only brother with a phone. I have visited them in Iowa three times from May 2012 to January 2014.

After one year searching for work, Chit Poe found employment at a factory that makes office equipment. He worked there for six months and then quit because of the schedule, labor conditions, limited pay, and the unfair treatment of his Vietnamese boss, and so as to return to school to attain his adult high school diploma (personal communication, September, 2013). He returned to community college and received an Adult High School Diploma in the fall of 2013. He recently returned to Georgia and is living in Atlanta with friends. He plans on finding work

and is getting married April 25, 2014 to a young Karen girl he met as a researcher during our project. He continues to interview Karen friends and family on their resettlement experiences. Interestingly, he uses these interviews to gauge people's opinions on issues that are important to him like marriage, employment, and other concerns. We talk on the phone regularly and I am the only American who assists him and his family.

Like his older brother, Narko worked for six months at a factory job but quit in order to find something more to his liking. Recently (March 2012), he found employment at a coffee factory in Des Moines and has expressed satisfaction in his latest job. He currently resides with his parents in Iowa and spends most of his days writing and playing music. He has very little contact with Americans and we have only spoken on my annual visits to their home.

Gola attended high school for one year and graduated in 2013. He is currently attending community college in Iowa. He spends most of his days Online or sleeping (personal communication, January, 2014). He does not keep in regular contact with me.

CHAPTER 5

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the research methods employed in both aspects of this study. I first describe those methods employed by me as a participant observer. I then provide a full account of the research protocols used in our PAR study. This study also provides a description of the ways which data was analyzed.

This study evolved and transformed over its duration. Initially, the study was intended to broadly analyze the literacy practices of three adolescent Karen brothers I was tutoring. During the early phases of research I acted as a participant observer. Later, since scant literature on the Karen in the US is currently in print, I conceived of doing work in the tradition of refugee scholars such as Bankston and Zhou and Rumbaut and Ima. Their mixed methods approaches looked at general trends related to education and community and seemed to be important first steps in situating the Karen with concomitant groups from Southeast Asia. These researchers remained important sources and functioned as a backdrop for the “action-research” dimension of this dissertation study.

This ethnographic study uses what Nelson and Wright (1995) call “creative synthesis” when describing the use of both participant observation and participatory action research methods. My participant observations began in May 2010 and have continued to date as I

continue to be actively involved in the focus community. The PAR component of the study (data collection) lasted from February 2011 until May 2012.

The initial pages of this chapter offer a review of the theoretical perspective that frames this study. I then provide a brief description of the purposes of this study. Since this study employs two distinct methodologies I offer a description of both methods used. The first offers a description of the longitudinal ethnography on the brother's digital literacy practices. Much of the setting for my participant observations is described in Chapter 4. Then, I offer a complete description of the methods employed in our study. I conclude this chapter with the perceived limitations of the study.

Theoretical Framework

Informed by critical perspectives on social construction and literacy, this qualitative research study first explores issues pertaining to Karen resettlement in the United States. As Heath & Street (2008) contend, ethnography "is a theory-building and theory-dependent enterprise" (p.61). Therefore, I offer some description of the theories that guided the research.

As Watson-Gegeo (1988) suggested, traditional ethnography is both naturalistic and impressionistic in that the researcher is meant to experience and observe the natural setting of his/her participants and then offer a personal interpretation of what the researcher has observed and experienced. Such was the case of my participant observations of the Karen brothers at the heart of this research.

My participant observations, as I carried out the roles of a tutor and cultural broker within the community, have informed much of this research. I incorporated a *critical* dimension during the enactment of our participatory action research (PAR) project as I worked alongside the brothers to investigate issues related to Karen resettlement. Critical ethnography, like

participatory action research (PAR), aims to work alongside local stakeholders as they gain critical consciousness (Freire, 1994) and both methods view the research process as political.

Critical ethnography as a method evolved from ethnography and incorporates the principles of critical theory in order to critique the injustices, inequities, and oppression of a certain group. As such, it is a method predicated upon the assumption that culture can be a dominant ideology in which power and oppression become taken-for-granted realities or ideologies (Madison, 2005). In this way, critical ethnographers go beyond a simple description of the culture and actively set forth to expose and challenge prevailing ideologies (Thomas, 1993). Similarly, for our PAR project, the brothers and I intended to expose the ways in which resettled Karen have been ignored, marginalized, and, consequently, *oppressed* in the United States.

Madison (2005) stated that critical ethnography

...takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo...critical ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Others(s), one which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the other's world (pp.7-9).

In short, whereas traditional ethnography attempts to describe what is, critical ethnography asks what could and should be. This notion of *research as change*, rather than *research for change* (Dyrness, 2008) was particularly appealing to the brothers and I as we set out to identify issues and concerns and then address them via collective action.

Empowerment

The purposes of this research study are manifold. First, this study attempts to offer some insight into this latest U.S. immigrant community from Southeast Asia. Second, this study aims to speak to an audience of teachers and others working with the Karen community alongside the

stakeholders about issues related to their lived experiences as newly arrived immigrants. Simultaneously, this research draws from my participant observations as the brothers' teacher. Furthermore, I hoped that our collaborative efforts would lead to their empowerment, as they gained greater insight into issues facing Karen communities and, ultimately, ways that they might individually and collectively respond.

Drawing on Wallerstein's (1992) PAR work in the field of public health, I view empowerment as part of a process that "promotes participation of people, organizations and communities toward the goal of increased community control, political efficacy, improved quality of life, and social justice" (p.98). Moreover, I view the first step toward empowerment to lie in "awareness" or heightened consciousness. The conclusions and implications chapter will specifically address how each of our research team members transformed and saw ourselves becoming more empowered through the enactment of our PAR project.

Critical ethnography attempts to address an inequity in society or institutions such as schools, to use the research to advocate and call for changes, and typically identifies specific issues. In the case of this research, examples of issues were oppression through silence, marginalization, inequality, benign neglect, lack of awareness, and discrimination.

Similar to Balcazar's (2009) PAR work with immigrant youth in Chicago and Rodriguez & Gifford's (2010) work with Afghan women, I too approach the research process in dual roles as both teacher and collaborator. This study is an attempt to work alongside participants and, as Carspeken (2005) suggests, make ethnography a "collective-political-pedagogy" (p.24). I aimed to teach and be taught by the brothers, and hoped that the experience would provoke the type of critical awareness espoused by both Freire (1992) and Carspeken (2005) and lead to the

empowerment espoused by Wallerstein (1992). I begin with a description of the methods used in my ethnography focused on the brothers' digital literacy practices.

A Longitudinal Study: Participant Observer as Teacher-Researcher

As a study that includes both participation observation and PAR methods, I first describe the data collection process via my participant observations as the brothers' tutor. My role as participant observer over our two years together can best be described as "deep hanging out" as described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1998 p. 188). Over the two-year study much of our time together was spent doing a variety of activities beyond studying and/or interviewing and researching. Throughout the study I varied my routine with the brothers in order to better capture a more complete and nuanced picture of their lived experiences (Glesne, 2011). I would often vary our teaching schedule, and over the duration of the study we met at different times, on different days, and in different capacities. This variance in meeting times and places was coupled with a variety of different contexts from which I could observe the brothers. Observing them at church, in the mall, at the movies, and at a myriad of other locations afforded me a more complete picture of the brothers in the context of the broader Karen community.

Most of our tutoring sessions included two to three hours of study followed by lunch, casual conversation, and a few games of cane ball, Wiffle ball, and/or basketball. As their tutor, I was committed to providing each of the brothers as many authentic, naturalistic (Krashen & Terrel, 1983; Wong, 2006) communication opportunities as possible in addition to the traditional test preparation activities we were compelled to undertake. Their isolation and lack of interaction in English was of major concern, and, therefore, most lessons were focused on engaging them in talk. I wrote field notes as well as lesson notes of the material covered for each study session.

These notes also included observations of the brothers interacting with each other, as well as with their parents, relatives, friends and American neighbors.

Each session I also took time to address family issues, from plumbing problems to deciphering and explaining bills and report cards. We also spent time fishing, going shopping, visiting family, attending church, practicing driving, attending sports events, listening to music or watching YouTube, or just hanging out talking. Often times I was able to video record or photograph these excursions. In short, hanging out was a valuable means of better understanding the brothers and was also a means of establishing and maintaining rapport. All of the video collected, over 87 hours, was reviewed and selectively transcribed. I transcribed all conversations germane to three broad categories: (1) resettlement experience, (2) education, and (3) language learning.

Interviews

Structured, semi-structured, and conversational interviews (Glesne, 2011) were all used. Semi-structured interview topics were specified in rough draft form, while the exact wording of questions was modified during application. Over the duration of the study, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with the brothers and countless informal interviews with each of them. The formal interviews were video recorded and then transcribed.

In conclusion, I was able to observe the brothers as they used the Internet for a variety of purposes. These observations were recorded in field note journals. In total, I was able to view each of the brothers as they used digital technologies to create digital photography, video and music files, access services, maintain and build friendships, share information, and disseminate their creations. Other methods were employed in our participatory action research project as

described below.

Field Work Dialogues and Field Notes

Dialoguing with each of the brothers and as a group was a major means of performing, or as Street and Heath (2007) preferred to call it, “doing” ethnographic work. These fieldwork dialogues (Lassiter, 2005) acted as a means to test and challenge our, the brothers and my own subjectivities. A major influence in my role as researcher and educator was my commitment to what Carspeken (2005) describes as “stimulating positive efforts to make change” (p.22). In line with Freire’s anti-authoritarian and dialogic pedagogy, I wanted each of us to come to our own realizations according to our personal experiences, beliefs, prejudices, and proclivities. My role was to stimulate dialogue with the brothers so that they might begin to *challenge their own certitudes* (Freire, 1994, p. 83). Moreover, I challenged or troubled my own opinions, beliefs, and prejudices. These field work dialogues were a hallmark of both my participant observations and our collaborative work.

Tutor-Researcher and Artifacts

Other methods were used to collect data and provided additional types of rich information that informed this study. From the start of my tutoring sessions, I tried to create lessons and assignments that directly related to their lived experiences. Informed by my readings of Elsa Auerbach (see *Making meaning, making change, 1992*) on using participatory approaches with adult ESOL populations, I began to use the boys’ individual life experiences as a means toward engagement in English. I was fortunate that the brothers, namely Chit Poe and Narko, were very knowledgeable about their culture and eager to discuss what they knew and believed. Over the duration of our work they shared with me many stories related to them over the years by their father and other relatives. They also used their artistic skills to produce multimodal

artifacts that were rich data sources.

As I served dual roles as researcher and tutor, my research interests often merged with my pedagogy (Carspeken, 2005). Over the two-year study I was able to collect a variety of artifacts such as report cards, school notices, school writing assignments and projects, standardized test scores, drawings, photographs, letters, Karen clothing, and a host of other digital artistic creations produced by the brothers. More importantly, I would give the boys writing or drawing prompts on various topics. For example, I assigned the boys to compare Karen urban and rural experiences in the US. The following color pencil (figure 5.1) drawing is Chit Poe's completed assignment.



Figure 5.1

Rural vs. Urban Karen Life, by Chit Poe, April 2012

In this color-pencil drawing (Figure 5.1) Chit Poe depicts a comparison between Karen living experiences in urban and rural settings. Chit Poe's artistic rendering offers his own

insights on what he learned from our collaborative efforts as well as his lived experience. It provided a means to blend pedagogy and research in a mode that he preferred over writing. Importantly, after completing this drawing I video recorded his explanation of his rendering. This visual ethnographic method is commensurate with PhotoVoice, a valuable data collection tool used by ethnographers. PhotoVoice has been used with youth in the camps in Thailand (Oh, 2011) and other refugee settings (see Green and Kloss, 2009 for similar work at a Ugandan refugee camp). I used a similar method with the brothers' photographic choices as well as their artistic and musical creations. After sharing with me a drawing or picture they created I would enter into conversations to try and draw out their opinions and thoughts.

Finally, each of the brothers designed multiple digital-artifacts that informed this study. The first findings chapter focuses on the ways in which the brothers were using the Internet in their daily lives. For example, Chit Po's YouTube page is replete with different modes of representation. The following link provides a look at one of his photographic compilations set to music and uploaded onto YouTube: <http://youtu.be/74ra6L7P7-U>. Such data offered insight into his beliefs, values, and attitudes about resettlement, religion, and identity.

Participant Observation Data Analysis

The analysis was based on a theoretical framework focused on literacy practices. Digital literacy practices as described in field notes and interview transcripts were identified. The data were then coded using the axial coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and clustered into home and cyber domains. In addition, the observed literacy practices were linked to specific cultural practices. Table 5.1 illustrates the types of literacy practices and how Chit Poe used these in daily life. For example, Chit Poe often expressed his views on the ongoing civil war in Burma through the texts, photos, and videos he shared online. His online political

expressions exemplify his ethno-political solidarity with the Karen resistance movement in Burma. Thus, he is demonstrating an ability to express his Karen identity in the new communicative landscape (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) afforded through the Internet.

Table 5.1

Chit Poe's Digital Literacy Practices

Literacy practice	Function	Technology
Music production	Entertainment	GarageBand YouTube
Video production	Entertainment Creativity outlet	iMovie, MovieMaker YouTube
Chatting, social networking	Connect to friends and affinity groups (co-ethnics)	Facebook ooVoo Skype
Read and translate Karen literature	Read and maintain cultural tradition and identity	DrumPublications.org
Smart phone	Connect to friends and family and share information	iPhone, iMessage, FaceTime
Photography and photographic compilations	Share experiences and memories, maintain relationships	WordArt PhotoBooth for self portrait Facebook YouTube
Letter writing	Personal advocacy	Microsoft Word
Reading online text	Consuming and disseminating news from Burma and camps	BBC KarenNews.org Kwekalu.net (in Saw Karen language)
Translation	Translation from English to Karen and from Karen to English	Drumpublications.org/Dictionary

PAR Methods

One aim of this study was to demonstrate how two methodological approaches can offer unique and insightful insights into a particular cultural group. By doing research both with and on the Karen I hoped to provide those interested an emic and etic accounts. The goal of the participatory action research (PAR) component of the study was to collaborate with the brothers by actively involving them in creating research questions, collecting data and, finally, analyzing the same. We also intended to create a documentary film about our trip. Their emic perspective was seen as critical to gaining access and understanding of the issues and concerns of the Karen communities investigated.

In ethnography, there are multiple types of information useful for collection: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts (Madison, 2005). In this research study, I focused on four of the recommended types of data: formal and informal (conversational) interviews, participant observation, fieldwork dialogues between members of our research team, and artifact collection. Each of which will be described in detail.

Moreover, Creswell (1998) suggests the need for a thorough analysis of the participants to develop an overall understanding of the information. Following this format, I developed a detailed description of the brothers and our relationship to establish a context for the study (see Chapter 4 Research Context). In this chapter I provide a further description of the brothers' efforts in collecting and later analyzing data.

Our PAR study began in February 2011 and concluded in May 2012. Interviews were our primary means of data collection. Importantly, we used the Sgaw Karen concept of *tapotaethakot* to guide our research methods.

The Seven Principles of Tapotaethakot

Our interview protocol was guided by the Sgaw Karen concept of *tapotaethakot*. I came upon this concept while reading an article written by Karen scholar, Violet Cho, a Sgaw Karen graduate student working with *Burmese* refugees in New Zealand. I became intrigued with the idea of using it for our research. I immediately shared the article with the brothers and discussed its potential for guiding our research. In the end, we appropriated the term to frame how, where, when, and with whom we conducted our research.

I initially wrote the word TAPOTAETHAKOT on a Whiteboard and asked the boys what they thought it meant. They each sounded out each syllable and finally decided it was not a Sgaw Karen word. After much debate and my insistence that it indeed was a Sgaw Karen word they defined *tapotaethakot* as *close talk*, which was commensurate with Cho's definition, *chatting*. Like Cho (2011), they found the term to indicate talk with someone who is *close*. When the boys mentioned *close*, I suggested that they might mean casual. We immediately turned to our Karen-English dictionary and each of the brothers accepted *casual talk* as a working definition. Interestingly, the brothers repeatedly declined the choice of *chatting* as it was a word they associated solely with online communication. We then discussed the seven principles of *tapotaethakot* (see Table 5.2) and how we might use them for our research project

Table 5.2

The Seven Principles of Tapotaethakot

Principle	Cultural Context	Enactment
1. Open, direct and upfront about research purposes and objectives	Explaining research purposes in Karen and English	IRB consent forms in English and Sgaw Karen
2. Recruit research participants through family relations	All secondary participants were related to the boys or close acquaintances from camps	Research road trip was organized based on family relations in various cities visited
3. Informal interviews and reciprocity	Share personal stories with participants in informal setting	During meals or while playing music or smoking on the stoop
4. Respect all participants	Respect elders, treat all informants as intimates	Conducted interviews with adults first to show respect
5. Recognizing and valuing people's experience and experiential knowledge	Listening to individual stories and showing respect for those stories as well as their accomplishments	Making videos about participants music, history, or special skills in hunting, fishing, butchering, gardening, religion
6. Recognize and make use of oral tradition and storytelling	Listening to elders' stories	Video recording elders' narratives
7. Become involved in the community	Helped with different needs in community	Our efforts to help within the community with moving, transportation, translation

Modified from the original by Violet Cho, 2009

The following description aims to provide the reader some sense of how we appropriated the principles of *tapotaethakot* throughout our research.

First principle: Openness

We made every effort to insure that all participants understood who we were and the purposes of our research. We addressed this by providing all consent material and questionnaires in both Sgaw Karen and English. In addition, the brothers would verbally inform each participant of three key points; first, they described our research goals; second, we guaranteed the interviewee's anonymity and confidentiality when reporting our findings; and, third, we informed participants that they could refrain from answering any or all questions. Likewise, the same information was provided verbally and in written form in both languages on all distributed questionnaires.

Second principle: Participant recruitment

In keeping with the second tenet of *tapotaethakot* we initially recruited all our participants from the brothers' family and acquaintance ties. We began our pilot interviews with the brothers' family in rural Georgia. Later, on our research road trip, we interviewed those with close ties with the boys and their family from the camps. Fortunately, these relationships often snowballed as more and more people heard of our research. In many cases, people approached us with their own stories. In one case, in Des Moines, Iowa, an elderly Karen man asked us to come to his house to talk. He willingly answered all our questions and then asked his own questions. He was interested in knowing more about the U.S citizenship test. Although we were unable to answer all his questions, it prompted us to find the answers for him and others. Such reciprocity was common and an important part of our approach.

Third Principle: Informality

I first interviewed participants formally. Participants were seated in the best light in front of at least one video camera, with a wireless microphone attached to their lapels. My amateur background in videography was influencing how I worked. Seemingly, I was more interested in

sound quality and images than in the interviewee's words. However, it was clear from the outset that participants were uncomfortable with this formality and, therefore, only offered brief responses. After consulting with the brothers and considering the principles of *tapotaethakot*, I began interviewing in more informal ways. Later, on our research road-trip, we conducted all interviews informally. We often talked with participants around the dinner table, in the park, or late at night in the family living room. Fortunately, most of these informal interviews were video or audio recorded. As a smoker at the time, I found that talks over a cigarette allowed me a unique opportunity to interact with adults one-on-one. Such informality led to more rich conversation as both adults and youth offered many candid personal stories about their lives and resettlement experiences. This informality was also a feature of all my interactions with the brothers.

Fourth principle: Respect

A crucial principle of *tapotaethakot*, and critical theory, stresses the importance of respect. Therefore, I followed the brothers' lead on whom, when, and where to interview. The brothers informed me of the *dos and don'ts* of Karen culture. This exemplifies my own attempt to, as Freire suggests, disrupt the "teacher-student contradiction" so that "both are simultaneously teacher and student" (Freire, 1994, p. 68). As the *insiders*, the brothers had to *teach* me about Karen cultural practices. Although most Karen granted me much latitude as a non-Karen, I learned over time how to act in culturally appropriate ways. This included greeting adults formally with a two-handed handshake, trying to interact in Sgaw Karen language, deferring to elders, and showing respect by always interviewing elders first. Most importantly, I learned the importance of creating a natural, informal space to conduct interviews.

Fifth Principle: Valuing participants' knowledge

We continually tried to recognize and value people's experiences and knowledge. We learned the importance of asking broad questions that would allow for the interviewee to take the question in often unexpected and personal ways. For example, we often asked questions like, "Are you happy you resettled to the United States?" or "Could you tell us about life in the camps?" Often, these broad questions elicited responses that provided the interviewee enough space to interpret the question in many different ways.

Our research drew great attention and new participants approached frequently. Some wanted to share stories, while others often asked us to film special events or practices for them. In the brothers' community we all became trusted videographers for weddings and other special events. We also learned that many older Karen had skills they wanted to pass down and used us as a means to preserve traditional practices. In one particular case, an elderly Karen man noticed my interest in a fence he had built around his garden. The man approached us and went on to explain how he had built a system of traps within the walls of the fence to snare animals. He then asked that we film him as he showed us how he made a variety of traditional animal traps. Other times, people wanted to express their fears or frustrations on camera about their own resettlement experiences, which became rich sources of information. This active involvement of participants was not only an excellent source of data but confirmed the support we had within all communities for our efforts to bring to light their culture and those issues that were important to them.

