

“Education Changes the World”: The World University Service of Canada’s Student Refugee Program

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the origins and development of the Student Refugee Program of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and its significance as a “transformational” force in the lives of individuals and communities. The WUSC Student Refugee Program is a unique effort involving students, faculty and staff at universities and colleges across Canada who work together to mobilize material and human resources in order to enable student refugees to resettle and complete their post-secondary studies in Canada. The author, who has worked closely with the Student Refugee Program at the University of British Columbia since the mid-1990s, first describes the operation of the Student Refugee Program, and then considers its significance in relation to issues of resettlement, gender equality, “brain drain” and transnationalism.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur les origines et l'établissement du Programme d'étudiants réfugiés de l'organisme Entraide universitaire mondiale du Canada ainsi que sa place en tant que force « transformationnelle » dans la vie d'individus et de communautés. Le Programme d'étudiants réfugiés d'EUMC est une initiative unique faisant appel à la participation d'étudiants, de professeurs et de membres du personnel d'universités et de collèges de partout au Canada. Ensemble, ils travaillent à ramasser du matériel et des ressources humaines afin de permettre à des étudiants réfugiés de se réinstaller et de terminer leurs études postsecondaires au Canada. L'auteur, qui a travaillé étroitement avec le Programme d'étudiants réfugiés à l'Université de Colombie-Britannique depuis les années 1990, décrit le fonctionnement du Programme, pour ensuite examiner son apport dans les questions de la réinstallation,

de l'égalité des sexes, de l'exode des cerveaux et de la transnationalisation.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the significance of a unique educational program involving Canadian universities and student refugees whose lives have been disrupted by war and political upheaval.¹ For more than three decades, World University Service of Canada's Student Refugee Program (SRP) has enabled student refugees from countries around the world to complete their post-secondary studies and build new lives in Canada. It is currently the only program of its kind in the world, combining resettlement with education.

The SRP is also a program that facilitates transformative learning, not just for the refugee students themselves, whose lives are changed in very direct and tangible ways by their participation in the program, but often also for the Canadian students, faculty and staff who are involved in the program. By “transformative” I mean learning processes that involve an expansion of consciousness and/or an altering of perspective. As described by Mezirow, Boyd and Myers, and others, transformative learning theory suggests the processes and ways in which adult learners construct meaning in their lives.² Unlike learning that involves the acquisition of skills or the application of established frames of reference, transformative learning is learning that involves a change in one's world view and/or understanding of the self. Transformative learning occurs infrequently and often in response to a major life change or crisis, but can also be cultivated by teachers and structured learning environments. I suggest that the informal learning environment of the Student Refugee Program, in which student refugees and Canadian students, staff and faculty come together for a common purpose—to facilitate the academic and personal success of the student refugees—is conducive to transformative learning. The WUSC students themselves are

undergoing a major life change when they come to Canada, which may augment the conditions for transformative learning. Indeed, the universities and learning communities that have embraced the Student Refugee Program see it as an example of the power of education to effect positive change. One of the mottos of the World University Service of Canada or “WUSC” as it is more commonly known is “Education Changes the World.” It is a motto founded on the belief that education is a key to both individual and collective empowerment, and that education involves not only the transmission of knowledge and the acquisition of skills but an awareness of the self and a capacity and will to effect change.

It should be made clear at the outset that this paper is not the outcome of a structured research project. The data used in this paper were not systematically gathered, nor is the paper an attempt to test a set of predetermined research hypotheses. Rather, this paper is based largely on the personal experiences and reflections of someone who has worked closely with the WUSC Student Refugee Program and its participants for nearly two decades at one Canadian university campus. It is the hope of the author that the reflections offered here may help to illuminate some—though certainly not all—of the experiential aspects of the Student Refugee Program. If the paper subscribes to any one subject position, it is one of advocacy for a program that deserves more attention than it has so far received. The paper begins with a brief overview of the origins of the World University Service of Canada in an earlier era of student activism in Europe. I then describe the workings of the contemporary Student Refugee Program and the long journey that students make from refugee camp to Canadian campus. This part of the paper builds heavily on my own experience as Faculty Advisor to the local WUSC committee at the University of British Columbia, a position that I have held since 1994. In the remaining sections of the paper, I adopt a more academic perspective and ask what the Student Refugee Program can tell us about some of the key issues surrounding the role of education in human and international development, including the “brain drain” phenomenon; the relationship between refugee resettlement and the construction of a transnational or diasporic consciousness. In the conclusion, I return to the question of transformative learning and offer some examples, gleaned through personal observation and experience, of ways in which the Student Refugee Program provided a transformative learning experience for participants.

The World University Service

Refugee assistance has been central to the World University Service since the organization’s inception. The roots of

WUS stretch back to August 1920 when a body known as the World’s Student Christian Federation launched European Student Relief, a student-led organization for assisting students whose lives and studies had been disrupted by the First World War. From its headquarters in Geneva, the Student Christian Federation appealed to students around the world for contributions.³ Soon European Student Relief expanded its role beyond Europe and victims of war, organizing an emergency feeding operation for more than 30,000 famine-stricken students in Moscow and contributing funds to rebuild libraries in Tokyo that had been destroyed during the great Kanto Earthquake.⁴ In May 1925 European Student Relief changed its name to International Student Services (ISS) and it remained active throughout the 1930s, organizing conferences, seminars and study tours, and providing assistance to Jewish students and other refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. The first Canadian committee of ISS was formed in 1939 by a group of students and professors at the University of Toronto.⁵ The first UBC ISS committee was established in 1948. In 1950 ISS renamed itself World University Service. The name change reflected the fact that the focus of international relief and refugee assistance was beginning to shift from Europe to Asia and the Middle East. WUS also shed its former Christian affiliation and declared itself a secular organization. But the humanitarian commitment and much of the earlier focus on student relief and refugee assistance remained. In the ensuing decades, national WUS chapters were established in many countries around the world, including Canada (1957). At the same time, local WUSC (for “World University Service of Canada”) committees, composed of students, staff and faculty, began to spring up on university and college campuses across the country. By the 1970s, WUSC had become firmly focused on the problems of the developing world.

