

# Governing Sponsorship in a Literacy Support Program for Resettled Refugee Students

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*This essay proposes that a “governmentality” framework applied to literacy sponsorship in refugee communities can help identify and critique competing agendas of control. By drawing on interview transcripts collected from an after-school program for refugee youth, the essay offers a glimpse of the different perspectives that shape tutor and aid worker discourse. Some of these discourses deceptively appear to be more “acceptable” than others, while sponsors can seem to be limited in their range of rhetorical strategies for talking about their work with refugee students. Michel Foucault’s (1991a) theory of governmentality shows how such discourses do not necessarily emanate from sponsors themselves, as if they are a central location of authority, but from power relations that are diffuse and contradictory. By examining these relations, a governmentality framework can help teacher-scholars in the community identify alternative discourses to those that shape the sponsor-sponsored paradigm.*

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## “I WANTED A CHALLENGE”: THE WILL TO SPONSOR

**W**hen I began this project at an after-school program for refugee youth from the African

continent, I was what Deborah Brandt (2001) has called a “sponsor of literacy,” both as a volunteer tutor, supporting refugee students’ literacy practices, and as a researcher, talking and writing *about* literacy in a refugee community. The students who attended the program were resettled from Somalia, Eritrea, Ghana, Sudan, and South Africa. The tutors were mostly work-study and service-learning students from neighboring universities. In the interviews, I asked the tutors why they chose this program in particular. Mary replied, “I wanted a challenge and something that would be inspirational to me because some of these kids come from backgrounds that you wouldn’t believe. When they were in Africa, they were almost killed with bows and arrows and stuff like that.” The troubling phrase “bows and arrows” recalls a colonial discourse of power that casts “Africa” as a homogeneous, pre-modern, and violent place. Though perhaps less overtly troubling, Mary’s use of the word “challenge” reflects a *neo*-colonial rhetoric that casts the refugee student as a problem and the sponsor as a solution.

Such statements point to the central problem of this essay: When discourses of power remain unquestioned, sponsorship projects that aim to empower vulnerable populations are in danger of not serving those populations as well as intended because the discourse of empowerment itself masks Other(ing) objectives. It is important to ask not only how discourses of power are reproduced, but how they remain the norm, and how they persist even within a progressive organization. Where did they come from? How did sponsors, like the tutors, aid workers, and volunteers in this program, reproduce and circulate such discourses of power? Foucault’s (1991a) conceptualization of “governmentality” examines how discourses of power do not originate from a central, fixed authority—like an individual sponsor, for example—but from a wide array of competing agents, both individual and collective, both private and institutional. Brandt’s (1998) theory of sponsorship also goes beyond individuals to institutions, and the two theories appear to complement one another, both emphasizing *practice* with sponsorship focusing on “economies of literacy” (168) and governmentality examining practices of government and self.

But governmentality can also reveal a different side to the literacy sponsorship paradigm. While Brandt describes literacy as a “commodity” (169), thereby arguing for its inclusion within a framework of “differential economies” (172), governmentality describes the marketization of social life itself, of governance, behavior, culture, discourse, and literacy (Brown 2015, 62). This framework is helpful for seeing the borders—which are perhaps porous—of the given rhetorical situations produced by literacy sponsorship projects in refugee communities.

As I continued working with this refugee resettlement organization, I did not see a given tutor or volunteer as solely responsible for reproducing these discourses. They were instead partially responsible agents within a larger economy of “literacy development” (Brandt 1998, 168). Literacy projects in refugee communities are governed by multiple parties and interests, what Foucault (2007) would call the “ensemble” (108), or the coming together of agendas and practices for the purposes of managing people. To put it simply here at the start, governmentality can be thought of as a framework for analyzing the *governing mentalities* that organize people and shape discursive practice. Scholars have often interpreted governmentality as “the conduct of conduct” (Brown 2015, 117; Rose 1999, 3). And, as Wendy Brown (2015) has observed, governmentality identifies a specifically neoliberal mentality, a “normative mode of reason” that “signifies specific principles, metrics, and modes of conduct, including endeavors where monetary profit and wealth are not at issue” (62). Competition, accumulation, self-improvement, and accountability are some of the strongest messages coopted and circulated via neoliberal governmentality. Even in the nonprofit and humanitarian sectors, the language of the market shapes interactions through discourses of statistics, risk, investment, growth, success, outcomes, and “best practices” (131).

