'If you write poems, it's like a crime there': an intersectional perspective on migration, literacy practices, and identity curation

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Abstract

This article offers an alternative point of view on the perspectives that large-scale literacy surveys provide on refugee women by presenting the case of Darya, a young Afghan woman who moved to Canada as a refugee in 2009. It also presents how a community-based organisation for young people addressed Darya's literacy and identity curation practices, and life situation in their everyday activities. The original study this paper is based on adopted an ethnographic and participatory approach. For the purpose of this paper, only the data relating to Darya was retained and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The findings illustrate how exploring the intersections between gender, race, and religion is a fruitful lens to adopt in order to understand young refugee and migrant women's literacy learning and practices. The data suggest that the community-based organisation provided a positive space not just for literacy learning but also for important identity work. It did so by 1) grounding its activities in young people's lives and practices, 2) aiming to foster confidence building and autonomy, 3) being open to multilingualism and multimodality, and 4) focusing on young people's futures. The findings also illuminate the need to train youth workers about cultural responsiveness.

Keywords

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Introduction

The *Institut de la Statistique du Québec* (ISQ, 2015) notes that refugee and migrant women generally achieve low levels of skills in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The ISQ (2015, p. 214) states that the skills level of migrant women and refugees is a matter of concern and that it should be increased to facilitate their participation in 'today's knowledge society'.

These findings offer, overall, a rather pessimistic portrait of migrant and refugee women. McPherson (2015, p. 3) points out that refugee women 'have been invisibilised, infantilised or paternalised in representations' and also presented in the media and public policies as victims possessing little or no agency. Refugee women's literacy is generally portrayed as deficient, signifying that there is a greater focus on what these women are not able to do in terms of reading and writing, rather than focusing on their strengths. Miller (2004, p. 7) argues that women who do not master dominant forms of literacies can be 'labelled as lazy or unmotivated, morally lacking, intellectually stupid, or just plain difficult. Literacy accomplishment continues to be constructed as their problem, solvable primarily through individual determination.' These dominant representations about literacy, gender, and immigration are also intertwined with others concerning religion, terrorism, criminality, and more globally 'otherness' (McPherson, 2015, p. 2). In her book entitled *Writing on the Move: migrant women and the value of literacy*, Lorimer Leonard (2017) explores migrant women's multilingual writing in the United States and the ways in which these literacies travelled across contexts, sometimes with fluidity, fixity or friction, depending on their perceived meaning and value. Lorimer Leonard's work (2017, p.4) sheds light on important power issues relating to migrant women's literacy practices. The challenges and barriers encountered included 'discrimination against accented or multilingual communication in contexts that maintain prestige-based (sometimes invisible) language

standards', signifying that even with 'good' literacy skills, migrant women might experience discrimination.

This article adopts a sociocultural perspective on literacy and specifically draws on the New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspective, also referred to as the Literacy as Social Practice perspective. The NLS originated in a dissatisfaction with cognitive and individualistic conceptions of literacy (Barton, 2001). For NLS researchers, literacy cannot be solely defined as the aptitude to read and write and needs to be understood in its socially and historically situated contexts. It focuses on what people actually do with literacies (multimodal texts, artefacts—from books to shopping lists—and digital technologies, etc.) in all domains of life. Barton (1991) explains that literacy practices are recurring and patterned cultural ways of utilising literacies. Literacy practices are also influenced by aspects of the individual since they can be shaped by the cognitive and physical elements, abilities, attitudes, and emotions associated with literacy (see Papen & Thériault, 2016, 2017).

Without wishing to play down migrant and refugee women's needs and difficulties, this paper aims to present a more complex and nuanced view of the intersections between literacy, immigration, gender, race, and religion. This is done by exploring, biographically, a young refugee woman's literacy and identity curation practices. Darya (pseudonyms are used for all participants and organisations) is a young Afghan woman who moved to Canada as a refugee in 2009 at the age of 15. She was attending activities in a community-based organisation called 'Le Bercail' in 2012.

The article pursues two research questions:

1) How did gender, race, and religion intersect in Darya's literacy and identity curation practices?

2) In what ways did *Le Bercail* respond to Darya's literacy and identity curation practices?

Young women with a migration background and their literacy practices

Adjectives such as migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker are often conflated in policy documents, reports and academic literature, leading to ambiguity, such as in the ISQ report mentioned above. The focus of the present paper is on refugee women, but the literature it draws on also includes women from a wide range of immigration backgrounds. In this section, I review recent studies that have explored the connections between gender, race, religion, and literacy in women's lives. Most of the studies selected include women with an immigration background.

Brigham, Baillie Abidi and Zhang (2018) conducted a two-year participatory photography research project with young women (aged 17-30) who were asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants in the province of Nova Scotia (Canada). The project aimed at understanding these young women's experiences of migration and integration into a new country and culture. Their findings indicate that the majority of the women in the study identified formal and informal educational experiences as being defining elements in their journeys (for example, the difficulty of accessing formal education in a refugee camp or the opportunity to attend community college in Canada). Brigham, Baillie Abidi, and Calatayud (2018, p. 109) explain that migrant women can experience various personal and social challenges such as:

> […] a lack of fluency in English, having to develop a sense of belonging in a new environment, having to establish new friendships and social networks, facing unemployment due to a lack of acceptance of their credentials received outside of Canada, and having to formulate and reformulate their identities based on the social context.

