Transformation and Care in a City of Refuge

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ABSTRACT

Although there are numerous studies of how resettlement affects refugees, there are fewer examining the dynamic of how refugees and long term residents join together in formal, and to even greater extent, informal relationships of care to reconstitute and reconfigure place. Theorists often focus on the economic, political and historical elements of place identity, ignoring the emotional, phenomenological, and grounded aspects of the everyday construction and experience of place. The production, distribution, and consumption of systems of care in Clarkston has immense impact on the habitual, mundane routines that significantly affect ideas of identity and spill over into social, cultural, economic, and political change. Using a qualitative analysis of interviews and participant observation, the focus of this thesis is on the material, performative, and representational ways in which the dialectical relationships of teacher and student, educator and educated, care-giver and recipient, are transforming the rapidly evolving City of Clarkston.

INDEX WORDS: Place identity, Refugee resettlement, Reciprocity, Volunteerism, Geographies of Care
TRANSFORMATION AND CARE IN A CITY OF REFUGE

by

Cheryl Nye

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013
TRANSFORMATION AND CARE IN A CITY OF REFUGE

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Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
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May 2013
DEDICATION

To my children, from whom and for whom I’ve learned everything of value. Thank you is far from adequate, but it’s what I have to offer here. Thank you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not be possible without the assistance and contribution of many individuals. First, it is requisite that I thank Dr. Katherine Hankins for her continued support and encouragement. Not only has she acted as guide and instructor during my time here at Georgia State, she has alternately cheered and/or cajoled, and what’s more, always known which was called for at any given time. Dr. Hannes Gerhardt and Dr. Andy Walter, who inspired and instructed me in what it means to be a geographer, I am immeasurably grateful for their education. Dr. Kate Derickson, who challenged me to be an engaged geographer, I thank her for insisting. Dr. Bill Fleming, who provided encouragement along the way, I thank him for his enthusiasm. Angie and Bill, and their little garret, thank you for shelter and comfort in my beloved little garret. My children, Charlie, Ben, Vanessa, Elizabeth, Andrew, David and Sarah, who helped me believe that I could hold onto my amazing life as their mother and the grandmother of their children while enjoying a second life as an academic, thank you for trusting. My colleagues, Paul Foster, Traci Dahl, Sarah Heck, Tyler Harris, and Mechelle Puckett, for all of you who listened, cajoled, and held my hand, thank you; I wouldn’t have made it without you.

Again, thank you is inadequate, but it is all I have to offer here. Thank you.

I also thank each of the individuals I worked with, interviewed, tutored or instructed in Clarkston. Thank you for sharing your stories, your hopes and dreams, your words and time with me. Thank you for trusting me to tell your story. I hope that I have done so adequately.
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1 INTRODUCTION

“Time takes it all whether you want it to or not, time takes it all. Time bares it away, and in the end there is only darkness. Sometimes we find others in that darkness, and sometimes we lose them there again.”

—Stephen King

The places in which we find ourselves transform us; the change we experience in place transforms that place, making it into something new. Place is ontologically significant—it determines not only what we know but what we can know, in other words, where we are influences who we are. Contemplating the significance of place, I am often reminded of the story of a family I knew long ago who had lived in a lot of different cities and states. The stay-at-home mother of the rather large family explained a bit abashedly, “We couldn’t really afford vacations so we would just move every four or five years. That way we got to experience different places and different ways of being.” While my friend’s words illustrate the role of place in forming our life experience, her words can also serve to demonstrate that experiences of place are always individual and particular. She found the idea of moving and mobility to be exhilarating and an adventure; other people experience moving as dislocation and loss.

Dislocation and loss are very much present in Clarkston, the site of the case study for this thesis. Clarkston, a small town slightly northeast of Atlanta, is a gateway city, officially designated by the United Nations as a refugee resettlement site. Described by Time Magazine as “the most diverse square mile in America,” Clarkston is a small town with a history of farming and a relatively stable population of just over 7,000 residents despite the fact that an average of 2,000 refugees are resettled there every year. For the refugees Clarkston is a sanctuary, a refuge from ethnic and political turmoil, but it is also much more. The forced migration and resettlement of the refugees brings with it reverberations of famine,
political instability, and even war. The juxtaposition of dislocation and loss onto what was once a relatively isolated and intact farming community brings with it change—change that necessitates a renegotiation of what it means to live in that place for everyone who lives there, refugees and indigenous residents alike.

Much of that change results simply from the necessity of negotiating in both positive and challenging ways the wide variety of difference and diversity that exists when people from many cultures reside in a relatively small geographic territory. Other change comes as a result of direct interaction with the refugee community by residents in the form of volunteer actors working to assist the refugees in making a new life for themselves in the United States. It is this group of individuals who first spurred my interest in Clarkston as a case study. Initially I approached the subject with the intent of understanding what motivated some people to help the refugees when others in their community either ignored the presence of the immigrants or actively resisted their relocation in the community, a dynamic made famous by the book *Outcasts United* by Warren St. John. What I did not expect to uncover were the myriad changes experienced by the volunteers engaged in caring for the newest members of their community, or the ways in which those changes manifested in shaping the community at large. This research seeks to investigate how the engagement with refugee resettlement in Clarkston has resulted in changes in identity for those volunteers and professionals who work with the refugee community and how those engagements make Clarkston a place of difference.

The larger goal of this research is to employ the place that is Clarkston, Georgia in this particular moment in time to investigate concepts of place and place identity as advocated by novelist Eudora Welty who explained that, “One place understood helps us understand other places better” (Rash 2008). The importance of place to human existence is evidenced by an extensive body of theoretical literature incorporating a wide range of philosophy and theory, much of it contentious. The extent to which place generates debate and conflict stands contra posted against the common sense everyday nature of place
Chapter two of this thesis examines a theoretical framework for place situated in human geography with, first, a focus on place as primal and essential to identity. The next section scrutinizes the literature to consider place as socially, culturally, and politically constructed and the last section of Chapter two contemplates place as a space of care.

Chapter three presents and justifies the methodology utilized in this project in terms of my ability to answer the stated research question. It then outlines the research methods I used including my time spent as a participant observer in Clarkston and the details of the loosely structured interviews I conducted with various individuals volunteering in the refugee community. It also includes an outline of the analysis structure I employed to make sense of the large amount of data acquired throughout the project. In this chapter I also address my positionality and possible biases as a participant volunteer in the case study area. Chapter four describes the historical materiality of Clarkston, the ramifications of the city’s designation as a resettlement site and the need for and resultant development of volunteerism. Chapter five presents the empirical findings and analysis of this thesis. The empirical chapter is organized around three distinct typologies of volunteers: those who are called; those who adapt; and those who are giving back. Throughout the empirical chapter I note and emphasize the relational and reciprocal nature of identity in the ever-changing place that is Clarkston in the 21st century.

In this thesis I illustrate a specific instance of how place is changed by the presence of the individuals who live and work there, and in turn, how the necessity of negotiating the transformation of place changes the residents of that place. And while I argue that everyone who lives in a place of such rapid social and cultural change as that being experience by the city of Clarkston is changed by the sheer fact of living everyday life in such a dynamic setting, I specifically argue that change is most evident in those individuals who willingly and knowingly participate in their community as practitioners of care.
2 PLACE AND IDENTITY, A THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

“It is not down in any map; true places never are.”

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Human geographers, working against for the most part justified critiques of the determinism of regional geography, as well as the geometric focus of many geographers on space, developed in the 1970s a substantial body of critical literature with an emphasize on investigations into the philosophical nature of place. This literature review is situated within this philosophical framework of place theory, specifically within theories examining the ontological and phenomenological experience of place as well as those investigating relational place and the subsequent formation of place identity, ending with a consideration of geographies of care such as those extant in Clarkston.

2.1 Place Theory

“I don't even remember the season. I just remember walking between them and feeling for the first time that I belonged somewhere.”

— Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Place is basic to all that is. It is at once the canvas and the medium of human life on earth. For geographers who study the earth, its features and characteristics along with the distribution of life on earth, particularly of human life, place is fundamental. And yet, despite the fact that place is central to our lives as human beings, is a “key aspect of human experience” (Arendt 7) the lived reality of place, the sheer everydayness of place, lends itself to a “common sense” understanding of “place as a word that seems to speak for itself” (Cresswell 1). Concepts of place are simple and assumed at the same time they are nuanced and contentious. Place is perceived as simply natural, as natural as the air that
we breathe or day turning into night and yet place is contested: place as location or territory is fought
over and disputed; place as theoretical construct and definition is argued over and debated.

The debate over the definition and significance of place ramped up in the early 1970s when ge-
ographers, Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph being the most prominent, began to argue against what they
perceived to be a restrictive focus of geographers on the relatively abstract aspects of space and spatial-
ity. As well, these critical theorists expressed an interest in making “a turn” toward the philosophical in
order to incorporate concepts of phenomenology and existentialism into the discipline of human geog-
raphy, a turn they believed would allow for a deeper understanding of how human beings experience
the world (Cresswell 2004). The humanistic focus on place and the experience of place in space facili-
tates the ability of geographers to investigate, examine, and analyze specific instances and examples of
individuals in place and to then project those findings onto comprehensive theories of place.

Martin Heidegger argued for the importance of “being in the world” to animate his iconic con-
cept of dwelling or *dasein* (1962). The idea of being-in-the-world assumes a place to be; it assumes the
existence of an encompassing place in the world that shapes understandings of what it means to be
human. The idea that human beings exist physically in the world seems obvious but it is not. Arturo
Escobar argues overtly for an understanding of the importance of the physical existence of people in
place, “There is an embodiment and emplacement to human life that cannot be denied” (2008, 6). Ed-
ward Casey also argues for the necessity of an overt understanding of “place’s indispensability for all
things that exist” (1996: 14). He buttresses his argument by leaning on classic philosopher Archytas of
Tarentum who wrote in the 5th century B.C., “Since everything that is in motion is moved in some place,
it is obvious that one has to grant priority to place, in which that which causes motion or is acted upon
will be. Perhaps thus it is the first of all things, since all existing things are either in place or not without
place” (qtd.in Casey 1996). If I follow Casey’s argument far enough and long enough across its logical
continuum, it is difficult not to consider Hamlet’s often quoted “To be or not to be” soliloquy. In answer
Casey describes the feeling of being “without place” as involving “a sense of unbearable emptiness” (2008: x emphasis in the original). The felt, or even imagined experiences described by Casey highlight the shift in geography to the study of the phenomenological.

The philosophical focus on the phenomenology of place brought with it an investigation into the more human aspects of place: feelings of attachment, of relationship, of participation, and care (Cresswell 2004). The study of the phenomenology of place has an emphasis beyond definition or location. It involves the essence of place, what Relph calls the genus loci or potential of place (1976). Casey weighs in on the experience of place: “The relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence ... but also, more radically, of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect there is no place without self and no self without place” (2001: 68). The thorough understanding of place and the importance of place to the human experience advocated for by place theorists such as Tuan and Relph, and even Casey, has present day implications for the conservation and preservation of existing places as well as the making and/or remaking of new places.