Sixth Principle: Oral Tradition

As a culture with a rich oral tradition we made every effort to allow participants (especially older participants) to express themselves in ways that suited their traditional communication styles. We learned over time which topics were going to elicit the most

passionate responses, and acted accordingly. We would always respect the speaker's desire to elaborate on topics for as long as they desired. Again, such freedom provided us interesting narratives on a host of issues.

Seventh Principle: Reciprocity

Finally, *tapotaethakot* involves a very active component on the part of the researchers. Cho (2011), much like Freire (1994) or Carspecken (2005) and Carspecken & Walford (2001), sees the research process as a type of reciprocity, a means for the research team to become more active in the community. As a volunteer in their community, I always tried to assist in ways that made me a *useful* member of their home community. On the road, we all had to try and reciprocate the time and effort people gave to our research. So, in each community we tried to provide some service as a means of reciprocity. This often amounted to assistance with transportation, answering questions about American culture, reading and translating important paperwork, and partaking in community events like soccer, cane ball, and volleyball matches. Such interactions helped as we built rapport with the communities we visited.

Adhering to the principles of *tapotaethakot* also served my intended goal of offsetting the traditional subject-object binary as espoused in critical ethnography (see Madison, 2005, pp. 4-5). As the outsider, I had to rely on the brothers in order to navigate in each community. This made me much less the *extractive* outsider and more the collaborator. Thus, *tapotaethakot* provided us a methodological framework that guided how, who, where and when we conducted this study. The following section provides a description of the five distinct stages of our PAR project.

The Five Phases of Our PAR Study

In aggregate, the study went through five distinct stages and continues today. The following table (Table 5.3) provides a description of when, where, how long, and what types of data were collected. Each phase was a critical step in conducting, organizing, and analyzing our data.

Table 5.3

Five Phases of the Study

Phase	Timeframe	Main Tasks	Instruments used
Phase I- Tutoring sessions and building rapport	May 2010 to October 2010 ≈ 6-8 hours per week 2x per week	Established rapport Conceived of research goal and possible research questions Began reading literature on Karen culture, history, and language	Participant Observation Field notes and audio notes Built bibliography on Karen culture and history
Phase II- Pilot Study	October 2011 to June 2011 ≈ 4-6 hours per week 2x per week	Tutored, observed, and discussed Karen resettlement; Read literature on Karen history, culture, insurgency and religion.	Participant observation Interviews- Informal and Formal, Field notes, field note dialogues, Audio and video recordings Photography
Phase III- Research Road Trip	June 26, 2011 to July 9, 2012	Collaborative assessment of Karen resettlement in three U.S. cities Actively documented the stories and experiences of resettled Karen in three U.S. cities	Interviews- Informal and Informal Field note dialogues Collaborative discussions Audio and video recordings Photography Questionnaires Discussions
Phase IV- Data Analysis	August 2011 to December 2012 ≈ 8-12 hours per week	Review and organize of video, field notes, and discuss emerging trends Selective transcription	Discussions, Field work dialogues Microsoft Word and Excel
Phase V-	April 2012 to	Letter writing campaign,	Writing, Presentations and

Action!	February 2014	Information sharing (verbally papers, video and Online), Making videos
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Importantly, throughout this study, I positioned myself as collaborator/teacher. In the early phases I was recording my thoughts in a field journal or via audio field notes. In the latter stages, when I worked alongside the brothers on our research road-trip, I often maintained the dual roles of both observer and active co-researcher. Such a nuanced role provided me a unique position to conduct research both *with* and *on* the brothers.

Phase One: Building rapport

The first phase was a time for us to get to know one another and establish rapport. As a tutor and novice researcher, I wanted to gain the trust of the community and gauge the feasibility of conducting research with them. Therefore, I made myself available to all the families and by the end of that first summer I became a trusted cultural broker, explaining bills, report cards, credit scores, bank statements, and other questions that arose. I also assisted each of the families with paperwork, transportation, and became a broker between the families, the school and the American bureaucracy.

The decision to work with the brothers rather than another family that I tutored was based on three factors. First, the brothers and their parents asked me to continue working with them as their tutor. Second, they seemed to be in the most need of assistance as they struggled with school and state mandated graduation exams. Third, as a novice doctoral student I had other obligations that would preclude me from working with all the children.

My initial research interest pertained to language learning. I was overwhelmed by the diversity of language abilities within the households I visited. As a 15+year teacher of English to students of other languages (ESOL), I was facing new and troubling issues. The brothers were my biggest concern. As *1.25 generationers* (see Rumbaut 1997 on the differences between 1.25,

1.5, and 1.75 generations) they had less exposure to English than their younger relatives and they had the extra burden of trying to graduate from high school while taking on many family responsibilities. Therefore, in the fall of 2010, I began discussing with the boys and their parents the possibility of conducting research on their family and community. I hoped that our collaboration would resemble the type of “educational project” advocated by Freire. By researching together, I hoped they would gain insight into the research process and also develop their English reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Phase II: Pilot study and preparations

In October 2010, I began to interview the brothers and their family. Initially, I was interested in learning more about their culture and background. The more I spoke with teachers and community members, the more I realized how little was known about the Karen. Our weekly meetings changed during this period.

Although we continued to look at test preparation books, we began to spend more time discussing their stories and the state of Karen resettlement. It was also during this phase that I began reading the work of Paulo Freire and studies identifying themselves as participatory action research. I became committed to finding ways for the brothers and me to begin to become more *critically aware* of self and their community’s situation. We began to discuss possible ways that we could collaborate on a research project. I informed the brothers and their parents about my research interests and the possibilities of collaborating so as to bring more awareness to the Karen people living in the US. I also explained the institutional review board procedures and their rights as potential participants.

In February 2011, we decided to begin investigating certain issues that were of concern to the boys, their family, and their community. We began discussing topics for our research and

possible research sites. Issues pertaining to school, language learning, housing, employment, and access to services became major topics of concern based on our discussions. One broad research question drove our investigation: *What are the issues and concerns of Karen communities as they cope with resettlement?* Concurrently, I had my own research question: *How can such a PAR project influence these three brothers' critical awareness, language development, and acculturation into American society?*

It was during this phase that we created interview protocol following the principles of *tapotaethakot*, created questionnaires, worked on all documentation to attain IRB approval, trained in using video cameras and still photography, and began planning a research-road-trip based on the brothers' network of friends and family in Atlanta, Iowa, Tennessee, and Milwaukee. We also began discussing assumptions about what uses we might find.

In one session leading up to our trip I asked the brothers what they expected we would find in relation to the English ability of adolescent Karen we intended on interviewing. Whereas Chit Poe expressed his belief that his English was going to be better than most adolescents we would meet, Narko and Gola were less certain. Another example related to living conditions. Each of the boys anticipated that urban Karen would live in dangerous neighborhood with more crime and violence. They supported such assumptions based on their experiences in Phoenix and Atlanta. Other assumptions made prior to our trip related to employment, school drop out rates, and religion. Importantly, at the conclusion of our research we compared some of the brothers' assumptions with our data.

Furthermore, during this phase we conducted a pilot study on their local Karen community. We first practiced by interviewing my cohorts from the university. They offered feedback and suggestions on our work. We then interviewed all eight adult relatives living

nearby. In addition, we began handing out questionnaires to gauge Karen participant reactions to questions. In the end, multiple revisions were made to these questionnaires and we finalized with two separate questionnaires, one for adults and one for adolescents (See Appendices). Importantly, as a graduate student taking courses on qualitative research I shared with the brothers what I was learning.

Prior to our departure, we planned and put together a research kit. In all, we had three digital video cameras, two digital cameras, one wireless microphone, two tripods, and a laptop computer for storing our digital files. We trained for over three months using video and audio equipment. We conducted practice interviews with classmates of mine from the university and willing family members of the brothers' extended family. This gave us the opportunity to work on interviewing and filming. In fact, each of the brothers rotated filming duties.

During each visit I brought video equipment that one brother was responsible for setting up and filming. We looked at issues related to light, sound, and positioning. By our departure, each of the brothers had ample experience filming and learning how to export and save video files. In addition, I prepared a three-ring binder with a notebook for field notes, some Social Studies study materials, and a form I had created for keeping track of mileage and expenses. Again, I wanted this experience to be an opportunity for them to learn about all aspects of research including budgeting, planning, and keeping track of data.

Phase III: The Trip

“The trip,” Phase 3, represents the participatory action research (PAR) component of the study. The trip was conceived of and executed in cooperation between the brothers and me. The reasons why the brothers were so invested in engaging with me on this road trip were manifold. Their desire to do research was founded as much on their shared desire to ostensibly “interview”

adolescent girls⁹ as it was to learn about how family and friends were coping with their new lives in the United States. The brothers were also interested in visiting friends from the refugee camp.

The Research Road Trip

On June 26, 2011, the day after IRB approval, I picked up the brothers in a rented Dodge Charger and we headed north toward our first destination, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. En route, we visited Nashville, Tennessee, Saint Louis, Missouri, Springfield, Illinois and Chicago. The trip was an opportunity for the brothers to directly experience the United States and I made every effort to show them important historical landmarks along the way. We arrived at a two block Karen enclave (we referred to the neighborhood as Little Mae La) on the 34th Ave block of north Milwaukee late in the afternoon on June 27, 2011.

We spent five days in Milwaukee with the brothers' maternal uncle's family. We spent each day visiting old friends of the brothers from the camps. We video recorded all our interviews and began compiling a video database. In total, we interviewed 10 adolescents and eight adults. We also collected questionnaires from 20 adults and nine adolescents. We recorded six hours of video. (see Table 5.4). Each evening we met to discuss the day's research and the following day's schedule. These meetings are commensurate with the field work dialogues described above. I began compiling a list of topics discussed. These topics mostly focused on the issues community members were talking about the most and our individual observations and opinions.

We were also invited to participate in local activities such as community picnics and a soccer tournament. These events provided an opportunity to informally speak with people about

⁹ Interestingly, Chit Poe met his fiancé while interviewing new Karen arrivals in Atlanta. They have been a couple ever since!

their community and resettlement lives. After these events, I recorded my impressions and any questions in my field notes. These notes would be reviewed at our evening meetings. In total, we recorded over six hours of video while in Milwaukee.

We arrived in Des Moines, Iowa on July 1, 2011. We stayed with the brothers' sister's family in a small two-bedroom apartment that was home to six adults and two children. We followed the same daily routine of interviewing and nightly meetings. We also had the opportunity to observe and film a Karen church service, Karen heritage language classes for children, celebrate the Independence Day holiday at a Karen picnic, and interact with more of the brothers' extended family. In addition, I tried to allow the brothers more freedom to interview without me by their side.

They filmed their own interviews, which provided emic data as well. In total, we recorded four hours of video and interviewed seven adolescents and eight adults. We also collected eight adult questionnaires and 11 adolescent questionnaires (see table 5.4). Like our research in Milwaukee, we were able to informally speak with a wide range of people in the Karen community at the Fourth of July picnic and after church services.

Our next leg of the trip was supposed to be Murfreesboro, Tennessee. However, en route Chit Poe informed me that his friend was not at home and that we would have better connections in Atlanta. So, on July 6, 2011 we headed back south to Atlanta, Georgia.

The brothers had made connections with many adolescents in Atlanta through their older brother Moo Tha Wah's network of friends. In Atlanta, we were able to interview eight adolescents and six adults. Importantly, the boys would independently travel to Atlanta over the next months to hand out questionnaires and conduct interviews. They began to assist newly arriving Karen in a host of ways including procuring drivers licenses, car insurance, and phone

and Internet services. In total, they collected eight adolescent questionnaires and six adult questionnaires in Atlanta and many informal interviews.

Table 5.4

Data Collected

Location	Interviews	Questionnaires	Video recordings
Brothers' home community, GA	3 Adolescents (5 Semi-structured interviews with each brother) 8 Adults *The brothers interviewed me together 2X	3 Adolescents 10 Adults	87+ hours
Milwaukee, WI	10 Adolescents 8 Adults	9 Adolescents 20 Adults	6 Hours
Des Moines, IA	7 Adolescents 8 Adults	11 Adolescents 8 Adults	4 Hours
Atlanta, GA	8 Adolescents 6 Adults	14 Adolescents 12 Adults	2 hours
TOTAL	28 Adolescents 42 Adults	37 Adolescents 50 Adults	≈100 hours

Phase IV-Organizing Data

From August 2011 until December 2011 we met three times each week to organize, discuss, and begin coding data together. We began by organizing and coding our questionnaires using Microsoft Excel. The brothers translated interviews conducted in Karen. Most of our data collection was also filmed and recorded.

We also made files to store all our video and audio recordings. I reviewed all video and began to transcribe key interviews or fieldwork dialogues. In total, we collected over 12 hours of video that we backed up on a removable hard disk and then copied to DVDs and reviewed. I, in turn, collected over 87 hours of video during my participant observations as the brothers' tutor.

Chit Poe and Narko began making very rough compilations of scenes from the trip using iMovie software. However, the growing pressure on the brothers to graduate high school interrupted this stage and introduced the final phase of our work together.

Phase V: Transcription, Dialoguing, and Analyzing

In February 2012 one event and another decision changed the course of our collaboration. Our anticipated goal of making a video documentary of our trip was interrupted when Chit Poe and Narko were informed by their school that they had failed their most recent attempts to pass the state's mandatory graduation exam. Without a passing score on all five sections (math, science, social studies, English language arts, and writing), they would not be eligible to graduate high school. Chit Poe (see Chapter Three for complete description of the brothers and research context), soon to turn 21, was anxious about his future without a high school diploma. The urgency of their situation was compounded by their parents' decision to relocate to Iowa at the end of the school year. Therefore, our final months together focused primarily on studying for the high school graduation test and finding other alternatives that might help them graduate.

Though I continued to work on transcribing and reviewing our data, our research collaboration was reduced to one three-hour session per week from January 2012 until May 2012 when the boys moved with their family to Iowa. However, I was able to integrate, quite unexpectedly, the content we studied for the Social Studies exam on US history and civics with the participatory action goals of our project.

Action! Praxis

A key component of PAR and tapotaethakot is the commitment to collective action based on the needs of the stakeholders. The pressing issue of graduating led to our first *active* response to a critical issue in the brothers' and their friends' lives. While studying a unit on the U.S.

Constitution, we began to talk about individual rights and what it means to “petition the government.” While explaining, I told the boys of how my brother had written a letter to his local Senator and how he was able to save his house from foreclosure. When I suggested that the brothers might want to write a letter based on their own experiences, they decided to write letters about the unfairness of the graduation exam for ELLs like themselves. Thus, they began to draft letters to state and federal officials expressing their concerns (see appendix A for Chit Poe’s letter and Appendix B Narko’s letter to County Superintendent). Responses from Congressmen and other state officials were met with enthusiasm and elicited real change in the brothers’ lives. Though I originally conceived of this particular letter-writing campaign, the brothers took the time to write and edit multiple drafts. In the end, what began as an activity on U.S. civics, evolved into an active political statement. This letter writing campaign led to Narko receiving a waiver from the state board of education, which allowed him to graduate in 2012!

The brothers also were active in sharing our research findings with their community and the wider Karen community via the Internet and on visits to Atlanta. As noted earlier, they, namely Chit Poe and Narko, became more actively involved in assisting Karen families. In addition, Gola wrote a letter to secretary Clinton in advance of her trip to Burma in 2011.

Collaborative Data Analysis

Crystallization and the Longitudinal Approach

Certain protocols were followed to substantiate my interpretations, choices of representation, and claims. These procedures evolved over time, as I became a more sophisticated researcher. Following Richardson (2000), I have opted for the metaphor of crystallization rather than the more commonly used term *triangulation* to describe the procedures

I used as a participant observer and collaborator to better understand or validate the multiple perspectives under consideration in this study. Richardson (2000) writes of crystallization:

I propose that the central image for 'validity' for postmodern texts is not the triangle –a, rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imagery is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. (p.934 as quoted in Glesne, 2011, p. 47)

Despite the messiness implied in such an understanding of the research process and the inherent difficulties in attaining any validation, certain strategies were employed to contribute to the trustworthiness of the claims made in this study.

Importantly, my prolonged engagement with the primary participants contributed to our building relationships of *confianza* or mutual trust, a term borrowed from Gonzales & Moll (1993). A longitudinal approach, two years (and counting), enabled me the requisite time to better understand the family and Sgaw Karen culture. A protracted study also allowed us the time to bridge our personal worlds.

Over the duration of the study multiple colleagues, friends, and family members were able to “hang-out” with my primary participants. Such meetings not only strengthened our relationship but also provided new insights and “alternative interpretations” (Stake, 2009, p.113). Since I was working with an ethnic group that was foreign to me, the insights of other ethnicities, genders, and ages proved invaluable in *troubling* my own assumptions and biases. I am especially indebted to my Asian friends and colleagues who made multiple visits to the brothers’ home and offered me invaluable interpretations of cultural behaviors and mores that often demystified some of my own interpretations.

Such alternative interpretations are best exemplified by the following anecdote. After their older brother's wedding ceremony, I mentioned to Chit Po how impressed I was with his father's ability to get the entire Karen community laughing during his wedding speech. In response, he related the story of how his father had acquired his rhetorical perspicuity by eating the tongue of a particular bird. Like many of the stories Chit Po recounted to me over the years, he related the story with great earnestness. I would immediately scribble such stories in my journal; "the Karen attribute speaking ability to eating a certain kind of bird," I wrote in my field notes. When I later shared the story with a Korean friend, she informed me that Koreans share a similar folktale. After my initial disappointment, I began to realize that other parallels existed between Karen and Korean culture. Moreover, these *external audits* (Glesne, 2011) led to extended conversations and debates that were instrumental in my coming to better understand Karen culture. These conversations became an intrinsic part of the collaborative process. Because of such input, I often returned to the brothers with new questions and better understanding (see table 5.2).

The length of my study also proved conducive to member checking (Stake, 2009). The brothers and their family were consulted continually throughout the study as major sources of information, clarification, and comparison. As I transcribed, read about Karen history and culture, wrote field notes, video recorded, and discussed with friends and colleagues, new questions emerged and I was able to discuss my reflections, assumptions, and confusion with the brothers and their family.

A critical component of this study was the use of various modes of data collection. The use of video and audio served the dual function of preservation of data and multi-representation of data collection. The brothers' perspective was captured through how, what, when, and where

they chose to film. Their role as recorders of events, people, and places allowed for an active participation that was sought after in this study and afforded another means of crystallization.

The data were coded using the axial coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and clustered into to three broad domains: community, education, and language learning.

Throughout our analysis we collaboratively focused on issues that were important to each of us. These choices were then discussed and a final decision was made on what to include. We then referred back to our questionnaires to see if they supported our findings. These questionnaires provided us some verification of our individual claims but were not major sources of analysis.

I reviewed all the video recordings, my audio diaries, and field notes. The video data was viewed and then certain files were selected for transcription based on the content of the video clips. Again, I focused primarily on those videos that dealt with issues related to the three broad themes of community, education, and English language learning. These video and some audio files were organized in folders for later transcription.

All video from the research road trip was transcribed. Narko and Chit Poe transcribed those interviews conducted in Karen. Importantly, I did all of the English transcriptions. I often consulted the brothers about what I was viewing and these transcriptions became topics of discussion. Thus, an iterative process of transcribing and then discussing “emerging themes” was a highlight of the data analysis. For example, after reviewing interviews I conducted in English with Karen adolescents, I became interested in finding out how the brothers viewed the great discrepancies we found in English language proficiency. Their opinions and feedback became rich additional sources of data (see figure 5.2). I continually returned to the brothers with new inquiries borne out of my review of our video-recorded conversations.

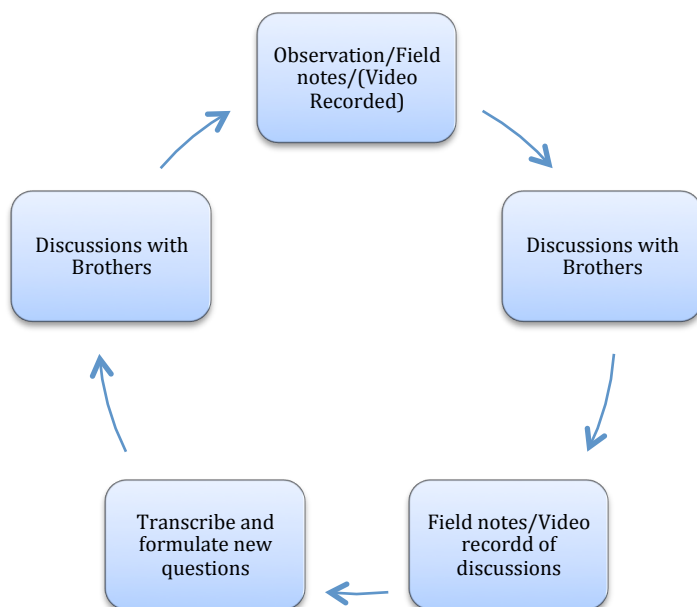


Figure 5.2

The Iterative Process

Transcription lasted from the summer of 2012 to the summer of 2013. Once transcription was complete, I printed out all of the files and placed them in two three ring binders chronologically. One binder was for transcriptions of interviews and informal conversations and the other was a record of all our study sessions. Throughout our two-year long tutoring sessions I kept track of the topics we covered and my ongoing impressions of the brothers' progress.