These findings are in line with two key issues identified by Guo (2015, p. 9) in relation to transnational migration and adult education: 'the devaluation of immigrants' foreign credentials' and the 'marginalization of immigrant women'. Based on a review of studies

conducted in Canada and other Western countries, Guo (2015) observes that migrant women face more barriers to integration due to negative preconceived ideas about their race, gender and social class (see also McPherson, 2015, discussed before).

Turning back to Brigham, Baillie Abidi and Zhang's findings (2018), they found that the women in their study expressed a need to reflect on and embrace their migration journeys. Many participants used reading and writing in order to fulfil this need. For example, one participant reflected on the most influential books that had shaped her identity and another one used poetry to reflect on her migration experience (Brigham, Baillie Abidi & Zhang, 2018). These results are similar to those of Warriner's ethnographic study (2004) conducted in the US with seven refugee women. Her analysis of the experiences of two of these women indicates that they used literacy to navigate and survive in their new social context (e.g. filling in paper work to find a job) and to re-shape their individual identities. The enormous pressure put on these two women to find employment meant that they had to jeopardise their projects of improving their English and obtaining a qualification (Warriner, 2004).

Religion is not referred to in the studies presented above, but for some young refugee women it can be an important aspect of their migration experience. McArthur and Muhammad (2017) have explored—using poetry and letter writing—how black Muslim girls (aged 12–17) negotiate their identities in the US context where preconceived ideas about their race, gender and religion (especially post 9/11) might influence the way they perceive themselves. Although these young women were American citizens and not refugees, McArthur and Muhammad's findings (2017) are relevant to the present paper as they give an insight into Black Muslim girls' aspirations and what they find important in their lives. The key themes identified in the girls' writing were 'sisterhood and unity, shattering misrepresentations, empowerment, strength through faith, education, and speaking up and fighting for rights' (McArthur & Muhammad, 2017, p. 69).

These studies provide examples of young women's enterprise, solidarity and thirst for learning, contrasting with the idea that they are 'unmotivated, morally lacking, [or] intellectually stupid' (Miller, 2004, p. 7). The studies also illustrate that literacy in those women's lives was not only driven by functional motivations such as finding a job. Educational opportunities (formal or informal) were identified as being fundamental in supporting women in their immigration and integration journeys (Warriner, 2004). Some of the young women used literacy to challenge preconceived ideas about their gender, race, and religion (McArthur & Muhammad, 2017) and others engaged in literacy practices that supported their identity development such as writing a poem to reflect on one's immigration journey (Brigham, Baillie Abidi & Zhang, 2018).

Curation and sedimented identities in texts

In order to explore the connections between identity development and literacy, I draw on Potter's (2012) concept of 'curation', which refers to the self-conscious construction of identity and the process of trying out different representations of oneself. With the increasing importance of digital technologies in people's lives, existing materials (pictures, quotations, images, etc.) can be used and modified to express one's identity. Potter (2012) initially coined the term to explain what people do on digital platforms, but in my previous work I found that identity curation was also happening offline in young people's everyday literacy practices such as writing song lyrics, poems, or multimodal texts in a personal diary (Thériault, 2015).

Davies (2013) has applied the concept of curation to explore trainee hairdressers' digital literacy practices across different spaces: hair Salons, restaurants/bars, homes, etc. She found that the young women's '[t]extual identity performances both reflected but also affected how they saw themselves, their world and their place within it' (ibid., p. 72). The texts produced had an influence on the young women's identities that would then shape future practices, suggesting a dynamic interaction between texts and identity construction.

The process of curation, as defined by Potter (2012), seems to lead to what Rowsell and Pahl (2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) call 'sedimented identities in texts'. Drawing on Bourdieu's 'habitus', González, Moll, and Amanti's 'funds of knowledge', and Holland and colleagues' 'history in person', Rowsell and Pahl (2007, p. 401) explain that '[t]he notion of "sedimented identities" can be used as a heuristic device to identify a triadic relationship in an artifact—where it is made, by whom, and through what set of practices.' They argue that the process of text making (i.e. literacy practice) also involves a process of sedimentation of identities as the artefact produced retains aspects of its author's previous identities and carries over, in part, the significance it had in the context where it was produced. As such, 'texts can be seen as traces of social practice, and their materiality is important in revealing those traces' (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007, p. 388). I further propose that literacy artefacts can be looked at from an intersectional perspective in order to acknowledge the complexity of identities.

'Intersectionality as a lived experience'

The term intersectionality was first coined at the end of the 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw to express how race and gender intersect in Black women's experience of discrimination and violence in the US (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Since then, the term has been widely used by feminist scholars to explore other 'ax[es] of social division' (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 2) such as social class, religion and sexuality in addition to race and gender. Yet, intersectionality has received little attention in the field of literacy studies so far (but see the Women's Studies Quarterly's special issue entitled *Women and Literacy: Moving to Power and Participation*, 2004) even though it seems particularly suited to improving our understanding of literacies as social practices, embedded in complex social contexts where race, social class, religion and sexuality are likely to have a fundamental influence. Taylor (2011, p. 38) explains that '…intersectionality refers to the mutually constructed nature of social division and the

ways these are experienced, reproduced and resisted in everyday life.' Similarly to the NLS, intersectionality also puts the emphasis on everyday life. The way Taylor, Hines, and Casey (2011, p. 4) prefer to understand the concept is 'intersectionality as a lived experience'. In this paper, I consequently adopt both a sociocultural and intersectional approach to literacy.