Tuan argues for a temporal understanding of place as pause, as “where we live our complete selves” (143). And while I agree with Tuan that place is where we may achieve our full potential, I argue that it is also where we expand our complete self to exist in proximity with other selves in that place. We do so in relationship to the place, to the others who live and work with us in that particular place, and as well, to our connections with other places and the individuals who live and work in those other places. Connections stretch through space and time. David Smith argues that proximity does matter to those connections but that it is not solely determinative (Smith 2000). Proximity and separation to place and to those others who live in that place are merely varying degrees of connection and relationship.

Many humans experience their emotional relationship to others and to place as positive, even as a feeling of love. To describe this feeling Tuan devised the term “topophilia” which he defines as the “affective bond between people and place” (Tuan 1976). Though these feelings and connections vary
from person to person and from place to place, fluctuating significantly according to varying social or cultural norms, the bonds created by human beings to their places are not only a response to place but serve also to create, modify, and sculpt place (Tuan 1976). The known world of the individual is always in the making. The scale of our world contracts or enlarges in conjunction with our relationship to it, whether in our homes, our towns, the nation-state or the large scale spoken of so often now, the scale of the world. Place is at once particular and universal. All humans exist in this place that is the earth and are connected to it to in varying degrees but no two humans perceive place in exactly the same way. Cresswell offers a critique of humanist geographers when they “claim that place is a universal experience (while at the same time using the word ‘man’ as the universal person)” (2004: 25). The particularity of place is at least as important as its universality. Ideas of “topophilia” as an affective connection to place, maybe even a love for place tends to engender thoughts of household and home. Place is often portrayed in literature and the vernacular as home, as a place of one’s own, or as being at home in the world. While the idea of home suggests a fire in the hearth, supper on the table, and a comfortable chair for some, for others thoughts of home have the potential to spark memories and fears of abuse, negligence, violence and loss (Rose 1993, hooks 1990, Young 1997). This discrepancy in how places are perceived points to the next step in the evolution of place theory, a focus on the constructed nature of place.

2.2 Place as Constructed

“We live at our best when engaged in acts of history making.”

—Arturo Escobar

Thus far I have briefly outlined the arc of human geography beginning with the detailed descriptions of regional geographers, through the geographic focus on the spatial up to and including the focus on place as a lens through which to understand the intricate and complicated relationship that exists
between human and place. The complex nature of the embodied and emotional relationship between humans and place led to the next ideological shift in geography, the investigation of the social nature of place, of how the idea and experience of place is constructed (Agnew 1987; Cresswell 1996; Harvey 1996). So while yes, place is basic to existence, it does not spring up naturally or fully formed. It is created, constructed, and thus contested—anything that is made can be made differently (Cresswell 27).

The constructed nature of place brings with it social, cultural, and political conflict. Critical human geographers view place as a lens through which to investigate problematic and often hidden relationships between place, power, and meaning, bringing with it the necessity of examining issues of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Massey 2005).

The meaning ascribed to place is not fixed. It is not a given. The assignment of meaning to place is a process, on-going, never completed, never stagnant. The process of place is a composite project, “Places are not constructed out of nowhere but involve materialities, politics and imaginations, comprising people’s engagement with their physical-material environment” (Bærenholdt and Granås 3). The materialities of place are accompanied by processes, by praxes, by enactments of routine activity. In what might at first appear to be circular logic, it is possible to argue that while place is process, it is process that creates place. It is a distinctly reciprocal relationship.

The relationship of place to process factors into John Agnew’s three part analysis concerning the significance and meaning of place. In *Place and Politics* he outlines the three essential aspects of place: location, locale, and a sense of place (1987). The first of Agnew’s terms, location, can be distinguished from the rest by its relationship to place as a verb with the meaning of situating an object, person, or event; it refers to the fixed position. Location can be fixed in space by a specific set of coordinates. Locale requires a more contextual understanding than does location. It refers to the environment as it is materially and culturally constructed. The environment may include elements of nature but specifically includes buildings, roads, and public spaces such as playgrounds, parks, or community gardens. Humans
might temporarily be absent from a particular locale but for Agnew, a requisite characteristic of locale is that it be imaged by or as a space for meaningful human activity (1987). In the third term of his typology, “sense of place” Agnew refers to the emotional attachment humans ascribe to places. Significant to this project, “a sense of place” often has a temporal aspect as in the “sense of place” we have for places in our memory, a feeling of loss and nostalgia, which has relevance to the loss felt by both refugees and the discomforted indigenous residents. It is this third understanding of place that drives this thesis.

Agnew’s three part understanding of place facilitates a deeper investigation into both the lived experience of place and place theory. It also enables and promotes a critical understanding of the intersections of location, locales, and people, in particular the ways in which individuals and groups live, work, and play in place with an emphasis on the meaning ascribed to place in the context of everyday life (Massey 2005). It in these intersections of location, locale, and meaning that place is constructed and reconstructed. Each intersection of place and meaning is unique, a product of a precise set of circumstances and processes. Massey argues, “[W]hat gives place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together in a particular locus” (1991: 150). Place is a social milieu, constructed by the actions of social agents; it is also social agents who contest constructions of place.

Place is created by the actions of a multitude of actors living and working separately and together in place. Much of the process of place is through the relatively unconscious actions of individuals as social agents but those actions are often fostered or proscribed by structural forces. Harvey argues that “places don’t just exist but that they are always and continually being socially constructed by powerful institutional forces in society” (57). Traffic engineers, city planners and elected officials, as well as powerful actors in the business community are invested by society with the capacity to make decisions about place and bestowed with the ability to override and over-power the choices of individuals. Responsibility in an official capacity implies the mandate to remake the spaces of place which leads to the
often critiqued understanding of place “space invested with meaning in the context of power” (Cresswell 2004: 12). The importance, the value of place, is not ascribed uniformly or evenly. Meaning exists across “the contested terrain of competing definitions” (Harvey 1996: 309). Yes, “powerful institutional forces” have the ability to socially, culturally, and politically mold both the concepts and construction of place but they do not have the ability to singularly determine place. Place as a process resists stagnation.

The making of place is a process continually under construction as both invention and transgression. Place-making, defined as “the set of social political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate experienced geographies in which they live” is the material and cultural result, though not a permanent result, of invention and transgression and invention (Pierce, Martin and Murphy 2011: 54). Place evolves and changes as a result of the quotidian and mundane actions of individual actors just living their life, in relationship to other individual actors also living out their everyday lives. As Amin argues, it requires a considered realignment: “the necessity of negotiating across and among difference the implacable spatial fact of shared turf” (2009: 13). The process of negotiation changes both those who engage with it and the place being contested. Escobar writes of the importance of viewing place as a configuration of grounded connections and boundaries existing in everyday life but with the acknowledgement that “its identity is constructed, traversed by power, and never fixed” (2001: 140). The lived reality of the material structures of everyday life is made visible and mediated through the social and relational.

The interactive nature of place-making contributes to the possibility of conflict. The continuous and never completed nature of place-making inevitably leads to considerations of multiple trajectories that not only intersect but collide (Massey 2005, Pierce, Martin and Murphy 2011). Politics allows and facilitates creation and innovation but, more significantly, politics provides a medium through which place as a network of possibilities is mediated and negotiated. Pierce, Martin and Murphy argue for
place-making as “an inherently networked process, constituted by the sociospatial relationships that link individuals together through a common place-frame” (2011: 54). Place-frames exist in the spaces of commonality that are to be found between groups who might otherwise have conflicting claims and goals (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy). As creative ways for otherwise conflicting groups to reach resolve conflict and reach social, political and material goals, place-frames are also representative of relational, responsible place.

2.3 Place as Relational

“Nearly all of us care, because we ourselves know what it means to have our hearts cut away by life . . .”

—Barbara Kingsolver

The next period in the evolution of critical human geographical theory through and into the 21st century involves the conceptual leap from viewing place as socially and politically constructed to understanding place as relational, responsible, and responsive. The conceptualization of place-frames as outlined by Pierce, Martin, and Murphy represents a move toward ideas of place as relational; Massey’s idea of “throwntogetherness” emotively engages geographers into investigating place as relational, responsible, and responsive. If we understand, as I have proposed above, place to be produced through multiple interactions between individuals interacting in either the same place or in places connected over time and space, then it becomes necessary to consider the possibility of responsibility being engendered by relationships, both those in proximity and those more distant. The “throwntogetherness” of individuals in place and across space necessitates on-going negotiation and as a result, suggests the relational nature of place. According to Massey, “what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated, together at a particular locus” (1994: 66). The mediation of place and meaning brings with it relational space.
Understanding place as relational requires considerations of place identity. The analysis of identity through the lens of geography increases our ability to investigate ways in which the construction of place structures, creates, and recreates human identity. Both the materiality of place and the social and cultural conditioning extant in place influence the labels attached to individual human beings (Keith and Pile 1992). These labels are to varying degrees accepted or fought against. They are however almost always associated with place. Tilly writes, “Personal and cultural identity is bound up with place; a topoanalysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place (15). Understanding the reciprocal relationship of self to place, and place to self, brings critical human geographical theory back to considerations of the philosophical.

Massey exemplifies the turn to the philosophical nature of human geography when she employs the work of philosophers Gatens and Lloyd and their conceptualizations of “Spinozistic responsibility” to illustrate how relational and responsible place is constructed (2004). Spinozistic responsibility is distinctly relational in that it is depends on an outside entity such as a political group, a place, or even another individual in which to relate to (Massey 2004). Responsibility as Spinoza theorized it, also requires embodiment in relationship to place or others. Massey argues, “The identities in question, including those of place, are forged through embodied relations which are extended geographically as well as historically” (2004: 10). Place is occupied by bodies in space; the relationship of those bodies in place points to relational space, and, more importantly, to responsibility towards place and towards the occupants of place.

The identities of individuals exist together and in relationship to others who share similarities but who also display difference. Massey writes of her hometown of Kilburn as a “celebration of diversity and hybridity” (74). Diversity and difference are, however, not always celebrated, or even accepted. Feminist geographers have taken the lead in calling for investigations into how difference and diversity is negotiated in place, as well as arguing that relational and responsible ideas of place call for consider-
ations of geographies of care. According to Victoria Lawson, geographies of care are built on our mutual embodiment of place and the connections therein: “Care ethics begin with a social ontology of connection ... care ethics understand all social relations as contextual, partial, attentive, responsive and responsible (3). Geographies of care incorporate within their area of focus considerations of how places are structured socially, culturally, politically and economically, and the uneven power relations engendered by those structures. Difference is often cemented into the structures extant in specific places. Anderson explains that some “places are ideologically constructed as places of difference ... the result of negotiation with those with the power to define place” (583-584). Places defined as a place of difference, such as Anderson’s Chinatown, or Massey’s Kilburn, offer a unique and valuable opportunity to pursue meaningful and forward-looking geographic research into the construction of place and place identity. Clarkston, like Chinatown and Kilburn, is a place of difference and diversity, but it is also a place of care as evidenced by the actions of resident volunteers in the city. The City of Clarkston, Georgia as it exists in the 21st century presents a rich opportunity for meaningful research into place, place identities, and reciprocal, relational geographies of care.

3 METHODOLOGY

“[P]lace is not simply something to be observed, researched and written about but is itself part of the way we see, research and write.”

