MORE THAN ENGLISH: KAREN REFUGEES NEGOTIATING THEIR LIFESTYLE IN A COSMOPOLITAN CITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnographic case study of a Karen refugee resettlement community in Trident City. Due to oppressive control by the Burmese government in Burma, the Karen National Union, a political organization with an armed military called the Karen National Liberation Army, has been fighting an endless on-and-off war against the Burmese military. The outcome of war has made Karen villagers become refugees in Thailand’s Western and Northern provinces. Through UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), these Karen refugees find a new life in the U.S., specifically for this study, Trident City. Resettling in a new environment, particularly a cosmopolitan one in which the Karen refugees have to adjust their new lives to a neoliberal lifestyle, is a very difficult challenge. The challenge becomes obvious when we see a large number of refugees who have no place to work due to the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs as well as their lack of relevant education that would allow them to work other jobs. Life is ever more difficult because they have low cultural capital, which is cultural knowledge that is widely accepted by the elite or majority of the country. In order to accustom their lives better, the Karen must increase their cultural capital. This is typically done through the acquisition of the English-language, furthering education, particularly a post-secondary education and the experiences of living life in a neoliberal context Trident City has to offer. I observed Karen refugees in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class setting, home tutoring, and mentoring sessions to understand their process of settlement. In the end, the Karen are having to struggle in order to live a better life than their former lives in the Thai refugee camps. As they live their lives in the U.S., they gain bits and pieces of cultural capital along the way. How much cultural capital do they need to survive the harsh realities of a neoliberal lifestyle?
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Straight from the gut I want to say that I have been in school since I was four years old to the age of 35 nonstop. I have matriculated a Bachelor’s in Science, a Master’s in Business Administration, two Master’s in Art degrees and I have finally come to an end point, not necessarily a final destination in my endeavors to keep learning, but to a point where I need to go out and see what lies beyond the structures of education. I do need to still take a look back and acknowledge my mom, Pailin Roungchai (AKA Thim). She has been there for me throughout all my 31 years of schooling and I do not know if I could have ever achieved what I have so far without her support. She has also fulfilled her promise to my father, who asked my mom before passing away to support my educational aspirations to the fullest. I want to acknowledge my best friend Mark, who has been my pal going through the same process of getting a doctoral degree, I hope he will soon persevere and relish in the moment as I am doing now. Another great friend going through the process is Fon, may she finish as soon as she can so we can partake in more celebrations together. I must thank my family both in the U.S. and in Thailand and close friends both in Thailand, the U.S. and everywhere in-between, who have understood why I must put life on hold and cheered me on towards my goals of getting a Ph.D. I would like to thank my friend Peach, during our times together, was a great listener and accompanied me to local coffee shops and libraries as I worked on this project. My colleague and close friend Nang, without your mentorship, I would not succeed and finish this dissertation in the time I needed to have it done in my life. Also my colleague and friend Pai, thank you for your help as well with my dissertation and making my time at school a great experience. My editor, Hillary, thank you for your help, as you can see, it finally all came together. Also many thanks to my other editor Jacob, who had helped me through the process of applying to the doctoral program and past term
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# Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 2: GENERAL BACKGROUND ......................................................................................... 28

CHAPTER 3: LIMITED EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR KAREN ........................................ 57

CHAPTER 4: LIVING IN AMERICA: WHAT WAS I THINKING? ..................................................... 67

CHAPTER 5: EDUCATION FOR SURVIVAL ..................................................................................... 98

CHAPTER 6: LINKING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT ..................................................................... 130

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 163

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................. 189

APPENDIX A: MAP OF KAREN STATE ......................................................................................... 198

APPENDIX B: REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS DIAGRAM .................................................. 199

APPENDIX C: TOP 10 LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY INCOMING REFUGEES IN 2012 ................. 200

APPENDIX D: THE TOP 10 STATES THAT BURMESE REFUGEES ARE BEING RESETTLED FROM 2005 TO 2009 ........................................................................................................... 201

APPENDIX E: SUPERIOR CLEANERS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .................................................. 202

APPENDIX F: THE FIRST THANKSGIVING ..................................................................................... 203

APPENDIX G: EMAIL TO THE KAREN GROUP IN MINNESOTA .................................................. 204
Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation examines the Karen refugee resettlement process and their lifestyle in the United States. The Karen have been ousted by the Burmese government and therefore migrated to Thai refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. Eventually, they resettle in countries such as the United States. The history of the Karen consists of their people moving constantly, trying to adapt to the culture of each place they resettle. This study looks at how older and younger Karen refugee adults negotiate their ways of living to a neoliberal lifestyle with the help of an English language education and how learning English in this location is not just about the language itself but about the culture and lifestyle that is embedded within language. I became interested in the Karen through reading literature about their stay in the Thai refugee camps in Thailand’s Tak province. Growing up as a first generation Thai-American, I have always been interested in doing research on social cultural issues that exists in Thailand. Having a background in Educational Policy Studies, the Karen refugee settlement in the Thai refugee camps and their system of education gave me interest. However, many of these refugees would end up being resettled in the United States and some arrive in cosmopolitan cities that provide a different lifestyle than what they are accustomed to. As an ESL (English as a Second Language) tutor to this group of refugees, I became interested in how English language acquisition has become a means for these refugees to help integrate themselves into a U.S. cosmopolitan culture. An even greater challenge to resettlement is to negotiate ways of living in a neoliberal society through the cultural capital that the Karen have gathered throughout their past experiences from living in Burma, Thailand, and their present stay in an urban city in the United States. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to address the following questions: “How do Karen negotiate the complexity of daily survival in a cosmopolitan city in the U.S. given the
emphasis of English fluency as a means of success in a neoliberal American culture? What are the ways in which ESL classes assist or hinder that process?"

This dissertation project consists of my one-and-a half years of observations pertaining to three Karen families, three Karen adults attending ESL at a community center, and a young male Karen who recently arrived in the United States when this study started to his present stay here in America. My observations are intertwined with my ESL lessons to the refugees. From the three families that I talk about, two of the families I teach at a refugee agency and home tutor. Another family and three individual Karen adults I have met at a community center that teaches ESL. My last participant is a young male Karen refugee whom I have known through being his mentor at a refugee agency.

In order to try to understand the Karen I provide a historical overview of their origins and the struggles that many minorities in Burma share, the process for resettlement and how has their resettlement been. Before I talk about my observations I discuss two theories, which are cultural capital and neoliberalism in order for us to visualize the struggles that come with their resettlement. My observations are brief ethnographic stories that I tell of my time with the Karen. I spent most of my time teaching them ESL but also learning about their lives as well when I am tutoring them at the refugee agency, at their home, community center and being a mentor showing one young adult Karen refugee what life in Trident City¹ is like through my eyes. To better explain why the Karen are going through the different challenges for resettlement, I will discuss cultural capital and how it may impact the ways of living for Karen refugees resettling in a neoliberal context.

¹ The names for places associated with Karen resettlement are fictitious to protect their anonymity.
Theoretical Framework

Karen refugees are resettling in an environment in which they are the minority, again. They seem to have to play this role everywhere they go, whether in Burma, Thailand, and now the United States. Being a minority in the U.S. also means that their access to economic and social stability, as well as mobility, becomes limited. The lack of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 51) to gain access to opportunities that are deemed successful by U.S. white standards become hampered not only by their refugee status but by their limited English proficiency. In addition, the realities of neoliberalism, which emphasizes individualized entrepreneurialism within a capitalist framework, eschewing governmental support also add additional barriers to successful transition to the United States. Both theories, cultural capitalism and neoliberalism, interact extensively with each other. Cultural capital stocks up cultural values which are various assets that contributes to the collective aspects of a people or group (Throsby, 1999, p. 6). Neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Also, Neoliberalism is an economic environment defined by trade agreements that create difficult financial situations for those who do not directly profit from them. For this project, cultural capital pertains to the resettlement experiences the Karen have as they try to acculturate their lives in the U.S., and with neoliberalism relating to the current economic environment, a global environment rather than a local environment that the U.S. used to abide by before globalization, in which they are gaining these experiences. The following section provides details on each theory and its relation to the Karen refugee experience.
Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, as mentioned, is defined as capital that stocks up cultural values, which are various assets that contribute to the collective aspects of a people or group (Throsby, 1999, p. 6). These assets can be tangible items like artworks, fashion, music, or anything that exemplifies cultural existence (p. 7). They can also be intangible like a set of ideas, practices, beliefs and traditions (p. 7). For my interest, I am emphasizing the intangible aspects of cultural capital, looking at the English language as a cultural capital that Karen refugees may obtain through an English-language education. For instance, gaining an English-language education may increase a Karen refugee’s confidence to socialize themselves with other groups of people residing in Trident City, which brings in various cultural perspectives from numerous ethnicities. Overall, English language is the lingua franca of the mainstream society in Trident City and an English-language education may enhance the Karen refugee’s social mobility. However, it is not only about English acquisition but all that it entails, the rights and privileges of “mainstream whiteness”; but that the entrée to that exclusive membership comes with limitations.

In exemplifying a more technical outlook and giving a small history on cultural capital theory, the concept was coined in 1973 by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. In his book, *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986) talks about cultural capital as three subgroups. He first talks about cultural capital from the *embodied state* in which capital exists in the long lasting dispositions of the mind and body (pp. 241-258). This means that cultural capital, as being part of a state of mind, is accumulated through a person’s experience. It can actually change a person’s way of thinking through impressions from their environment, like the period, society, and social class in which they exist (pp. 241-258). For example, acquiring certain local knowledge is vital for refugees to get around. In regards to large cities like Trident City,
experiencing the different ways of public transportation, whether by bus, train, or even taxi, would help a refugee become as mobile as a person who is a native to Trident City. This means the refugee first needs to know how to read the words “bus,” “train,” and “taxi” so they can read the signs that will help them utilize the type of transportation that is needed for their situation. Then they have to find these signs so they know where to wait for the bus, train, or taxi. Once they have successfully experienced the different means of public transportation, they have gained an embodied state of cultural capital to become as mobile as any Trident City native.

The second manifestation of cultural capital is the objectified state, the accumulation of cultural goods such as pictures, popular literature, educational books such as dictionaries, instruments, machines and so on (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-258). In the objectified state, cultural capital has a number of properties, which are defined only with cultural capital in the embodied form (pp. 241-258). For instance, a person can own a machine like a computer, which is economic capital because the computer can be sold for money or traded in for other valuables. In relation to the embodied state, having greater knowledge of the computer, knowing all its functions and potential uses, would help the person sell the computer to a buyer.

The third manifestation of cultural capital is the institutionalized state. The institutionalized state of cultural capital is also a form of objectification but sets itself apart from the objectified state (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-258). The institutionalized state establishes the power of recognition, in which the one objectifying has a secure belief in him or herself and others’ perception of his/her ideas. In other words, having something like a degree from an accredited institution makes you seem more credible. For instance, going back to the computer sale example, if the person selling the computer were to have a bachelor’s degree in computer science from an accredited university, what he/she says about the computer may have more value
than someone who does not have a bachelor’s degree in computer science and is selling the same computer.

Bourdieu identifies individuals as possessing cultural capital if they have acquired competence in society’s high-status culture (Mahar, 1990, p. 147). The most important cultural capital from the three subgroups that were mentioned would be the embodied state (Throsby, 1999, p. 4). This is because the embodied state is cultural capital at its fundamental state linked to the body and presupposes embodiment (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). Education can be seen as playing a key role in maintaining the status quo (Sullivan, 2001, p. 894). This adds on to the institutionalized state that Bourdieu was mentioning, in which social inequalities become legitimated by educational credentials held by those who are in dominant positions (p. 894). In regards to other defining points of cultural capital it can be said that cultural capital is embodied by the individual and cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift of bequest and purchase of exchange (Bourdieu, 1996, as cited in Brammer, 2002, p. 16).

Another simple way of defining cultural capitalism is McLaren’s (1998) perception of cultural capital as “the general cultural background, knowledge, dispositions, and skills that are passed on from one generation to another. Cultural capital represents ways of talking, acting, and socializing as well as language practices, values and types of dress and behavior” (p. 189). Lamont and Lareau (1988) propose that cultural capital is institutionalized, widely shared, high cultural signals (which are attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge behaviors, goals and credentials) used for social cultural exclusion (p. 156). This is interesting because it focuses on the exclusion of others, meaning, cultural capitalism is a means for direct exclusion.
Linguistic Capital: A Subset of Cultural Capital

Within the embodied state Bourdieu wrote of linguistic capital. This is one of the more important capitals that Bourdieu mentions because it mainly pertains to my research on Karen refugee resettlement in Trident City. Linguistic capital is the ability to speak with confidence, correctness, and grace, which would be regarded as a form of cultural capital (DiMaggio, 2007, p. 167). Linguistic capital may also be considered capital, which represents status, power, and benefit through the quality command of language (Jiang, 2009, p. 1). Linguistic practices provide access to material resources, in which case linguistic practices become a resource in its own right (Gal, 1989, p. 353). For instance, linguistic practices in school are often the forms of access to other valuable linguistic practices, such as literacy (Michael, 1986, pp. 94-116).

Gal (1989) also notes that special kinds of verbal skills form central components in many professions for advanced capitalism (p. 353). A good example would be a lawyer, who has gained a lexical knowledge of “Legal English,” English used by lawyers and judges in a court system, for their professional work. Knowledge of Legal English is a good example of how society institutionalizes certain ways English is represented as being prestigious. This reminds me of cultural capitalism as sometimes being misunderstood as cultural knowledge or linguistic knowledge that helps people get ahead when realistically that knowledge is supported by institutions, universities, the state or established churches, then it becomes a cultural resource (DiMaggio, 2007, p. 168). In other words, it is not that cultural knowledge itself that is prestigious but those who (typically the dominant group) legitimates what cultural knowledge is considers it prestigious. What then becomes prestigious is a vital resource for people who want to live a “good life” under the authority of the dominant group.
So far what has been said makes it seem that linguistic forms or certain types of language have power; however, as mentioned, there is no power to legitimate forms of linguistics other than its reflection of power from the dominant groups’ usage of certain types of linguistics (Gal, 1989, p. 353). It is quite interesting that the masses who do not utilize the same types of linguistics as the dominant group tend to accept the dominant’s group language as authority (p. 353). This acceptance of authority exemplifies Bourdieu’s (1977, as cited in Gal, 1989, p. 353) talks about linguistic capitalism being symbolic domination. Gal states that “symbolic domination is an ‘unconsciously inculcated’ consent by subordinated classes and groups to the legitimacy of those in power” (p. 353). In other words, groups that are subordinated to the dominant power would accept what the dominant power has to say, regardless of what is being said. Bourdieu (1977) discusses an intellectual encoding-decoding relation that is an authority-belief relation (p. 649). Bourdieu states that “listening is believing” and this “is clearly seen in the case of orders and watchwords, the power of words is never anything other than the power to mobilize the authority accumulated within a field” (p. 649). Those in authority then have the capability to control the contents that are spoken within any context they participate in. This supports the structure of an authority-belief relation in which so long as those in authority are considered the dominant group, they are freer to say what they want and it is believable to the subordinate groups.

Furthermore, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) states that, “language provides a more or less complex system of categories, so that the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logical or aesthetic, depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family” (p. 73). In other words, the closer one’s linguistic capability is to a
high-class culture the more one fits into a high-class system and vice versa. Language has become a source of an unequal selection process determining who fits where in society.

English in the U.S. becomes a form of authority over those who have been semi-coerced to live in the U.S., like the Karen refugees. Although the Karen refugees did have a choice to stay in the refugee camps in Thailand, the ones that came here had to make a choice of whether to search for a better life or live in poor conditions while waiting for a chance that one day, Burma will accept them back. Overall, as the Karen come here and those who attempt to acculturate into U.S. society, particularly those who are ELT or ESL students, at the time being are gaining cultural and linguistic capital that would slowly increase their well-being in the U.S.

I then question, “What is the type of English the Karen need to learn in order to gain linguistic capital?” Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) state that, “in an academic universe in which the ideal is to ‘talk like a book’ the only fully legitimate speech is one which presupposes at every point the whole context of legitimate culture and no other context” (p.120). What is legitimate culture in the American context? In Bourdieu’s and Passeron’s case it would seem that a legitimate society is one that is fully accepted by all societies or classes, as being standard as to how all societies should live their lifestyles.

In the U.S. context, if English that is taught from a textbook in an ESL class is considered to resemble a legitimate culture, then it seems that all the Karen have to do is to diligently master what is being taught in order to fully be accepted as first class citizens in the United States. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) also claim that “no one acquires a language without thereby acquiring a relation to language”; that in relating to language can the principles that underlie the visible difference between bourgeois and working class language can be further noticed (p. 116). Bourdieu and Passeron then make apparent this difference in class structures by stating that,
“What has often been described as the tendency of bourgeois language to abstraction, formalism, intellectualism and euphemistic moderation should be seen primarily as the tendency of a socially constituted disposition towards language” (p. 116). Furthermore, “Distinguished distance, prudent ease and contrived naturalness which are the foundations of every code of society manners, are opposed to the expressiveness of working class language (p. 116).

Bourgeois language is somehow perceived in society as an institutionalized language, a language embedded into what society accepts as legal or without shame, even when the logic behind how people use this language tends to be ambiguous compared to working class language, which at times can be clear and concise in acting as a means to effectively communicate within the local context yet, is perceived as having lesser value than bourgeois language. Overall, society provides a context, in which language and cultural experiences play out in the resettling of refugees like the Karen. The next section describes this context as neoliberalism and its role in changing the ways the Karen have negotiated their lives to survive its harsh realities.

**Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism plays a large role in how refugee resettlement takes place in highly industrialized countries like the United States. As mentioned, David Harvey (2005) provides a perspective of neoliberalism as “A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (p. 2). This definition entails the state (government) as being the gate keepers for private organizations and transnational corporations doing business in the country but it gives them little leverage in how that business is played out. In other words, the
belief in privatizing services and markets, whether it is education or health care, would be better for the people than the government servicing such sectors. This brings us to the usage of human capital and cultural capital that refugees have to gain from an English-language education. How is this capital utilized in a neoliberal society? As mentioned, Karen refugees migrated from a country that is realistically being governed by a military junta. To acculturate themselves in Trident City’s neoliberal society, where markets have the power over how refugees can live a better or worse lifestyle, forces them to change their ways of living and enhances their use of human and cultural capital.

Ong (2006) states that “neoliberalism recasts our thinking about the connection between government and citizenship as a strictly juridicallegal relationship” (p. 6). In other words, neoliberal way of governing centers on the capacity and potential of individuals and the population as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes (p. 6). We see how America wants their refugees to be self-sufficient with jobs in which they can pay for their housing and food. In my observation, there are many Karen refugees coming here at either an old age, in which they are not eligible for many jobs (particularly physical labor) or at a young age, in which finding a job is very difficult.

Michael Holtz (2012), a reporter for the Trident City Tribune, did a report on New Life (refugee agency on the north side of Trident City) and interviewed administrators and refugees:

New Life aims to make newly arrived refugees self-sufficient as quickly as possible. To do so, the agency helps them in nearly all aspects of their lives. It offers mental health services, housing assistance and childcare, in addition to English-language classes and job training. But landing a job — the first step
Kano, acting executive director at New Life states in Holtz’s (2012) article:

They're competing with people who were born and raised here and have college degrees. It's tough out there. Twenty years ago, local manufacturers would hire batches of seven to nine workers through New Life. Refugees could count on low-skill manufacturing jobs to hold them over until their English was good enough to apply for a better position. That quickly changed when factories began closing their doors and moving overseas. Ninety-nine percent of our clients (refugees) are coming to work hard and start a new life. All they want is the opportunity to do so. And what's missing now is that opportunity. (p. 1.16)

In relation to what has been said by the reporter, “Since the 1970s, notions of ‘worthy’ citizenship in the United States has come to mean an individual’s responsibility to decrease her burden on the state, especially the welfare state (Ong, 2003, as cited in Erikson, 2012, p. 167). However, “how does a refugee find work if there is no work available?” (Holtz, 2012) Living in times of neoliberalism, all the work has been shipped overseas to countries where the refugees are coming from. For instance, the Karen are coming from refugee camps in Thailand but the manufacturing jobs that are for example, making shoes for U.S. companies like Nike, are in Thailand or surrounding countries like China or Vietnam but not in the U.S.

Erickson (2012) states that elderly volunteers in Fargo, North Dakota serve the state by molding refugees into proper worker citizens, teaching them how to speak English, how to dress, how to behave, how to get a job, and to attend appointments on time (p. 168). As a mentor, I
was typically on time to pick up Saw Htoo\(^2\) (My Karen ESL mentee) but there are times when I am just three to four minutes late and times where I would call in advance to say that I would be 15 to 30 minutes later. Saw Htoo has never been late, he is always on time or ready to go when I saw him. I believe New Life and similar agencies teach the value of being punctual and respecting the “Protestant work ethic” in the U.S.

We would think that refugees and other immigrants can become great workers as long as they adhere to a U.S. working class structure, in which being on time and working diligently would in the end have them work towards a happy and fulfilled life. However, the general living conditions of the U.S. population have stagnated or even decomposed over the past few decades (Castillo, 2011, p.72). Yet it should be noted that the living conditions for most of the countries in the rest of the world is worse off than the U.S. (p. 72). That being said, Castillo (2007) notes that the deterioration in the quality of employment and the increase in income inequality, social inequality has increased and with it poverty for the vulnerable segments of the population (p. 68). In further regards to “quality of employment,” Castillo is saying that the quality of U.S. jobs has worsened with the increase of part-time work and stagnation and decline of real salaries (p. 68). The increase of part time work is the result of the U.S. becoming dependent on deregulated flexible labor in which the job market has changed stable contracts to temporary ones and full-time jobs to part-time jobs that generally pay lower salaries and lack social security provided by unions-benefits, vacations, and retirement plans (p. 69). In other words, less emphasis on hiring someone for full-time work but more emphasis on hiring the substitute teacher or the contracted construction worker who only works on certain projects and gets no benefits.

\(^2\) Names of people in this study are fictitious to protect their anonymity.
A worst-case scenario is the outsourcing of jobs with the advances in technology. Technological innovation systematically reduces the importance of human labor in the productive process to the point that it is possible to imagine “the end of the working class, and of work itself” (Castillo, 2011, p. 72). At the same time we have the popular case of deindustrialization in which the closing of factories and the rise of production in regions and countries with cheaper labor force that contributes to the political disarticulation of the working class (p. 72). How are refugees going to benefit from this instability? What do they have to look forward to if they work hard but it only goes to paying the rent for their housing with no benefits of a 401K or savings for retirement? Immigrants in the U.S. are the fastest growing sector of the labor force (this would include a large number of refugees in our case since they are continually looking for working class jobs), are employed in less-skilled jobs and earn substantially lower wages (pp. 72 & 81). In order to give specific details of how I did my field research, the next section talks about my data gathering techniques.

**Methodology**

**Ethnographic case study approach.** This research employs a qualitative ethnographic case study approach. I examined a community of Karen refugees resettled in Trident City, Nashburn. Case study methods are used to observe the characteristics of an individual unit such as a person, a group or a community, in order to analyze various phenomena in relation to that unit of study (Cohen & Manion, 1989, as cited in Suryani, 2008, p. 118). Yin (1994) states that a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p. 13). Stakes (1995) defines a case as a specific, a complex, functioning thing (p. 2).
The Karen refugee population as a “community” in Trident City is a “specific functioning thing” with complexities. Meaning, I am looking at the community as one single entity that has many intragroup issues with resettlement and their aspiration to acculturate into U.S. culture. This particular group resettled on the north side of Trident City and my interests dealt with the Karen trying to negotiate their ways of living within the context of a neoliberal lifestyle through the help of gaining cultural capital.

Second, ethnography is a first-hand study about what people do and say in a particular context (Hammersley, 2006, as cited in Suryani, 2008, p. 121). In general, it involves cultural analysis which means not simply recounting behaviors and events like what case studies do but also inferring the cultural roles that guide the behaviors and events (Cohen & Court, 2003, p. 284). It allows for the strange to become familiar and the familiar to become strange. Cohen and Court dynamically stated that ethnography captures the everyday, unwritten laws, conventions and customs that govern the behavior of persons and sub-groups within a culture (p. 284). Due to their two Karen languages, Ska and Pwo and the geographic location they are coming from, the Karen refugee community have their own culture unique from other refugees in Trident City and other minority refugee groups originating from Burma.

Another reason I conducted ethnographic research was to learn the culture of the Karen from within. To become an insider both within the refugee agencies where they spent their time learning English and trying to understand how their community worked. Yet, gaining an English education taught them how to better live their lives, like teaching them how to conduct themselves in an interview for a job, but did not teach them the realities of neoliberalism, in which the jobs they were eligible for were hard labor jobs.
It was vital to become an insider in the refugee agencies, because I had the experience of being rejected by one of them to do a case study in the past. However, as soon as I became an ESL volunteer tutor for the refugee agency, I was able to gain access to meet my Karen participants. It became clear that being a tutor (participant observer) gave me more access to the agency and their students. Furthermore, ethnographic research for my project, took almost two years in order to observe just a fraction of what cultural capital they may have gained by attending ESL classes, living their lives in Trident City and hearing their stories of what they have gone through in the past to the present. Hardships that they have endured, with not being able to find a job, not being able to pay the rent, or just having enough money for a one bedroom apartment for a family of seven people, were stories that validated the relevance of living a neoliberal lifestyle. From close interactions with the Karen I see how they perceive life, I can see that living in Trident City has become a new experience for them but at the same time a harsh reality of how their world has changed from a slower paced life of a farmer from Burma, a prisoner in a refugee camp, and now a resident in a cosmopolitan city, which has a “survival of the fittest” mentality.

It should be noted that collecting data from several sites was also important, whether it was a classroom, home, cultural event, and numerous places in the city that I visited with the Karen, in order to gain a collection of data to work with; the more data, the bigger the perspective. For instance, I took a young male Karen shopping at the mall to gain insight on how he perceived shopping in America. Shopping is one of the many ways a person learns about living in a neoliberal society. From shopping in a space where everything is available like a hair salon, department store, eyeglass store, etc., to the different clothing stores that offer various American name brand apparel being made by low industrialized countries. As
mentioned, many Karen in Trident City live in apartments with extended family and friends due to the high cost of rent in the city. Being a home tutor, I got to view this lifestyle and witnessed how they ended up living.

This study is both a case study and an ethnographic study. A case study, because the scope of research is limited to one refugee community and an ethnographic study, because it strove to describe a particular refugee community resettling in Trident City (Negis-Isik & Gursel, 2013, p. 223). The overall research method and topic for this study is thus recognized as an ethnographic case study on Karen refugee resettlement in Trident City through the use of English language acquisition.

**Unstructured interviews.** A large part of my research utilizes unstructured interviewing. I used unstructured interviews to both prepare me to ask more structured questions for “focused interviews” (which will be discussed below) but also I lightly probed refugee individuals to gain a general story of their lived experiences here in Trident City. Unstructured interviewing is excellent for building rapport with the subjects (Bernard, 2011, p. 158). It was also more natural to do unstructured interviewing with the subjects I first met because being structured got in the way of communicating freely with the informants (p. 158). Overall, the Karen refugee community is a tight knit group and I gained rapport with the community by letting them talk freely with me without the fear of losing anonymity.

As mentioned, this study focused on understanding the life of Karen refugees living a new life in a cosmopolitan city. From a village and refugee life to a cosmopolitan “hustle and bustle” city life, life can become very complex. Such complexity was witnessed with a lot of informal time spent with the refugees. An example of this time included my attendance at the ESL classes with the refugees and talking to them during break time and after class. I soon
realized how important break time became. The discussions I had in the hallways gave me clues to how the Karen perceived English and how this language was supposed to help them create a better life for themselves. For some middle aged Karen refugees, it is obvious that ESL lessons are to help the Karen prepare them to know enough English to help them find work; however, it is also a place for them to “get out of the house” or to give them reason to wake up in the morning. I can see this because as soon as they obtained a job, it was back to work and no more time for ESL classes.

Bernard (2011) recommended that when interviewing the subject, there is a time in which we must let the informant or respondent lead the interview (p. 160). This was done by getting the subject on a topic of interest and getting out of the way (meaning, letting the subject speak freely) (p. 160). This lets the informant provide information that he or she thinks is important and gives context to what is important (p. 160). For instance, I wanted to find out about the hardships of working in America for the Karen. I would just informally ask during a break from home tutoring a male Karen in his late 20s, “How do you like the place you work at?” There was a discussion about not being able to work full time because the company needed to cut down on costs. I became silent for a few minutes while he talked the issue of downsizing in order to cut down on cost of paying him for full time work and to save on paying for his benefits. It became interesting to me that he lived in the refugee camps for much of his life and to now know the harsh realities of large companies needing to cut costs in order to save money. It is fascinating that he already understood how elements of global neoliberalism operated in his life.

Bernard (2011) also expresses the importance of presenting yourself to the subject (p. 168). There were times we may seem like a friend, a professional, someone who is
nonjudgmental and so on (p. 168). A lot of issues came about from refugee adaptation, which can create major causes for depression. There were times when I acted like a friend lending his shoulder for comfort to the subject; however, there are times when I spent a lot of time attending to the subject’s needs so that I can gain important information about their life in Trident City. Overall, I relied on being myself and intuition to help me probe and structure an unstructured interview. Furthermore, during my time with the Karen, I had some questions in the back of my mind to help me gain the information needed for my study. I did not ask them these questions directly but when I had time to talk with the subjects, I would try to gear my conversations towards the following questions:

1) Why did you choose the United States as the place for resettlement?
2) How do you like it here so far?
3) Are you taking English courses now? If so, where and at what level are you in your program?
4) Are these English courses helping you live a better life here?
5) Are you working? If so, do you speak a lot of English at work?
6) Are you planning to do more schooling after your English education? If so, where do you plan to attend school? (Geared towards prospective Karen College students).
7) Do you want to obtain an Associate’s degree, Bachelor’s degree, or certificate in a certain field of study? (Geared towards prospective Karen College students).
8) Why are you planning to further educate yourself? (Geared towards prospective Karen College students).

Overall, the above set of questions was not asked specifically. The questions are more so for the purpose of forming a conversation that I can use to collect data for my research.
**Chain-referral samples (snowball samples).** The snowball sample method was utilized to study hard-to-find or hard-to-study populations (Bernard, 2011, p. 147). Populations can be hard to find or hard-to-study for four reasons: (1) they contain few members who are scattered over a large area, (2) they are stigmatized and reclusive, (3) they are people who have something to hide, and (4) they are members of an elite group (pp. 147-148). In regards to the Karen refugee population in Trident City, the first two were relative. Some semesters of ELT or ESL classes at the refugee center or community center respectively, have a large concentration of Karen refugees and sometimes a very low concentration or none at all. If there were a low concentration, I needed to rely on the few who are attending English-language courses. However, this does not mean there were not many Karen refugees in Trident City. In Trident City, as mentioned, there are 1,388 Burmese refugees that have arrived from CY2007 to CY2012, in which many may be Karen (Refugee Processing Center, 2012c). Also, Karen comprise 50% of the Burmese minorities that are resettling in the U.S. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). This means that English Language Education is not compulsory for refugees when they come here to the U.S.; therefore, Karen refugees can choose to not come to class. This can sometimes occur when refugees find jobs before completing all four levels of English, have a mental disorder, are elderly and do want to attend class because they cannot keep up with the material being taught and many more issues. Snowball sampling is therefore most helpful because of its method. An example of employing the snowball method came during my time tutoring a female adult Karen refugee in an English-language home tutoring session and indirectly asking her if I could speak to her husband. The husband, all of a sudden became part of my study because being a married couple, he would not simply refuse to be talked to since I was his wife’s tutor.
**Focused one-on-one interview.** I conducted brief, one-hour, one-on-one, focused interviews that had some open-ended questions, but the interview had a set of questions that derived from my unstructured interviews (Yin, 1994, p. 85). The main purpose of the focus interviews were to corroborate facts that I already believed had been established from my open-ended conversations and experiences I had with other Karen refugees (p. 85). Focused interviews tended to be closed-ended and so I did not want to sound like I am asking my informant direct questions that I know the answer to. In other words, I played naïve in order to see what the informant had to say that might add important value to my research (p. 85). For instance, I would ask a simple question to a Karen elder, “Do you think learning English is difficult?” The typical response would be that it is but I wanted to understand why learning English was difficult to them.

Bernard (2011) mentioned there are several techniques to probing (pp. 161-166). One technique that I believed was beneficial for my study is “long question probing,” which induces a longer and more continuous response by making the questions or statements longer. For example, instead of asking, “How has English helped you better your lifestyle in Trident City?” I stated, “Tell me about your new life in Trident City after gaining some English-language education.” This worked great with young mature Karen refugees that have been here for a few years. However, it did not work well for Karen refugees that have been here for one year or less. This question is especially for more mature Karen refugees who are having a more difficult time adapting to a new language and culture slower than younger Karen refugees. For the Karen refugees who struggled to communicate their story to me, I probed by leading. Probing questions are based on what an informant has finished saying or is based on something an informant told me anywhere from an hour to a year ago (pp. 164-165). From my experience
with mature Karen who have limited English capabilities, I became more direct otherwise there is not much being said in my conversation with that person. For instance, in my study I mentioned that I was having a conversation with two mature Karen adults, one in her late 40s and the other in his 60s. The topic was ice-skating and winter activities. My goal was to not just see if they know what ice-skating is as an American past time during the winter months in Trident City, but to see what they have learned from an ESL class about it and what they think about ice-skating. Saw Thu, the mature elderly Karen in his 60s did not know what ice-skating was, even after it was explained during class, but Naw Eh, the Karen in her late 40s did, and I was able to direct the conversation by having her define ice-skating in her language to Saw Thu. Most importantly, once Saw Thu understood, he started giving me some great information about how he felt about having leisure time for activities like ice-skating is not possible, especially with his kids and grandkids because it is too expensive to live here in America. This then became a great segue to use the theories of neoliberalism to help explain why they felt that living in America was too expensive and linking this feeling to ice-skating. There was also a lack of cultural capital, in which ice-skating was not an acquired sport for the Karen back in the tropical climate of Burma and Thailand. It is more of an activity for those living in big cities like Bangkok. The Karen may know of ice-skating on television but may have lacked the opportunities to indulge in the activity in Trident City. Trident City has free ice-skating at Paradise Park and being a pastime in Trident City, because we have very long winters here, is an enjoyable activity for many Trident City residents. However, for the Karen I have talked to, it is not something that sounds fun to them, especially since they have this mentality that every activity in Trident City is expensive and they might have to use money to fund these activities.
Focus groups. In focus groups, a group of people are recruited to discuss a particular topic, anything from people’s feelings about a topic like how life in America is so expensive to how have their experiences been in learning English-language classes (Bernard, 2011, p. p.172). This research utilized two focus groups, both of them being family-oriented. As an ESL home tutor, I was able to step into the lives of two Karen families in their most comfortable environment. My goal was to not necessarily interview all the refugees but sometimes the situation just called out for it, meaning, there were times when I was interviewing a Karen elder in her home and it turned out that I was doing a focus group interview because everyone in the family wanted to participate. Especially if I asked a common question everyone could answer to such as, “What did you do to make money in the refugee camps?” Initially, I did not think making money would be important when one is living in a refugee camp but capitalism has its way of permeating every space where it should not necessarily exist. I gained some great insight, one of them was from the husband of the Karen female elder whom I home tutor mentioned that his job was to carry bags of rice for low wages.