I also organized and reviewed all my field notes during the same timeframe as transcription. Some field notes that were written in notebooks were typed out and saved in Microsoft Word documents. I inserted these field notes within the transcription binders. Once organized, I began coding based on the original three broad categories. I would hand write an "E" for topics related to education, "C" for Community, and "L" for language learning. I then began making more specific codes under each category. For example, a major topic of interest

between us was bullying. Therefore, while coding I would look for instances of bullying. I would highlight these instances in the transcripts and write “Bullying” in the margins.

I used grounded theory as my data analysis tool. In total, I analyzed field notes, interviews, and informal conversations of video and audio recordings with Karen adolescents, adults, and American teachers. Grounded theory takes the approach that a researcher generates a theory by interacting with the collected data and highlighting emerging themes and patterns from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theoretical approach is particularly useful when well-established theories of the research topic are not available and will allow the researcher to be informed by the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The grounded theoretical process began with lower level coding and concluded with higher level theorizing (Charmaz, 2006). Thematic analysis through the constant comparison method as well as open coding, categorizing, memo writing were used in order to identify key themes and patterns from the collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As a result, I developed conceptual clustered matrices to organize themes (categories), codes, and supporting excerpts.

During coding one interesting, and unanticipated, theme emerged which related to the brothers’ Internet use. For the findings chapter on the brothers’ digital literacy practices I drew from those findings related to their digital literacy practices. Therefore, in addition to my three broad themes I began looking at instances when the brothers either individually or collectively used the Internet and other digital technologies.

Issues of Subjectivity: An Example

Qualitative inquiry, as explained by Stake (2011), is subjective: “The intent of qualitative researchers to promote a *subjective* research paradigm is a given. Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding” (p.45). My own

interpretations, biases, and prior beliefs were a major consideration at every stage of this study's enactment. As an outsider to the Karen community I was constantly testing my own assumptions and interpretations against those of the boys. Therefore, I sought out theoretical positions that would allow me to express how my own subjectivity was influencing my interpretations. Like Crotty (1998), I consider meaning and knowledge as socially created and that subject and object "emerge as partners in the generation of meaning" (p.9). The partnership that was formed throughout the duration of our time together afforded each of us the chance to generate our own meanings through a dialogic and dialectic process. This, according to Crotty (1998), is the defining characteristic of a constructionist epistemology.

Such challenges to our own belief systems are not without conflict; rather it is a fluid process that may lead to change or a reinforcement of our beliefs and values. An excellent example of such a dialogue occurred one day when we had a discussion about a female cousin of the boys. It stands as an example of how I struggled and, ultimately, challenged my own prejudices. And, moreover, how the brothers began to question some of their own beliefs. The following example exemplifies how I attempted to "challenge *educands* in regard to their certitudes" (Freire, 1994, p.83).

One afternoon while I was casually chatting with Chit Poe after one of our lessons, he told me how his cousin, a 17-year-old high school student living in nearby South Carolina, was having problems with a "black boy". He did not elaborate and I let it go. Periodically, I would ask about their cousin and one day he mentioned, rather shamefully, that she had gone "crazy and sick." When I pressed him for what he meant, he recounted the following story.

It seems their cousin had a Black male friend who was her best buddy at school. One day this friend indicated that he wanted to be her boyfriend to which she declined. The result,

according to the brothers, was that the jilted boy “did something to her to make her crazy.” After some time looking through their Karen-English dictionary to qualify what he meant by “did,” we determined that the jilted boy had placed some sort of curse or spell on their cousin. Intrigued, I pressed on with questions and they related to me her symptoms: silent, withdrawn, grumpy, quick to anger, “sick,” and neglectful of her housework. As a brother who had experienced such behaviors with his older sisters, I suggested alternative interpretations. “Maybe she might be upset at losing her friend or sad for other reasons” I responded. Chit Poe only admonished me for not recognizing what to him was obvious- the jilted boy had cursed her and now she was acting “crazy!” “It is true! Really, Mr. Dan, it is true! If you don’t believe me ask my dad!” implored an exasperated and indignant Chit Poe sensing my doubt. This was always the way these types of conversations ended, with Chit Poe testifying to the veracity of his claims. I clearly remember feeling a strange combination of shock and awe.

Initially, I dismissed their interpretation as some reminiscence of animist beliefs. However, the more I thought of the conversation the more I reflected on Freire’s (1994) own admonition:

Their speech, their way of counting and calculating, their ideas about the so-called other world, their religiousness, their knowledge about health, the body, sexuality, life, death, the power of the saints, magic spells, must all be respected. (p.85)

Thus, I began to reconsider. Wouldn’t Chit Poe’s interpretation as valid, if not more valid than my own? What right did I have to so casually dismiss his interpretation? Was I not dismissing him because his interpretation did not fit with my neoliberal Western interpretation? I became more interested in learning how and why he framed things the way he did. I was also interested in seeing what the other brothers thought. Such reflexivity became a hallmark of our time together.

The following is an excerpt from my field notes from that day. It provides a sample of the kinds of notes I took and how these notes informed future *fieldwork dialogues*.

FIELD NOTES: DATE: November 6, 2010

Met with the boys today for three hours. We reviewed parts of speech and they each made progress. Gola still is struggling with identifying verbs and nouns! After lunch their dad bought a roast chicken and they gave me the inevitable monster portion of rice. As always the boys watched as I ate. It reminded me of teaching privates in Korea!

We played cane ball as it was a perfect fall day. We sat at the bench near the churchyard across from their house and talked about their cousins who visited last weekend. Chit Poe told me an animated story of how their cousin, living in South Carolina, had been sick because of some sort of problem with a black guy. I really didn't follow and need to follow up on it. It's really amazing how excited he gets when he sees doubt on my face.

**It seems that despite their strong Christian faith they still hold onto some Animist beliefs. Is this animist or where do such ideas come from?*

This field note entry not only offers the reader an example of how I wrote my field notes but also exemplifies the type of questioning and the connections I was continually making based on my personal biases, experiences, and assumption. Such biases are a consideration in the following section on the potential limitations of the study.

Limitations

The limitations of this study as currently understood are fourfold: (1) generalizability/transferability, (2) validity/trustworthiness, (3) representation and (4) subjectivity (prejudice). The nature of the interpretive paradigm in which this study was situated, along with crystallization of data and subjects, as well as my concerted efforts to limit the negative impacts of my presence in my participants' lives, should, however, reduce the limitations of each. Ultimately, it is for the reader to determine how well I have represented and interpreted the various data and make the brothers' own interpretations based on their own experiences and conclusions.

This study is limited in terms of generalizability or transferability to other similar studies. The brothers and I, their community, and the setting that are the focus of this study are singular and impossible to replicate. Though the brothers and their family are representatives of Sgaw Karen culture, they do not characterize all Sgaw Karen families living in the United States. Their community in rural Georgia provides the background context for participant observation aspect of this study and is also singular in its demographics, history, geography, people, climate, and schools. Every effort has been made to afford the reader rich descriptions of these brothers and their community so that the reader may recognize the possibilities of transferability to other cultures, genders, ages, and populations.

The reliability, accuracy, and availability of data collected from both the primary and secondary participants in this study were limited by multiple factors. Since I am a non-Karen speaker and English was a second language for all the Karen participants, there were inevitable miscommunications and misunderstandings due to a lack of a common language. As nearly all participants in this study were limited English proficient, every effort was made to mitigate

misunderstandings based on language. All consent forms and questionnaires were provided in Sgaw Karen to ensure participant understanding of the goals of the study and their rights as participants. The scarcity of Sgaw Karen interpreters and translators made it difficult to ensure that participant opinions and testimonies were accurately communicated at all times. However, care was taken with all interviews and questionnaires to ensure that participants understood what was being asked of them and that their responses were accurately being represented. Secondary participant (those Karen participants of our PAR study) misunderstandings were greatly limited due to the continued diligence of our research team to conduct interviews according to the participants' language preferences and our commitment to the principle of *tapotaethakot* outlined earlier in this chapter. There were discrepancies in the literature that needed attention as well.

Accuracy surrounding facts and figures related to Karen history, their continued civil war, and culture are subject to scrutiny based on the discrepancies in the literature. As was noted in Chapter Two, Christian missionaries wrote much of the literature on the Karen. Furthermore, the long-standing ethno-political tensions between the Karen and Burmans have created a gap in facts. Every effort was made to clarify possible discrepancies in information namely in regard to demographics, which varied greatly depending on the source.

Qualitative inquiry, as explained by Stake (2011), is subjective. He writes, "The intent of qualitative researchers to promote a *subjective* research paradigm is a given. Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding" (p.45). My own interpretations, biases, and prior beliefs were a major consideration at every stage of this study's conception, design, and analysis. As an outsider of the Karen community, I was constantly testing my own assumptions and interpretations against those of the brothers. Reflexivity was a major means to question and contest some of my own beliefs, understandings,

and prejudices. Therefore, I sought out theoretical positions that would allow me to express how my own subjectivity was influencing my interpretations.

Like Crotty (1998), I consider meaning and knowledge as socially created and that subject and object “emerge as partners in the generation of meaning” (p.9). The partnership that was formed throughout the duration of our time together afforded each of us the chance to generate our own meanings through a dialogic process. This, according to Crotty (1998), is the defining characteristic of a constructionist epistemology.

Moreover, social constructivism, as Burr (2003) contended, “cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be” (p. 3). This is especially salient when, as in this study, the ethnographer comes from outside the community under investigation. Throughout the study design, data collection, and analysis phases I was mindful of how my own subjectivity was influencing my interpretations and, therefore, I have provided a comprehensive autobiographical sketch (see Chapter 3).

Subjectivity on the part of the researcher acted as both a limitation and a research tool during this study. Due to the long history of Karen-American relations, I was forever grappling with the role I assumed as a single, educated, Catholic, White American male intent on “helping” the Karen community. In fact, each of the aforementioned (my age, skin color, religion) became topics of discussions between us. My status as a teacher also played a role in both my access to the community and the respect and deference I was shown. However, it should be mentioned that I made every effort to present myself in as genuine a light as possible, exposing both my strengths and weaknesses as a novice researcher. Ironically, some of my personal “flaws” and or limitations helped establish some form of affinity between us. In time, I believe that unpredictable factors such as the condition of my decrepit old Nissan Altima became a means of

acceptance. I believe that over time the high status associated with being a “White” American male wore off on the brothers and their family. My car, forgetfulness, relationship issues, and lack of finances were all sources of mild ridicule, curiosity, and astonishment by the Karen community. My meager salary as a graduate student was also a source of solidarity and somewhat alleviated the economic divide between us. I also made every effort to show respect for their culture, religion, and circumstances as refugees in a foreign land. I believe that my patience and genuine curiosity about their culture, traditions, and beliefs was transparent and well received. In order to limit misunderstanding, I continued to read literature related to ethnography, Karen culture and history, as well as commensurate research involving refugees so as to better understand cultural mores and ethical considerations.

It must also be noted that I assumed multiple roles beyond that of researcher and tutor throughout this study. I became a friend, advocate, and resource for the family. Most notably, I became a source of information and guidance about the brothers’ schooling. Over time I also became an active advocate for the brothers’ family and the wider Karen community. By journaling my reflections and sharing my evolving thoughts with friends, family, and colleagues, I was better able to cope with the often conflicting roles I was assuming. My continued reflection on my own subjectivity led to my search for a methodology that would better suit my growing advocacy. My decision to incorporate participatory action research was made to offset my own subjectivities.

As the author of this study, I have had to make difficult choices about how to represent the actors and settings set before my reader. Despite my efforts towards inclusion, research rigor, and fairness, I recognize that my representations are inherently limited in scope due to my “etic” position. The language I use and the images I present are representations of my, and the brothers,

making. In addition, I included the brothers and the other participants in this study when making decisions regarding how and whom to represent. The brothers were also consulted at different stages of the writing process. The language-divide between my participants and me made this process difficult, as they were not accustomed to or interested in academic writing or reading. It should be noted that the brothers showed limited interest in reviewing my writing and, therefore, the brothers' input on my final written representation was limited to oral explanation and feedback.

I remained aware of the ethical implications surrounding this study and extra precautions were taken to ensure the participants' understanding. Because of the vulnerable nature of the population that is the focus of this study, the institutional review board (IRB) process was especially rigorous, providing me important guidance as I made my way through the research process. As noted earlier, all consent material was offered in English and Sgaw Karen. It was also made explicit that people who did not feel comfortable with the study's purposes, or felt uncomfortable answering any questions, could opt out of the study at any time. Although no one opted out of interviews, some preferred to not be filmed. In short, following Glesne (2011), I have tried to minimize researcher representational bias by including the brothers in the choice of images used and by taking every precaution to ensure participant understanding.

SECTION III: FINDINGS

CHAPTER 6

KAREN RESETTLEMENT: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT ON KAREN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE US

Since 2006 ethnic Burmese refugees represent the largest group of refugees resettling to the United States. Currently, a dearth of information exists in the academic literature about any of the ethnic groups resettling under the designation *Burmese*. This study offers insight into the largest ethnic group resettling under the designation Burmese, the Karen. This study investigates the educational experiences of Karen students via a participatory action research (PAR) project between a White male English tutor and three adolescent Sgaw Karen brothers. This particular paper draws on data gleaned from our two-year collaborative, qualitative research, which used interviews, questionnaires, and the participant observations of our research team. We focus on issues identified by our team as principal concerns of the brothers' Karen community in rural Georgia and three other Karen communities visited.

As a collaborative project this paper offers a unique synthesis of both emic and etic perceptions on Karen resettlement. The findings from this study are threefold. First, this study demonstrates how collaboration between an outside academic researcher and minority youth can offer insights into issues related to refugee resettlement to the United States. Second, the research demonstrates how such collaboration can provide viable solutions to problems identified. Finally, such an approach offers a response to the deficit model within education and

society that often does not “recognize the skills, intellect, creativity and promise” (Campano, 2007, as quoted in Van Sluys, 2010, p.140) of minority youth.

Introduction

A polarizing topic for many North Americans and Europeans is the issue of immigration. Though most of the media attention focuses on illegal immigration, there is a growing concern in government, communities, and schools around the United States on legal immigration; namely, the government’s refugee resettlement program. Under heightened scrutiny, the Obama administration is currently reviewing its policy toward refugee resettlement amidst calls from both Democrats and Republicans to reexamine the nation’s refugee resettlement policy (Lugar, 2010).

Amidst the political and public debate, refugees continue to resettle in U.S. communities across the nation. According to the U.S. government’s Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), refugees from Burma represent the largest group resettled in the US over the past decade, with nearly 120,000 resettling in states across the entire country (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2014). The largest ethnic group resettling under the designation *Burmese* is actually ethnic Karen. To date a dearth of refugee related literature addresses issues germane to refugee resettlement from the perspective of resettled refugees. This participatory action research approach is unique in the literature and fills that gap. Moreover, this research addresses issues connected to the lived educational experiences of Karen youth, which is also unique in the literature. This chapter first provides some background information on this latest resettled group from Southeast Asia, the Karen people, and then offers a description of our collaborative research project. Next, I discuss the findings related to Karen educational experiences in the US and conclude with some conclusions and implications.

Identifying refugees from Burma

Although refugees originating from Burma¹⁰ are designated as *Burmese* by the U.S. government, the designation *Burmese* is somewhat misleading. In fact, the United States has been resettling six distinct ethnic minority groups under the designation *Burmese*: Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Mon, and the largest group, Karen (kuh REN) (Baron et al 2007). Although the Karen consist of multiple language groups, namely Sgaw, Pwo, and Bwe, this study looks at the largest Karen sub-group coming to the United States, Sgaw (also spelled Sgau or Skaw) Karen.

Terminology

Throughout this study I will refer to the primary participants or co-researchers as “the brothers” rather than the more commonly used descriptors *participants* or *subjects*. “The brothers” are three adolescent Sgaw Karen brothers who collaborated with me on this research project. Therefore, the focus of this study is specifically related to Sgaw Karen educational experiences as the brothers were most connected to the wider Sgaw Karen community in the US.

I have opted to use the subjective pronoun “we” and the possessive pronoun “our” throughout this paper to reflect the collaborative work that went into all phases of this research study. Importantly, the use of “we” and “our” relates to our findings whereas the use of “my” and “I” refer specifically to my participant observations. Moreover, it should be noted that

¹⁰ Burma or Myanmar? The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta officially renamed the country “Myanmar Naing-ngan” in 1989 (South 2008). However, ethnic minority groups and some governments, such as the United States, still use the old designation “Burma.” This study follows the traditional usage of “Burma” as it was the only designation used by the Karen contributors to this paper.

Finally, I will often use the phrase “focus community” in reference to the brothers Karen community in rural Georgia. I visited the community over 350 times as a tutor/researcher to 15 Karen children from May 2010 to the present, December 2013.

The Karen

The Karen people remain relatively anonymous in the US despite a vast amount of anthropological and ethnographic literature written about them and the long history between Americans and the Karens. We never met any Americans who had heard about the Karen people. However, relations between Americans and Karen date back to 1813 with the arrival of the first American Christian missions, Ann and Adoniram Judson (Thawngmung, 2012).

The people known as Karen come from various regions throughout Burma and the eastern hills of Thailand. They have long been labeled as a “hill tribe” in the region but controversy abounds in regard to what constitutes *Karen* identity. According to Chessman (2002), the “Karen are bound neither by a common language, religion, nor many of the characteristics conventionally used to designate an ethnic group” (p. 200). The current study involved only those Karen who identified as Sgaw Karen. Moreover, all our participants were Christian Karen despite the reality that most Karen are Buddhist or Animist.

As a minority hill tribe, the Karen were long subjugated by the dominant Burmans and Mons (Cusano 2001; Marshall, 1970; Mason, 1843; Pedersen, 2011; Rogers, 2004). Historical animosity between Karen and Burman intensified with the near simultaneous arrival of American missionaries and the British colonial enterprise in the early nineteenth century (Harriden, 2002; Smith 1999). Many Karen supported the American missionaries and the British colonial enterprise. Sgaw Karen soldiers fought alongside the British during three consecutive wars with the Burmese until the country’s annexation in 1885. These alliances played a critical role in the

development of Karen culture, education, identity, nationalism, and religion over the ensuing 200 years (Ananda, 1990; Cusano 2001; DeLang, 2000; Harriden, 2002). After independence many Karen political organizations competed for representation of all Karen people (Thawngmung, 2008). This division led to disparate goals of various Karen groups regarding a path forward post independence. One route was the armed struggle for an independent Karen state, which has lasted for over 60 years.

Ethnic minorities, including the Karen, have faced persecution in the form of forced labor, rape as a weapon of war, forced conscriptions into the military¹¹, burning and looting of villages, mass killings, and even genocide (Malted, 2010; Misbrand, 2012; Pedersen 2011; Rogers 2004; TBBC 2011). The civil war has led to both internal and external displacement. Although the Karen have suffered innumerable casualties and abuses, they have not been silent victims.

Under the leadership of the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Karen¹² have fought a guerilla style war against the Burmese Army since independence in 1948 (Harriden, 2002). The civil war has led to an exodus into neighboring countries with the majority of Karen seeking shelter in Thailand. The US, Australia, and Canada have led the way in offering third country resettlement to these refugees. The Karen people continue to resettle in communities across the United States and are

¹¹ It is important to note that Karen armed groups, including the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), have been accused on human rights violations, including forced conscriptions as a means to continue their insurgency (South, 2011, p.15)

¹² It is important to note that most Karen are not directly involved with the “civil war” (see Thawngmung 2012 for a complete description of the ‘other’ Karen who live within modern Burma)

anticipated to continue resettlement through 2014. As of 2012, nearly 100,00 Karen have resettled to the US.

Background

The Georgia Migrant Consortium, a state agency offering assistance to immigrant students and families, hired me to tutor the brothers during the summer of 2010. Initially, I met the brothers as their English tutor. Our work together led to my own investigations about the Karen people. I began reading the corpus of literature on Karen culture and history. These readings became talking points between us and led to many discussions about Karen history, culture, the ongoing war, and Karen resettlement.

It was clear that many Karen, including the boys and their extended family, were facing hardships related to school, housing, public safety, accessing services, and struggling with the financial and psychological demands of resettlement. We decided to see for ourselves, and in January 2011 we began to plan a research- road-trip. During the summer of 2011 we visited three Karen communities, one in Atlanta Georgia, one in Des Moines, Iowa, and one in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We devised one overarching research question based on the experiences of the brothers' family and local community to guide our investigation:

What are some of the most important issues related to Karen educational experiences as expressed by Karen adolescents and adults and their American teachers in four communities in the US?

In total, we collected a vast amount of data on a variety of topics using qualitative methods namely, interviews, informal conversation, field notes, and participant observations. This paper specifically focuses on issues pertaining to Karen educational experiences and is rooted in a

critical framework. The following provides some insight into how participatory action research framed this study.