—Yi Fu Tuan

3.1 Research Question

This research seeks to investigate how the engagement with refugee resettlement in Clarkston results in changes in identity for the volunteers and professionals who work with the refugee community
and how those changes make Clarkston a place of difference and diversity, but also a place of care. Specifically this thesis is a case study of the community of actors in Clarkston engaged in the resettlement process as tutors, case managers, program directors and ecclesiastical professionals.

In addition, following the instruction of Eudora Welty that “One place understood helps us understand other places better” I hope that my investigation of the unique and particular place that is Clarkston, Georgia at this specific moment in time helps us better understand other places, and their relational, responsible nature across space and time.

Extant literature on refugees, with its focus on the reformulation of individual refugee identities, leaves open a space for the study of how the arrival over time of a significantly large group of political refugees necessitates the reformulation of identity in the older, host population and simultaneously perceived place identities of the community at large (Ley 2004). This agglomeration of individuals includes the long-term residents, or indigenous residents for want of a more explanatory term, whose identity struggles have not, in the past, been studied closely. Over the last few decades these residents have watched their city changed almost beyond recognition due to its selection by government and non-governmental agencies as a designated refugee resettlement site, and yet, as my research and that of others has demonstrated (St. John 2009) many individuals have chosen to become active participants in the process, not only actively welcoming and assisting the refugee population but pushing back against community resistance to the resettlement process. The first group of participants in this project consists of long-term residents in the case study area. The second group with whom interviews were conducted is made up of new residents of Clarkston who moved to Clarkston intentionally to work with the refugee community. The third identified group with whom interviews were conducted for this project is comprised of individuals who came to the United States themselves as refugees but who now, as naturalized citizens, work to facilitate the settlement process for others. The study group is not a formal group, organized and self-identified; it is an agglomeration of many smaller groups operating at shifting, and intri-
cately-nested, multiple scales. It is the collection of these groups, varied and separate organizations, as well as the individuals connected to them, structured into a loosely connected network: governmental agencies, not-for-profits and an assortment of religious, faith based institutions. In this research I explore alliances between individuals in these organizations, as well as alliances across and between associations. I examine how these alliances facilitate and smooth the process of identity reformulations in Clarkston. In addition, I investigate the ways these alliances facilitate integration into the culture, social, educational, and economic spheres of life as an American for the refugees. Lastly, I analyze the shrinking interstitial space between designation of resident and refugee.

Clarkston offers a unique and valuable opportunity for this study. The rapidity and intensity of the transformation of Clarkston from a hollowed-out city due to “white flight” to a “city of refuge” is partially due to the rapidity of the transformation in Clarkston but also due to the fact that it is a relatively small city. In order to undercover the social, cultural, and political construction of place I surveyed and interviewed resident and non-resident actors working with the refugee population in Clarkston (Derrida 2000). Some of those actors work in the private sector, others are governmental employees, and still others are simply volunteers, giving of their time and energy to facilitate the resettlement process. Specific participants with their assigned pseudonyms are listed in Table 1. This study identifies through loosely structured interviews the self-identified characteristics of place identity employed by residents and non-residents to describe the place in which they live and their lives within that place. It also identifies changes and modifications in those self-selected identifiers over time, and as well, analyzes characteristics that overlap and intersect throughout the respondents to the study.

The methodological approach of this paper is a case study analyzing how social relations are enacted in the volunteer spaces of Clarkston through specific, empirical examples of volunteer actors working in community organizations functioning to effect change in Clarkston. The research uses a multi-method methodological approach. The methods implemented, discussed individually and in depth
below, are chiefly participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, complimented and off-set by selective archival research.

3.2 Positionality

Before I outline the methods of research used to complete this thesis, it is necessary to comment on my positionality in regards to the volunteer community in Clarkston. I would prefer not to acknowledge the mind-set with which I began this research but fairness, as well as academic rigor requires that I do. I believe I would be remiss if I failed to disclose the rather biased and non-critical approach that initially led me both to the site of my research and to the particular array of questions animating my research. While my experiences and social standing facilitated access to the community, it also framed, and perhaps limited, the scope and breadth of the findings and conclusions.

I began my academic career as a non-traditional student in my early fifties. Prior to enrolling in university I spent several decades working as an unpaid volunteer in various civic and religious organizations. For much of that time I served as an instructor and tutor, teaching a wide range of ages up to and including adults. In Tampa I was trained and worked as an adult literacy instructor working with one student at a time to improve readings skills. At various periods of time throughout my years as a volunteer I served as the president of several organizations, ranging from president of the Parent Teacher’s Association to president of an organization administering to the physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare of around two hundred families. I share all of this not to promote myself and my past experience as situating me perfectly to question and examine the perceptions of volunteer actors in Clarkston but to acknowledge that there are parallels between my experiences and those of my respondents that might have shaped my observations. However, I do believe, as Tillman (2002) argues, that my positionality and social knowledge allowed me access to the understandings and perceptions of my respondents that might otherwise not have been the case. If, as Patton (1990) maintains, the credibility of qualitative research resides in the confidence that readers of such studies have in that particular researcher’s under-
standing and interpretation of the gathered data, as well as in the analysis of that data then my positionality serves not so much as a signatory of my bias but instead points to my ability to see, understand, and effectively analyze the data.

3.3 Significance of the Research

While only one of multiple resettlement sites in the United States, Clarkston offers a unique research opportunity due to in part to its small size and population but also due to its location close to production centers tied into global markets. The labor demands of the poultry processing plants in Gainesville, approximately an hour away from Clarkston and the carpet factories spread throughout North Georgia for a continuous supply of low-paid wage labor not only influenced the decision to designate Clarkston as a resettlement site, but also drives much of the activity of the volunteer actors in the city, particularly those working to aid refugees in finding employment opportunities. Though supervised by paid staff members in the not-for-profit resettlement and support agencies, the day-to-day work of incorporating the newcomer into the community is largely accomplished by volunteers. It is these actors, both volunteer and employee, along with city and governmental leaders who comprise the interview pool for this study. Clarkston as a case-study is the subject of the next chapter but here I want to highlight its significance as a research site in helping to understand shifting concepts of identity among the volunteer actors in Clarkston as they at once facilitate and resist normative American subjectivities.

This research on the development and evolution of shifting concepts of identity in Clarkston also makes possible a better understanding of the impact of refugee resettlement on place identity in officially designated refugee resettlement sites.

Past research in resettlement areas has focused mainly on questions concerning changing identities in the fragile and at-risk refugee population (Smith 2009, Boehnlein 1985, Kinzie 1986). Most of this research focuses on the trauma of forced migration and the difficulties in the initial period as well as adjustment and adaptation to the society and culture of the receiving community (Shaw 2008, Streed
Sociologists such as Stephen Castles investigate the effects of forced migrations on the refugee population as part of a larger societal group (2003). Anthropologists analyze individual experiences of refugees against the larger global experience of transnationalism and globalization (Kearney 1995, Malkki 2009). Absent from these academic contributions to the general field of knowledge are the voices of critical geographers researching shifting concepts of identity in localized resettlement areas. This thesis seeks to build on the social sciences body of knowledge concerning place and place-identity as it pertains to the reformulation of identities amongst volunteer actors in a refugee resettlement site.

3.4 Methods and Data

This study is a qualitative research project intended to investigate shifting concepts of identity in volunteer actors in the Clarkston area. The methodological approach for this paper is a case study analyzing how social relations are enacted in the volunteer spaces of Clarkston through specific, empirical examples of volunteer actors working in community organizations operating to affect change in Clarkston. The methodology for this project is a multi-methods approach. Much of the data for this thesis project was acquired through individual interviews constructed to gather empirical information concerning individual experiences, attitudes, and emotions involved with volunteering in the case study location. The use of personal interviews facilitates the description and analysis of local social and cultural constructs, as well as individual resistance and cooperation with those constructs, all in the context of larger scale external interactions (Herod 1993). This research also employs archival research to contextualize, verify and situate data acquired through interviews, as well as participant observations. The data acquired through these three methods provides a way into understanding the relational nature of identity and place in Clarkston.

The data for this research was acquired over a relatively long period, beginning in the winter of 2011 and extending into the spring of 2012. Throughout that time period I volunteered at the Clarkston Community Center as an art teacher in the after-school program once a week as well as in the evening
tutoring adult refugees. One or two evenings a week, depending on my class and teaching schedule, I worked under the direction of Bobby King, the coordinator for the Advanced ESL/GED classes. Throughout this period, I kept a journal of my observations as a participant in the community. As the research design included interviewing volunteers in the community, working as a volunteer myself allowed me to foster relationships with other volunteers and thus create a pool of potential participants. Individuals interviewed initially were selected through personal connections made while I was working in the community. Additional interview participants were recruited using the snowball method in which primary contacts, as part of the interview process, are asked to make referrals to other individuals who might be able to provide valuable data and insight into the research subject. The referral process allowed contact with individuals such as the mayor and program director who might otherwise have been wary of speaking openly with a stranger and interloper into the community. In order to guarantee anonymity, and as required by IRB Human Subjects guidelines, the names of all participants have been changed. Participants in the interview process represented a wide and varied range of ages and were both male and female. Defining characteristics of each respondent are included in Table 1. but it is worth noting here that they ranged in age from the early twenties for several participants to one woman who self-reported her age to be in her eighties. Participants also represented diverse professional, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. While all of the participants had been to, or were currently in college, their backgrounds were especially dissimilar. Some came to work in Clarkston as intentional neighbors out of religious convictions (e.g., Hankins and Walter 2012), others for social justice reasons, and still others for unspecified reasons unrelated to Clarkston’s status as a refugee resettlement site. Respondents work in the community as volunteers, as employees of resettlement agencies and not-for-profit organizations, as well as pastors and ministers, and as elected officials.

The resettlement process in Clarkston as well as in other cities across the country has been ongoing for several decades. The length of time allows for the inclusion of the rather unique perspective
of several participants who came to the United States as refugees and who are now naturalized American citizens working to help to smooth the way for more recent immigrants. One participant described her life as a child in war-torn Burundi as well as in a refugee camp and was then able to compare her experience of being resettled in Clarkston against her experiences as a volunteer working to smooth the way for new refugees. Another respondent, placed in a resettlement site on the west coast, evocatively described her decision to move away from her ethnic enclave and to become a professional social worker in a different refugee community. The data gathered from these respondents provided particularly rich data as they described the long process of integration along with the felt and lived experiences of that process.

It should be noted here that individuals from other groups might have been included in this project. Largely due to IRB restrictions this project did not include individuals who would be identified as refugee by the agencies operating in the case study area. Also, noticeably absent from representation in this thesis project are those individuals actively resisting the designation of Clarkston as a resettlement site and also those individuals antagonistic to refugee themselves. This absence is due to the design of the project as one investigating shifting ideas of identity among individuals working with the refugee programs. A second more inclusive project might do well to aim for the inclusion of these other voices.