Case Study on Classroom Learning of ESL

I sat in on some classes in which Karen refugees attended ESL (English as a Second Language). The classes that I sat in gave me insight as to how the Karen were reacting to learning English but most importantly, the culture that is embedded in learning English. There were some thoughts that arose from my observations. Living in a neoliberal framework, there are many barriers for them to be fully proficient English speakers and for prospective college students, to finish a post-secondary education. Karen refugees have to fully establish their lives before they can think about advancing their education. Needing to pay the bills has become more important than the betterment of their English language skills or pursuing a college degree.
I also questioned the usefulness of ESL. As they learn English they are increasing their cultural capital to a certain extent. However, does this increase in cultural capital necessarily improve the living conditions for the Karen to live a lifestyle that is better than their previous life in the refugee camp?

**Place of Study**

The place of study is Trident City, Nashburn in the United States. Trident City is a cosmopolitan city and one of the four leading cities in the United States (Savitch, 2010, p. 43). This study emphasizes cosmopolitism to show where the Karen that I am studying now are living in contrast to living in a refugee camp or a village in Burma. Cosmopolitism can be defined as based on local people who have gained a broader orientation and identity reaching beyond the confines of their immediate environment (Merton, 1964, as cited in Pichler, 2012, p. 22). Pichler claims that a broader consensus is that globalization is the driving force of contemporary cosmopolitism (p. 22). Increasing levels of interconnectedness and interdependence between states and people in economic, political, cultural and social terms elude people and societies towards cosmopolitism (Pichler, 2012, p. 22).

Savitch (2010) compares the urban cities of the U.S., which resemble a cosmopolitism in which he describes as an ability to embrace international, multicultural or polyethnic features (p. 43). The cities that Savitch has listed as cosmopolitan are New York, Los Angeles, Trident City, and San Francisco. Savitch talks about currency as one factor in which cities with a high degree of currency will not only do well on the gross metropolitan product (GMP is the market value of all final goods and services produced within the metropolitan area), but enjoy the largest number of jobs and serves as the location for most Fortune 500 companies (p. 46). Out of the four cities mentioned, New York’s predominant GMP of $116.40 billion is much high than Los Angeles’s
$687.2 billion, Trident City’s $498.6 and San Francisco’s GMP at $292.6 billion (p. 2010). Yet, Trident City is home to the second most number of Fortune 500 companies, in which Trident City has 11 compared to New York at 45, San Francisco at six and Los Angeles at four (however Los Angeles is not far from Silicon Valley which houses numerous fortune 500 companies like Dell, Intel, and Microsoft). The employment total for Trident City during 2005-2007 is approximately 1,242,375, which is higher than San Francisco’s 418,914 but much lesser than New York’s 3,720,248 and lesser than Los Angeles 1,766,442. As far as immigrant settlements are concerned, Trident City has 594,841 immigrants during 2005-2007 following Los Angeles at 1,509,764 and New York at 3,028,148. Trident City includes the total estimated population in 2011 at 2,707,120, 45% of the population in Trident City is White (which includes 28.9% who are of Hispanic origin so there are 16.10% who consider themselves only White), 32.9% are Black, 5.5% are Asian, and 28.9% who consider themselves Hispanic or Latino origin.

Although highly segregated, Trident City is a diverse, cosmopolitan city. Karen are meeting people from many different backgrounds other than the variety of ethnic Burmese people they see in the refugee camps, the NGO employees and Thai government personal. Public transportation will be very new to them, in which they will commute on trains and buses daily, given their new freedom to do so. Having the second most number of Fortune 500 companies being located in Trident City, one would believe that there would be a lot of employment for the refugees; however, these jobs are for the service sector whereas the manufacturing sector is shipped overseas. Also, many Fortune 500 companies do not have a manufacturing sector but jobs that consist of hard labor whether being part of a cleaning crew or cooking staff, which may be work opportunities for many Karen.

**Refugee Center and Community Center Backgrounds**
In regards to the specific places of study, I started my research in four different places in the city. First, my study took place at Lakeview Park Community Center on Trident City’s north side. The community center is located in an area that is recognized as one of the most diverse areas in the country. Its zip code is the third most ethnically diverse zip code in the United States. Previously, an upper-working class Jewish neighborhood, Lakeview Park is now home to many foreign born residents, mostly from Latin America. There are also a large number of immigrants from the Philippines, India, Korea, Cambodia, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Romania, Pakistan and the Middle East. They offer free classes in English as a second language (ESL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and General Educational Development (GED). From my experience, Karen refugees come to this community mainly for ESL. They typically come here after exceeding all four levels of ESL or have gained some exposure of ELT (English Language Training) at refugee agencies located in Trident City.

New Life was founded in 1980 and every year resettles approximately 2,500 refugees. The refugees they are currently serving and focusing on are Bhutanese, Burmese, Eritrean, Iraqi, Somali, and Sudanese (Darfuri); however, there are refugees from other countries as well. In regards to this research, the Burmese refugees they resettle are made up of Karen at 80%, Karenni at 15%, Burman at 2% and Chin at 1%.

New World Alliance, does ELT classes, case management and so on but they also have in-house training on customer service and hospitality. Their training corresponds to the hiring season for both hotels and customer service tourist companies. This means that courses are offered in the Spring so the refugees have some ELT knowledge for customer service and hospitality jobs for the tourism periods of May through October. In FY2011, their job placement rate for refugees is over 90% with 97% retention rates.
Limitations

The Karen refugees have been fleeing from tyranny since their ancestors migrated from Southern China to what we now know as Burma (officially Myanmar). As refugees, they may not be accustomed to speaking to researchers because they have a lot of trust in the people within their own community. In other words, I am an outsider to them. I am also a Thai-American who speaks Thai, depending on the situation and may act Thai as well. Thai people can be perceived badly due to their status as authority figures in and around the camp. However, the Karen refugees that I have met did not mention that they did not like the Thai government and some are thankful that the Thai government has given them a place to stay when they were ousted by their own government. To be realistic, I look Thai, so it is difficult for a Karen to realistically tell me that their life in Thailand was terrible because they may not wish to make me feel bad.

There was also the language barrier issue. I speak Thai and English. I relied heavily on my interpreters, one who speaks broken English and another who speaks fluent English to help interpret. The one who speaks broken English does speak a little Thai and I can relate with him on some level but I relied heavily on his English to help me. The Karen refugee who speaks better English, can speak Thai as well. I could relate to her in both English and Thai. However, the Karen refugees rarely spoke Thai and their English was sometimes not good enough for me to deeply gain insights from them. In this study, there were times when I gained so much knowledge from my time with them and other times, there were assumptions and inferences that needed to be made because I could not understand what they were truly trying to tell me.
Chapter 2: General Background

Who are Karen?

The Karen are a minority ethnic group from Burma (politically known as Myanmar but popularly known amongst scholars as Burma). Many Karen believe their origins come from Southern China (Buadaeng, 2007, p. 78). However, there is no clear evidence of where they originated from but cultural myths (stories foretold from generation to generation), Christian missionary reports, and Karen intellectuals, give the earliest recollection of Karen existence beginning in Babylon (Australia Karen Organization, 2000, pp. 1-8). They left Babylon in BC 2234 to the Kingdom of Mongolia arriving in BC 2197 (Australia Karen Organization, 2000, pp. 1-8). Then they departed Mongolia in BC 2017 and arrived in East Turkestan in BC 2013 (Australia Karen Organization: 2, 2000). They left East Turkestan in BC 1866 and migrated to Tibet, arriving in BC 1864 (Australia Karen Organization: 2, 2000). They left from Tibet in BC 1388 and arrived at the Kingdom of Yunnan in BC 741, and finally arriving in Burma in BC 739 (Australia Karen Organization, 2000, pp. 1-8).

However, the Karen people in Thailand, who exist outside the refugee camps and live as Thai citizens, have a different story. Karen in Thailand mainly reside in two parts of Thailand, the Northern Part of Thailand and the Western part of Thailand. The Northern Karen communities in Thailand believe their ancestors came from the west of the Salawin River, which is today Burma (Buadaeng, 2007, p. 83). However, unlike the Karen in Burma, they only know that their people moved from place to place in Burma and not before. Others in the north believed their ancestors were captured in a war toward the end of the 18th century (p. 83). Karen in the Western part of Thailand believe their ancestors came from Tavoy, in present day Burma, and having fled from the Burmese King who conquered the Mon Kingdom in the mid-18th
century and settled in the land of the Siamese King (Thai King) in present day Thai provinces
called Uthaithanee, Suphanburi, and Kanchanaburi (p. 83). Demographic wise, there are
approximately 6 to 7 million Karen living in Burma, 300,000 Thai-Karen living in Thailand and
more than 140,000 who have fled Burma to live either in Thai refugee camps or in Thailand
(Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2010, p. 4).

Burma and Thailand Backgrounds

The host countries, Burma and Thailand, provide important context for Karen refugee
background. Burma’s population is estimated to be at 54,584,650 (Central Intelligence Agency,
2013a). There are over 100 ethnic groups that make up the population but the most known are
the Burman (who make up 68%), Shan (who make up 9%), Karen (who make up 7%), Rahkine
(who make up 4%), Chinese (who make up 3%), Indian (who make up 2%), Mon (who make up
2%) and other (who make up 5%) of the population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013a).
Overall, the Karen are the third largest ethnic group in Burma.

Thailand is made up of 67,091,089 people. In Thailand the popular ethnic groups are
75% Thai, 14% Chinese, and 11% other (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013b). In the “other”
category there are 5% Malay, Mon, Khmer and highland ethnic groups (which consists of the
Karen,) which make up 600,000 to 1.2 million of the population in Thailand (UNHCR, 2013).

Why are there Karen Refugees?

Let us look back to World War II, specifically the year 1945. The Japanese have just lost
the battle to occupy Burma against the joint forces of the Burmese, the Karen, and the British
armies (Buadaeng, 2007, pp. 80-81). Before the British granted Burma their independence in
1948, the Karen wanted an autonomous state under British protection which included a seaport
or a Karen state in a federation or a frontier area within the British Commonwealth and separate
from Burma (p. 81). However, the Karen’s request to the British government would not be supported and civil war would take place between the native communists of Burma and a number of ethnic groups—including the Karen—who had their own army called the Karen National Union (KNU) (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011, p. 4). Mirante (1997) states that two reasons out of many for this war were that (1) the Karen were escaping Burmanization, a term meaning the Burmese government were forcing the cultural assimilation of minority groups and (2) the Karen did not have equal ethnic minority representation. The Burmese majority and anyone identifying with that majority would be treated better than those identifying as an ethnic minority. An additional reason is that the Karen, as do many of the different minority ethnic groups, want their own land, specifically land that previously belonged to the Karen (known as Karen State by the Karen but as Kayin State by the Burmese) (see Appendix A). The Karen are now fighting for its re-establishment and independence from Burma.

The fighting that has taken place between the Karen National Union and the Burmese army State Peace and Development Council, has forced civilian Karen to flee to Thai refugee camps along Thailand’s western border (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011, p. 4). Roughly 92,000 refugees are housed between nine refugee camps in Thailand: Ban Mae Nai Soi, Ban Mae Surin, Mae Ra Ma Luang, Mae La Oon, Mae La, Umpium, Nu Po, Ban Don Yang, and Tham Hin (UNHCR Country Operations Profile, 2012). Refugees are alienated to this kind of cramped living space since they are coming from villages in Burma that are occupied by a few hundred families, in other words, there is more living space when they were living in villages in Burma than in the refugee camps (Renard, 1980, p. 126). In regards to ways of living, officially, refugees do not have access to services provided outside the camps nor are they permitted to leave the camp to earn an income (Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008, p. 590). There is report of a few
income-generating programs including a weaving project in which the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) supplies the threads and the final product is distributed to those in need (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011, p. 6). There is also a black labor market in which Karen refugees can find farm work on farms near by the camps. However, in recent years, the Thai authorities have not been allowing such work to be obtained, so Karen refugees are left with nothing to do and some wish to resettle (Thailand-Burma Border Consortium, 2007a).

Most Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) provide the most basic and capacity building services such as food rations, shelter, healthcare, education, and community services (Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008, p. 590). However, despite the good intentions of the NGOs, the long lasting refugee situation and restrictions on refugee movements create a disability for the Karen refugees to control the development of their own society (p. 590). An example of this disability is a lack of nutritious food for infants, nursing mothers, new arrivals and other vulnerable camp populations (Thailand-Burma Border Consortium, 2009). The food basket provided for the refugees does meet international nutritional standards yet fresh vegetables and fruit are absent (Thailand-Burma Border Consortium, 2009).

Are the Karen Fighting this War Alone?

Every Burmese ethnic minority group has had their human rights violated. There are millions of Burmese migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees that have left Burma to live in Thailand, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Singapore (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Since the Democratic Elections of 2010, the country is technically no longer ruled by a military junta; however, the Burmese military continues to be responsible for abuses against civilians in conflict areas, including forced labor, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, use of human shields, and indiscriminate attacks on civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2012). All the ethnic groups really
want a federal government (state autonomy), in which each state can govern their own people, but the Burmese government refuses to honor these appeals for independence (IRIN, 2012, p. 13). The main problem is that each ethnic group, except for the Burman, who mostly make up the Burmese government and army, wants to protect their individual languages, customs, culture, and natural resources, which link to their national identity (p. 12).

**How did all this Oppression by the Burmese Government Start?**

All the problems between the ethnic minorities and the Burmese government (Burman majority) started right before the British pulled out of Burma in 1947, making it a sovereign state (IRIN, 2012, p. 13). With British officials as witness, many ethnic groups in Burma signed the Panglong Agreement, which would guarantee ethnic rights and self-determination and the inclusion of minorities in the democratic process (p. 13). At the time, the Burmese government was represented by Aung San, who is father to the current popular Aung San Suu Kyi, the pro-democratic opposition leader (p. 13). He signed the agreement with representatives of the Shan, Kachin, and Chin states. However, Aung San was assassinated and the Burmese military began to slowly advance their military power into the ethnic states to rule by force (p. 13). The ethnic groups (Karen, Kachin, Karenni, Chin, Mon, Rahkine, Shan, and Wa) then took up arms to protect their states from Burman rule. Below are the details on the main armed groups (p. 13):

1. **The Karen National Liberation Army:** Known as the KNLA, have taken up arms against the Burmese government since 1949. They are the military wing of the popular Karen National Union, which has been spoken of throughout this exam.

2. **Kachin Independence Army:** Formed by Kachin rebels in 1961 after a coup led by General Ne Win who turned the country on the path to Socialism in the early 1960s to the late 1980s.
3. Karenni Army: Created after the Burmese government incorporated Kayah state (also known as Red Karen or Kayin Ni) into the Union of Burma in 1951. The Karenni leaders did not agree to this incorporation.

4. Chin National Front: Created in 1988 as a coalition of several Chin opposition groups to push for greater autonomy.

5. Mon National Liberation Front: Formed by the New State Mon Party to fight the Burmese government since 1949, when Burmese military entered Mon territory.

6. The Arakan Liberation Army: Belonging to Rhakine state and was first started up by the KNU in the 1950s, became defunct after its leaders were arrested by the Burmese government. However, it reassembled in the 1970s and is one of the smaller ethnic armies fighting the Burmese government.

7. Shan State Army: Formed in 1964 as the Burmese military began to move into Shan state.

8. The United Wa State Army: Created after the fall of the Communist Party of Burma in 1989, is the country’s most powerful ethnic minority army who receive military supplies from China.

Currently, the international world is looking at the Rohingyas (a Muslim ethnic group in Burma), a group experiencing an ethnic cleansing in Burma. Burma, a Buddhist majority country, has in its constitution that they do not recognize Rohingyas to be citizens, on grounds that their ancestors did not live on Burma’s soil when there was British rule since the 19th century (Ritu, 2012, p. A23). Current violence can be traced back to the rape and killing of a Buddhist Woman, and the subsequent detainment of three Muslims accused of the crime (p. A23). Burmese security has since then conducted mass arrests on Muslims, destroyed thousands
of homes, most owned by Rohingyas (p. A23). The displaced Rohingyas have migrated as refugees to Bangladesh, with people dying in the process (p. A23).

Why are Karen and Other Refugee Groups Coming to the U.S.?

The United States plays a humanitarian role in the international community. Therefore, the United States admits tens of thousands of refugees who add richness and diversity in the society (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012, p. 37). Also, the United States leads the world in the number of refugees it welcomes to its shores (U.S. Department of State, 2006b). In the Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (2007), it is U.S. policy to admit at least half of the refugees referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) (p. CRS-2). The United States has been playing this role since 1948, following the displacement of more than 250,000 Europeans. As a result of the fall of Vietnam in 1975, the United States was faced with an influx of refugees coming from Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013). Therefore, in 1980, The Refugee Act amended the Immigration and Nationality Act, which provides a systematic and permanent procedure for admitting refugees into the United States (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012, p. 3). The main objectives of the Refugee Act are to maintain comprehensive and uniform provisions to resettle refugees as quickly as possible and to encourage them to be self-sufficient (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012, p. 37). However, what is considered self-sufficient? The HHS’s (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) Office of Refugee Resettlement defines economic self-sufficiency in its regulations as earning a total family income at a level that enables a family unit to support itself without the receipt of a cash assistance grant. Another understanding is that refugees may still be economically self-sufficient if they received other
types of non-cash assistance, such as Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012, p. 3).

In addition, the United States government is not the sole decision maker on who and how many refugees should be admitted. They have lost some decision making control to the U.N. (United Nations) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Barnett, 2011). UNHCR refers 95% of the refugees needing resettlement to the United States government (Barnett, 2011, p. 3). Some of the reasons the U.S. government may be influenced to assist in the resettlement process is because refugee resettlement is profitable for non-profits. There are religious organizations and NGOs whom are involved in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). They do not commit their resources to the resettlement process but rely on the program to generate streams of income (Barnett, 2011, p. 1). The U.S. is also a referral for many organizations because of their welfare system. The U.S. has a certain amount of programs like Medicaid, subsidized housing, ongoing welfare and so on that somewhat attracts the ideal for resettlement (Barnett, 2011, p. 1).

**Barriers to the Resettlement Process**

In U.S. history, there have been anti-immigration laws against Asians. We can look all the way back to the exclusion of Chinese migration in the late 19th century, when there was a law called The Chinese Exclusion Act, which passed from U.S. Congress to put an end to Chinese immigration but successfully repealed in 1943 (Library of Congress, n.d., para. 1). Presently, it may seem that the U.S. is an ideal place for Karen to come to resettle due to the large number of refugees being resettled in the United States; however, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, counterterrorism policies have had a negative effect in helping the Karen and many other refugees enter the U.S. (Sridharan, 2008). The policy that is impacting is particularly targeting people who have participated in “Material Support to Terrorism.”
The concept of Material Support to Terrorism is part of a 1996 amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952, which defined it as the provision of money, goods, personnel, and/or training to terrorist organizations (Sridharan, 2008). It basically barred those who provided such assistance to terrorist. In the most up to date form, Title 18 of the United States code states that material support is defined as “any property, tangible or intangible, or service, including currency or monetary instruments or financial securities, financial services, lodging, training, expert advice or assistance, safe houses, false documentation or identification, communications equipment, facilities, weapons, lethal substances, explosives, personnel… and transportation, except medicine or religious materials to terrorist.” Overall, refugees who provided material support for terrorist would have their appeals for asylum rejected (Sridharan, 2008).

This raises a huge issue in refugee resettlement to the U.S. for the Karen. Many of the Karen refugees are accused of supporting the KNU (Karen National Union), which is an insurgent group or as mentioned, a political organization, fighting the Burmese government. As of March 2007, an estimate from Refugee Council USA submits that 15,310 cases are on hold due to material support reasons for the Karen and others (Chin of Burma, Karenni of Burma, Colombians, the Montagnards of Vietnam, Hmong, Cubans, Liberians, Sierra Leonians, Congolese of Africa, Eritreans of Africa, Ethiopians, and Kunama of Africa) (Refugee Council USA, 2007). However, there are situations in which the Karen, or other refugees that are banned from gaining asylum due to the materials support for terrorist act, did not support the terrorist directly. For instance, a Burmese pastor provided a hat and other small articles to a cousin who was a member of the KNU (Sridharan, 2008). Another situation is when a Burmese refugee 10 year old girl, whose parents hosted rebel soldiers of the KNPP (Karenni National Progressive
Party), another minority group in Burma that is fighting against the Burmese army, was being questioned if she can resettle, in which the state finally did agree that she did not herself support this terrorist group (Sridharan, 2008).

The Refugee Council often lobbied members of Congress and the administration to take steps to prevent refugees and asylum applicants from being unfairly victimized by the material support bar (Sridharan, 2008). In 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her administration, created the Exercise of Authority under Sec. 212(d)(3)(B)(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act stated under the subsection of 212(a)(3)(B)(iv)(VI) that Karen refugees from Burma living in Ban Don Yang, Mae La, Umpiem Mai, No Po, Mai Kong Kha, and Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camps in Thailand, at the time they are interviewed in Thailand as applicants for resettlement in the United States, and under the United States Refugee Admissions Program, the Material Support Act shall not apply to them (U.S. Department of State, 2006a). This waiver from Rice’s administration has been expanded to supporters or alleged supporters of eight other Burmese groups which are the Karen National Union, Chin National Front, Chin National League for Democracy, Karenni National Progressive Party, Kayan New Land party, and Arakan Liberation Party.

**Where are the Karen Resettling in the World?**

Since 2006 refugees have been resettled through third country resettlement. These countries are the U.S., Australia, Canada, England, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Finland, New Zealand, Belgium, and Japan (Kwa Lay, 2012). Below are three stories of how Karen families have been handling their new lives in Japan, Canada, and Australia, respectively. Each story begins with the optimism of increasing the number of Karen to be resettled in their country;
however, there is also a negative side that looks at the pessimistic views of third country resettlement.

Japan is part of Asia’s first-ever third-party resettlement program (UN News Centre, 2010). On September 28, 2010, the first 18 refugees that took a flight from Thailand to Japan touched down into Tokyo. The refugees consisted of six adults (three married couples) and 12 children ranging between one year old and fifteen years old. They are farmers of Karen ethnicity (UN News Centre, 2010). They are part of a pilot program in which, if successful, Japan would accept 90 refugees from Burma over the next three years.

A newspaper article in 2011 in the Daily Yomiuri headline article states that, “Myanmar refugees in Japan find adjusting to a new life difficult.” Language barrier and too much work are making the Karen resettlement process in Japan very difficult (Oshige, 2011). The Daily Yomiuri did a story on two Karen refugee families resettling in Yachimata and Suzuka. The farm they are working on had them working everyday with only one day off during the week (Oshige, 2011). The farm’s operator who accepted two Karen families, complained about the central government for leaving these refugees who speak such poor Japanese language to him (Oshige, 2011). Overall, the result of the test program, in relation with the UNHCR, the Japanese will still accept about 30 refugees from Mera camp (refugee camp in Thailand) each year until 2012 (Oshige, 2011). However, one may question why maintain an “open-door” policy if the Karen are not happy working in Japan and cannot speak the host language well. The refugee camps in Thailand have NGOs that mainly teach English (particularly to young Karen), not Japanese. The Karen are not well trained in Japanese and giving them a “crash” course in Japanese language before they resettle or while they are resettling may be unbenefficial. Plus, we may also want to look at history and how the Karen helped the British oust the Japanese
from Burma during World War II. In regards to upward mobility, overworking the Karen on the farm sounds like it would be their role to just be farmers in Japanese society because there is not much else they can do since there is a language barrier and no time to further their education.

In Canada, more than 800 Karen were first accepted for resettlement in 2006 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). In 2007, Canada decided to accept 1,800 more Karen (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). Another 1,300 were expected to be accepted in 2008. The University of Edinburg Canadian Studies (2008) description of the success of Karen Burmese refugees can be exemplified by this quote:

A Burma refugee family of eight will soon have a new life in Canada thanks to the efforts of the Owen Sound and Vicinity Ministerial Association. Law May, 54, his son Pa Shaw Lu, his wife Say Thaw Paw and their five children, ranging in age from 2 to 14 years, are expected to arrive in Owen Sound in May or June. For the past 12 years the family has lived in a refugee camp in Thailand. Upon hearing about the plight of refugees from Burma last fall, Rev. Claire Miller of St. Thomas Anglican Church in Owen Sound began to explore on behalf of the Ministerial Association, ways to help. As a result, for Law May, Pa Shaw Lu and Say Thaw Paw and their children, a long hoped for dream of a better life is about to become a reality. For the first four months, Law May, Pa Shaw Lu, Say Thaw Paw and their children will be supported by the federal Citizenship and Immigration department under its Karen Refugee Sponsorship program. The government will provide financial assistance for food, clothing and housing. (p. 7)
On the other hand, refugee resettlement, in general, is not welcoming to tax payers in Canada. University of Edinburgh Canadian Studies (2008) states this:

Ontario taxpayers are paying a whopping $135 million a year to look after 14,600 refugee claimants on welfare and some provincial programs may take a hit due to rising costs, officials warn. The funding for refugee claimants is such a hot topic that Immigration Minister Madeleine Meilleur sent a letter to federal Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg two weeks ago seeking financial help for Toronto, Windsor, Hamilton, Niagara and Peel for dishing out millions in care.

(p. 7)

Overall, the first story made Canada seem like a good place to start over and increase one’s social status. However, the second story seems like a nightmare for Canadian residents. Paying high taxes to help 14,600 refugees on welfare does question if Karen would be welcomed by Canadian residents. Also, if the cost for welfare and some provincial programs have risen, this may mean that the Karen cannot find jobs to help sustain their ways of living in Canada.

In Australia 2006, Australian Senator Amanda Vanstone, on her visit to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, which shelters 45,000 Karen refugees, announced that Australia would double the quota that it had set to resettle Burmese refugees from 400 to 900, which is more than doubled (UNHCR, 2006). From 2007 to 2008, Australia granted 2,961 humanitarian visas to Burmese refugees (Chris Bowen MP, 2008). Australian Senator Chris Evans stated that the Burmese people would continue to be one of the largest entrants under Australia’s humanitarian program for 2008-2009, states Senator Evans (Chris Bowen MP, 2008).

However, in a newspaper report in The Sydney Morning Herald, there are more than a dozen Burmese refugees who failed to find steady work in Sydney (Power, 2012). Gay Htoo
Paw, a Burmese Karen travelled from Sydney to Perth, where he still could not find employment, before finally settling in the western region of Albany, where he landed a job as someone working in an abattoir (slaughterhouse) owned by Fletcher International Exports (Power, 2012). It took him three years to finally get this job. Albany’s general manager Greg Cross states that for a couple of years, it was difficult to recruit workers for Albany’s abattoir industry (Power, 2012). Most skilled workers at the time were serving the mining industry (Power, 2012). Many Karen have followed the same route as Gay Htoo Paw, to make the move to work at Albany’s abattoirs. However, the move is far from the most Southeastern part of Australia to a far Western part (3,290 Kilometers or 2,044 miles distance). As for other Karen, Gary Cachia, a community development officer at the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, states that many Karen are highly motivated to move away from Sydney to towns where they can grow vegetables (Power, 2012). The Karen refugees mainly have a background in farming, but many have found their lives in southwest Sydney suburbs where there is no place to farm (Power, 2012). Overall, Cachia states that living in Sydney’s south-west suburbs; the Karen encountered high cost of living, unaffordable rent, and not being able to grow their own food which made their living conditions more difficult than their lives in a refugee camp (Power, 2012). This questions why the Australian government does not initially resettle Karen refugees near abattoirs for them to work in. It seems Karen refugees have to put extra effort in order to find work because the government puts them in places where work is not available. The government seems oblivious to the need for Karen social mobility and oblivious to the skills that Karen refugees have. Also, since they are farmers, having them living on or near a farm is also another way to better accommodate the refugees, giving them a familiar lifestyle they left in Burma and Thailand.
The Refugee Resettling Process

Karen refugees would go through a process for resettlement similar to other refugees entering the U.S. (see Appendix B). Typically a refugee flees from his or her country to a neighboring country (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). The refugee then applies to UNHCR for protection, in which they receive a card and are allowed to live in a country or refugee camp (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). UNHCR presents three durable solutions: voluntary reparation to the home country, local integration in the country of asylum (which is not happening in Thailand), and resettlement to a third country (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011, p. 7). Priority for resettlement is given to those who came to the refugee camp first (Mathews, 2012, p. 10). The refugee then decides which country they want to resettle. If, in this case, they want to go to the U.S., the UNHCR will refer him or her to a Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) or U.S. Embassy. The JVA are bodies established by the U.S. to process refugee cases and to coordinate administrative aspects of the U.S. refugee process (USA for UNHCR, 2013). At the JVA or U.S. embassy, the refugee gathers the necessary paperwork for resettlement and waits for an interview by a U.S. official, which can take months or years (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). Once an interview takes place, the refugee needs to convince the U.S. official that he/she is a refugee. If denied, the refugee would return home to where they were persecuted (which is not an option for the Karen since they would be abused when going back), stay where they are (refugee camp or place of asylum) or apply to another country (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). If approved for resettlement in the U.S., their situation becomes a case (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). Then the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), who fall under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), interviews the refugees and puts them through a medical security screening process (Mathews, 2012, p. 10). After they pass USCIS,
Overseas Processing Entity then refers the refugee’s case to the United States Refugee Processing Center for sponsorship assurance (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011, p. 9). Sponsorship assurance means that the American resettlement organization must “assure” the Department of State that it is prepared to receive each matched refugee. There are 10 voluntary agencies participating in the Refugee Admissions Reception and Placement Program in FY2011 (State Government Bureau of Population and Refugee, 2011): Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, Kurdish Human Rights Watch, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, and World Relief. These voluntary refugees then link the refugee to further help with sponsors whom are refugee family members already in the U.S., church and civic groups in the U.S. who would promise to help the refugee once he or she reaches their place for resettlement in the U.S. (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). There are certain responsibilities a sponsor must complete, such as: (1) Meet refugee at the airport, (2) Provide housing for at least a month, (3) Provide access to a doctor for a health checkup within the first 30 days, (4) Provide any necessary clothing, (5) Enroll children in public schools, (6) Help refugee adults learn English-language, (7) Help adults become job ready and helps them seek employment (Idaho Office for Refugees, 2013). On a side note, I have seen World Relief, a voluntary agency, act as a sponsor in which they help adults learn English-language and provide housing for the refugees. So the differences between a voluntary agency and sponsor can overlap. If the refugee has been on good behavior (not getting in trouble with the law during their stay in the U.S.), after 12 months of residency, they are able to apply for permanent resident
alien (green card) (U.S. Department of State, 2013). After five years in the United States, green card applicants can apply for U.S. citizenship (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

How Many and Where in the United States are Burmese/Karen Refugees being Resettled?

As of December 31st, FY2012, 14,160 Burmese refugees settled to the U.S. In December 31st, FY2011 there are 16,972, the following fiscal year, FY2010, there are 16,693, FY2009 there are 18,202, in FY2008 18,139, in FY2007 13,896, in FY2006 1,612, FY2005 1,447, FY2004 1,056, FY2003 203, FY2002 128, and FY2001 at 544 (Refugee Processing Center, 2012a). The numbers seem consistent throughout the years except from 2006 to 2007. As mentioned earlier, the Material Support to Terrorism policy was lifted in 2006 by the Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. This meant that more Burmese refugees were given the opportunity to enter the U.S. unlike before when they were suspected of assisting terrorists (their own actual people who were fighting against the Burmese army).

The top three Burmese ethnic languages, which typically tie to the refugee’s ethnic group, are Karen at 31,369, Burmese at 12,037 and Kayah (Karenni ethnic group) at 8,963 (Refugee Processing Center, 2012b) (see Appendix C). This means that the Karen are the largest Burmese ethnic group being resettled in the U.S. To support this claim, there is another source as well that states that the Karen make up half of the Burmese population resettling in the U.S. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). The top ten states that are receiving Burmese refugees, in which there is likely a Karen resettlement taking place, from FY2005 to FY2009 is Arizona at 1,953, California at 1,522, Georgia at 1,889, Nashburn at 1,720, Indiana at 3,741, Minnesota at 1,503, New York at 4,585, North Carolina at 2,409, Texas at 6,024 and Washington at 1,324 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Unfortunately there is no breakdown of Burmese ethnic groups being represented from state to state; however, I was able
to find an approximate number of Karen refugees being represented in Bakersfield, California at 20,000, 4,000 Karen in St. Paul Minnesota, and 3,500 Karen in Atlanta, Georgia, and Chapel Hill North Carolina (Steinhardt New York University, 2010) (see Appendix D). In Nashburn, between the calendar years of CY2007 to CY2012, there are approximately 3,954 Burmese Refugee arrivals (Refugee Processing Center 2012c). In Trident City alone there are 1,388 Burmese refugees arriving from CY2007 to CY2012 (Refugee Processing Center, 2012c).

Why are Karen Resettling in Certain Places in the U.S.

Karen and all other refugee placement in the U.S. is dependent on the resettlement organization (10 voluntary agencies that were mentioned) sponsoring the refugee. The resettlement organization bases the place of resettlement on availability of housing, employment, needed services, readiness of host community, and a variety of other factors (USCRI, 2011). However, if the refugee has a relative in the U.S., then there is an effort to have the refugee placed as close as possible to their relative (USCRI, 2011).

I asked Naw Wah, a former Karen refugee and a current Karen interpreter at New Life (a refugee agency on the north side of Trident City) this question, “Do Karen refugees choose to come here to Trident City to resettle?” Naw Wah (2013) reply is this:

I don't think Karen people choose Trident City to resettle. Usually, we like to live in groups and we don't want to be alone at the place where we never been. For instance, my family decided to resettle to Trident City because we have relatives here. We believe that being closer to someone who we know is better than being with strangers. Likewise, Karen want to resettle to the place where there are more Karen because we trust our own ethnic group more than other ethnicities. As you can see, many Karen live in Minnesota, there are also a lot of Chin (another
Burmese minority ethnic group) in Indiana. Generally, all Burmese believe that sticking with who we know and trust is the best idea (personal communication, January 15, 2013).

**How has Resettlement Been for Karen in the U.S.?**

Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2010) have looked at resettlement in a multi-ethnic city of a population over 100,000 (pp. 12-16). They called the city Westville, which seems to be a pseudonym for a large city in the northeastern part of the U.S. The city itself has an unemployment rate well above the state and national averages (p. 13). The city has been getting large waves of immigrant resettlement, which in consequence, has ghettoized the city and segregated its neighborhoods by social-economic status and race (p. 13). The cost of living was relatively high with monthly rent falling between $650 to $700 (p. 13). However, the most affordable housing is located in the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city (as it is typically in most large cities).

The part of the city that the Karen families were being resettled in was in a neighborhood with notorious gang, drug, and prostitution activity (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010, p. 13). The building they were housed in was in a state of semi-disrepair with broken windows, leaking ceilings, rodent infestations, and unreliable plumbing (p. 13). The apartment building was overcrowded, with six to seven individuals sharing a two-bedroom space. The apartment was also initially unfurnished. Local press ran a story of the Karen being resettled in horrible conditions and so the resettlement organization took the families to a safer and better conditioned apartment complexes in the downtown area.

