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Performing Identities on Facebook:

Young Bhutanese Women Becoming ‘Kiwi’

A dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Palmerston North New Zealand

Jessica Halley

2014
Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many important people in my life.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Sita Venkateswar for her guidance and support, particularly in the early stages of this project as I gained entree to the Bhutanese community. I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr Carolyn Morris for her intellectual contribution to this project and her ongoing friendship and patience guiding me throughout this year. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work so closely alongside two accomplished academics that have cared so much about my work.

I would like to thank my parents Bruce, Fiona and Brent for their ongoing love and support throughout this year. In particular I wish to thank my mum for her consistent belief in my abilities as an anthropologist.

Thank you to my Grandmother Joan Massey for her encouraging phone calls throughout the year and continued interest in my research.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to my group of friends in Palmerston North for all the laughter, the many cups of tea and the interesting conversations that have taken me away from the pressures of student life. Thank you, Emma Clark, Olivia Williams, Sarah Cowan, Matthew Clark, Sarah and Daniel Jones, Isobel and Bevan Topham, and Phillip Halley.

Most importantly I wish to thank my best friend, my husband Nicholas Halley for listening to all of my research ideas, for letting me take over his computer and every wall in our bedroom with posters of brainstorms and research plans but most importantly for showing me that in following my dreams, I am always loved. Thanks to you I have been able to reach my full potential, may our adventure together continue.

Finally I wish to thank the women who participated in this research. This would not have been possible without you all, thank you for opening your lives to me and including me as part of the family. This thesis is a dedication to you all.
Abstract

This research traces the experience of resettlement among a family of five Bhutanese refugee women, a single mother and her four teenage daughters. My fieldwork involved ‘hanging out’ with the young daughters in this family. Using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and visual ethnographic methods, my findings reveal the struggles of being low caste single women in a predominantly Hindu refugee community. My participants used their research cameras to take photographs of themselves, tracking these photos led my analyses into the online world of Facebook. This research offers an anthropological enquiry into the impact of Facebook within the daily lives of young refugee women. The visual methodologies used in this project expose the private and complicated identity work that occupies Bhutanese youth in their experiences of learning how to be ‘Kiwi’. Using Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, this research seeks to understand the relationships between these young women and the complicated online and offline worlds they are a part of. My findings problematize universal notions that the identities of young refugees are a ‘singular’ or ‘fixed’ reality, centred on their inherent ‘refugeeness’. Alternatively this research endeavours to bring to light the enabling factors that allow these young women to negotiate the performative process of ‘growing up’ in a new country.

Keywords: performativity, identity, social media, refugee, New Zealand
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