WUSC and Students

WUSC’s engagement with Canadian university students takes place on two levels. One involves the effort to provide Canadian students with direct exposure to the peoples and problems of the developing world by sending students overseas on study seminars and as volunteers. The annual International Seminar has taken place every year since 1948; its alumni include some of the most influential figures in Canadian public life over the previous half century, including the late Pierre Elliot Trudeau (Ghana 1957), former OECD Secretary General Donald Johnston, former Governor of the Bank of Canada David Dodge and current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, the Honourable Beverly McLachlin.⁶ WUSC’s other main form of engagement with Canadian university students is through

its flagship Student Refugee Program. Established in 1978, the Student Refugee Program was both an outgrowth of the earlier efforts described above and a response to a significant change in Canadian immigration policy. In 1976 the Canadian Immigration Act was changed to recognize refugees as a separate category distinct from other immigrants. In the late 1970s, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Vietnam by sea in vessels ranging from wooden rafts to ocean freighters.⁷ The “boat people” crisis captured Canada’s and the world’s attention, dramatizing the plight of refugees in a way never before seen. Canadian voluntary organizations as well as individuals and families pressed the Canadian government to open its doors to the boat people. In response to these demands, the government formally introduced the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP) in 1979. Under this program, individuals, organizations and private citizen groups can apply to the federal government to sponsor refugees to resettle in Canada by undertaking a legal commitment to provide their full resettlement needs for a minimum of twelve months after their arrival in Canada.⁸ Since its establishment, the PSRP has enabled more than 200,000 refugees who would otherwise not have been able to come to Canada to resettle in this country.⁹ Today there are a total of eighty-nine incorporated organizations (known as Sponsorship Agreement Holders) that are regularly involved in the private sponsorship of refugees to Canada. WUSC is the only non-faith-based organization among them, and the SRP is the only one that combines refugee resettlement with post-secondary education.

From Camp to Campus

The journey from refugee camp to Canadian university campus is a long and arduous one. It takes a minimum of eighteen months from the time a student is selected until the day they land in Canada, but there are any number of hurdles along the way that can delay or even scotch entirely a selected student’s chances of finally making it to Canada, including the detailed medical and security checks that are required by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In addition, because there are so few ways to escape the life of the refugee camp, many young people have grown up with the dream of winning a WUSC scholarship, so that preparation often begins years before a student is actually selected—or not—to participate in the program.¹⁰ Yet the limited resources of the program dictate that the number of spaces available in any given year is tiny in relation to the overwhelming need; competition is intense, and only a very small percentage of those who apply to the program end up being chosen.

In Kenya, the country of asylum from where a large proportion of the sponsored students are selected, preparation

often begins when a student enters primary school in one of the two sprawling UNHCR refugee camps located near Dadaab and Kakuma in the remote northeastern and northwestern regions of the country, respectively. In recent years, many of the students who have come to Canada have spent most of their lives and received all of their primary and secondary schooling in the camps. Education in the Kakuma camp (population around 90,000) and in Dadaab (in reality three camps with a combined population of over 400,000) is managed by a combination of local and international voluntary agencies and, in some instances, by the refugees themselves.¹¹ However, access to education in the camps is limited, especially at the secondary level, and facilities are severely lacking.¹² Even so, parents often encourage their children from a young age to study hard in the hope of being chosen for the Student Refugee Program.

Students apply to the program in their final year of secondary school. There are also persons in the camp who have already completed high school and, in some cases, have even attended university in their home countries or in the country of asylum. Such persons are also eligible to apply for the program, so long as they meet the program’s maximum age limit of twenty-four years. Each year around sixty students are selected, which often translates into around a dozen students each from the Kakuma and Dadaab camps, with the remainder recruited from other countries in Africa and elsewhere (such as Burmese refugees in Thailand). Students selected for the program undertake a year-long program of intensive ESL training and academic preparation, which is carried out by WUSC’s local partner organizations in the camps. During this time students also sit for their TOEFL examinations and begin the immigration screening process, while anxiously awaiting the news of which university or college they will be attending.

Within Canada, the Student Refugee Program is a joint undertaking of the WUSC national office and the local student-based WUSC committees located at universities and colleges across the country. A small team of staff at WUSC Ottawa is responsible for organizing the application and selection process, including in-camp interviews, in conjunction with WUSC’s local NGO partners on the ground. The latter includes organizations such as the Windle Charitable Trust in Kenya and the Jesuit Refugee Service in Malawi and Thailand. WUSC Ottawa works together with local WUSC committees to place the students at universities and colleges in Canada. There are currently fifty-five university and college campuses participating in the Student Refugee Program. Local WUSC committees undertake a legal commitment to provide for a student’s full living expenses as well as his or her personal and emotional support for a

period of at least twelve months following the student's arrival in Canada. Most local committees strive to extend this support in various degrees beyond the first year, but the availability of funds is a formidable constraint for many local committees. Local WUSC committees on campus raise funds for the Student Refugee Program by a variety of ways and means. They include, for example, annual student levies, whereby students vote by referendum to allocate a certain portion of their student fees to support the Student Refugee Program. Amounts typically range from fifty cents to several dollars per student. This is the preferred source for most committees as it ensures stable and recurrent funding. Other sources of funding include tuition and residence waivers, faculty association contributions, donations from local businesses, and annual fund-raising campaigns.