Interviews began with an explanation and presentation of the IRB approved Consent form along with an explicit conversation concerning anonymity and security. Participants were also asked if they were comfortable having the interview digitally recorded. All but one respondent agreed to the recording process. For that one interview, I took copious notes in order to reconstruct the conversation later that day. Interviews were transcribed and coded from the digital recordings. The actual interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format employing a list of previously constructed questions, approved in the IRB process. Interviews facilitate the investigation of what matters most to the individual informant and, when semi-structured or open ended, allow the exploration of deeper concerns and
3.5 Analytic Framework

In that, as previously outlined, the purpose of this research is to describe and analyze the ways in which identity and place-identity shifts and evolves in individuals working with the refugee community in Clarkston this research depends primarily on qualitative research. Qualitative research, particularly through interviews and discourse allows the researcher to disentangle social issues from the broader inscribed structure (Dixon 2010). The ability to make sense of and use this research depends heavily on intent (Dunn 2010; Herod 1993). This organizational structure provided a foundation to build rapport with the respondent, but allowed enough flexibility to change the direction of the interview following the individual interviewee’s responses and lead. This allowed me to explore emerging questions and issues as I became aware of them.
how well the information provided by the interviewees is organized and categorized. In order to make the best use of the rich data provided in the interview process, the interviews have been coded. This coding allows an at once deep and reflective textual analysis to better identify texts and sub-texts running through the conversations.

The detailed nature of the eighteen interviews conducted as part of this research resulted in a large quantity of data. In addition to the set of predetermined questions, the semi-structured format gave free reign for each interview to veer off into unexpected themes and subjects, resulting in additional questions and data. To organize and evaluate the large amount of information garnered from the interviews, they were coded for analysis as advocated by Cope (2008). This allowed the responses to the interview questions to be ordered into key themes and, as well, initiated the process of analysis.

The predetermined questions were constructed based on preliminary research to investigate possible themes and discussion material that might develop during the interview process. From this initial investigation, and as part of putting together the thesis proposal, several patterns evolved into a series of themes that could be sorted into a series of codes to employ during the analysis portion of this thesis research process. Because, however, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format in order to allow room to explore unexpected paths, additional codes came to the forefront during the data gathering portion of this research project. The new analytical codes were added to those that had been identified earlier in the process and systematized into an organized structure in order to answer the research question (Cope 2008). The construction of the new analytical structure revealed some expected themes in response to the research question, but also completely unexpected ones.

A theme-specific code book was created in order to organize the data into the themes that had been identified. These themes were color-coded in order to highlight specific descriptive and analytical themes of discourse as they were emerged in the transcriptions of the eighteen interviews conducted for this project. The color-coding for the qualitative data resulting from the interviews was organized
along four themes as suggested by Straus (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In conjunction with Cope’s suggestions that qualitative research focus on the individual respondents who agreed to and participated in the project, particularly on the interactions between actors and with a focus on relationships and interactions, conflictual and consensual (Strauss 1990, Cope 2008). The relational nature of this type of investigatory coding has resonance with the relational understandings of place and identity as identified in the literature review portion of this thesis, and therefore, have great significance for this project. This focus on the personal, social, and cultural conditions of the individual participants, including current and past socio-economic conditions and experiences, fits into the first two of Strauss’s four types of themes, conditions and the aforementioned interactions between actors (1990). The third and fourth of Strauss’s themes, strategies and tactics and consequences are only able to emerge out of the base created by investigating and understanding the first two themes as they are presented in the interview conversations (Cope). Examining the data for strategies and tactics allows a deeper understanding of not only actual events but of the emotions and felt experience engendered by said events, allowing the research to uncover the social, cultural, economic and political processes underlying events. The coding of consequences highlights the real world outcomes of relationships, events, and resultant consequences (Cope 2008). Following this coding strategy, modified slightly to include my personal observations as a participant observer, allowed me to compile and present the data acquired through the interview process in a series of narratives to the reader. In the next chapter, I outline and describe the history of the city of Clarkston along with the current, on-the-ground situation in the case study area. In Chapter five I present the extant discursive narratives in Clarkston as investigated through this analytic qualitative research project. The narratives are organized into the three categories: those who are acting out of religious or spiritual convictions, those who choose to adapt and assist the refugees, as well as those who arrived in the United States as refugees themselves. Chapter 5 is followed by a brief conclusion.
4 CLARKSTON, GEORGIA: A CASE STUDY

“Perspectives are altered by the fact of being drawn; description solidifies the past and creates a gravitational body that wasn’t there before.”

—John Updike

The script of the southern city is well-known, well-worn, more dichotomous than dialectical. The adversaries are understood to be recognizable, either by the color of their uniform, the color of their skin, or the color of the sunburn on their neck. The accepted trope is frequently brought out, paraded, exhibited for effect, invoked to influence opinion. “Why, when I first moved here the KKK still marched openly on Church Street,” the mayor reminisces, in his wood-paneled office in the City Hall building, a building situated on the east side of the raised CSX tracks, nested beneath a copse of sheltering oaks (Interview). And yet, the reminiscence of long-time Clarkston resident and the city’s current mayor, Emanuel Ransom, concerning decades old KKK marches and parades diverges from the expected script for a small, insular southern city in significant ways. First, the African-American mayor moved south to Clarkston from the northern United States, specifically Pennsylvania, in the 1960s at the time of the Second Great Migration in which an estimated five million African Americans moved from the rural south to northern cities (Frey 2004). Second, Ransom presides over a gateway city, (Figure 1. next page, is a map courtesy of Craig Skelton intended to illustrate how Clarkston is situated within the Atlanta Metropolitan Area as well as in Georgia) an officially designated resettlement site for political refugees, a city that has been labeled and described as the “most diverse city in America” by Time magazine and by The New York Times reporter Warren St. John (2007). Though not the subject of this thesis, it bears noting here that, as indicated by the mayor’s comment concerning the KKK, Clarkston’s past has been fraught with its share of contentions divided along racial lines. Also, despite the fact that recent refugees pro-
vide much of the labor that powers Georgia’s economy which will also be discussed in more depth in a later

Figure 1. Map of Clarkston in context of the Atlanta Metropolitan Area
chapter, Georgia is often considered an anti-immigration state and even at that, refugees have a much smaller support base than other immigrant groups, particularly Hispanic groups due in part to sheer statistics but also due to the transient nature of the refugee population (Interview). And yet, despite past and present conflicts and discord, the city of Clarkston in many ways defies the expected trope for a city in the American south.

The road into Clarkston follows the CSX rail line. Situated eleven miles northeast of Atlanta’s skyscraper dominated downtown in DeKalb County, just inside the ubiquitous I-285 loop, Clarkston is, in population if not reputation, a small town (see Figure 2 on the previous page, map courtesy of Craig Skelton). It was, according to St. John, “a homogenous, white southern town,” comprised of “mostly white farmers and railroad workers, (Refugees 3). Many of the homes of those farmers are still present in Clarkston, as illustrated in Figure 3. below.
Mayor Ransom’s predecessor Mayor Lee Swaney called it, “just a sleepy town by the railroad tracks” (St. John, 33). It stayed that way, a small southern town more reminiscent of the “old south” than the new, until the 1970s when the children and grandchildren of those same farmers began to build “apartment complexes for middle-class workers” (Benson 3, interview). It is still a small community, both geographically and demographically. The 2010 census set the population at 7,554, a number that has stayed relatively stable through the last few decades (US Census 2010). The 7,554 number is just slightly more than the 2000 census estimate of 7,300, an interesting phenomenon given that estimates place annual immigration to be just less than 2,000 individuals (Interview Ben). Census results show the number of foreign-born residents to be about 28% of the population but the mayor estimates that there are somewhere between two and three thousand uncounted refugees living in Clarkston at any given time, which if true, boosts the percentage of foreign-born residents closer to 50% or a full half of the population (Interview). According to one resident, the community of Clarkston is “mixed transient” or diverse and fluid (Interview). Indicative of both the identity and the fluidity of Clarkston’s population, newcomers arrive on the state highway where they are greeted by a sign at the city limits on which “Welcome” is displayed in bright colors in six different languages (Figure 4 below).
Standing guard along the tracks is the imposing campus of the Clarkston International Bible Church (CIBC), renamed from Clarkston First Baptist in the mid-1990s. Though it will be discussed in detail in a later chapter, it is worth noting here that CIBC’s campus, comprised of three large buildings sprawled over a wide swath of land, is currently home to eleven distinct and separate ethnic congregations. Phil Kitchens, current pastor of CIBC famously teaches, “Jesus said heaven is a place for people of all nations. So if you don’t like Clarkston, you won’t like heaven” (Lee). On the CIBC Website, Pastor
Kitchen restates both the church’s and the community’s diversity, “God has brought the world to a little suburb” (CIBC). The church’s marquee stands tall along the raised bed of dirt and ballast of the rail line proclaiming the willingness of church members to welcome strangers from many cultures (Figure 5, above).

Clarkston has been referred to as “A Modern-Day Ellis Island” by NPR contributor Bryan Meltz. Just as the red brick buildings of Ellis Island stand representative of American immigration and the immigrant experience, the Clarkston Community Center (CCC) symbolizes the immigrant experience in Clarkston (Figure 6, below). Enclosed on two sides by historic Victorian farmhouses festooned with gingerbread trim and wide porches, vestiges of an earlier time when Clarkston farmers raised crops for market, the back of the historic building edges up to a line of small cottages built by warehouse managers and railroad foremen. The red brick community center originally housed the high school and while the
high school is now contained in a newer facility half-a-mile down the road, the rural nature of early Clarkston is epitomized by the fact that the current mascot of Clarkston High School is still the Angora Goat. Though restored and reconfigured to serve the diverse community that comprises present day Clarkston, it is important to note here that the events at CCC are not without controversy. The center’s director characterizes Clarkston as comprising three communities: the “Old Guard” white community, the refugee community\(^1\) and the African-American community; these three communities are described as “disparate and discrete” with very little social interaction between groups (Interview). “It’s difficult to bring all three into the same room” (Interview Martha). There are outliers in addition to the three groups: the LGBT community across from CCC who according to one resident “just want to be left alone”, the Libertarians who sponsor the Contra dances at the community center, and the iconoclasts

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\(^1\) The refugee community includes not only the refugees but the individuals, volunteer and/or professional who actively work to assist in the resettlement process.
who stand alone (Interview Martha). Both the “Old Guard” white community and the African-American community have in the recent past expressed animosity to what they perceive as the “take-over” of the community center by “the international community” (Interviews). That resistance seems to be diminishing under the direction of the center’s new director who has actively facilitated cooperation between Clarkston’s older, host population and the refugee community. Men, women, and children move in and out of the center throughout the day and evening, with a noticeable increase in foot traffic in the afternoons when the after-school program is in full-swing. Even the weekends see the building in use for community contra dances and meetings of ethnic organizations as well as for receptions to celebrate community weddings.