Critical Participatory Action Research

This study was predicated on the *critical* conviction that the people traditionally *under investigation*, the stakeholders, are in the best position to identify and address the issues of the brothers' community (Fals Borda, 2001; Freire, 2000). Thus, this paper is the result of a two-year collaborative effort between the author, a 40 year-old White American male Ph.D. student and English tutor, and three adolescent Karen brothers. Importantly, this manuscript is a product of our collaborative research efforts.

For this particular study, Paulo Freire offered a theoretical and pedagogical framework for both my roles as teacher and co-researcher. The critical pedagogy proposed by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994) and *Pedagogy of the Heart* (1997) influenced this project in three distinct ways. First, as a teacher I wanted to appropriate Freire's perspective on literacy as a means of helping humanize the oppressed. His notions about creating authentic dialogues between students and educators matched my own conception of what it means to teach and learn. Like Freire, I wanted to dismantle traditional binaries of teacher-student and researcher-subject with a paradigm built on empathy, mutual trust and respect. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993) Freire calls for a new teacher-student relationship. He writes,

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (Freire 1998, p. 74).

As a novice ethnographer, I was interested in collaborating with the brothers so as to learn from and with them about the Karen past and present. As a teacher I hoped that this research project would engender experiential learning and authentic language situations.

Second, I wanted to appropriate Freire's notion of critical consciousness, or conscientização (Freire, 2000, 1993, 1987). In the brothers' criticisms of school, housing, their family's financial difficulties, and the hardships of resettlement, I saw the seed of consciousness that recognized their own *oppression*. I wanted to help foster that consciousness while also learning to question my own certitudes. Following Freire, I wanted to challenge the brothers and my own "certitudes." (Freire, 1994, p.83). Through the enactment of our participatory action research (PAR) project I hoped we would be able to identify the issues important to Karen communities while also challenging our own beliefs.

Third, I wanted to work with the brothers to find ways that we could begin to address the most important issues. This *action* component is an important component of any PAR informed project and became a central consideration after data collection. The implications section of this paper will consider how our team acted in response to our findings.

Methods

The Brothers

At the outset of this study the eldest brother, nicknamed Chit Poe (Little One) was 19; the middle brother, Narko, 18; and the youngest, Gola Thu (meaning dark foreigner or Muslim) was 15. These are not pseudonyms but rather nicknames the brothers go by and asked me to use in this and future papers. Each of the brothers was born in a Thai refugee camp and lived most of their lives in Mae La Temporary Shelter Area, better know as Mae La Refugee Camp, the largest on nine refugee camps along the Thai/Burmese border.

They originally settled with their parents and two other siblings in Phoenix, AZ in 2007. They relocated to Georgia in 2009 in hope of steadier employment planting and harvesting crops and to reconnect with extended family members who settled in Georgia in 2007. They were amongst the first Karen families to move to the area. As of April 2013, over 60 Sgaw Karen live in this growing community.

Collaborative research methods

In early 2011, we decided to embark on a research road trip to visit three Sgaw Karen enclaves where the brothers had family and friends. In preparation of the trip we created all interview questions and began pilot interviews with family members and friends. We then devised two sets of questionnaires, one for adolescents and the other for adults. Finally, we trained in using video, audio, and photography equipment needed for our research.

After four months of planning and attaining the needed institutional review board (IRB)¹³ approval we departed Georgia on June 26, 2011. We began our research in Milwaukee, WI where we spent five days living with the brothers' maternal uncle and his family. The days were spent visiting friends and family. At each home we interviewed, distributed questionnaires, and networked. Each evening we ended the day with a meeting about what we had learned and discussed the following day's itinerary. These meetings reflect what Lassiter (2005) refers to as *field not dialogues* where collaborators share and contest each other's opinions and observations. I video recorded these sessions and they became rich sources of data. Later, while reviewing the

¹³ Every effort was made to insure participant understanding of the purposes of the study and their rights as participants. All IRB consent forms were translated into Sgaw Karen. Minors were never interviewed without the consent of their parent or guardian. In addition, the purposes of the study were explained in advance in Sgaw Karen. Participants were notified that they could drop out of the study at any time. Parental consent was attained for the youngest brother, who was a minor. Also, we had IRB approval to use images of the brothers in this and future publications and/or presentations.

video of these meetings I would list new questions or concerns, which led to further dialogues with the brothers after we returned from the trip. Figure 6.1 demonstrates the iterative process. Such an interactive process is reminiscent of Freire’s words “The act of knowing involves a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action (Freire, 200, p.21).

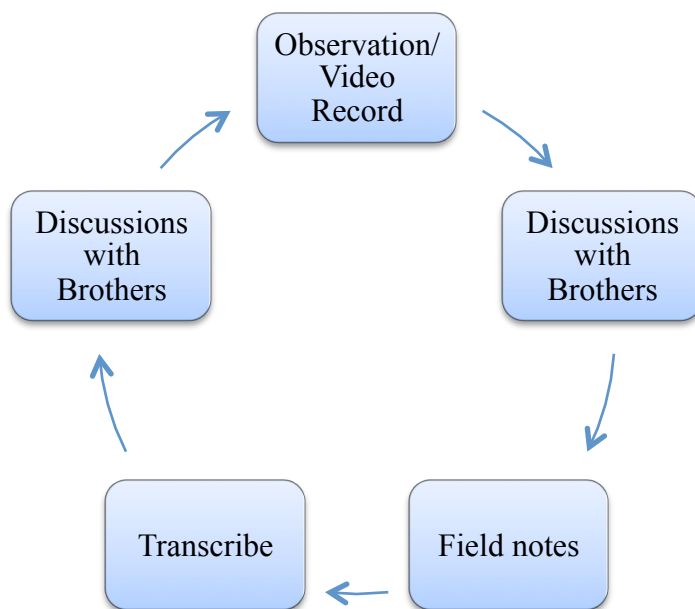


Figure 6.1

The Iterative Process

Our next destination was Des Moines, IA where we stayed with the brothers’ older sister. We continued our research protocol for the next six days. In Iowa, we attended church services, a community picnic, and met with a Karen youth group. These events gave us the opportunity to meet, interview, and distribute questionnaires beyond the brothers’ family and friend network. On our return to Georgia we stopped in Atlanta and wrapped up our research with final

interviews. Importantly, the brothers visited Atlanta periodically to distribute questionnaires and conduct interviews after our return.

In total, we conducted over 50 (28 adolescents and 22 adults, see table 6.2) structured (see appendix C for interview questions) and semi-structured interviews as well as numerous informal conversations with Karen of all ages. Interviews were also conducted with seven Americans involved with the Karen communities in three of the four communities. The opinions of neighbors, teachers, and advocates of the Karen were included to better represent the perspectives of non-Karen stakeholders in refugee resettlement.

Two sets of questionnaires, one for adolescents and one for adults, were created and distributed and collected in each community visited. Questionnaires provided us with some basic demographic and biographical information about our participants. The brothers translated all questions and consent forms into Sgaw Karen so as to ensure participant understanding (See Appendix D). Multiple alterations were made prior to our research trip. The brothers provided verbal instructions or explanations in Sgaw Karen to clarify any concerns or questions. In all, we collected 40 adult questionnaires (19 female, 21 male) and 45 adolescents questionnaires (29 female, 16 male). We collaboratively went through all data from the questionnaires and put them into Excel spreadsheets. We worked in collaboration with a colleague to sort our data using Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) and then created tables to organize our data (see Appendices E and F).

Table 6.2

Data Collected

Location	Interviews	Questionnaires	Video recordings
Brothers' home community, GA	3 Adolescents 8 Adults	5 Adolescents 8 Adults	87+ hours
Milwaukee, WI	10 Adolescents 8 Adults	10 Adolescents 14 Adults	6 Hours
Des Moines, IA	7 Adolescents 8 Adults	14 Adolescents 10 Adults	4 Hours
Atlanta, GA	8 Adolescents 6 Adults	16 Adolescents 8 Adults	2 hours
TOTAL	28 Adolescents 22 Adults	45 Adolescents 40 Adults	≈100 hours

Transcription lasted from the summer of 2012 to the summer of 2013. Once transcription was completed I printed out all of the files and placed them in two three ring binders chronologically. One binder was for transcriptions of interviews and informal conversations and the other was a record of all our study sessions. Throughout our two-year long tutoring sessions I kept track of the topics we covered and my ongoing impressions of the brothers' progress.

I also organized and reviewed all my field notes during the same timeframe as transcription. Some field notes that were written in notebooks were typed out and saved in Microsoft Word documents. I inserted these field notes within the transcription binders. Coding was based on three broad categories; education, community, and language. I would hand write an "E" for topics related to education, "C" for Community, and "L" for language learning. I then began making more specific codes under each category. For example, a major topic of interest between us was bullying. Therefore, while coding I would look for instances of bullying. I would highlight these instances in the transcripts and write "Bullying" in the margins.

I used grounded theory as my data analysis tool. In total, I analyzed field notes, interviews, and informal conversations of video and audio recordings with Karen adolescents, adults, and American teachers. I also analyzed 87 hours of video that primarily captured my conversations with the brothers. Grounded theory takes the approach that a researcher generates a theory by interacting with the collected data and highlighting emerging themes and patterns from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theoretical approach is particularly useful when well-established theories of the research topic are not available and will allow the researcher to be informed by the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The grounded theoretical process began with lower level coding and concluded with higher level theorizing (Charmaz, 2006). Thematic analysis through the constant comparison method as well as open coding, categorizing, memo writing were used in order to identify key themes and patterns from the collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As a result, I developed conceptual clustered matrices to organize themes (categories), codes, and supporting excerpts.

Findings

In aggregate, this study collected a vast amount of information and opinions on a host of issues articulated by the Karen communities and it would be impossible to include all that we believe deserves attention. In this article on Karen educational experience in the US we discuss four themes that we collectively deemed as most salient; (1) educational experiences prior to resettlement of Karen adolescents; (2) English language learning; (3) parental involvement in their children's schooling; and (4) bullying and gangs.

The Educational Background of Karen Adolescents and Adults Arriving in the USA

The protracted nature of the Karen refugee experience has created a unique refugee situation in regard to education. Interestingly, most Karen youth interviewed reported having

attended school in the camps in Thailand from early ages. Only one of our adolescent participant's (interviewees) schooling was disrupted by the civil war in Burma. The camps, especially Mae La, offer a range of educational opportunities from kindergarten to grade 10 (Thawngmung, 2012). Conversely, we found that twenty-five percent of Karen parents had no schooling and another thirty percent reported only one to three years of education (see Table 6.3).

Table 6.3

Karen Parents Years of Education

Years of Education	Parents (n=40)	Percent
0	10 (6 Female, 4 male)	25%
1-3	12 (7 female, 5 Male)	30%
3-5	8 (4 female, 4 male)	20%
5-7	9 (2 female, 7male)	2.5%
7+	1 (Male)	2.5%

Those parents arriving between the ages of 30 and 55 with school-aged children had their education cut short because of the ongoing hostilities in Burma. One Karen parent spoke about his educational experiences this way.

My village [in Burma] was big and have school with many student. I go for maybe 4 year and then no more school. Many village Burmese soldier burn and baby sister, and she dyeing there. For maybe two year hiding, go place to place... When I go Thailand I no go school. But [my] children go school every day in Mae La [camp] but nothing for

them in there, no job no university. (Eh Taw (pseudonym), age 35, Des Moines, Iowa, July 2, 2011)

Like Eh Taw, many Karen parents reported disrupted educational experiences. Moreover, although those Karen students who resettled as adolescents have had more formal education than their parents, educational practices are extremely different in the camps. Many students described their camp education like Ler Gay, a nineteen-year-old Karen living in Iowa. “*Maybe it [camp school] not good. We only learning like to copy teacher and only listening. Too many student and teacher very tough, student no speaking. So many kid, teacher must to tough. And not many thing like book or papers (Ler Gay, 19, Des Moines, IA, July 2, 2011)*.” In addition to the limited materials available at camp schools, most Karen students spoke at length about corporeal punishment when describing their schooling in the camps.

Corporal Punishment

The teaching methods in the camps are comparatively strict and corporal punishment is practiced for classroom management and discipline (Moonieinda, 2011). Moonieinda, a Buddhist Karen monk in Australia, describes the pedagogy as “rote- learning” (p. 42). Likewise, disciplinary practices are different. Gola described the style of discipline as follows.

She [teacher] very tough and hit you for many thing (gestures as if wielding a stick). When I late, she always hit me. And no homework, she hit me, and then I always do homework. One time I run away from her (smiles and gestures as if protecting his head) but she find me (the family explodes in laughter). (Gola interview, Georgia, October 5, 2011)

Many Karen adolescents related similar stories of corporal punishment used in the camps.

Another student expressed his indignation toward the behavior of his American peers and the need for “hitting.” *They [his American peers] are bad many time and no listen. They no listen teacher, student need do respect* (Htoo Wah (pseudonym), age 19, Georgia, November 10, 2011). Gola added that the absence of such discipline influenced his lack of effort as he wasn’t “scared” of his teacher.

Htoo Wah expresses a common theme regarding teaching styles and perceptions about corporal punishment. He perceived “hitting” as a legitimate motivational and disciplinary tool for teachers and parents. Interestingly, some of the Karen parents implored me to use a stick when their children became unruly. More surprisingly, I heard multiple reports from Karen parents that their children were threatening to call the police if the parents used corporal punishment. It seems that Karen children have become savvy on how to use American cultural norms as a threat against their parents, thus exemplifying a widening gap between parents and children.

Language

English language learning is seen by the US (Halpern, 2008;) and Australian (Watkins et al., 2012) governments as key to successful refugee integration. However, our findings corroborate earlier findings on refugees that suggest the US is not meeting the language needs of resettled refugees, namely adult and 1.25 generation youth (those who arrived between the ages of 13 and 17) (see Lugar, 2010; Tollefson, 1993; Tollefson, 1995; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). English language learning was the primary issue identified by both adolescent and adult Karen when asked about their greatest concerns.

We found most school-aged children were able to speak both English and Sgaw Karen.¹⁴ However, there was a great discrepancy in spoken language proficiency in both languages and between ages. Overall, younger Karen children, 1.75 generation children (those who arrived between the 0-5, see Rumbaut, 1997 for distinction between 1.25, 1.5, and 1.75 generation) spoke English with native-like pronunciation but demonstrated limited spoken proficiency in Karen and demonstrated no reading and writing ability in Karen. This was seen as unacceptable to many Karen parents.

Karen parents continually expressed concern over their children's limited speaking skills and the perceived loss of Karen language. This is more concerning when we consider studies that suggest that biculturalism and bilingualism are beneficial for newly arrived immigrants like refugees (Bankston & Zhou, 1995a; Feliciano, 2001; Rumbaut, 2005; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Although 59 percent of Karen parents reported teaching their children Karen language, we met few children under age 12 who could read and write in Karen. One Karen parent explained the differences between his English and that of his 10-year-old son and nineteen years old daughter that is indicative of wider trends.

He speak perfect [English] and he ten. I can't learn like that because for me English is not easy, for me too late. My daughter [age 19] write Karen and read, he [his son] don't know. He speak Karen, only simple thing. He listen me speak [to] my wife [or] brother but he don't know what we say we talk many thing. He don't know so many word in Karen like English (Anonymous Karen parent, Iowa, July 1, 2011).

¹⁴ We did not use any formal language assessment tools and these findings are based on our discussions about the language ability of various participants throughout.

This comment from a Karen parent represents a common theme throughout our research trip and in the brothers' home community. He tells of the language discrepancy between his and his child's English language ability but, more importantly, he speaks to a common linguistic disconnect between generations. The younger brother cannot understand a variety of topics in Karen because he does not have the requisite "words." Such disconnects can lead to a widening of the generation gap that divides children from their parents and siblings (Zhou & Bankston, 2000). Moreover, this father views his child's English ability as "perfect" because of his perceived fluency. However, I found in my focus community that despite native-like pronunciation many Karen youth lacked what I term "home-language" namely, idiomatic expressions or culturally specific language usually picked up in the home (i.e. set the table, pick up your room, do the dishes, dozen etc.). More studies that look at the disconnect between children's perceived (perceived by Karen parents and often their American teachers) English language fluency and actual language ability are warranted as such false perceptions can lead to unrealistic academic expectations.

Expectedly, we found Karen youth to have much stronger English language skills than their parents and grandparents. Like Vernez, Abrahamse and Quigley (1996) we found that length of residence in the US was a major indicator of English proficiency for most youth.¹⁵ However, length of residence was rarely an indicator of English language ability for adults. When asked about this discrepancy, Narko offered this perspective.

School. Kid go to school, every day study English, everything English. But parent never go. My dad he go [to English class] like two week and [then start] work. Now

¹⁵ Importantly, in my focus community, those late 1.5ers (those who resettled between 6 and 12) demonstrated difficulties in speaking, reading and writing in both Karen and English.

he only know 'good morning,' 'thank you,' like that. He not working but he never study now. He want but he never do. He think he too old (Narko, Georgia, November 16, 2011).

This, too, was a common story for many Karen families interviewed. We found many Karen parents quit language classes to begin work. Alarming, many 1.25 generation Karen adolescents and young adults spoke of how they quit or would quit school when they turned 18 because of their language frustrations and difficulties with school. Language was also found to be a major contributor to the marginalization of Karen parents, limiting their engagement and understanding of their children's schooling.

Marginalization of Karen Parents: The Papaya Effect

Lack of parental involvement in their children's schooling was a major concern documented in this study. Forty percent of parents answered "never" when asked about how often they had contact with their child's teacher. I rely heavily on my experiences within the brothers' family and their community in rural Georgia in this section on parenting, as I was not able to observe parent-school interactions at all sites visited. However, such experiences were corroborated in other settings and are seen as indicative of broader trends within Karen resettlement communities.

Like many recently settled immigrant children, Karen adolescents take on many of the responsibilities typically associated with parents due to their relative proficiency in English (Bankston and Zhou, 1995a). This included negotiating loans and rents, filling out applications, and navigating their and their siblings' education. The eldest child in the family was often responsible for managing his/her education as well as that of their younger siblings.

In addition to not visiting schools, most parents reported not understanding report cards, notices sent home from school, and state and national test scores. They relied solely on their children to translate all material. Grace Moo (pseudonym), a 16-year-old Karen girl living in Milwaukee, offers a compelling description of her responsibilities.

I never have time, only school and help my family; my parent, brother and sisters.

My parent don't know to do so I do every day but... I don't want. They [her siblings] never listening... And I do everything for pay bill, calling to landlord, and everything with money. I don't sometime know but I do because only I know

English. But I hate to do! (Grace Moo, age 16, Milwaukee, WI, June 28, 2011)

Grace Moo's story was very common. Many Karen youth are burdened with family tasks that demand spoken English. Interestingly, the Karen have acknowledged this new phenomenon and refer to it as "papaya," as the younger fruit on a papaya tree are the first to be picked.

Analogously, Karen youth are usually the ones "picked" to handle many of the family responsibilities Grace Moo describes. In addition to the burdens of home life, Karen students are often confronted with difficulties at school.

Isolation and Bullying

Thirty five percent of youth surveyed reported having been bullied. However, when asked directly about school life in informal conversations, all related some form of bullying. Instances of bullying ranged from name calling to physical assault. Narko was particularly vocal about his feelings of isolation and bullying, and his feelings represent a common sentiment expressed by other Karen adolescents. In a poster he drew about his schooling experience, Narko wrote,

I just keep quiet without saying one word. I felt like I am a stranger and no one talking to me. When I didn't understand what the teacher said, I felt so shy to asked. In my mind I thought that, I wish I could talk to them and have fun. I was nervous and sad. (Narko, Interview transcript, April 2, 2012)

Later, he writes an equally disheartening account of his first day on the school bus.

I didn't know where is my sit so I was sat in the wrong sit. Than the bus driver told me 'Hey you sit in the back.' I sat in the back. I was worry that I might sat in somebody sit. What I hate about school bus is too noisy and I got bully by black American, they call me Chinese. But I don't mind at all. (Narko, April 12, 2012)

His younger brother Gola related a similar story in his writing journal about how he experienced and responded to bullying. His account is also characteristic of how many Karen students said they coped with bullying. Gola wrote,

I don't listen to what they said. I just act like I don't know what they said. If I talk back to him I know there will be a fight, so I don't want it. Since I was in school, I never get in trouble and have to go to ISS [In-School-Suspension]. I try not to go to ISS so that why I don't listen the people that make fun of me. Now he don't bully anymore. (Gola, Writing journal entry, 2012)

Such reserve in the face of bullies was commonly reported and witnessed. Many Karen youth, like Gola and Narko, were frustrated with bullying but able to respond in non-aggressive ways. However, evidence also suggests that some Karen adolescents are responding to bullying in less passive ways.

Gangs and Crime

Like other South Asian communities before them, Karen youth are forming their own gangs. It was evident that some Karen youth were using drugs and joining gangs, a sign of what Portes & Zhou (1993) refer to as “downward assimilation.” YouTube is replete with Karen-Gangster videos celebrating guns, drugs, and violence (see YouTube, search terms Karen Gangster). It is clear that the Karen, much like the Hmong (Straka, 2003) and Vietnamese (Hong, 2010; Krott, 2001) refugee youth before them, are forming their own gangs. Lwet Wah (pseudonym), age 12, related his impressions of Karen youth joining gangs in Milwaukee.