The goal of every local committee is to secure stable, recurrent funding that is sustainable over the longer term. In many cases, this has proven possible. However, because each local committee is responsible for raising its own funds, there exists a patchwork of different funding arrangements, which vary from institution to institution across the country. This means that there is a great deal of variation in terms of both *sources* and *levels* of funding. Some institutions such as the University of British Columbia (UBC) where the program is long established and has the strong support of the senior levels of the university administration sponsor up to four students each year. Students at UBC also receive full tuition and living allowances as well as a meal card and an eight-month housing waiver during their first year, as well as a tuition waiver and book allowance for the duration of their academic degree program. But at many smaller institutions where the student body is much smaller or where the program is relatively recent, both the number of students sponsored and the level of support that is available to them is often much less, sometimes not extending beyond the mandatory twelve months of living support required under the PSRP. The author's experience is that sponsored students themselves are often acutely aware of these discrepancies and of the different levels of support that exist. Indeed, this has become an ongoing source of tension within the program. Unfortunately, there appears to be little chance of remedying this problem under the current funding model and it is difficult, at least at the present, to envision any workable alternative to this model, whereby each sponsoring institution is responsible for raising its own funds.

As the students in the camps prepare to board the long transcontinental flights that will take them to a new country and the beginning of a new life, an annual ritual takes place every August at airports across Canada, as local WUSC committees gather with brightly coloured banners

to welcome the newly arrived students at the moment they step into the airport arrival hall. Warm greetings are exchanged and old friendships are sometimes renewed as current or former sponsored students are often present to welcome the newest arrivals. Initial days are spent setting up bank accounts, acquiring cooking utensils, learning how to take a bus, shop at a supermarket, and all of the other myriad details that one needs to learn in order just to get by on a day-to-day basis in urban Canada. The learning curve is normally incredibly steep. The onset of classes in a few weeks' time brings a new level of excitement. At the same time there is a new set of challenges. Nearly all of the students struggle, especially in their first year. Many experience severe personal as well as academic difficulties. Yet despite personal traumas and, in many cases, significant difficulties adjusting to life in Canada, many of the students who have come to Canada under the Student Refugee Program have gone on to achieve meaningful and fulfilling lives and careers. At UBC, the program's alumni include the current Executive Director of the Vancouver multicultural agency MOSAIC as well as a leading cancer specialist at the BC Cancer Agency. Others have earned master's and PhD degrees in fields such as counselling psychology, physics, education, forestry, law and community planning. Although there are many success stories, there are also some for whom the academic and personal challenges prove insurmountable. In these relatively few instances, the students often end up leaving the university. Some find good jobs, some don't; in cases where it has been possible for them to do so, a few have returned to their home countries. The outcomes have not been universally positive, but they are largely so, and more than enough to justify the continued existence of this remarkable program.

Sponsorship and Resettlement Success

How does sponsorship relate to "success" in resettlement as measured by such factors as employment, health and sense of well-being? The examples cited above point to the role of sponsorship as an important factor in the successful resettlement and social integration of refugees. Several countries besides Canada have embraced sponsorship as a means of refugee resettlement, notably the US, Australia and France, among others. However, the Canadian model differs in several key respects. In the US, sponsorship entails the provision of guidance and support from a voluntary agency for an initial thirty-day period, after which refugees are expected to rely upon established welfare programs; there is no provision or expectation of continuity with respect to personal or organizational association. Australia and France rely heavily on "reception centres" as a means of concentrating resources and personnel in designated locations in order to achieve

administrative efficiencies and cost savings.¹³ By contrast, Lanphier describes the Canadian sponsorship model as “the most personnel- and organizational-intensive” among the various resettlement models currently practiced internationally.¹⁴ In order to accommodate private sponsorships, the federal government commits significant additional personnel and resources in order to process sponsorship applications. In addition, sponsoring groups themselves must come up with substantial financial resources and are required to have close and sustained personal contact with the sponsored individual or family over an extended period. The minimum legal commitment of a sponsoring group to the refugee is twelve months after arrival, but in practice sponsoring groups often retain contact for much longer periods. Unique among resettlement schemes, the Canadian sponsorship model “invites public intervention and implementation” in the resettlement process.¹⁵

There may be a link between the civic engagement that sponsorship enables and, indeed, requires, on the one hand, and “success” in resettlement, on the other. A recent study of the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada over a ten-year period found that “private sponsorship predicted successful integration” (as measured by employment, language fluency and general health) whereas government sponsorship was “more likely to predict the opposite.”¹⁶ Some of the reasons for this may include the close interpersonal bonds that often develop between sponsors and refugees; the opportunities for networking with the wider community that sponsorship sometimes facilitates; and the ability of sponsors to “connect” refugees with important institutions and services (such as the education and health systems, faith-based organizations, employment opportunities, and so on).¹⁷ In the case of the Student Refugee Program, the link between education and resettlement is woven directly into the objectives of the program. Likewise, the personal bonds formed among refugees and local students, faculty and staff are often enduring.