In addition to refugee communities, stakeholders invested in the project of refugee resettlement include actors like the United Nations and its various humanitarian agencies, like the UNHCR and UNICEF. These groups offer guidance and resources and are responsible for drafting international law. Then there are the nation states that interpret the law and provide the mechanisms for

granting asylum and resettling refugees. Interpretations can vary wildly and are often based on political rather than humanitarian rationale (Nyers 2006). Operating in and around the nation state are various non-governmental organizations (both for- and not-for profit). Two of the most visible are The Red Cross and Save the Children Foundation, but many local organizations also play a role in governing refugee groups, especially in advocating for protections at borders and camps. In the United States, many local programs and individual sponsors provide support to refugees after they have been resettled. These include case managers, church groups, community volunteers, immigration lawyers, and health and education specialists. Refugees' lives are also greatly affected by political campaigns, the press, and public opinion.

Ideas about literacy sponsorship encompass many perspectives, but this essay narrowly focuses on just one after-school program. It points to the potential for broader studies of governmentality in literacy sponsorship across what refugee studies scholars call the "international refugee regime" (Lui 2004). My purpose here is not to propose a set of best practices for working with refugee students, but rather to offer a specific critique of how literacy sponsorship relations can reproduce certain kinds of governing mentalities. I treat transcripts of interviews with sponsors as textual artifacts that provide representations of discourse that governs sponsors' encounters with refugee students. In what follows, I first theorize the relationship between governmentality and sponsorship, including its potential relevance for service-learning projects. Then, the methods section explains how interviews were collected and analyzed. Specific excerpts of sponsor discourse are then discussed according to the general themes I saw in the interview texts. The essay concludes with a rationale for why a governmentality framework can generate important critiques of the literacy sponsorship paradigm, particularly in the realm of refugee resettlement.

## **GOVERNMENTALITY AND LITERACY SPONSORSHIP**

An increasing body of research on education in resettled refugee communities has focused on the specific literacy practices of refugee students (Perry 2008; Bigelow 2010; Shapiro 2014). Some have examined issues of representation alongside those practices, arguing

for more inclusion of student voices (Duffy 2007; Shapiro 2014; MacDonald 2015). My essay adds to these ongoing conversations by specifically examining the discourses sponsors use to describe their work *as sponsors*. Sponsor discourse can have a privileged status within these settings as a location of authority or power, and yet can go unnoticed because the target of sponsorship is often the “refugee problem” (Lui 2004, 116). The focus can often be on diagnosis and the resulting best practices for helping refugee students.

Theories of governmentality have proven useful for examining education in global contexts (for instance, see the volume *Refugees, Immigrants, and Education in the Global South: Lives in Motion*, Bartlett and Ghaffar-Kucher, 2013). In his treatment of governmentality, Foucault (1991c) emphasizes discourse and its implications for the enactment of power. He is particularly concerned with the “positivity of discourses” and “the systems which regulate their emergence, functioning and transformation,” and treats discourse as “an ensemble of regulated practices” (69). Such systems create the conditions for certain kinds of statements about the sponsorship of refugees to be possible in a specific place at a particular moment in time.

Literacy sponsorship itself is a relation of power that can be obscured by the desire for normative diagnoses and outcomes. As Brandt (2001) has contended, sponsorship is not merely a matter of fostering agency through reading and writing. It also involves the recruitment, regulation, suppression, and withholding of literacy (19). This definition compellingly parallels Foucault’s (2007) description of governmentality as an “ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, and tactics that allow the exercise” of power (108). Both concepts point to asymmetrical relations that link individuals and institutions. These ideas also imply that power is heterogeneous in form and not necessarily absolute in its exploitation. Analyzing sponsorship discourse can help sponsors better understand the implicit agendas being set for refugee communities.