They like TKB [Thai-Karen Boys] because alone they never win, like when they fight.

Many Karen boy get tattoo like in camp. They fight and many stay home and they smoke weed all day. Too many Black guys want to fight Karen so they make gang ...

(Anonymous Karen adolescent male, Milwaukee, July 29, 2011)

In all three urban areas visited (Atlanta, Milwaukee, Des Moines) Karen youth related stories about Black-Karen tensions. Similar to Harkins (2012) and Mitchschke et al.’s (2011) findings, which report on the tensions between Blacks and Karens, we found relations to be highly contentious. Tension between Asians and Blacks is not unprecedented (Mawby, 1979) and has been well documented in the Vietnamese community in New Orleans (Bankston & Zhou, 1995b; Tang 2011) and Hmong communities (Straka, 2003). Young and old alike reported cases of bullying, assault, theft, and vandalism attributed to Black Americans. On our research trip we witnessed two assaults perpetrated by Black American youth. More recently, we became aware of multiple YouTube postings depicting Karen-Black street fights (see <http://youtu.be/YlvoLE7V7Rc> and http://youtu.be/_YRq27dhqWs).

Moreover, once a crime was perpetrated against a Karen the victim often did not report the crime to the authorities. A reoccurring theme throughout our interviews was the inability or

unwillingness of Karen victims to report crimes. We found instances of theft, assault, and even rape that went unreported. Chit Poe explains it this way:

People don't know, Mr. Dan. They are scare. Nobody want to call police even when they have fire or someone steal. Nobody gonna trust in police. Maybe they call police they have big trouble. They don't know and nobody make trouble. They think they call, they can in trouble. In camps nobody talk Thai police, they scare. (Chit Poe, personal correspondence, December 10, 2011).

Chit Poe's appraisal of the situation offers some insight into why many Karen remain silent. Their historical experiences with police and soldiers have instilled in them a culture of silence and mistrust of uniformed officials. They have been conditioned to stay under the radar and opted to handle community issues internally.

The brothers often downplayed much of what I observed in terms of Karen youth and gangs. Much of what I observed they associated with posturing rather than any real gang affiliation. Although they spoke of Karen gangsters, they believe they represented only a marginal group. However, we agreed that resettlement of Karen in high-crime neighborhoods is having a negative impact on the community. We anticipate that the residual effects of such downward assimilation will adversely impact the community and that drop out rates, crime, interethnic conflict, and violence may escalate. More studies are warranted on Karen youth and gangs.

Conclusions and Implications

Though limited by our shared lack of research experience, a common language, and funding support, we believe that the findings of this study offer significant contributions to the topic of Karen resettlement and the wider discussion on the merit of participatory research

alongside refugee youth. The brothers' participation offers an emic perspective that is unique in the literature. The brothers' network of friends and family allowed us access to Karen communities that would otherwise be difficult to attain.

This study exemplifies the benefits that such a collaborative project can have on adolescent refugee youth and outside researchers. Such research experience provides each with insights into some of the challenges and possible solutions for issues facing their community. Moreover, this study also suggests that the research process can be transformative for all participants and the wider community. The brothers demonstrated keen insights into the issues addressed in this paper and were invaluable in accessing, understanding, and dialoguing about possible solutions.

We believe such a collaborative research project can be an effective way for minority adolescents to become actively involved in identifying and addressing their communities' concerns and for younger children, like Gola, to learn about their own cultural heritage. Gola related the following upon our return from the research trip.

I learn many thing from old guy about Karen and I learn like you [author]. He said many thing I never know. They [his two older brothers] know many things and remember don't know about fighting and many story. Now I know. (Gola interview, Georgia, August 16, 2011)

Gola also learned something from this experience I had not foreseen. He was able to learn about the experiences of older Karen through our interviews. In addition, as researchers the brothers were able to see the hard work and sacrifice of so many adult Karen. By stepping outside their role as sons, cousins, nephews, and friends they were able to gain new insight into the resettlement experience as co-researchers. And I was able to gain new critical awareness into

refugee resettlement, my role as an out researcher, Karen culture, the potential and pitfalls of PAR, and my own prejudices.

We also gained critical awareness from the process. For example, when looking at the attitudes of many female participants, Chit Poe reconsidered his assumptions about Karen girls. After reviewing a transcript where one Karen adolescent girl expresses her desire to forego marriage in order to pursue a career in nursing, Chit Poe had this to say. *“I think Karen girl only want to quit school and marry. I never think they want job more than marry. I think some girl like that and want to work hard. Maybe she will be rich”* (Chit Poe, Georgia, September 2, 2012). I contend that such a comment exemplifies how he transformed his own views about Karen women.

In addition, a PAR project can be an important way for minority youth and teachers/co-researchers to actively engage in evocative research that is pedagogically meaningful. We each became more aware of the difficulties associated with resettlement, while improving our research skills. Narko, in particular, transformed through his experience and expressed his feelings about his role as a researcher. His remarks about the trip offer some validation to the collaborative process employed. *“Now, I like to talk with people. A researcher must like talking and now I, too, because now I am important”* (Narko interview, September 6, 2011).

Finally, for the purposes of this teacher/researcher, I believe such a project can be a means for tutors and volunteers to work with refugees and other minority adolescents to identify and address issues specific to each community while developing their language repertoire. The brothers not only researched and discussed the topics addressed in this article but also took direct action toward solving some of these issues. For example, they wrote letters to state and federal officials about their concerns. Narko's letters led to his being granted a hardship waiver that

enabled him to graduate high school. They also shared our findings with other Karen and began to informally help Karen adults and youth prepare for their drivers exams, open bank accounts, report crimes, attain cell phones, and Internet service, access information and services via the Web, learn about their rights and responsibilities as U.S. residents, and prepare for the citizenship test.

CHAPTER 7

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL LITERACY PRACTICES ON REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT: THE CASE OF THREE KAREN BROTHERS¹⁶

Teaser Text

This article provides a unique look at America's little known but largest resettled refugee group, the Karen of Burma, and ways that they are using new technologies.

Abstract

This study explores the social and cultural uses of digital literacies by adolescent immigrants to cope with their new lives in the United States. This case study focuses on three adolescent ethnic Karen brothers. Two years of participant observations in their home and Karen community, accompanied by formal and informal interviews, serve as the data. Findings report the ways in which these adolescents' digital literacy skills serve them and their family throughout the resettlement process by facilitating: (1) the maintaining and building of co-ethnic friendships, (2) connection to the broader Karen diaspora community, (3) the sustaining and promoting of ethnic solidarity, and (4) the creation and dissemination of digital productions. We argue that the Internet facilitates these youth as they cope with the economic, educational, and social demands of resettlement. This study can inform teachers and others working with immigrant communities about the literacy practices of their students.

¹⁶ Gilhooly, D., & Lee, E. (2014). Manuscript published in *Journal of Adolescents and Adult Literacy*.

Since May 2010, I (the first author) have been witness to a unique U.S. immigration experience, the story of the Karen people and their resettlement in rural Georgia. In my first year as a doctoral student in the department of TESOL and World Languages at a large public university in the southeastern U.S., I met the brothers who are the focus of this study. I was initially hired as an in-home tutor by the state's Migrant Consortium, an agency within the state's education department that provides tutoring and other services to immigrant families. Over the next two years, I taught and collaborated with the brothers on a variety of research projects related to language learning, education, and broader issues related to the Karen resettlement.

Although this study does not reflect our collaborative efforts in its entirety, its findings stem from my work with the brothers as a primary English-speaking partner, tutor, friend, collaborator, and *cultural broker*. As a *cultural broker*, I assisted Karen families in a variety of ways, from accessing social services to helping them understand American cultural mores to preparing paperwork and assisting with language issues. With regard to the study, I have had the opportunity to observe the brothers as they used digital technologies for both academic and personal purposes.

A colleague became involved in this project due to her background in online education and understanding of emerging technologies and digital literacy. She played a major role in the data organization and analysis phases of the study but had limited contact with the brothers. She also provided the impetus for me to focus on the brothers' online activity.

Refugees from Burma*: The Karen Road to the US

Since 2006, the United States has been resettling Burmese refugees from Thai-Burmese border camps to communities across the U.S. As of June 2013, nearly 90,000 refugees from Burma have been resettled (WRAPS, 2013), representing the largest single refugee group

resettlement in the U.S. within the past five years. Although multiple ethnic groups have resettled under the label *Burmese*, the majority of these refugees are ethnic Karen (kuh-REN).

The Karen people are a large ethnic minority from Thailand and Burma. Interestingly, despite their relative anonymity in the United States, the Karen people have a long history with Americans. In 1813, the first American missionaries to travel abroad arrived in Burma (Harriden, 2002). The Karens' conversion to Christianity and later ties with the British colonial enterprise in Burma cemented Karen-Western relations (Marshall, 1970). Since Burmese independence from the British in 1949, the Karen and other minority groups have been fighting consecutive regimes, which has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Karen and other ethnic minorities. Although a complete description of the ongoing war between Karen insurgents and successive Burmese governments is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note the extent of this conflict.

Burma has been embroiled in multiple internal wars since its independence. The Karen have fought the longest and have arguably suffered the most. Karen civilians have suffered directly from the fighting and the repressive and often brutal methods employed by the Burmese military. The Burmese military has used forced military conscription, rape as a weapon of war, the burning of villages, imprisonment and forced labor, torture, and murder as means of punishing and intimidating ethnic Karen. Although the Karen National Union (KNU) signed a peace accord with the Burmese military in 2011, sporadic fighting continues, and many Karen citizens in the conflict areas still report human rights violations (McClelland, 2010). Moreover, many Karen are still displaced within Burma and live in refugee camps in Thailand or live illegally in Thailand, Malaysia, and China. Although the resettlement of Burmese refugees is anticipated to continue through 2015, fewer and fewer Burmese refugees will move to the U.S.,

because the government has ceased to accept Burmese applications for resettlement from the Thai camps as of June 2013.

As is true for many Karen arriving in the U.S., the family fled Burma in 1989 and found shelter along the Thai-Burmese border. Each brother was born in these camps, where they lived until their resettlement to the United States in 2007. Prior to arriving, they had no experience with technologies other than rudimentary tools for farming and hunting.

* The Karen, as well as foreign governments, namely the United States, still refer to the nation as Burma despite the official name change from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 (Harriden, 2002). I have elected to use the term Burma throughout this paper in deference to the brothers' preference for this appellation.

Participants

I have opted to refer to the primary participants of this study as “the brothers” rather than *participants*. The brothers are Sgaw Karen, the largest Karen subgroup. Like most Sgaw Karen, they are Christian, whereas the majority of Karen are Buddhist. They arrived in the United States from the Mae La Refugee Camp with their parents and two other siblings in August 2007.

The names provided throughout this paper are neither pseudonyms nor given names but rather, nicknames the brothers use and asked to be referred to in this and future publications. Images of each of the brothers are found in various media with full Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Every effort was made to ensure that the brothers completely understood their rights as participants. They and their parents each signed a consent form allowing for their images to be made identifiable in this and other papers and presentations.

Chit Poe (meaning Little One) was born in the Bornho Refugee Camp (now defunct) in 1990, shortly after his parents' flight from Burma. He lived most of his life in the Mae La

Refugee Camp, where he attended school until 8th grade. At the outset of this study, Chit Poe was 18 years old and a senior in high school. His English language confidence, relative language proficiency, age, and willingness to communicate made him the primary family spokesperson. Chit Poe is bilingual and biliterate in Sgaw Karen and English but has limited reading, writing, and speaking proficiency in English.

Narko (Narko has no meaning) was born in the Tah Lah Thaw Refugee Camp, Thailand in 1992. He attended school in the Mae La Refugee Camp until 2006, when he moved to a boarding school outside the Ma La Refugee Camp. He was 15 years old upon resettlement in the U.S. and 17 years old and a junior in high school at the outset of this study. Narko is bilingual and biliterate in Sgaw Karen and English but also has limited reading, writing, and speaking proficiency in English.

Gola (Gola means dark or Muslim in Sgaw Karen) was born in the Mae La Refugee Camp in 1995. He was 12 years old upon resettlement in the U.S. and 15 years old and a freshman in high school at the outset of this study. He attended school in the Mae La Camp until 4th grade but was placed in 8th grade upon arrival in the U.S. He is able to speak Sgaw Karen, but has limited reading and writing ability. He speaks and writes English with major grammar and pronunciation difficulties but demonstrates excellent listening skills.

Context

At the time of this study, the brothers' family lived in rural eastern Georgia, U.S.A. They relocated to Georgia from their first resettlement site in the American southwest. They migrated east to Georgia to reunify with family and to secure more stable employment in the poultry slaughtering industry. During this study the mother was employed at a nearby chicken plant with

the eldest brother. The father was denied employment at the same factory because of a physical limitation.

The brothers attended a county high school in rural Georgia and accounted for the entire Karen population in the school. While the brothers qualified for free breakfast and lunch, the family did not receive monetary assistance from the government. However, they did receive non-monetary assistance with finding and negotiating housing, paying bills, finding employment, and accessing services such as phone, Internet, and medical care from their local community.

The brothers were first introduced to computers upon arriving in the U.S. Although they never had any formal computer training, their English for students of other languages (ESOL) classes incorporated the use of computer programs such as Rosetta Stone. They attributed their computer skills to “playing” with computers during their homeroom period in high school as well as at home.

At the outset of this study, the family shared one desktop computer (a PC) with a limited Internet connection (they occasionally connected to a neighborhood wireless signal). The family PC was initially equipped with little software and was used mostly to store and edit photographs and videos. In time, the brothers installed word processing software and wrote school assignments. After six months into the study, the family acquired their own Internet service. Their parents purchased a new PC laptop for Narko. I gave Gola my dilapidated PC laptop, which he used for a year before it failed. I also loaned them a MacBook Pro for six months, which they used primarily for its digital movie editing software, iMovie and music creation software, GarageBand. In May 2012, all three of the brothers had iPhones, which became their primary means of connecting online. Although I consider myself a low-literate computer user, I

incorporated basic tutorials on Microsoft Word and PowerPoint into our lessons on essay writing.

Theoretical Framework

This study pursues a broad definition of literacy that includes a host of digital manifestations. Viewed from a sociocultural perspective, we perceive language and literacy as complex, dynamic, and historically and socio-culturally situated (Gee, 2008; Street, 2001). We also believe that meaning and knowledge are signified through the complex social, cultural, and historical instances of language. In the realm of digital literacies, these communicative events are observable in a variety of modalities: video, text, photography, music, drawing, and the combination of these (Kress, 2001).

Language, therefore, is not simply viewed as a set of skills to be mastered but an ever-reoccurring part of the social experience of life. For the brothers, their online worlds are their primary sites for socialization and information gathering and, therefore, their literate lives. Their participation in online spaces provides them access to social worlds otherwise denied to them because of their second language limitations, rural isolation, and outsider status at school and within the host community. We anticipate that documenting the various digital literacy practices of these adolescents would provide a better understanding of how they are using digital literacies to cope with and thrive through resettlement. Such an analysis also presumes to offer a better understanding of how their cultural uses of digital spaces shape the ways they use language and, ultimately, experience the world around them. These digital spaces, as we shall see, play an important and defining role in their resettlement lives.

This study expands on emerging research on refugee adolescents' use of digital technologies and explores how this one immigrant family's *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, 2005)

play a critical role in how and why they use new technologies. Specifically, this case study focuses on three adolescent ethnic Karen brothers' digital literacy practices and their connection to larger literacy and cultural practices. The study attempts to answer the research question: How do digital literacies facilitate the resettlement process of immigrant refugee adolescents?

Method

Data collection and analysis

This study emerged from a larger collaborative ethnography on the Karen culture and resettlement alongside the brothers. Consistent with Shento's (2004) strategies for promoting validity and reliability in a qualitative study, this study includes a thick description of the context and a detailed account of the brothers' personal experiences, education, and uses of various technologies.

My role as participant observer can best be described as "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998). I believe I gained the trust of the brothers and their family through my continued efforts to assist them and my commitment to learning about their culture. Following Segal and Mayadas (2005), I gained rapport by educating myself on their culture and immigration experience. I have read the body of studies pertaining to Karen history, culture, and religion and often had long discussions with the brothers about their personal and family story.

The data for this study were collected over 120 visits to the family home from May 2010 to May 2012. Participant observations in their home included observing the brothers working on the computer alone, together, and with others. I video recorded these observations and documented my thoughts and impressions in field notes. Throughout the study, I varied my routine with the brothers in order to better capture a more complete and nuanced picture of their lived experiences (Glesne, 2011). Formal and informal interviews were conducted. Informal

conversations generated rich data on topics related to the brothers' computer use, daily routines, motivations, schooling, and overall opinions about their resettlement experiences. I collected and analyzed a variety of multimodal videos, photographs, drawings, song lyrics, prayers, poetry, texts, and other digital creations.

The analysis was based on the theoretical framework of literacy practices. Digital literacy practices as described in field notes and interview transcripts were identified. The data were then coded using the axial coding method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and clustered into the home and cyber domains. In addition, the observed literacy practices were linked to specific cultural practices. Table 7.1 exemplifies the types of literacy practices and how Chit Poe utilized these in his daily life. For example, Chit Poe often expressed his views on the ongoing civil war in Burma through the texts, photos, and videos he shared online. His online political expressions exemplify his ethno-political solidarity with the Karen resistance movement in Burma. Thus, he is demonstrating an ability to express his Karen identity in the new communicative landscape (Kress, 2001) afforded through the Internet.

Table 7.1

Chit Poe's Digital Literacy Practices

Literacy practice	Function	Technology
Music production	Entertainment	GarageBand YouTube
Video production	Entertainment Creative outlet	IMovie, MovieMaker YouTube
Chatting, social networking	Connect to friends and affinity groups (co-ethnics)	Facebook ooVoo Skype
Read and translate Karen literature	Read and maintain cultural tradition and identity	DrumPublications.org
Smart phone	Connect to friends and family and share information	iPhone, iMessage, Face Time,
Photography and photographic compilations	Share experiences and memories, maintain relationships	WordArt PhotoBooth for self portrait Facebook YouTube
Letter writing	Personal advocacy	MicrosoftWord
Reading online text	Consuming and disseminating news from Burma and camps	BBC KarenNews.org Kwekalu.net (in Saw Karen language)
Translation	Translation from English to Karen and from Karen to English	Drumpublications.org/Dictionary

Findings

The brothers involvement in various online literacy spaces served the family in four ways by: (1) maintaining and building co-ethnic friendships, (2) connecting to the broader Karen diaspora community, (3) sustaining and promoting ethnic solidarity, and finally (4) creating and

disseminating digital productions. I begin with a discussion on how they were able to maintain and build co-ethnic friendships online.

Maintaining and building co-ethnic friendships

The family's rural setting made socializing difficult. They had little geographic access to American peers and even less access to co-ethnic peers. Their rural home was 17 miles from the nearest town with limited transportation and few neighbors. Soon after gaining Internet access, the brothers had created Facebook accounts and actively sought out friends and family back in Thailand and those who resettled in the U.S. and other countries. They chatted on Facebook, talked via Skype and Oovoo, and shared photos and songs with Karen friends from the Thai camps now living in Australia, Norway, New Zealand, and in states across the U.S. The maintenance of such interpersonal relationships is seen as critical in the refugee communities' psycho-social well-being (Feliciano, 2001).

Each day when I arrived at their home, all three boys were typically online. Narko busily worked on composing music on his laptop in his room. Gola was hidden away in his room working Facebook or YouTube on an old Dell Laptop. Chit Poe was usually found in the living room watching YouTube videos or reading about events in Burma at the family desktop. Other times they were all huddled around the family desktop watching a movie or music video.

One of Narko's drawings provided a telling account of his personal isolation and his reliance on online friendships. In the following picture, he depicted his daily routine of chatting with his girlfriend online. The picture illustrated him lying in bed with his laptop. In the talk bubble he wrote "HGH [his initials] fall in love with computer (indiscernible) so far...." He also included two hearts on the screen.



Figure 7.1

Narko's Self-portrait of Chatting Online

Such online interactions not only provided Narko companionship but became critical in alleviating the trauma and isolation often associated with resettlement (Lewig et al., 2010). Moreover, the brothers were able to create new friendships and networks within the Karen diaspora community. These relationships not only served a psycho-social function for the brothers but exposed them to a vast network of information that assisted them with resettlement.

Connecting to the broader Karen diaspora community: Information sharing

Once contact had been made with new and old friends and family, the brothers were often observed sharing and receiving information about a host of resettlement topics. Gola told me how he specifically shared information via the Internet.