Methodology

The original study this paper is based on adopted an ethnographic and participatory approach. I conducted fieldwork and various research and dissemination activities from 2012 until 2015 in two community-based organisations working with young people in Québec, Canada. This larger research project aimed at understanding the relations between the literacy practices used in community-based organisations and those of the young people in a situation of precarity who attended their activities.

For the purpose of this paper, only the data relating to Darya was retained and analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Gibbs, 2008). The initial codebook counted 195 themes, but only 20 were retained based on their relevance to the present paper (including: immigration/moving, literacy artefacts, multilingual literacies, poetry, family, etc.) and additional themes (e.g. race, gender, religion) were added as they were not a focus in the original analysis. A secondary analysis was performed on the selected materials focusing on the intersection of literacy, immigration, gender, religion, and race, in accordance with an intersectional approach.

The data set includes 16 pictures, one interview transcript, two audio files and 18 observation notes. The original study was reviewed and approved by the Arts and Social Sciences Ethics committee at Lancaster University. Some elements of Darya's narratives have been left out intentionally (e.g. circumstances leading to migration, experience of abuse, and family background) for ethical reasons, as these were deemed too sensitive and not essential to the analysis.

Darya took part in the Mobili-T programme at *Le Bercail* in 2012.This programme consisted mainly of group activities, but also included individual counselling and follow-up sessions. It aimed to foster young people's social development and integration into employment. The young people (aged 16 to 21) who took part in Mobili-T were experiencing 'precarity'; their personal, professional, and social lives were characterised by insecurity and uncertainty (Thériault, 2016). In addition to their participation in Mobili-T, the young people were also enrolled at the local adult education centre in a distance-learning programme. They were completing school subjects (e.g. mathematics, sciences, French, English at primary or secondary levels) on the premises of *Le Bercail*.

In 2012, one week before the interview, I had asked the young people to bring in an object related to their personal use of literacy. During the interview, I invited the young people to explain to me what their literacy artefact was and why it was important to them. That method was used to get a better understanding of the young people's everyday literacy practices. Using artefacts during the interview also allowed the participant to disrupt the traditional research-participant power dynamic.

In this paper, I present the few literacy artefacts Darya and I discussed together. Based on these artefacts, and on the concept of 'sedimented identities in texts' (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007), I reconstruct Darya's narrative around her literacy and identity curation practices from an intersectional perspective. Narrative approaches have been frequently used to explore experiences of migration because of the richness and complexity they afford (Baynham & De Fina, 2005; Dossa 2004; 2008) and because they are more ethical and respectful of participants' experiences, especially if adopted in parallel with a collaborative and participative approach (Lenette, Brough, Schweitzer, Correa-Velez, Murray, & Vromans, 2018). Clifford (1986, p. 7) notes that ethnographic research always offers partial accounts; '[e]thnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*─committed and incomplete'. It is important

to mention that the account presented below is a reconstruction of Darya's literacy and identity curation practices. Being a white female academic meant that my reality was very different from Darya's. This is where the concept of intersectionality has proven particularly useful as it helped me to recognise the complexity of Darya's reality.

The participant selected: Darya

Darya grew up in Iran, but her family was originally from Afghanistan. Both her parents had passed away when she was a child. She briefly attended primary school in Iran but had to stop at 7 years old as her family considered that she was old enough. Darya had learned how to read and write at a basic level in her native language, Dari, a variety of Persian spoken in Afghanistan. Darya moved to Canada as a refugee when she was 15 with some of her siblings and relatives. They were settled in a small city in the Province of Québec. Darya was sharing a flat with one of her sisters. She was put in an immersion class in order to learn French, the official language in Québec. She was later put in a special needs class in a regular secondary school. She had left school in 2012 (aged 18) without gaining her high school diploma. She started attending *Le Bercail* in 2012. Darya was proud of being a Muslim, but also told me that 'It's not easy to be a Muslim woman'.

