Responding to Marginalization: Language Practices of African-Born Muslim Refugee Youths in an American Urban High School

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Abstract
This article offers an analysis of how refugee youths from Africa used and shifted languages and discourses in the United States. Drawing on sociocultural theories of language and utilizing ethnographic discourse and classroom observation data, the author illustrates the varied ways in which three high school-aged refugee youths used languages to make sense of who and where they are; respond to social, religious, and linguistic marginalization in the United States; and challenge narrow perceptions of African Muslims. This article brings to fore a group that, although facing a unique set of challenges in the United States, is rarely included in research on youth language practices and immigration. Attention to their multilingual practices and the multilayered nature of their identity is central to understanding how refugee youths experience school in their new land, and how they see themselves and others. This understanding can guide school personnel, educational researchers, and community-based youth workers in their respective work with refugee students.

Keywords
refugee youth, Muslim youth, language practices, African-born immigrants, discourse analysis

When I first came here, I don’t know how to speak English, and I went to immigration shelter. I learn A, B, C, D and Monday, the seven day of the week. I think I learn, but the most I learn there was Spanish because all kids speak Spanish.

—Cleo (18-year-old)

When I first came here, they asked me, “How did I understand English?” For crying out loud, they speak English in my country so what are you asking?

—Monique (17-year-old)

This article offers an analysis of how refugee youths from Africa used and shifted languages and discourses in the United States. Drawing on ethnographic discourse and classroom observation data, I illustrate the varied ways in which three high school-aged youths—who came from Mali, Nigeria, and Ethiopia—used language to make meaning of who and where they are; respond to social, religious, and linguistic marginalization in the United States; and challenge narrow perceptions of Africans and Muslims.

Traore and Lukens (2006) and others (see Harushima & Awokoya, 2011) have drawn attention to the underrepresentation of African immigrant and refugee voices in educational research and practice. This article brings to fore a group that, although facing a unique set of challenges in the United States, is rarely included in research on youth language practices, identity formation, and education: African Muslim refugees who enter the United States as unaccompanied minors. The focal youths in this article negotiated daily about what it means to be young, Black, Muslim, female, and poor in the United States. Furthermore, they were under the care of foster parents whose language and cultural practices differed from their own.

The young women in this article differed from many Muslim and Muslim American youths in several important ways. First, they were recent-arrival refugees who had been in the United States for less than 4 years. Refugee youth, as distinct from immigrant youth, are at greater risk for discrimination and school failure (McBrien, 2005). Second, unlike many Muslim immigrant youths who grow up in working or middle-class families (Sirin & Fine, 2008), the young women in this article entered the country as unaccompanied minors, traveling alone or with a sibling. Due to their documentation status, they were unable to work after school, which created

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constant financial stress for them. Finally, unlike some Muslim youths who appear to be White (Mosselson, 2007; Sirin & Fine, 2008), the young women in this article identified themselves as Black, and confronted racism in their new country. McBrien (2005) noted that although Black Africans are culturally distinct from African Americans, they are “perceived by native-born White Americans to be in the same cultural group” (p. 335). Navigating the racial terrain in the United States, the young women in this article grappled with how some of their classmates saw all Black students as the same (i.e., all students from Africa are the same, even though they are from different countries), whereas others created a hierarchy (i.e., African Americans are better than recent-arrivals from Africa).

Most literature on refugee youth focuses on the obstacles they face in and out of school (see McBrien, 2005; Kanu, 2008). Although acknowledging the constraints that refugee youths face in different social spaces, I foreground their language practices as meaning-making tools and navigational resources. More specifically, I show how they used language in dexterous and creative ways to negotiate human relationships, build identity and affiliation, exercise agency, and question the conditions of their life in the United States. Attention to their multilingual practices as well as to the multilayered nature of their identity is central to understanding how refugee youths experience school in their new land, and how they see themselves and others. This understanding can guide school personnel, educational researchers, and community-based youth workers in their respective work with refugee students.

In the next section, I review scholarship on refugee youth in the United States, highlighting what is known about their experiences and make the case for research that focuses on the function and meaning of youth language practices. Then, I describe the three young women involved in the study and my approach to data collection and analysis. Throughout the article, I build the argument that although the focal youths in the study were discriminated because of their language, race, religion, and immigration status, they combated their discrimination with and through language, turning a source of their pain into a resource for organizing their experiences and building identity.

**Review of Relevant Literature**

Although increasing numbers of refugee students of African origin have entered different countries around the world (Kanu, 2008), this section reviews scholarship on refugee students in the United States. McBrien’s (2005) review of research on refugee children in the United States focuses on their unique needs and obstacles to academic achievement. She draws distinctions between immigrants and refugees (refugees do not leave their homes by choice), and among refugees (anticipatory refugees have more time to plan their departure than acute refugees). Although stressing the diversity that characterizes refugees in the United States, McBrien does not address the experiences of refugee students who live with nonrelative foster parents.

A selective review of qualitative studies on the experiences of refugee students in the United States revealed several cross-cutting themes. First, the experiences of refugees are shaped by not just their contexts (e.g., school, neighborhood, places of worship, etc.) but also a range of sociopolitical considerations, including the relationship between the refugee’s home country and host country (Zhou & Bankston, 1998), and the degree to which refugees are perceived to be “different” from dominant groups in the host country (Mosselson, 2007). These considerations determine whether and what opportunities are available to refugee youths. Second, refugee students—although critiquing aspects of their American schooling, such as being tracked into remedial classes—value their education (Mosselson, 2007; M. M. Suárez-Orozco, 1989; Townsend & Fu, 2001). Working with 15 Muslim girls from Bosnia, Mosselson (2007) found that they viewed their U.S. education as a form of portable capital—a “portfolio of skills and knowledge that would travel with them” (p. 107). This resonates with findings from Marcelo Suárez-Orozco’s (1989) ethnographic study of recently arrived immigrant and refugee youths from Central America. He found that many were academically motivated despite their hardships. He noted, “Schooling in the United States . . . is the medium to become somebody” (p. 82). Studying the literacy practices of Sudanese refugees, Perry (2008) found that the young men ascribed great importance to their education, which was seen as central to improving their own lives and collective future of Sudan.