However, even when conditions are good (meaning Karen are living in a safe and well maintained apartment complex) the social issues arise. Residents in these apartment complexes
complained about the odors produced by Karen cooking (which from my experience they seem to always cooked curry), congregation of Karen in large groups in the hallways, and the flushing of disposable diapers which causes plumbing problems (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010, p. 13).

In regards to rent, the Karen had to pay rent and utilities on day one of their stay. They were given minimal assistance by the resettlement organization in dealing with paying bills and managing a household (which most likely meant managing money) (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010, p. 13). The Karen fell behind in their payments but at times they also overpaid because they were unaware of the discounts available to them because of their low income status (p. 13).

As far as gaining access to healthcare, families are provided with free medical care through Medicaid. However, local health clinics were frustrated because Karen families miss their scheduled appointments due to them being unaccustomed to strict time keeping (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010, p. 13). The agencies did try to help by making medical appointments for the refugees and notifying the families for these appointments but the letters in this study were written in English and so the Karen were not able to read it. Also, most of the Karen, upon arrival to the clinic, could not speak English and there was not always a Burmese translator available. This particular study stated that many of the Karen could not speak Burmese and can only speak Karen; therefore, even if there are Burmese translators, some Karen may not be able to communicate with that translator.

The Karen in this study generally did not suffer much from any extraordinary medical issues, but those who had non-acute conditions like problems with hearing, vision, or chronic pain went without medical attention until a volunteer realized the need for treatment (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010, p. 14). Those Karen who had prostheses due to the war experienced
greater difficulties (p. 14). Karen children were prevented from going to school on time if they did not receive their vaccinations, as mentioned this was a problem because Karen families were missing their medical appointments.

In regards to education, there were 20 Karen students who were enrolled in various inner-city schools, from elementary to middle school level (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2010, p. 14). The majority are enrolled in large middle schools of over 1,200 students that are labeled as failing schools by the Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind Policy.”

Karen and Christianity

The relationship between the Karen becoming Christian relates with the many Christian denominations assisting with the resettlement process in the U.S., which will be further discussed in the next section. First, I will give a brief discussion on the history of how Christianity entered the Karen population. In 1807 the first Christian missionary arrived in Burma from India (Buadaeng, 2007, p.76). However, Buadaeng states that the first sizable outreach took place in 1826 by American Baptist missionaries, when the British won the war against the Burmese and gained control of the southwest region of Tenasserim and southern coastal regions of Arakan (p. 76). In detail, Petry (1993) sums up the work of Adoniram Judson, the first American Missionary to Burma, who foretold the progress of his missionary work which stated that, “after 15 years, he had 15 converts-a soul a year-and with a population of 20 million or so (at the time)” (pp.46-47). Due to traditional oral stories that foretold the return of a “lost book”, which meant the “the Bible” at the hands of a “white brother,” a story that closely paralleled the biblical records, the Karen welcomed the American and European missionaries (Thawnghmung, 2012, p. 23). Missionary and ethnologist Harry Marshall (1927) noted that:
Somewhere, sometime, they must have come in contact with wandering companies of Jews, from whom they must have learned about the Creation, for they have the story of that far-off event in almost the exact form which has come down to us in Genesis. But they had prophets among them who said that they thought they had lost the law of God and His Book, and that the ‘younger white brother’ who had never lost His Book, would someday bring it back to them, and then they would again become a nation with the knowledge of God, which would bring them relief from their slavery to the evil spirits and also from their Burman neighbors. (p. 10)

In 1833 an American missionary by the name of Dr. Francis Mason speculated that the Karen may have descended as one of the lost tribes of Israel. This is due to the biblical parallels in their folklore in which the saying of God in Karen language is “Ywa”, which is similar to the saying of God in Hebrew, which is Yahweh (Petry, 1993, p. 170).

In greater detail, the Burmans, who missionaries have been trying to evangelize decades before 1826, in which by 1834, fewer than 125 Burmans had converted to Christianity while the Karen conversion rate was between 500 to 600 Karen (Buadaeng, 2007, p. 77). This naturally gave the incentive for missionaries to invest their attention with the Karen (p.77). As the Karen started embracing Christianity, they also wanted their children to learn how to read God’s gospel for themselves so there was great investment by the Karen to build Christian schools. The Christian schools provide the foundation for success of the Karen due to the shared religious beliefs with the well-funded missionary groups (p. 77). Presently, the many Karen that are resettling in the U.S. consider themselves Christian. Whether they are devout or not is another
matter. Their resettlement is somewhat easier due to the varying levels of support that is given by the different Christian denominations residing in the U.S.

**Resettlement, “A Church Thing”**

Since 1946, the Lutheran Social Services (LSS) has been resettling refugees in North Dakota and until the 1990s, the services of resettlement was primarily handled by the church (Erikson, 2012 p. 168). The director of resettlement states that the motivations for caring for refugees range from “Christian passion” to help support the less fortunate to evangelizing the refugee population (p. 168). The director also recounted examples of refugee families who complained about sponsors pressuring them to baptize their children, go to church, and who refused to provide information about divorce (p. 168).

In further detail on the influences of refugee resettlement, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (2012a) states, “We are called to serve, accompany and empower these refugees who find themselves among the most voiceless, forgotten and vulnerable. Our nation, with its history of being a safe haven for those fleeing persecution, has the same calling. These refugees from Burma clearly need the support and intervention of our agency, the refugee advocacy community and our country” (p. 3). They also generally state that, “LIRS (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) is one of 10 national organizations that resettle refugees on behalf of the U.S. government. In partnership with local organizations and congregations, we strive to create welcoming communities to receive refugees.”

On a Seventh Day Adventist website there is a verse from the Bible, “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19, New International Version). The Seventh Day Adventist group, as do most Christian groups, is aiming to make sure that refugees that are moving into their neighborhoods either stay Seventh Day Adventist or become one. In the
refugee ministries website it states, “It is when people are displaced that they are the most open and receptive to the gospel” (Refugee Ministries, 2013). The website also states, “Many of these refugees and immigrants come from areas of the world where we cannot send missionaries and there are very few Christians. Inspiration tells us: ‘We should be able to see in the multiplying opportunities to reach many foreigners in America a divinely appointed means of rapidly extending the third angel’s message into all the nations of earth’” (http://www.refugeeministries.com/article/40/learn-more/north-america-the-mission-on-our-doorstep). Specifying to Karen refugees the website states, “Twenty to thirty years ago there was a large influx of Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian refugees to the US. Sadly, many SDA (Seventh Day Adventist) believers became members of whatever group reached out to and help them. We must not let this happen again with the Karen people” (Refugee Ministries, 2013)!

Baptist Churches are stating a similar story,

The Karen were some of the earliest converts to Christianity in Southeast Asia, and one of the fastest-growing churches after American Baptist missionary efforts began with the arrival of Adoniram Judson in Burma in 1813. The excitement and interest of these early mission efforts were the reason Baptist churches in the U.S. formed societies to work together that led to the formation of our Baptist denominations that exist today. For nearly 200 years, the Karen have been graciously receiving our missionaries and their message, and they are proud of their links to Baptists in America. Now it is our turn to receive and help them become a part of our American communities. (ABCOPAD, 2013)

On the other hand, Catholic Charities in Connecticut has this to say:
The Karen refugees are resettled here by Catholic Charities under a United Nations program. Catholic Charities provides case management to get each family set up with immediate social services, English-language training, job searching and schooling for the children. Currently 180 Karen children attend schools in our neighborhood. Over 65% of the adults obtain jobs within 4 months – managers tend to seek them out because of their reputation for excellent work habits. The refugees tend to come to the U.S. with very little. As this winter began, Immanuel purchased 62 winter coats for the newly arrived refugees. Immanuel looks forward to getting to know and working with the Karen refugees on S. Marshall St. (Immanuel Congregational Church, 2013)

From personal experience with Naw Wah’s father, being his ESL tutor at Lakeview Park Community Center, I have heard of Karen refugee outings that are mainly based on a Christian outlook. Once a year a large number of Karen Christians have an outing where the Karen are coming from all over the United States. These outings teach moral education to young Karen. What is interesting is that I asked Naw Wah’s father who are teaching these moral lessons and he said they are American priests.

Between the Lutherans, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and the Catholics, all Christian denominations want to help Karen refugees with the resettlement process. Only through literature researched on the Internet have I found that the Lutherans and the Catholics do not expressively want the Karen to either stay or become part of a Christian faith while the Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist seem to have taken a more enterprising venture to assist and heavily influence a Christian lifestyle. Yet, Karen refugees may see religion, particularly Karen elders, as a means of participating in the neoliberal economy. Many Karen elders do not have the skills
to work professional and certain blue collar jobs in this modern economy but they can make use
of their religious beliefs (particularly Seventh Day Adventist for many Karen) in a way that can
eventually generate income. For instance, they can venture into the world of entrepreneurship by
starting new churches, which may be a small market because Seventh Day Adventist are a
minority religious group in the U.S. but that also means there is a need to open up more churches
because there may only be a few. Overall, religious organizations strongly influence the
resettlement process due to their involvement with refugee agencies that need their assistance in
refugee resettlement. Obviously the church becomes involved because there is a humanitarian
need to assist people who are suffering and need help. However, the churches and refugee
agencies leave formal education to traditional educational institutions.

**Southeast Asian Refugees of the Past to Present**

Due to the war on Communism in Southeast Asia, there was a large influx of Southeast
Asian refugees that entered the United States from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, preceding
the relatively recent arrival of Karen refugees. It may be valuable to take a brief look at how
other Southeast Asian refugees, in particular I looked at Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodian
refugees have gone through the resettlement process in the past compared to Karen refugees, the
Southeast Asian refugees of the present.

The resettlement process amongst the Vietnamese and Cambodian actually took place in
waves. The first and second waves were mainly ethnic Vietnamese (as oppose to Sino
Vietnamese), wealthier, and had political connections with the U.S. government. However,
having strong ties with the United States government and the government of South Vietnam
(especially high ranking officers in the South Vietnam army) meant that they were targeted by
the Northern army (Vietnamese Communist party) for extinction (Rutledge, 1992, p. 4). The
first two waves were also easier to resettle because of their ties to America, whether it was because they spoke good English, already had relatives in America, had a place to go, were wives of American servicemen and there were a high number of Roman Catholics that were chosen for resettlement (pp. 4-5). The Cambodian refugees had a very similar outlook, in which the first groups of Cambodian refugees from 1979 to 1982 tended to be more educated with urbanized backgrounds and some knowledge of the English language (Hopkins, 1996, p. 112). They were the first to receive individual and agency sponsors (p. 112). For the Hmong, the servicemen who worked with the Americans in their war against communism were the first to be resettled (Chan, 1994, p. 81). During the year when the Refugee Act of 1980 was legislated, there was an emergence of approximately 27,000 Hmong refugees admitted to the United States (Yang, 2001, p.166).

In regards to arriving in America, there were four refugee camps in the United States that received the tens of thousands of Indochinese, particularly the Vietnamese refugees. In the camp, children attended school and adults could take classes focusing on vocational skills and English language training (Montero, 1979, p. 25). Vietnamese refugees spent four hours daily studying English while they wait for a sponsor to resettle them (p. 25). The Vietnamese were also immediately resettled once they arrived in the U.S., like many refugees such as the Cambodians, as long as there was someone or an organization to sponsor them (Hopkins, 1996, p. 111). Cambodian refugees did have issues of deteriorating in health due to the war so many individual sponsors were discouraged to sponsor them (p. 111).

Regarding adaptation of Vietnamese refugees, their greatest strength in resettlement is community formation (Rutledge, 1992, p. 58). Vietnamese communities have proven to be strong pillars for assisting refugees in their adjustment psychologically, spiritually,
economically, and most importantly, symbolically (p. 58). This was also similar to the Hmong in which community enclaves were formed. Furthermore, the U.S. government had initially relocated the Hmong to live as dispersed communities throughout the United States (Chan, 1994, p. 59). This was to encourage the Hmong to learn English quickly as they cannot be dependent on their neighbors who were not Hmong and also to avoid the over population of Hmong in one location in which that location would need to over pull their resources to help the Hmong resettle. However, the Hmong, through word of mouth, would move from their initial place of resettlement for family reunification, search for employment, the inability to continue in places with high rent, hostile actions by the host communities and relationship issues with their sponsors (p. 59).

The Karen refugees are the newcomers to the U.S. They were not resettled in certain waves like all the other refugees. Karen were also not coming here as refugees as a result of an American war. Instead, they are coming here from the result of a war with the Burmans, the majority group in Burma that ousted many Karen villagers and farmers. For humanitarian and complicit purposes by the U.S. government, NGOs and UNHCR, the Karen are here to resettle their lives, but in a 21st neoliberal America. Although similarly like the resettlement that took place with the Southeast Asian refugees of the past, in which resettlement depended a lot on the need of an organization to help sponsor the refugee for resettlement and the need for English acquisition to help with the resettlement process, the Karen resettlement experience is taking place in an era where the American people and refugee organization in the U.S. have many experiences with dealing with Southeast Asian refugees. The Karen are following a trend of decades of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement that consistently needs further research to see how the trends may be different. For instance, from my data collection in Chapter Six, I
mentioned Karen youth becoming more Americanized by their use of “Youtube” and “Google,” which is commonly used in urban households throughout the U.S. and the world in the 21st century, and not during the resettlement of the Southeast Asian refugees of the 1980s and early 1990s.
Chapter 3: Limited Educational Opportunities for Karen

Access to Education for Karen Refugees in the U.S.

Young Karen adults are aware that they can further their education after a high school education or an English education but there are many barriers to attaining college enrollment. Let us first consider what the typical path to college enrollment is. Choy (2001) states five steps: (1) Students must decide they want to pursue post-secondary education and what type; (2) Students must prepare for college level work; (3) If they want to attend a four-year institution they must usually take the SAT and ACT (typically for students attending high school in the U.S.); (4) Must choose one or more institutions and file applications; (5) Students must gain acceptance and make the financial and other arrangements necessary to enroll. All five steps may be troubling for Karen refugees because many refugees are typically part of the first generation to consider an education after high school. The parents of many of these young Karen refugees are coming from farming villages in Burma before they migrated to the refugee camps in Thailand (Barron et al., 2007, p. 28).

Refugee ESL students have to take more classes than the typical proficient American student because they have to take additional language instruction (Kanno & Varghese, 2010, p. 311). There is also a feature of racism that refugees might face, for instance, a Vietnamese college student who has been in the U.S. since the age of nine was still spotted by her professors as being a non-native speaker (p. 316). Earlier in my theoretical framework, my research acknowledged the use of linguistic capitalism as a subgroup of cultural capitalism, due to linguistic capitalism’s involvement with ESL.

In regards to the financial impact of ESL and post-secondary attainment, ESL college students are found to be taking classes that are not considered college credit by some institutions
Refugees are already stigmatized as having low SES (Social Economic Status) but young adults may also have the stigmatization of being less than the average college student. Kanno and Varghese (2010) state in their study that many top public and private university requirements require that ESL students in high school must have three years of college-preparatory composition or literature to enter college (p. 318). This means that ESL high school students can have only one year worth of ESL lessons, which is troubling because many students may need more ESL classes. Some refugees or immigrants in the study are mentioned to come into U.S. high school during the second or third year of high school so it is close to impossible to have three years’ worth of English college-preparatory courses completed before entering college (p. 318). Therefore, many recent immigrants and refugee students attend community colleges first, where they can take regular classes and ESL classes before being eligible to attend a four-year university (p. 318). Community colleges have open access so students from all background can enter, even ESL high school students, Kanno and Varghese have found a couple of students to have outsmarted the system by enrolling in a summer English program at a nearby college or “double up” on college preparatory English courses in one year at their high school (p. 318).

In Kanno and Varghese (2010) they noted that many of the students’ parents were coming to the U.S. so that their children can have a better education (p. 319). Numerous parents have a high to middle class background from their country of origin with a college education; therefore, their parents provided a middle class upbringing and habitus that put college education on the horizon for many immigrant and refugee students in their study (p. 320). In the case of Karen refugees, as mentioned, they are an agrarian society but there are some Karen parents, as in Lar Htoo’s case (a case that will be elaborated later on), where his father attended college but
was required to change his name to a Burmese name in order to graduate. His father did not graduate but Lar Htoo is on the road to getting his Bachelor’s degree from North Park University. As noted previously, Choy (2001) states that first generation students at four-year institutions tend to come to college less academically prepared than other students (p. xxxi). She states there is some evidence that first generation students who began at four-year institutions during the years of 1995-96, were less likely well prepared academically than their peers whose parents had a bachelor’s or advanced degrees (p. xxxi). In high school, these first generation students whose parents did not have a Bachelor’s degree were less likely to be prepared to take ACT or SAT examinations (in some case this would apply for Karen refugees entering high school but for those who are 18 and over, they have to take the GED), less likely to follow a rigorous curriculum in high school, less likely to take an advance placement examination, and may not have taken calculus.

**Student Aid**

Karen refugees can get student aid from the federal government. Refugees in general are considered LPR (lawful permanent residents) (FSA, 2004-2005, pp. 1-19). This is because refugees are eligible for permanent residency (green card status) or U.S. citizenship. However, student aid is not always available for low-income refugee families.

Karen refugees, when coming to the U.S., would be categorized in the low income bracket due to coming here with few assets or any at all (Bollinger & Hagstrom, 2004, p. 3). In regards to the financial support for student aid from the Department of Education, families with low income, even with government assistance, face an annual $3,800.00 college expense burden not covered by student aid, work study and student loans (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002, p. v). If there is shortage in grant aid, low-income families are then
required to pay around $7,500 which is two-thirds (67%) of college expenses at public four year universities and one-third (33%) of family income through work and borrowing (p. v). These financial barriers prevent 48% of low-income high school graduates from attending a four-year college and 22% from attending any college at all within two years of graduation (p. v). Those students coming from moderate income families are not doing well either since statistics shows that 43% of them are unable to attend a four year college and 16% do not attend college at all (p. v). Many refugees would be classified in this statistic because they are part of the low income bracket. As mentioned before, many refugee young adults who do not meet four-year university acceptance criteria would enter community colleges (particularly because of low English skills) but it is reported that high school graduates who do enter community colleges find it difficult to stay in college because of their financial barriers (p. v). Besides the barriers to financial aid, refugees lack social capital to maneuver the bureaucratic process of filling out college and federal aid financial applications (Salaam, 2012). Additional barriers to educational access among Karen occur where many live in poverty and the parents, if working, barely earn subsistence wages.

Overall, there are some young adult Karen refugees who are the first generation students in college and besides the issues of overcoming ESL issues, they have to overcome the number of students whose parents did not finish college, may not end up finishing undergrad. As Naw Wah mentions in her story (elaborated later on Chapter 6) on Karen refugees coming here, there is no time for young Karen to worry about schooling because they have to work. They do not have time to prepare for the GED to get into college. As mentioned, refugees have to overcome the barriers of learning English, of passing ESL and taking regular English classes to be a college
student. The last but not least of the Karen refugee worries, is the struggle to access the money for schooling.

**Gender, Age and Educational Opportunities**

Women in traditional Karen culture are not expected to attain a post-secondary education. They are steered to subscribe to heteronormative structures emphasizing marriage, having offspring, and tending to domestic chores. Naw Wah, one of the refugees I got to know, does not want to see Karen women in this status. She stated (Naw Wah, personal communication, June 28, 2011):

> Back home in the refugee camp females do not need to be educated. They always relied on their husband when they got married. So instead of going to school they might be good at cooking or doing home stuff. For me, I don’t know but I feel like everyone should learn everything whether female or male because everyone has the same opportunity. The female should not always rely on their husband. They have to try by themselves. I always believe in this, since I know who I am. Because of my environment in the camp, I use to see sometimes in one family, when the wife has to depend on the husband, the husband would harass her, he would be the head of the household so sometimes he has power. When I saw that I don’t like [sic] that behavior. The wife has to be patient with the husband because she has to rely on him. She has to be patient all the time.

Another issue for young Karen women in the refugee camps is that they are stigmatized by pregnancy. Many secondary school aged female students drop out of secondary education because they become pregnant. Another study also reported that young Karen women face exclusion from education because of marriage and parenthood since they tend to marry older
men (Walsh & Hendy, 2006, as cited in Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008, p. 602). Young men who marry are subjected to the same social pressures as the women; however, they can easily move to another camp and attend a different school (p. 602). Overall, women’s sexuality is often subject to more control from societal pressures in the camp than men and so if their sexual behavior does not fit into the society beliefs, Karen women must bear the grunt of being ostracized from formal education in the camp (p. 603). There is a Karen Women’s Organization (KWO) that offers classes for women who are married or have become pregnant (p. 604). The organization provides the highest quality of education for women who have been discriminated against (p. 604).

Older refugee men in particular experience downward mobility because they lack the English skills for work (Chenoweth & Burdick, 2009, p. 21). Many elderly refugee, like the Karen I have encountered in Trident City, attempt to enroll in second-language classes but find that few classes are geared towards their needs, especially if the classes deal with work, but the elders might be too old for work (p. 22). Chenoweth and Burdick state that ESL teachers need to realize that refugee elders have different needs (p. 22). These needs differ from the adult refugees who are working (UNHCR, 2002, p. 286). Also refugee elders in the classroom may not be comfortable learning with younger students, because they may feel ashamed if they make a mistake (p. 286). This is especially seen in Asian cultures when the elder is typically correct, but is being told by the ESL teacher that a younger student may have the correct answer. UNHCR suggests that classroom learning for elder refugees should be elder-specific, such as having older teachers teach the class (p. 286). There are negative images of aging in the receiving cultures curriculum that can affect an elder’s self-esteem and self-worth (p. 286). UNHCR suggests that English-language learning curriculum must show positive images of aging
(p. 286). There are also additional health barriers related to language learning such as hearing loss, vision impairment, dental problems (which results in problems with pronunciation), depression, dementia and arthritis (which makes it difficult to write properly) (p. 286). UNHCR recommends that agencies such as English-language program providers need to be aware of the health barriers and link these issues to the barriers of learning English to provide a better service to the elders (p. 286).

Some elders also fear and distrust the government more than their younger counterparts due to past experiences of state-sponsored persecution (Chenoweth & Burdick, 2009, p. 22). This seems very similar to Burmese government ethnic cleansing objectives that took place against the Karen refugees in Burma. The young refugees are therefore relied on as the ones who would fully care for their elders (p. 22). Even if the elder refugees do trust and rely on the government social services, the menu of services offered by the government may not match the elders’ needs and interests, like food that may be served may not be culturally appropriate (pp. 22-23). In my experience, the Karen refugees who come to Trident City are on welfare and given an Nashburn Link card (which is equivalent to food stamps) from the Nashburn Department of Human Services. This reliance on Link benefits comes as a result of not being able to work due to a lack of English skills because of problems with accessing the appropriate ESL courses.

Lacking knowledge of the English language becomes a huge barrier for elderly refugees to succeed in becoming U.S. citizens because they need to pass an English test, and demonstrate basic verbal, reading, and writing skills (Chenoweth & Burdick, 2009, p. 23). Most elderly refugees’ fundamental needs are met with the time-limited welfare programs; however, there is no money for additional expenses (p. 23). In order to keep their eligibility for welfare assistance,
such as medical insurance, food vouchers, and cash assistance under the United States’ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, they must become citizens.

**Confirming the Titles: ESL and ELT**

Throughout this study, I have come across the acronyms English as a Second Language and English Language Training sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes are considered different programs. What is the difference? At the community center in Lakeview Park, they teach ESL. At New Life they teach ELT. At World Relief Trident City they offer both ESL and ELT. New World Alliance however has ELT and Vocational English. A director at New Life stated that the main difference between ELT and ESL is that refugees speak more than one language so it is better to use ELT than limiting their background and saying they only speak English as a second language when English can be their third or fourth language. However, on the World Relief Trident City website, I note that ESL is “English life skill classes for newly arrived refugees and immigrants” and ELT is “intensive job-focused English language classes for newly arrived refugees who will soon be entering the work force”. A student from my observations, Saw Htoo (discussed more in detail in Chapter IV), states that his English learning at New Life relates to work, in which case I believe he means using English to function in hard labor jobs.

A research study from the Northwest Regional Educational Lab, Office of Research and Evaluation Services, and Office of Refugee Resettlement (1984) suggests that ELT promotes language learning more than refugees who learn English while working (p. 1). Meaning, when refugees come here and attend ELT courses, they learn more English than they would at work. Which implies that ELT is teaching a lot of English that can be used for life than just for work; however, throughout the study, they use the word ESL interchangeably with ELT and so it
becomes confusing again, as to what the difference really is. From what has been said by the refugee and community centers in Trident City and literature that I have read so far, I have found a third category that links ELT and ESL and that is ESP (English for Specific Purposes). The goal of many societies is to have a self-sufficient citizen and ESP promotes this status. Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) state that ESP requires the careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context (p. 298). ESP can be used to fulfill many academic “Englishes”, for example, English for science and technology, English for graduate teaching assistants and English for vocational purposes which is most relevant to the English-language learning that refugees would be taught. This type of ESP is also known as a restricted language, in which case the language does not allow the speaker to communicate effectively in novel situations or in context outside the vocational environment (Mackay & Mountford, 1978, pp. 4-5). So the language itself is restricted for work purposes so for example, the language of international air-traffic controller could be regarded as special in the sense that the repertoire required by the controller is strictly limited and can be accurately determined by situation, as it may also be for air hostesses and dining room waiters (pp. 4-5). Overall, English for Specific Purposes relates well to what I have observed in the ESL/ELT classroom where there are certain types of language needed for the refugees to find and function in a hard labor job environment.

In this research, English is being taught to these refugees so they are eligible to work and function at work. To clarify, functioning in vocational jobs that require the understanding of English to take commands like boxing up cakes in a cheesecake factory. It is also for the purpose of living a life that may not be as sophisticated as someone who is living in mainstream society but to live a provisional life in the beginning stages of assimilation into the mainstream
society; for instance, understanding how to use U.S. money or how to ask for directions when lost.
Chapter 4: Living in America: What was I Thinking?

Introduction

Living in America is a dream come true for many immigrants. However, upon arrival and after many days, months and years of challenges in resettling, it is obvious that America is not always the greatest place to call home. In this chapter, I talk about Saw Htoo when he first came to Trident City. He had new experiences of living a cosmopolitan life, such as going to a supermarket and shopping mall.

Another set of stories contain issues related to discrimination, employment, old age, and uneasiness with the American culture all mixed together which challenges the notions of how a Karen living in the U.S. may someday ask, “Living in America, what was I thinking?” Much of the cultural capital that would help them establish their lives are to be earned through these new experiences. However, the harder they try to adapt themselves to their new lives in America’s neoliberal lifestyle, the more complicated their lives have become.

American Consumerism through the Eyes of a 19 Year Old Karen

It was a cloudy Saturday afternoon in October and I met up with Saw Htoo to take him to his first supermarket experience. He had never set foot in a Safeway supermarket so when we arrived he was amazed. To our right was the bakery section. I pointed to the bagels, cupcakes and so on and I told Saw Htoo the names of each object I pointed to as a way to give Saw Htoo an English lesson. As we walked by the cheese section, he started touching the different kinds of cheeses and said, “I never ate this.” In my mind, I wondered if he meant that there were just so many different kinds of cheeses and so he pointed to the one he never ate. I asked him if he ever had cheese in general and he answered in a soft curious manner, “What is cheese?” I soon realized that this was going to be a long day at the supermarket because there was just so much
to see. The supermarket is a “one stop shop,” where we have everything in one space. Saw Htoo is actually getting the culture of American consumerism or at least the consumerism of food, being flashed right before his eyes.

An interesting observation was when I took him to the toilet paper aisle and he shook his head. I wondered what was wrong and decided to ask. Saw Htoo explained how there were just so many brands of toilet paper, he was wondering how a person can actually decide! At this point I knew what he meant. As Americans, we tend to over consume. There are just so many brands for us to choose from because that is the capitalistic framework. The brands with the best quality, quantity, logo, and even shelf space would be the best sellers. If Saw Htoo understood American consumerism, he would make his choice dependent on what he felt was best for his needs. For Saw Htoo, who just came from the refugee camps where there was probably a small selection of toilet paper to choose from, the toilet paper aisle at Safeway was just too much drama.

As I took Saw Htoo home from Safeway I asked where he shopped if not at these huge supermarkets and he pointed out the Indian supermarket by his house. It was the “Tambe Brothers” Supermarket, a smaller supermarket that caters to the Indian and Pakistani community. I now understood that my job, as his mentor, was to show him more of Trident City, rather than the two-mile radius he walked around in. I also understood that I was passing on my cultural capital knowledge to him within a neoliberal context. Not only about shopping at a Safeway but the idea of why people shop in supermarkets (due to one-stop-shop convenience) rather than the local ma and pop grocery stores. As I dropped him off I told him I would see him the following week to take him to the mall. He did not know what a mall was but would meet with me next week to find out.
Saw Htoo’s experience with me at the supermarket was an eye opener at how much he knew about American consumerism. In a neoliberal context, Saw Htoo is experiencing an abundance of goods being marketed at a massive amount. In light of cultural capital, Saw Htoo has never had the experience of shopping in a supermarket. The experience he had at Safeway gave knowledge of how Americans shop for food. Saw Htoo lived most of his life in the refugee camps and so his knowledge of how to shop and what shopping is in America is still very new to him. These are some of the things that continue to make resettling so difficult for Karen refugees like Saw Htoo.

**Mall Madness: The Ultimate Consumer Experience!**

After giving him one week to recuperate from our trip to the supermarket, I took Saw Htoo to an indoor shopping mall just outside of Trident City. I thought this would be another great opportunity for him to see America’s big consumption of goods and services all put into one giant space. Although the difference between the supermarket and a mall is that the mall was an even bigger “wonderland,” with not only some of the items that you see at a supermarket, but there are restaurants, clothing stores, video game centers, department stores, and just so much for Saw Htoo to get lost in.

As we entered the parking lot of the mall he was surprised by the amount of vehicles that were parked. I told him this means there are a lot of people shopping today. As we entered the mall I started to point out the different stores around our entranceway. To our left I told Saw Htoo there was the “LensCrafters,” which is an eyeglass store. To our right there was a beauty salon. Up ahead there was a store that took professional photography. I had him walk with me slowly around the mall to get a feel of what the mall was really like.
Interestingly, we walked past a store that featured video games. He seemed to recognize the games on sale from a marketing display by the store’s entrance. I asked him, “Do you play video games?” He answered, “I did because in the refugee camps there is a room where young people play video games.” Saw Htoo stated that he would play PS2 (PlayStation 2) by paying money and taking turns with other players. I was amazed at this point that the refugee camps have somehow recreated what we Americans used to have in almost every mall in America, “the arcade.” The refugee camp’s arcade room became a replication of the past, in which a lot of kids in America used to beg their parents to take them to the arcade where they would spend their allowances on playing PAC-MAN and Street Fighter. However, due to the impact of American capitalism and the advancement in technology (the game console at home), Americans that love playing video games at the arcade can now play it in their own living rooms.

Saw Htoo seemed a little famished with all the excitement of the mall so I asked if he was hungry. Across from us was the cafeteria, so I just pointed out that there are all kinds of vendors to choose from. There was Japanese food, Italian food, American food (The Great Steak), and so on. I think Saw Htoo lost his appetite with just so many choices to choose from so he just shook his head as if it was time to move on.

I took Saw Htoo to one of my favorite clothing stores, “Old Navy,” an American clothing store that caters to pop culture/mainstream apparel. We looked through all kinds of items like sweaters, jeans, t-shirts and etc. We then looked at the label of a sweater and it stated, “Made in Vietnam.” Then I pointed to another sweater, and the label said, “Made in China.” I then asked him, “Do you know why these clothes are being made in different countries when Old Navy is an American store?” He seemed puzzled. It was time to give him a quick lesson on capitalism and outsourcing. I told him that in order for American companies to save money they hire cheap
labor around the world to make the clothes that you see. He shook his head stating, “I don’t understand.” I figured we would someday have this discussion again so we kept walking.

For Saw Htoo, neoliberalism was a new concept. He did not understand why American brands were being made in different countries and my attempt to teach him about this probably confused him because the concept of “outsourcing” was still very new to him. In the U.S., we complain and protest over the outsourcing of jobs, particularly manufacturing jobs, to overseas countries by big corporations. This has become part of the ways of living amongst Americans but for Saw Htoo, outsourcing is not seen directly as much in the refugee camps.

We then walked into a Carson Pirie Scott (a department store), where there were salespeople spraying cologne on strips of paper for us to sample. We passed by some women’s handbags and I asked him what he thought of the prices. He said they were just too expensive. Some handbags were over $100 dollars. I wondered how Saw Htoo knows that handbags over $100 would be too expensive. Did he know that some of the brands may actually be cheap for being a little over $100? For him, $100 is a lot of money, and it is for me too, but I am not referencing just the dollar amount. I am comparing the brand names to the dollar amount as well. Saw Htoo was probably not doing this because he lacked the knowledge of the brands being sold in the store. Saw Htoo’s cultural capital in the U.S. context was still limited at that time since he had only been here for a couple of months. In fact, knowledge of products and services that are typical for consumers who reside in a cosmopolitan city was still very new to Saw Htoo. Once Saw Htoo becomes more exposed to American consumerism I believe he will be up to par with U.S. consumerism as any young person that loves shopping. In the neoliberal context, Saw Htoo is still on welfare or someday he may be off welfare but just above the poverty line. Yet because big corporations support deregulation of the banks, in which the banks
are allowed to fuel the system with credit, Saw Htoo can keep participating in this economy by spending more than he makes. An example of how he can do this is just by simply making credit card purchases which he cannot readily pay back; therefore, leaving him in debt and not increasing his social economic status.

We went up the escalators and looked at kitchenware. There was a spatula that was over ten dollars and Saw Htoo said, “It’s so expensive.” I agreed that a spatula can be brought for a cheaper price but then again, this is Saw Htoo lacking the cultural experience to differentiate the prices of items. In other words, a spatula that one sees at a supermarket can be cheaper but it may not be a well-known brand or endorsed by a famous “Iron Chef” like the one we would see in a department store.

We walked out from Carson’s to a Bath and Body Works, where there was a collection of different soaps for Saw Htoo to look at. A sales rep came up to us and said, “We have a sale, you can get one free item if you purchase two.” Saw Htoo was confused, so I picked up two bottles of soap and said that, “If you buy these two bottles, then the third one is free.” Saw Htoo thought that was a good deal. I asked if he understood why they were having this sale and he did not know. I had to explain to him that the Bath and Body Works needed to market their store to gain more customers and wanted customers to buy more stuff.

This was my first experience with Saw Htoo to see what a “sale” meant to him. Saw Htoo has told me of a market around his refugee camp and so I imagined he may have a sense of what it means to buy something on sale. In regards to cultural capital, his language skills were not up to par with the language of shopping yet. He may know enough English to understand certain verbiage but there is a lot of cultural verbiage that is embedded in the world of shopping.
The last place we visited was a vitamin store called GNC (General Nutrition Centers). There was another sale for Saw Htoo to look at, this time for vitamins in which a customer could buy one product and get the second similar product for 50% off. Except this time, we were not told of this sale by a representative but read it off a label next to the item. Saw Htoo was not sure what this meant so I picked up one bottle and said if you buy this one, the second bottle, which I also picked up, is only half the price of the regular price. Saw Htoo seemed to understand right away. He is starting to get the gist of American consumerism, but as mentioned, I also suspect that in the refugee camps, he has been exposed to this type of capitalism but in a different way. I talk more about Saw Htoo’s consumerism in the refugee camps in Chapter 6.