Retracing Darya's literacy and identity curation practices: yesterday, today and tomorrow

Ève-Lyne, one of the youth workers and educators working at *Le Bercail*, asked the newly formed group of participants to reflect on themselves in writing. Ève-Lyne distributed an activity sheet with three sections: '*Hier*' (Yesterday), '*Aujourd'hui*' (Today), and '*Demain*' (Tomorrow). She explained to the young people that these words were not being used in their literal sense, but that they instead referred to 1) their past, 2) their present life and 3) their

future. Figure 1 shows a translation of what Darya wrote in 2012 on the activity sheet distributed by Ève-Lyne.
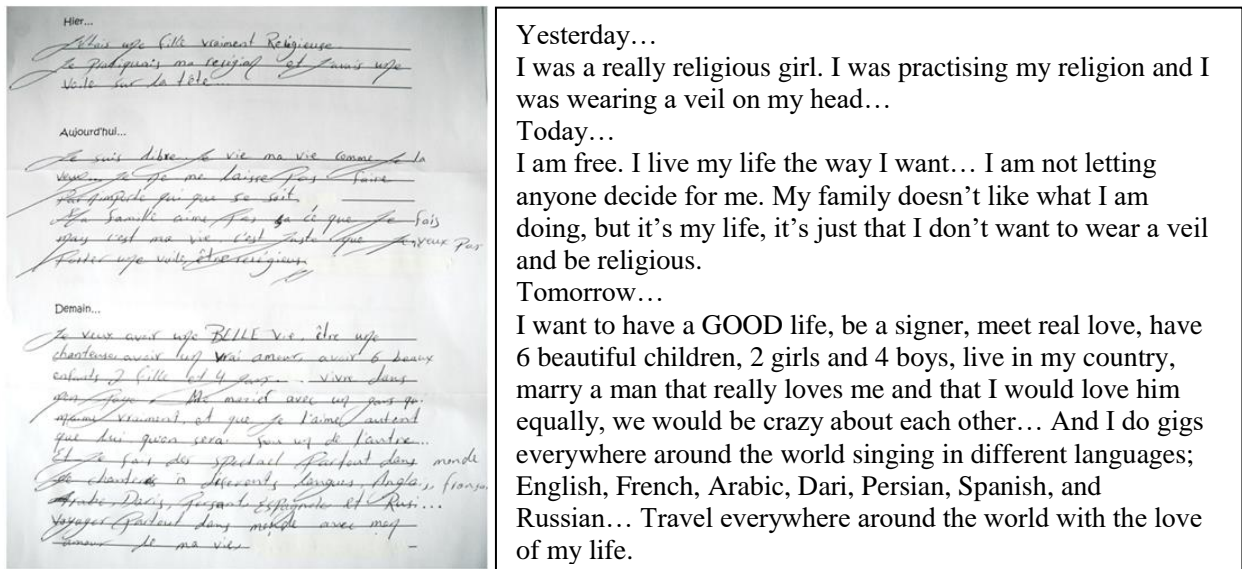

Yesterday…
I was a really religious girl. I was practising my religion and I was wearing a veil on my head…
Today…
I am free. I live my life the way I want… I am not letting anyone decide for me. My family doesn't like what I am doing, but it's my life, it's just that I don't want to wear a veil and be religious.
Tomorrow…
I want to have a GOOD life, be a signer, meet real love, have 6 beautiful children, 2 girls and 4 boys, live in my country, marry a man that really loves me and that I would love him equally, we would be crazy about each other… And I do gigs everywhere around the world singing in different languages; English, French, Arabic, Dari, Persian, Spanish, and Russian… Travel everywhere around the world with the love of my life.

Figure 1 Translation of Darya's perception of her life yesterday, today, and tomorrow

In the following sections, I shall go back to the categories introduced by Ève-Lyne—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow—and revisit the role of literacy in these different periods of Darya's life. For each section, I selected at least one literacy artefact that allows me to unfold Darya's literacy and identity curation practices from an intersectional perspective.

Yesterday: life in Iran and the move to Québec

Between 7 and 15 years old, Darya found herself spending much of her time at home with other female members of her family. She started writing poems for herself in Dari. Since her knowledge of the language was limited she had to (re)learn how to read and write by herself with the help of her brother. This is how she described her writing process:

> I recopied it on paper. I tried many times. I tried to understand what the meaning was.
>
> With the help of my brother, he taught me… At the beginning, he did not tell me to

write poems. This, I copied it from the computer. The others, I made them up myself because my brother told me 'If you copy all the time, you will never learn anything.'

(*Le Bercail*, 15th May 2012)

Darya explained that she mainly wrote poems about love and relationships, two forbidden topics at school. Darya mentioned that where she is from 'you cannot love anybody other than God'. She said that writing poems was 'like a crime' at school back in Iran. The teachers would judge such practices severely, but at home no one could prevent her from writing poetry although some members of her family did not approve of the topics she wrote about.