Some research speaks to the linkages between language, literacy, and academic outcomes for immigrant and refugee youth (Short & Boyson, 2012; C. Suárez-Orozco, M. M. Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). First-language literacy facilitates English acquisition and bolsters refugee students’ academic performance (Cummins, 2000; Genesee, 2006). Maintenance of first-language literacy also has positive effects on future academic aspirations. Despite well-documented benefits, researchers have found that refugee students are discouraged by school personnel from drawing on their home language and literacy practices in the classroom (Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 2010). For refugee students learning English as an additional language, their unfamiliarity with English academic literacy can limit their participation and inclusion in the classroom. Townsend and Fu (2001) presented the case of a Laotian refugee youth who struggled to take hold of academic literacy practices, such as engaging in debates or defining abstract concepts. Townsend and Fu attributed the youth’s struggles to inadequate support for English learners to acquire dominant discourses in classrooms.

In this article, rather than focus on how language and literacy affect school outcomes, I highlight how different languages, including English, interacted and became part of
how refugee youths navigated different settings, questioned their realities, and negotiated a sense of self in the larger social world. Thus, I situate this article in scholarship focused on not only the use, value, and meaning of language and literacy but also the relationship between language and identity, as documented in the lived experiences and linguistic navigations of immigrant and refugee youth (Lam, 2006; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003; Perry, 2007, 2008; Skerrett, 2012). Taken together, these studies foreground how youth, as language users, “blend, appropriate, and draw from a variety of practices in their own communities and the mainstream community to accomplish certain goals” (Perry, 2008, p. 324), including building identity. For example, Perry (2007) discovered that Sudanese refugees chose to use English (as opposed to Arabic or Dinka) as a means to signal their collective identity as Southern Sudanese. According to participants in Perry’s study, Arabic is the language of Northern Sudan, and therefore equated with slavery, oppression, and forced religious conversion. By using English, the men positioned themselves as Southern Sudanese. Lam (2006) studied how Chinese immigrant youth used language in online communicative contexts to fashion new linguistic and cultural identities. Studying the linguistic practices of two young women in a bilingual chatroom, Lam found that her participants, through their use of English and Cantonese, created an identity as multilingual English speakers—an identity that went against their status as linguistic minority students in their American school. According to Lam, immigrant and refugee youths navigate different “time spaces” in their lives, making it important to study how young people use language within and across a range of sites in understanding and responding to their social worlds. Taking Lam’s argument seriously, I investigated youth language use, which includes but is not limited to English, in classrooms and an afterschool program. Focal youths in this article appropriated and blended different linguistic and discursive practices in the service of figuring out who they are and who they could be in their world.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This article is rooted in sociocultural theories of language (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Lam & Warriner, 2012; Norton & Toohey, 2011), which recognize the many ways of meaning-making, participating, and communicating that are varied in form, value, and consequence. From a sociocultural perspective, language is not merely a fixed system of signs and symbols, and language users are not autonomous beings with a stable set of linguistic competences. Instead, language is a complex social practice, and language users are “differently-positioned members of social and historical collectives, using (and thus learning) language as a dynamic tool” (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 419). The “social practices” turn in language research represented a shift to studying language as it holds meaning and value to the participants, and as it is used and situated in everyday activities. Language research that uses sociocultural frameworks can show how youth enact and, at times, invent language practices for a range of purposes, including defining themselves within or against a group; protecting themselves, friends, and family members from marginalization; and making sense of and critiquing oppressive conditions (Blackburn, 2005).

Within sociocultural frameworks of language, the term *discourse* is used to highlight the relationship between language and identity. According to Gee (2001), discourse is a way of using language, thinking, and even acting that can be used to position or represent oneself as a member of a group. In other words, discourse is an identity kit (Gee, 2001). This means that every time a person speaks, he or she is signaling who he or she is in relation to a discourse community, and negotiating a sense of self. Implicated in this kind of identity work is not only the person’s language and discourse use but also his or her gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Norton, 2010).

In addition to identity, sociocultural theories of language have focused on the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which individuals use language. A focus on context has revealed how power differentials in relationships constrain or promote language use, and how sites of language use and production are characterized by conflict (Norton, 2010; Pratt, 1991). This means that efforts to understand youths’ language and discourse have to consider issues of power in society (Fairclough, 2013), and account for conditions of language use and production, which derive from the social setting and relationships.

This study is also rooted in the idea that language is a resource, which youth not only draw upon to accomplish various tasks but also reconfigure when navigating new environments (Moje, 2002). A resource perspective highlights youths’ knowledge (e.g., understanding social, cultural, and ideological aspects of language), linguistic capacities (e.g., code switching or translating), and interpretive frameworks. According to C. Suárez-Orozco and M. M Suárez-Orozco (2001), immigrant and refugee students possess a valuable interpretive framework, which they call a *dual frame of reference*—or “worldview organized around comparing experiences and opportunities of their home country and the adoptive community” (p. 114). This dual frame of reference supports them in developing more nuanced views of the United States, and living amid contradictions—contradictions of a new life that is painful, yet characterized by promise. More relevant to this article is the central argument that youths’ language and discourse are “transformative resources” in homes, communities, and schools (Luke, 2003). In fact, among the symbolic resources available to youth for organizing their experience and negotiating identities, language is the most flexible and prevalent (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

Guided by sociocultural theories of language, I was able to make sense of what the focal youths said in and across
different settings. That is, I examined the form and meaning of their languages, paying careful attention to what they wanted to convey and accomplish in and through their languages. I also examined the youths’ languages for insight into their developing interpretive frameworks and social identities.