On the drive home, I asked Saw Htoo if he misses his family and his life at the refugee camp. I also asked him if he misses Burma but he said he misses the refugee camp in Thailand and his former life there. I wondered about what he was learning in school at New Life Refugee Agency in regards to English. He said English that is related to work/workplace English. This made me believe that it is my job to assist Saw Htoo in learning English for practical everyday use. The type of English that he would use to help him relate to others, his needs and wants so that he can achieve what the Declaration of Independence states as “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

Saw Htoo at the Art Store: Big Discount!

A couple of weeks after our mall experience I wanted to take Saw Htoo somewhere he would love to shop. I have asked him what he likes to do in his spare time and he told me that he likes to draw. So I took him to the “Blick” art material store in downtown on a late Saturday afternoon. When I took him in the art store he was intrigued with the poster board canvases. A
20 x 20 board is around $20 and he thought it was really expensive. Again, a recurring theme came into my mind like it did with us at the mall a few weeks back, in which I wondered, “How does Saw Htoo really know a 20 x 20 board is really expensive for $20?” As someone who likes to draw, does he see these board canvases somewhere else for a cheaper price?

We then went over to a table of sketchbooks. Saw Htoo was wondering about the different prices on one price tag for one sketchbook. I told him the higher price tag, approximately $21 labeled “MSRP price,” is not the price now but the retail price the store was going to sell it for to make profit. The lower price, approximately $14, is the sale price. Saw Htoo was wondering why this is and I told him MSRP stands for “manufacturer’s suggested retail price.” I told him that the manufacturer’s price is the unit price, which is the money spent by the store to pay for the items. Blick lowered the retail price, meaning the price they will sell it at. The MSRP is just the suggestion by the manufacturer to Blick on the price they should sell the item at in order to turn a profit. Saw Htoo was still confused that they would sell these notebooks at a lower price. My technical verbiage on explaining MSRP did not get through to him. If one thinks about it, Saw Htoo just needs more experience buying items at the discounted price and retail price or MSRP. For me, I learned the meaning of MSRP through buying a car. I did not know what MSRP was in general for most of my life until I had to invest in something that would take me years to pay off. So I really understood Saw Htoo’s dilemma with understanding certain concepts in American consumerism.

Cultural capital comes into play here because Saw Htoo lacks the experience of ever being offered an item sold at the MSRP price. MSRP sounds very formal to someone who used to shop in an outside market around his refugee camp or buying items from other refugees like
wood for fire or vegetables for consumption. There is no manufacturer suggesting a price for an item for Saw Htoo to buy when he shops around his refugee camp.

When we approached the sales staff at the register to pay for his items, the clerk started asking Saw Htoo if he was a student. In a way Saw Htoo is a student, but an ESL student at a refugee agency, so not your typical college student. I asked the sales clerk what Saw Htoo needed to do to receive the student discount. He stated that Saw Htoo needed to initially give his first and last name and a school email. I was not sure if he had a school email but I asked the sales person, “Would he be considered a student because he is a refugee coming from the refugee camps in Thailand learning ESL at New Life?” The salesperson was very pleasant and greeted Saw Htoo with a “Welcome to America.” He said maybe we should wait on getting Saw Htoo a membership then and we could use a coupon. He took out a 40% off coupon from behind the cash register. It looked like it has been used from a previous transaction with the edges of it cut out as if it has been torn out from a coupon book. Thanks to the discount, Saw Htoo only paid about $8 for the sketchbook and a little more than $1 for two pencils. His final total was close to $12. Saw Htoo was surprised that it went down so low and wondered how the salesperson lowered the price. I said he used a coupon. He did not know what that was so I had to let him know that a coupon is another incentive to get people to come into the store and buy more stuff. This may have caused more confusion for Saw Htoo as he started sighing.

People who were raised in a consumer culture and certainly in a Western culture, run towards discounts and eagerly grab on to coupons. We know, thanks to cultural conditioning, that discounts and coupons are a good thing and will enable us to spend more money if we want to. However, I do wonder if and when Saw Htoo does start catching on to this excessive need to buy at a low price, would he likely assimilate himself in the U.S. buying culture to the point he
loses parts of his refugee identity? For instance, as a refugee, when he first came here he had very little, which is typical of most refugees because one had fled persecution, only able to carry whatever valuables that person has during their migration to safety. Once he knows he would not have to pick up and flee at a moment’s notice, what kind of items would he buy? My question is relating to how he will accumulate material items to have in a permanent residence, signifying being settled.

**Downtown…A Figment of the Imagination**

As we drove home from downtown after our visit to the art store, he asked me, “When do all the building lights turn on?” I told him that the buildings he is looking at are office buildings and condominiums/apartments. I also said, “Today is a Saturday so all the office lights will not turn on because it is a day off for everyone. For buildings that provide apartments and condominiums, they housed people who all live separate lives. Some people work, sleep, go out shopping and so on, so the lights in each person’s apartment would not all turn on and off in that building at the same time.” I then asked Saw Htoo, “Why do you ask?” and he just stated, “I just want to know.” I asked him, “How is it in the refugee camps?” He said that everyone lights a candle when it gets dark and blows it out at 9 p.m. So I am wondering if the life he lived before was more of a collectivist lifestyle and that is why he was asking me about a standardized time the lights turn on and off for the people who live in downtown. All things considered, I told him that downtown is highly populated with buildings, which is more noticeable in a large metropolis than in a small town or village. However, just because there are many buildings in one section of a city does not mean it to be a downtown area. It could just be a busy area of the city and I think Saw Htoo understood.
Overall, Trident City is a cosmopolitan city wealthy enough to have their downtown area lights on 24/7. Many of the buildings belong to large wealthy corporations and the people that rent or own the rooms in these buildings are well established. Big cities like Trident City like to exemplify this saying with their city lights, “the city that never sleeps” (which is a saying for New York). If Saw Htoo were to travel to Las Vegas, he would truly see a city that uses a lot of the earth’s natural resources (Hoover Dam) and nuclear energy in order to market and operate Las Vegas’s “Sin City” image; also America’s impressive capability to operate an entire city in a desert. Until then, I can see that Saw Htoo had never experienced a day in a big city back when he lived in Thailand. He has not gone to Bangkok in Thailand or Yangon in Burma. He was experiencing the big city lights in Trident City, which in relation to globalization, are not so different from the big city lights of all the major cities in the world.

**American Horror Story: Department of Motors and Vehicles (DMV)**

Living in the U.S., a State ID or Driver License can give access to a lot of things. For one thing, Saw Htoo needed to open a bank account and a State ID would be the easiest way to do it. Up until now, Saw Htoo would cash out his checks from work and keep the money with him, which is a very unsafe thing to do. I did some research on the internet as to what Saw Htoo needed to prepare for when getting a state ID at the DMV. When we got there, it was just a horrific experience for us. It was nothing we could have prepared for. Even I, a native who has gotten his driver’s license at this same DMV location, had trouble helping Saw Htoo to get his ID. This example was brought up in relation to linguistic capital and how it plays a role to inhibit Saw Htoo’s confidence in Saw Htoo getting his state ID.

When we arrived at the DMV, we were standing in a long line to be interviewed by one of two agents that were present. First, a young woman assisted us. She asked us what services
we needed and, pointing to Saw Htoo, I told her that he needed a State ID. She asked Saw Htoo for various identifying documents such as a social security card, which I did not tell Saw Htoo to bring. I misread the requirements on the DMV website about what was needed to obtain the ID card and so did not properly prepare Saw Htoo for this. Luckily, Saw Htoo brought every official government document he had that would verify his identification, including his I94 card, which fulfills the birth record requirement and provides an arrival and departure record for Saw Htoo. However, this needed to be accompanied with his passport. I told her, “He does not have a passport because he is a refugee.” She did not comprehend that refugees do not have passports because they are stateless. Fortunately her co-worker, an older man named David, overheard me and said, “Refugee, well this is interesting” and started training her on how to deal with the process. It seems that this lady is still new. So David explained to her that he is okay and to punch in some codes in the computer to let Saw Htoo go through. A short time later, we were given a ticket for another line to get one step closer to finally getting the ID card. A lesson came about in which it seems that many Americans may not understand the status of a refugee. As Americans, we may think that a refugee is a person just running away from persecution but because we do not see Americans losing their citizenship quite often, we do not understand that a refugee is considered stateless. This may be a cultural norm for people who live in countries where there is war and persecution within their state.

Furthermore, I thought to myself, what if David did not step in to help us? Would I have to take Saw Htoo home and do more research? Most importantly, I understood that the female administrator may still be a bit new, but she works for a department that deals with immigrants all the time. However, this administrator was not so bad though, she was not mean about Saw
Htoo not having a passport but she got Saw Htoo and I worried that we would be sent home to
start over.

When our number was called we approached a short blond haired Caucasian lady in her
mid-fifties by the name of Martha. She had an impassive face and wore a pair of glasses with
thick plastic frames. I gave her a smile and she asked, “Who is this ID for?” This time I let Saw
Htoo do the talking and Saw Htoo stated the ID card was for him. She noticed me and said that I
can interpret but cannot answer for him. I nodded in agreement. She spoke to us using
bureaucratic verbiage that Saw Htoo felt was very confusing. I tried to translate all her questions
into simple English. For one thing, she did not accept the Medicaid mailings from the state. She
wanted more ID so she asked for my state ID. I gave it to her and asked, “Why did you need my
ID”? She stated that she wanted me to sign a letter stating that I bear witness to Saw Htoo being
a resident in Trident City. I did not want to sign anything and I pointed her to the list of
acceptable documents that the previous administrative lady gave me, fulfilling the requirements
for obtaining an Nashburn ID. She then asked for a piece of mail from the government. We
gave her a selective services (the United States Federal government enlisting Saw Htoo to serve
in the arm forces in times of crisis) letter and card. She was a little mad that it was still in the
envelope when Saw Htoo took it out of his school bag. She exclaimed, “He needs to take it out
and hand it to me!” When Saw Htoo gave her the selective service letter and card she started
thinking and then went to her supervisor to see if this would work. When she came back she
asked Saw Htoo for a work card. Thank goodness that he did have that on him as well. She then
did some typing and asked Saw Htoo something that I cannot say verbatim because she was
using bureaucratic words and not everyday words. She basically wanted to know if Saw Htoo
committed any crimes against the government, which in turn would deter them from issuing a
State ID to him. Saw Htoo was so confused and I tried to explain it in simple English and he was still confused. I told Saw Htoo to just say no and at that moment, Martha shouted at me, “You cannot speak for him!” I nodded my head and did not know what to do but to stay calm because Saw Htoo can lose his chance to get his state ID today if I talked back at her. I then tried to explain to Saw Htoo again what her questions meant and he said no on his own. She then asked Saw Htoo his height and he only knew it in centimeters. Luckily she had the conversion for centimeters to feet posted on the side of her desk. On a side note, America is the only industrialized country in the world that doesn’t use the metric system. This would make understanding measurements a bit difficult for immigrants like Saw Htoo. Until he learns how to convert centimeters to feet, he can be held back on a few jobs. Martha then asked for Saw Htoo’s eye color and he said it was black. Martha stated, “The state does not recognize black eyes and the closest thing is brown eyes.” She gave us a printed sheet of paper stating that Saw Htoo needed to verify all the information was correct, like his address, gender, and so on. He also needed to read and sign that under perjury he is telling the truth (this is not exactly what the paper stated because the language was too bureaucratic for me to remember). I had to ask Martha what this verbiage meant so she explained to me that he has to sign the statement that he is telling the truth. Saw Htoo signed and verified everything she needed him to. She seemed annoyed that he was reading stuff that was in the “office use only” section and loudly said, “Sir, that is for our use only!” Saw Htoo and I both said sorry at different times because we felt like we were wasting her time. After approval was finally given, we went to the cashier’s line. I saw that Martha left her desk and left the facilities joking with her coworkers out loud but I was unable to hear what she was saying as we were heading to the cashier for payment. As we were driving home we talked about Martha, the second administrator that was pretty mean to us. Saw
Htoo stated, “I don’t think she likes me.” I then told Saw Htoo in a chuckled voice, “I don’t think she likes me either.” He smiled and I took it as a good sign.

Overall, I did not like the bureaucratic language and attitude used towards Saw Htoo though I do understand that the administrators need to have a uniform way of handling everyone who was applying for a driver’s license or state ID. Thinking back, will other Karen have the misfortune of meeting someone like Martha? It can be very difficult for a new immigrant to come into a society like ours and try to adjust themselves to our standards. Although with every painful encounter an experience can be added to a collection of other bad experiences that will help refugees like Saw Htoo learn what to expect when they get into a situation like we did with Martha. Saw Htoo’s English may never be good enough to understand bureaucratic verbiage skillfully. Even if his linguistic capital increases, certain English, like the “legal English” that is used amongst lawyers, must be used every day to fully make sense of what is being said. I am saying this because being a native here, sometimes I did not understand Martha’s verbiage and the fine print that she wanted us to read, but in the end, Saw Htoo may not totally feel like Martha disliked him if he understood this is the way administrative people who work for the government are trained to talk to avoid any issues with the public. Martha also exemplifies what Bourdieu would call “symbolic domination,” which earlier I described as, “unconsciously inculcated consent by subordinated classes and groups to the legitimacy of those in power.” In other words, Martha was an authoritative figure who used bureaucratic language to assert her authority over us but it was also necessary because she also symbolizes the authority of the state.

**Sometimes it Sucks being in a Refugee Camp and Sometimes it Sucks being in Trident City**

One day I went to visit a garden that was tended by refugees from Burma. The garden was located on Main and Goodwin Avenue. It is just west of the Trident City River where there
is a large vacant lot with one single townhouse building adjacent to the west part of the lot and surrounding town homes across the street, was transformed into a garden for refugees to plant their crops. Since the Karen came from an agricultural society, this was a very comfortable place to go for them. I met my interpreter, Naw Wah, planting a small plot in the large garden. She saw that I was looking for more Karen Refugees to interview for my study and advised that I should talk to Saw Gay Ler, who was tending to vegetables and crops he was growing on his plot of the garden.

Saw Gay Ler is Pwo Karen, who has lived in Trident City for five years, has a wife, two daughters and one son. He works as a dishwasher in a busy restaurant in downtown Trident City. I asked how he likes Trident City and he gave a little sigh to indicate he does not like it but he says it is better than the refugee camp. I asked him the age and school level of his daughters. He said that his oldest daughter is 14 and she is going to enter a high school in the Southside of Trident City. I asked him what school that may be but he says his daughter does not tell him. I then asked him about his second daughter and he said she would enter high school in two years because she is 12. He also has a son at the age of 3 years old that will soon enter preschool.

His daughter, the one that does not tell Saw Gay Ler where she is going for high school, is intriguing. It seems Saw Gay Ler’s daughter has more cultural capital because of her knowledge of good public high schools that exists in Trident City. Typically in Trident City we have public schools that children can attend in their neighborhood; however, we also have magnet schools throughout the city, which accept bright students from all over Trident City. Since Saw Gay Ler’s family lives on the Northside of Trident City and Saw Gay Ler’s daughter was accepted in a high school on the Southside of Trident City, it is obvious that she will attend one of Trident City’s magnet schools on the Southside. Although, does Saw Gay Ler realize
this? He relies on his daughter to tell him what is going on because his life experiences are coming from the refugee camps. Meaning, he cannot use some of the educational knowledge he may have experienced in the camps in the Trident City context. He may have a harder time directly helping his daughter with any educational aspirations she may have.

In continuing with my experiences with Saw Gay Ler, I want to recall meeting him again on World Refugee Day in Trident City. World Refugee Day was established by the United Nations to honor those who have been forced to flee their native lands to escape persecution. This year they had a celebration at the beach, where I met Saw Gay Ler. When I met with him, I asked how he was doing and he started talking about his life in Thailand being a lot easier than his life here as a dishwasher. He mentioned how in the U.S., he has to work really hard to get low pay and that he would rather go back to Thailand. I started getting confused because when I first met him, he was happy that he lived here in the U.S. than in the refugee camps and now it is vice versa a month later. I then tried to picture how cultural capital is actually related to this issue. What if Saw Gay Ler could decide on getting a job that pertained more to what he experienced in the refugee camp? Would he change his mind and want to live here? In the refugee camps many of the Karen who live there are farmers. Some of the work that they did while living in a refugee camp was work for Thai and Hmong farmers, picking hot peppers, planting vegetables and so on. If Saw Gay Ler could mimic that lifestyle here in Trident City would he be happier? Unfortunately, a cosmopolitan city like Trident City does not have a need for farm work; furthermore, we have winter seasons that are unbearable for many crops to grow all year round. Saw Gay Ler is not really given a choice of whether to work or not work. In the refugee camp, people live on food rations and have a place to stay but in the U.S., if one does not work, one may not have a roof over one’s head. This is the neoliberal context I see Saw Gay Ler
living in. He needs to be self-sufficient yet I do not see him having the chance to enhance his well-being under the guise of entrepreneurial freedom. The problem again is that Saw Gay Ler does not have the skills to participate in the neoliberal context America has provided.

No Time for Fun

During my time observing Karen refugees attending Lakeview Park Community Center’s ESL level-2 program, I would like to recall an experience I had during Diana’s (ESL teacher) class that took place a few days after Thanksgiving. Diana talked about her time ice-skating during Thanksgiving weekend. During the break I asked Saw Thu if he knows what ice-skating is and if he was confused about what was said in class but Naw Eh tried to explain it for him in Ska Karen\(^3\) language. Saw Thu says he knows what it is now but is not interested in skating. I had asked Naw Eh in class if she liked ice-skating but she mentioned she was scared of it (assuming she was scared of falling on the ice). I then asked if anyone was interested in going to ice skate with their kids and both Saw Thu and Naw Eh agreed that there is no time for skating because their kids needed to work. Saw Thu stated that America is an expensive place to stay so their children needed to work hard. He then mentioned that America is not a good place for someone who is old like him. Naw Eh agreed and she has been trying to find work while attending Lakeview Park’s ESL program. She tells me about her experience working at a pizza factory (I am imagining a place that packs frozen pizza) near O’Hare Airport. She does not like to work there because it takes her almost two hours by public transportation to go there and she starts work very late at night. This became a great example of how neoliberal ways of living has interfered with the Karen refugees’ lifestyle in specific regards to leisure activity in Trident City. Saw Thu did not initially understand what ice skating is but as soon as he was able to identify it

\(^3\)To reiterate, the Karen are mainly grouped into two factions, the Ska Karen and Pwo Karen.
as a sport that Americans would participate in for fun during winter, he would assume that it would cost money to do this activity. He also felt there was no time for this sport because his family has to work hard since they are living in America or in our case, an American neoliberal context. Naw Eh also added on to the conversation talking about how hard it is to find a job, especially a job that is more convenient to her time schedule and lesser travel time. This is another example I see the Karen trying to adapt to, manufacturing jobs that have work shifts very late at night, something the Karen are not use to but in this economy, companies must meet the demands of many of their customers. In Naw Eh’s case, her pizzas must be on a supermarket’s shelf on time or else there are other competitors waiting to take this shelf space.

In regards to cultural capital, Saw Thu and Naw Eh made it seem that ice-skating would be inaccessible. They do not have time with their children to do such activities because their children must exemplify the Protestant work ethic, “to work hard.” However, ice-skating at Paradise Park in Trident City is free and so it would be worthwhile for Karen families to find time to have fun.

**America is for the Young, Not for Old Folks like Me**

What happens to the Karen who are much older in their 50’s and 60’s? It is hard for them to find a job here in the United States. Why do some of them come here and some of them stay back at the refugee camp? Could it be that life in the U.S. can be very difficult for those who are older, and that is why it may be better for younger Karen to come here? I have seen some Karen elders who come here trying to find things to do for their selves relevant to their location. For instance, there is the Karen elder, Saw Thu, who is interested in becoming a pastor for a church. Apparently he was a church minister back in the refugee camps and would like to continue this role in Nashburn for the Karen community. However, he is now in Shell, Nashburn
continuing his ESL studies that would someday help him integrate himself with the English-speaking population, while his son works for a meat packing company. He moved to Shell because the rent is much cheaper than it is in Trident City and he would like to be closer to his son. However, this may be deterring him from becoming a minister since he is mainly practicing ESL and not so much church activities.

Although I have heard that there is a growing Karen community in Shell, which may actually be an opportunity for Saw Thu, since a Christian Karen community may need someone to take over the role of a religious leader. Religion, as an embodied set of beliefs, then becomes this cultural capital that many Karen elders can utilize to find work and ways of coping with their lives in the United States. I have talked to another Karen elder, Saw Klay (talked about more in Chapter 6), who is in his 50s working for Big Apple’s meat packing company. It is very difficult for him to do any kind of professional work other than hard labor due to low-level English skills and a small social network. He believes that when he gets too old, he cannot work these kinds of jobs and would like to then continue what ounce of energy he has left to work for God. This could mean holding a position in a local church as a treasurer, church developer, secretary/administrative position and so on. Religion has then become an outlet for Karen elders who may not be able to do physical work when they are old but gives them an important role in the community. They may also be able to make some money from it but not for profit rather, to keep supporting their work by building churches and funding other church related ideas.

Saw Thu and Saw Klay exemplified how Karen elders must find ways to cope in a neoliberal society that does not necessarily have room for people to work once they become very old. Since Saw Thu and Saw Klay can only rely on their physical attributes for work in a factory or places that need physical workers, it is very difficult for them to work at these places once
they get too old. Saw Thu, being in his 60s, does not seem to wish to find any physical work but wants to further his skills for being a religious leader. Using religion has become their coping mechanism as it has been for many other cultures, in which the elderly are not able to participate in this neoliberal economy.

In a similar story, Aye Moo (ESL female elderly Karen student at New World Alliance) had an interview with Superior Cleaners, a cleaning company serving Trident City and surrounding areas. In regards to recruiting Karen refugees for work, they mainly have them working at the airport doing cleanup work aboard airplanes that have been docked to service future flights. One day at New World Alliance, after tutoring Ka Paw, during break time I talked to Katie (the employment specialist at New World Alliance) about Aye Moo’s interview with Superior Cleaners. Katie said the interviewer spoke very loud to Aye Moo, which Katie felt did not improve Aye Moo’s comprehension of what was going on. Katie thinks that the Superior Cleaners representative felt that Aye Moo has low English skills and thought speaking loud would help her understand better but Katie felt it did not. She also said that the representative was too casual with Aye Moo by asking general questions like, “What have you been doing for the past 2 years?” Obviously it is hard for Aye Moo to answer such a question because I believe she just came from the refugee camp to Trident City and does not have any work experiences to give her. Also, Katie mentioned that the interviewer might have taken offense when Aye Moo started laughing during her interview, when the interviewer was not joking. I know from being Aye Moo’s tutor that she likes to laugh when she does not understand something but she may not know that there are certain types of etiquette that takes place when doing an American formal interview.
Katie gave me a list of 14 questions, which I included in this dissertation as Appendix E, which are used to prepare the refugees for interviews conducted by Superior Cleaners. One question was a bit obvious such as “Why are you here?” Other questions were “Are you here alone?” which is sort of a private question and maybe it should not be asked. The interviewer probably wanted to know if the interviewee had anybody to go home to. If they did not, that could mean that the prospective employee could be asked to come into work at any time. Whatever the case may be, compared to the Karen culture, Americans ask very direct questions. Some Karen may not want to answer “they are here alone” because they do not trust the interviewer. The Karen came from conditions where people have been raped or people from the opposition are out to kill them so naturally they would answer “no, they are not alone.” Although typically, most Karen that come to the U.S. come as a family. I would also add that some of the more practical questions would be “Did you work in your home country” and “Do you have any work experience?” These questions seem more related to a work interview but the Karen do not have much experience vacuuming and mopping floors, which are the kind of chores Superior Cleaners is looking to fulfill. These are also questions that show the hierarchy of refugees in a neoliberal context. Refugees in general come from all sorts of backgrounds, some being in areas that are more cosmopolitan than others, who have experienced vacuuming and mopping floors. This makes the cosmopolitan or more Westernized refugee more valuable, in a neoliberal context, than a refugee who is only familiar with an agrarian lifestyle.

Whatever the questions may be, knowing they are a cleaning company and seeing their questions seem relatively easy (if one speaks English with ease). I would say they do not need someone with high skills to work with them. They just need, “hard workers” as their eleventh question stated, “Can you work hard?” This is another question that ties into culture, the
American Puritanical work ethic. In the end, Superior Cleaners is trying to recruit those who can physically take on demanding tasks, know how to work, and can work when they need the person (on their website Superior states they service their customers 24 hours 7 days a week).

Rent is High and Space is Small but Hey, You’re Living Next to a Beach

Today I was working with Ka Paw at New World Alliance on a worksheet trying to get him to converse and write more to practice his English. The worksheet dealt with determining “opposites” or antonyms. We looked at neighborhoods and I asked what he liked about his neighborhood and what he did not like. He stated that he likes the location, which is quiet, and there is a neighborhood beach. Ka Paw and his family live in Everclear Park, a neighborhood adjacent to Lake Michigan in Trident City, which houses Francesco University, a private Jesuit University that enroll around 10,000 students. Ka Paw lives just two minutes by car from this school. Everclear Park itself is an enclave of immigrants from Africa, Southeast Asia, Middle Eastern countries and other places known for having refugees come to Trident City. They are all mixed in with Francesco University students and young professional class of people that like the area because it is assessable to the train for work in downtown Trident City. From my understanding of the neighborhood, a lot of the refugee agencies tend to place their refugees in Everclear Park or anywhere north of Main Avenue (which is as north one can get before hitting a suburb) in Trident City. It seems there are a lot of apartment vacancies that are in need to be filled and there are many transportation options like the train and bus.

After we had a short talk about his likes we started talking about his dislikes about the neighborhood. He does not like the costs of rent, which is $785 per month. His daughter, Naw Bal, pays $165 of the rent; I do not know who pays the remaining balance since neither Ka Paw nor his wife, Aye Moo, work. Their other children are still young in school and so it looks like
the burden seems to fall on Saw Tha Wah (son-in law to Ka Paw and Aye Moo and husband of 
Naw Ku Ku) since he is the other person in the family that is working. I also confirmed that Saw 
Tha Wah helps out with the payments from discussions with Naw Ku Ku. Ka Paw tells me that 
it is his daughters, Naw Ku Ku or Naw Bal, who deliver the payment for rent in cash on the 
fourth or sixth day of the month. I became curious if Ka Paw has any other dislikes about his 
neighborhood or living space and he did not mention any. I asked if maybe he disliked living in 
a one-bedroom apartment with seven people but it seems he does not mind. He just pointed out 
to the rent being too high.

Rent being too high would deter someone from staying but they do not have much 
choice. In a neoliberal context they may need to be more established before they can really 
afford to buy a house. Plus, they may have to start with cheap housing, which means they may 
be pushed to segregate themselves into poorer neighborhoods, away from the neighborhood they 
are used to now, which is a fairly acceptable neighborhood, considering there is a major 
university nearby. Also, if they move to a poorer neighborhood, then it can be unsafe at times.

However, if space is not a real concern, then why not just stay where they are? Yet rent 
is high and it can be very difficult for them to pay rent they can barely afford. The question 
becomes, “How can they establish themselves if they are putting whatever money they have on 
rent and not being able to invest their money in anything else?”

**Discrimination and Part-Time Work: A Bad Mixture**

During one of my home tutoring sessions with Naw Ku Ku (Ka Paw and Aye Moo’s 
daughter), Saw Tha Wah (Naw Ku Ku’s husband) just came back from work and so I got into a 
discussion with him about how Aye Moo, his mother-in-law, is looking for work. When Aye 
Moo first got here, the African Community Association of Trident City, whom not only serves
the African community but other ethnicities as well, was the first to really help her resettle. They helped her find a place to stay but Saw Tha Wah states they did not do a good job with trying to help her find a job. Same with Saw Tha Wah, they did not help him find a good job as well because when he was at Superior Cleaners, he felt discriminated against. When he left Superior Cleaners the African Community Association of Trident City could not help him anymore or he claims they did not want to further help him. He turned to New World Alliance and felt more at home with New World Alliance Refugee Agency than with the African Community Association of Trident City. New World Alliance helped him find a job at Big Apple, where he claims discrimination was less. I can see that the African Community Association of Trident City not able to further help Saw Tha Wah. They found a place for Saw Tha Wah to work but Saw Tha Wah was not happy there. Is it then his responsibility to find another job on his own or someone else’s job? Or should he always rely on a community center or refugee agency for help? How about Aye Moo? Aye Moo on the other hand is an elderly woman in her 50s whereas Saw Tha Wah is a young man in his late 20s. Can the community center even help her find a job? Most jobs for refugees are hard labor jobs and someone in their 50s may be less of a candidate to work those jobs unless they look physically strong and their language skills are really good. Currently Aye Moo cannot find a job through New World Alliance as well. This does raise a question, “Do Karen refugees know how to find work on their own without the help of an agency?” In the neoliberal context it has become cultural conditioning in America that people need to learn to network and try to find jobs on their own. The Karen do not have much of a social network in Trident City nor can they really find jobs on their own because of the language barrier. They rely heavily on the refugee agencies to help them find work or reach out to the manufacturers
that need workers. In other words, the refugee agencies are the only social network the Karen have in finding work.

I asked Saw Tha Wah if he liked it there (at Big Apple) and he said he really did. He said the people at Big Apple respect him a lot more than the people at Superior Cleaners. He said his bosses at Superior Cleaners did not respect him. They would get angry with him when they needed him (or commanded him) to work but he did not understand what needed to be done due to the language barrier. I asked about the background of his bosses and he said they were Polish or other European descent while the people at Big Apple, who talked a lot gentler with him when giving orders, were of a mixed racial background, meaning some bosses were of Mexican descent and some were of Anglo American descent. This can be related to cultural capital, in which some of Saw Tha Wah’s bosses from Big Apple are immigrants just like Saw Tha Wah. I want to emphasize this immigrant bosses versus native bosses relationship. His bosses of Mexican descent are immigrants or prior generations of their family have immigrated just like Saw Tha Wah. Having the same experiences or observations from immigrating to the U.S., the Mexican bosses may then understand the hardships of overcoming the language barrier and have more sympathy to Saw Tha Wah trying to follow commands at the workplace. Saw Tha Wah’s immigrant experiences then become an asset to him when he is working with his immigrant bosses.

**When You Think Everything was Getting Better Reality Sets In**

It sounded like Saw Tha Wah was happy with Big Apple; however, now Big Apple only lets him work part-time, to be specific, close to part-time. They are letting him work only 36 hours a week. Full time is 40 hours, so it is kind of strange, but Saw Tha Wah believes there is an underlining issue between the bad economy and why Big Apple lets him work close to full
time. He believes that there is some kind of contract that lets them work part time now because it saves the company money in the long run. I thought it is quite interesting that Saw Tha Wah believes in the same things a person who lives in a capitalistic society like me would believe, that there is some benefit that the company is getting in order to survive the bad economy by lowering cost through cutting hours. Cutting hours means that Saw Tha Wah would not be working full time, which means the company is not obligated to give him full time benefits like insurance. Saw Tha Wah mentioned that his cousin in Australia states that the government takes good care of the children’s education and housing costs but here in America, you need to pay for housing, whether you work full time or part time, but schooling, primary and secondary schooling, is free in the United States. Furthermore, Saw Tha Wah is not an American citizen yet and may not be able to take advantage of certain housing that is discounted to citizens who are under the poverty line. Coming back to the story, before Big Apple, Saw Tha Wah worked for a hotel company, he said it did not work out because they only offered part time and he needs the money to care for his family and pay rent. But now he is stuck with working part time at Big Apple, which initially gave him full-time work but the difference is that his hours at Big Apple is just shy of reaching 40 hours.

In a neoliberal context, companies must cut costs in order to survive. They do this by outsourcing to contract workers, people who work temporarily for the company with no benefits. This is very similar to what we are seeing with Saw Tha Wah, in which he may be a full time employee with Big Apple in the past, but he is being treated like a contract worker. Saw Tha Wah has become more or less a victim of the neoliberal structure that many companies tend to follow in order to survive.
Choosing the Right Package for Insurance is Actually Scary

I picked up Saw Htoo at his home one day to take him to the Blick’s art store again and then to a Starbucks (no surprise since this franchise is taking over American coffee consumption), to discuss his future goals in academia. However, that day was a bit surprising because he had a complicated case for me to look into. He pulled out a packet that contained a lot of information in regards to picking out insurance benefits from his new work place, Sofitel Hotel. There were choices for health care insurance, dental insurance, and even investments that did not pertain to his health, which I avoided because I am not sure what is best for him to invest in. I tried to read it first in the car and see what would be best for him. Then I tried to read it at the art store, while Saw Htoo was shopping for his art materials. However, I was not confident because there were so many plans to choose from and so I advised Saw Htoo that we needed to see someone at New Life or New World Alliance for advice.

A week later I took Saw Htoo to New Life, to see Susan White, an employment specialist who by luck, was the one who recommended Saw Htoo his job at Sofitel Hotel. She was happy to help us further understand what benefits Saw Htoo needed. By the end of the day, we picked the cheapest plans since Saw Htoo is not sick and he is healthy. For instance, for PPO (Preferred Provider Organization) we picked the cheapest plan of around $18 per month but he would need to pay a higher co-pay if he sees the doctor. Saw Htoo mentioned that he had some problems with his eyes so we decided that once Saw Htoo received his insurance card, he can go to an eye doctor in his network.

Susan then said that I needed to find a dentist on the internet that would be in Saw Htoo’s chosen network and so we did that at New Life. Susan had to step out of the office so we continued talking to Mark, another employment specialist, to ask if Saw Htoo should get
insurance in case he gets into an accident at work but Mark says he would be fine since the hotel would have worker’s compensation regardless. On the other hand, being a native here, I can say that Worker’s Compensation at times does not work in favor of the worker, especially if he/she is working for a large company. This is because the company is able to hire skillful lawyers to help avoid paying worker’s compensation. Yet, I do totally understand that Mark was being sympathetic to Saw Htoo’s financial needs. This is when cultural capital sets in, me being a native understanding that Saw Htoo needs to invest what he can on insurance but not to the point he becomes penniless. Yet, if Saw Htoo knows what I know about worker’s compensation, he might make the investment for accidental insurance at work.

I am happy that we got a chance to get his benefits from Sofitel cleared away. I believe that the refugee agencies in the future may need to follow up on what benefits refugees have to decide on once they find jobs because in the end, the refugee will benefit from good healthcare because they made the investment for it. In addition, healthcare service should be good everywhere yet in the neoliberal context, it is dependent on what kind of insurance one has. The kind of healthcare a person would receive depends on the type of insurance company and if the plan consists of payments being made at a price that only middle and upper class income people can afford.