The relatively imposing structures of the City hall, Clarkston International Bible Church, and Clarkston Community Center are all situated on the east side of the tracks, along College Avenue and parallel to Indian Creek Drive. On the “other side of the tracks” are older, smaller frame shops housing small businesses and restaurants. Indian Creek Trail angles off from the highway and the railroad bed and leads to a strip mall anchored by the Global Pharmacy on one end and a heavily trafficked grocery store at the other end. Red dirt paths snake their way up, around, and across the raised CSX tracks, evidence that despite the proximity of MARTA bus routes and stops, many of Clarkston’s newest residents conduct their daily routine on foot. As evidenced by the worn footpaths (See Figure 7. below) etched across the backdrop of the railroad tracks, the boundary created by the tracks is more littoral than literal, hinting at the liminality of identities divided into distinct categories such as resident or refugee.
For the most part, the daily journey of Clarkston’s resettled refugees, as well as for many of the
respondents in this thesis, begins in the ubiquitous apartment buildings that occupy much of the city’s
landscape. As mentioned earlier, for much of its history Clarkston was comprised of “mostly white
farmers and railroad workers” (Refugees 3). It stayed that way, a small town more reminiscent of the
“old south” than the new until the 1970s when the children and grandchildren of those farmers began
to build “apartment complexes for middle-class workers” (Benson 3 Interview). Following relatively
quickly after the building boom, however, partially as a part of the general suburbanization of metropol-
itan areas across the country, but also as a result of changes brought to Atlanta in the wake of civil rights
legislation, “white flight” began in earnest and all those who could, usually affluent, middle-class whites
moved from Clarkston. While there is not sufficient space here to entertain an in-depth investigation of
the effects of race and resistance on the landscape of Clarkston, it is worth mentioning, particularly in
lite of Mayor Ransom recollections of KKK marches on Main Street. Kevin Kruse writes of what he calls “the realities of white resistance to segregation” in his bellwether book, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. In a comment with particular relevance to much of this thesis, Kruse argues for the importance of understanding phenomena such as “white flight” as “the complex relationships between people and places, which are always their clearest at the local level” (11). Kenneth Jackson succinctly describes the move to the suburbs: “[t]he fear of those with different skin color that has driven many people to seek the suburban sanctuary” (189). Out-migration of whites to the suburbs resulted in Clarkston being a “hollowed-out” city, setting the stage for its selection as a refugee resettlement site.

![Example of the Clarkston's Ubiquitous Apartment Complexes](image)

**Figure 8. Example of the Clarkston's Ubiquitious Apartment Complexes**

The resultant vacancies in many of Clarkston’s apartment buildings, along with its proximity to Atlanta’s regional job market, combined with the fact that it was, and is still, served by Atlanta’s Metropolitan Area Regional Transit System (MARTA) led refugee resettlement agencies charged by the United States government to designate Clarkston as a prime site for the resettlement of political refugees (Refugees 6). Newly settled refugees arrive at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport with very little in ma-
terial goods, and with even less knowledge of the place they are now to make their home in. With that in mind, and when the system works, they are greeted at the airport by volunteers for the resettlement agencies and taken to a new home in one of Clarkston’s vacant apartments.

They arrive as survivors of conflict, political violence and, in some instances, even genocide (Patil et al 2010). Often they arrive after years spent living in refugee camps (Faith Interview). According to the Department of Health and Human Services, in 2010 over 73,000 individuals were resettled to the United States; of those, approximately 4.5% were placed in Georgia (Orr 2010). In 2008, DeKalb County, the county in which Clarkston is located, received 85% of all refugees resettled in Georgia, a number that has remained relatively stable (GRPI 2009). Both government-sponsored and non-governmental organization (NGOs) provide refugee services in DeKalb County; in 2009 the only organization in Georgia selected to receive community discretionary grants from the federal government were those located in DeKalb County, the county in which Clarkston is located (ORR 2007-2009). All of these organizations, listed, along with the services they provide, in Table 1.1) are engaged in caring for those “persons seeking asylum from persecution in other countries” (United Nations 1531:2). The stranger at the gate, the outsider, challenges those inside to action (Philo 2012).

The stranger at the gate presents contemporary cities, particularly post-colonial, contemporary cities with a dilemma—a dilemma surprisingly reminiscent of the one experienced by fortified and walled cities of an earlier time. As Derrida writes, an encounter with the stranger “puts me in question” (2000: 3). Contact with “the other” through the resettlement process, or even just as neighbors requires a renegotiation similar in some ways to the resettlement process experienced by the refugees.

Resettlement, “a process during which a refugee having arrived in a place of permanent asylum, gradually re-establishes the feeling of control over his/her life” begins when the refugees are met at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport by volunteer actors, who then help them get settled into an apartment in one of the ubiquitous apartment complexes in Clarkston (Patil et al 62). For the first few
months their lives revolve around non-profit support agencies providing health, education, employment and social services, as well a semblance of community. For the new arrivals, divested of all social capital by their forced emigration, the early fostering of community is vital (Stewart et al 2008). The fostering of community allows not only integration but the accumulation of social capital. This social capital in turn promotes and accelerates the creation of community, as opposed to individualism, allowing for a strengthening of social networks (Ferragina 2010, Bourdieu 1986). Accessibility to the services provided by refugee support agencies is vital, as has been determined in studies conducted by Beveridge, in New York, and Cuba, in Worcester, Massachusetts (2000, 2010). Newly arrived refugees to the United States are expected to have a job by the end of their first ninety days in the country and to be self-sufficient, which translates to being able to pay for their apartment by the 120 day mark. Six months after their arrival, at the 180 day mark, refugees are expected to begin paying back the travel loan that allowed them to immigrate and that paid for their apartment and groceries during their initial few months in the country (Ben Interview). For these first months, their days and lives revolve around the non-profit agencies assisting with the acquisition of health, education, employment, and social services. The next chapter illustrates the felt experiences of the volunteers and professionals who actively volunteer with and work under the auspices of the resettlement agencies to help refugees find their way in their new community, although it does bear repeating here that the community is not a monolithic whole but an agglomeration of multiple communities networked at various scales.

5 Exploring the Discourse: Identity is Relational, Reciprocal

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.”
In Clarkston there is no simple answer to the question “Who are you?” The black/white binary implied by Mayor Ransom as he remembers the KKK marching on Main Street belies the lived reality of identity for those who reside there, “older” indigenous, “homegrown” residents, resettled refugees, or those who moved to Clarkston to work with and serve the refugee community. In this chapter I present a typology of three foremost identities adopted by actors working in the community with an understanding that, for the most part, these identities are hybrid, shifting, and liminal.

Strangers arrive “at the gate” almost every day in Clarkston. Refugees walk through arrival gates at the airport and are shepherded to Clarkston in cars, mini-vans, or SUVs by volunteers working with the various resettlement agencies. The volunteers drive their charges to their new apartment, unlock the door and hand over the key to the often quite bewildered refugee. If these particular volunteers are diligent and caring, they walk through the few rooms of the designated apartment, providing instructions and details as they go concerning the use and care of the contents of the apartment.

The process of bringing these strangers into the community generates unexpected relationships, and as is often the case, the unexpected brings with it tension and resistance. The integration of the newcomers into the community is fraught with difficulty not only for the uprooted new immigrant, but for all those in the receiving community. The “necessity of negotiating across and among difference” changes the individuals who live in Clarkston as well as the place that is Clarkston. It challenges their very identity and necessitates a reordering of who they are, a re-ordering very similar to that which takes place for the refugees themselves. Mayor Ransom, who served on the city council before being sworn in as mayor (the mayor is serving out the remainder of Mayor Howard "Trey" Tygrett who died suddenly in December of 2010) is more explicit concerning the extant changes in the city. “The violence. I’m sure you know,” he said, “sure you heard or read about the man who cut off his son’s head and
walked down the road carrying it, about the family that started a fire in the middle of the living room in their apartment. And that doesn’t even begin to address the times the police were called out to deal with domestic violence issues” (Interview). Though it reads as more apocryphal than actual, the reality is that the beheading did occur, and was reported not only in the local Atlanta media but also in the national media in an article published in the New York Times by reporter Warren St. John as well as in his book, *Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman’s Quest to Make a Difference*. The world had come to the doorstep of Clarkston and not everyone there was happy about it. In a deposition after the problematic and violent arrest and incarceration of one male immigrant, one of Clarkston’s police officers articulated the frustration felt by many of his colleagues, as well as lay residents of the community, “They’re in American now. Not Africa” (St. John 2009: 84-85). Residents were frightened and unsure about what the changes meant.

Peter admits to being unsure. At 75 years of age, still active in the community and his church where he has served for many years as a deacon and board member, Peter witnessed the arc of change brought to Clarkston by decades of refugee resettlement. “The first time I really stood up and took notice was when there started to be issues in the schools. The number of students enrolled went through the roof, and the teachers, and school board, started fussing and making noise about all the discipline problems” (Interview). He continues to explain, “Of course, I had noticed the women on the streets in their traditional dress, and the shops and restaurants with their signs in other languages, but it wasn’t really until the school problems that I realized something had really changed” (Interview). DeKalb County school district struggled to deal with the influx of students in Clarkston’s schools, students who had witnessed horrific trauma and many who not only did not speak English but who could not read in their native language. Much like the school district, Peter, along with the other residents and institutions struggled to adapt.
Ruby, now retired, worked as a teacher for an undisclosed number of years in both the high school and the local junior college. She relates the trauma of teaching in a classroom where many of the students were not able to comprehend what was being taught, “I wanted to help the new students, the Internationals, but I could spend all my time helping them catch up while the English speaking students in the class weren’t learning what they needed to learn. It wasn’t fair to anyone, not to anyone.” Ruby explains, “Many of the children, and the adults, are illiterate in their own language and they all come from different cultures” (Interview). As a tutor in the refugee after-school program I witnessed some of the difficulties spoken of by Ruby as I watched the children work elementary math problems. First they would read the problem out-loud, and then count in the own language on their fingers and then mentally translate their answer into English. And while it has none of the trauma of the violence spoken of by Peter and the mayor, it is, for students and their teachers, a labor-intensive and time consuming process.

The tension involved in negotiating change in the community transpires not only for the established, “native” residents of Clarkston but also for the newer residents, even those who deliberately moved to the city to live with and work with the refugee community. David and his wife left their suburban community and moved to Clarkston with the intention of “making a difference” in the lives of the refugees, with a determination to “Welcome the Other” (Interview). David said, “I thought we’d be the teachers. I thought we could bring positive change to the lives of those we worked with. And … well maybe we do … but we’re the ones who change the most” (Interview). David tells a story about their first day in Clarkston that illustrates his point. As part of their commitment to live with, and work with, the refugee community, the couple purposively rented an apartment in one of the complexes where many of the newest arrivals of the refugee community lived. With a broad, rather embarrassed, smile David relates, “We didn’t know anything about welcoming the other. We learned how to welcome the other that first morning. Without asking, without saying a word, our Burmese neighbor sent his sons
into the moving truck and got them started hauling the heaviest pieces of our furniture up the stairs before they even introduced themselves” (Interview). After a long pause, he adds, “The Burmese, they know how to welcome the other” (Interview). While David and his wife moved to Clarkston consciously and deliberately, rather than just waking up one day to discover their town changed by the arrival of the refugees, the story of their discovery about how much they had to learn is still illustrative of the fact that it is not only the refugees who are forced to negotiate personal and emotional change as they adjust to the social, cultural and political realities of everyday life in a resettlement site. Much like the refugees, David and his wife arrived in Clarkston to find themselves facing the unknown and unfamiliar. For them, as for the individuals they work with, they are learning to navigate what Chris Philo labels “the social geographies of outsiders” (2012). Learning to navigate individual, social, cultural, and political difference is a process.