Research on Youth Language

Context and Participants

This article draws on data collected as part of a larger multi-year study on how multilingual youths in an urban school participate in discursive spaces throughout the school (e.g., English as a second language [ESL] class, mainstream English class, afterschool literacy program). Since 2013, I have been working at Hope School (all names are pseudonyms), a Grades 7 to 12 school in the Northeast. For 72% of 502 students, English is not their first language. Eighty-nine percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. I was introduced to the three students through their English and ESL teacher, Mrs. Mitchell. Shortly thereafter, they began to participate in an afterschool literacy program, which Mrs. Mitchell and I facilitated. At the time of writing this article, Farrah was a 10th grader, while Cleo and Monique were seniors. Wishing to challenge the notion that “all refugees have one common, shared inevitable life story” (Mosselson, 2009, p. 456), I briefly describe their backgrounds below.

Cleo was born in Mali to a family of six children. In Mali, she attended a private school. Cleo spoke multiple languages, including English, French, Spanish, and Maasina Fulfulde; however, she worried that she did not know enough English for college. Cleo aspired to become a nurse, flight attendant, or professional interpreter/translator.

Monique was born in Nigeria. Monique identified herself as African and Muslim, and introduced herself as “100% Nigerian.” Monique attended school in Nigeria where English was the primary language of instruction, which facilitated her transition into U.S. secondary schools (Townsend & Fu, 2001). In Nigeria, she spoke Yoruba, and can read and write in Yoruba. Monique planned to study computer science in college.

Farrah traveled from Ethiopia to the United States with her high school-aged brother. Farrah first attended a newcomer’s school, which serves students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). After a year, Farrah transferred to Hope. She spoke Amharic, and read and wrote Arabic. Unlike Monique and Cleo, Farrah wore her hijab (veil covering her head), which marked her identity as a Muslim.

Despite differences in country of origin, linguistic background, and circumstances surrounding their departure, the young women told similar stories about coming to the United States and being placed in foster care. They were served by the state’s Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program. In 1995, the Office for Refugee and Immigrants (ORI) and Department of Children and Families (DCF) decided to provide unaccompanied refugee minors with the same services available to any young person under the state’s care. ORI and DCF contract community organizations in the neighborhood to provide direct services, including foster care, case management by social workers, and medical and legal services.

I have come to know the young women very well. Although I did not come to the United States as a refugee, I am the daughter of immigrants and learned English as my second language. As an immigrant woman of color and English learner, I shared certain experiences with the focal youths; however, I worked to reflexively acknowledge my positionality as a middle-class adult who teaches at a private university, and the frameworks (and privileges) afforded by that positionality.

Data Collection and Analysis

I relied primarily on ethnographic and discourse-analytical approaches to data collection, which recognizes the “variety of forms and functions available for communication, and the ways such forms and functions are part of different ways of life” (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 137). To document and understand youths’ language-in-use, I utilized participant observation, audio-recording, and interviews. For 2 years, I was a participant observer in the focal youths’ ESL and English classes, taught by Mrs. Mitchell—a middle-aged, Anglo-American woman who had been teaching for 8 years. I observed Mrs. Mitchell’s classes 2 or 3 days a week. When taking field notes, I worked to generate ethnographic descriptions of the classroom environment and language culture. I also placed multiple audio-recorders in the classroom. I transcribed the audio files, focusing on interactions between students during a specific activity (e.g., small-group project, whole class discussion, etc.). I did not transcribe moments in the classroom when students engaged in independent work.

In addition to classroom settings, I interacted with the youths in an afterschool context. Since January of 2014, Mrs. Mitchell and I have cofacilitated an afterschool literacy program, designed for immigrant and refugee girls. We met every Friday for 2 hours to read and discuss graphic novels. I audio-recorded the weekly afterschool meetings and transcribed the files. To date, there are 74 transcripts from the afterschool program.

Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the focal youths. The protocol was designed to elicit the young women’s linguistic resources and educational background, their literacy practices across a range of social activity domains (e.g., school, home, mosque, online spaces), and their perceptions of, and experiences in, the United States. Interviews were conducted in Mrs. Mitchell’s classroom, and lasted approximately 25 minutes. I transcribed all three interviews.

My analysis was informed by three sources: field notes and transcripts from Mrs. Mitchell’s first-period English
class and third-period ESL class, transcripts of the afterschool program, and transcripts of the interviews. I utilized different analytical approaches for different data sources. When analyzing field notes, I paid attention to literacy and language events (i.e., observable events which involved language(s), texts, and meaning-making practices). I also tracked who spoke to whom, in what languages, and with what goals. For example, I noted when Monique, attempting to get another student’s attention, said “Ven aca” (Come here), or when Cleo alternated between Spanish and English to help a classmate understand an assignment.

To analyze transcript data from the classroom and afterschool program, I first relied on open coding (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), generating codes that were descriptive and low inference. Some of the codes were words or phrases used by the focal youths, such as “patience” or “fight.” However, other codes were labels that described their communicative practices and behaviors, like “translate.” From the codes, I created a category system, which showed what youths do with language. Some categories were “narrating an experience,” “speaking against another student,” “giving voice to a worldview,” and “displaying a social identity.” Most of the categories fell into three functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and ideological (Halliday, 1973; Kutz, 1997). In the third level of analysis, I reread the transcripts, with the categories of language use and functions in mind. I found that when focal youths spoke, they were fulfilling multiple categories at once. In other words, as participants in a language event, they not only narrated an experience but also conveyed their social identities and gave voice to their worldview. In the third level of analysis, I also paid attention to the context of situation. In ethnographic approaches to discourse, the “context of situation” includes not just what has been said before but also the conditions or events that motivate language use (Schiffrin, 1994). Given the scope of this article, I cannot address all of the different contexts of situation which motivated the youths’ language use—for example, the different pedagogical situations that prompted their language use. Instead, I focus on the context of situation that I call “social, linguistic, and religious marginalization,” which I describe as part of my findings. This specific context was referred to repeatedly by focal youths. It also motivated a range of linguistic responses from the three young women, which revealed their strategies and approaches.

Analyzing the interview transcripts inductively, I learned what kind of schools the youths attended in their respective countries, who they were becoming in the United States, and what beliefs and practices they were internalizing about language (English and their home language). Interview data were triangulated with field notes and transcripts from the classroom and afterschool program. The interview data complemented the other discourse data, providing insight into how the refugee youths interpreted and responded to their experience in a new country and school.