Many people don't know how to do many thing, and with Internet, they do. My father don't do on computer, but telephone, he talk to many friend. Many people ask question for school, job, house, and they tell every people. My dad ask me ask someone for tax [how to file their taxes] nobody know here. I ask my friend, and he tell me, like that. My dad know he tell every person. (Interview transcript, Gola, March 23, 2012)

In addition to attaining information about how to file taxes, the Internet was also used for solving other pragmatic issues. After successfully passing his driver's permit test, Narko directed people to Internet sites, which provided a Sgaw Karen language version of the driver's guide. Information about procuring driver's licenses, accessing public services, attaining citizenship applications, learning about immunization requirements for attending school, and information about employment opportunities were just some of the types of information I observed them sharing.

The Internet also provided a means to connect Karen communities across transnational borders. One cousin resettled in Norway was a frequent presence at parties via Skype. A laptop would be set up on a table and people would speak with him and his family. These transnational exchanges provided the family a more nuanced perspective on resettlement. The brothers often spoke to me about their growing envy of those resettled in Australia and Norway who, they perceived, had less stressful resettlement experiences. Chit Poe described what he learned about Karen resettlement in other countries.

Yeah. It is easy. They don't work, they just study. I think it good, you know? Here nobody study, only work. Here nobody work, they [will live] under the bridge (laughs). You have to pay everything. In Australia, my friend, he only study, study English. The house and food all pay by government. His parent, too, they only study. (Interview transcript, Chit Poe, September 10, 2011)

Chit Poe was able to compare and critically consider the strengths and weaknesses of resettlement procedures in different regions and countries.

These online communities also provided important links to important regional, national, and international Karen events. Karen New Year, the most important cultural holiday, is an opportunity for reuniting kin and friendship ties on a regional and national scale. All of these gatherings were organized at the local level and then publicized by social networking sites. At a regional New Year's celebration we attended in Atlanta, Georgia, the brothers met friends and family living throughout the southeast, all of which they coordinated online.

Sustaining and Promoting Ethnic Solidarity

Online interactions also manifested in promoting and disseminating ethno-political views. The Internet provided the Karen a virtual space to maintain ethnic solidarity that helped alleviate the trauma associated with resettlement (Beiser & Hou, 2001). Karen, in resettled countries like the U.S., Canada, Norway, and Australia, were linked with friends and family back in Thailand as well and, to a lesser extent, to those still in Burma (Lee, 2012). The Karen used digital videos and photographs to document and represent the ongoing war in Burma and conditions in the camps. These images were then uploaded onto YouTube providing some account of the fight against the Burmese government (search terms *Karen, Burma, War*) and providing the Karen an

opportunity to broadcast their experiences transnationally. Disseminating images and videos of their ongoing struggle to the global community could be a powerful act of solidarity on the part of marginalized and oppressed people like the Karen.

The BBC Burmese broadcast via the Internet became the soundtrack of the family home as the father listened throughout the day. As a Burman language speaker, his father monitored ongoing events in Burma and Thailand. This information was then shared with the local and wider Karen community by word of mouth, telephone, and via online chat. Chit Poe explained his father's telephone conversations in the following excerpt.

They do same, my father same in Mae La [Refugee Camp]. Every day they talk and talk. They not work, so they sitting, smoking, talking. They do talk on Burma and government. Same here. He call friend and talk. Every day BBC Burma and talk. (Interview transcript, Chit Poe, February, 2011)

As a traditionally oral culture, the Karen have long used the spoken word to pass along information, establish rules, and maintain cultural practices (Marshall, 1970). Harriden (2002) referred to the Karen insurgency as the “father-to-son” war as each generation has passed down a distinctly militant narrative. This narrative has now found voice in online spaces. Hence, traditional cultural communication practices and modern technologies are merging. Such preservation of heritage cultural and linguistic practices have also been found to be beneficial to refugee communities (Feliciano, 2001; Hones & Cha, 1999; Rumbaut, 1988).

Creating and Disseminating Digital Productions

In addition to being consumers of various websites, the brothers were also producers or what Kress (2001) calls *designers*. The current Web 2.0, the second generation of the Internet, such as YouTube, facilitates and promotes Internet users to become creators of Web content

(Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). The brothers demonstrated a remarkable propensity for creating their own digital texts, photographs, videos, and music and disseminating them on the Web. They learned many of these skills by watching YouTube how-to videos and by learning from online peers. Previous studies show that creating digital artifacts that have authentic purpose and lasting value, and are accessible by others, may enhance adolescents' engagement with learning and academic performance (Lee, 2011; Kearney & Schuck, 2006).

Chit Poe's YouTube page was replete with different modes of representation. The following link provides one of his photographic compellations set to music and uploaded onto YouTube: <http://youtu.be/74ra6L7P7-U>. It was clear that he asserted solidarity with the Karen resistance movement. Pictures of the Karen flag and famous Karen military and political leaders offered evidence of his political views and allegiances. He deftly used these different modalities to express his identity as an adolescent, refugee, minority, Christian, and displaced Karen.

Likewise, Narko's YouTube posting (<http://youtu.be/quPy73wNeSA>) offered an example of a modern version of a time-honored Karen tradition, the serenade. The Karen love song, once reserved for funeral ceremonies (Marshall, 1970), is a new forum of expression via YouTube. His music video that he wrote, choreographed, edited, and performed allowed him the creative space to share his artistry with a limitless audience. Narko created another interesting video (<http://youtu.be/DUG0eQYqfa8>) featuring many things he made as a child in the camps. Whereas most narratives about life in refugee camps portrayed suffering and deprivation, Narko used video, music, and text to portray his own lived experience. Gola, too, used various features on his Facebook page to tell his personal story. Facebook revealed much about his tastes, style, and background and was replete with various modes of representation in the form of texts, poetry, song lyrics, photographs, and videos.

The brothers' various digital creations allowed them a means of expression otherwise unavailable to marginalized groups like immigrants. This also arguably provided them a freedom of expression that they are often denied in traditional academic settings. The brothers each expressed their frustration with school, where they felt isolated and marginalized. Narko offered this compelling drawing to represent his feelings of isolation in school.

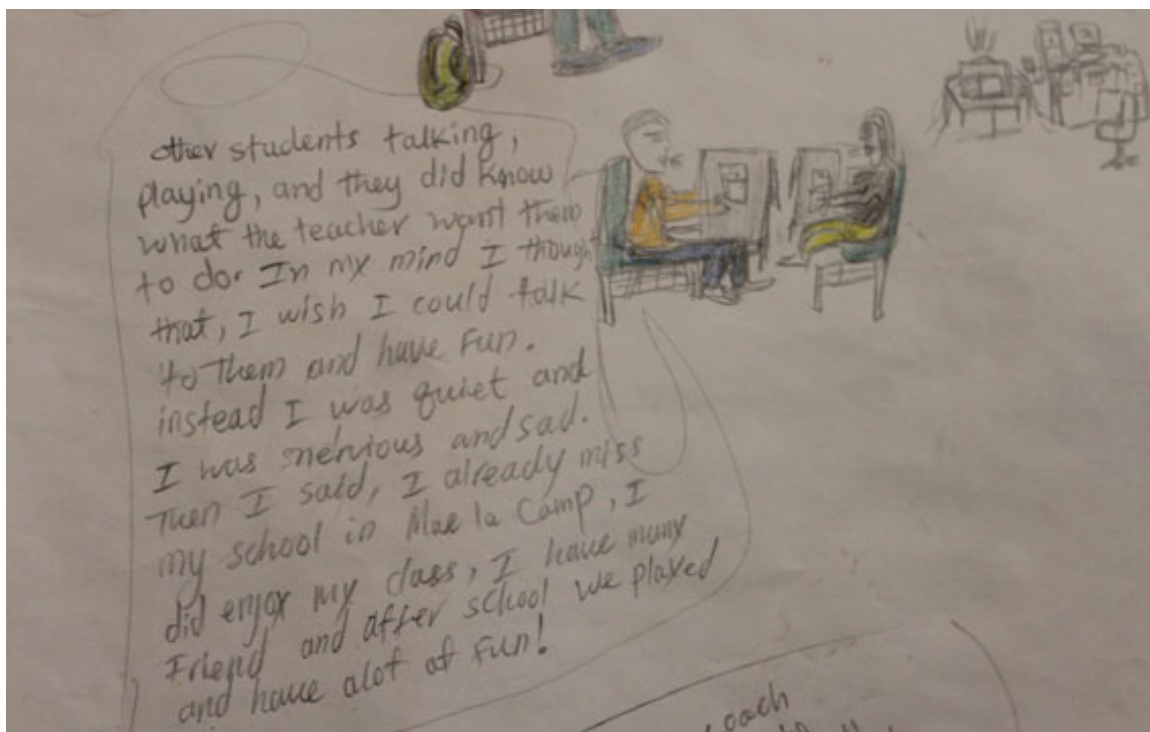


Figure 7.2

Narko's Drawing on Isolation in School

It was evident from his drawing that he felt isolated by both teachers and classmates because of his uncertainty about what was expected of him. He wrote the following,

It's tough because of your language. If you speak, you speak like, it's not really deep like they speak. You don't know how to speak like their way, you know? I speak like Karen, like I usually speak simple word and they, they listen you like first, twice, and then it's

boring for them to talk with you, you know? (Interview transcript, Narko, March 19, 2011)

Many immigrant students were marginalized because of language and cultural differences in American schools and communities (Nawyn et. al., 2012; Ngo, 2006). Narko was treated with what Kenny and Kenny-Lockwood (2011) described as benign neglect. Although his teacher expressed concern about Narko's reticence, she felt ill-prepared to support either his socialization or participation in school (anonymous teacher, personal communication, May 2011). As Hones and Cha (1999) report, schools are critical in facilitating socialization and acculturation of refugees and immigrant children. Teachers, too, play a vital role in creating inclusive classrooms for minority language students. Furthermore, such feelings of isolation can be mitigated through the use of the Internet where refugees like Narko and his brothers can connect with co-ethnic peers.

Implications

Prior to the ubiquity and affordability of Internet access, resettled refugee families had few means to maintain contact with family, friends, and their wider ethnic community. Today, the Internet is seen as a vital means for maintaining family and acquaintance ties and serves a host of various interpersonal, community, and potential educational functions. This study provides some important insight into how the Internet is being used to ease the trauma associated with resettlement. It seems clear from these and other findings that computers, digital devices, and Internet access can serve communities in a host of pragmatic ways (Cho, 2011).

Literature on refugee resettlement demonstrated the importance of heritage language and cultural maintenance as a means to successful acculturation (Rumbaut, 1988). The Karen used the Internet to sustain and develop co-ethnic relationships with people and groups that were

formed pre- and post-resettlement. This study also demonstrated how traditional cultural practices are being maintained and promoted via the Internet. By promoting their Karen culture, the brothers were able to identify with a larger group that reflects their own personal lived experiences, tastes, and cultural orientation. The Karen brothers demonstrated an ability to utilize the Internet and all its communicative and creative capacity in ways that bridge traditional cultural practices with modern technologies.

The implications for teachers, tutors, and schools are two-fold. First, educators need to recognize the importance of bridging new technologies and traditional practices. Teachers may want to assign projects or lessons that incorporate their students' *funds of knowledge* as part of their curriculum. Teachers can learn from their students. Throughout our research we found that few teachers at any level of education had heard of the Karen people. Moreover, few incorporated diversity into their school culture. By exploring their heritage culture online, students can gain new insights into their cultural past and then share their story in ways that represent the cultural present as embodied in their lived experience. Such forms of expression can foster interethnic communication and may promote healthy acculturation.

Second, the Internet and digital technologies allow second language learners a space free from the restrictions imposed by language. The Internet provides them a chance to create meaningful digital productions. As many ELLs struggle with communicating in the second language and building meaningful relationships, the Internet provides a forum for expression that is not exclusively bound by language. Such freedom will lead to much-needed confidence and a sense of belonging.

How can new technologies better include minority students into the classroom? We believe that all students can work together on topics of universal interest. For example, Chit

Poe's love of both Korean-Pop and soccer, were a bridge to his classmates. Students can work collaboratively with native students on creating digital stories, cartoons, movies, music videos, newsletters, or blogs based on common interests. Many free Web 2.0 tools exist to facilitate students' creations and publications (See Take Action! for possible Web sites for teachers).

Teachers can start with easy and fun tools such as cartoon creation and digital storytelling. ESL students can create level-appropriate stories by selecting premade images and entering their own texts and, then, share with friends and classmates. Later, teachers may include video and music creations, which require more complex literacy and technology skills. More advanced lessons may include blogging. For example, while students are involved in blogging, they can research a topic of interest and learn to communicate with a general audience. In addition, students can view and comment other classmates' blogs. Teachers, though, should check online resources' availability because technologies can become obsolete or charge for their usage.

Conclusion

The brothers' journey from refugee camps to rural America stands as a compelling example of globalization and the changing ethnic landscape of communities across the globe. The Internet and other digital media provide new immigrant youth a means to cope with and thrive in their new communities. Technology, in all its incarnations, can and does provide marginalized students a place in the classroom, in their community, and positions them to socialize and build friendships that support their transnational lives. Moreover, it provides them the creative license to express and explore self, their heritage culture, and the host culture. The insights gleaned from this study hope to inform teachers, administrators, and other agencies assisting with refugee resettlement.

Take Action!

- Otherwise shy, Karen students are eager to sing and play music. Teachers may want to incorporate songs into their language classes, and/or schools may want to create music classes or clubs to attract Karen students.
- Student autoethnographies or autobiographies using video, audio, and photography can be an excellent means for students to learn how to structure and organize projects.
- Letter-writing campaigns are an excellent way for students to actively advocate for issues important to their community while working on more traditional writing skills.
- Teachers need to actively inquire about how and why students are using the Internet at home. Immigrant students like the Karen may demonstrate unexpected technological skills, and their creations may enhance teachers' understandings of their students.
- Web 2.0 sites of interests: pixton.com, storybird.com, and goanimate.com allow users to select premade images and animations, enter their own texts, or record their voices; scribblar.com and popplet.com facilitate dialogues around media among multiple users. Students can mix their photos, texts, music, and videos into one video through masher.com and add translations and caption their videos via dotsub.com. Toolkit.witness.org supports the process of making a video for social change. Popular blog tools are wordpress.com and tumblr.com. Students may also create their own website using weebly.com.

More to Explore

- Read Mahadi and Ubaidullah's (2010) article on the use of social networking sites and language learning.

- Gain access to Karen language material, Karen–English dictionary:
www.drumpublications.org.
- For news on the Karen, visit KarenNews.org.
- Learn more about the Karen resettlement to the United States by watching the documentary film *Nickle City Smiler*: www.nickelcitysmiler.com.
- For information on Karen history and the ongoing civil war in Burma, read Mac McClelland's *For Us Surrender Is Out of the Question* and Daniel Pedersen's *Secret Genocide*.
- Read contemporary literature on the Karen by Karen authors: *Little Daughter* by Zoya Phan or *Life's Journey in Faith* by Saw Spencer Zan.

SECTION IV: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I will discuss the conclusions and implications of both findings chapters. First, I will provide a review of the positive attributes associated with using PAR as a research method and as a form of pedagogy. I will then offer some of the limitations and potential pitfalls of PAR as experienced via this study. The second section will specifically address issues germane to my findings related to Chapter Seven and my participant observations on the brothers' digital literacy practices. I will conclude this chapter with a list of future publication and research goals related to the Karen.

Benefits of PAR

Though limited by our shared lack of research experience, a common language, and funding support, I believe that the findings of our PAR study offer significant contributions to the topic of Karen resettlement and the wider discussion on the merit of participatory research between refugee youth and outside researchers. Firstly, the brothers' participation offers an emic perspective that is unique in the literature.

The brothers' access to their local Karen community and the wider Karen Diaspora community provided us access to and trust of Karen participants. Such trust can take months if not years to attain without insider status. My relationship with the brothers as research collaborators built a relationship of trust that extended to other families in their community and

other Karen communities visited. This access to other Karen communities provided me a means to compare and contrast what I was observing with the brothers with other Karen resettlement experiences in the US. It allowed the brothers the same vantage evaluation. These other Karen communities shared with us their concerns and successes, which also became rich sources of data and led to new ideas and assumptions.

Moreover, this study exemplifies the benefits that such a collaborative project can have on individual adolescent refugee youth and outside researchers. Such research experience provides each with insights into some of the challenges and possible solutions for issues facing stakeholder communities. Likewise, such a project values and respects the opinions and views of immigrant youth who are often viewed as deficient when it comes to their skills and abilities. The brothers demonstrated keen insights into the issues addressed in this paper and were invaluable in accessing, understanding, and dialoguing about possible causes and solutions. This project met my anticipated goals of merging research with pedagogy; namely, English language learning and cultural understanding.

PAR as Pedagogy

As the brothers' teacher I was intent on making our PAR project an educational experience. The brothers gained in specific pedagogical ways from our collaborative research. They were able to experience multiple forms of academic literacies through reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English throughout our collaboration. They also learned from the research process about what it means to collect, organize, and analyze data. As assistant researchers they were actively engaging in the kind of apprenticeship or "intent learning" advocated by second language scholars like Rogoff et al. (2003) and Elsa Auerbach (1996; 1992), or the *naturalistic language learning* Krashen (1985) describes.

Language was a major consideration for the brothers as well. In our research-road-trip wrap up meeting I asked the brothers to talk about what they had learned from the trip. I was expecting them to comment on some of the findings and their early assumptions. Surprisingly, Narko expressed that he had “learned new words” from the experience. We proceeded to make a list of words and expressions. These words and expressions ranged from very unambiguous research vocabulary to more everyday idiomatic expressions. The following table (8.1) provides some examples from their list.

Table 8.1

Acquired English Vocabulary and Expressions

English Vocabulary and Expressions List	
Research Related Vocabulary	General Expressions
Questionnaire	Pop the trunk
Interview	Set up (i.e. tripod, camera)
Researcher	Fill up the tank
Data	Get gas
Assumptions	Move over
Field note	Action!
Question/Response	Fill out
Formal/Informal	Pick up (i.e. car)
Professional	Pull over
Discuss	Tourist
Resettlement	Drive-thru

Importantly, the brothers were able to learn these words in the process of doing research. I never explicitly taught them these words. Such learning is reminiscent of what Krashen (1985) and Gee (2004) refer to as *natural language acquisition* or what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as

language appropriation (p.291). The brothers acquired these words through travelling and researching alongside me. As such, PAR is seen as an excellent opportunity for students to engage in authentic dialogue with teachers or other collaborators so as to develop a wider language repertoire that can serve them academically as well as socially.

In addition to gaining opportunities to engage in English, the brothers were able to conduct much of the research in their native language, Sgaw Karen. The brothers' use of Sgaw Karen included writing consent letters, acting as interpreters for my interviews, and conducting their own interviews. Such experiences validated their native language and provided them a chance to showcase their skills as bilinguals. This, too, gave them a sense of pride, confidence, and a desire to improve their English and Sgaw Karen language skills in order to become interpreters. An interesting encounter during our research trip provided the brothers insight into the need for Karen-English bilinguals.

While interviewing an American volunteer working with the Karen community in Milwaukee, the brothers learned that there was a need for Karen interpreters and translators in the area. Upon hearing this, the brothers were excited by the prospect and continue to say they would like to be interpreters in the future. As Chit Poe explained later,

My English is good and I can do many thing. I always help Karen people with many things. If I translator I can help many people and make big money. That is good for me because many old people no speak English and they need me (Chit Poe, November 9, 2011)

The man's enthusiasm with the brothers' English skills provided them a sense of pride, language confidence, and a possible career direction. Interestingly, after that encounter both Chit Poe and Narko continually expressed their interest in becoming interpreters to help their Karen

community and make “big money.” Such a project can also be an important way for minority youth and teachers/co-researchers to develop in other affective ways.

By actively dialoguing and performing research in English the brothers developed language confidence, an important aspect of second language learning (Krashen, 1985). I believe that English language learners (ELLs) can transform as language users as a result of such collaboration. Narko, in particular, transformed through his research experiences and expressed his feelings about his change due to his role as a researcher.

Now, I like to talk with people. I feel so proud ...before I go on trip I thought I am going to be nervous or something but when I got there is nothing wrong with me. People they respect you with a camera and now I like to speak, not only Chit Poe (Narko, personal correspondence, August 21, 2011)

Interestingly, after the trip Narko became much more active in helping translate and interpret for his family. As the family prepared to move, Narko was the one who called to disconnect the Internet and negotiated with the landlord. Whereas his older brother Chit Poe would normally solicit help from me or another American to handle such transactions, Narko began doing things himself. Likewise, his brother Gola gained more confidence in his spoken and written English. Gola, though still shy, was much more active in our group discussions after the trip. It is clear from the video data that each of the brothers was far more talkative by the end of our two-year relationship than they were at the outset.

Unlike his two younger brothers, Chit Poe confirmed his English language proficiency by comparing himself to all the Karen participants we met. At that final wrap-up meeting he proudly announced, “I think my English is good, I speak better than them [those participants we met

during our research].” I content that involvement in such a collaborative project can increase language confidence and that by acting as researchers young people gain a new sense of pride.

It is important for teachers to recognize the need for second language learners like the Karen, who are often very reticent and unwilling to speak in English, to have authentic opportunities for interpersonal communication. Such involvement can increase students’ motivation, confidence and pride.