For David and his wife, daily life in the ever-evolving community of Clarkston requires learning and adaptation, what Frantz Fanon labeled “an insurgent act of cultural translation ... In the world in
which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself” (Fanon 7). So while the couple consciously made the decision to move to Clarkston, once in residence they do not command the process. Even though David and his wife initiated the process of conscious social action once that action is set in motion it has possibilities beyond the expected as it engenders creativity in the form of new and re-configured relationships. It is in those relationships that changes in personal identity often occur. While representative of the shifting nature of identity in the place that is Clarkston in the 21st century, David and his wife are also representative of the level of commitment of many of the volunteers working to make Clarkston worthy of being “the most diverse square mile in the country” and a “city of refuge”. Deliberate, intentional neighbors such as David and his wife fit into the first of three typologies that I have identified as descriptive of the volunteer community in Clarkston. Members of the first group, which includes David and his wife, consider themselves to have been called by their god to serve their neighbor. They serve out of religious commitment. The second group is made up of long-term residents of Clarkston who choose, for various reasons outlined below, to assist rather than resist the resettlement process. This category also includes one couple who moved to Clarkston out of civic mindedness rather than religious convictions. The third group, maybe most representative of how identities shift, meld, and become relational and responsible in Clarkston, consists of volunteers who were themselves refugees. The next section of this thesis addresses these three categories of actors in the order listed above, an order that is not intended to representative of importance or relevance.

5.1 Some are called

“The noun of self becomes a verb. This flashpoint of creation in the present moment is where work and play merge.”

—Stephen Nachmanovitch
In the previous section I referred to David and his wife as intentional neighbors, identified as such by Hankins and Walters (2012: 1508) “Intentional neighboring, or strategic neighboring, refers to the acts of individuals who move to high-poverty neighborhoods to live in solidarity with the marginalized.” David, as well as Ben, is representative of the intentional neighboring phenomenon. As discussed earlier, David and his wife made the decision to leave their comfortable suburban lifestyle and home to move to Clarkston and serve the “stranger” based on the Christian Ten Commandments: “And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). David recounts, “I consider myself a neighbor. Our intention in coming into the neighborhood was ... to come in and bring something to the community” (Interview). He quickly adds, in clarification, “We have this real sense of reciprocity, like, we’re not going to come in as experts on how to do, how to live right, we’re gonna learn. I come in as a student” (Interview). Like David and his wife, many strategic, or intentional neighbors act on religious convictions.

David and his wife carefully selected Clarkston as their new home where they would be able to serve “the stranger” as intentional neighbors. Ben chose to serve “the Other” but did not choose specifically choose to serve in Clarkston. That decision was made for him by the Mission Year administrators when he volunteered to work with their organization for a year just out of college. Mission Year recruits volunteers (under thirty) to work and live in under-developed neighborhoods (see Dahl 2012 for a detailed discussion of Mission Year). Several of the tenants of Mission Year service have particular relevance for the diverse community that is Clarkston. Volunteers are required to live in the neighborhood in which they serve, in a house central to traffic patterns and usually with a porch to enable interaction with the members of the community. They attend church in the community and are required, as much as a volunteer can be required, to volunteer thirty hours a week with a local service agency. They are instructed to walk or use public transportation, again, to facilitate interaction with the individuals in their community. They are not there to proselytize. Also, in order to keep the volunteers grounded,
they must live very frugally, with limited financial resources in line with those of their host community and also with very limited internet communications with their own friends and family. The goal of Mission Year, to “to build beloved community by equipping people from all cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds for service” exemplifies the relational nature of community responsibility written of by Massey and Amin.

Ben and his wife met as Mission Year recruits in Clarkston as young college graduates. They spent their allotted year serving under the auspices of Mission Year and then returned to college for Masters Degrees. Ben earned an MBA but chose to return to Clarkston to work for one of the resettlement agencies at a salary much less than he would be able to command elsewhere but one in line with the principles he had learned and practiced as a Mission Year participant. “It’s good to live frugally, to resist Madison Avenue, and it’s good to be forced to share a house with another couple. That way you can’t hide. Your issues, as an individual, as a couple, are public. You have no option but to address them. You can’t hide” (Interview).

Ben and his wife live immersed in the community. At first they rented a house, a house rather than an apartment so they’d have space for a community garden but then later, with the help of their church organization, they purchased a house that had been the residence of a local drug dealer. “So not only did we drive the dealer’s out by buying the house, we also got some interesting stories. Imagine the shock on the face of one of the children of a family we’ve been helping when he knocked on the door to buy marijuana” (Interview). Ben continues the discussion of living in the community on a more serious note, “We subscribe to the Dorothy Day school of social work—you don’t commute to your calling … identity is rooted in practice” (Interview). Living within the community also allows the couple to share their social and cultural capital with their neighbors:

It took a while but we figured it out. We have a system now. Who know why exactly, maybe it’s simply due to their hard to understand English or maybe it’s because they’re foreign but the police don’t come when the refugee call them. So what we do is … when they see something, like what looks like a drug deal, and they’re, especially the woman,
the mothers and grandmothers who don’t work, more likely to see it, they call us and we call the police. And then the police come (Interview).

It also allows them to serve their neighbors more effectively and it also enables them to practice the reciprocity that they view as key to building relationships:

You can’t help out in a medical emergency if you’re miles away in the suburbs. They feel bad enough about having to wake you up when they have a sick child ... if you’re far away how can they call you or knock on your door in the middle of the night, and how could you get there in time to really help. And another thing, you have to be there close by so they can pay you back. You have to be there to receive the twenty-five pound bag of chicken thighs that they were able to get from their work. And you have to take it. If you don’t receive their gifts and allow them to reciprocate you tell them their gifts don’t have value, and in turn, that they themselves don’t have value (Interview).

Ben is very careful to emphasize that reciprocity is a part of the community. He claims that he and his wife “get back as much or more” than they give: “These neighbors of ours, even though they’ve been through so much, maybe because they’ve been through so much ... they teach us to live with vulnerability, to trust that what today brings, whatever it is, we’ll make it through ... and that the best way to make it through is together” (Interview). By living and working in the community Ben is able to be present to the relational nature of place and responsibility.

He carries that responsibility with him into his work for one of the resettlement agencies as a program director in charge of employment services. He speaks of the fiscal responsibility shared by the agency, its employees and the refugees served by the program:

The resettlement program is one of the most cost efficient government programs out there ... because resettled individuals are required to pay back the loans given them by the agencies, which of course use government funds, it cost very little—just the administrative costs but even those are minimal because agencies tend to be as frugal as those of us who work in them. And the refugees, somehow they manage to pay the loans back, and usually on time, often while also sending money home in the form of remittances. I don’t know how they do it ... well, yes I do, many of them work two or three jobs until they can find a better paying job. And when refugees are more established, they start businesses, buy houses and they don’t default on their loans. They could serve as an example (Interview).
Ben adds that another of the gifts he receives by working with the refugee community is that it makes it easier for him and his wife to resist the commercialization so prevalent in America, “We make do, we share and we re-use, all lessons we learned from our neighbors” (Interview). As they work and volunteer in the community to bring about positive change, they are also changed. There are at once teacher and student.

Retired and well past the age to serve in a program like Mission Year, The Stacks also serve in Clarkston as unofficial but devoted advocates for children and families. Retired and “of a certain age” and beset with health issue—Ned recently had knee surgery— the couple maintain an open door policy at their home. Like David and Ben, the Stacks are intentional neighbors. After retiring as full-time missionaries, having careers served in the mission fields of Africa and Asia, they made the decision to continue serving by moving to Clarkston. As a crucial component of that decision, they carefully selected as their home an apartment in one of the larger apartment complexes in the city, one with a very high percentage of immigrant families. The couple’s commitment to serving their neighbors is made evident the minute a visitor enters their apartment. Toys are spread throughout the dining room and living room. The walls are lined with shelves full of books, workbooks, crayons and markers. The dining room table is covered with piles of paper work and forms the neighbors have brought in the hope that either Ned or Hilda will able to read through them to correct any mistakes that might prevent someone from getting their green card, or that might keep a child from being accepted into a much needed school program. Boxes and bags of food, some donated, some purchased, litter the kitchen counters and the floor, gathered by the couple to feed the children who arrive every day after school for tutoring and snacks, as well as to provide to the occasional parent temporarily unable to purchase food for their families. “If you have any peanut butter, we need that,” Hilda remarks when she notices me ogling the jars stacked on
the counter. “Or maybe jelly,” she adds. “The kids, they’ve discovered jelly and they ask for it every day. We really don’t like to give it to them, you know, it ruins their teeth but, as you can see, we do.”

While the accoutrements of the Stack’s apartment aptly demonstrate their Christian commitment to service, what is not displayed is just as evocative of their welcome. Absent are the visible signs of their religion, objects that might be offensive to the children and families they serve, many who come from Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist backgrounds.

Rebecca also works with the refugee population in Clarkston in response to the “call to serve her neighbor” as outlined in the Christian New Testament. Like the Stacks, she has lived in what she identifies as “the mission field” most of her life, in fact, she was born in China to missionary parents. She did not move to Clarkston as a strategic neighbor, in fact, she is not actually a resident; instead she drives to Clarkston to work ten hour days at The Women’s Sewing Circle, a not-for-profit she founded around five years ago. The Women’s Sewing Circle offers both educational and small business instruction for immigrant women, many of whom, according to Rebecca, “would be stuck in empty apartments with nothing
but their horrific memories for company” (Interview). Located on the second floor of the Clarkston International Bible Church’s annex, the suite of offices housing the Sewing Circe is, most days, full of volunteers, some from as far away as North and South Carolina. In some rooms, volunteers, mostly women but not exclusively, organize yarn waiting to be knitted into scarves and baby blankets and clothes. In other rooms volunteers sort fabric while explaining to the women gathered around them that some colors work better for baby clothes and others do not. Rebecca relates, “teaching them the what they need to know to make their stuff sell isn’t easy—that bright colors and black just won’t do for baby clothes is really hard” (Interview). “It’s cultural,” she says, “no African woman would consider dressing her baby in pastels. But if they want to sell what they make here then they have to adjust to what will sell” (Interview). She pauses to look around, making sure that no one else is listening, and then adds, “But not as hard...I don’t even know what word to use, hard doesn’t even begin to touch the trauma of what it feels like to sit here in the safety and comfort of this room and listen to their stories. One woman, an older woman, she’d been coming here for almost two years and then one day, when only one other woman was here, she started talking” (Interview). While the story of the massive trauma experienced by many of Clarkston’s refugees is not the subject of this project, Rebecca’s story illustrates the way the “trauma of political unrest” arriving in what “once felt like a safe haven” requires an accompanying shift in identity and how one’s place in the world is perceived. “What could I say,” Rebecca asked, “What could I say when she told me of how they stripped her clothes off, and then, when they were finished with her, left her for dead?” She paused and then continued, “When a second round of soldiers came, she hid under the dead bodies of her neighbors until the soldiers left and she could crawl away” (Interview). Again, she paused, “I could feel her shame. She kept saying, I can’t tell them. I can’t tell my daughter. I can’t tell her” (Interview).