Findings: Responding to Social, Linguistic, and Religious Marginalization With Language

Before identifying the youths’ responses, I describe what I mean by “social, linguistic, and religious marginalization” as a context for language use. Field notes from Mrs. Mitchell’s English class showed instances of English-dominant students sighing or rolling their eyes when Cleo read aloud or laughing at the way she pronounced certain words. Monique asked Mrs. Mitchell one day, “Ms. Did you hear? [Name of classmate] said I had an accent.” Cleo and Monique were aware of how English learners were assigned lower status in their classrooms. In Mrs. Mitchell’s ESL class where all students were learning English as an additional language, there were fewer instances of students ridiculing and silencing each other. During a discussion in the afterschool program, Monique described her experiences in English class, illuminating how she responded to a context where language was used to differentiate and silence students. The discussion included Monique, Cleo, and Maria, a young woman from Puerto Rico.

Monique: But I just notice, ever since I came here, they really turn me into somebody else. Because if you notice, in here [afterschool program] I talk a lot. I do everything. But if you see me in class, do I really talk? Except if Mrs. Mitchell calls me.

Maria: You know what? Last year, you talk more in [ESL] than this year.

Cleo: Yeah. She’s quiet.

Monique: Desmond and Arthur [names of male students in the class] will not let you talk.

Maria: I talk with [another teacher’s name]. I said, like, “I don’t like my first period. I don’t really like Desmond, Arthur.”

Monique: Those people. They’re so. Oh my God.

Cleo: Me? I keep fighting with everyone.

Maria: I don’t like when Desmond say, “Oh. Why we need to stay with the language learner?”

Cleo: Oh, he say that one day. You see. That one we talk- ing about. So mean. They show you different, how you are.

Monique: They always make me feel bad. Every time so hurt, but I control myself. Every time, every time. Why? Why would this happen? (Transcript, Afterschool Program, October 9, 2015)

Monique, Cleo, and Maria were acutely aware of being labeled a “language learner” by the school and some of their classmates. García and Kleifgen (2010) noted that refugee and immigrant youth, many who are emergent bilinguals or multilinguals, understand how language works, and bring a heightened awareness of the ideological aspects of language. The young women in the study understood how language can
be used to create hierarchies between and among students, and justify exclusionary practices. In the discussion, Monique highlighted the role of the classroom in influencing a student’s silence or participation. That is, students choose to be silent as a response to their environment, situation, or people. Finally, the young women pointed to the way they “feel” when they hear their classmates’ language toward them. Language, Monique and Cleo suggested, hurts them.

The youths also experienced discrimination as a result of being Black, African, and Muslim in the United States. In an interview, Monique claimed, “The way they take Muslims here is more like kind of like a racist. It stands side-by-side with racism” (Transcript, Interview, March 9, 2016). For Monique, she experienced both racism and Islamophobia, and saw the two as standing side-by-side in the United States. Also in an interview, Cleo referred to the ways in which classmates perceived Africa and Africans.

If they say something bad [about Africa], it will hurt me and I will like, just fighting, start fighting. I will be very aggressive. That why like, because sometimes I can’t control myself. They say bad about Africa, like we so poor. (Transcript, Interview, December 22, 2015)

These comments speak to the importance of understanding refugee youths’ experiences within the complex intersection of religion, immigration status, race and nationality, and language. Farrah discussed how she was made to feel different and isolated from the student body at her school. She shared the following:

In [newcomer’s school], they, all of them are from different country. I love the student. Even the Spanish. I love them. But when I come here, I hate all the students. Here, I think that I’m different from them. But in [newcomer’s school], I would like, we was like family, like, they were so nice. They’re friendly. All of them. But here, I don’t know. (Transcript, Interview, March 2, 2016)

Farrah used “different/difference” in a way that showed the duality of her experiences with difference. At the newcomer’s school, students came from different countries, which made her feel more connected. However, at Hope School, she saw herself as different, and excluded by her peers.

Through their use of languages, the youths responded to, and at times challenged, their linguistic, religious, and social marginalization. From the data, I identified four approaches that were part of the young women’s repertoire: exercising patience, looking to the future, fighting, and creating solidarity. In all four approaches, the young women used language(s) in creative and strategic ways to accomplish their goals. That is, although the three youths in the study were marginalized because of their language, race, religion, and immigration status, they made sense of their new life in the United States and, at times, even combated their discrimination with and through language.

“Have Patience”

The first approach was to “be patient” or “have patience.” In fact, this was an emic concept for the group, especially for Cleo. Any time she was upset, Cleo would say to herself, “I have to be patient. Patient. Patient. This is my word. Every time I say patient.” Cleo also encouraged Monique and Farrah to adopt an approach of patience. One day, Monique announced that she was going to “fight” a classmate. Cleo cautioned Monique, “No. Don’t get trouble for that. One day I fight and go to [assistant principal]” (Field notes, English Class, January 13, 2016).

In another example, Cleo, unhappy with her foster parent, shared in the afterschool program that she wanted to move to a group home.

Monique: You want to go to a group home?
Cleo: I say that.
Monique: I don’t think that’s the best idea. The devil you know today is better than the one you want to know tomorrow.
Cleo: Yeah. I need patience. (Transcript, Afterschool Program, January 8, 2016)

Again, Cleo, considering her options, used the language of needing “patience.” Monique’s language involved asking a clarifying question (“You want to go to a group home?”) and offering advice in the form of a common Nigerian expression. The young women enlisted this strategy of telling themselves and each other to be patient so that they could avoid trouble with teachers and administrators. They also enlisted this strategy to avoid instability in their home lives as minors in foster care. Although having patience/being patient is a strategy with short-term benefits, it has limitations. Cleo acknowledged that having patience meant that she could not “defend” herself. Farrah adopted a variation of being patient, which was to cope with mistreatment from peers by believing that marginalization is not unique to American schools.