As a longtime teacher of English to students of other languages (ESOL), I had always hoped to take my students outside of the classroom to help promote their language development. This project allowed me an opportunity to witness how second language learning can be developed by active participation or experiential involvement. The brothers developed all aspects of English language speaking, listening, writing, and reading throughout the enactment of this project. For example, by writing letters, interview questions, and various writing assignments the brothers gained valuable experience writing academic texts. They learned how to address envelopes, organize and structure a formal letter, organize video clips, write interview and questionnaire questions, apply for IRB approval, and edit various texts and video productions. Such multimodal experiences broadened their exposure to various types of new literacies that can help serve them in pragmatic ways.

After the trip we organized all of our video files and began considering how we might organize some video documentary of our research. Thus, we began to practice using video editing software. We also watched multiple documentaries to learn how various directors created their storylines. The brothers appropriated the skills learned and began to create videos for their own purposes. Narko and Chit Poe made a music video together and both brothers

created other multimodal creations that they disseminated via YouTube. They also worked on more traditional literacies during our collaboration.

The brothers read multiple texts as part of our research. For example, we read the article by Violet Cho (2011) that provided us the Karen concept of *tapotaethakot* discussed in chapter five. We also read other Karen publications in English, such as Zoya Phan's autobiography, *Little Daughter*. As we advocated for Chit Poe and Narko's graduation we also had to read the correspondence between the brothers and various state officials who responded to their letters.

This experience has informed my own teaching and I believe PAR is an optimal way for teachers and students to work and learn cooperatively. Although the scope of this project was quite expansive and demanded an extraordinary commitment from the entire research team, other smaller projects can serve similar purposes. The key is recognizing that dialogue and collaboration are conducive to meaningful ethnographic work and second language development.

PAR as a Means to Heightened Awareness

This study also suggests that the collaborative research process can be transformative for all participants and the wider stakeholder community. I believe such a collaborative research project can be an effective way for minority adolescents to become actively involved in identifying and addressing their communities' concerns and for younger children, like Gola, to learn about their heritage culture. Gola related the following to me upon our return from the research trip.

I learn many thing from old guy about Karen and I learn like you [author]. He said many thing I never know. They [his two older brothers] know many thing and remember many thing. I only remember go to school and play in the camp. For me it

was only fun and I don't know about fighting and many story. Now I know. (Gola interview, August 16, 2011)

Gola learned something from this experience I had not foreseen. He was able to learn about Karen culture through our research by listening to the experiences of older Karen during our interviews. As a *1.5 generationer*, Gola was less connected to Karen culture. Our research informed him about the experiences of older Karen who had experienced many traumas as soldiers and or victims of oppression and flight. As researchers, they were afforded a new perspective beyond their role as brothers, sons, cousins, nephews, and friends. As the outside researcher, I was able to gain new critical awareness into refugee resettlement, Karen culture, the potential and pitfalls of PAR, and my own prejudices. In short, we each gained *critical* awareness from the process.

As Freire suggests in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994) “A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction (pp. 30-31). We all gained a heightened awareness of their community’s needs and concerns through the enactment of our PAR project. We also gained critical consciousness through our discussions, as we often tested one another’s understandings about resettlement, life, and our values and beliefs. As the brothers’ teacher I attempted to challenge the brothers’ understandings and beliefs throughout our collaboration and, as Freire (1994) put it, “challenge their certitudes” (p.83) and they, in turn, challenged mine.

I transformed in how I came to challenge my certitudes. Many of my opinions about the Karen and my interpretations of their behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs changed as I became more aware. Importantly, I learned to question my own assumptions and certitudes. The research process allowed me the type of reflexivity necessary for critical self-reflection. Through my

dialogues with the brothers and other participants (Karen, American, Korean, and other Asians) I learned new perspectives that challenged my own understandings and beliefs. This no more apparent then when I consider how my views transformed in relation to many of their beliefs.

Over time, I learned to appreciate and respect beliefs that I had initially discounted. For example, one day after about 16 months together, Narko informed me that someone had drowned in a river back in the camp. He claimed that the “river was hungry.” This led to a discussion about his belief. When I looked at the video of this interaction I realized that I was demonstratively less dismissive of his understanding of a phenomenon as I had been in earlier discussions. In the first months together the video captured me outwardly expressing my skepticism. In fact, I only realized my behavior after watching the video footage. While watching the video of the conversation with Narko, I witnessed my own transformation. I saw myself as someone who was respecting his interpretation of the event by listening patiently. I contend that the transcription process (viewing and reviewing video) allowed me a unique vantage point to witness and reflect on my/our actions, words, and attitudes. I would then address my insights with the brothers and we began to *reconceptualize* our prior understandings.

Another example of how the research process, reviewing the video, allowed me a means to re-view our interactions relates to a realization I had while transcribing multiple discussions with Chit Poe. It became clear to me while watching video of our trip that Chit Poe had his own research agenda and that his purposes were a direct response to my questioning of the many beliefs he expressed. The dialectic natures of our interactions lead to Chit Poe making the research his own.

Throughout our time working together, Chit Poe told me countless Karen tales about curses, ghosts, auspicious signs, and diabolical beings. Before the trip, we would often speak

about such things and I would express my doubts. I knew that I had expressed doubt but when I watched myself on video it was clear from my tone and facial expressions that I was very dismissive and openly derided such stories. When I reviewed the video from the trip, I was surprised to see how many times Chit Poe related stories of how he interviewed someone who could attest to the veracity of his early claims. For example, Chit Poe explained to me his interview with an older Karen man.

I talk to her daddy and he tell me many thing about baby born with hat, and the tiny baby bring you good luck and the tiny elephant. He tell me if my teacher [author] no believe he show you. You buy him airplane ticket and he show you back in Burma. Many people see like that. It is true Mr. Dan (Chit Poe, Interview transcript, June 30, 2011, Milwaukee, WI)

Chit Poe used the research trip not only to document our intended focus on the issues related to Karen resettlement, but also to defend his own belief system. Such dialectic processes were an important way for us to exchange ideas and, ultimately, learn to respect one another's opinions. I had unknowingly influenced his individual research purposes through my expressed doubt. I realized when watching our interactions that I had unknowingly discounted his belief system and dismissed them as wild, exotic, and unreal. After watching the video of our trip I realized how I had influenced his desire to prove me wrong. This awareness changed my behavior and I began to respect and value his future claims. Again, I could see this transformation in later video files or field notes where I encouraged dialogue and refrained from belittling his claims.

In addition to transforming how I responded to the brothers' claims, I also realized how many "funds of knowledge" the boys possessed. Initially, I viewed the brothers as deficient in so many ways. My field notes often referred to them as "lazy" and "lacking." Over time, I realized

that the brothers and their family had a vast array of talents and knowledge that were not only valuable to their lives back in Burma or the camps but could also be utilized in the US. For example, the brothers were continually learning from their parents how to garden, tend animals, cook, butcher animals, hunt, build traps, play guitar, sing, and maintain other cultural practices such as respecting elders, participating in religious activities, and maintaining family and ethnic ties. Such *knowledge* was utilized in the US to offset food costs, provide entertainment, maintain ethnic solidarity, and preserve other cultural practices. Initially, these skills seemed inadequate in helping them as they tried to adjust to American culture but over time I realized that such knowledge was valuable in helping them cope with resettlement. There are manifold ways that these brothers' funds of knowledge were teaching them valuable life lessons as well as important lessons on what it means to be Karen. Such cultural rootedness is expected to serve them as they cope with new challenges associated with resettlement.

Another important implication related to using PAR with immigrant youth relates to their acquiring new insight into the host culture. This project exposed them to new views as expressed by me and other Americans. The rapport that such a project demands provides participants an opportunity to ask questions of Americans they may never have the opportunity to breach. Our conversations about controversial topics like marriage, homosexuality, the death penalty, crime and punishment, and many others afforded them a chance to consider topics they had never discussed and/or considered. As they cope with navigating American culture they need opportunities outside of class to engage in such debates and casual conversations about new ideas and beliefs. As new immigrants they were fascinated with US laws, punishments, rights, and beliefs. A PAR project of any scale can provide such opportunities.

Overall, our relationship was faithful to Freire's description of the progressive educator in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994). Freire writes, "To challenge educands with regard to their certitudes is a duty of the progressive educator" (p. 83). I would add that it is also the goal of the progressive educator to allow students to challenge the "certitudes" of their teacher. In the end, involvement in a PAR project can provide opportunities for all participants to learn in affective, pragmatic, and more critical ways.

PAR as A Means for Action

The action component of this project was a major consideration throughout. I continually asked the boys "What can we do?" in relation to new findings. Whereas I, as the outside researcher, could share our findings with the academic world through conferences and articles, the brothers were able to share information with their Karen community, the wider Karen community and act for their own self-interest.

For example, Chit Poe made a list to share with Karen in the camps preparing for life in the US. He offers suggestions based upon his lived experiences and the findings of our collaborative efforts (see Table 8.2). This list is a response to the question I posed to him when we returned from the trip. I asked, "What did you learn from the trip that you think would help others in the camps?"

Table 8.2

Chit Poe's Recommendations for Refugees Preparing to Resettle in USA

-
1. no parking in front of your house. If you park you get ticket.
 2. Study English hard before coming to America.
 3. You should learning more about U.S.A rule-law in the camp
 4. You have to work hard and be healthy
 5. If couldn't have Medicaid card. Don't go to the hospital! It cost a lot of money.
 6. America is not very easy to live a long life. It's very difficult to live if you don't know how to speak English really well and don't know the law.
 7. If you miss more than 5 times at work. You got fire. No more job for you. If you apply another job it hard and you have to wait too long. You should respect the time. Time is very important.
 8. If you pass over the law here. You will get a big trouble.
 9. You must teach your children and control them very strong about America life and the way they live.
 10. America have five freedom.
 11. Always ask people when you need helps. Don't be quiet and shy in U.S.
 12. If you ask them, they will help you. Many White American are nice people and care about the refugee people
 13. Money here is very expensive. It have big value.
 14. A good way to live here work hard and be healthy. Than you can buy anything you want. Suggest, car, bicycle, T.V, clothing
 15. Live in apartment Be careful. Always lock the door. You might get killed or stole your money or value things.
 16. * in here a lot of Karen young kids become gangster. Also both boys and girls went in wrong direction here. Smoking, drink, Fight, wearing clothes
 17. * Free to go to school [in USA]
-

Such a list is testament to his recognition of the difficulties associated with resettlement.

Moreover, such an assignment gave him the chance to reflect on his experiences as a son, student, and immigrant in the US. The list also demonstrates how he gained *new* awareness about time, employment, crime, and other realities of resettlement. Most importantly, this list is patently personal. Our trip was the catalyst for his personal transformation through the process of living, reflecting, dialoguing, and then writing about issues important to him. Such a project is

conducive to participants making meaning out of their experiences and then acting to enact some change.

Chit Poe, independent of me, also began advocating for the Karen at school. He was able to get the autobiography of Karen author Zoya Phan (*Little Daughter*) placed in the school library and began teaching his teachers more about his culture. As he did with me at one of our earliest meetings, he suggested that his teachers rent *Rambo IV*, which depicts the Karen story along the Thai-Burma border. Chit Poe was also very active in helping other Karen based on what he learned from our trip and our discussions. He shared information about US law, individual rights, and past on information on how to attain services, licenses, and other information. Such advocating is essential in maintaining the critical purposes of this research. Whereas Chit Poe made efforts to share his information and findings with Karen and Americans, his brother Narko had more personal purposes that may have implications for other immigrant youth struggling with graduating high school.

Narko was successful in self-advocating. While on our trip he continually asked other Karen high school students about the graduation policies in their state. He soon realized that not every state had a mandatory graduation test. Thus, upon our return he began to actively advocate through a letter writing campaign. At the time, December 2011, he had taken the graduation test 12 times and had passed all sections of the state exams except for English Language Arts. He was losing hope that he would graduate before relocating to Iowa at the end of the 2012 school year. In response, we began to talk about possible solutions. He decided to begin writing letters to local and state education officials based on my advice. His letters led to his receiving a hardship waiver from the state (see Appendix B), which allowed him to graduate in May 2012. Importantly, as their friend and teacher I was able to steer him in the right direction but, more

importantly, he was the one who wrote the letters and followed up on the responses he received. Such a relationship represents the merits of such collaboration. His brother, Gola, took yet another approach.

Although Gola was less proactive in his actions, he did write a letter to Secretary of State Clinton in advance of her trip to Burma in 2012 (see Appendix G). He expresses much of what he learned while interviewing Karen adults about their experiences. Thus, his transformation was more personal as he became more aware of his own people's tragedies and stories of perseverance. He then used this new knowledge to educate others (Secretary of State Clinton) he deemed might be able to help make real changes in Burma.

In aggregate, our PAR project was an effective way to build rapport between teachers and students and for all participants to gain in pedagogical and critical ways. Our findings are important in bringing more awareness about the Karen people and their resettlement experiences. And, moreover, it is an excellent means for gaining more critical awareness about self, others, and ways to address the identified issues facing stakeholders.

Reflections on the Limitations of this PAR Study

I see the major limitation of this study to relate to my limitations as a researcher. As a novice researcher I could have done a better job in all aspects of qualitative inquiry. Like the brothers, I was learning as I went along. My courses on qualitative research as well as the opinions of my advisors provided me direction but, in the end, I learned by doing. Such an ad hoc process is inherently flawed. The following provides some of the lessons I learned from the experience.

First, despite my attempts at making the PAR component of this study collaborative, not every stage was collectively executed. The brothers did little in the way of writing this or

any other papers concerning our work. Although I made every effort to include the brothers' words and consulted them about what to include, in the end, I made the final decision about what would be included and excluded from this and other publications. Collaboration is inherently problematic when only one participant, in this case the outside academic, is the sole writer. I wish that time and circumstances had allowed for a more collaborative product.

As noted earlier in this chapter, I realized my limitations as an interviewer by reviewing the video files. Often times I was not a good listener and was noticeably impatient. I could have stepped back many times and allowed the brothers and other interviewees the opportunity to steer the interview in their own ways. In my eagerness to "get good data" I often missed opportunities by not simply listening. I could have done a better job realizing the cultural reality that Karens defer to adults and those in authority. My voice dominates early audio and video files of our interactions. Over time I became a better interviewer and collaborator as I learned to step aside and allow the brothers to lead interviews.

I also believe that my lack of Karen language skills limited this research. If I had dedicated more time to learning their language I would have gained a greater understanding of the brothers and their culture. It would have also allowed me more interaction with Karen adults whom I had limited opportunities to speak with on a variety of topics. Learning Karen would have also provided me much greater insight into their specific needs as English language learners, as I would have gained a better understanding of the linguistic differences between English and Sgaw Karen. Moreover, by actively studying Sgaw Karen I would have placed myself in a more vulnerable position as a language learner, which would have created more solidarity with the brothers as language learners. By learning Sgaw Karen I would have also tacitly demonstrated respect for their language.

Furthermore, this study may not be easily replicated as it involved a particularly robust commitment on the part of participants and their teacher/researcher (me) that may not be representative of most teacher-student relationships. While presenting at a major conference on applied linguistics an audience member initially complimented my work and then asked how such a demanding study might inform other tutors unable to commit such time and attention. My answer was and is the same. This PAR project was singular and was the product of a very specific time and place and includes singular characters. The methods used are meant to inform others about the merits of such a dialogic approach. Others working with the Karen or similar groups have to work within their own time schedules and means. This study is not intended to be a template for future research but represents one particular approach to collaborative action research. Its successes and flaws can serve as a guideline for future tutors/teachers and or researchers.

Also, I believe this research would have been richer if I had had been able to include a female researcher on our team. As male researchers we did not always have access to female Karen. In fact, many Karen girls were unwilling to speak with me because of their shyness. A female co-researcher would have provided our work a perspective that is lacking in the current study.

Another limitation of this study relates to the vast amount of data collected. As a novice researcher, I made the mistake of collecting too much data. Although the accrued data may serve future research papers, such a vast collection of audio and video files made organization and transcription both unnecessarily time consuming and unfocused. I believe that I could have been more structured in creating a research protocol from the beginning and had more concrete research questions that could have better steered my research.

Also, I believe that this study on the Karen lacks a very important component that would have greatly enriched my understanding of the Karen story. Although I made multiple attempts to visit the camps, I never found any funding that would have supported such a trip. I believe that a research trip to any of the Thai refugee camps would have greatly enhanced my understanding of the Karen diaspora story and would have provided me a better understanding of their educational and personal histories.

Finally, I often consider what tangible *good*, if any, came about for the brothers as a result of our collaboration and sometimes question whether or not our collaboration had any lasting impact. As noted earlier, the PAR framework was selected with the intention of creating some change in the brothers' lives. Although the full extent or limits of collaboration can never be realized, I often look at where they are today and reproach myself for not better preparing them to fulfill their dreams. I think of Chit Poe, unemployed and embarking on starting a family with few employment options and his dreams of becoming an interpreter all but lost. I wonder what more I could have done (and can do now and in the future) to better assist him up to meet his personal goals. I was in the unique position of being able to help and often feel that I did not do enough. Was my inability to help promote more concrete change a sign that my intentions were more self serving? Was I, in the end, the extractive outsider I had professed against? These questions will forever remain unanswered and I can only hold on to my integrity as a teacher, researcher, and friend. My greatest desire was to *help* and that alone creates the need for a deeper discussion on the role of researcher and researched. My critics may charge that our research was nothing more than false *collaboration* and that our relationship only reinforced my privileged position and that this work is nothing more than the *pseudocritical* educator's cry for empowerment for the lower classes that Freire warns against. This is a very tricky conundrum

that every researcher must consider when their research intends to transform and empower under the banner of critical theory. The key for me is that such issues must be considered and not be shied away from.

At more optimistic times I think back on our relationship and believe that we all grew and benefitted from our collaboration and I like to think that if we had had more time we would have been able to meet our individual and collective goals. I am content in the realization that our friendship and collaboration were genuine and that we all benefitted from having met and worked together. We met at a very singular time in each of our lives and built friendships out of the enjoyment of each other's company and a shared desire to make some sort of difference. At the very least I hope that anyone who glances at these pages will know a little more about a people they had heretofore known little about and that those considering using a similar methodology may be better informed of the possibilities and hazards implicit in such an approach.

Implications for Digital Literacy Findings

The brothers' journey from refugee camps to the rural US stands as a compelling example of globalization and the changing ethnic landscape of communities across the globe. The Internet and other digital media provide new immigrant youth a means to cope with and thrive in their new communities. Technology, in all its incarnations, can and does provide marginalized students a place in the classroom, in their community, and positions them to socialize and build friendships that support their transnational lives. Moreover, it provides them the creative license to express and explore self, their heritage culture, and the host culture. The insights gleaned from this study hope to inform teachers, administrators, and other agencies assisting with refugee resettlement.

Prior to the ubiquity and affordability of Internet access, resettled refugee families had few means to maintain contact with family, friends, and their wider ethnic community. Today, the Internet is seen as a vital means for maintaining family and acquaintance ties and serves a host of various interpersonal, community, and potential educational functions. This study provides some important insight for teachers and others working with immigrant communities into how the Internet is being used to ease the trauma associated with resettlement. It seems clear from these and other findings that computers, digital devices, and Internet access can serve communities in a host of pragmatic ways (Cho, 2011).

Literature on refugee resettlement demonstrated the importance of heritage language and cultural maintenance as a means to successful acculturation (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). The Karen used the Internet to sustain and develop co-ethnic relationships with people and groups that were formed pre- and post-resettlement. This study also demonstrated how traditional cultural practices are being maintained and promoted via the Internet. By promoting their Karen culture, the brothers were able to identify with a larger group that reflects their own personal lived experiences, tastes, and cultural orientation. The Karen brothers demonstrated an ability to utilize the Internet and all its communicative and creative capacity in ways that bridge traditional cultural practices with modern technologies.

The implications for teachers, tutors, and schools are two-fold. First, educators need to recognize the importance of bridging new technologies and traditional practices. Teachers may want to assign projects or lessons that incorporate their students' *funds of knowledge* as part of their curriculum. Teachers must learn from their students. Throughout our research we found that few teachers at any level of education had heard of the Karen people. Moreover, few incorporated diversity into their school culture. By exploring their heritage culture online,

students can gain new insights into their cultural past and then share their story in ways that represent the cultural present as embodied in their lived experience. Such forms of expression can foster interethnic communication and may promote healthy acculturation.

Second, the Internet and digital technologies allow second language learners a space free from the restrictions imposed by language. The Internet provides them a chance to create meaningful digital productions. As many ELLs struggle with communicating in the second language and building meaningful relationships, the Internet provides a forum for expression that is not exclusively bound by language. Such freedom will lead to much-needed confidence and a sense of belonging.

How can new technologies better include minority students into the classroom? We believe that all students can work together on topics of universal interest. For example, Chit Poe's love of both Korean-Pop and soccer were a bridge to his classmates. Students can work collaboratively with native students on creating digital stories, cartoons, movies, music videos, newsletters, or blogs based on common interests. Many free Web 2.0 tools exist to facilitate students' creations and publications (See Take Action! for possible Web sites for teachers).