Mentioned earlier in regard to the difficulties of teaching groups of children when the children speak many different languages, Ruby is another example of a Clarkston resident following the Christian
call to service. Like Rebecca, Ruby did not move to Clarkston as an intentional neighbor, but unlike Rebecca, Ruby, along with her now deceased husband, was a resident of Clarkston long before the arrival of the refugees. Like Rebecca, she embraced the opportunity to assist with the resettlement process. Long past retirement age, Ruby, trained as a high school teacher, continues to work with the international community by teaching ESL at the local community college, as well as by working with selected individual students as an ESL tutor. I met Ruby in the midst of a flurry of organizing. Bags and boxes of donated clothing, along with a smattering of packaged foodstuffs were spread across the floor of the church gymnasium, intended she said, “for the Internationals who have need” (Interview). Ruby is very proud of her church’s outreach program; she supports and promotes it whenever possible, in fact, she insisted I tour all the buildings on the church campus, making particular note of the many congregations that meet in the various spaces. While Ruby donates her energies to the international community that meets in her church out of personal altruistic sentiments and has, through her work with the ethnic church groups, developed close relationships, for the congregation at large, the decision to host the international congregations was not wholly altruistic; it developed as a way to offset the problem of dwindling attendance and financial resources that accompanied “White Flight” and the general decline in church attendance occurring in the United States.

Also a member of the same large Southern Baptist church Ruby attends, deacon and board member Peter remains feisty and energetic, despite the fact that he has retired twice, from two very separate and distinct professions. As example of his feistiness, Peter was the only respondent who refused permission for the conversation with him to be recorded, “just in case,” he said, “something might be taken wrong” Peter (Interview). Peter has been a resident of all of his life, minus the years he served on active duty with the U.S. Army as a pilot and flight instructor. He attended primary school in Clarkston, went to high school in the building that now houses Clarkston Community Center and moved back to Clarkston to raise his children after retiring from the Army. Peter was instrumental in the decision to
build the church annex where our interview took place. He also donated many hours of physical and organization labor to the actual building project. The annex contains a full size, regulation basketball court. The Upward Basketball program, operated in conjunction with one of the larger suburban Baptist congregations, not only allows refugee children a chance to learn and excel at a physical activity, but is one of the few venues in which local children and suburban children join together in activities. While the program is considered an outreach program, and does include a Christian message at half time, it is immensely popular and enjoys considerable support in the community as well as with the parents of the participating children. In 2012 season, the program saw 420 boys and girls registered to participate, from Clarkston, from the suburban community and from countries as disparate and far flung as Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, Iraq, Sudan, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Columbia (Website). Peter believes that by being obedient to the “word of God” and heeding the instruction to build the annex, the congregation is obeying the commandment to serve their neighbor. “Someone asked me,” he recalled. “How do you start an international church? Tell us the secret?” His answer, as he remembers was, “You gotta get rid of all the prejudice” (Interview). He adds, “Pruning, you gotta prune out the prejudice” (Interview). The Bible says “respect everyone. It’s also what it says in the Uniform code of Military Justice” (Interview). According to Peter, “When you look out over the congregation [here] you’re going to see what Heaven looks like” (Interview).

The last example of individuals who work with the refugee community based on their religious belief, Pastor Reynolds also answered the call to service in Clarkston; in his case a very specific call from the Search Committee of the church he now leads. He and his family were enjoying an extended sabbatical in the United States, “a one year Stateside leave” from their long-standing assignment in working with refugee and immigrant families in Belgium, when they were asked to speak at one of the larger churches in the Clarkston area. They were asked by the organizers to share the “miracles they had wit-
nessed in Belgium as God worked with the immigrants and refugees pouring into Europe” (Interview).

Pastor Reynolds shares his memories of that event on the church website:

In this 125-year-old church were the same people groups that we had known in Belgium. God had brought the world to a little suburb, just 11 miles east of Atlanta, Georgia! People groups from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the ex-Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, all within a one-mile radius of this wonderful, old Baptist Church. Plus, the people of CIBC had already organized themselves, committing their future and ministry to reaching these people groups with the old, old story of Jesus and His love! Fantastic! (Website).

For Ben, David and his wife, Rebecca, Pastor Reynolds and Ruby, the decision to work with the refugees in Clarkston evolved from their identity as Christians. Whether called to move to Clarkston, or simply called to work with the refugee population, each of these individuals volunteers and works on a regular basis, most of them daily, to make a difference for their neighbors in Clarkston, regardless of native language, skin color, or country of origin of those natives. And they uniformly agree that living in their diverse community changes how they perceive the world and their place in it.

5.2 Some are adapting

“The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, new pages: I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was I thought it worth the trouble.”

—J. M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians

Not all of Clarkston’s “Old Guard” residents have adapted to adopt and welcome the refugees in the way that Ruby and Peter have, but on the other hand, not all of the long-term residents of Clarkston who choose to work with and for the refugee community do so out of religious sentiment. William is representative of those whose motivations are more secular.

For William the practice of providing assistance to those in need is one of long standing. In the late sixties, just out of college, William worked as a Peace Corp volunteer in a small village in sub-
Saharan Africa for two years. It was in his experiences in Africa, he relates, “that he learned to keep going ... to keep working no matter what” (Interview). His “no matter what in Kenya” included having to pay two months of his meager Peace Corp salary as a fine in order to get out of jail after an incident in which he inadvertently allowed the bicycle he was riding to hit a resident’s cow, a story that he related to me twice, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. Now retired, he took early retirement from his job as an administrator in the school district in order to work with the refugee community as a full-time volunteer, he has replaced that long ago bicycle with a Honda sedan packed full of soccer equipment for the youth leagues he works with and stacks of paper for the ESL/GED tutoring program his directs.

He is perpetually rushed, and often late. William is in charge of the ESL/GED program at Clarkston Community Center where I volunteered twice a week so I was able to observe and interact with him over a period of a little over a year as well as record his sentiments during our more formal interview. His hurriedness is a function of his frustration, which often shows in what might almost be called rants. “There just aren’t enough programs to help all these folks who need help. Perimeter [Georgia Perimeter College operates a campus just on the edge of Clarkston] has ESL classes, beginning classes. They say, yes, this person speaks English. And then they kick them out” (Interview). He rushes on, his voice raised, “But no one who completes a Beginners class can speak a language. They can’t interview for a job, can’t fill out an application. They can’t pass a GED test. It’s not enough. In what is perhaps an explanation of his perpetual lateness he offers, “There’s never enough, never enough time, never enough money. Well that’s what they say, they can’t offer intermediate classes—there isn’t enough money. So here we are. Look over there,” he says pointing to an older man at one of the tutoring tables. “He has a professional degree. He speaks four languages. It just so happens that not one of them is English. The only job he can get now is minimum wage. That’s unacceptable.”
In order to change what he finds unacceptable, William plans the curriculum, teaches and supervises the volunteer tutors who he has recruited to work in the program, administers tests, meets with current and prospective students all while scavenging teaching material wherever he can and rather vociferously criticizes those less committed, particularly those who hold political or bureaucratic positions. “You know, the refugees cross the street when they get to City Hall,” he informs me. “They don’t trust him” (Interview). While it might be a function of past issues with political authorities that frightens refugees, William’s statement is indicative of how he feels about ineffectiveness.

William identifies as a liberal and has little patience for conservative politics when they get in the way of his agenda:

It’s a problem. The evangelicals, they move here and sure they work hard and they try but they’re conservative. They vote conservative even though hard that means programs don’t get funded. And they work with the religious refugees who tend to be conservative too when they get to be citizens. They vote in blocks. Someone who has a license and a car drives everyone to the polls (Interview).

He is particularly critical of the “Old Guard” who still resist the presence of the refugees, who refuse to participate in events at the community center because they do not want to interact with others who are different.

They’re just like Mayor Swaney. You know the whole controversy about Mayor Swaney and the Fugees and the baseball fields that weren’t made for soccer. All of that brought negative publicity to the town and many [people] still blame that on the refugees. If it wasn’t for them the whole thing wouldn’t have happened. They just want things the way they used to be. And even the African-American community doesn’t want the refugees here. They’re afraid there aren’t enough resources for everyone and they were here first … There aren’t a lot of Hispanics here in Clarkston but even they have it better than the refugees—they are organized, politically organized. There isn’t anyone to stand up for the refugees” (Interview).

It is important to note here that William’s anger is diverted into action. Despite the fact that we had a set time and location arranged for our interview in order to allow for a focused and uninterrupted conversation, William moved it to another building so that he could administer practice GED tests to three
students preparing to take the state administered test; we were interrupted several times by the stu-
dents as well as the receptionist in the building who came to William several times with questions and
requests from visitors in the reception area.

While William self-identifies as a liberal committed to engagement in a broadly defined commu-
nity, he is “a man-of-faith” married to a protestant minister who agreed to keep working in order to al-
low him the freedom to retire and work full-time as an unpaid volunteer. Ted on the other hand, a
friend of William’s who works as a volunteer tutor, is adamantly, maybe even militantly secular. “My
father was a militant volunteer,” he explains when asked about the motivations that led him to donate
his time and energy, “it was his way of protesting the status quo. But he got that from my grandmother.
I come from a long line of rebels. But I’m not sure how committed I am. I sort of just got into the habit
and I haven’t stopped” (Interview). His motivations are also rather practical:

This is pretty perfect. I’m a graduate student working on a Masters in English as a se-
cond language. So I get to make a point by supporting the refugee community and re-
sisting everyone who is resisting change while I get to real world experience in my field
... and I’m resisting the colonial mentality that everyone has to speak English. I know
that’s weird since I’m teaching English but ... it feels like resistance to help these people
who escaped from the effects of colonialism (Interview).

Ted’s education and skills make him a superbly effective tutor in the ESL/GED program administered by
William and the one in which I myself volunteer. As well as working with and tutoring the volunteers, he
also provided assistance to me and the other tutors when we needed it. The group of tutors, while de-
mographically a cross-section of individuals, worked together much as the larger community. Along
with William and Ted, Lynn also worked with me in William’s tutoring program.

Like Ted, Lynn is tutoring in ESL/GED program to make a difference but also to gain experience.
And like William when he went to Africa as a young starry-eyed Peace Corp volunteer, Lynn has a BA
degree that he wants to put to use in a meaningful way, “By working here I get to help someone while I
also learn how to teach. In two months I’m leaving for Cambodia to teach English so ... well while I wait I
help out here” (Interview). Although William, Ted, and Lynn all had training as teachers and/or as English majors which they chose to use as tutors it is noteworthy that professional training is not a requisite to participation as a tutor in the ESL/GED program. Many of the volunteers in the program become engaged in volunteering at the center due to Emory University’s requirement that all students volunteer in the community.