During the interview, Darya brought a notebook that contained a number of poems, personal writings, and photographs (see Figure 2). The notebook contained poems written in Dari and in French. The poem in Figure 2 is about two lovers who have been separated and the messenger bird that is delivering letters between them.
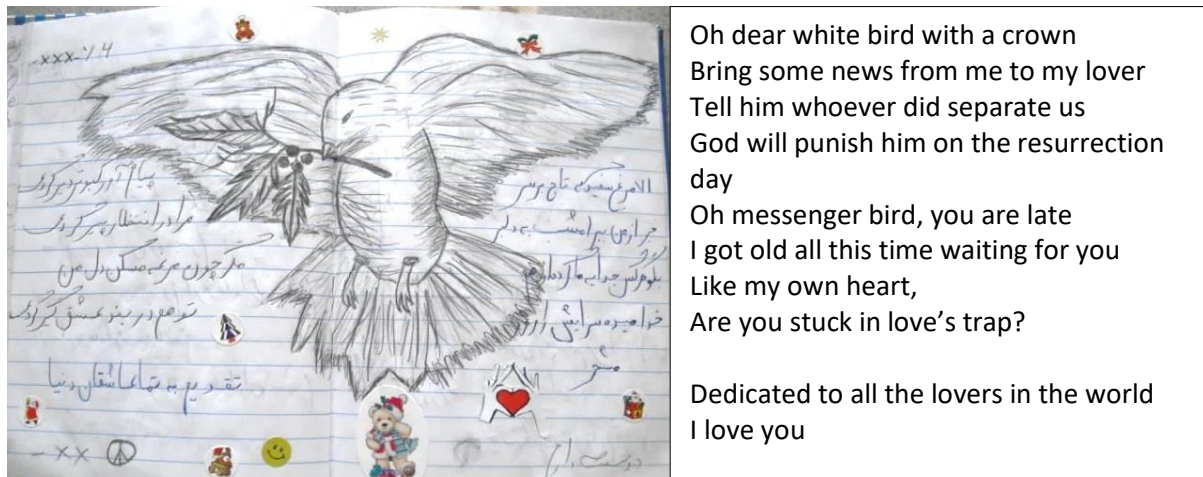

Oh dear white bird with a crown
Bring some news from me to my lover
Tell him whoever did separate us
God will punish him on the resurrection day
Oh messenger bird, you are late
I got old all this time waiting for you
Like my own heart,
Are you stuck in love's trap?

Dedicated to all the lovers in the world
I love you

Figure 2 Darya's poem

This poem, which Darya had copied in part, resonated with Darya's migration experience. She had been in love with a boy while she was still in Iran. Although they had had a secret friendship that lasted for over 5 years, she was not able to say goodbye to him when she moved to Canada.

According to Schimmel (1992, p. 185), who has extensively studied symbolism in Persian literature: '[m]any poets have understood the dove's constant cooing as the Persian word kū, which means "Where?" That was easily interpreted as the dove's, and the lover's, call for the faraway beloved: "Where, where is he?"' This analysis fits Darya's poem particularly well. Love and longing for people she had left behind were recurrent themes in her writing. The notebook also contained pictures of Darya's siblings who she had limited contact with, and her mother who had passed away.

Darya engaged in a form of curation practice (Potter, 2012), selecting and coping poems online and gradually modifying them, and finally composing her own. Many of the texts she had written in this notebook were multimodal, including drawings, stickers, or pictures. Some of the texts were directly related to difficult periods or moments, such as leaving Iran and being a victim of bullying at school in Québec. This suggests that Darya's personal diary played a therapeutic and liberating role during those events. She explored the various tensions that were intersecting in her life at that time (e.g. gender roles, romantic relationship, and religion) in her writing.

Darya's uses of poetry supported her developing identity and offered opportunities for reflection that resemble some of the practices described in Brigham, Baillie Abidi and Zhang's study (2018). They mention, for example, that for one of their participants 'reflecting on her migration experience through poetry enabled a deep learning process, which culminated in a stronger sense of self' (Brigham, Baillie Abidi & Zhang, 2018, p. 8). A similar informal learning process can be observed in Darya's account of poetry writing.

Today: Participation in the social and professional workshop at Le Bercail

In 2012, Darya told me that she enjoyed the Mobili-T programme and the various workshops offered at *Le Bercail*. I asked her how she felt about the activities that required her to reflect

on herself. She said that it was generally easy for her. An example of such an activity was when Ève-Lyne, the youth worker, asked the young people to paint a flower pot with a design that would represent them. Ève-Lyne used the flower pot as a metaphor and explained that if the young people took good care of themselves they would develop, like the tomato seeds they had just planted.

Figure 3 Darya's flower pot

Darya used Google Translate since she could not type Dari characters with the keyboards at *Le Bercail*. She typed words such as '*arbre amour*' (love tree), '*tu sais que je t'aime*' (you know that I love you), and '*amour*' (love) into Google Translate in order to translate them into Dari (Persian). She then copied these words in Dari into Google Images. As illustrated in Figure 3, she finally selected these words: 'Love' and 'I swear to God, I love you'. These words were related to topics Darya often talked about, love and religion. She went through a complex curation process to select them.

The activities at *Le Bercail*, like this one above, generally had as their starting point the young people's lives and identities. They often resulted in the creation of an artefact. The young people were regularly asked to reflect upon their strengths, their weaknesses, their aspirations,

and so on. For example, each young person had to select a personal project they wanted to achieve during their participation in the programme Mobili-T. Some young people decided to select activities that had something to do with documenting their lives. Darya decided to write the story of her family. She wrote about her parents and how they had died. She also explained the circumstances of her immigration from Iran to Canada.

Other activities followed a more formal structure. As mentioned earlier, most of the participants in the Mobili-T project were also enrolled on distance-learning modules at one of the local adult education centres. Tommy, a youth worker at *Le Bercail*, mentioned to me that Darya was struggling with mathematics because he believed that she had not stayed long enough in school to develop learning strategies and logical thinking. The availability (or lack of) educational opportunities, whether informal, non-formal, or formal, can have a major and long-lasting influence on young refugees' learning and development (Brigham, Baillie Abidi & Zhang, 2018). Tommy had the feeling that Darya did not always ask for help or tell the educators when she did not understand something. She also experienced difficulties with her written French. She was placed in a lower educational level at the adult education centre based on an evaluation of her skills. Darya found this experience disheartening. The youth workers were supporting her, generally on a one-to-one basis, with her coursework. Resources such as computers, dictionaries, stationary and whiteboards were available at *Le Bercail* to support the young people with their studies.