Since Brandt, scholars have added terms that augment or supplement the idea of sponsorship. For instance, some have spent time considering the positions of the sponsored and how sponsorship should be thought of as a dialogic relationship (Cushman 2014;

MacDonald 2015). Alanna Frost (2011) reimagines sponsorship as a form of “stewardship” that protects indigenous literacy practices, and Kara Poe Alexander (2017) examines the concept of “reciprocity” in relation to service learning. These conceptualizations rearticulate sponsorship’s multifaceted nature, a plurality that can be illuminated through a governmentality framework. Katie Vieira (2016) observes how an emphasis on “the economic and material aspects of literacy” is important to consider, but at the same time, literacy is an important part of people’s “relational and emotional lives” (426). It is in this respect that governmentality can provide a lens for critiquing the sponsor-sponsored paradigm as it shapes and is shaped by governing mentalities.

Power, from a governmentality perspective, is a facet of border “security” (Kelly 2011, 3), as well as the broader ensemble of practices implemented by institutions and rationalized by individuals. Governmentality is as much about nation-state governance as it is about reflections on self-government, or as Colin Gordon (1991) puts it, what it means “to be governed or governable” (31). For literacy sponsorship in particular, governmentality involves “the formation of individuals as moral and economic subjects” who “do the work of nation building” through reading and writing (Kelly 2011, 2). Likewise, the promise of the “literacy myth” (Graff 1979) has perpetuated the assumption that literacy naturally increases access to resources and markets. But, as Anne-Marie Hall (2015) observes, “Literacy education is always a political struggle” even if “its work is presumably to create more egalitarian relations” (80). If a primary goal of literacy sponsorship is empowerment, then it bears considering Barbara Cruikshank’s (1999) important observation that “empowerment is a power relationship, a relationship of government; it can be used well or badly” (86). Authority, then, is not necessarily centralized, but rather, in many cases, plural and multifaceted. Refugees can be governed by institutions like state agencies and schools, but they can also be governed by individual literacy sponsors.

The governmentality framework is not without its critics, some methodological, some practical. For instance, Giorgio Agamben has questioned Foucault’s treatment of history and the origins of modern governmentality. Marxist scholars often argue that

Foucault's emphasis on discourse pays too little attention to material realities. More relevant to this essay, Derek Kerr (1999) argues that Foucault's conceptualization of governmentality produces a "top-down" view of neoliberalism "that is devoid of any notion of contradiction, antagonism or resistance" (193). At the same time, this specific issue has since been taken up by several postcolonial feminist theorists like Inderpal Grewal (2005) and Aihwa Ong (2006) who use a governmentality lens to identify moments of contradiction as possible points of resistance. They observe, as Foucault did, that power is not wholly uniform; its deployment is uneven and can produce contradiction (MacLeod and Durrheim 2002). By applying governmentality to specific examinations of citizenship, human rights, and forced migration, postcolonial feminist theorists highlight the usefulness of a governmentality framework.

In the realm of refugee resettlement, state institutions and non-governmental organizations often work alongside one another to deliver services. This relationship has resulted in a revision of state responsibility. As Ong (2006) observes, the "globally excluded" (23), such as the forcibly displaced, "have [had] to look beyond the state for the safeguarding of their rights" (19). For instance, refugees have a right to education and many NGOs, including private companies like Pearson, have tried to deliver education to refugee children (Pearson 2017). A governmentality framework can help contextualize these kinds of power relations, showing how state and non-state actors alike operate according to similar neoliberal rationalities (Lui 2004; Grewal 2005; Ong 2006).