Saw Htoo’s experience with picking an insurance package was quite confusing, even for a person like me who went through the same process when I used to work for a Fortune 500 company. The difference between Saw Htoo and I is that I had family members that worked in the same company and I would ask them to advise me on what insurance benefits to invest in. Therefore, I did not have the best knowledge to give advice on what insurance package is best for Saw Htoo. I wondered how a refugee would pick his benefits without any help. I do recall
Saw Htoo telling me that he has a Spanish-speaking colleague at the hotel who does not believe in getting insurance because it is a waste of money and he is healthy. However, since I believe that “accidents can happen” and “it is better to be safe than sorry,” I recommended Saw Htoo to get insurance. I am juxtaposing a cultural capital belief from my end versus Saw Htoo’s Spanish-speaking colleague who from his experiences seems to believe that money can be better invested in something else.

**Crystal Ball, What does the Future Hold for Our Mature Karen?**

In a conversation with Pue Pue, my mature ESL homeschool tutee, during one of my home visits I asked her where she sees herself in the future. Pue Pue stated that once she and her husband obtain their United States citizenship, they want to go back to Burma and open a farm. I was a bit unclear as to how they were going to do this given their age and the political situation between Karen and Burmese government.

They told me that as U.S. Citizens, they can go back to Burma and rent a farm somewhere in Karen State (a state in Burma the Karen have been fighting for). Since Pue Pue is 49 and Saw Bu Gay is 60 years old, it would be difficult for them to work on a farm so they would hire farmers to do the actual farming using the money they made in Trident City. This sounds like a neoliberal attribute to me because they are using U.S. currency to hire others to do physical farm labor for lower wages in Burma. However, I told them that the Burmese Army burned down their villages and so how is it practical to go back? In other words, “Won’t they just come and burn down your farm again”? They said that if the army comes back to their farm, they would just run to the mountains. Their daughter, Eh Wah, also stated that many Karen farmers did the same thing, when there would be Burmese soldiers coming to harass or threaten
the Karen farmers livelihood, they would all just run for the mountains and come back to farm another day.

This story seems to be quite interesting because in some sense, they have not forgotten the cultural capital they once gained as farmers. The skills they have had before is still something they wish to utilize in their future when they can go back to Burma and become farmers again. However, it can also be more of a reflection of their idealism of what home represents and that life in the U.S. is too difficult to navigate. In other words, Karen are struggling to make ends meet in the U.S. and they are trying to find ways to escape this struggle by trying to get back to the basics, which is going back to Burma to do what they know how to do best: farm.
Chapter 5: Education for Survival

Introduction

Education has many embedded cultural capital elements within its makeup and these elements give way to neoliberal forces, which prohibit the Karen in becoming a well-established immigrant community. In the following observations, the first four themes talk about cultural capital that is gained from learning ESL and how ESL has cultural attachments within its lessons. One of the four themes also talks about the ESL teacher and how much is known about the Karen from her perspective. The next three themes talk about my observations at New World Alliance Refugee Agency’s ESL program in the classroom and at home, in which I discuss certain ESL lessons or discussions that may have increased a Karen refugee’s cultural capital or may be of no value due to the neoliberal context the refugees are living in. The last five themes talk about my time with Saw Htoo and hurdles we must face to avoid Saw Htoo from becoming another statistic as one of those young refugees who did not finish college.

American Thanksgiving and India: Lost in Translation?

About one month into my observational period of the Karen at Lakeview Park Community Center’s ESL level-2 class, it was almost time to celebrate Thanksgiving. Given that the holiday was just around the corner, there was a lesson on Thanksgiving and how it became a holiday by Diana, the ESL teacher.

Diana distributed a worksheet in class titled, “The First Thanksgiving” (please refer to Appendix F) which gives the story of the Pilgrims who fled England due to religious persecution by the king. She then asked everyone if they knew Abraham Lincoln who made Thanksgiving a national holiday. Saw Thu, a Karen elderly in his 60s, mentioned he was a Black man, which is incorrect but I wondered if this might relate to Lincoln’s role in abolishing slavery. In any case,
the class did not really know who Abraham Lincoln was and so Diana had to explain he was the 16th president of the U.S. who, unfortunately for a short period, saw the aftermath of the Civil War.

After we talked about Lincoln the conversation steered to talks about the American Indians. Saw Thu asked in class, “How many years did the American Indians fight with the English?” A very good question, but one that was confusing at first because Saw Thu initially stated, “How many years were the Americans and India fighting?” I became worried if Saw Thu knew the difference between the American Indians and people from India because earlier he mentioned “India” in his question. After class I took a calendar that the teacher passed around earlier containing pictures of American Indians and their attire. I took Saw Thu to a world map in the room and told him, while pointing to the country of India, that there is a difference between the people from India and the American Indians, now pointing to North America on the map. I told him that the American Indians were already in North America. Pointing to the different European countries on the map like England, Spain, and France, I stated that they came after. He expressed his comprehension by nodding. It could just have been a simple misunderstanding because the word “India” is used with the words “American Indians,” which describes the indigenous group in America. However, I need to further clarify with another Karen in the class to see if this is a recurring issue.

After talking to Saw Thu, I had a chance to ask Naw Lar, a Karen in her 20s, if she knew the difference between American Indians and people from India. She talked about American Indians as having the red circular mark on their forehead (the Bindi). Like Saw Thu, I was worried that Naw Lar did not know that American Indians and the people from India were different so I took out my laptop from my school bag and “Googled” pictures of American
Indians. She understood once I showed her but asked me if they were still around. I tried to explain that American Indians are all around us. They can dress like mainstream Americans and we may just walk pass them on the street. On my laptop I clicked on an American Indian woman wearing a typical t-shirt to show her how a modern day American Indian may look.

At this point I confirmed that the Karen did not know that the people from India are not American Indians. This is a huge gap in cultural capital between Americans that grew up here and the Karen refugees that just came. Meaning, the Karen are trying to understand American culture in order to successfully integrate their lives with the dominant culture (the Americans that have lived here for many generations). Although it should be noted that many Americans have a distorted understanding of American Indians but in any case the community center is trying to fill this gap by teaching English to the Karen and with language acquisition comes American culture being taught as well. However, the Karen are not processing what is being taught correctly at times. Obviously this happens a lot of times in a classroom setting. What is most interesting is that the ESL class has become a “first encounter” for the Karen in regards to this mystical American past we used to have. In order for the Karen to truly understand the American Indians and their struggle as much as American citizens whom have heard the story of Thanksgiving many times in their lives, will take time.

**Thanksgiving Emergency**

It was the Monday after Thanksgiving and Diana started her ESL lesson with asking everyone in class what they did last weekend. Saw Thu answered Diana’s question by stating, “On Thanksgiving I took my wife to the hospital downtown.” This startled Diana because going to the hospital on a major holiday is rare. Diana asked Saw Thu if it was an emergency visit. Saw Thu mentioned it was not. He stated that his wife has an ongoing issue with her eardrum for
a month now. Saw Thu was confused why Diana would ask if it was an emergency. He did not understand that Thanksgiving was a day that people did not typically work which meant there would only be a few staff members working. As a result, there was no doctor for Saw Thu’s wife to see. During break time I asked Saw Thu if his wife went to the hospital because she was in pain just to confirm if it was really a non-emergency visit. He said she was not in pain but a bit deaf in one ear. This was troubling but as he mentioned earlier, she had this problem for a month now so there was no urgent need to visit the hospital.

We again see this cultural capital gap when a simple conception of a holiday would mean a day off work for us Americans. Saw Thu and his wife could have avoided their trip to the hospital if they have been in the U.S. long enough to understand that Thanksgiving is a major holiday that many Americans, particularly doctors in our case, would take a day off to spend with family. Also, Karen coming to the U.S. may not fully understand the concept of a holiday because if they are coming straight from the refugee camps where there are hundreds of people who are not working; this means they might not typically associate a holiday as a day off.

Overall, emergency rooms are better staffed than other departments in the hospital because emergencies can happen any time but that trip to the ER was irrelevant in the case of Saw Thu’s wife. I felt really bad for Saw Thu because a trip to the hospital during late November in Trident City means it is terribly cold outside. Also, Saw Thu and his wife live on the Northside of the city and traveling downtown on a holiday was time-consuming at best, especially since she did not have a medical emergency.
Computers, ESL, and the 21st Century Refugee

Every other Tuesday Diana’s ESL class at Lakeview Park goes to the computer lab, which is next door to their classroom. I am actually observing the sixth time Diana’s class had attended these computer classes.

There is a CD English lesson that is loaded on to each of the computers. The lessons that are being taught on the computer are typical exercises or modules for the students. Martin, the computer teacher, coordinates with Diana on what exercises the students are to work on. Martin mentioned that the students have been working on the same CD from the first computer class until now. As a result, I asked Martin, “How are the students learning computer skills if they are only working on one CD program?” He stated that many of the students have not even seen a mouse. He also mentioned that during the first day of class, Diana tried to teach something in the computer class that was too advanced for them. Plus the class signed up for learning English and not learning computer skills. Martin made me realize a lot of cultural capital that the Karen have gained within just six computer classes. Just learning to use a mouse is very new to the Karen (mainly Karen elders) but also being able to learn how to type in English can be useful for their lives, especially for work. With American technological advancement in the work area, refugees who are more technologically advanced, especially those that can type in English, may be more inclined to get a job than a refugee who does not know how to use a computer. In a neoliberal context jobs are becoming more automated, in which we have a lot of machines doing the physical work. However, some of these machines do need an operator and if the Karen were to be more experience with the computer, they may be a more valuable asset to the company.

During the times that I did not talk with Martin I was watching to see how the Karen students were doing. Saw Thu raised his hand needing my help with an English exercise. The
exercise on the screen had a sentence that was missing a word to make it complete. Saw Thu is given three groups of words to choose from and the one he chooses must relate back to a paragraph he read; therefore, I read the paragraph and helped Saw Thu pick the correct answer. When I finished helping him, the sentence read like this: “The most basic rights of a citizen is to vote.” Initially the sentence was incomplete because the word “vote” was taken out. The choices Saw Thu had to choose, if he did not choose “to vote,” was “to work” or “to live.” This exercise made me think about how democracy is being implicitly taught in an English exercise. If I did not read the paragraph to help Saw Thu choose the correct answer, I may have chosen “live” and the sentence would have read, “The most basic right of a citizen is to live.” I believe if you are a citizen of any state then the right to “live” in that state is the most basic right because one needs to have a right to live in the state before one can vote. Really, it is just subjective thinking but I think the exercise is trying to make people believe that the right to vote is the most important attribute of being a citizen. This also relates to cultural capital because the lesson is trying to teach the importance of voting for newcomers, so that in the future when they have obtained U.S. citizenship, they are aware that they can vote. This however does not necessarily increase the Karen’s cultural capital if they do not know who to vote for.

After computer class I talked to all three Karen students. Everyone felt that it was important to learn English from the teacher in the classroom and through the computer. They seem to know the importance technology plays in their lives. Interestingly, Saw Thu states that he does not seem to need exposure to the computers at school because he has a computer at home. Saw Thu believes he types in English well because whenever he has time he practices typing every day. However, Naw Eh says she does not understand what is being taught in computer class and she cannot type well. She states that she does not have a lot of time to
practice at home because she has a lot of house chores like laundry, cooking and so on. She points at Saw Thu and chuckles that he has lots of time and Saw Thu chuckles in agreement. Saw Thu says he does not have a job and does not do anything around the house so I teased him by stating, “that is because your wife does all the chores right?” He agrees but adds that his daughter does as well and so I see Saw Thu, as an elderly man trying to make the best use of his time in a society that may not have a lot of “revenue-generating” use for elderly people, regardless of citizenship status, and much less an immigrant who speaks little English. The activity of educating himself has become a way for Saw Thu to productively keep himself occupied. Also, since Saw Thu plays a traditional male dominant role in the household, he does not have to cook or clean which leaves room for more time to do other things.

Overall, learning English on the computer gave Karen refugee students added on cultural capital in using technology. The fact is that there are very few jobs available that do not use computers. Being unable to quickly adapt to different hardware and software will leave the refugees without certain jobs for the most part. Even some manual labor jobs may require the workers to log-in and log-out of a computer system on site so their hours can be calculated for paychecks. They would also be unable to apply to many jobs if they do not understand how to use the Internet as many businesses only have their applications online and do not take paper applications (including paper resumes), or phone calls to inquire about job openings. Those businesses will simply redirect the caller to their website.

**The ESL Teacher’s Perspective on Who the Karen Are**

I decided to interview Diana and relate to her answers to my research on Karen integration into U.S. society through an ESL education. I started out asking generally, “What are your thoughts of the ESL program at Lakeview Park Community Center?” She mentioned that
compared to other programs she has been at she absolutely enjoys her time here the most. This place is more professionally challenging and supportive than any other place she has been. On a side note it is nice to see that the Karen are learning in a nice environment. Diana gave an example of this “support” by mentioning that before my interview with her she had a three-hour meeting with other ESL teachers in Lakeview Park and they all shared stories about their current students in their classes. The big issue at Lakeview Park is the lack of funding for the teachers. Diana states they pay a low hourly rate; however, they compensate by paying for two hours of “prep time.” Prep time is the time that is needed to prepare for class. So if a class is three hours and she preps for two hours for the class she gets paid for five hours. Diana believes the administrators need to find ways to get more money for the teachers. Many of the teachers are highly educated and are professional teachers. I can understand how ESL teachers may not look as professional as teachers who traditionally teach grade school, high school and college education. Society might not value ESL teaching as they value traditional ways of teaching. This is simply because many young primary and secondary school students can be molded into law abiding citizens whom can contribute financially to the neoliberal economy for many years to come.

Furthermore, in regards to the financial issues with Lakeview Park, I asked Diana if she knows the administrators and she says they are located in another building a few blocks away but she does not go to that building. She mentioned that there are company events but still, she believes there should be more communication between the administrators and teachers.

Turning to a different topic I then asked, “Why do you think students come to this ESL program?” Diana mentions that she has heard that Lakeview Park is the most diverse zip code in Trident City (which draws in people from many backgrounds such as immigrants and refugees),
there is childcare, and a Head Start program (helping children develop language and literacy skills) for the children of the adult ESL students. Diana mentions that Lakeview Park has a program called Family Literacy where the parents are learning how to read along with their children. A big problem with immigrant children (which would relate with Karen families) is that children are not growing up with the language that is being spoken in the family and this program is trying to bridge this gap. Kids are growing up speaking to their friends in English while their parents “are in a different world” not understanding what is happening with their kids. This is similar to many of the Karen children where the parents are not speaking English as well as the children, making them lose some power in the household. What happens then is that English, being more practical, is considered more important than other languages being spoken at home by immigrants. However, the U.S. is a big melting pot for many cultures but to gain a good knowledge of English and even Spanish can increase one’s cultural capital tremendously. The Karen children seem to then have gained more cultural capital than the parents in regards to language proficiency in the practical context of living in the United States. In other words, children are growing up learning English. English in a sense has become “second nature” to them. In a society that uses English as the lingua franca, the children may have more of an advantage than their parents in finding ways to increase their social status. In many cases, we see children of immigrants knowing how to read the utility and other miscellaneous house bills that are in English for their parents to comprehend in their language.

Diana talks about family life with Hispanic families she has observed and she sees how immigrant Hispanic families do not have an American way of living “structure” in place for living their lives at home. She compares this to “mainstream” American families in which the children come home from school, have homework time, and the parents help their children with
their homework. She was starting to worry this structure would not be put in place with Karen families as well. Hispanic families put family time first and school time second. She worries that this difference in structure would not help immigrant Hispanic families succeed in an American society. However, American society has changed and so have many generations of Hispanic families. Diana deals more so with the Hispanic population learning ESL, which typically are first generation immigrant Hispanics but there are also many generations of Hispanic families that resemble American culture and American culture itself is made up of the many generations of Hispanics that have influenced this country’s way of living. Furthermore, modern American mainstream culture, due to neoliberal economic policies, demand that workers put in more hours for less pay. This means that the parents spend more time at work than at home in order to keep their jobs.

This was a good segue way to ask, “What do you think about family time or structure amongst Karen families?” She said she does not honestly know much about Karen families; however, she does see Karen women having children when they are young. She also notices they do not have much education from their own country. This lifestyle stands in contrast to the neoliberal lifestyle, in which having proper education may lead to skills that would be profitable in the marketplace so that one may avoid any dependence on welfare or any other human being. In U.S. society it becomes more acceptable to become self-sufficient in life before starting a family so typically marrying young is becoming uncommon. Young Karen parents are entering a lifestyle in the U.S. that is more unfamiliar to them and yet they are not alone. America is made up of many different immigrants that do not come from a neoliberal lifestyle yet their children, as it is with the children of the Karen, may in some cases exhibit this lifestyle but some may not. It is dependent on the social networks they become exposed to as they grow up.
Diana’s observations are very informative and for the most part true. Many of the Karen adults (typically the mature ones) do not have secondary and higher education since they were farmers. There may have been some educational experiences since many of them can read and write in their own Karen language but otherwise, the children are going to have to rely on other social groups (like the city’s homework hotline) and themselves for questions they may have relating to school.

One thing about education that she noticed is that there is a priority to keep open communication between the student and the teacher. For instance, she had a Karen student whose mother was in the hospital but she came to class to tell her that her mom is in the hospital. I asked, “Why didn’t the student call the office?” and Diana believes the Karen student wanted to personally communicate that she is sorry she cannot attend class and to add to this, she was worried about not being able to turn in her homework on time. Diana feels that Karen students have such high respect for their teachers that it makes her feel a little uneasy. Just to note, ESL students can call in using a script that they learned during the first week of class to report they cannot come to class.

Going on to the next question, “What do you believe is the impact you have on Spanish speaking students compared to non-Spanish speaking students due to your Spanish speaking abilities?” Diana’s second language is Spanish and so I wanted to find out if it would have an impact on the Karen in the classroom because half the class is Spanish speaking while the other half are Middle Eastern and Asian students. Diana states there are times when her Spanish speaking abilities can help Spanish speakers compare both languages (like an English word versus a Spanish word) and sometimes it helps to just “cut to the chase” and avoid confusion. However, Diana does not wish to exclude anyone. She does this by trying to have everyone
sometimes participate in their own language. For instance, she would have everyone write a word they are studying for the day in the native languages of all the students. Diana also has a good knowledge of how certain students can drop their consonants on different words compared to other students. She would know if her Vietnamese speakers, Spanish speakers, and Arabic speakers would say a certain syllable or a consonant a different way; however, with the Karen students, she has only been exposed to five students and believes there are certain consonants that are said incorrectly but she still cannot pinpoint common mistakes. This led me to believe that ESL teachers are just beginning to understand the Karen and their language learning process.

I asked, “To what extent should American culture be incorporated into the lesson?” She believes there is a lot of culture that is embedded into the curriculum and so she feels she is teaching American culture non-intentionally. Diana also talks about herself being half-Irish and how her family immigrated to the United States. She wants everyone to have a sense that everyone is joining this “American project” and they (all immigrants) are not in the margins of U.S. society. In other words, America is a place for immigrants and learning English is a way to successfully incorporate immigrants into American society.

Diana started to share a story of making a pumpkin pie that Naw Lar got emotional eating because she stated it was her first pumpkin pie and that she really liked it, saying this with a tear in her eye. Diana thinks she also got emotional because this may be some kind of initiation into American cuisine and maybe because she, Diana, made it. In addition to Naw Lar’s introduction to American cuisine, she may have been overwhelmed of what it means to be in America and to understand all the nuances of American culture. From my experience, the Karen, do not enjoy American food and prefer their own cultural foods even after being in the U.S. for a few years. However, parties and events such as Thanksgiving dinner are times when American people
gather to talk and eat. Although not to say that the Karen have to force themselves to enjoy American food in case they get invited to an American Thanksgiving dinner, yet understanding why certain foods are most important for certain events can be a way to understand a bit more about American culture. Sometimes we tend to fit in with the crowd once we know a little more about what pleases the crowd.

Furthermore, to a related topic I talked about earlier, I asked Diana, “What are the challenges Karen refugee students face in regards to English compared to students in the class?” She again focused her knowledge of Karen women as lacking confidence but I am unsure if she is comparing women students from other ethnicities in which there are some cultures where women play a more silent role in society. She also believes that learning the English language would be more difficult for the Karen because their lettering may be different as opposed to Spanish speakers using Roman characters.

The final question I asked Diana was, “How do you feel about teaching Karen refugee students as opposed to other immigrants in your class?” She believes Karen students are very respectful students. Diana contemplates that some ethnicities have more deference for their teachers but overall she believes all ethnicities are very eager to learn. She believes the Karen have a certain shyness, such as not speaking out much in class (with the exception of Saw Thu who is a minister so he naturally likes to talk in public) but she does not know much about the Karen. She knows about the political situation between the Karen and the Burmese government, about the freeing of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, and ceasefire between the Karen and the Burmese government. Together, Diana and I wonder if there would then be more Karen coming to the U.S. or if they would all go back but overall, Diana hopes everything will become more stable with the situation in Burma.
Overall, I gained great insight from Diana and her experiences with the Karen. There are some thoughts to reiterate such as Diana’s feeling that Lakeview Park Community Center is a great place to work which is why she likes teaching ESL at her location; however, there is the issue that teachers should be paid more. Plus the administrators are located in a different building so it is difficult to communicate with them about the money issue. Does this impact the Karen? It does not seem to impact them directly but the idea of having little money for teachers has been maintained historically to the present. Even the Trident City Public Schools barely get enough funding for their teachers so to find money for ESL teachers can really be complicated. The future of ESL education looks dismal.

There is also the matter of Diana’s perspective on Hispanic families. She tried to relate the Hispanic ways of living with the Karen ways of living and believes that Hispanic values tend to clash with mainstream American values. I do point out that American values have been changing because of Hispanic influences such as many Americans seeing the importance of the Spanish language in this country. For instance, there are a lot of times we see signs and hear telephone prompts that give us the option to read and communicate in Spanish. Most importantly, Diana’s perception of mainstream America does not put into consideration that many parents these days do not have much time to go over their children’s homework because they must put work first in order to keep their jobs.

Diana’s encounters with the Karen are decidedly different than the encounters with Hispanic students, with whom she has more familiarity due to her knowledge of Hispanic culture and language. Her interaction with the Karen students are somewhat minimal with few instances that are very captivating, like the one day a Karen student came to let Diana know that she cannot attend class because her mom is in the hospital. Diana felt a bit uneasy about this
situation since the student should have been with her mother but it could be that she and many other ESL teachers still need to learn more about the Karen culture and the Karen need to learn more about what American teachers expect.

**Lesson for the Day, How to Make an Employer Want You!**

One of the most pressing issues with resettlement for Karen is securing employment when they resettle in the United States. With the neoliberal agenda, prominent international trade agreements like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) are influencing large U.S. companies to outsource their jobs to other countries creating a lot of competition to get hard labor jobs for the underclass, including Karen. Refugee agencies tend to introduce ESL course material that talks about getting a job and so, as an ESL tutor and my first day at New World Alliance, I went ahead and tackled on this dilemma of getting a job with my lesson on job interviewing skills to Ka Paw and Aye Moo.

I decided to start off with a lesson on how to conduct oneself at an interview for a job. I took out a worksheet pertaining to “Making a Good Impression.” The first section is titled: “Arrive on time.” I told them that if an employer or boss calls them and wishes to have them come in for an interview for a job, they must come in about 10 minutes before the interview time just to let them know that you are here. Ka Paw looked puzzled because he probably did not understand what I was trying to teach him. Since this is a very important part of interviewing for a job, the first on a “must do” list for interviewing, I did my best to make sure Ka Paw realized that being on time is important by repeating the lesson.

We looked at “dressing appropriately” for an interview. I showed them a picture of how a man was dressed in nice pants and buttoned shirt. Ka Paw understood and stated, “no jeans.” I was impressed and then I taught him about shaking hands properly and making eye contact.
Reflecting on what I have taught them so far, for these types of jobs the interviewee in most cases probably does not need to wear professional attire, know how to do a proper handshake, or always maintain eye contact. I can attest to this because at one point in my life I used to work in a manufacturing warehouse for a telecommunications technology company, picking radio parts and bagging them for resale. There was no need for the interview to be formal.

The most important thing to the interviewer is that the interviewee understands English to the extent that he or she can follow commands. Sounds a bit degrading but that is the reality that many of these refugees are facing when they are looking for these types of jobs. Therefore, are they actually gaining cultural capital if the lessons they are learning are not useful? Like my example of teaching them about interviewing for a job? They may not utilize what I have been teaching them. Although for Ka Paw and Aye Moo, who are in their 50s and are starting to have grandchildren, may be able to transfer some of this knowledge to them. This is in turn the transfer of cultural capital to the children from their elders.

I started probing to see what kind of work they were interested in doing. Somewhere along the line I asked what they have done before and they mentioned they were farmers. Here in the U.S., the only thing they were interested in working as was to be a “washer” for something. Aye Moo gave the example of washing dishes and laundry. Do they know there are other jobs they are eligible for besides physical labor like washing dishes? Or was it because of their lack of English proficiency that they already knew that working physical jobs would be the role they would play in our society? Cultural capitalism plays a big part in what jobs Karen can obtain in the United States. The more marketable skills learned by the Karen, whether it is English language proficiency, computer literacy, communication skills, etc., would help the job recruiters fit the refugees with the appropriate employment opportunities. In addition, physical
attributes are also important such as health, strength, endurance and so on since many of these jobs are physical labor. Yet, are there no jobs that Karen can do that are nonphysical? One may enhance their skills to get the jobs that they want, so long as they work for it. However, many of these skills are not easily obtainable and take years to harness into something that is usable for the professional workforce. For instance, a Karen refugee who first comes to the U.S. needs to increase their language skills, then their computer skills and earn a Bachelor’s degree or at least an Associate’s degree from an accredited institution in order to gain a professional job. Yet, many that come here may be in their late 20s and have a family they need to support so they either find jobs or babysit their children but there is no time for school. Another scenario are elderly Karen who must take a lot more time to improve their English skills and may be too old to navigate the realms of academia. Neoliberalism naturally favors the young, those that have the time to increase their language skills, have computer literacy, finish a degree in college and so on. The younger one comes here, the better chance they have at gaining a professional career.

While I was teaching Ka Paw about interviewing skills I noticed he has a difficult time pronouncing certain words. For example, we were talking about working as a meat packer, but when he said “packer” it would sound like “taxi.” I talked to Nancy, his ESL level-2 teacher about his issues in pronunciation and she states that Ka Paw actually has a lot of missing teeth. This was not good for his pronunciation and I am starting to realize the implication of dental hygiene and linguistics. In the U.S., there are a lot of great deals on healthcare plans, but dental is not always included, unless you are a child. Dental insurance plans vary and procedures are costly. Medicaid will only pay for a full-set of dentures which means teeth cleaning, braces, bridges, etc. are not included. For a refugee who needs extensive dental work but cannot afford
it, this can certainly limit the types of jobs they will be able to have because many companies may not employ someone to interact with the public who do not have all of their teeth.

**No Where to Run, Discrimination in Education is Everywhere**

Many of my observations were conducted with the Karen in their homes. Sometimes Karen refugees have obligations at home, which prohibit them from attending ESL classes at the refugee agency. Being an ESL teacher at a refugee agency also gave me the opportunity to tutor the Karen in their home environment. Let me talk about one of my visits with Naw Ku Ku and her family, which mainly involves her husband Saw Tha Wah and his experiences with discrimination.

So I visited Naw Ku Ku’s apartment, which is situated in a neighborhood where most refugees would be resettled on Trident City’s north side. As I was tutoring Naw Ku Ku, Saw Tha Wah came home from work and greeted Naw Ku Ku, their three children and me in English loudly saying, “Hello Everyone!” As he was walking around the house relaxed in an old Cleveland Browns (American Football team) t-shirt, I decided to have a chat with him while Naw Ku Ku and I took a break. We were talking about his job at Big Apple Meat Company and how they cut his hours to part time. We also ended up talking about how Saw Tha Wah used to go to school and would like to continue going but because he has to work and care for his kids it was too much for him. Saw Tha Wah mentioned that he attended Clinton College ESL adult education, up to level 5 (there are 8 levels all together). I asked why he left, he mentioned discrimination. The teacher was a Spanish speaker and was more inclined to help other Spanish speakers, even though he did all his homework. He felt discriminated for most of his educational life, like when he was a student in Burma; the Burmese teachers favored the Burman students rather than the Karen students. In the Thai refugee camps he felt discriminated against but he
would not elaborate much and I told him he did not have to since he was feeling a little uneasy with my ethnicity being Thai. Now, he is discriminated in ESL classes in the United States. For the most part, he has faced discrimination at work with Superior Cleaners and years of education at the places he has reside, whether Burma, Thailand or the United States. Another thing to mention is that he had to quit school because his youngest child was born; it was hard for him to find parking when he got home late in his neighborhood, and etc. There seems to be numerous reasons why he left Roosevelt but he now wants to work for his children’s future. He wants his children to “reap in the benefits” of being an American citizen and when his children grow up, he will go back to Burma or Thailand, since he will be an American citizen by that time.

Saw Tha Wah’s observation of being negatively impacted by discrimination in his educational experience is not farfetched. In other words, I believe he has encountered some discrimination because his ethnic background makes him a minority wherever he goes. When he is in school in Burma, his teacher is Burman, who is part of the majority group in Burma. Naturally there may be discrimination since the Burmans are at war with the Karen (particularly with Christian Karen). In the ESL classroom at Roosevelt, the teacher is a Spanish speaker and the majority of the students are Spanish speakers, so it may have been unintentional for the teacher to help the Spanish speaking students more than the non-speaking Spanish students. In further regards to cultural capital, being a minority means that Saw Tha Wah would need to further his language education to be able to communicate fluidly in English so he can resemble a bit more of an educated class in Trident City. From what I have mentioned in my theoretical framework, bourgeois language is perceived in society as an institutionalized language, whether the Bourgeois are the majority or minority of any society it did not matter as long as they were able to talk the institutionalized language. If Saw Tha Wah were to aspire to become a better
English speaker, he may increase his linguistic capital to help him “break the walls of discrimination.”

**Too Young to Have Kids**

During another home visit with Naw Ku Ku we took a break during one of our ESL lessons and decided to reflect on our personal lives. She personally reflected with me about her years of marriage. She married six years ago at the age of 23 and since she had children during the early years of her life, it has prohibited her from furthering her education. “Children are a lot to handle,” she says and she does not have time for school. I told her she could take all the time that she needs to try and get her bachelor’s degree. Also, I mentioned that in America, she can keep going to school and work as well but I am not sure if she really wants that kind of life, which is to pursue a degree for a long period of time instead of using that time to do other things. It seems that I was trying to persuade her to obtain a bachelor’s degree in the future but in reality she has three children to support so she may have to start working once her youngest baby has grown.

I told her that I wished I was married with three children of my own and to my surprise Naw Ku Ku tells me that I am probably not married yet because I am still in school. She says that those who have been in school for a while tend to not marry early. I wondered how she came about making this observation but it could be that she possesses a natural wisdom that comes from her own life experiences.

Naw Ku Ku undoubtedly misses her freedom before she had kids. It is even more complicated now that she just has a one year-old boy, whom she cannot leave by himself. Naw Ku Ku, who is 29 years old now, had to drop out of New World Alliances’ level-3 class to be with her baby. Although she loves him dearly, it is a big sacrifice on her part. She returned to
New World Alliance to attend their pre-GED course in the afternoon because her parents, Ka Paw and Aye Moo, both come back home after their ESL course at New World Alliance in the early afternoon to care for their one year old grandson.

She is not alone because there are many Karen and many other ethnic groups in which it is custom for the wife to have children at a very young age. However, in a cosmopolitan city like Trident City, this is not always the case as women have become more educated and gain professional careers in the job market; marriage is put off to the side. The cultural gap between being a Karen woman from the refugee camps and a woman she sees taking a bus going downtown to work is wide. Naw Ku Ku’s Karen culture has her marrying early and having children early, compared to the cosmopolitan women in Trident City. This does not mean that Naw Ku Ku cannot have an education and career like any other modern woman in our society but it is just more difficult to have that lifestyle. There are a lot of women who have families while working on their undergraduate degrees and have professional careers but as a refugee trying to establish a new life, Naw Ku Ku believes she may have to just work once her baby is grown and not attend college. Her job prospects may have dwindled because taking the time to care for her children leaves her with no time to work on her English skills, which are much needed for her to enter college. Without a college education, she is quite limited to find labor jobs. This is the neoliberal way, in which education supports a means of segregating who belongs where in the U.S. class system. For example, the necessity of attending college just to get a basic job as, say, an administrative position, is a way of reinforcing the class system. With college tuition rates being astronomical, the number of applicants thins out; the increase in the availability of loans with the concurrent decrease in scholarships and grants thins out even more
applicants. So where does that leave people, immigrant or not? Many without jobs and depending on welfare.

It is also a cultural capital issue, in which the degree becomes an example of cultural capital in the institutionalized state. The degree becomes an object of acceptance making one who earns it become credible. This credibility is like a key to open many doors for job opportunities, but without it, job recruiters would look at a Karen refugee, as just a refugee.

**Burned Out! GED Can Be a Waste of Time for a Karen who has a High School Diploma**

Karen refugee young adults who come to resettle around the age of 18 years old and are educated from the high schools in the refugee camps have a difficult time continuing their education when they come here to the United States. Traditionally, when one has a high school diploma, then one would be eligible to apply for a college education. However, neither the Thai nor the Burmese governments sponsor high school education in the refugee camps. Academic credential evaluators such as the ECE (Educational Credential Evaluators) do not recognize the high school camps and so cannot provide official transcripts for the Karen attempting to enter college in the United States. This means the Karen refugee student would need to take the GED (General Educational Development) test which, if passed, he/she would have a certificate that is equivalent to a high school diploma. In order to take the GED for a Karen refugee, he/she would have to at least have to be proficient in English. After being proficient, that student would need to (not required) take a pre-GED course to help prepare for the exam. By this time, with all the issues of resettlement, being busy with work, and taking GED classes, most likely the Karen student would be too burned out to take the GED and would most likely not finish their college degree. This has become a dilemma to many young Karen students who are trying to establish themselves within the current system yet there are so many obstacles these students need to jump
through. It seems that the system needs certain people to play a subservient role in society. However, there is hope for the Karen refugees and Saw Htoo’s story below is a good example.

Saw Htoo and I were driving to The Art Institute of Trident City. I felt that during our travel to the museum it would be a good time to ask him about his academic aspirations. I first started the conversation by asking him if he would like to attend Roosevelt Community College (local college in Trident City) in their free ESL program and he smiled and stated, “I am interested.” I also asked if he would be interested in taking the GED (General Education Development). However, Saw Htoo said, “I want to take one year off.” He states that when he was in the Thai refugee camp education was very demanding. “Everything was about school! School! School!” It seems Saw Htoo wanted to relax. He also mentioned that he does not like Math and for the GED he would need to study for that. At this point in time Saw Htoo does not know what he wants to do with his life.

I became worried that Saw Htoo would drop out of academia and just work like many of the other Karen that have found a job while they were attending ESL. From Saw Htoo’s fatigue of thinking about school, I am starting to realize that schooling in the refugee camps must have been rigorous. It would be a waste to not have it count as an acceptable high school diploma so that Saw Htoo does not have to take the GED.