Tomorrow: Dreams and aspirations for her future

During the interview, I questioned Darya about her short-term and long-term goals. She said that in the next few years she wanted to obtain her secondary school diploma. Yet, she also wanted to find a job in order to remain independent from her family. As in Warriner's study

(2004), Darya's educational project had to be compromised in order to financially support herself.

Darya also dreamed of becoming a singer in Afghanistan. She wanted to prove that girls can sing and rap like men. She wrote songs and kept all her texts because she believed that one day she could use them as lyrics. She composed lyrics about topics such as racism and Muslim women's rights. Similarly to the young women in Muhammad's study (2015), topics relating to war, violence, and discrimination against women were present in Darya's writing. Figure 4 shows a rap song that Darya described as being about '*les gens de couleur*' (people of colour).
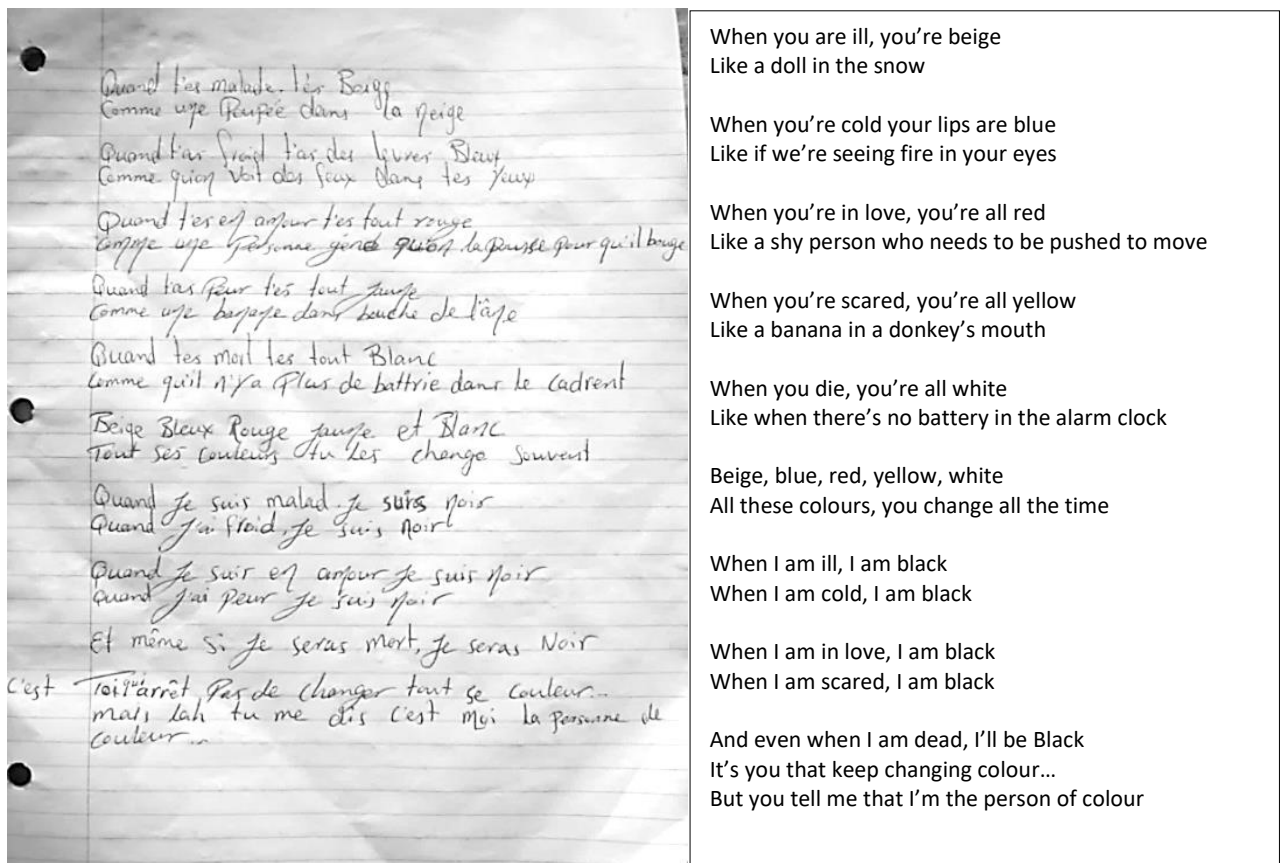

When you are ill, you're beige
Like a doll in the snow

When you're cold your lips are blue
Like if we're seeing fire in your eyes

When you're in love, you're all red
Like a shy person who needs to be pushed to move