Even in my country, some, some student are still good, some of them are not good. Like, I go different schools. So I’m quiet girl. So, some student, even they are my country, I don’t like them because of the way they are acting to me. It is the same, like the way, how I see they are acting here in United States. (Transcript, Interview, March 2, 2016)

In trying to make sense of her experiences at Hope, she focused on the similarities between students in Ethiopia and in the United States. In both countries, she encountered students who are “good” and “not good.” Furthermore, in both countries, she was the “quiet girl.” Focusing on the similarities between Ethiopia and United States, Farrah worked to normalize her treatment at Hope.

The strategy of being patient has limitations in that it does not mitigate the toll of discrimination experienced by youth. Furthermore, in being patient, youth can end up perpetuating
their linguistic and social marginalization. In an interview, Farrah shared an incident in her history class:

They call me that because I’m wearing, like that (pointing to her hijab). ISIS who bomb in New York. In [History] class, we was watching the movie and there was one boy, and he was telling to his friend, “Do you see that girl? She’s the one who have bombed the New York.” The way he’s looking, I know that he’s talking about me because nobody was in the class except me who is Muslim. (Transcript, Interview, March 2, 2016)

Sirin and Fine (2008) found that school was the setting where Muslim American students reported being mistreated the most. Farrah’s classmate used language to mark Farrah as a terrorist. Farrah, however, did not “speak back” to his statement, even though she thought it made no sense. Although emphasizing the resilience of recent immigrant and refugee youth, C. Suárez-Orozco (2000) cautioned against the toll that discrimination can take on youth development.

**Look Forward: The Value of a U.S. Degree**

The second approach used by the young women was using language to remind themselves of their end goal of obtaining a college degree in the United States and occupying positions of power in their home countries. When I asked the young women in the afterschool program what motivated them, they said the following:

Farrah: The school.
Monique: School.
Cleo: If you study here, you have more opportunity than your home.
Monique: Well. There’s nothing too bad about the school ‘cause when I was in Nigeria, I was going to school. I was getting my education, but the only difference is that, let me say, the degree matters a lot. If I take an American degree to Nigeria, oh my God, I make money. That’s why a lot of people come to the United States. Just to study. So, the degree.
Farrah: Degree. Yeah. Mmmm hmm.
Cleo: Even you go back you on your country with your diploma, you can get higher than people who study more than you.
Farrah: Yeah, I see many people they finish high school, they will, they will come to America.
Monique: Degree is the main thing. Oh my God. If you have a degree.
Cleo: Even the person who study more than you, you will be higher than that person.
Monique: If I get my degree here now and I go to Nigeria, they will look for me. Like they will, I will be the one to say how much I want to collect for my salary. Like I will be the one to tell them, “Well, if you cannot pay me this, I think I’m gone.” (Transcript, Afterschool Program, January 8, 2016)

This was one of several discussions that revealed how focal youths used their dual frame of reference to compare opportunities in the United States with those in their home countries. In calling attention to her education in Nigeria, Monique counteracted the misconception that African countries have no school systems. In her interview, Monique mentioned the rigorous science, foreign language, and geography curriculum in her previous schooling. The young women agreed that a degree from the United States meant access to positions of economic power. This is not because a U.S. degree is innately better, but because of the value that others (e.g., prospective employers) place on it. They imagined a future that includes returning to their home countries to lead powerful lives. This differed from the Vietnamese refugee students in Zhou and Bankston’s (1998) work, who were oriented toward achieving social mobility in their host country. The young women’s aspirations most likely reflect the fact that they left behind family members, including parents and siblings in their home countries.

**Fight**

The youth practiced patience and reminded themselves (and each other) of their goal of obtaining a college degree in the United States. However, there were moments when those approaches were not enough, and the girls chose to “fight.” Examining ethnographic discourse and classroom observation data, I learned that fighting happened in several different ways—verbally confronting classmates who silence them, critiquing the school’s exclusionary practices, and appropriating the language of those who marginalize them. In the rest of this section, I will show how refugee youths used their languages to fight their social and linguistic marginalization.

**Fighting honorably.** The first form of “fighting” involved confronting classmates. Below, the young women, while in the afterschool program, described their encounters with one particular student, Desmond. Monique and Cleo were troubled by Desmond laughing at an English language learner.

Monique: Whenever she’s about to talk or read, they start saying something or they start laughing. Why? Why would you do that? Go to somebody else’s country where they don’t speak English and see how hard it is. They never learn that. Never, ever. Those guys. I am waiting for the day, I’m so gonna insult one of them. I swear. I’m waiting for that day.
Cleo: No, don’t get trouble for that.
Monique: No. I can’t get in trouble. See Cleo? There are sometimes when you get into trouble, you get in trouble honorably. It’s good to get in trouble honorably than get in trouble embarrassed. If I fight with Desmond, I get in trouble honorably. I will so beat the
person blue black. I am waiting for that day. (Transcript, Afterschool Program, October 9, 2015)

During the academic year, Monique never physically fought with Desmond. However, in 2 years of observing Mrs. Mitchell’s classes, I noted two instances where Monique engaged in verbal altercations—first with Desmond and then with another student. Monique distinguished between getting in trouble “honorably” and getting in trouble “embarrassed.” Although Cleo cautioned Monique about the consequences of fighting, Monique believed that fighting a classmate who silences others is honorable. In this statement, she used language to present herself not as a rude person who would insult a classmate but as a person with honor.

Voicing dissent. The second form of “fighting” involved critiquing unjust practices in their home, school, and foster care program. While observing Mrs. Mitchell’s classroom in the winter of 2016, I noticed that Cleo was upset. She had received a call from her foster parent who forbade Cleo from visiting the public library after school. Her foster parent suspected that Cleo was going to the library to use Facebook. After explaining the situation to a close friend, Cleo said, “I want to. Not fighting, but disagree with something” (Field notes, February 13, 2016). In her comment, she differentiated between “fighting” and “disagreeing.” However, disagreeing with a person, especially an adult, was frowned upon. For example, when Cleo questioned several of the house rules for being unreasonable, her foster parent, a Dominican woman, responded by asking her, “Tu eres abogado?” (Are you a lawyer?) (Interview, December 22, 2015). Teachers lamented immigrant and refugee youths who questioned authority figures, describing them as becoming “too Americanized.” This reveals the double standard imposed upon students: They were expected to adapt to their host society by forfeiting aspects of themselves (e.g., language, religious practices, etc.), while ensuring that they were not becoming “too Americanized.”