There is a cultural capital lost from Saw Htoo’s perspective. His rigorous years of high school in the camps was basically for nothing other than obtaining pure knowledge and a “know how” to learn. As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, a degree or diploma exemplifies the third manifestation of cultural capital, which is the institutionalized state. Saw Htoo’s diploma from the refugee camp was to make him more credible as a high school graduate but because the institution he graduated from is not recognized by any established form of
government, he practically does not have a high school diploma. Furthermore, in American culture, if someone says they have a GED, the reaction can often be seen as condescending. GED is often in our mind means “failure in the past,” or “high school dropout.” In a neoliberal economic context, it draws on the cultural context by signaling to many that this person is unable to work a “real” job, that is, a job which is not based on physical labor. It is incredibly unfair but that is the very popular stereotype of a person with a GED and is certainly a stigma in many circles. Culturally, this stigma is compounded if the person is an immigrant and/or an ethnic minority. All being said, young Karen trying to get a GED may not comprehend the stigma attached to the saying, “I have a GED.”

**Field Trip to a Four-Year University**

I took Saw Htoo to Northeastern Nashburn University to give him an idea of what he can aim for in regards to a college education. I was a bit nervous because I did not know if he would be interested in going to visit a university. However, he was extremely happy that I took him. He heard of Northeastern Nashburn University (NENU) and I told him it is a good school because it is one of the most affordable accredited universities in Trident City, assuming that he would be able to afford it with the help of financial aid and part-time work. As we arrived at NENU, I drove through the university from its north entrance to its south entrance for him to see the whole campus. He thought the university looked pretty large. However, this university is fairly small compared to a few other universities in the Trident City area.

As we were entering one of the buildings I directed Saw Htoo to the undergraduate enrollment office and the receptionist asked if she could help us. I told her that Saw Htoo was a prospective student for a Bachelor’s program. She asked if Saw Htoo went to high school and I told her he had a high school education in a refugee camp in Thailand. However, we were
unsure if the high school credits would be accredited to U.S. standards. She gave us a postcard featuring ECE’s (Educational Credential Evaluators) website. Saw Htoo did not seem to really understand what was going on but I would ask him if he understood and he would just say okay. I told Saw Htoo that if he had any questions he is free to ask anything and not to be shy about it. The receptionist had us fill out a worksheet that asked profiling type questions such as name, phone number, ethnicity and most importantly, major/interest. It was interesting that Saw Htoo was not sure if he should say that his interest was in art. I think he was just unsure of what he should be doing with his life and thought that art was more of a hobby than a major in school. I told him that if this is what he is really interested in he should write it in the worksheet. “Things can change” as I told him, meaning, when he grows older he may not be interested in art. He then asked if he should put math. However, math, as long as I have known him, is a topic he hates. I reminded him that he hated math but he told me “that he can learn it.” In any case, in my mind, Saw Htoo can just leave “Art” as the interest for study only because I do not think he understands that the admissions counselor was just trying to find out what major would suit Saw Htoo at NENU. We turned in the worksheet and Saw Htoo and I were called in to see Helen Makos, the admissions counselor assigned to us. We sat at Helen’s desk and she asked us what we would like to know. I told her that Saw Htoo recently came to the U.S. and he is interested in attending college. Helen told us that Saw Htoo may have a long wait before he is ready to enter college since he may need to obtain his GED. Helen says there is GED training at Clinton College and the test is given by Cook County. However, if ECE were to honor Saw Htoo’s high school experience in the camps, then Saw Htoo would not have to take the GED. He does need to take ESL at Clinton College and prepare to take the ACT/SAT (since he is under 21 years of age). He needs a minimum of 19 on the ACT and 890 on the SAT. Another route is that after he
passes all his ESL courses at Roosevelt, he can take eight college level courses at Clinton College and transfer (become a transfer applicant) from Clinton College to NENU.

Then she told us the prices for attending NENU, which is $344.60 per credit hour or an estimated $5000 for 12 credit hours, which included miscellaneous costs by the school. So if Saw Htoo takes just six credit hours then it is only $2,500 per semester. She also told us that Saw Htoo would need to complete 120 hours for the Bachelor’s degree. She recommended Saw Htoo to look into FASFA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), especially at Clinton College, if he is going to take college courses there. On a side note, Roosevelt offers free adult English courses. By this time Saw Htoo and I were just overloaded with information. I soon realized that Saw Htoo in the future must understand the importance of FASFA. I am worried that he does not know the importance of taking advantage of funding that is provided by the federal government. From my experience, I was able to take advantage of a four year undergraduate education partially supported by FASFA and it was just so helpful to my family, especially since my father at the time recently passed away and it was just me and my mother.

Next, we asked her to direct us to the Arts building. As we were walking there, there were pictures of someone playing an instrument. Saw Htoo likes music since he plays the guitar so he is starting to gain interest. Even more interesting was when we passed by a room in which a woman was singing opera. We then saw a collage of pictures and Saw Htoo became fascinated with the art NENU presented in their Arts building. We walked on and passed by a classroom that had drafting tables and cabinets an artist or architecture would utilize. To my astonishment Saw Htoo said, “this is my room.” I was impressed with what he stated and I hope Saw Htoo will get a chance to experience the art school at NENU.
As we left the campus we talked about Saw Htoo’s Karen friend who will attend NENU next fall. I asked how she got in and he said she has been in the U.S. for five years, since the age of 13, so she attended high school here. Saw Htoo feels that he came here when he is too old, which is the age of 19, and it is more difficult for him since he has to work and she does not have to. In the U.S., Saw Htoo should not feel that he immigrated here too late at the age of 19. He is witnessing many times the benefit of coming to the U.S. at an early age. When his friend came here at the age of 13, she got to adjust early by taking ESL classes during her time attending grade school or high school. When she finished high school, she was eligible for college. She did not have to take the GED like Saw Htoo may have to. However, Saw Htoo does not realize that going to college does not mean he cannot work and he can take as much time as he needs to finish college. It is common for many young Americans to work while attending school, especially in times of economic distress. It becomes apparent that even though Saw Htoo’s friend may have the opportunity to finish her college degree before Saw Htoo, she may not be able to find a job afterwards. Saw Htoo on the other hand has work experience and if he someday finishes his degree, he would have both work experience and a degree to better equip him to find a job. Yet, he felt he is behind because he still needs to overcome the GED, which gives him access to taking college credit courses.

To GED or Not to GED, that is the Question

We went to an art supply store today so that Saw Htoo can shop for some art supplies. While he was shopping I talked to Saw Htoo about Naw Wah, my Karen interpreter, who told me in a conversation a few days ago about Saw Htoo’s situation. She states that Saw Htoo should test for the GED certificate because ECE needs substantial evidence of what Saw Htoo learned. This substantial evidence can be very difficult to obtain from the camp; however, I do
not believe it would be difficult since Saw Htoo states he has his transcripts in his apartment. Yet, Saw Htoo believes that the high school certificate that he received from the camp does not look legitimate because it is just on regular A4 paper.

I mentioned to Saw Htoo that Naw Wah was having a difficult time with ECE because she needed to apply to nursing school and they needed proof that she finished her high school diploma. Naw Wah attended an official high school in Burma and so obtaining her records would have been easier than it would be for Saw Htoo since education in the refugee camps are not supported by a government. She stated that her uncle was trying to help her send original school documents from Burma but it did not work well. Saw Htoo’s friend, a Karen who is attending Northeastern Nashburn University, is also recommending that he take the test. She states that the high school education in the refugee camp would not be accredited in the U.S.

It seems that Saw Htoo would probably need to take the GED but I wanted to have Saw Htoo look into one more resource. Saw Htoo said there are Karen refugees in a state in the Midwest who were able to waive taking the GED so I told Saw Htoo to look up a refugee group in the Midwest and see what they say. We went onto the Karen organization website and found two people on the website that may be helpful (please refer to Appendix G for our email to them).

A few days later after the two emails were sent there was no response. We decided that it was time to face the truth. The GED is an inevitable challenge that must be met and we just needed to have Saw Htoo overcome this challenge. The real problem I wondered was if Saw Htoo was just going to be “burned out” with work and ESL schooling before he gets to take a pre-GED course to help him prepare to take the GED and if Saw Htoo does take the GED, will he pass?
Saw Htoo’s lack of cultural capital is embedded in his situation. For one thing, Saw Htoo mentioned that his high school diploma does not look legitimate because it was printed on regular A4 paper. This of course does not mean that it is an illegitimate diploma but in Saw Htoo’s mind, his diploma is just a piece of paper. It may seem that Saw Htoo has a high perception of universities in the United States and their selection process for incoming students. Also, I would like to point out that Saw Htoo’s resources; mainly a Karen group in the Midwest, did not get back to Saw Htoo. The Midwest has one of largest Karen refugee populations so we figured they would know a lot about Karen refugees applying for college but Saw Htoo did not hear back from them. They could have been overwhelmed with other Karen refugees who needed their help with the resettlement process.

Preparing for the GED: Too Much Trouble

Since Saw Htoo was attending Clinton College’s ESL program, I decided to tutor him on the days he has class. On one of the days I tutored him, we talked about how long it would take Saw Htoo to get to ESL level 8 and finish level 8 so he can be eligible to attend the pre-GED course. Right now Saw Htoo is in level 5. The semester would end in December 2013. We believe he would finish level 6 by Summer 2014, level 7 by Fall 2014 and level 8 by the Spring 2015. This means that by fall 2015, Saw Htoo might be able to attend the pre-GED course at Roosevelt. Saw Htoo gave a little sigh saying, “I have a long way to go.”

We talked about Saw Htoo’s interest in attending the pre-GED courses being taught at New World Alliance Refugee Agency. However, this course is not equivalent to Roosevelt’s pre-GED but it gives refugees the opportunity to study for the GED without the restrictions that Clinton College has in place, which is the opportunity to do the pre-GED after ESL level 8.
It seems a lot of negotiating took place to make this journey to the GED a little easier. Saw Htoo is a little frustrated since he cannot take the GED preparation courses at Clinton College until he is done with level 8 English. To help him speed up the process, having him attend pre-GED courses at New World Alliance will give him better insight on what he can study for before taking the GED exam. In other words, Saw Htoo may not have to wait until he finishes level 8 English at Clinton College. He can just go ahead and take the GED exam when he thinks he is ready. However, it is tiring in the end because now he has to attend both the ESL courses at Clinton College, in case he can take the pre-GED course there and he has to take the pre-GED courses at New World Alliance.

Overall, we had to negotiate ways for Saw Htoo to keep him interested in studying because the longer it takes for him to have the opportunity to take the GED, the less interest he will have in wanting to go to college. In general, many young Karen adults, if coming to the U.S. around Saw Htoo’s age, would have to go through ESL, take pre-GED courses (if their high school diploma is not accepted by a college), and pass the GED. By the time they have gone through the steps mentioned, the Karen student is just too exhausted because they have to also work in order to establish themselves. (Note: Two Karen students, Lar Htoo and Naw Wah, talked about the importance of being established before thinking about gaining an education in Chapter 6.) This is where the neoliberal agenda comes into play. For the Karen to overcome the steps mentioned they have to consider their time being spent on trying to be self-sufficient. In other words, money becomes more important than education because in order to even finish school, one literally needs money to put food on the table and not wait for the government to do it for them. With Saw Htoo’s case, as he is working full-time, we were able to help him possibly
take the GED sooner than the two years we previously planned for him by having him take pre-
GED courses at New World Alliance and simultaneously take ESL courses at Roosevelt.

**Shining Light to the Darkness…No More GED**

I attended a lunch celebration for the Karen New Year. Sitting at a table with a Karen Community Leader named Zin Ei, who was a caseworker at New World Alliance Refugee Agency and has been an English interpreter for the Karen community, we talked about Saw Htoo and his issues with school. I found out from her that Saw Htoo does not have to take the GED. He can just go to Clinton College and show them his high school diploma and transcripts in English. Zin Ei states that Clinton College should let him take an entrance exam, consisting of math and English. Zin Ei and her cousin, Naw Wah (who is my interpreter) did the same thing.

A week after the Karen New Year celebration I took Saw Htoo to Clinton College to inquire from the registration office if Saw Htoo can take college credit courses at Clinton College by showing his high school diploma. As we approached an administrator at the registration office I told him that Saw Htoo should be eligible to register for college credit courses since he has a high school diploma. At my suggestion, Saw Htoo showed his original diploma to the administrator, who reviewed it as well as Saw Htoo’s current student records at Clinton College. Currently, in his Clinton College records, Saw Htoo is eligible to take ESL course level 6 (he only needs two more levels to finish the ESL program). The administrator recommended to Saw Htoo that he enroll in a program called, “Gateway to College” which is a program that lets Adult Education students (in Saw Htoo’s case as an ESL adult student) take college credit courses, if eligible, at a reduced cost. Meaning, if Saw Htoo’s English was not good enough to take English 101, a college credit course, he can still take free ESL courses until
he gets to that level and take college credit courses that deal with other general education subjects like math and science.

The opportunity for Saw Htoo to take college credit courses would mean that he could collect credit hours towards an Associate’s degree, or as the advisor at Northeastern Nashburn University has mentioned, he can finish eight college credit courses and transfer to the university and not have to take the ACT (American College Testing). All in all, Saw Htoo gained cultural capital through my knowledge of the education system and my communication skills and with Zin Ei’s academic experiences, we were able to succeed in having Saw Htoo not take the GED and enter a university hopefully by next year. In addition, as Saw Htoo progresses through college and into the mainstream workforce, there will be the constant pressure to maintain a standard of living that is consistent with neoliberal economic expectations.
Chapter 6: Linking the Past to the Present

Introduction

Our past experiences make us who we are today. The same goes for Karen refugees as they struggle to negotiate the demands of their current living conditions within the backdrop of their experiences in Burma and the Thai refugee camps. During this struggle, they utilize elements of cultural capital they gained in the past with new forms of cultural capital they slowly began to acquire from their present time in America.

In this chapter I discuss Saw Htoo’s past life in the refugee camps from how he used to shop, spend his free time and an example of how technology has changed his lifestyle. I mentioned three stories about Naw Ku Ku’s and Pue Pue’s families and their pre-settlement experiences from their homes in Burma and the refugee camps to how they are living their lives in the United States. I talk about the unique experience of how a Karen who lived a cosmopolitan life before America and how he is living it in America. The last story pertains to an interview I had with two young Karen college students whom have different pasts and different futures but overall they are experiencing life within a neoliberal context.

Not Just English…the Shopping Experience of a young Karen Back in the Camps

During Saw Htoo’s ESL tutoring session at Clinton College I wanted to ask him about his past. This was to help me link his former lifestyle with the kind of lifestyle I presently see him living in Trident City. In my first data chapter I talked about Saw Htoo and how he experienced shopping in Trident City and our experiences together of his first time in an American supermarket. Now I am asking him about his consumer lifestyle when he was in the refugee camp and attempting to tie his former life with his current life which can give us some ideas of how he is negotiating his ways of living in Trident City.
Saw Htoo started out stating that in his entire life before Trident City, he has never been to a big city. The kind of market he shopped at would be totally different than what I, his mentor, have experienced. Nevertheless, I was starting to get intrigued so I asked him to keep talking about his shopping experiences back home in Thailand. Within his refugee camp is a black market he calls “Money Market,” where he and many refugees buy clothes, shoes, medicine, cosmetics, household appliances like a hammer or screwdriver and so on. When he first told me of the money market and what it entailed the first thing in my mind was a strip mall minus the parking lot and neon signs that would advertise the different products they were selling. The market itself is just one to two blocks of little stands, or booths. The owners of the market were made up of Rohingya refugees from Burma. Saw Htoo mentioned there were some Karen shops but mainly the shops were owned by the Rohingya. I asked Saw Htoo to clarify with me again if the Rohingya were refugees because I found it quite interesting that they were able to open little markets inside the refugee camp. He clarified they are refugees along with the Karen as well. I imagined there must be other merchants of refugee status taking advantage of this new market. This really had changed my perspective of the refugee experience. Refugees are typically running from persecution and living in camps to await their time to resettle, go back to the country they came from, or stay where they are. I now see that this is not always the case and the capitalistic model of consumerism is strongly present at these camps. From what I have seen and imagined through Saw Htoo’s story, the Money Market uses a capitalistic model from a previous time, which differs than what Saw Htoo is now seeing in Trident City’s neoliberal context. The various booths and spaces that the Rohingya and other refugees are selling their goods exemplify an entrepreneurial spirit we used to have in the United States. We used to have the “mom-and-pop” stores that catered to individual needs but since we started to just go to the
mall, shopping plaza, strip mall, and so on to buy our brand name items, the mom-and-pop stores are slowly going away. In this neoliberal context we see more people dependent on big businesses than individuals who want to open their own business (unless you count businesses being done online like eBay). This is why Saw Htoo was a bit surprised when he entered a mall that I took him to in the near suburbs of Trident City. When he was in the Money Market, it was the buyer and the seller making the deal. The seller would only specialize in certain items like clothing for instance. There would not be many other sellers that sold clothes from what I imagined what Saw Htoo was seeing. However, from Saw Htoo’s experience with me at the mall, not only were there name brand stores that sold exclusively one brand like Old Navy would only sell Old Navy clothing or The Gap would only sell clothes by Gap but there were also department stores that sold all types of clothing for all types of brands. Saw Htoo was a bit shocked at the mall and now I see why, we have evolved the shopping experience during the 20th and 21st century from something Saw Htoo was accustomed to back in the refugee camps.

Since the camps are located within Thai territory, I would think that the host population would set up shop as well but Saw Htoo states the market is made up of the refugees from Burma. This meant that everyone would speak Burmese. Saw Htoo did see the Thai police border guards who took care of the camps, shop at these markets as well but did not speak Burmese. The Thai police border guards would use body language to express what they needed, use a translator from the camps (someone who can speak Thai and Burmese) to speak for them and use some Thai words, which the merchants understood, to buy what they wanted. It became clear that Thai presence might be quite minimal except for the Thai border guards, translators and possibly academic teachers coming from Saw Htoo’s camp. The Thai people that shop at the refugee camps have actually become a minority in a little section of their country and this
cultural format is quite present in the U.S. as well, where we have enclaves of ethnic communities, like the Chinatowns that facilitate the lifestyle of many Chinese and Asians living in its neighborhoods.

These neighborhoods have people speaking in their own language and they did not have to rely on knowing the dominant language, which for our context is English. The Karen in the refugee camps would not need to learn any Thai to survive except when there is communication needed with the Thai police officials. If Saw Htoo had a larger Karen community living in Trident City, he may not need to rely on any English speakers as well. However, the Karen community in Trident City is not as large as the community in Minnesota. Yet, since Saw Htoo must rely on other refugees from Burma, like the current Chin refugees who are living with him as roommates, Burmese language becomes essential for him as well as English. Yet, since he speaks English at work, Burmese at home, Karen to one roommate at home and other Karen living in Trident City, Saw Htoo relies not just on one language but he must rely on various languages to get what he needs. The diverse languages that Saw Htoo knows become a linguistic capital, which serves to help Saw Htoo adapt his life here in Trident City. In addition, he is also the “go-to” person for any refugee that speaks Burmese or Karen, whom cannot speak English well and needs an interpreter. For instance, he once had to interpret for a Burmese speaker at a clinic not far from his home. Saw Htoo’s linguistic capital makes him a valuable person in the Burmese and Karen speaking community.

**The Great Outdoors**

Saw Htoo misses his life from the camps. I asked him what activities he misses to get a better understanding of the kind of lifestyle he had and if that kind of lifestyle can be replicated in Trident City. First Saw Htoo tells me that he misses going to the mountains. His refugee
camp is walking distance from a mountainous region where he and his friends like to frequent. I asked what he does in the mountains, thinking it was mainly for the view, but he is actually there to find vegetables (maybe he means fruit) and with a laugh he says he “goes there to kill animals.” Saw Htoo was very shy when he said he killed animals in the wild. Living in Trident City, he does not typically get a chance to do this and probably sees that since I lived here my whole life, I probably do not go hunting. The kinds of animals he killed are squirrels, birds and lizard like reptiles, which he would eat after killing. He also likes to go fishing at the river, which he would catch fish for food as well.

I soon started to realize that Saw Htoo’s lifestyle was mimicking the country lifestyle in the United States. A lot of urban dwellers like me would not know much about killing lizards and squirrels for consumption. Many of us in Trident City would frown on this because people from a cosmopolitan lifestyle just do not kill their own food. I mentioned to Saw Htoo that, “the majority of us in Trident City would just buy our food from the supermarket.” Saw Htoo started laughing and I can only imagine Saw Htoo, killing a squirrel in Trident City. The closest thing a Trident City resident is most comfortable with is fishing. Most certainly there are many animal hunters, such as deer and rabbit hunters, that enjoy going in the forest for recreation to hunt, but that is only a minority part of the population in Trident City. One thing that Saw Htoo also misses and cannot replicate here is cutting bamboo. I asked Saw Htoo why he misses this activity and he just says, “I miss carrying bamboo for building houses,” with a chuckle. In Trident City, a construction worker would use concrete, wood and brick, to build their houses but for Saw Htoo, since the Thai government does not want anything permanently built in the refugee camps because the refugees are only “temporarily” supposed to be there, so bamboo and wood are used. Although I do not think that carrying bricks and making concrete as an employee
of a construction company would satisfy his desire to carry bamboo. The main thing that Saw Htoo cannot do here is carry bamboo because there is just no bamboo for Saw Htoo to carry for building anything. Saw Htoo may enjoy carrying other material that requires building something but when he was in the camp, it was more of a leisure activity for him than something he would do for work here in Trident City. Although he is currently tired of washing dishes so working for a construction company may be something to look forward to but this type of work is physically demanding for a person who wants to also be a university student, meaning, he may just be too tired to do both.

One can imagine the difference from living a life that was more outdoors like to living a life that was more urban. Saw Htoo’s cultural capital that he gained from living a life in the camps is good for a life that is not so urban. He seems to have a lot of knowledge of living a life outdoor and probably favors the weather in the Southern states of the U.S. rather than the four seasons in Trident City. Yet, he is placed in a very urban setting in the United States, although as a young person he probably enjoys the cosmopolitan life as most teenagers do, but the weather and the least amount of forestry he was used to in Thailand’s countryside is not available for Saw Htoo. His activities for hunting and cutting bamboo are not much use in Trident City nor can he do these activities for leisure.

**Washing Well versus Washing Machine**

Saw Htoo’s lifestyle from the refugee camps is even more different than his new life in the United States and since he is living in a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, I wanted to focus on what technological differences he uses here as opposed to what he was used to in the camp. One example he gave me was the washing machine. When Saw Htoo first came here he did not know what a washing machine was. He had to rely on his Chin (another minority group from Burma)
roommate to teach him how to use a washing machine in the basement of his apartment. In the Thailand refugee camps he was washing clothes any day he wanted to at a well. He states that it was routine for him to just wash a shirt that he wore one day and to hang the shirt to dry as opposed to washing it once a week in his life here in Trident City. The main reason he could only wash clothes once a week is because he has to pay money for the washing machine whereas the washing well in Thailand was almost an endless supply of water, except for the soap of course. It becomes interesting that in the U.S. we tend to overspend and over consume whereas in the refugee camps a refugee would be considered poor and not have the capability to spend more than they want. However, washing the laundry is quite opposite to the stereotype just mentioned. Being in the U.S., Saw Htoo is restricted to doing what he used to do on a daily basis, which is to wash clothes whereas in the U.S. he is restricted to washing clothes one a week due to it being a coined washing machine.

In a neoliberal society, everything is up for sale, especially in an urban setting. Trident City is situated next to a lake that millions of people depend on for water for everyday consumption. However, in order to manage safe quality water to every household and business in Trident City, there is Trident City’s Department of Water management team that works off of charging all residents a water bill for the month. This is why Saw Htoo cannot just simply wash his clothes everyday like he does back in the refugee camps. Water is not simply pumped out from the ground into a well, where Saw Htoo would just need to visit to use the water. In a big city in the U.S., it needs to be distributed right to a person’s sink. This individualizes the use of water but at the same time this convenience for water comes at a cost. For Saw Htoo, he used to have the inconvenience of carrying buckets of water from a well to his home but now he can turn a knob on the kitchen or bathroom sink, for a price.
Let there be Light…if you have the Money for It

In the refugee camps, candlelight was all that was available for light once it got dark around 6 p.m. For Saw Htoo, when it got dark, the family would gather around a candle and converse. Saw Htoo would also read a book at night with a candle in hand, but he rather read it in the morning when there would be sunlight. Things have changed now that the Thai government provides electricity in the camp from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Saw Htoo states that for just 100 baht (around $3.00) a month, refugees can enjoy electric light in their homes. However, Saw Htoo states that his family just recently got electricity one year ago. Before, they were still using candles because they could not afford electricity like some of the other refugees in the camp. This meant that there were other refugees in the camp that had more money than Saw Htoo’s family, although typically we would think that in the refugee camp everyone was poor. Now that Saw Htoo is working in Trident City and his older sister is working in Bangkok, where she installs visors in vehicles to block the sun for the driver and passenger, they can both help send money to their mom to have electric lighting every day. In the neoliberal economy we see the migration of immigrants from poorer regions of the world to more developed countries or in Saw Htoo’s sister’s case, a cosmopolitan city to work and help provide for the family. In the global market economy, in order for some of the families to increase their social mobility, someone in the family has moved to a country that is monetarily stable or doing better than most economies. For Saw Htoo’s sister, she made the sacrifice to leave the camp to find work in Bangkok, where she may be accepting a subservient role in Thailand’s society but she gets to send money to her family so they can live a little bit better. In addition, because the Thai government gave her a work permit, she has the opportunity to enroll her daughter in a Thai school and gain a Thai education like any other Thai citizen. The same can be said for Saw Htoo
as well; if he has children, they can also receive education as any citizen in the United States. The exception for his sister is that Saw Htoo has an opportunity to gain a college education and someday obtain a professional career. However, for Saw Htoo’s sister, living in Thailand and trying to make ends meet for her daughter and family in the camp, it may be a lot harder for her to obtain a higher education. There are public universities that are low in tuition in Thailand but the entrance exams for these universities are brutal. Also, Saw Htoo’s sister is in her late 20s and her lifestyle is more about caring for her daughter/family and working a full time job. She will not have the chance to improve her cultural capital like her brother. Just Saw Htoo attending ESL classes and experiencing life in the U.S. has Saw Htoo on the stepping stone of improving his lifestyle, better than the life his family has in Thailand.

**Survived Burma and Survived the Refugee Camps but America?**

Pue Pue’s and her family’s past is a tale of struggle from first coming from Burma (or as they always refer to it “Karen State”) to the refugee camps in Thailand. Their story is of hardship, yet, how they have adapted in the refugee camps is quite similar to how they have lived their lives in Burma. However, coming to the United States, they cannot reproduce the same lifestyle, particularly for the Karen that have resettled in a cosmopolitan city like Trident City. In other words, the cultural capital that they once had cannot be easily replicated to the new life they have now.

In the beginning, Pue Pue’s home and farmland was in Karen State, the land in Burma the Karen army is fighting for to gain its independence. Since the Karen are at war with the Burmese government, they came in one day and burned down Pue Pue’s village, which resulted in her home being burned down as well. Pue Pue’s family began a seven-day walk to the refugee camps in Thailand. During their travel, they had to sleep in people’s houses along the way but
luckily, the people were Karen as well so there were no issues with communicating and they were welcomed to stay. They crossed a river on the Thai-Burma border on boats owned by the Karen army and began their new lives in the refugee camps. One would think that a refugee camp is not a place to start a “new life”; however, Pue Pue and her family ended up living the same lifestyle in the refugee camps that they did back in Karen State (Burma). In the camps, they tended to livestock, Pue Pue particularly stated she fed the pigs and chickens so they can either sell the pigs to make a profit or the eggs the chickens produced. She also weaved Karen clothing when she has the chance to sell for profit as well. They farmed vegetables to sell to their neighbors and other Karen people in the camps. When they went outside the camp, Pue Pue told me stories of growing corn, which I believe is done for Thai farmers to make money. Saw Bu Gay, Pue Pue’s husband, came into our conversations telling me of hardship in which he carried rice bags for only 3 baht (around 17¢). His Thai bosses would make a deal with him to carry three bags of rice for 9 baht (around 50¢). Saw Bu Gay would have to carry these bags of rice over mountainous terrain. Eh Wah, Pue Pue’s daughter joins in as well into our conversation talking about picking peppers on farmland for Thai farmers. She would need to pick one bottle full of peppers for 40 baht (around $1.15) but unfortunately there was one incident when after she picked the peppers she claims the Thai farmers would not pay her. Other than Eh Wah’s story, it sounds like Thai farmers and bosses (just saying “bosses” because I am unsure of what their careers are) are making a profit from the Karen refugees working for them. They seem to be paying lower than minimum wage for the work the Karen are doing (since minimum wage in Thailand is supposed to be 300 baht or around $9) yet this may be the norm for what a lot of Thai farmers can afford. It is the stereotype in Thailand that Thai farmers (in Thai called “Chao Na”) are one of the hardest working people in Thailand yet they make little
profit for what they sell to the city folks in Bangkok. Coming back to Pue Pue’s story, one can start envisioning a capitalistic lifestyle taking place, from Pue Pue raising livestock to growing vegetables, all to make a private profit. The one main thing to point out again is that they are reliving their lifestyle from Karen State. The refugee camps may be overcrowded and one cannot just leave the boundaries of the camp freely but their work lifestyle did not change much. They are doing the work that they know how to do in order to survive.

When Pue Pue’s family arrived in Trident City, they lived in a three-story apartment with elderly American neighbors, one floor below them, who complained to the landlord about the noises the family have made. This is because Eh Wah has a one-year-old son who likes to push around anything that is not bolted to the ground like a chair or moves everything in the apartment from furniture to appliances. In front of their house are other apartment buildings and cars parked in a long line in front. Everything from the sidewalk to nearby apartment buildings are made of concrete. There are trees on every quarter block or so, but there are really no front yards. Just some patches of grass in front of some of the apartment buildings. So what lifestyle has Pue Pue and her family gotten into now? It has become a very cosmopolitan lifestyle where Pue Pue lives in a diverse ethnic neighborhood and there are more homes made of concrete and brick than wood and bamboo she was used to back in Thailand and Karen State. Pue Pue’s new responsibility is to learn English and get a blue-collar job. So she goes to New World Alliance refugee agency to learn English while her husband works in a meat packing company. The children go to school and come home glued to a computer that was donated by one of their school friends. They watched YouTube and “Googled” things that are of interest to them. Their life has become Americanized. No longer are they living the life of selling livestock, eggs, and
vegetables or carrying bags of rice to make money. Pue Pue’s family has moved on with their lives to adapt to the demands of capitalism.

**Big House in Burma but Little Place in Thailand…and America too?**

Naw Ku Ku and her family have a very similar story to Pue Pue and her family. It is interesting to highlight the similarities and point out the differences. Similarly, Naw Ku Ku’s mother and father were farmers in Burma. One thing to highlight is that they felt their house in Karen State was a big house with at least five rooms. However, when they got to the refugee camps they had only one bedroom or no rooms and again, when they got to Trident City, there is only one bedroom. I was curious as to where people slept if there were no bedrooms or just one bedroom in the refugee camp setting. It was quite simple really, the boys slept with the boys in one part of the room and the girls slept with the girls in another part. The married couple would take the bedroom, if there was one, or they would live in a different house all together.

Now we are starting to see a similarity from the refugee camps to Trident City in which, the Karen are living in one bedroom apartments as well and people just sleep on the floor where space is available just like they have done so in the camps. They use blankets and mattresses to sleep on so it is almost like one is camping but inside the house. Naw Ku Ku’s depiction of her five room house in Burma tells me that she has experienced living in a home with more space. In this current environment that she inhabits, space costs money. The more rooms she wants the more she needs to pay for it. This is common everywhere in the world but in the refugee camps space is not much of an option. One cannot simply pay for a bigger place in the refugee camp. In Trident City, as long as Naw Ku Ku has the money, she can buy as big of a house with as many rooms as she wants. However, in a neoliberal context the means to make good money are
not available for the kind of skills she and her husband have; they have few choices but to live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in an expensive American city.

**Maybe we should get a Bigger Place?**

Continuing from my conversations with Naw Ku Ku and from my thoughts in regards to the housing situation with other Karen families like Pue Pue’s, I wanted to see if Naw Ku Ku might decide on getting a bigger place. Just to give a rough idea of rent costs around Naw Ku Ku’s neighborhood, a one bedroom can range from $700 to $800 a month, a two bedroom can range from $1,000 to $1,500 a month and a three bedroom can be priced up to $2,000 a month.

So for Naw Ku Ku, she lived in a one-bedroom apartment with her husband and three of her kids. Plus her children are very young and very active in the apartment (which means they play a lot at home). Throughout the apartment there are pencil, pen, and marker markings along the walls from them playing. The only spots that were clear were the ceiling and high places on the wall. I asked Naw Ku Ku if she would like to move and she definitely wants to live in a two-bedroom apartment someday. However, “it is too expensive,” she says. I mentioned to her that she may need a three bedroom apartment. Amongst the three children she has, two of them are boys and one of them is a girl. I suggested to her that her daughter needs to someday have her own bedroom because she is a girl, the brothers can have their own bedroom and she and her husband can have another bedroom. Naw Ku Ku thinks that would be too expensive for her family to afford. I told her that the children will someday become old enough to work and can help with the housing payments. What I also found interesting is that I did not see an interest to buy a house. Do the Karen want to keep renting? Most of the Karen I have met never mentioned they wanted to buy a house. I am not sure if this is related to the fact that they do not have a mindset to purchase one. Before, they lived in the refugee camps for a long period in
their lives (many people up to 10 years), in which the land that the camps are based on would belong to the government, so for them to think about buying a house in the future might not be in their mindset. However, since I have been talking to them about living arrangements and recommending them to rent a three-bedroom apartment, I get this feeling that I am influencing them to “think bigger.” In other words, my opinion of how living in a two bedroom apartment may be crowded for them since they have two sons whom should not share a bedroom with their daughter, pushes them to consider to get an extra bedroom. Am I telling them to skip a step? Could they just first invest in a two-bedroom and then a three-bedroom or go right into buying a house? I also wondered if they considered occupancy code violations. Many rental properties may take it seriously, leaving this Karen family with no option but to buy a larger place. Ultimately, from my discussions with the Karen about someday purchasing real estate, housing in Trident City is just too expensive for them.

Overall, as mentioned earlier, there is not much difference in the living lifestyles of many Karen who have lived in the refugee camps and come here to live in Trident City because it is just too expensive for the Karen to buy a house and to even rent an apartment in Trident City. There tends to be a social reproduction (a reproduction of status) taking place where the barriers that keep many of the Karen from living lives of a first class citizen are in place because as noted, their living arrangements in the camps are not as different as they are here in the United States. However, Naw Ku Ku has noted that Trident City is much cleaner than the refugee camps and they have public transportation to travel throughout the city. I myself may be influencing some kind of mentality that buying a house or investing in property is important when for some people, even for families that have been living in the U.S. for many generations, may not see it as important. However, many people who rent may not want to buy a house
because property taxes increases for public schooling. Even when a family’s household had all graduated high school, they still have to pay mortgage taxes that are tied into public schooling needs. People may then be more inclined to invest in other things besides property. In any case, as mentioned, I told Naw Ku Ku that once her kids are grown, they can try to find a job and help support Naw Ku Ku and Saw Tha Wah to buy a house. I am trying to give her hope that there is a chance that her kids can help her increase the family’s economic capital but it will take some time. For myself, growing up with immigrant parents, it was very difficult for us to buy a house. Eventually, with my mom’s hard work, it became a reality but much later on in our lives. Meaning, my mom and dad were not the typical married couple that just brought a house or a condo when they got married, but hoping to someday buy one was a mindset my parents and I had. The Karen may be going through the same experience as well where it will take them more time to buy a house than the typical American whom have been here for many generations.