This is not to say that the sponsorship mode in general and the Student Refugee Program in particular are without problems. Criticisms of the sponsorship program include long delays in the processing of sponsorship applications and the high cost in terms of time and resources deployed. In addition, some have identified an “assimilationist orientation” on the part of some sponsoring individuals, in which behavioural expectations are imposed on refugees, while at the same time sponsors often have little or no knowledge of the cultures and societies of the refugees themselves. Another problem that has been identified concerns the ambiguity of the refugee’s relationship to his or her sponsor. Are they dependents? partners? cooperants? Are refugees expected to conform or oblige in return for the assistance

they receive, for example, by behaving in certain ways or by agreeing to participate in certain social or religious activities with their sponsors?¹⁸ In the author’s experience of the Student Refugee Program, all of these issues have surfaced at one time or another. Since there are no easy or fixed answers to these problems, resolving them is usually a matter of ongoing negotiation and mutual accommodation among the various actors involved.

The Gender Gap

When looking at the profile of SRP alumni, it is immediately obvious that there is a significant and ongoing gender gap in the proportion of male and female students. According to the latest SRP impact study, a total of 577 students were sponsored during the period from 1978 to 2000. However, of that number 456 or 79 per cent of the participants were male, compared to only 121 or 21 per cent who were female.¹⁹ The reasons for this imbalance have little to do with the SRP itself. Rather, this is a structural problem that is deeply rooted in the unequal opportunities for education afforded to boys and girls from a very young age. In 2010 the participation rate in primary schools in the Dadaab refugee camps was 61 per cent for males compared to 39 per cent for females. At the secondary level the gap was even wider with 72 per cent of males enrolled compared to only 28 per cent of females.²⁰ Therefore, closing the gender gap requires tackling the problem at its roots. This involves creating greater opportunities for young girls to enter primary school while at the same time working to change deeply held attitudes and the broad socio-economic structures that continue to value females as labourers and as brides but not as learners. Even when successful measures have been undertaken to raise the participation rates of girls in primary school, female participation often drops off dramatically at the secondary level. This is because this is the age when young girls are expected to assume household responsibilities and even to marry.²¹ As a result, the pool of eligible female applicants able to meet the high admission standards of Canadian colleges and universities is normally very small compared to the number of qualified male candidates.

Relaxing the admission requirements for female applicants is not always the best answer to this problem, for students who are admitted below the minimum admission requirements often find themselves at a disadvantage in the classroom, and there is always a risk of setting students up for failure. Having students take remedial classes before entering a regular degree program is another way to address the problem, but for most local committees the scarcity of funds precludes this option. More promising in the long run are a series of initiatives that WUSC has recently undertaken which are aimed at raising the participation rate of

female students in primary and secondary schools in the camps. One strategy involves the use of female role models. In 2007, I accompanied a small group of Canadian students on a WUSC study seminar which involved spending several weeks at the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya. One of the Canadian students chosen to participate in the seminar was a former sponsored student from Somalia who had just completed her master's of science degree and was preparing to enter a PhD program. One of her assignments during the seminar was to speak widely with the female students attending primary and secondary school, addressing them in their classrooms and speaking informally with the students and their parents about her own experiences and opportunities as a university student in Canada. Another initiative involves the "Shine a Light" campaign, which raises funds for the purchase of solar-powered lights that girls can use to study by during the evening hours, since there is no electricity in people's homes and evenings are often the only time that girls can devote to school work, after they have finished their household chores.²² There are also plans to raise funds to provide in-camp remedial classes as well as school supplies and even scholarships for female students. The goal of these efforts is to close the gender gap in the Student Refugee Program by 2015, by ensuring that an equal number of female and male applicants are qualified to study in Canada.

A Problem of "Brain Drain"?

If the gender gap is one problem that has been identified with the SRP, another, somewhat opposite criticism one sometimes hears is that the Student Refugee Program contributes wilfully to the "brain drain" phenomenon. According to this view, the SRP skims off the best and brightest of refugee youth for education and resettlement overseas, thereby depriving Africa of much-needed human talent. Canada is the winner; African countries are the losers. It should be pointed out that the very notion of a "brain drain" is premised upon a nation-based conception of economic and social benefit which does not take into account the advantages that accrue to the migrating individual.²³ However, even if we accept the welfare of the nation-state as the main criterion for evaluating the human capital impacts of migration, the brain drain charge is valid only insofar as it can be shown that students who come to Canada under the SRP lose all ties to their home countries. This is certainly true in some cases, and perhaps was especially so during the early years of the program, when the opportunities for physical return or even for maintaining regular and sustained contact with one's native land were few. However, recent research suggests that increased opportunities for mobility in recent decades, as well as the digital transformation of communications

technology, have altered migration patterns and migrant behaviour. Instead of a "brain drain," what we are sometimes witnessing now is a phenomenon of "brain circulation." Studies have shown that highly skilled expatriates often form transnational networks that link them to their countries of origin, resulting in a net "brain gain" for those countries. Foreign-educated engineers from countries like China and India are transforming the development process through the professional and business connections that they build to their home countries, attracted by economic opportunities and the chance to make an impact.²⁴

These findings appear to be borne out by the career choices of some recent graduates of the SRP at UBC. Of course, there is one crucial difference affecting the mobility options of refugees compared to other migrants: the ability to return and live safely in one's country. For refugees, return is often simply not possible. However, in some previously war-torn countries such as Sudan, where a peace agreement and a successful referendum for the independence of South Sudan have recently taken place, a new trend seems to be emerging. Several recent SRP graduates from UBC have returned to the new Republic of South Sudan, where they have found prestigious and well-paying jobs with organizations such as the UNDP and the government of southern Sudan. In these cases, it is precisely their overseas educations that have empowered these individuals to return to the Sudan in order to take up responsible positions and contribute to the development of their home region.