Monique also used language as a weapon, speaking out against unfair policies and pointing to what was problematic with the status quo. Monique “fought” by questioning the student body government and yearbook committee. At a senior assembly, Monique stood up and addressed the unequal representation of students in the yearbook. This resulted in unequal representation of students in the yearbook, which Monique addressed at a senior assembly. She also used her language in the classroom, with her math teacher. She said, “Like explain. Explain. I fight with [math teacher’s name] all the time because I need him to explain to me” (Transcript, Afterschool Program, May 10, 2016). Fighting here means asking for a different kind of teaching from the teacher so that she could understand a difficult math concept. She also used her language to bring attention to problematic policies in her foster care program. She asked the program director why students were discouraged from communicating with other refugee youths in the area. Although Monique was not successful at changing the program’s policies, she planned to address a group of influential sponsors and program evaluators, who visit the community organization every year. In all three examples of Monique “fighting,” she was not rejecting her school or the Unaccompanied Refugees Minors program. Instead, she wished to engage with her classmates, teachers, and program directors so that there could be inclusion, as well as increased opportunities for herself and other youth.

Appropriating language. The third form of “fighting” involved appropriating the language that holds power in certain discourse communities. The language that was used and valued at home and by many peer groups at Hope was Spanish. Cleo, who lived in a Dominican household, spoke Spanish fluently. Some of her classmates thought she was Dominican. In fact, below is a conversation that I recorded in Mrs. Mitchell’s classroom. It began when a student said, “She [Cleo] is Dominican.”

Monique: No.
Student: Yeah. She’s Dominican.
Cleo: I’m African.
Student: You’re African? But you’re talking all Dominican.
Cleo: A lot of people tell me that. Some of them say I have Dominican accent. (Transcript, ESL Class, October 8, 2015)

If discourse is akin to an identity kit (Gee, 2001), then Cleo was expanding not only her communicative repertoire but also her identity options. In certain settings, and with certain groups of people, Spanish leads to greater social capital than English. Although the school administrators and teachers valued English, specifically academic English, the majority of students at Hope were Spanish speakers who used Spanish in the hallways and lunch room. Also, to communicate with her foster parent and “defend” herself at home, Cleo had to understand and use Spanish. Monique was also learning Spanish while living with foster parents and foster siblings who speak Spanish.
Cleo decided that she needed to learn Spanish while she was at the shelter. In an interview, I asked what influenced her to learn Spanish.

When I come first, I don’t know how to speak Spanish and she [a young woman from Honduras] talking about me . . . She tell me one day on the public, “Negrita. No me habla. No somo igual.” She say, “Black Girl. Don’t talk to me. We’re not the same.” That was so bad. I was feeling like so bad when they translate to me. You have to learn Spanish. I start like that (snapping her fingers). (Transcript, Interview, December 22, 2015)

Cleo responded to the situation by learning Spanish. She reasoned that if she knew Spanish, then she would always know what others were saying about her. Cleo’s decision shows her theories about language and its use. Language can be used to exclude a person and position her as an outsider—as the young woman from Honduras did. By appropriating the language that was once used to exclude her, Cleo “flipped” the script. Cleo also understood that language creates access to information and knowledge in a particular social space—in this case, what her peers at the shelter were saying about her. Examining how Cleo narrated this experience, I noted several moves she used as a storyteller, especially how she was considerate of her audience, providing English translations for Spanish words and phrases.

Cleo’s strategy of appropriating language is similar to the strategies documented by Blackburn (2005), who illustrated the varied ways in which Black queer youths engaged in a form of linguistic warfare, defending themselves against heteronormative oppression, and asserting their identity and dignity. Cleo shared how she surprised two girls in the school’s locker room.

If you saw me, nobody will say, “Oh I speak Spanish and I understand Spanish.” Two girls, they start speaking Spanish, say something, but I was next to them. They never know I speak Spanish. And in Spanish, they say, “Oh. She’s Black.” They know I’m African. After, I go to the girls. “Hola. Como estas? (Hello. How are you?)” “Tu hablas Espanol?” (You speak Spanish?) “Si” (Yes). (Transcript, Interview, December 22, 2015)

Cleo used Spanish for subterfuge and subversion. She could pass the hallways, listen to conversations undetected, and know what was being said about her or other students. She would sometimes surprise her classmates by contributing to class discussions in Spanish.

Monique created agency through language as well. On several occasions, she expressed feeling “left out” by her Spanish-speaking peers. While observing Mrs. Mitchell’s classroom, I heard Monique say to a classmate: “The question I want to ask is, I have a question.” When this failed to elicit a response, she added, “Pregunta. Pregunta.” (Question. Question) (Field notes, English Class, March 29, 2016). In another example, comforting Cleo, who was upset at being gossiped about by a classmate, Monique said, “Don’t mind her. She’s chismosa (gossip)” (Field notes, English Class, May 11, 2016).

Create Solidarity

In the example above, language is also used to create solidarity and pleasure. When Monique used the word, chismosa, she made Cleo laugh. I saw Monique using chismosa—as opposed to the English word, gossip—as an instance of not only linguistic appropriation but also linguistic play and playfulness. The refugee youth were hurt by some languages (English and Spanish), but they also used languages to mark their solidarity, and approach life in the United States with humor. During a small-group project in Mrs. Mitchell’s classroom, Monique said, “Na-Wow-O” which made Rita, a classmate from Ghana, laugh. I happened to be sitting near the small group, which prompted me to ask,

[Author]: What does that mean?
Monique: You [Rita] laughed so you better say it. I don’t know. It’s like a slang. Nigerian. I don’t know. We use it every time, for anything. It depends whatever the person you are talking to, at that moment. Say, for instance, if I try to, if I try to take Cleo’s phone and she doesn’t want to give me, and I probably need it and I get mad, I’m like, “Na-Wow-O.” Or like, maybe she’s gossiping to me about something. I’d be like, “Na-Wow-O”

[Author]: And it’s also used in Ghana?
Monique: No. It’s Nigerian. But they say it in most Nigerian movies and most Africans watch Nigerian movies. (Transcript, English Class, January 14, 2016)

Youth used language to mark their solidarity as African women. Monique knew that Rita understood “Na-Wow-O” from watching Nigerian movies. Monique used insider language, creating a discursive space that was protected from non-Africans.