Cultural capital and neoliberalism both impact immigrants in a way that hinders them from achieving the American dream. Buying a house is not a new concept to immigrants coming to the U.S. but how to buy one is. Besides the language barrier like understanding real estate and banking jargon like “mortgage loan” or “equity loan,” many immigrants who come here with low level skills for work would not be making enough money to qualify for those loans. On the mind of many immigrants when they first migrate here, basic necessities come first such as putting a roof over one’s family’s head (basically renting an apartment) and providing food on the table. If there is any money left over then saving for a house may be second.

**Refugee Camp Education and Privatization…Not so Neoliberal**

Aside from living arrangements, Naw Ku Ku’s mother (Aye Moo) took care of livestock similarly with Pue Pue’s family, in Burma and in Thailand. In this particular conversation Aye
Moo mentioned that they planted rice for the Thai farmers. They would also go to work on a Thai farm, sometimes, for two days, sometimes for one week and even for one month. Picking chili was another common task as well with an addition on planting garlic and onion. The family would earn around 80 baht (almost $2) a day. Another way to make money was through Ka Paw (Naw Ku Ku’s dad) who would cut wood somewhere and sell the wood to people in the refugee camps as fuel for fire. So what happens to all the money that they make? What became interesting was that since they had seven children, they had to use most of their money to send their kids to school. A very common theme with immigrants who come to the United States would be the parents working to help support their kids in school. Although in America, we have a free public school system for both primary and secondary education but for the Karen in the camps, there is no support. Payment must be made during registration but the cost is not expensive per student. However, a family like Naw Ku Ku’s has to pay for seven children, which is a lot of money in the end.

Naw Ku Ku tells me that she remembers the payment going up with each grade. She was only able to recall that 40 baht (around $1.15) was needed for grade 5 registration while for grade 10 it was 120 baht (around $4). This was a huge difference; no wonder why Aye Moo said she had no money when she was in the camps. I asked if there was any help at all from the Karen Education Department (KED) if they could not pay and they said there was no help. The only relief in Naw Ku Ku’s family’s situation is when one of the siblings dropped out of school because he just did not like going to school. The remaining six children in the family continued with their schooling, leaving their parents without money after paying their school fees. The comparison made earlier between paying for school in the refugee camps and going to school for free in the U.S. cannot be comparable. The education in the camps is not being supported by the
Thai or Burmese government. The money that the KED would collect would go towards uniforms and school supplies. Here in the U.S. and in many other countries that offer free schooling, it is possible to do public schooling because taxes are being collected. So when the Karen come here to the U.S., do they realize that education is not necessarily free? Do the Karen comprehend that the taxes that are taken from their paychecks at work are used to fund public schooling? So when Naw Ku Ku tells me that their mom and dad worked hard for them during their time in the refugee camps to pay for school, can she imagine that it is the same here, but a bit more indirect? It becomes interesting that the schooling in the refugee camps exemplify some similarities to a neoliberal framework. To a certain degree, the education in the refugee camps has become private. There is no government entity telling the KED how they should structure their education. In an interview with a Karen named Lar Htoo (who will be talked more about in this chapter), in his high school graduating class of 500 student, the majority of students do not have jobs. This is not so different from the neoliberal society we see in the United States where many college students who graduate cannot find jobs as well. However, the big difference between education influenced by neoliberal ideology and the refugee camp or KED education is that there is no option for the KED to rely on a government entity to work with them. In other words, the KED started out needing to charge for registration in order to pay for uniforms and school supplies because who else would pay for it?

**Different Past, Different Story, the Migration of a Unique Karen**

Throughout my research it may seem that the Karen are all farmers and came from a non-cosmopolitan lifestyle or village. Saw Klay, a Karen in his mid-50s and his family are the biggest exception. Saw Klay was born in the capital city of Karen State, Pa-an. His father was a “substitute doctor,” meaning, there are times when people in the surrounding villages needed a
doctor equivalent to an M.D. (Medical Doctor) in the United States but if there was none available then his father would be the one to care for that patient. His mother was a teacher who taught Christianity for Seventh Day Adventist grade school students. His family, as one would imagine, was a strong Christian family who wanted Saw Klay to finish high school and attend a Bible College in Karen State. However, the power of capitalism for him was, at the time, stronger than the call for religious service.

When Saw Klay graduated high school, money meant power, even in a Socialist Burma in the 70s. Burma has had a high poverty rate for the past several decades, but only recently has it been easier for the Burmese to access goods with the same frequency as we see in capitalistic societies. Saw Klay started his own business, in which he would be a merchant who imported certain items into Burma, such as MSG (Monosodium Glutamate) or other types of seasoning for food, brand named clothes, sewing machines and all sorts of items we take for granted in a capitalistic society. He brought these items with his employees in Thailand and sold the items in Karen State. The items that he sold would be priced at a standard rate dependent on what other vendors were selling them for and if the price would make profit. Saw Klay’s stock of certain items can also be short because there were times when the Burmese army would capture some of his men and take the items they were importing from Thailand. Up until this point, Saw Klay fully exemplifies not only a neoliberal lifestyle, in which he was profiting from meeting the demands of thousands of people who wanted items they could not get in Burma due to political restrictions but he was a successful entrepreneur in an unorthodox way.

At the age of 27 years old, Saw Klay decided it was time to make money somewhere else and so he went to Thailand to live in a city close to the Burmese border. He had his hands in all kinds of businesses, one of them was selling jade. The other business was the transportation of
money. He was, to simply state, the “Western Union” to many Karen and Hmong workers who worked in Bangkok and needed to send money to their families in Burma. In this line of business, it was very unsafe and there were cons that would try to take the money and run. Meaning, when one of Saw Klay’s men arrived in Burma to deliver the money, sometimes there were people who pretended to be the rightful receivers of that money and just took the money. Saw Klay mentioned that he survived in the business making whatever profit he could make. He would also, in special cases, import large items such as motorcycles and parts for cars. Again, Saw Klay is an entrepreneur fulfilling a need for a country at the time was either Socialist or ruled by a military junta, depending on the time frame. His business networks at the Thai-Burmese border were vast and he knew influential people in Burmese politics. Saw Klay, in my mind, would fit right in with the kind of business people we have in Trident City. However, when he came here to the U.S. his life was totally different. Saw Klay came in 2009 for various reasons; one of them was for his daughter Naw Wah, who is technically listed on the United Nation’s paperwork as a refugee. Naw Wah’s story will be talked about later but first, let us keep discussing Saw Klay’s case. Saw Klay is unlike most Karen refugees who come here. He tells me that he is not awestruck by the tall buildings and metropolitan lifestyle Trident City has to offer. Being city folk himself and having gone to Bangkok numerous times, he feels Trident City is a bit of a slower paced city. Although he still wishes to visit New York as well to complete his comparisons. Saw Klay has then been quite the exception of a Karen immigrant in Trident City. However, coming to the U.S. also meant he lost his social and political networks that he had at the Thai-Burmese border. One of the main reasons of not being able to gain new networks and to do business here in the U.S. is due to being less proficient in English compared to the other languages he knew. When I conducted my interview with Saw Klay, he spoke Thai
to me during most of the interview. He was one of the few Karen that spoke mainly Thai to me. Saw Klay is proficient in three languages, Burmese, Karen, and Thai. At the Thai-Burmese border he would use those languages day to day to get what he needed. It then became obvious that Saw Klay’s linguistic capital was knowing the three language that are most spoken at the Thai-Burmese border. With these languages he owned a business, founds ways to own property, and lived a decent life.

Unfortunately, in the U.S., English is the dominant means of communication. Saw Klay was not proficient in English as he was in the other three languages he knew. His social networks in the U.S. were limited to refugees coming from Burma, who are not the elite group he was used to dealing with back home. One would think that a refugee with the kind of capitalistic and cosmopolitan background like Saw Klay may have a better chance of adapting to/negotiating in an American lifestyle than one who has always been restricted in movement and therefore lacks the experience in adapting to new areas. Yet, once Saw Klay arrived in the U.S., his problems were not much different than the typical Karen refugees who are resettling here.

There is then this longing to go back to where he came from. Similarly for many elderly Karen, Saw Klay would like to revisit his past life, not necessarily Burma or Karen State like other Karen elderly but the Thai-Burmese border, where he still has some social networks. He believes he can still find work, the work that he used to do but it seems he would be doing it for someone else. That means if he does go back then there is no coming back and forth from the U.S. to Thailand, he would have to stay in Thailand and be dedicated to his job.

There are a few things that are stopping Saw Klay from going back to Thailand right away. First he needs his U.S. citizenship. Once he gets his citizenship he can go back with fewer problems than having a “green card.” His next reason for not going back is his youngest
daughter. She is in her first year of high school and Saw Klay still worries about her. He wants her to grow up into a young adult before he leaves her to take care of herself in Trident City. The third issue is age; he is just getting too old. If he were in his 30s and even 40s, he would be able to go back when he could but now, he feels he is losing parts of his memory. He tells me, with a laugh, that he would forget his glasses somewhere and would find them in his shirt pocket. He says it seems like it is time for him to serve God. I started to realize that money was no longer his desire as it was when he was a young adult. I thought it was also ironic because when Saw Klay graduated high school, his parents wanted him to attend a Bible school. I wondered if being in Trident City had given him a different perspective. If he were still at the Thai-Burmese border, would he actually be doing the same work he was doing? Does resettlement take a lot of energy, which made Saw Klay not want to go back to his past life? Amusingly, he told me that in America, he is grateful that he sweats at work from time to time. Similar to many Karen refugees, Saw Klay works at Big Apple, the meat-packing factory. He sweats moving the meat around and for that he feels he is getting a workout. A doctor in the U.S. found out that Saw Klay has very high cholesterol. He could eventually have a heart attack in his near future. So now Saw Klay is taking cholesterol pills and his workout at the meat factory helps him keep his cholesterol under control. Saw Klay then seriously said that, “If I were back in Thailand, I would be eating foods with high cholesterol and just use my brain for work. I would have died from a heart attack by now.” It was nice to hear Saw Klay saying some good things about being here because typically it is quite the opposite where doing physical work is frowned upon by someone who once was a professional entrepreneur. In further regards to a career back in Thailand, he did give up a lot to be here in the United States with his two daughters. Naw Wah, his oldest daughter, again has a story of why they ended up coming here
later on in this chapter but I want to point out how life can change in an instant. One day Saw Klay was a businessman and now he works in a meat packing company, which may be less luxurious than his previous job but his health is better and since he is getting a bit older, that entrepreneur spirit seems to have left him. So coming here may have been a better change for him. As I mentioned earlier, he wants to serve God in a certain capacity. Saw Klay expanded on this by stating he would like to, “Continue what ounce of energy he has left to work for God. This could mean I can hold a position in a local church as a treasurer, church developer, and secretary.” It is ironic, that he may not have gone to Bible school like his parents planned for him to attend but he never left his faith as a Seventh Day Adventist. Realistically, there are only a few Seventh Day Adventist followers and churches overall in the U.S. and Trident City. Therefore, Karen Seventh Day Adventists are a minority group within a minority group. As a result, being Seventh Day Adventist may not increase the Karen refugees’ cultural capital. Nevertheless, religion becomes this bridge for Saw Klay and may other Karen Christians to help them cope with a new life here in Trident City by servicing the religion they had in Burma and Thailand. In other words, their Christian faith was one of the familiar things that they knew when they first resettled in the United States and many times being familiar with something is very helpful in coping with the hardships of resettlement.

We started talking about his older daughter, Naw Wah, since he mentioned that he takes care of his younger daughter. I asked, “How about Naw Wah, do you have to take care of her?” “Naw Wah (who is also my Karen interpreter) is old enough to take care of herself,” says Saw Klay. Naw Wah is currently 20 years old attending Clinton College for an Associate’s Degree in Nursing (ADN). Saw Klay knows that Naw Wah is working on her degree in nursing but he does not know what she is exactly doing. I reiterated with Saw Klay that Naw Wah is doing
what academia calls an Associate’s degree, a two-year degree in college. I also told Saw Klay that I have a friend who works for the NCSBN (National Council of State Boards of Nursing) who recommends that people in nursing should graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN). My friend states that hospitals are slowly moving towards hiring BSNs over ADNs. I told Saw Klay that if Naw Wah goes for a Bachelor’s degree, there is a chance she can go for a master’s degree as well, which may lead her into a managerial position. In the U.S., we tend to like the idea of getting a managerial position. It typically means a higher salary and more authority; therefore, Saw Klay, being a businessman that he is, thought what I said sounded good and would like to relay my information to Naw Wah. He also feels that he cannot help his younger daughter with her schoolwork. The younger daughter would ask Saw Klay for help but Saw Klay just cannot help her and he blames it on the language barrier. Our discussion made me think of Saw Gay Ler, who I talked about in another chapter, about his daughter who was not informing him of where she is going for high school in Trident City’s Southside. There again comes a gap in cultural capital where Saw Klay does not have knowledge of the education system in the U.S. and what schools would be good for his daughter’s education. Saw Klay’s background in business and his past career at the Thai-Burmese border do not contribute much knowledge towards helping his two daughters in school. More emphasis needs to be put on the resettlement of his life in the U.S., which also makes it harder for Saw Klay to understand the education system. However, if he were back in Thailand, he would have the social networks whom he can go to and find out what society considers best educational alternatives he should recommend for his daughters.
Naw Wah and Lar Htoo…a Comparison between Two Different Lifestyles

The following section reflects an interview I did on two Karen refugee students, Naw Wah (my Karen translator and the daughter of Saw Klay) and Lar Htoo, whom have resettled in the United States. They both came from Thai refugee camps in Thailand and both were college students at the time of this study. Their cultural capital has dramatically been affected since their migration to the U.S. but quite differently due to their different social backgrounds. It is typical that Karen refugees who come here seem to “start from scratch,” meaning everyone starts on equal ground needing to learn ESL and get a job to adapt their lives here but for these two, their difference in background makes for an interesting comparison. The subsequent sections below enlist the questions I asked and themes that popped up from our conversation.

How did you become a Refugee?

I had the pleasure of interviewing Naw Wah and Lar Htoo during a warm June summer at New Life. Sitting at a conference table, I asked them both the general question, “How did you become a refugee?” Their answers became interesting because both of them have resided in the Thai refugee camps; however, under different circumstances. Naw Wah’s parents resided in Thailand’s Tak province, not in the refugee camps. They registered themselves as refugees but did not live in the refugee camps beforehand because they migrated to Thailand preceding the influx of Karen refugees entering Thailand in the 1980’s. Naw Wah was born and grew up in Tak province. Her father sent her to Burma, for secondary schooling. When it came time to apply for a university in Burma, her exam scores were not up to par with students that would enter a medical program. Her father decided to have her gain more education in the refugee camps in Thailand because she would at least have a chance to learn English.
If she were to stay in Burma, she would obtain a poor university education. From her experience, it seems the better universities in Burma focused on highly skilled occupations like Medicine, Engineering, and so on but again, due to Naw Wah’s low test scores, she could not attend such universities. During her stay at the refugee camps she learned English but also taught Burmese. Her experience in Burma gave her the skills to learn Burmese language and she taught it in the refugee schools. When she came to the U.S. she knew five languages due to her multicultural experiences. She was fluent in Thai because she grew up as a child in Thailand; she knew Burmese because she was educated in Burma’s secondary education system, can speak two Karen languages because of her ethnic background being Pwo Karen, and she knows English because she lived in the refugee camps where she learned English from teachers working for NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in the area and her life in the United States.

Currently, due to her proficiency in multiple languages, she works for New Life as an interpreter and attends a community college. Her parents are in their 50s (her father being Saw Klay) and can still socialize into the U.S. working class system and work blue collar jobs. Naw Wah is young, only being a sophomore in college in her early twenties. She may be able to assimilate herself into U.S. culture better than her parents.

Like her father, when he was living at the Thai-Burma border, her linguistic capital came from being proficient in languages that were spoken wherever she lived. Living in the U.S., her English skills were good enough to help her become a liaison between refugees that could not speak English. She became a liaison not only to the Karen people but to all ethnic groups that spoke Burmese. Her job at the refugee center was secured. She also makes extra money being an interpreter outside the agency as well (thankfully for me too).

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4In most cases, being Pwo Karen means that one can understand Ska Karen language. However, being Ska Karen does not necessarily mean one can understand Pwo Karen language.
Unlike Naw Wah, Lar Htoo was born and raised in the refugee camps with his parents and siblings. His parents entered the camps during the influx of refugees entering Thailand in the 1980s. This was the period in which the Burmese armies were burning down Karen villages to stop the further support of the Karen rebel army who raised armed struggle against the Burmese government since 1949. Lar Htoo’s parents were part of the villages that were being burned down. Lar Htoo’s father, as a young person living in Burma, was accused of being a supporter of the Karen rebel groups/Karen army. However, Lar Htoo’s father was not affiliated with the Karen army and he was a student in Burma.

Still, there were rumors that were spread by the Karen army about his father’s affiliation with the Karen rebels and eventually he was arrested three times. One day Lar Htoo’s father was out playing in the fields outside his village and his sister, Lar Htoo’s aunt, followed him to the fields to warn him that he could not go back to the village because there was Burmese intelligence searching for him. His family threw away his belongings and he had to flee, possibly to another village but eventually he had to flee the country, becoming a refugee in Thailand.

Lar Htoo has been greatly exposed to the conflict that the Karen have with the Burmans. His parents (at least through his father), elders in the camp, Karen scholars from Burma, and foreign scholars gave a great historical outlook for Lar Htoo to learn about the Karen conflict with the Burman since the time of Burman migration into Burma. Lar Htoo states that it is very difficult to gain educational material in the camps on the history of this conflict but scholars and researchers are finding ways to document these historical stories for future educational use.

Lar Htoo finished high school in the camps though he and his fellow students had no future prospects after graduation. He could not leave the camps to obtain post-secondary
education. The only college in the camps is a “Bible College,” however; Lar Htoo states they did not offer a bachelor’s and master’s degree. Lar Htoo says there are around 500 high school students without jobs and without work. Some refugees do get jobs with the NGO’s if their English is good but otherwise there is not much opportunity. Overall, it is a typical conclusion for students to gain an education because it is a human right to have it but there is no opportunity to advance himself or herself with this education. The Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 26 that everyone has a right to an education, in which case the KED (Karen Education Department) in the camps are fulfilling this but when students graduate there are no jobs available and no college to gain a Bachelor’s degree. It sounds like a neoliberal economy in which there are no jobs domestically and there are many college graduates that are looking for work. Also, many jobs in the U.S. are “service” jobs, some of which require the candidate to have a college degree even if the difficulty of the work itself does not demand such a high level of work.

When Lar Htoo was given a choice to apply for resettlement he chose the United States. He believes life to be better in the U.S. but he had informed me that some refugees do prefer to stay in the camps. It was not clear to me if the people that wanted to stay were either young or elder Karen, but Lar Htoo mentioned that with his situation, his parents are in their 60’s and it is difficult for them to have jobs in the United States. Lar Htoo has to work to support his parents and he also has to attend school. This may be the reason certain refugees do not wish to resettle because they already know that they are too old to start a new life in a different society. Overall, Lar Htoo is hoping to finish his undergraduate degree in a year or two while at the same time taking care of his parents. In comparing the two Karen students, the major difference between the two students was social economic status. With Naw Wah’s family’s status in Thailand, Naw
Wah was able to move around for her education, from Thailand to Burma, Burma to the refugee camps in Thailand, and eventually her resettlement in the United States. Her experience is much broader than Lar Htoo, as we can see from the number of languages she speaks. It is also interesting that she had mentioned that her parents would like to return to Thailand because they have their own property there. On the other hand, Lar Htoo did not have many opportunities in the camps. He could not move around to Burma and to Thailand. He even told the story of leaving the camp and traveling in Thailand, which got him arrested with the Thai Police. Even though Lar Htoo came from a poorer social economic status background his historical knowledge of Karen origin and struggles against the Burman was very good compared to Naw Wah. As it was mentioned earlier, the refugee camps were the place to teach and learn about Karen origin and historical struggle against the Burmans. When Naw Wah was attending high school in Burma, she mentioned that Karen history was not taught, just Burman history; plus growing up in Tak province in Thailand also meant that she was not exposed to Karen history. Any history she learned about the Karen was from her time in the refugee camps, which is a much shorter time period of her life compared to growing up in Burma and Tak province. It can then be said that there is a gap in cultural capital in which Naw Wah has lot of experiences living in different places giving her more linguistic capital than Lar Htoo but his time in the refugee camp has given him more historical knowledge (which can also be a kind of cultural capital) of Karen history than Naw Wah. Which means Lar Htoo may have a better grasp of Karen identity than Naw Wah and may be more secure in wanting to assimilate his life in the U.S. context whereas Naw Wah may not be as secured in her Karen identity and in order to preserve it she will try to not fully assimilate into U.S. culture.
So are you Karen-American or Just Karen?

From our previous conversation about their past lives in the camps we started talking about the present. Naw Wah was just about to receive her permanent resident card while Lar Htoo received his around a couple years prior to this interview so he was in the process of receiving his citizenship. I decided to ask the question, “What do you identify yourself as?” Both students simply stated something different even though the end result would be that both of them eventually would become U.S. citizens. Again, Naw Wah has gained all kinds of experiences in Burma, in the refugee camps, and in Thailand outside the refugee camps. However, Lar Htoo came directly from the camps, where he grew up and spent all his life until his immigration to America.

Moving on to the results from my question, Naw Wah states that she identifies herself only as Karen. If people were to ask, “What do you believe yourself to be?” She would state she is just Karen and nothing else. I asked, “What if you were an American citizen?” She stated she would still state, “Karen.” I asked Lar Htoo the same question and he does not mind to be called Karen plus being a citizen or part of another identity. Meaning, if he is a U.S. citizen he would call himself Karen-American. If he were a Thai citizen he would call himself Thai-Karen. What was interesting was that if people would ask him what nationality he was he would state Burmese simply because many people do not know who the Karen are. Some people mistake the Karen for being Korean because the names sound similar. I was confused why Lar Htoo would not mind being called Burmese because the Burmans chased many of the Karen from Burma but Lar Htoo stated that “Burmese” means the people who originated from Burma, this also includes the ethnic groups. Overall, Lar Htoo’s reason for the categorization of who he is stems from practical reasons. It may either be for others to easily identify him in a certain category or if he
is a citizen of a country in which he would do the hyphen (Thai-Karen, Karen-American, etc.) category to represent his assimilation into that country. On the other hand, Naw Wah cares only to identify herself as Karen. I asked Naw Wah where she would feel most “home” at because I felt that this might change how she identifies herself. She mentioned she does not have a home because she is not a citizen anywhere. As mentioned, Naw Wah and her family are actually an interesting case because she grew up in so many different places but she was not a citizen in any of these places. She has gained a lot of cultural capital like knowing Burmese language during her time of secondary education in Burma, English in the refugee camps, and Thai language during her time growing up in Thailand’s Tak province.

Naw Wah mentioned she may feel more at home in the place she has citizenship; therefore, I wondered if she were to become an American citizen, would she mind calling herself Karen-American? Citizenship is an interesting concept that deals with the rights and privileges a person has in a country. Cultural capital can be related to the kind of citizen a person wants to be. In other words, Naw Wah did not grow up here in the U.S., but she speaks English well due her past educational experience in the camps, which gives her certain advantages as a person living in the United States. She may not need to fully benefit from being a citizen like the right to vote or the right for federal employment that requires citizenship but she benefits greatly from knowing English well.

For most of the Karen refugees the need for U.S. citizenship is needed so they can travel back to Thailand and Burma, where they have spent part of their past lives. They miss their past lives or they wish to escape the hardships they are experiencing here in the U.S. and so they need to just go back. They cannot just go back with a green card (permanent resident card) because when they travel to the camps in Thailand and Burma, they may have a harder time coming back.
to the United States. This is because the U.S. government does not understand why refugees
would go back to the place that ousted them out in the first place. The government then becomes
suspicious and may not allow the Karen refugee to come back to the States. However, if the
Karen were a U.S. Citizen, this means the Karen is no longer a refugee but a citizen of the United
States and if he/she has not done anything against the law, they can come back with little or no
issues. Citizenship becomes a cultural capital in which one’s status has changed, possibly for the
better if you are a citizen of a highly industrialized county. This means the Karen, who is a U.S.
citizen, can travel to many places around the world without much restraint. The downside is that
being a former refugee does not necessarily change economic status, which means it is just too
expensive to go anywhere internationally. Although in Lar Htoo’s case, he told me that once his
parents received U.S. citizenship, they want to travel the world and I am keeping my fingers
crossed that it would be possible for them.

What do you think about Preserving the Karen Language?

Linguistic capital is one of the major elements in cultural capital that helps a person gain
a good life in the country they live in. So naturally people living in the U.S. believe that
knowing English will help them live a successful life. What is interesting is Naw Wah’s concern
to preserve the Karen language because it ties them to their history. For Naw Wah, she learned
the history of her people in the refugee camps. She knows less history than Lar Htoo because
she moved around from Tak Province (province in Thailand), to Burma and to the refugee
camps. She was a teacher for two years teaching Burmese in the refugee camps. However, there
was conflict with her students because everyone knows they are in the refugee camps due to the
Burmese government ousting them from Burma. They question Naw Wah as to why must they
learn Burmese language, since the Burmese majority group or the Burmans do not like them.
Naw Wah believes that learning Burmese is still important because refugees from different Burmese ethnic groups can understand each other. This is interesting because Naw Wah believes the importance of a common language and this importance overcomes some prejudice that Naw Wah might have against the Burman ethnic group. Knowing Burmese language becomes a cultural capital for Karen refugees to be able to communicate with other Burmese ethnic groups whom are resettling in the United States. This ability to communicate lets the Karen increase their social network.

**Concerns with the Newer Generation**

When a young Karen refugee makes it to the United States, education may be in their minds, but it becomes less practical to finish any schooling since they are put into a capitalistic system to make money for survival. Naw Wah states that many of the young non-educated Karen who have stayed in the U.S. for three years or so still need to ask for assistance from the refugee agencies for welfare issues (or specifically to find new work). Both Lar Htoo and Naw Wah observed the challenges of needing to be self-sufficient before having the opportunity to gain a college education. The state of self-sufficiency is part of a neoliberal ideology, which creates a major gap in young Karen coming here to live a better life. Karen come from a collectivist community, particularly when they lived in the refugee camps, so they tend to rely on each other for social support. Everyone seems like family in a village back in Karen State or within certain segments of a refugee camp. To some degree, they have carried over this behavior to the U.S. as well. When I did my home tutoring visits, I noticed that there were Karen guests consistently coming in and out of the apartments to socialize with my tutee and other Karen living in the apartment. However, Americans generally emphasize individualism, in which case everyone has their own activities to attend to and relying on others too much may be held in
contempt. Lar Htoo mentioned, young single refugees must find work and be self-sufficient before they can attend college. In continuation with Naw Wah’s statement, the issue with this is that the more focused a refugee is on attaining self-sufficiency, the less focused they are on attaining education. After two or three years of working for self-sufficiency, they are too tired to go to school. A social reproduction occurs in which each new generation of young Karen adults that keeps coming to the U.S. just adds to the blue-collar workforce. Overall, let us close this chapter with a quote from Bourdieu’s interview with a New York Times reporter, “The point of my work is to show that culture and education aren't simply hobbies or minor influences. They are hugely important in the affirmation of differences between groups and social classes and in the reproduction of those differences” (Eakin, 2001, p. 1).
Chapter 7: Summary and Conclusion

Summary

In summary, this project attempted to understand a particular refugee group residing on the north side of Trident City. My interest dealt with trying to see how the Karen try to negotiate their ways of living within the context of a neoliberal lifestyle through the help of gaining cultural capital. My real focus was to look at cultural capital being accumulated mainly from English language acquisition but with language learning, specifically within a cosmopolitan city, it is not just about the language itself but about the culture and lifestyle that is embedded within language.

In order to study Karen refugee resettlement in Trident City I took a qualitative ethnographic case study approach. The Karen community is a specific, complex, functioning entity. This approach gave me a chance to see how the Karen are interacting day-to-day within the cosmopolitan life that Trident City throws at them and how they have learned certain levels of English to deal with the messiness of living this cosmopolitan life. I do not go deep into the Karen culture itself, my method was to attend ESL classes with some of the Karen, talk to the Karen during break time from class, tutor ESL in a group or one-on-one setting, tutor ESL in their homes, and be a mentor for one young male refugee. I was able to observe and find many issues with Karen learning English, living a life in Trident City, and struggling to comprehend the question that many Karen refugees might ask in their mind: “Living in America: What was I thinking?”

In Chapter 4, I discussed my experiences with taking a 19-year-old male Karen out to a supermarket and an indoor mall. In the neoliberal context we see the supermarket and the indoor mall as sources for consumerism in every cosmopolitan city in the United State and every
cosmopolitan city in the world. Saw Htoo, my Karen refugee mentee, saw American consumerism on steroids. When I took him to Safeway, a supermarket in Trident City, he was just confused with all the choices one could make on purchasing a particular item. Let alone, his lack of cultural capital for the kinds of food we Americans consume. For instance, he did not know what cheese was, and what good cheese was. Although a native like myself who knows what cheese is, when looking at the different kinds of cheese that is available from the type of slices, to triangular or circular shaped choices, and the different shades of color from white to yellow, one would get confused as to what is really good cheese. What was even more interesting was our walk in the toilet paper aisle. Saw Htoo shook his head as he was looking at an entire aisle dedicated to toilet paper. He asked, “How can one actually decide!” In the refugee camp toilet paper was just toilet paper but in a neoliberal context, consumers choose toilet paper dependent on their needs, whether there was a particular brand, texture, quantity and where it is located on the shelf. Since there were so many brands to choose from that catered to the different needs, Saw Htoo did not know which brand to choose from because he did not understand what his needs were.

At the mall, Saw Htoo saw many brands of clothing and services all conveniently put into one giant space. One lesson in neoliberal ideology was taught at “Old Navy,” an American clothing store. Looking at some of the clothes that were offered, Saw Htoo and I saw that they were not “Made in the U.S.A.” I asked Saw Htoo if he knew why clothing was made in different countries when Old Navy was an American store and he did not know. I taught him a lesson on how companies outsource to save money and he still did not understand but I still counted this interaction as a step towards gaining more cultural capital.
Furthermore, in regards to cultural capital, Saw Htoo and I experienced a real life horror story, our trip to the DMV. Linguistic capital plays a role in dealing with government entities. The DMV uses bureaucratic language that many immigrants get lost to understanding. Even a native like myself did not understand what the people at the DMV are saying. Two things to highlight are that a refugee does not have a passport because they are stateless. The personnel at the DMV did not understand this and made me realize that people always tend to think that we belonged somewhere, especially if we were born there. Another interesting observation was when the DMV personal, pretty much interrogated Saw Htoo to verify that he is a resident in the State of Nashburn and that he is the person he identifies himself to be; however, the verbiage she used and how she said her sentences had strict connotations, which Saw Htoo is not used to from his ESL lessons. For instance, she loudly and rapidly asked if Saw Htoo committed any crimes against the government but what she said may have used verbiage that was a bit harder to understand because of the level in vocabulary. For one thing, Saw Htoo may have been confused with the words “committed.” For the past one-and-a-half years, I have known Saw Htoo he has never used that word before and for her to say it so fast in a formal manner could have confused him. Linguistic capital becomes essential for Saw Htoo to make sense of what is being said to him. Furthermore, if Saw Htoo knew English as much as the native person in the U.S., he may be more confident in his reactions and answers to the DMV personnel.

Shifting the story to another experience, Saw Gay Ler was another refugee that I met at an outdoor garden the Karen were farming. Saw Gay Ler’s family consisted of two daughters but his oldest daughter’s story was most interesting. Saw Gay Ler told me that she would not let her dad know where she went for high school. From knowing where Saw Gay Ler lived and from him telling me in what area of Trident City she was going to attend school, I was able to
find out that she was going to a magnet high school, a school that would cater to youngsters that did well on standardized tests and have good grades in grammar school. However, there was a difference in cultural capital between Saw Gay Ler and myself. This difference has actually helped me understand the kind of cultural capital that Saw Gay Ler lacked. He did not experience schooling in the U.S. nor did he experience any high school education in the camps. Therefore, he did not have knowledge of what schools may be good for his daughter. This experience also told me that Saw Gay Ler’s daughter has more cultural capital than her father by knowing which schools are good to meet her own academic goals.

In continuing with family I discussed about “family time” with Saw Thu and Naw Eh in my subchapter, “No Time for Fun.” Saw Thu and Naw Eh just learned about what Americans did for fun during the Thanksgiving holidays, which was ice-skating. Saw Thu and Naw Eh both expressed that living in America; their children have to work hard. There is no time for leisure activities and everything is expensive. However, they were not aware that ice-skating in Trident City is free at Paradise Park downtown. So here was this gap in cultural capital, in which Saw Thu and Naw Eh are recent immigrants to Trident City and there are many things they might not know about the city, like free ice-skating in downtown to be one of them. They also have this pessimistic view of how doing leisure activities in the U.S. cost too much money. Saw Thu also sees this neoliberal context we all live in by generally saying, “There is no time to have fun in the U.S., the children must work hard because everything is expensive.”

In regards to the Karen adults like Saw Thu, who are in their 60s and those who may be in their 50s, work can be very difficult. I discussed about Aye Moo and how she struggled to find work while she attends ESL classes at New World Alliance. Aye Moo, her husband Ka Paw and Saw Thu all share the unfortunate disadvantage of being too old to work the physical jobs
that are only available for the kind of background that most elderly refugees do not have. The neoliberal economy likes young people to work because it favors rewarding people with the most modern skills. This also means that, in regards to physical jobs, the most skilled people would have to be young enough to be physically fit to work with these skills. For instance, speed and strength is needed to work in the meat factory because a lot of Karen are given the jobs of moving heavy pieces of meat around in an efficient manner. There is also this emphasis on communication skills or to serve our purpose, linguistic capital, that is missing amongst the Karen elders when they go for an interview. For instance, Aye Moo was given an interview with a cleaning company. The interviewer talked very loudly to try to get Aye Moo to understand what she was saying. Aye Moo also laughed a lot when she did not understand what was being said but the interpreter took it as an insult. Aye Moo may not have realized that during an interview, there are certain times to laugh and times to not laugh. There needs to be a certain amount of cultural capital or knowledge of how to behave in a job interview. Aye Moo may not have ever interviewed for a job in Burma or Thailand because she would be working on a farm that either belonged to her, her family or other farmers that took her in with no questions asked.