When you're scared, you're all yellow
Like a banana in a donkey's mouth

When you die, you're all white
Like when there's no battery in the alarm clock

Beige, blue, red, yellow, white
All these colours, you change all the time

When I am ill, I am black
When I am cold, I am black

When I am in love, I am black
When I am scared, I am black

And even when I am dead, I'll be Black
It's you that keep changing colour…
But you tell me that I'm the person of colour

Figure 4 Rap song about 'people of colour'

Using metaphors and cultural references from Afghanistan, Iran and Québec, these song lyrics are a critique of racism. Unfortunately, the translation provided in Figure 4 does not reflect the

initial aesthetic impact of the piece as the rhymes did not translate well into English. The first half of the poem, using the pronoun 'you', seems almost light-hearted using colourful metaphors such as 'When you're scared, you're all yellow/Like a banana in a donkey's mouth'. In Persian literature, the donkey is generally considered as an impure animal and a 'satirical figure' (Schimmel, 1992, p. 194). This suggests that the donkey's mouth represents an undesirable and shameful place/situation. In the second half of the poem, the tone shifts and the pronoun 'I' is being used. Darya uses the word 'black' in lower case first to refer to the skin colour, but then changes deliberately to 'Black' suggesting a more complex understanding of the term, black as a social construct. It is interesting to note that Darya wrote this song for a friend and not to specifically describe her experience in Canada.

Yet, it seems possible that this song and other texts she had written were channelling some of the frustrations that Darya had experienced, such as being called 'terrorist' by peers at school in Québec. This kind of abuse is unfortunately part of the everyday lives of many young Muslim women, as reported in McArthur and Muhammad (2017). The data suggests that Darya's texts became more critical and socially engaged once she had moved to Canada, and began engaging in a form of 'protest poetry' (Muhammad, 2015).

According to Pahl and Rowsell (2010, p. 9), people 'bring their own ways of being, doing, and feeling—their acquired dispositions—into writing'; what they call 'sedimented identities in texts' (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). Texts retain traces of their author's identity. Darya's rap songs embodied what was important in her life at that time, but also her past experiences and cultural background.

Darya was aware of the unrealistic aspect of her dream of becoming a rap singer. She mentioned the current tensions in Afghanistan as being potential obstacles. Darya also mentioned that returning to Afghanistan might mean that she would be forced into marriage by relatives. These rap lyrics and poems embodied Darya's dreams and made them important

empowering literacy artefacts for her. As in Davies's study (2013), the literacy artefacts produced allowed Darya to try out different identities (i.e. rap singer) that shaped the way she perceived herself (and wanted to be perceived) and in turn influenced her subsequent literacy practices. Gender, race and religion can be clearly seen as intersecting in Darya's experience in school and in her personal writing. In addition to gender and religion, race became a more apparent axis in Darya's writing and identity curation once in Canada.

Le Bercail's response to Darya's literacy and identity curation practices

In this section I present four aspects inferred from my analysis that characterised Le Bercail's response to Darya's literacy and identity curation practices: 1) the activities were grounded in young people's lives and practices, 2) aimed at fostering confidence building and autonomy, 3) were open to multilingualism and multimodality, and 4) focused on the young people's futures.

The activities at *Le Bercail* were drawing on similar literacy practices as those Darya was already engaging with in her private life. As illustrated by the flower pot activity (Figure 3), young people were often asked to search online and find images and quotes that would represent themselves. These practices relate directly to the concepts of 'curation' (Potter, 2012) and 'sedimented identities in texts' (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Rowsell and Pahl, 2007). The vast majority of the activities observed at *Le Bercail* offered the young people opportunities to select topics they were interested in. For example, Darya prepared and delivered a radio spot about the belly dance (*Baladi*). Darya and the other participants were allowed to take ownership of the various activities at *Le Bercail*. The youth workers used these activities as a way of getting an insight into the young people's interests, hobbies, and personal lives. They were therefore also 'positioning [themselves] as learner[s]' (Stewart, 2015, p. 156).

The youth workers at *Le Bercail* were always making sure that the young people had a positive experience with activities involving numeracy and literacy. For example, Tommy regularly helped Darya with mathematics exercises. Tommy and Darya discussed strategies that she could use in order to resolve mathematical problems. The young people were encouraged to keep a budget and to calculate their working hours so that they could become more autonomous, but also develop their numeracy skills. I also witnessed the youth workers supporting Darya when she had to write in front of the group. They would always make sure that she would not be humiliated in front of the others who all had French as their first language. The young people regularly had to work in teams of two on the computer (e.g. to create a poster, search information, write a promotional text). They were generally paired in such a way as to complement each other and foster their learning or confidence with the French language or the software used.

The group activities at *Le Bercail* generally focused on young people's aspirations. For example, Ève-Lyne's activity presented earlier was structured in the following way: allotting three lines for 'Yesterday', six lines for 'Today' and eleven lines for 'Tomorrow'. Many texts written by Darya during her participation in the Mobili-T programme were about her dreams and aspects of herself she wanted to work on (e.g. becoming more tolerant and patient). Despite this overall focus on the future, the young people also had the opportunity to talk about their past, but this tended to be done individually during one-to-one counselling meetings with a youth worker. Such reflective activities seem particularly relevant as young refugee women like Darya might express a need to reflect and embrace their migration journeys (Brigham, Baillie Abidi & Zhang, 2018).