Finally, there is also the fact that, for many refugees, especially those in Africa, the only possibilities for the foreseeable future are either third-country resettlement—however slim the chances may be—or languishing permanently in UNHCR-supported refugee camps. Recent studies have pointed out that an increasing number of refugee situations in Africa and elsewhere (such as Burmese student refugees who have been in Thailand since 1988 and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere since 1948) belong to what the UNHCR terms "protracted" refugee crises.²⁵ Refugees caught in these situations are stranded by long-term, ongoing civil conflicts for which there appears no end in sight.²⁶ This has given rise to the phenomenon, readily observable in some parts of Africa today, of what some scholars have described as the long-term "warehousing" of refugees in remotely located camps that were originally set up to provide temporary asylum but which have become, in effect, permanent human settlements. They are the size of cities, but have no economic base and are sustained exclusively by international donations channelled through the UNHCR. When individuals are faced with such dismal prospects, the charge that resettlement is contributing to a "brain drain" seems somehow to miss the point entirely. In

fact, as we shall see below, for many refugees it is leaving Africa that ironically sometimes produces both the desire and the means to reconnect in tangible and meaningful ways with their roots.

Refugee Resettlement and Transnational Possibilities

Thus far, I have focused on the ways in which the SRP is related to various issues involving resettlement—the relationship between sponsorship and resettlement success, the gender gap, and the question of “brain drain.” However, from the perspective of refugees themselves, one of the most salient aspects of being a “refugee” concerns the socially constructed meanings that are attached to the refugee label. In her landmark study of Hutu refugees from Burundi in exile in Tanzania, anthropologist Liisa Malkki found significant differences in how her subjects viewed the “refugee” label, depending on whether they lived in confined refugee camps or open urban settings.²⁷ For Malkki, the refugee camp is not just a place of asylum but also, following Foucault, a “technology of power” with the capacity not only to physically confine but to generate consciousness and world view.²⁸ She found that the refugee camp was “both the spatial and the politico-symbolic site for imagining a moral and political community” in which the notion of “refugeeness” was regarded as the defining feature of Hutu identity and culture. Camp-bound refugees constructed a powerful “mythico-history of exile” in which it was believed their collective voice would only be recognized so long as it remained the authentic voice of the “Hutu refugee.”²⁹ By contrast, Hutu refugees who were living in towns in Tanzania tended to regard the refugee label as a stigma and a limitation that had to be overcome or erased: an aspect of one’s past that could not be allowed to define the present. Just as the refugee camp had been conducive to the production of a powerful nation-based discourse of displacement/exile, among town-based refugees the entire refugee discourse with its affiliated juridical categories and institutional apparatus of decision-making tribunals, “protection certificates” and so on, was experienced as a “disabling variety of parochialism that would hinder social mobility and, falsely, unnecessarily fix people in social locations not of their own making.” As a consequence, town refugees often went to considerable lengths to devise what Malkki terms “strategies of invisibility” and ways of negating the refugee label and replacing it with others (such as that of “immigrant” or “Burundian” or “Muslim”), which they juggled depending on the social circumstances and context.³⁰

Malkki presents a powerful argument about the different ways in which the urban environment, on the one hand, and the closed world of the refugee camp, on the other, shaped

the identities and historical consciousness of Hutu refugees in Tanzania. What happens when we ask a similar question about the identities of refugees who have resettled overseas? Does the cosmopolitanism of “the town” also shape the identities and historical consciousness of the WUSC student refugees who have resettled in urban Canada? Do they also tend to experience their formal as well as informal “refugee” status as a stigmatizing label to be overcome or erased? Does the discourse of “nationness” have little appeal against the desire to demonstrate one’s cosmopolitan credentials and the social and cultural pressures to fit in as “new Canadians”? There is no uniform response to these questions. One can readily find examples of both, that is, of individuals who embrace the fact that they are or were, at one time, refugees; and, on the other hand, individuals for whom the refugee experience belongs to the past and is not something that can or should define their identities now or in the future. It is also true that, within the Canadian context, refugee status is something that can sometimes be leveraged for advantage and entitlement—access to government services, educational opportunities, and so on—and at other times be a hindrance and a stigma. The binary identities of refugee versus cosmopolitan appear to break down in the overseas context. What is perhaps most interesting is that resettlement overseas appears not only to foster the kind of “cosmopolitanism” described by Malkki but, in doing so, also creates the conditions for a diasporic national consciousness to emerge. Indeed, new technologies of communication have enabled this kind of diasporic consciousness and transnational networking to flourish. Let me provide one example, in the form of a new Internet website known as “Radio NILO.”³¹

Radio NILO’s home page introduces itself in the following words:

Browsing Radio NILO’s website, one finds everything from the latest Confederation of African Football news, a reader’s forum on whether a future independent republic of South Sudan should align itself with East Africa, a eulogy for the late and much-beloved South African female singer Miriam Makeba and an update on South Sudan’s contestant in a popular East African reality TV show to a discussion of African philosophical traditions and a profile of Africa’s richest billionaire. In short, this is probably one of the best places on the Internet to find all manner of news and opinion relating to the continent of Africa and to East Africa and South Sudan in particular. One might easily assume from this coverage that the website is the product of some incredibly well plugged-in young Africans in some place like Juba, Nairobi, or Dar es Salaam. In fact, Radio NILO is based in New Westminster, BC, and is the brainchild of a WUSC-sponsored student refugee and current UBC anthropology major. Radio Nilo

advertises itself as the “latest, hottest addition to the vibrance [sic] of the entertainment scene in Juba, South Sudan,” and it is quite conceivable (judging from the number of hits the website has received since it went live) that Radio NILO is where the youthful citizens of Juba turn regularly for information about what is going on in their city and region. Yet the entire operation is based out of a student apartment in a Vancouver suburb.