I talked about Appendix E, which are a set of questions being asked by a cleaning company. One of the questions, “Do you have work experience?” can be a question that relates to cultural capital. As mentioned, having the most skills makes the prospective employee become more valuable to the employer. A cleaning job does take certain skills but these skills can be learned at work. Therefore, the question can also allude to seeing if the refugee can do certain tasks such as knowing how to vacuum, mop the floor, and so on. This makes the job become more competitive because some refugees, like the Karen, may have lived in a more rural environment where they do not use a vacuum cleaner and instead of a mop they used a broom. It
is interesting that refugees who are more cosmopolitan may fit the job description more so than a refugee who has lived in a less urban environment.

In this neoliberal environment we also see the cutting of job hours. This impacts many refugees like Saw Tha Wah, whom, like many other Karen refugees, works for a large meat packing company in Trident City. His hours were cut from 40 hours to 36 hours. It is actually not a large amount of hours that were taken off but in the United States, 40 hours is considered full-time while 36 hours is considered part-time. This means Saw Tha Wah’s full-time benefits would be impacted as well let alone, money that is much needed for rent.

Furthermore, in regards to benefits given by large companies, I found that many refugees may be confused about choosing the kinds of benefits they should be investing from their employers. Saw Htoo was very confused as to what he needed and he may not have understood that in this neoliberal lifestyle, one where he has a full-time job; welfare may not always be there to cover hospital costs if Saw Htoo were to be really ill. So Saw Htoo had to choose his benefits wisely but with the help from others who are more experienced to what refugees needed. Saw Htoo and I visited his employment specialist and she was able to inform Saw Htoo what he should be investing in. However, prior to our visit Saw Htoo asked a fellow co-worker for advice and he thought that investing in health insurance was a waste of money if one is not ill. It became apparent that many refugees may be given advice not to choose insurance because of the belief that it is an unnecessary investment.

In light of future investment, particularly for our elderly Karen, Pue Pue and Saw Bu Gay want to open a farm back in Burma, particularly in the location they originated from. They were not set on settling their lives in the United States. Once they obtain their U.S. citizenship, they would like to go back with the money they have earned here and possibly rent a farm and hire
workers to do the physical work. This became a common story because in a neoliberal framework we find that many immigrants cross the borders of their country to invest their time in places where the economy is better than where they came from and they could make money to send back to their home country for their families or investments they needed to make. It seems that Pue Pue and Saw Bu Gay may have known that coming to America, they would have this opportunity to make some money and being a U.S. citizen they would have higher status. Going back to Burma with American money and hiring labor to do the farm work is a very neoliberal way of doing business. We are living in times of globalization where neoliberal policies will drain the resources of developing countries, keeping those countries or at least a large portion of their populations, in a cycle of poverty, which keeps those countries in the “developing” stage. This can be exemplified from the Old Navy example I have given earlier and how they are an American apparel store but their clothes would be made in a different country than the U.S.

In my next chapter, “Education for Survival,” Chapter 5, I talk more about what was happening with the Karen as they attended ESL classes, tutored them at home and mentoring Saw Htoo through the realms of academia. In my first theme I looked at how they misunderstood certain material being talked about in class. When they were learning about an American holiday, Thanksgiving, they learned about the war between the American Indians and the English (prospective Americans after the American Revolution). However, they were about to leave class that day not knowing the difference between the American Indians, the indigenous group of North America and the people coming from India. It seems they were confused because the word “India” is also part of the words “American Indian.” Although Christopher Columbus did call the American Indians, “Indians” because he thought he landed in India, which means the Karen were not way off from a certain perspective. Sometimes we think that the
Karen are effectively gaining cultural capital each time they attend ESL but there are many misconceptions they encounter along the way. Learning about culture is an ongoing process, not a simple “two step” process where we learn it and internalize it for our benefit later on.

Moving on to an ESL class time right after Thanksgiving, the class was asked by the ESL teacher what everyone did during Thanksgiving. Saw Thu stated that he took his wife to the hospital. Everyone was worried if it was an emergency but it turned out to be more of a visit to see a doctor about his wife’s eardrum not working properly. This problem has been happening for months but Saw Thu and his wife went to the hospital to see a doctor right on a holiday. As we all know, major holidays are not a good time to travel to the hospital for a nonemergency visit. In Chapter 5, I mentioned that the emergency room would be better staffed than any other department in the hospital during a national holiday because emergencies can occur anytime. It is part of our culture that many Americans, including certain professionals that are on call 24/7 like specific doctors and nurses would take a day off on Thanksgiving. The exception would be given to doctors and nurses working in the emergency room. Saw Thu and his wife came from a refugee camp lifestyle where work was available at times and not available. A lifestyle in which one did not have to work to earn money for survival because living in a camp meant one was taking refuge from persecution; therefore, a time off from work was not important. However, in the U.S., a holiday meant a day off from work. This is a gap in cultural capital between Saw Thu and his wife’s refugee lifestyle and the American work lifestyle.

At Lakeview Park Community center refugees signed up for the ESL program to learn and improve their English skills. Luckily for them Lakeview Park also incorporates computer classes into their ESL program. Computer literacy is a basic need for everyone, even those who do hard labor work. For example, there are some manual labor jobs that may require the workers
to log-in and log-out of a computer system on site so their hours can be calculated for paychecks. This means that the Karen must increase their cultural capital the more times they become exposed to technology, in order to meet the demands from the example just given. This exposure to technology is apparently more related to the elderly Karen than the younger generation of Karen who seem to use the computer every day. Aside from learning the functions of the computer the Karen are exposed to ESL learning lessons on the computer. There was one instance, in which a program that teaches vocabulary and reading comprehension would ask the student to “fill in the blanks” to incomplete sentences. There would be word choices for the student to choose from and a paragraph above the sentence to help the student find the right answers. One sentence that Saw Thu was trying to complete stated, “The most basic rights of a citizen is _____..” The choices to complete the sentence was “to vote,” “to live,” and “to work.” The correct answer was “to vote,” looking from the paragraph that was talking about “basic rights.” However, I would have picked “to live” instead because one must have a right “to live” in a place one has citizenship first, before being able to vote. Yet, the program was trying to teach the importance of voting as a privilege and a right once one has citizenship. So the ESL language programs have not only taught vocabulary and reading comprehension but the importance of voting. This may have increased cultural capital from the perspective of a democratic government like the United States.

On another story about ESL, during my ESL tutoring time at New World Alliance, I taught Ka Paw and Aye Moo a lesson on job interviewing skills. I was teaching from an ESL book about being on time, formal attire for an interview, shaking hands and making eye contact. Everything being taught was relevant for someone interviewing for office work yet for the work the Karen were going to receive, it was not necessary. I know from experience of working in a
warehouse for a telecommunications company, picking parts for radios to bag up for resale to a distributor, that everyone wore jeans at work and the most two important things that mattered to be able to work in this warehouse was to be able to communicate in English and to be physically functional to do certain tasks (in other words, you had to be able to move efficiently and effectively with your two legs and arms). In regards to cultural capital, my lesson on job interviewing was not going to help them directly with interviewing skills; however, they may be able to pass it down to their children or grandchildren if they ever have an opportunity to interview for an office job.

On a different note, during one of my visits for home tutoring, I talked to Saw Tha Wah about his experiences with discrimination in education. He would tell me that throughout all his life in the classroom he has gone through discrimination at some point. In Burma, when he was a student, he felt discriminated against because he was a Karen while many of his teachers were Burman (the Burmese majority group). The teachers would favor teaching the Burman students rather than the Karen. When he was in the Thai refugee camps he felt some discrimination as well but he would not tell me. I was thinking it might have been due to my ethnicity being Thai. When he was at Clinton College’s ESL program in Trident City he felt he was discriminated against because some of the teachers were of a Spanish speaking ethnicity and so they assisted the Spanish speaking students more than they were assisting him. Regardless of what the truth may be, Saw Tha Wah has been a minority all his life. For him to “break down the walls of discrimination,” he would need to increase his linguistic capital so that he can he can resemble a more educated class in Trident City. This may not necessarily solve the issues he has with discrimination but it would help him maneuver his life a little easier in a country that predominately speaks English.
After talking to Saw Tha Wah, I talked to his wife, Naw Ku Ku. She started reflecting more on her life and how she had kids at a very young age. Her issue sounded more like a midlife crisis. She has three children now at the age of 29 and she married at 23. We ended up talking about my lifestyle of being 35 years old, single and still attending school. She believes that my schooling experience made me stay single while people who do not go to school marry and have families early. How she made this assumption was interesting to me so I tried to find out more about her aspirations for education to see why she made that assumption. I told her that in America, people go to school and work all the time. This meant that when her youngest child starts attending preschool or kindergarten, she might be freer to work and attend school. However, she feels that children are a lot of work. She has lost her motivation to gain more education or in regards to this project, her motivation to increase her cultural capital and will leave it up to her children to take the opportunities to gain an education.

In regards to educational opportunity, Saw Htoo and I have broken some barriers for him to obtain his bachelor degree. After our visit to a four-year university and to a two-year college, we found out how Saw Htoo was going to avoid taking the GED. This was a major breakthrough because Saw Htoo did initially need to take the GED to be eligible to be a college student. However, he received his high school education in the refugee camps but it would not count because it was not sponsored by a government entity. Saw Htoo in some sense lost the importance of his high school education he had rigorously achieved in the past. We were not going to let this pass and so after many times of trying to find ways for Saw Htoo to avoid taking the GED, we met Zin Ei, a leader in the Karen community who encountered the same problem as Saw Htoo. From her experiences she was able to direct us to the admission’s people at the community college. With Saw Htoo’s high school diploma in hand and me voicing that he
should be able to take college credit courses, an administrator recommended Saw Htoo to be part of a special program for adults who are given the opportunity to take ESL and college level courses. After Saw Htoo takes up to 24 college credit hours or eight college credit courses, he would be able to transfer to a four-year university. In relation to cultural capital, through Evelyn’s experience, and my knowledge, which directed Saw Htoo to the gate keepers in academia, we have overcome a major barrier for Saw Htoo to be accepted into a Bachelor’s program in his near future.

In Chapter 6, I talked more about the past lives the Karen have lived before to enhance our understanding of the past two chapters. I start out with Saw Htoo’s past life experiences with shopping around the refugee camp. There is a market which he calls, “Money Market,” where refugees would shop for clothes, shoes, medicine, cosmetics, household appliances like a hammer or screwdriver and so on. The market itself is just one to two blocks of little stands, or booths. The owners of the business were mainly Rohingya refugees and a few Burmese refugee minorities. When he shopped at these places he needed to know Burmese language, which is the lingua franca of all the Burmese ethnicities. This reflects his linguistic capital that he has been relying on here in Trident City. For instance, his Chin (another Burmese minority) roommates talk to him in Burmese and help him greatly with his resettlement in Trident City. He is also the “go-to” person for any refugee in Trident City that speaks Burmese or Karen, whom cannot speak English well and needs an interpreter. In addition, he has experience with shopping, but not a hyped up form of shopping we see in a neoliberal context. The black markets in and around the refugee camp served as a steppingstone for Saw Htoo to learn ways of consumerism but there was no in-between stage for Saw Htoo to prepare him for his first visit to the mall in the
Trident City area. It seems that time will take its toll on Saw Htoo and he will just get use to American consumerism.

In regards to Naw Ku Ku, she lives in a one-bedroom apartment with her husband and three kids. Her parents live in a one-bedroom with seven people. Although Naw Ku Ku’s past was not always like this. In Burma, she stated that she lived in a house with five rooms. Once she took refuge in the camps in Thailand, she started living in a one-bedroom home. One would think that many years in the camp would have made her use to the life of living in a crowded home in Trident City but she one day told me that she would like to move out to a two bedroom apartment. I even suggested a three-bedroom apartment because she has two boys and a daughter, in which the boys can sleep in one room, the parents in another room and the daughter in a third room. However, for Naw Ku Ku, this was still a dream. In this neoliberal economy, her husband’s company cut his hours and so he is getting lesser pay. Naw Ku Ku has to stay home to care for her third child who recently turned one year old, which means she cannot work. It will take some time for Naw Ku Ku and her family to achieve their dream home. Yet in reality, the neoliberal framework has us working hard to try to achieve these dreams. Naw Ku Ku and her family could have just been satisfied with the one bedroom space they live in now but if there is opportunity through hard work to buy more space, “then why not?”

In the case of Saw Klay, a Karen refugee elder, he lived a cosmopolitan life. He grew up in Pa-An, the capital city of Karen State. Saw Klay was a businessman at the Thai-Burma border before coming to the United States. Since he lived on the border, he was proficient not only in his own language, Karen, but he could speak Burmese and Thai very well. His business was to be the “Western Union” to many Karen and Hmong migrants who were working in Bangkok. They would send Saw Klay and his company personal money to transport over to their families.
back in Burma. He also exported back to Burma certain items like auto parts and even a whole motorcycle. He has made many trips to Bangkok as well for his work. Saw Klay had a vast network at the Thai-Burma border from knowing certain government officials to other businessmen. When he came here to the U.S. he was not awe-struck by the skyscrapers and the hustle and bustle of life in Trident City. However, his cosmopolitan life took a shift to something different. In Trident City, he did not have many social networks other than the Burmese ethnic minorities whom were refugees in the United States. Being a refugee himself and having a social network that were mainly refugees, there was a different lifestyle Saw Klay was going to get himself involved with. His linguistic capital was still intact since he currently spoke all three languages proficiently but the neoliberal environment he was once living has changed to another neoliberal environment which caused him to change his lifestyle. Now he works at the meat packing company like most refugees but positively likes it because it has improved his health with exercise. Saw Klay’s case was very interesting because he has a lot of cultural capital from being a businessman back at the Thai-Burma border but he could not apply these skills in Trident City and so he looks forward to a different cosmopolitan life, one that is more similar to a refugees life but with a slightly different perspective.

My last theme talks about Naw Wah (Saw Klay’s daughter) and Lar Htoo. They are Karen college students in their twenties. Their story became interesting because both of them have different past lifestyles. Naw Wah grew up in Thailand, not in the refugee camps but not too far from the camps themselves. She went to Burma to attend high school and then to the Thai refugee camps to learn English. Her past, lived experiences increased her linguistic capabilities.
Lar Htoo did not have the opportunity to move seamlessly from Thailand, to Burma, and then the refugee camps like Naw Wah. His life mainly existed in the refugee camps. Growing up in the refugee camps, he finished his primary and secondary education in the camps. He speaks fewer languages than Naw Wah but his cultural capital lies in his knowledge of Karen history, instilled in him from the education in the camps.

When they both came to the United States, Naw Wah used her linguistic capital to obtain a job for a refugee agency as an interpreter for all Burmese ethnicities that could not speak English. Naw Wah was a student at a community college, with hopes of becoming a nurse. Lar Htoo was working part-time and was a full time college student at a four-year Christian university. They both negotiated their identities in the U.S. in two different ways. Saw Tha Wah’s cultural capital that was mentioned earlier made him feel secured in his Karen identity and that once he received his citizenship in the U.S., he would not mind being called a Karen-American. However, Naw Wah has lived in three places before coming to the United States. Her linguistic capital lets her blend in with many different types of Burmese ethnicities and possibly with the Thai community to a certain degree. However, she would rather not be called a Karen-American but just Karen when she has obtained her U.S. citizenship. She wants to hold on to her Karen identity much more than Lar Htoo but Lar Htoo does not mind integrating himself with any place that lets him become a citizen. Lar Htoo’s historical knowledge of his origins has on some level made it easier for him to become a hybrid: Karen-American. Naw Wah’s few years in the refugee camp has not secured her with the same Karen identity Lar Htoo has obtained but by living in various places in her past life, her linguistic capital has given her the capability to become the “go-to” person for the Burmese community. Overall, both students exemplify a great future for the first generation Karen in Trident City.
Conclusion

My one-and-a-half years with the Karen have been an extraordinary time. I have learned so much about an ethnic group that is generally not well-known. Before I even did this study I saw Burmese refugees as just being Burmese and not a community that is made up of so many ethnicities fighting for their right to preserve their identities from the Burmese government. The Karen refugee community in particular has shown me another side of a great group of people that are housed within this cosmopolitan city I call home.

There are some recommendations and observations I would like to illuminate for and about the Karen community. There needs to be more effort in building a social network amongst the Karen within Trident City but also to the cities and states that many Karen are spread out in. Trident City is actually one of the smaller settlements of Karen refugees; therefore, it would be wise to build a larger social network so that the Karen can rely on each other in times of need. In addition, social networking is even more prevalent due to the social media we have such as Facebook. With Facebook and other such social media, the Karen can further their networks, not only in the U.S. but the resettlement of Karen in other countries across the world. It is also quite important to have Karen leaders from each country physically meet to extend further connections between the groups in order to help preserve the Karen identity across the globe. This would mean that Karen groups in each country need to pull resources to elect officials and send them to meeting places where each leader discusses some of the ways they have preserved the Karen culture in relevance to their place of resettlement.

There also needs to be a stronger network amongst the Burmese community as well. The Karen may be the majority of the ethnic Burmese minorities in the U.S. but having a strong network with other Burmese minorities and possibly with Burman residents in general can build
an even larger network. Large networks can provide a pool of resources that can aid in resettlement, find jobs, counsel and aid refugees who have mental and physical scars from their struggles in Burma, provide leadership to the newer generation of Burmese minorities and so on. In pertaining particularly to the Karen, the Karen language is mainly made up of Pwo and Ska Karen, in which the majority of Karen speak Ska. However, the younger generation of Karen seem to be speaking more English and have less emphasis on reading and writing Ska. It is vital to keep the identity of being Karen alive by trying to at least preserve the Ska language with the younger Karen generation. The Karen community needs to establish a strict schooling system that teaches Karen oral and written language. It can first start out as a cultural language program once a week and then branch out as an after school program.

In regards to the struggles of resettlement, in this neoliberal climate we see an economy where jobs are not available. There needs to be a community of Karen entrepreneurs that are willing and able to support small businesses that would cater to the Karen community. Making financial gain within the community would increase the welfare of the Karen group in general.

There also needs to be an Karen academic advisor for Karen students interested in obtaining a postsecondary degree whom they can rely on to help them navigate through the realms of academia. Presently, many young Karen adults are finding ways to gain access to a college education on their own. In Trident City, they follow two paths. If one is a teenager when they first come to the U.S., they finish high school and go to college; but if one is a young adult, they first attend ESL, go to the community college and to a 4-year college. However, this path is not always clear so again, an advisor for education is needed.
There is also a need to help Karen adults navigate the job market. Karen refugees coming here already know that the jobs they are given are not going to be the best jobs out there. Language competency has become the segregating factor of who works where. However, the Karen coming here expect that they do get to participate in America’s workforce, whatever the job may be. Yet what is not understood is that there are other factors besides language that give refugees a hard time to find work, particularly age. Due to the poor economy and the need for a younger workforce, Karen elders have a difficult time finding a job and creating a productive role for themselves in the family and in the community. Elderly Karen refugees come here believing they can work; however, some jobs are too physically demanding for them. Many elderly do not mind the hard work but it is the employers who need younger hard workers to meet their quotas. There needs to be a committee, whether it would be a government sponsored one or an agency’s initiative to help elderly Karen refugees in their 50s and 60s, with job finding skills but most importantly, we need to give them certain marketable skills so they may be attractive to potential employers. In general, the refugee agencies have done a great job with preparing refugees to find jobs. However, some of the material that is being taught may not be practical. I mentioned in my study that I used a workbook being utilized by the agency, which taught interviewing skills for a professional environment and not a warehouse or factory context. It is recommended that we emphasize on the importance of teaching three main skills for interviewing: being able to show that one is physically fit, being able to communicate well with the employer/supervisor in order to follow commands, and being on time. Also, for elders that cannot work, there are many Karen elders that need a place to spend their life other than being home. The Karen need to support their elders by building a community center in which the Karen elders and Karen of all ages can socialize and the young Karen can learn more about what
it means to be Karen from their elders. However, elderly Karen do not know much about the 21st century American.

Karen are the new 21st century Southeast Asian refugees coming to America from Burma, a country ruled by military dictatorship in the 20th century. This means many Karen, particular the elders, may not know much about American culture because Burma was closed off to the world for many years. For instance, in the story about Thanksgiving, the Karen elders did not know that American Indians existed. They only knew about the people from India since this is a country that is very geographically close to Burma. This may be an inclination that there are numerous things that are very new to them, including the right to vote for a country’s politician into office. Karen elders may not also be willing to participate in a lot of activities that exist in the United States, even free activities like what I mentioned was being offered at Paradise Park, which was ice skating. Although such activities are not necessarily free as well, because one may have to pay for parking or public transportation and rent a pair of skates. The Karen elder, Saw Thu, who said that everything in America is expensive, is pretty much correct. In relation to what was mentioned, the Karen have held minority status from Burma, to Thailand, now in the United States. They know how it is to be manipulated, because that is what typically happens to those holding minority status. It then becomes apparent that the Karen are going to be careful of the choices they make in terms of financial decisions.

In regards to policy implications at the government level, the situation at the DMV only shows how much policies need to be changed in order to help refugees who cannot comprehend the bureaucratic lingo that is being used at government facilities. Martha’s interrogation tactics seem to suggest that America is trying to control the migration of transnational migrants, many who come here illegally but also many who come here legally like our Karen refugees. She does
this by trying to make Saw Htoo prove his identity in a few ways and trying to make me be accountable for any immigration laws that may be broken in the future by having me sign a form that supports Saw Htoo’s legal status in the United States. These tactics then become very difficult for immigrants who come here legally, who cannot speak everyday English and with the administrators speaking a type of English that is even more difficult to comprehend, gives immigrants a difficult time to resettle their lives in the United States. The United States is supposed to be a melting pot where immigrants from all corners of the planet can have equal opportunity to resettle. However, the line between who is coming legally and illegally is blurred, causing those who come legally to be intimidated with their life here in the United States. A better mindset is to be kinder to all migrants who come here because there is no telling if they are coming here legally or not. Furthermore, migrants coming here illegally are coming here out of necessity because in a global market, the money exchange rate is in favor for more industrialized countries like the United States. More respect should be given to all immigrants regardless of status. On a related matter, government officials need to inform their staff or provide training materials on what it means to be a refugee. Meaning, refugee status needs to be better known to all government officials because technically, they are the future American citizens who will contribute to this country’s economy. Many officials, as with the first administrative and the second administrative from the DMV in my story, did not know that being a refugee means they are stateless. Not having proper ID, like a passport is typical because they do not have a country to call home, for now at least until they get their U.S. citizenship.

Also, this brings about the issue of different types of English that are used throughout our society. Bureaucratic English is language that emphasizes power and authority. It is not everyday language that we used in everyday situations. Particularly for refugees who are new to
the United States. What is even more interesting is that people residing in the United States do not use more than one type of English. There is English for academics, for government officials, for different ethnicities, for people belonging to various regions in America and one can say there is plain simple every day English. When I was interpreting for Saw Htoo at the DMV, I was not interpreting in a different language. I translated Martha’s English into plain simple everyday English, which is ironic because Martha could have done the same. However, it is understood that if she tried to help Saw Htoo out with understanding what she is saying, she may look like she is being too mindful in helping migrants come to the United States. Government officials need to somehow create a system that involves everyday plain English to be used when they talk to their clients. As mentioned, even native people like me, whom have grown up speaking English for most of my life, do not comprehend what the people at the DMV are saying. The institution must respond to the linguistic variety of different cultural groups and help them understand their verbiage through simpler English that has friendlier connotations.

Another important aspect in regards to policy implication is the importance of refugee agencies and NGOs in Thailand, should have more connections with the refugee agencies and sponsors here in the U.S., specifically for this project, Trident City. Refugees should take a “crash course” of what life is like in a cosmopolitan city like Trident City in the refugee camps before coming here. It is typical for us to think that all cosmopolitan cities have similar characteristics but they do not. Some major cities have harsh winters like in Trident City, where only three to four months out of the whole year the weather resembles what it is like in Thailand or Burma. Also, some cities are more cosmopolitan than others where certain cities may not have a diverse melting pot of ethnicities as do other cities, which can be an implication of how a
community may be receiving these new Asian Americans. In more detail about Karen moving into a cosmopolitan city like Trident City, we find that housing can be a problem.

For the Karen, housing has always been an issue. Karen are being stuffed into one-bedroom apartments with five or more individuals. There may be an issue on safety, meaning it could be a fire hazard for many people living in a small space. Government and resettling agencies need to work together to either provide financial assistance or have someone help Karen refugees plan their way to accumulating the financial means to rent more apartment space or buy a house. It would be advisable for working Karen to have a financial loan consultant provided by the government and refugee agencies free of charge, from a bank in Trident City, who can advise Karen refugees on the kinds of loans they may be eligible for. Many Karen refugees may not have the dream of buying a house because they do not believe they can afford it. Plus from their past life experiences, building a house on farmland in Burma or in a refugee camp in Thailand is more or less what they know but to actually buy a house in a cosmopolitan city in Trident City is not the typical experience the Karen refugee are used to. Many families plan for years, meaning, save up money before buying a house or they take time to look for a good loan with low interest so they can be eligible to buy a house.

Another problem with Karen refugee resettlement is that public transportation is provided by the refugee agencies for Karen to attend ESL are only given for a limited time. There are times when the agencies are restricted in giving any more bus and train cards to ride public transportation mainly because there is no more funding available and it is assumed that they need to provide free public transportation to newer refugees that are coming to Trident City. Therefore, a lot of the Karen refugees who are still not able to afford public transportation would not be able to attend ESL. Government agencies need to step in to support this issue so that
Karen refugees and many other refugees in Trident City, especially if they cannot find a job, at least be provided with free bus passes to attend ESL. Encouraging Karen refugees to attend ESL programs is vital for those who do not have a job. It is the only way to force them out of the confines of their homes so they can gain more experiences of the lifestyle that Trident City has to offer. Many Karen refugees staying only at home can become depressed and feel oppressed like they were in the refugee camps in Thailand, which at times they rather go back to since they feel they may have had a better life there.

In my vignettes I used cultural capital to try to explain why there are so many challenges with refugee resettlement. However, what should also be explained is that cultural capital is not the best theory to explain the reason behind the occurrence of these challenges. I realized that the theory does not necessarily work unless we make it adaptable to our situation. Karen refugees do not have many capital resources when they first come to the United States. This capital must be earned whereas people who grew up in the United States may have had a chance to gain cultural capital whether by going to school and earning a college degree, working in different types of jobs and so on. However, the Karen did not grow up here and so their English skills were not up to par with other mainstream culture, yet, the cultural capital that they have lies within the community, especially for Karen that can speak Burmese, which helps them associate with other Burmese ethnicities in Nashburn.

In regards to global studies, Karen refugees in Trident City are not only citizens of the United States but they are an important part to the saying “Citizens of the World.” This is because refugee resettlement in general exemplifies the migration of people across borders, particularly migration taking place more than once. For Karen refugees in Trident City, their flight from Burma to Thailand and from Thailand to the U.S. has shown how the world is
becoming more interconnected due to political and social forces that are pushing for more movement amongst people. Refugee resettlement is therefore not only a process of people resettling from place to place but to how people traveling from place to place add on to an existing context that was already there like how our Karen are adding to the Trident City context and how this addition has created more diversity which adds on to the cosmopolitism of Trident City. We must also recognize that Karen refugees and refugees in general are not a burden to the state but resilient people who have lived through so much pain and suffering, more than what many of us have ever seen. Their struggle should be regarded as acts of heroism on the survival of humanity from tyranny. Refugee resettlement needs to have a strong voice that gives more power to the support of refugee resettlement.

Mass migration must be recognized as a global reality. We are going to see more and more people moving for reasons that can be economic, fleeing persecution, or just the need to move for freedom. As refugees immigrate into a local community they are affecting the cultural status quo set up by the local people. Trident City is a metropolis of people coming from every aspect of life so Karen refugees may have created little tension to the local community; however, the problem is that the lesser the tension the lesser attention is given to this Karen community. We tend not to acknowledge change when we get used to the same change that is occurring in our environment (such as refugee resettlement becoming a common thing in Trident City) and it is up to the refugee agencies, community centers, academics and all people involved with refugee resettlement to keep the awareness of refugee resettlement or for our particular context, the importance of Karen refugee resettlement alive.

In further regards to community, there needs to be a cross national and cross regional study on places where Karen refugee resettlement exist. Comparative analysis needs to be done
in order to decipher the challenges that Karen have faced from country to country and within the states of those countries. Eventually, the more research that is done in different spaces the more patterns we can see on Karen refugee resettlement issues because as my study has shown, understanding the host language is not only the biggest issue, but the cultural capital that is embedded within the language. Connecting the dots of the different challenges from the different contexts that the Karen are resettling may tell us there are certain policies that need to be in place globally for better resettlement across all borders.

Ultimately, Karen refugee resettlement, on many occasions, is an unpleasant process. English language acquisition does not guarantee a successful life compared to many Americans who have lived in this country for many generations. The process for resettlement takes time and the younger a Karen refugee is, the better chance he/she would be able to negotiate their ways of living within an American lifestyle. Karen refugees are the newcomers from Southeast Asia and they follow in somewhat similar footsteps to the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees from the past. A social reproduction has occurred in which we see many of the same issues of resettlement taken place in the past are now taking place in the present (in example, large refugee families coming to the U.S. living in small one bedroom apartments with little room to breathe). The political and economic system that we live in only allows a few refugees to become part of mainstream society while many others dwell in low income to poverty status. However, there is hope because more people are learning about Karen and this knowledge is helping Karen become more accepted in their new societies. The significance of this study adds on to the existing research in refugee resettlement in U.S. and transnational migration issues. This study will also benefit a new group of refugees that may come to Trident City in the near future. Zin Ei, a leader in the Karen community stated there are many pending cases, meaning
there are still thousands of Karen on the waiting list to be mainly resettled in Western societies like the United States. For Trident City, refugee agencies and community centers need to prepare for another wave of Karen refugees coming to their doorstep. There needs to be strong Karen leaders willing to work with the refugee agencies and community centers on better ways to address the issues of resettling Karen refugees in Trident City. For instance, in the ESL classrooms it is good to have a Karen who has been in the U.S. for a while to be a teacher’s assistant to ESL level-1 students; at least sitting in on a few classes to help new Karen students get situated. Although these classrooms are filled with people from many different places and so it does get difficult for the Karen teacher assistant to just work with the Karen while the ESL teacher is teaching. Nevertheless, a Karen teacher’s assistant would be very helpful to at least assist the student during class break time, to help him/her catch up with some of the lessons being taught in class. There needs to be more tutors that speak Karen or Burmese, which also provides job opportunities for unemployed Karen. Due to the lack of ESL teachers speaking Karen, there are many misconceptions to the material being taught in class; however, it is also a good thing to only have ESL teachers that do not speak Karen because this would force the Karen students to learn English.

Learning from the experiences of this particular group of Karen and examining what lies behind their successful and unsuccessful resettlement in a cosmopolitan city like Trident City brings the issues of refugee resettlement to light and also supplies the implications for educational and/or resettlement policies and practices that could create better experiences and opportunities for Karen people. This study not only presented the messiness that comes with resettlement but also the presence of a new Asian American community in the United States.
References


Appendix A: Map of Karen State

The piece of land the Karen are fighting for is in green color. Picture taken from http://www.guideformyanmar.com/images/touristplace/kayin_state.jpg

Please note, the Karen call the state they are fighting for “Karen State” while the Burmese call it “Kayin State”.

Appendix B: Refugee Resettlement Process Diagram

From http://www.idahorefugees.org/about_refugees/
Appendix C: Top 10 Languages Spoken by Incoming Refugees in 2012

Department of State  
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration  
Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center  
Top 10 Language Spoken  
Fiscal Years 2007 through 2012 as of September 30, 2012

Arrivals

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Report Totals 22603 41253 55609 52474 40197 40961 253097

Rank order listing is based off the cumulative totals.  
Data extracted from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS)  
at http://www.wrapsnet.org/Reports/
Appendix D: The Top 10 States that Burmese Refugees are being Resettled from 2005 to 2009

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<td>460</td>
<td>655</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1053</strong></td>
<td><strong>909</strong></td>
<td><strong>6182</strong></td>
<td><strong>7866</strong></td>
<td><strong>10660</strong></td>
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Data extracted from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) at http://www.wrapsnet.org/Reports/
Appendix E: Superior Cleaners Interview Questions

1. Why are you here today?

2. What is your name?

3. Where are you from?

4. How long have you been here?

5. Do you like Trident City?

6. What have you been doing here?
   a. If taking ESL courses: What level?

7. Are you here alone?

8. Do you have any children?

9. Did you work in your home country?

10. Do you have any work experience?

11. Can you work hard?

12. Can you work at night?

13. Do you have any questions?

Appendix F: The First Thanksgiving

The First Thanksgiving

For thousands of years, the Native Americans (or Indians) were living in the place we call America. They had many tribes with different cultures and languages. The Wampanoag tribe was living in a place called Massachusetts in the year 1620 when a group of English people arrived on a ship. The English people crossed the ocean to find a new place to live because they had a different religion from the King of England and he was trying to kill them. They were called "pilgrims."

The pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts in the autumn, and they had very little food. Their first winter in America, almost half of them died. The next spring was also difficult because they didn’t know how to plant food in their new world. The Wampanoag Indians showed them how to plant and eat the native food. They showed them how to plant corn, squash, pumpkins, sweet potatoes and beans. They showed them how to pick cranberries and hunt wild turkeys.

The pilgrims had success with their new crops. The next autumn, they had a big harvest, and they invited the Wampanoag people to a feast. It lasted three days. It was a wonderful time to eat, enjoy and say thank you. It was the first Thanksgiving.

Today, we celebrate in the same way, with traditional food that is native to America. We come together with our families and friends to eat, enjoy, and say thank you for the good things in our life.

To all my students - have a Happy Thanksgiving!!! You are one of the very good things in my life.

Love,
Appendix G: Email to the Karen Group in Minnesota

Hello Mr. Chan Chan and Mr. Tee Zar Htoo,

My name is Chaitut Roungchai (Chai) and I am a graduate student from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am currently doing a research project on Karen refugee resettlement in Trident City. I am also a mentor for a Karen refugee who recently arrived in Trident City back in September of 2012. He is Cc (carbon copied) to this email. I am wondering if one of you can answer these questions for me:

Do Karen refugees who graduated high school from Mae La Camp need to take a GED (General Educational Development) test to enter college? Or can they just go through ECE (Educational Credential Evaluators https://www.ece.org/) and get their transcripts evaluated and not have to take the GED?

We are asking these questions because ECE is expensive and in order to save some money, maybe you can let us know if it is worth going through the process so my mentee does not have to take the GED. Thank you so much for your patience in reading this email and I hope to hear from you soon.

Take care, Chai

Afterwards, I decided we should also ask ECE what we just asked the Karen staff in Minnesota and this is what I sent to ECE in an email:

I am an ESL tutor and I have a student who came from a refugee camp in Thailand.
He graduated with a high school diploma and is now in the United States. He is interested in applying to a college to obtain an undergraduate degree. Can ECE evaluate his credentials?

Under the "DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS BY COUNTRY" drop down on ECE’s website, I do not see the option to choose a refugee camp in Thailand. Just to clarify, he received his high school education in a camp in Thailand but this school is not part of the Thailand education system. Again, can ECE still evaluate his credentials?

Thank you for your time,

Chai