Two last interview participants in the resident category might also have fit into the first group, those who were called, except for the fact that the category was specifically defined to refer to individuals who answered what they believed to be a religious calling. Edward and Faith, a married couple who appear to be in their mid-thirties, did move to Clarkston intentionally but out of a civic commitment rather than religious one, they deliberately selected one of the small bungalows near the community center to purchase in order to be geographically and physically, as well as socially and emotionally, immersed in the refugee community. Faith works as a nurse and case manager in one of the larger resettlement agencies. With a Masters in Public Health and a specialist on reproductive issues, she brings a feminist perspective to the topic of resettlement. Edward owns a small business that operates out of Clarkston but also holds an elected seat on the city council, a position he takes very seriously and about which he speaks adamantly and with passion:

They just don’t get it. The mayor, the city manager, it’s almost criminal. The mayor, he talks about development. Talks about wanting to create an environment to attract a chain restaurant. Imagine, that’s his goal—a chain restaurant, with everything that needs doing here. Says he wants residents of Clarkston to be able to go out to eat in a restaurant without getting in their cars and driving out of the city limits. Did you know he wasn’t even elected—he just took over the remainder of the last mayor’s term when he died suddenly? He wasn’t elected—couldn’t be elected. I don’t think anyone even likes him. The refugees are afraid of him, one of them said, ‘He’s very mean. Maybe there’s something wrong with his heart.’ He hasn’t done shit to help (Interview).

It was his passion for the work that “needs to be done” in Clarkston that led him to run for city office. Faith is also committed to her life in Clarkston and to her work. As passionate as Edward is about politics, Faith is about her work with female refugees. Along with advocating for and providing health ser-
vices, Faith has worked to initiate cultural survival programs to help new refugees integrate into society better. She advocates for better living conditions in the apartment complexes, many of which are, according to her, “unsafe, sub-par and with absentee landlords who don’t give a damn” (Interview). Faith continues to explain her commitment, “This work defines who I am. My work with the refugee community allows me to not feel guilty for the relatively easy life I have enjoyed. It makes what I do matter.” Edward finishes her thought, “Here we’re part of a community. We learn. We adjust” (Interview). He pointed out to the lawn, “Yeh, we learn, sometimes just little things. Like, see the plants there on the edge of the lawn, I learned that if I just put something there on border, they’ll stop crossing my yard—they’ll walk around instead of cutting the corner. I didn’t want a fence—I didn’t want to a border—this way we all win” (Interview). Again, the message is one of reciprocal teaching and learning, caring and living together, a message that is uppermost in the voices and sentiments of the last group of volunteers.

5.3 Some are giving back

“The truth is, we all knew how she stood it. She stood it by standing knee-deep in the flow of life and paying close attention.”

—Julia Cameron

The last of the three categories of volunteers identified in this thesis is statistically the smallest group but nevertheless significant in that they have experienced the largest shifts in their identity. Adele along with her parents and siblings and Naomi, also with her family, came to the United States as refugees, participants in the resettlement program. My first face-to-face interaction with Adele consisted of her telling me to get to work, “They,” she said, pointing to the children huddled around the tables set

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2 It bears noting here that integration and assimilation are rather contentious topics for many individuals working in the resettlement community in that they can be interpreted as representing a colonial or imperial view.
up for the afterschool program, “need a lot of help with that math and spelling. You can jump right in.
Help them.” For the next five months Adele was my supervisor as I worked as a volunteer tutor in the
Clarkston Community Center afterschool program. Adele brought a special patience and compassion to
the sometimes unruly children of the program, “It takes time for them to adjust, to school, to sitting still,
to English ... to their lives here in American” (Interview).

Adele knows something of what it takes to adjust to life in the United States. She was just a
child when she first arrived in Clarkston with her family. They were resettled in Clarkston by the resettle-
ment agencies from a refugee camp in which they had lived for several years after escaping war torn
Burundi. “You go from hiding under you bed when there’s loud noises ... from remembering things you
don’t want to remember but can’t stop to ... well to something different. It takes a while ... Well, it just
takes a while. Now a content and engaged college student, Adele appears a typical twenty-something
American young woman. And she is a fairly “normal” college student, aside from the fact that she is
particularly driven to “give something back” to the community that helped her learn how to navigate
her new life. “They helped me so much. I have to help. I have to give back!” (Interview). Adele’s family
serves as a model of “giving back”. When Adele’s class and work load at college increases, she is re-
placed as the after-school coordinator by her mother. Her father serves as the president of the local
association for those of Burundi descent and takes a personal interest in the wellbeing of newly settled
families. According to Adele, it’s an unusual weekend when her father isn’t called away assist with one
crisis or another. From an identity as refuge and student, Adele has forged a new identity as resident,
citizen, tutor and teacher.

Naomi also initially came to the United States as a child refugee. She and her family were set-
tled on the West Coast in a community that hosted a large population of refugees from her country of
origin, an ethnic enclave. For Naomi, now college-educated and a case-manager for one of the larger
resettlement agencies, the need to provide help and assistance to her community has never been in
question. Even as the relatively young child, Naomi was called on to serve her community. She recalls being called out of her own classes to translate and advise in her brother’s Individual Education Plan (IEP). In a quiet voice she remembers, “You just don’t know what it’s like, to be asked to go with your mother, who’s a very very private person and to have to translate intimate, personal questions. Or for your father, the head of the family ... Children of immigrants have too much power. They have to take on adult roles, adult identities at much too young an age” (Interview). She adds:

Of course, my parents worked really hard to provide everything for me but now as an adult I realize how much they had to sacrifice to make this possible for me. And it’s one of the reasons why I work in the refugee communities ... is somebody else had to work really hard in this field to make this possible for me, to make it easier for my family (Interview).

Though she loved her community and her family “very much” as she is careful to explain, it became too much to try to be her own person there with all of them. “There weren’t any boundaries,” she said.

“Me as child, as refugee. Me as case-manager. I had to move. That’s why I’m moved to Atlanta to work with the Clarkston refugee community” (Interview). Yet, even here in Clarkston boundaries are hard for Naomi; she relates to, identifies with, her refugee clients:

That’s the hardest part. To look somebody in the eye and say I’m sorry but this is all I can do for you. So ... that’s, you know, so I end up going to the DeKalb Farmer’s Market, to go there and pile up my cart full of food and I run into one of my clients who I’ve just told today, I’m sorry I can’t help you. I’m sorry you don’t have enough money to feed your family and here I am pushing this cart full of food. Oh, I don’t look you in the eye. I want to walk by fast ...it’s hard you know, also because I have to write case notes on a daily basis and then there’s major case notes which are thirty days after they arrive, ninety days after they arrive, and then 180 days after they arrive and at ninety days I have to determine whether the family is self-sufficient or not and it’s really hard to write a report about a family of eight and the father is the only working person in the family and he’s making $8.00 an hour and how am I going to justify that this family is self-sufficient because they’re not? (Interview Naomi).

The interview with Naomi took place in her apartment at her request. As she served dinner she told a story: “I’m going to get in trouble for this kind of thing one day. I have to learn how to come home and to know that I can’t fix everything but last week I had a family about to be evicted. I called everyone I
knew to try to find them some help. I didn’t write my reports, I just called. But what was I to do?” (Interview). “But there are gifts,” she adds. “They come to see us. They bring their children. I see them with a car they just bought” (Interview). She pauses for a minute to consider. “For me, the gifts are not tangible, but that doesn’t make them any less real” (Interview).

Naomi’s definition of community seems to summarize the sentiments of all the participants in this research: “A place where you have a purpose and have a part in keeping that together, and also, not only do you have a part in it, a responsibility to it, but you benefit in it ... the community is there as your anchor, your pillar to stand. But as much as it helps you, you are also a part of it and it helps others” (Interview). Both Adele and Naomi are particularly representative of relational and responsible identity. Their actions in the place that is Clarkston have changed them even while those actions have brought positive change into the lives of others.

6 CONCLUSION: RECIPROCAL MODELS OF IDENTITY

“A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.”

—Joan Didion

Clarkston provides a window into the relational construction of place, place identities, and geographies of care. The necessity of negotiating difference in a shared terrain changes all those who live and work there. My goal in beginning this thesis research was to investigate the process of place-making, and re-making, in a community designated as refugee resettlement site. Specifically, I sought to understand how the indigenous residents of an officially designated refugee resettlement site negotiate both the positive and challenging changes brought to their community by the arrival of asylum seekers and other forced migrants—individuals who bring with them the trauma of famine, political violence,
war and even genocide. In order to meet my goal I designed a qualitative research project employing a detailed case study of the individuals in the volunteer sector of Clarkston who willingly participate in meeting the extensive and at times, exhaustive needs of the refugee community. Clarkston’s history as a relatively isolated farming community coupled with its proximity to the regional hub of Atlanta and its economic importance as a node of production on the global market provided a rich and unique opportunity to investigate the intricately connections that exist between place, place identity, and geographies of care.

In addition this thesis reveals possible future interventions into place literature. Place does matter. It is continually constructed, contested, and re-constructed by various actors engaged in place-making, as illustrated here and in investigations into place and place-making theory conducted by others. The actions of actors involved in place-making matter. But so do the motivations of those actors. The empirical examples of place-making in Clarkston point to the importance of investigating how the intentionality of engagement factors into the ways in which place is both constructed and contested. In Clarkston, the intention of providing care for the stranger at the gate, for the other, significantly altered and alters the social, cultural, and material geographies of place. Specifically, this case study revealed the various ways in which engagement in the processes of refugee resettlement changed the community and resulted in the material, social, cultural and political configuration that is Clarkston at this particular moment in time. By helping refugees adjust to their new location, through working as tutors in ESL/GED program, through instituting training programs to develop new skills, through their work as employment specialists, as members of religious congregations, or any other of the myriad ways being employed to assist individuals in the refugee community, Clarkton is being transformed.

These changes are made visible in the red dirt paths intersecting the railway running through the center of town. They are visible in the “Welcome Banner” that greets newcomers to the city, on the marquees listing the multiple international congregations that meet in a particular church, and in the
multi-lingual signs displayed over the doors of many small businesses. But not all the changes are material and so readily observable. The experiences of the residents who choose to participate in the resettlement process resulted in transformations in how they view themselves and their community. Students became teachers. Teachers became students. Refugees became case managers. Pastors of old settled congregations welcomed new congregations of internationals to join them. In Clarkton even the identity of parent and child shifts and evolves, is relational and reciprocal. The necessity of negotiating the volatile terrain of difference and need represented by the refugee community has changed everyone who shares the dynamic space of the city; the changes are most evident in those individuals who have willingly and knowingly participated in the community as practitioners of care.

Ultimately, the city of Clarkston has been transformed across the material, social, cultural, and political landscape. The specific and particular intersection of the city’s history, its social and cultural construction, its function as a node of production on the global market, and the many unique and diverse individuals who live and work there has resulted in a Clarkston becoming something more than just a resettlement site with an ethnically diverse refugee population; Clarkton is a place of difference and diversity, a place of care, an example of a “City of Refuge.”

REFERENCES


Appendix A. Map of Resettlement Service Providers in Clarkston and DeKalb County
Appendix B. Refugee Service Providers

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<tr>
<th>Targeted Service</th>
<th>Grantees</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnic Communities</td>
<td>Refugee Family Services, Inc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microenterprise</td>
<td>Refugee Women’s Network, Inc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unanticipated Arrivals</td>
<td>Refugee Resettlement &amp; Immigration Services</td>
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<td>Unanticipated Arrivals</td>
<td>DeKalb County Board of Health</td>
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<td>Healthy Marriage</td>
<td>Jewish Family &amp; Career Services, Inc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Services to Survivors of Torture</td>
<td>DeKalb County Board of Health</td>
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<td>Services to Trafficking Victims</td>
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