Many activities at *Le Bercail* allowed Darya to write in her native language, Dari, and to share her culture with the others. The youth workers were open to discussing and looking at the young people's vernacular literacy practices including reading and writing in different

languages (see Figure 3). The young people were also encouraged to use different modes (artefacts, writing, image, videos, etc.) in order to express themselves.

A need for more cultural responsiveness

While language and cultural diversity were celebrated by the youth workers at *Le Bercail*, some participants in the Mobili-T project expressed resistance toward Darya's race, religion and culture. These young people made derogatory remarks about Islam, belly dancing, but also the content that Darya had posted online (e.g. 'full of typos' and 'too personal'), and her relationship with her then boyfriend. Previous research had found that sharing personal stories with others could break migrant women's isolation and create a sense of solidarity (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, & Calatayud, 2018; Duckworth & Smith, 2018), but this contrasts with Darya's experience at *Le Bercail* as she did not always feel part of a community where it was safe to share her experiences and literacy practices.

The tensions present in the group rapidly escalated in a series of verbal fights. The youth workers were quick to intervene and met with all the participants on an individual basis in order to moderate the situation. One of the youth workers told me that they had to constantly 'extinguish fires' within that group, meaning that the young people were facing numerous personal crises and were also regularly getting into fights. To the best of my knowledge, the youth workers calmed things down without specifically addressing the remarks made about Darya's culture, religion, and race.

Williams (2005) mentions that educators sometimes feel uncomfortable with the idea of discussing religion with a group of learners. Based on my findings, it seems that religion was central to Darya's identity and shaped her experience of the project, but she could not really discuss this matter with her peers.

The youth workers' response to Darya's literacy and identity curation practices could be considered as culturally responsive to some degree. According to Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest Ettekal and Okamoto (2017, p. 13) cultural responsiveness takes into consideration 'the multiplicity and fluidity of cultural practices, beliefs, and knowledge, and conveys a dynamic, synergistic relationship between the provider (in this case, organized activities) and adolescent participants'. The facts that most activities were participant-led and that the youth workers encouraged Darya to share her culture with the others (e.g. write in Dari or research belly dancing) indicate the presence of cultural responsiveness. Yet, they did not always fully address the culture-related incidents mentioned above. Gutiérrez, Larson, Raffaelli, Fernandez and Guzman (2017) explain that thoroughly discussing issues related to culture and race could help young people to understand social injustice and develop resources to act against it in a more empowering manner.

With the recent influx of refugees across Western Countries, and into Europe in particular, educators and teachers are now facing considerable challenges that are sometimes exacerbated by a lack of resources or training (Guo, 2015). Training about cultural responsiveness should be made available for practitioners working in a wide range of youth organisations (Richmond, Braughton, and Bordern, 2018). Such training should emphasise the intersectionality of young people's experience, including their literacy practices.

Conclusion

The findings illustrate how exploring the intersections between gender, race, and religion is a fruitful lens to adopt in order to understand young refugee women's literacy and identity curation practices.

Darya's personal writing practices were a window into her migration experience, religious beliefs, gender identity, frustrations, and past. Writing was an important part of Darya's life,

but not in relation to academic achievement. She would use personal writing to engage in protest and therapeutic writing practices while facing personal difficulties (e.g. bullying at school). The findings support Rowsell and Pahl's (2007) concept of sedimented identity in writing and the usefulness of a sociocultural and intersectional perspective on literacy.

The results indicate that Darya learned considerably at *Le Bercail* because the organisation generally took her personal history and culture into account. Reading and writing were highly emotional activities for her. The data suggest that *Le Bercail* endeavoured to provide a positive space not just for literacy learning but also for important identity work (e.g. through curation). The small size of the group allowed the youth workers to get to know them all personally. They learned all about their previous experiences at school and personal difficulties.

Taking into consideration the sociocultural and intersectional aspects of literacy can help practitioners to adapt their activities sensibly to learners' needs, the data suggest. Brigham, Baillie Abidi and Zhang (2018, p. 18) argue that by:

> analysing […] women's stories, adult educators can benefit from understanding how trans-migrant learners' gender identities shift, how they negotiate complex social spaces, how they experience the gendered dimensions of learning, and the ways in which learning in all modes can be further enhanced and supported for migrant and refugee women and their communities.

In Darya's case, expressing her emotions in her native language and feeling that the youth workers were interested in her culture seemed important to her. The youth workers were particularly effective in supporting Darya in acquiring literacy, numeracy and ICT skills because they took her life, emotions, interests, and personal history into consideration.

The findings of this study are relevant to the present moment, considering the fact that so many unaccompanied young people have fled war zones and moved to Western countries over the last few years. Educational provision for young refugee women should focus on more than

skills development. Young refugee women should be able to increase their skills, but in a context that recognises the profoundly intersectional nature of their emotions, identity, and literacy learning and practices. Youth workers should be supported and offered training to ensure the cultural responsiveness of their intervention with young refugees. Educators and youth workers who feel comfortable addressing culture-related incidents will not only facilitate the integration of young refugee women and men but also, through discussing these social justice related issues, support the empowerment of all young people involved.

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