Teachers can start with easy and fun tools such as cartoon creation and digital storytelling. ESL students can create level-appropriate stories by selecting premade images and entering their own texts and, then, sharing with friends and classmates. Later, teachers may include video and music creations, which require more complex literacy and technology skills. More advanced lessons may include blogging. For example, while students are involved in blogging, they can research a topic of interest and learn to communicate with a general audience.

In addition, students can view and comment on other classmates' blogs. Teachers, though, should check online resources' availability because technologies can become obsolete or charge for their usage.

Future Research and Publications

As noted earlier, this study has collected a vast amount of qualitative data on a host of topics. I conclude with some description of future research topics related to this study's findings. I offer a brief description of eight topics that merit further attention in the literature.

First, as a teacher of English as a second language (TESOL) I am interested in exploring the ways that our PAR project influenced the brothers' language development. I have touched upon some of the merits in this concluding chapter but believe that more attention is merited. I am particularly interested in exploring how such a project facilitates second language speaking confidence, willingness to communicate, new literacies, as well as the development of the four skills (i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening). Such consideration will inform teachers, tutors, and school officials on ways to engage newly arrived immigrant English language learners. It is my belief that such collaborative approaches can be valuable for teachers and students.

Second, no discussion of the Karen people is complete without a discussion on the role of religion. More attention is warranted in relation to the role religion plays in the Karen community in the US. Religion, namely Christianity, is the central institution of my focal Karen community and provides the community religious and social capital. Churches also provide Karen support with finding employment, housing, and various other social services. Moreover, I consider the role of Christianity to be an important factor pertaining to a host of related issues like literacy, community building, epistemological and cosmological understandings of the world

and the hereafter, morality, marriage, ethnic identity, and nationalism. I also believe that more attention needs to be paid to the discourse styles of Karen-Christian church services. Such an analysis may provide a deeper understanding of how religio-cultural practices influence children's learning styles and worldviews.

Third, a major criticism of the U.S government's refugee resettlement program relates to placement of refugees in urban areas. A current gap in the literature on refugee resettlement is the absence of literature written by immigrant authors. I would like to co-write a piece with the brothers on the differences between urban and rural refugee resettlement in the US. As young men who have experienced both communities, they have valuable insights that can inform public policy. I hope that this may represent a collaborative writing project with the brothers. A corollary topic to urban resettlement relates to the *gansterization* of many Karen youth.

Four, I am interested in exploring why and to what extent Karen youth are turning to gangs. It is clear from my research that young Karen men are involved in gangs. I aim to juxtapose the Karen story with early studies on Southeast Asian youth and gang involvement (Hong, 2010; Krott, 2011; Straka, 2003). This study will look at wider trends throughout the country in order to gauge the extent of Karen gang involvement. Moreover, I also anticipate exploring how the Internet plays a role in how Karen youth express their gang identity through music videos and other media disseminated via YouTube. A corollary topic of interest relates to how Karen youth are using traditional Karen *htas* (oral poems) and using them to pass down their resettlement stories via the hip-hop songs they write and perform. More research on how such traditional practices are being used in new media warrants attention.

Five, after nearly four years working with the Sgaw Karen I have formed relationships with families and individuals that I am committed to maintaining contact with for the remainder

of my life. I have had the great fortune to continue to be a part of the brothers' lives and our phone conversations, annual reunions, and ad hoc interviews continue to inform my understanding of their resettlement experience. Since the brothers' departure to Iowa, I have continued to work with the Karen community in Sandville. I have continued to tutor the same elementary school children I began teaching in the summer of 2010. I have been able to monitor the growth and development of these eleven Karen children. This work has been fascinating as I have been able to witness how children from pre-kindergarten have developed over the past four years. I hope to maintain contact with them and their families in order to document a truly longitudinal analysis of 1.25, 1.5, and 1.75 Karen-American experiences.

Six, I am currently working on editing a compilation of Karen stories that document the lives of Karen post-resettlement to the US. This book was inspired by the publication edited by Tomas Rhoden (2011), a former English teacher at Mae La Camp. While teaching at Mae La Camp, Rhoden assigned a writing assignment to his English language students that became the content of *Burmese Refugees: Letters from the Thai-Burma Border*. The book offers a unique portrait of Burmese refugees in the camps. I was particularly struck with how the dreams and aspirations expressed in their writings juxtapose with the harsh realities involved in resettlement. I anticipate my compilation as a companion piece entitled: *Dreams Deferred: Letters from Karen Refugees Resettled in the US*. I recently contacted Thomas and he is interested in helping me publish these stories.

Seven, I would like to write a case study based on one of the families I worked closest with over the past four years. I would like to analyze how each of the children (four boys and one girl) have adjusted linguistically, culturally, and socially over the past four years. This family represents all three generations (1.25, 1.5, and 1.75) of immigrants as identified by

Rumbaut (1997). Such a case study would provide valuable information about the resettlement process in relation to schooling and overall acculturation.

Finally, it is my greatest hope that someday I may have the opportunity to cull all my video data and create a documentary film that tells my story with the Sgaw Karen. I am interested in documenting how our research team collaboratively conducted research, and the individual stories of the Karen participants who shared their stories with us.

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Appendix A Chit Poe's Letter to Congressman Broun

March 5,2011

The Honorable Congressman Broun

U.S House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman,

My name is Chit Poe, and I and a constituent and student at Oglethorpe High School, Carlton Ga. I am writing about the Karen people who live in Burma. My experience and the problem in the Burma.

You have to work very hard to get foods and moneys for your life in Burma. If you don't work very hard, you don't have money to buy a food, clothes and the other things.

Also you will be starve without money and foods. Because in Burma, The Burmese president's and Government's are really bad. They conquer poor people and murder poor people.

The Burmese president's give order to kill Karen poor people and take the land without no reason. That's why is really difficult for Karen people to live in Burma. Right now so many Karen people come to America and the other country too. Because the Karen people want to have a freedom and liberty in their life.

What I want the government U.S. to do?

I want U.S. government to helps the Karen people with money, foods and clothes. I want the U.S. government to have a conversation with Burmese government and Burmese president. I want U.S. government to tell the Burmese president and government will stop conquer and murder Karen people and the other ethnic group who live in Burma too. Also I want the U.S. government to ask the Burmese president will give Karen people state, freedom and liberty. That all I need.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Chit Poe

Appendix B Narko's Letter to County Superintendent

HserGayHtoo
22 New Hope Sandville Rd.
Carlton, Ga 30627

Dear Superintendent New,

Hello again and Happy New Year. Thank you for your letter that you sent me in December.

I also wrote a letter to State Superintendent Barge. His office wrote me and told me to see if I qualify for variance. I checked the variance requirement and I found that I qualify. I have attached a copy for you.

I am writing to you as the variance form says I should. I have passed four subjects on GHSGT; Science-211; Social Studies- 208; Math and Writing. I scored 192 in ELA on the October Test. So, I am requesting consideration for a variance for ELA and give permission to the local school system to release any records regarding my variance request to the State Board of Education.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to graduating and getting a Diploma. I will continue to work hard and study.

Sincerely,

HserGayHtoo

Appendix C Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interviews for the Brothers (Primary Participants)

1. General Background Information
 - A) How old are you?
 - B) Where were you born?
 - C) What refugee camp(s) did you live in?
 - D) What grade are you in?
 - E) When did you come to the USA?
 - F) Why did your father decided to resettle to Georgia?
 - G) How do you feel about moving to Iowa?
 - H) What do you like most about living in a rural area?
 - I) Which do you prefer, rural or urban area? Why?
2. Education
 - A) Did you attend school in Burma?
 - B) Did you study English before coming to the USA?
 - C) Are in ESL classes?
 - D) Do you attend any regular (non-ESL) classes?
 - E) Do you have special English classes after school or tutoring at home?
 - F) Do you like school?
 - G) Do you have any American friends?
 - H) Do you ever get bullied? What does Bullying mean to you?
 - I) What classes are most difficult for you?
 - J) Do you plan on graduating?
 - K) What will you do after you graduate/ quit school?
 - L) Do you participate in school sports or activities?
 - M) What do you like/dislike about your school?
 - N) Did your teachers hit you in school?
 - O) What are the biggest differences between school in the USA and in the Mae La Camp?
 - P) What are your future goals?
3. Community
 - A) Do you live in the city or country?
 - B) Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?
 - C) Have you ever been the victim of a crime? If so, what crimes?
 - D) Who do you live with?
 - E) Can you tell us about your home?
 - F) Do you live in a house or apartment in Karen neighborhood?
 - G) What do you like about your neighborhood?
 - H) What do your parents do? (job)
 - I) Do you “hang-out” spend time with other non-Karen youth in your neighborhood?
4. Resettlement

- A) Did you want to resettle?
 - B) Did your parents ask your opinion about resettling before resettling?
 - C) What did you know about the USA before coming?
 - D) What has been the most difficult part of resettling?
 - E) What do you like about living in the USA?
 - F) Do you feel life is better for you here? Why?
 - G) What would you advise others still in the camps about resettlement to the USA?
 - H) How do you feel about your parents' life in the USA?
 - I) What do you like to do on weekends?
5. Post-Trip Interviews
- A) What did you learn from your trip?
 - B) What surprised you about our research findings?
 - C) In what ways do you think you can help the Karen community?
 - D) How did you feel as a researcher?
 - E) Did people treat you differently as a researcher or as a cameraman?
 - F) What are your fondest memories from the trip?
 - G) Do you think you could do your own research project?
 - H) Do you have any ideas about new research projects?
 - I) How could we improve our research team?

Interview questions for Americans

1. How did you first meet the Karen people?
2. What was your first impression of the Karen?
3. In what capacity do you know or work with the Karen?
4. What do you think of as characteristics of the Karen people?
5. What problems do you see the Karen facing in the United States?
6. In what ways do you see the Karen successfully adapting to American culture?
7. In what way do you see Karen culture and American culture at odds?
8. Do you think that services were refugee populations like the Karen are working?
9. What could be improved upon in Karen resettlement to the US?
10. What is your main purpose in working with the Karen?
11. Do you think the Karen you know live in adequate housing?
12. In what ways have you seen Karen people acculturating?
13. Do you know why the Karen are in the United States?
14. What would you tell the communities expecting the arrival of Karen families?
15. Any customs or language that you have picked up either by observing or being taught?
16. Have Karen taught you anything?
17. How do you find yourself describing them to other people?
18. How do you view them as “immigrants”?

Parent Interview Questions

FATHER MOTHER

Parent Interviews

Names:

Past education of parents

Where are you from in Burma? Delta or Karen State

Town name: _____

When did you leave Burma?

Why did you leave Burma?

Did you experience any violence in Burma?

Who did you leave Burma with?

Who made the decision to leave?

How did you leave? On foot, bus, boat?

How long did you live in camps?

Did you work in the camps? If so, what did you do?

How many years of schooling in camps? In Burma?

Burma:

Thailand:

What languages can you read and write?

Why did you choose to resettle?

Will living in the USA change how many children you have?

What are your hopes and fears for your children?

What do you think of your children's' education?

Would you resettle knowing what you know now? Might you resettle in another country?

What has been the toughest part of resettlement?

Need to identify where everyone is from in Burma! Karen state or delta?

How many generations Christian?

When you think of the camps what do you remember? Anything you miss?

Did you experience any violence?

How do you know if your kids are doing well in school? Do you check homework? Reports cards?

Do you plan on staying in _____ or relocating?

What do you like about _____?

What don't you like?

How would you describe Karen people?

Why did you name your kids ...?

How often do you communicate with family in Thailand?

Burma?

How?

What do you tell people back in the camps about life in the USA?

Some Karen, including Htoo wah, say that they would never have come knowing what they know now about life in USA and the various hardships, what do others think?

Now that you have been here 5 years how do you feel? How is it different from your expectations?

Appendix E Adult Questionnaire Table

Table. Basic demographic characteristic of the adult subjects (n=40)

		Number	%
Gender	F	19	47.5
	M	21	52.5
Age	Mean \pm SD	35.2 \pm 10.0	
	20-29	15	37.5
	30-39	12	30.0
	40-49	9	22.5
	50 and over	4	10.0
Current residing area	Rural	3	7.5
	Urban	37	92.5
Housing	Rent	36	90.0
	Own	4	10.0
Place of resettlement	No response	1	2.5
	ATL, GA	10	25
	PHOENIX	3	7.5
	COMER, GA	1	2.5
	DES MOINES	6	15.0
	Lincoln, NE	1	2.5
	MIL	15	37.5
	NC	2	5.0
	TEX	1	2.5
I feel safe in the community I live (respondent No.=39)	Strongly agree	18	46.2
	Moderately agree	12	30.8
	Moderately disagree	5	12.8
	Strongly disagree	4	10.2
Year of resettlement in the US	2007	12	30.0
	2008	11	27.5
	2009	4	10.0
	2010	8	20.0
	2011	5	12.5
Birth place	Burma	37	92.5
	Thai	3	7.5
Refugee camp where they came from	BD	1	2.5
	HH	1	2.5
	ML	27	67.5
	MRM	5	12.5

	NUPO	5	12.5
	UMP	1	2.5

Table. Basic demographic characteristic of the adult subjects (n=40)

		Number	%
Occupation in the US	Yes	25	63.5
	No	10	25.0
	No response	5	12.5
Kinds of job in the US	None	10	25.0
	Baby sitter	8	20.0
	Hotel	2	5.0
	Meat processing	12	20.0
	Nurse	2	2.5
	Sewing	1	2.5
	Other	1	2.5
	No response	5	12.5
	Job in Burma	Farmer	21
Home care		1	2.5
None		3	7.5
Students		6	15.0
Teacher		3	7.5
No response		6	15.0
Job in Thailand	Babysitter	2	5.5
	Bamboo	1	2.5
	Farmer	11	27.5
	Fishing	1	2.5
	Graphic	1	2.5
	Library	1	2.5
	None	1	2.5
	Nurse	1	2.5
	SANITATION	1	2.5
	SELLING	1	2.5
	Student	8	20.0
	Teacher	6	15.0
	No response	5	12.5

		Number	%
Number of children	Mean±SD	3.2±2.0	
Number of children	0	3	7.5
	1	6	15.0
	2	6	15.0
	3	9	22.5
	4	6	15.0
	5	6	15.0
	6	3	7.5
	9	1	2.5
How often communicate with children's teacher	Never	16	40.0
	Sometimes	8	20.0
	Often	1	2.5
	No response	15	15.0
Expectation for children to do after school (respondent N=35)	Work to make money	10	28.0
	Get GED	21	60.0
	Study in college/university	34	97.1
	Study in time Community college/Technical school	24	68.6
	Others	3	8.6

Table. Religion related...

		Number	%
Participate in every week (respondent No.=39)	Read the bible	23	59.0
	Go to Bible study	10	25.6
Agreement status with the statements below			
Religion is important in my life (respondent No.=38)	Strongly agree	37	97.4
	Moderately agree	1	2.6
	Moderately disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Religion is very important for the Sgaw Karen (respondent No.=38)	Strongly agree	36	94.7
	Moderately agree	2	5.3
	Moderately disagree	0	0.0

	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
All the bible's statements are true (respondent No.=39)	Strongly agree	33	84.6
	Moderately agree	4	10.3
	Moderately disagree	2	5.1
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
I will teach my children religion (respondent No.=38)	Strongly agree	26	68.4
	Moderately agree	11	29.0
	Moderately disagree	1	2.6
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0

		Number	%
Participate in every week (respondent No.=39)	Listen to the BBC- Burma broadcast	6	15.4
	Help the children to learn Karen language	23	59.0
	Help the children to learn Karen culture	28	71.8

Agreement status with the statements below

Religion is very important for the Sgaw Karen (respondent No.=38)	Strongly agree	36	94.7
	Moderately agree	2	5.3
	Moderately disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Karen are the lost tribe of Israel (respondent No.=39)	Strongly agree	23	59.0
	Moderately agree	6	15.4
	Moderately disagree	9	13.1
	Strongly disagree	1	2.5
The KNU will succeed in freeing the Karen (respondent No.=39)	Strongly agree	33	84.6
	Moderately agree	4	10.3
	Moderately disagree	2	5.1
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
I will return to live in Burma in the future (respondent No.=39)	Strongly agree	23	59.0
	Moderately agree	11	28.2
	Moderately disagree	3	7.7
	Strongly disagree	2	5.1

		Number	%
Study English every week	Yes	23	59.0
	No	16	41.0
Taking ESL class	Yes	30	81.1
	No	7	18.9

APPENDIX F Adolescent Questionnaire Table

Table. Basic demographic characteristic of the high school students (n=45)

		Number	%	
Gender	F	29	64.4	
	M	16	35.6	
Age	Mean \pm SD	16.1 \pm 2.6		
	11-15	21	46.5	
	16-19	17	37.8	
	20 and over	6	13.3	
	Non response	1	2.2	
Current residing area	AZ	1	2.2	
	Canada	3	6.7	
	CT	1	2.2	
	GA	12	28.9	
	IA	11	24.4	
	K	1	2.2	
	NB	1	2.2	
	NC	5	11.1	
	NJ	1	2.2	
	Oregon	1	2.2	
	SYR-NY	1	2.2	
	WI	5	11.1	
	Non response	1	2.2	
	Place of birth	Burma	10	22.2
		Thailand	34	75.6
Non response		1	2.2	
Year of resettlement	2005	1	2.3	
	2006	3	6.8	
	2007	16	36.4	
	2008	13	29.6	
	2009	7	15.9	
	2010	3	6.8	
	2011	1	2.3	
Secondary migration	Yes	17	60.0	
	No	10	22.2	
	No response	8	17.8	
Refugee camps	Mae La	29	64.4	

Siblings	Mean \pm SD	3.8 \pm 2.6
1	3	7.0
2	8	18.6
3	8	18.6
4	8	18.6
5	10	23.3
6	3	7.0
7	3	7.0

Table 2. Education

		Number	%
Father's education level	None	16	35.6
	Elementary school	15	33.3
	Middle school	7	15.6
	High school	6	13.3
	No response	1	2.2
Mother's education level	None	18	40.0
	Elementary school	12	26.7
	Middle school	11	24.4
	High school	4	8.9
ESL at school in U.S	Yes	38	82.2
	No	5	11.1
	No response	3	6.7
Bullying at school	Yes	16	35.6
	No	24	53.3
	No response	5	11.1
Future job	CEO	1	2.2
	Engineer	2	4.4
	Flight attendant	1	2.2
	Labor	1	2.2
	Mission	1	2.2
	Doctor	4	8.9
	Medical assistance	1	2.2
	Nurse	8	17.8
	Police	2	4.4
	Represent Karen	1	2.2
	Sport player	1	2.2
	Social work	2	4.4
	Teacher	4	8.9
	Translator	4	8.9
	I don't know	4	8.9
No response	8	17.8	

Appendix G Hse Ku's Letter to Secretary of State Clinton

Hserkuhtoo

22 New Hope Vista Rd.

Carlton, GA 30627

November 27, 2011

Dear Madam Secretary,

My name is Hserku Htoo; I'm 16 years old boy living in Georgia. I go to _____ County High School. I came to the U.S from a refugee camp in Thailand. I am ethnic Karen. I am writing to you because you soon visiting Burma and I want you to speak with Burmese government about my people and family story.

The Karen experiences in Burma have been very difficult since 1962. We always have been in trouble because of Burmese soldiers. If Burmese came to their village, they must flee away from their place. If the Burmese catch them they have to force labor for Burmese. If they don't do it they will get killed or have to pay money. And the Burmese also burn the village and burn the food. My parent experience also the same way like this, so they escape from Burma to Thailand in the camp. My family escaped in 1990 with nothing but my brothers and my sister. They were

lucky to keep family together and find safety. Many Karen and other ethnic minorities are not so lucky.

I was born in the refugee camp in Thailand. Life in camp is just like jail, you can't go anywhere out of the camp to find the job because if the Thai soldier catch you they put you in jail till someone bail you out. Because the people in camp don't have education they have no hope for a good future. The people who don't have education they have to go out of the camp to find a job but they have to sneak around the forest so the Thai soldiers don't see them. They have to find money for children to go to school and the food. People that have education they been a teacher and some of them are a doctor and nurse. Some people can't send their children to school because they have no money. But it is a little bit saver for them then living in Burma.

Many people in the camp came to America because they want their children to have a good education and it is free education. It is also easy to find a job for them. Like a chicken poultry, dish washer, house cleaner- uut there was also a problem some of them don't have a job to get money and to pay the rent. It too expensive also and difficult to access service like health care, and language class. It not easy to find a job if you don't know how to speak English and understanding American culture. When I came here in 2007 I did not speak any English and feel very lonely and lost. Life in the US is safe and we have food but being in a strange country is not easy for me, my family and mostly my parents who work so hard.

I hope you can tell the Burmese Gov't to stop killing my people. Please help us to stop the forced labor, the burning villages, and forcing young people into the army. We hope for a new

government in Burma that will allow Karen state to be autonomous and peaceful. All we want is peace.

Thank you for your time and hard work. I hope you have a nice visit to Burma. Your trip gives me hope for the future of a free Burma where my people can return to a peaceful world they love.

Sincerely,

Hserkuhtoo.