This example says a lot about the role and power of the Internet in the creation of transnational fields of social communication. It also highlights the complexity of diasporic identities. The existence of Radio NILO shows how resettlement in a third country like Canada actually makes possible a heightened consciousness and sense of (virtual) attachment to one’s ancestral homeland, which is constituted and sustained by transnational networks of affiliation and communication. This observation has broader implications for our understanding of the very notions of “resettlement” and “citizenship” that underpin contemporary refugee practice and legal regimes. The assumptions underlying the original concept of refugee resettlement as embodied in the UNHCR’s founding statute and the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees no longer seem to fit the circumstances and experiences of some refugees who are fortunate enough to secure resettlement overseas. The original concept of refugee resettlement was rooted in earlier, *territorialized* definitions of identity and culture. Migration was generally understood to be a one-way journey of uprooting followed by assimilation into a new, territorialized national space of identity and culture.³² We now know that this model of uprooting and assimilation was never an accurate depiction of the complex and multi-layered identities and intentions of most migrants, and that the model actually tells us more about the nation-building narratives of countries than the experiences of migrants themselves. But the model is even less applicable in today’s rapidly changing world of technologically driven time-space compression and instantaneous global communication. We need to recognize that *forced* “uprooting” is a defining feature that sets refugees apart from other kinds of migrants. But we also need to recognize that for refugees, as for other migrants, resettlement overseas can often be a catalyst and a means toward realizing a renewed cultural, emotional, social and political attachment to one’s roots, and therefore a powerful source of identity. This has certainly been the case for some WUSC students, whose overseas experience has provided both the intellectual stimulus and the material means to reconnect with a real or imagined homeland. As Adam McKeown has reminded us, we need to take mobility and dispersion as the *starting* points of analysis, not as something incidental to an imagined process of assimilation, and

to recognize that people can and often do “belong” to more than one place at the same time.³³

Concluding Comments

In 2008 the WUSC Student Refugee Program celebrated the arrival of the thousandth student refugee since the program began in 1978. The number is tiny in relation to the size of the global refugee population: in 2008 UNHCR estimated there were at least 42 million “forcibly displaced” persons worldwide, of which only some 10.5 million were receiving UNHCR assistance. Less than 1 per cent of the 10.5 million refugees under UNHCR care in 2008 were resettled in third countries.³⁴ Today there are only around twenty countries that have resettlement agreements with the UNHCR, and out of those twenty countries, nine of them, including Canada, are responsible for the majority of resettlement cases. If WUSC was ranked as a country, it would be the fifth-largest source of resettlement in the world, after the United States, Australia, Canada and Sweden, but ahead of countries such as Spain and Brazil.³⁵ Figures such as these highlight the accomplishments of the Student Refugee Program but also, more importantly, the scale of the global refugee problem and the inadequacy of the world’s response.

Not that the world has remained oblivious to the plight of the forcibly displaced. On the contrary, as Malkki has observed, “a whole internationally standardized way of discussing people who have been displaced across national frontiers has emerged in the course of the last several decades.”³⁶ However, one consequence of this evolution has been that “the refugee” has come to be “an almost generic, ideal-typical figure” both in popular consciousness and in the vocabularies and practices of states and voluntary agencies that manage programs for the care and administration of refugees. “The refugee,” Malkki observes, often appears to us mainly as an “object of therapeutic intervention.”³⁷ To this we might add that refugees are often also objects of pity and of resentment. But as Malkki reminds us, if we understand displacement only as human tragedy, we can gain no insight into “the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people.”³⁸ I suggest that it is precisely this engagement with the “lived meanings” of displacement and resettlement that makes the Student Refugee Program such a powerful site for transformative learning. In the remaining section of this paper, I want to return to the SRP’s role as a catalyst of transformative learning.

A key component of the Student Refugee Program at universities and colleges across the country is the support network that local WUSC committees put in place in order to assist the students once they arrive in Canada. It is here, in this nexus of newly arrived students, local Canadian

students and faculty, staff and administrators that potential for transformative learning takes place, as bridges are constructed, bonds are formed, and meaningful, often enduring relationships are forged. “Being involved with WUSC changed my life” according to Masresha Arefaine, a WUSC-sponsored student from Ethiopia who came to UBC in 2003 and later went on to complete a bachelor’s degree in international relations and eventually became an immigration officer with Citizenship and Immigration Canada. “I got a chance to continue my education and live a new life.” But the adaptation process can often be slow and painful. “You need time to adjust, you need mentors,” Masresha observed, adding that “it is really difficult at the beginning, adjusting to the culture and living conditions in Canada. It’s like a computer—you must erase everything and download a new program.” The local WUSC committee, made up entirely of student volunteers, is a key source of support for students undergoing this transition. Pascaline Nsekera, a WUSC-sponsored student from Burundi who completed her bachelor of science degree at UBC, described how the local support network works. “Even before the student comes, we have a coordinator and we have a support system around that person ... we assign these various task[s] to different volunteers, so the students know who to talk to if they have certain kinds of problems.” The relationships that develop among students on this basis are often the starting point and the basis for a profound learning experience. As described by Syma Khan, a former student chair of WUSC-UBC, “We talk about the sponsored students and how their lives have changes, but our lives change as well. You learn about these issues in class or you see them on the news, but to actually meet someone who has lived through political instability and who has lived in the refugee camps and to be able to interact with them on a personal level and to become friends is really amazing and really enlightening.”³⁹ These are all examples of transformative learning through the SRP.