In a different example from the afterschool program, we read and discussed the graphic novel, V for Vendetta (Moore, 1989). It is set in London after a nuclear war has destroyed much of the world, and England is under the rule of Fascism. The fascist government forcibly removed people—Black, Pakistanis, gays, and political dissidents—to a concentration camp. Farrah said that she was confused why Pakistanis were sent to the camp.

Farrah: Why they mention Pakistani. They’re White, no?
Monique: They’re not, Pakistanis are not White.
Farrah: Some of them is White. Some of them have dark [interrupted by Monique].
Monique: They are not White. Okay Farrah. This is it. People with, like, from my own understanding and from what I’ve seen, most people that they call White
are basically from Europe. And Pakistanis and Indians and everything, like, Jillian [student in the afterschool program] is Asian, you understand? And like, the Hispanics are Latinos, they call them, you understand? Asians, you know, Black, Cape Verdean. Yeah. They are not White. Pakistanis are not White.

Cleo: They getting sent there because their skin. They just say their skin color and that look like racist? It’s not right. It’s not right.

Monique: Me, I would go. I would be sent to the camp.

Cleo: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That time, yes.

Monique: I would get a first-class ticket.

Cleo: I would be there first because I’m all dark.

Monique: You? They would find you real quick [girls laugh].

Cleo: I’ll be there first, and you (referring to Monique) second.

Monique: And Farrah third. [laughing] (Transcript, Afterschool Program, January 8, 2016)

The young women worked to make sense of race and what makes someone “White.” Using phenotype as a marker, Farrah stated that some Pakistanis are White. Hence, she was puzzled as to why Pakistanis were sent to the camp. Monique used language to educate Farrah about the usage of “White” to refer to White Europeans, listing ethnic and racial groups that would not be considered White. In her explication of Whiteness, she offered the preface, “From my own understanding and from what I have seen,” signaling how her own understanding of racial identity has been formed and informed by her experiences in the United States. Cleo used her language to call attention to what was happening in the book as racist. Monique used language to establish her identity as well as the identities of Cleo and Farrah as Black women, who, in the fictional world of the novel, would get sent to the camp. Then, Monique and Cleo coconstructed the order in which they would be sent to the camps—Cleo first, Monique second, and Farrah third—based on shades of skin color. Finally, the girls used language to provoke laughter, thereby making it possible to discuss racism and racial persecution. Monique’s use of “first-class ticket” is a play on language as first-class ticket signals that the ticket holder will be receiving the best treatment, not be sent to a concentration camp.

The young women also used their language to share and extend their knowledge of diverse religions, including Islam. While discussing a panel from *V for Vendetta*, in which the protagonist feeds a degenerate clergyman a communion wafer filled with cyanide, Farrah asked what exactly the clergyman was eating. Maria, who had attended Catholic schools in Puerto Rico, explained the significance of a communion wafer. She then shared her own religious background.

Maria: I grew up in a Christian family . . . My mom is Christian. My dad is Christian. But I go to Catholic school.

Cleo: I’m so confused. What is the difference? Like Muslim, we have two. All is Muslim but we have different. Wahhabis and Tijani.1

Farrah: Sunni and Shia.2

Cleo: Yeah. It’s different, but it’s same religion.

Farrah: No. It’s different. Sunni people believe in Prophet Muhammad, but Shia believe in Prophet Ali. Ali. The nephew of Muhammad. So it is different. We believe in Ali.

Cleo: Like my dad, he’s Tijani.

Farrah: Tijani. So he, your dad’s Shia?

Cleo: It’s not Shia. It’s Tijani. I don’t know how to say it in her language, but I know my language. (Transcript, Afterschool Program, March 4, 2016)

Attempting to make sense of how Catholicism differs from Christianity, Cleo drew on her own framework, wondering whether, like in Islam, Catholicism and Christianity are different denominations of the same religion. She offered the example of Tijani and Wahhabis. What stood out in this exchange is how Cleo’s language for talking about Islam differed from Farrah’s language. In Cleo’s language, her Father was a devout Tijani, whereas in Farrah’s language, one was either Sunni or Shia. Farrah also used her language to educate the group about the differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims, namely, that they believe in different prophets. Farrah also revealed her own religious belief through the statement, “We believe in Ali.”

In the transcript below, the young women in the afterschool program were discussing the attacks in Paris, and in San Bernardino, California. This prompted Cleo to talk:

Cleo: I don’t know why, but I’m so embarrassed. Going on in the world, Muslim, Muslim people. That’s so embarrassing to be a Muslim.

Monique: No, it’s not.

Cleo: I am not embarrassed by my religion, but the people doing that, they embarrassing all Muslim.

Farrah: They want to make Muslim religion down, that’s why they’re doing that.

Monique: I think there’s terrorist everywhere. There’s terrorist in all. I killed this person because Islam told me to do that. I don’t believe that there is a religion for harming people, or doing something bad. I think there might be a lot of bad people who say that they are Muslim, but that doesn’t mean that they are Muslim.

Cleo: But some people who is doing that they’re Muslim.

(Transcript, Afterschool Program, December 4, 2015)

Cleo struggled with feelings of embarrassment and doubt. She began by saying, “I am so embarrassed. That’s so embarrassing to be Muslim.” However, Monique’s response that it is not embarrassing to be Muslim helped Cleo to clarify her feelings. Cleo clarified that she is embarrassed, not by her religion, but by individuals who use her religion to kill.
Farrah theorized that the terrorists were against Islam because their actions undermine its legitimacy and value. Monique asserted that there are terrorists in all countries and religions. She added that terrorists might identify themselves as Muslims, but they are not practicing Islam, which denounces harming oneself and others. Cleo, however, pointed to the fact that the terrorists not only identify themselves as Muslims, but they are seen by others as Muslims. In their language use, Monique and Cleo put forward different theories around what makes someone Muslim. While Monique emphasized the role of religious practice (i.e., practicing Islam and its tenets), Cleo emphasized self-identification. The young women discussed issues of race and religion in the afterschool program, using multiple languages and discourses to wrestle with their experiences in the United States as refugee youth who are African and Muslim. That is, they used language to create a safe space (Fine & Weis, 1998) where they grapple with difficult issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, and speak back to dominant narratives about them.