The bonds forged through the Student Refugee Program often have far-reaching and long-standing impacts, not only in terms of personal friendships and experiential learning, but in terms of life and career choices as well. At UBC, an increasing number of WUSC committee members, both local students and former sponsored students, have gone on to pursue graduate degrees in refugee studies and related fields, and have chosen to build their careers around efforts to address the plight of refugees and the forcibly displaced. To take but one example, Pascaline Nsekera, who was described above, completed her studies in science at UBC but then decided to become a resettlement counsellor for recent Francophone immigrants in Vancouver, and eventually founded her own, non-governmental organization

to assist African refugees in Vancouver. This, too, is an example of transformative learning. At UBC and elsewhere, universities and colleges are more and more recognizing the significance of the WUSC Student Refugee Program as both a symbol and an embodiment of the principles of global citizenship. At UBC, President Stephen Toope, one of Canada’s leading human rights scholars, was until recently Chair of WUSC’s Board of Directors. UBC’s recently retired and long-serving Vice-President for Students, Brian Sullivan, knows many WUSC-sponsored students at UBC on a personal basis, and has been known to maintain contact with some of them for years after they have graduated from UBC. Examples like this can be found across Canada, at institutions where the WUSC Student Refugee Program has become a familiar and cherished part of the academic community.

Finally, participation in the Student Refugee Program has also been my way of coming to understand the “lived meanings” of displacement for diverse individuals. Before assuming my role as faculty advisor to the WUSC committee at UBC I had given little thought to refugees and issues of forced migration and displacement. My attention span was limited largely to the images that flit across our television screens from time to time and never for very long, until they are overtaken by the next big “breaking” news. But in the past fifteen years, the Student Refugee Program has become an increasingly large part of both my professional and personal life. I count the personal and professional relationships that I have cultivated through the Student Refugee Program—with students and members of the university staff and administration—as among the most meaningful and fulfilling of my own university experience.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Ruth Hayhoe, Sarah Dryden-Peterson, John Conway and Debi Goodwin for their helpful comments. This paper was originally prepared for the Education and Global Cultural Dialogue Conference: A Tribute to Ruth Hayhoe, University of Toronto, May 2011.
2. Jack Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory of Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000); Robert D. Boyd and Gordon J. Myers, “Transformative Education,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 7, no. 4 (October-December 1988): 261–84.
3. World’s Christian Student Federation was founded in 1895 by the American evangelist John Mott, who was also a leading figure in the international YMCA movement and was later instrumental in the founding of the World Council of Churches. By 1925 the Federation had branch movements in Australia, Burma, Canada, Ceylon, China, Denmark,

- Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain and Ireland, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. See Ruth Rouse, *Rebuilding Europe: The Student Chapter in Post-War Reconstruction* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1925), frontispiece, 221–22. The World Student Christian Federation, as the organization is known today, remains active with one hundred other affiliated movements in countries around the world. See the organization's website, <http://www.wsc-global.org> (accessed 14 March 2011).
4. Rouse, *Rebuilding Europe*, frontispiece, 221–22.
 5. [Http://www.wusc.ca/en/alumni/our_history](http://www.wusc.ca/en/alumni/our_history) (accessed 14 March 2011).
 6. [Http://www.wusc.ca/en/volunteer/seminar](http://www.wusc.ca/en/volunteer/seminar) (accessed 06 September 2011).
 7. Between 1979 and 1980 around 50,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Canada. Eventually, more than 100,000 refugees from Vietnam resettled in Canada. On the Canadian response to the Vietnamese “boat people” and changes to Canadian refugee policy, see Howard Adelman, ed., *The Indochinese Refugee Movement: The Canadian Experience* (Toronto: Operation Lifeline, 1979); and Elliot Tepper, ed., *Southeast Asian Exodus: From Tradition to Resettlement: Understanding Refugees from Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Asian Studies Association, 1980). The aforementioned studies were produced at the height of the crisis and represent the proceedings of two conferences comprised of academics, members of voluntary organizations and politicians, which were convened for the purpose of finding ways to respond to the crisis. While there have since been many social science studies of the refugees’ adaptation to life and Canada by sociologists, social workers and others, the history of the Vietnamese boat people and their resettlement overseas, including Canada, still awaits detailed scholarly treatment.
 8. See the Citizenship and Immigration Canada web page that explains the program and its history: <http://www.gic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/private.asp> (accessed 11 April 2011). Since the PSRP’s inception, the program has expanded to include two other categories of sponsors known as “Group of Five” and “Community Sponsors.” The former is a sponsoring group made up of at least five Canadians (nineteen years and older) while the latter includes non-incorporated associations and organizations as well as corporations. In all cases, the sponsoring entity undertakes to meet all of the refugee’s financial and emotional needs for the first twelve months after arrival in Canada.
 9. The PSRP operates separately from the federal government’s Government-Assisted Refugees Program, which provides for a limited number of refugees each year as part of the total immigration quota. The annual figures for government-sponsored and private-sponsored refugees from 2006 to 2010 are as follows: in 2006, 7,326 government-sponsored and 3,337 private-sponsored; in 2007, 7,512 government-sponsored and 3,588 private-sponsored; in 2008, 7,295 government-sponsored and 3,512 private-sponsored; in 2009, 7,425 government-sponsored and 5,036 private-sponsored; in 2010, 7,265 private-sponsored and 4,833 government-sponsored. Source: <http://www.gic.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2010-preliminary/01.asp> (accessed 11 April 2011).
 10. The journey from refugee camp to university campus is described in a brilliant new book by former CBC producer Debi Goodwin, who followed eleven students from the Dadaab refugee camp in northeastern Kenya for one year from the moment of their departure from the camp to the end of their first year at universities across Canada. See her *Citizens of Nowhere: From Refugee Camp to Canadian Campus* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2010). Goodwin also made the award-winning 2008 documentary “*The Lucky Ones*” about students who were selected for the WUSC Student Refugee Program.
 11. In Dadaab a total of 2,200 students completed primary school in 2007. However, only a quarter of the graduates were able to advance to the camp’s three secondary schools, all of which were run by CARE Canada. The following year, Somali refugees in the Dadaab camps banded together with former refugees who had resettled overseas and Book Aid International to raise more than \$2,000 for three community-run secondary schools which now operate in spaces provided by CARE and UNHCR. Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 74.
 12. For instance, only 43 per cent of school-aged children (and only 34 per cent of school-aged females) were attending primary and secondary school in the Dadaab camps in 2010, while the secondary school participation rate was just 12 per cent—well below the global average for UNHCR operations and the lowest among UNHCR operations in Africa. A recent authoritative assessment of the education sector in Dadaab recommended the construction of eighty-eight new primary schools at an estimated cost of US \$24.5 million to meet existing need. However, the assessment was conducted in August 2010 when the combined population of the Dadaab camps was 277,000. By July 2010, the population of the Dadaab camps had swollen to nearly 400,000 and was continuing to rise rapidly, as a result of new refugees fleeing famine in the Horn of Africa. See Joyce Umbina, Andrea Koelbel and Ahmed Adan Hassan, *Joint Review and Assessment of the Education Sector in Dadaab Refugee Camps* (Nairobi: UNHCR, 2010), 8–9 and *Report on the Enrolment Rates to Primary and Secondary Education in UNHCR Operations* (Geneva: UNHCR Department of International Protection, 2010). I thank Sarah Dryden-Peterson for bringing these sources to my attention.
 13. Michael Lanphier, “Sponsorship: Organizational, Sponsor and Refugee Perspectives,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 242.
 14. *Ibid.*, 238.

15. Ibid., 238.
16. Morton Beiser, “Sponsorship and Resettlement Success,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 203.
17. Lanphier, “Sponsorship,” 243, identifies these as among the “assets” of private sponsorship.
18. Lanphier, “Sponsorship,” 243–44. He also identifies strain on government resources and apparently marginal success in the job market as criticisms of the sponsorship program.
19. *Global Citizens: An Impact Study of Participants, World University Service of Canada Student Refugee Program, 1978–2000* (Ottawa: World University Service of Canada, 2003), 7.
20. Umbina, Koelbel and Hassan, *Joint Review*, 20.
21. Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren’t in School and What to Do about It* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006).
22. The Shine a Light Campaign was launched in 2008. Funds are raised by local WUSC committees across Canada.
23. Harry G. Johnson, “Some Economic Aspects of the Brain Drain,” Special Issue on the African Brain Drain, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 7–14.
24. AnnaLee Saxenian, “From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation: Transnational Communities and Regional Upgrading in India and China,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 35–61; Jean-Baptiste Meyer, “Network Approach versus Brain Drain: Lessons from the Diaspora,” *International Migration* 39, no. 5 (2001): 91–110.
25. [Http://www.unhcr.org/4444afcbO.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/4444afcbO.pdf) (accessed 06 September 2011).
26. Gil Loescher and James Milner, “The Long Road Home: Protracted Refugee Situations in Africa,” *Survival* 47, no. 2 (2005): 153–74; Gil Loescher, Alexander Betts, and James Milner, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: The Politics and Practice of Refugee Practice into the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 110–15.
27. Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
28. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
29. Ibid., 52–104.
30. Ibid., 53, 158, 232–35.
31. [Http://www.radionilo.com](http://www.radionilo.com) (accessed 30 March 2011).
32. For a useful critique of the “assimilationist” model of migration as seen from the perspective of Chinese migration, see Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and China, 1882–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 4–8; and Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900–1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7–13.
33. Here, too, we can learn from recent studies of Chinese migrant experience. See Minghuan Li’s illuminating study of contemporary Chinese migrants in Europe, *We Need Two Worlds: Chinese Immigrant Associations in a Western Society* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).
34. [Http://www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html) (accessed 06 September 2011).
35. This point was made by James Milner, professor at the University of Ottawa, cited in Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 95–96. WUSC’s ranking among resettlement countries is based on UNHCR resettlement figures for 2006.
36. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 9.
37. Ibid., 8. See also Roger Zetter, “Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, no. 1 (1991): 39–62.
38. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 16.
39. The comments are from a series of interviews conducted with WUSC local committee members and sponsored students. See “Ethiopian Student Finds Refuge at UBC” and “Refugee Program Creates Global Citizens,” *UBC Reports* 50, no. 4 (April 1, 2004): 11.

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