Discussion and Implications

In her review of research on refugee students in the United States, McBrien (2005) noted that refugee youths residing in high-poverty urban areas fall into a “negative, subtractive assimilation pattern” (p. 355). My work with the young women supports the notion that refugee youths in urban areas face subtractive interactions in school (Valenzuela, 2010) and, in some cases, at home. Cleo, Farrah, and Monique experienced social and linguistic marginalization, and encountered racism and religious discrimination. This article focused on how refugee youths responded to subtractive interactions through their languages. There are differences in how they responded to social and linguistic marginalization—differences that are specific to the individual. Farrah did not openly voice her dissent or appropriate Spanish. She held onto her identity as the “quiet girl,” and coped with what was said about her in the classroom. Cleo emphasized self-identification. The young women discussed issues of race and religion in the afterschool program, using multiple languages and discourses to wrestle with their experiences in the United States as refugee youth who are African and Muslim. That is, they used language to create a safe space (Fine & Weis, 1998) where they grapple with difficult issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, and speak back to dominant narratives about them.

Findings about how refugee youths use language suggest that schools can do more to create inclusive discourse communities, by which I mean sites where multiple discourses and languages are at play, and where youths’ experiences, identities, and inquiries are acknowledged as legitimate sources of knowledge. In such discursive spaces, youth can engage in dialogue—across differences in nationality, race, religion, and language—about what it means to belong to, and lead powerful lives in their new country. In other words, an inclusive discourse community does not need its members to be from similar racial and/or linguistic backgrounds. Perhaps not surprisingly, findings from the study show that such dialogue occurred more often in the afterschool programs than they did in the classrooms. Therefore, in addition to creating different discursive environments, schools can become more mindful of the discourse communities that already exist in classrooms. The focal youths shared experiences of exclusion from a range of discursive spaces (e.g., honors classes, whole class and small-group discussions, student government). Some spaces were designated, implicitly or explicitly, as “off-limits” to students who are English language learners, recent-arrivals, and Muslims.

The study’s findings point to how youths at times not only tolerated but also challenged their linguistic and social marginalization. The young women did not always respond with passive acceptance. Instead, they used their language(s) to speak back to policies that constrain opportunities for English language learners and refugee youths. Cleo and Monique even appropriated Spanish so that they could subvert those who use it to exclude them. However, the young women blamed their Spanish-speaking peers for being mean and unfriendly. They did not recognize why Spanish-speaking students used Spanish in a school that privileged English proficiency. Much like how the youths in this study used language, the Spanish-speaking students used their language to exclude non-Spanish speakers, signal their linguistic identity, elicit pleasure, and subvert the school’s language policies. Therefore, an implication emerging from this study is for educators to support all youth to explore language-in-use, identity, and power. Such explorations could help young people to “develop metacognitive understandings of discourses so they can make conscious and purposeful choices about which discourse(s) to use when and where in order to accomplish what kind of work” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 93).

The young women’s responses to the social, religious, and linguistic marginalization in their school also carry implications for researchers. The focal youths—who are learning about when they can talk, with whom, about what issues, in what languages and discourses, and with what consequences—point to “multiple sets of language norms or norm-generating practices [that] guide people’s behaviors across diverse spaces” (Lam & Warriner, 2012, p. 196). The concept that language practices are embedded in and created from multiple centers within an institution or environment is called polycentricity (Lam & Warriner, 2012). Researchers of youth language and literacies can generate scholarship that not only links the use of language(s) to its centers, each with its own set of ideologies, policies, and human relationships, but also illustrates the ways in which the different centers within an institution or environment (e.g., school, neighborhood) have porous borders, which youth push on and cross over in creative and purposeful ways.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented an analysis that focused on how refugee youths responded to subtractive interactions through their languages. The young women in the study recruited their
language and discourses so that they could mark their identity as Muslim and African, form friendships, grapple with issues of race and religion, and critique unfair practices in and out of school. When recruiting their language(s), the youths were learning how to make strategic choices concerning where and with whom they could express their confusions about, disappointment with, and hope for life in the United States.

In 2012, African-born immigrants and refugees in the United States numbered approximately 1.6 million (Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). Given that the population has doubled each decade since 1970, the number is expected to increase in the following years (Gambino et al., 2014). Tied to this demographic reality will be the ways in which schools, especially in new immigrant destinations, support recently arrived immigrant and refugee youths from Africa, and how the youths experience and learn in American high schools. In response to an increasingly multicultural and multilingual world, many schools in the United States—explicitly stated or implicitly carried out through policies—are looking to help students “fit in.” Beyond “fitting in” to a supposed norm of English monolingualism, the young people in this article tried on, questioned, and at times appropriated languages and discourses, and in the process “fashion[ed] new linguistically and culturally dexterous ways of being” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 91).

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Notes

1. Tijanis refer to the adherents of Tijaniyyah, a Sufi order within Sunni Islam (widely spread in West Africa; Hill, 2006). Wahhabis are adherents of Wahhabism, which is a Sunni Islamic movement. However, unlike Tijaniyyah, Wahhabism “seeks to purify Islam of any innovations or practices that deviate from the seventh-century teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions” (Blanchard, 2007, p. 1).

2. After Prophet Muhammad died in A.D. 632, he was succeeded by Abu Bakr. However, there was debate between whether Abu Bakr or a male relative of Muhammad should be chosen successor. Shia Muslims believe that Muhammad would have wanted to be succeed by Ali ibn Ali Talib, his closest male relative (Armstrong, 2002).

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