University-community partnerships might also fall into this category, especially given that such efforts are often done on an ad-hoc basis, without official federal or state support. In many cases, this partnership includes academic service-learning projects, with which many readers of *Reflections* are familiar. Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters (1997), for instance, have observed how service-learning projects often attempt to address "divides" between a campus and a surrounding community. This divide can generate a "fear" of the community among students, as well as a "resentment toward a college community that seems to have no investment in community interests" (5). Service-learning projects can risk perpetuating this

divide, especially because, as William DeGenaro (2010) points out, teachers and students “bring ideological beliefs to the classrooms and the community sites where service learning happens” (197). Much of this essay will discuss the kinds of ideologies communicated in sponsor discourse, especially given that three of the participants were engaged in some kind of university-community service.

The discourses that govern sponsorship in refugee communities are, in part, shaped by perceptions of the places from which refugees are resettled. Many begin with the belief that economic, political, and cultural development in “Africa” can be easily generalized as lacking, behind, or deficient (Lui 2004; Ferguson 2007). The term “refugee” itself suffers from a range of discriminatory, binary constructions: Victim/savage (Powell 2012, 302), suspicious/silent (Malkki 1996, 384), and fearsome/invisible (Zembylas 2010, 34) are just some of the discourses of power that regularly circulate. Sponsorship is also vexed by presumptions about refugee students’ perceived lack of formal education (Duffy 2007; Bigelow 2010; Shapiro 2014).

For this essay, I have drawn primarily from interviews of aid workers and tutors in the previously mentioned after-school program. I also drew from student interviews that I conducted for an article published in *Community Literacy Journal* in 2017. Interview excerpts are treated as artifacts that illustrate some of the governing mentalities operating within the sponsorship of refugee communities. These texts were read through the lens of governmentality and prompted the following questions:

- What “authority” (Rose 1999, 52) appears to govern sponsorship in refugee communities?
- What discourses are made possible in this context?
- How might the questioning of these discourses prompt critique of the sponsorship paradigm?

According to Foucault (1991b), such discourses circulate because they are seen as “acceptable” at a given place and time (75). In this case, discourses about refugee students being a “challenge” or an “inspiration,” discourses about hard work and individual responsibility, and discourses that generalized the idea of Africa were more easily



“translated and shared” than others (Malkki 1996, 386). A greater awareness and deeper understanding of these discourses might point sponsors to a kind of critical reflection that makes representations of refugees more deliberate.

## METHODS AND REFLECTIONS

The interview excerpts in this essay are drawn from a larger project that took place in a refugee resettlement agency in Wisconsin, the mission of which is to serve refugee groups specifically from the African continent. My research was in the agency’s after-school program for K-12 students. In total, I interviewed nine participants: three aid workers, three tutors, and three students. Although my purpose here is to reflect on *sponsor* discourse, it is worth noting that student interviews were compelling for the kinds of postcolonial knowledges the subjects developed during the resettlement process. When appropriate, student excerpts have been included alongside sponsor discourses to illustrate the complexities of the themes addressed below. I believe, however, that it is important to focus on sponsor discourse in order to examine the kinds of governing mentalities expressed by figures of relative authority in this literacy sponsorship project.

The aid workers I interviewed—Nikki, John, and Adam—had important knowledge about refugee resettlement and could describe how the mission of the agency informed the everyday work of the after-school program. Before joining the organization, Nikki and John had participated in a citywide non-profit internship that trained participants in self-reflective community practice. Adam had been a refugee himself and taught science and English at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya.

The tutors—Mary, Lisa, and Sara—came to the program from different contexts and for different purposes. Mary and Lisa were work-study students from the local public research university and were paid by the university to engage in community service. They were the only tutors I had contact with who stayed in the after-school program for more than one semester. Sara was a community volunteer who had previous teaching experience in Ghana and was applying for master’s programs in global studies.

Qualitative coding was part of the larger study and the analysis of interview transcripts, but I must acknowledge that this method can be somewhat incommensurate with a framework inspired by Foucault's ideas. Coding can lend validity and authority to a subject's voice because codes are supposed to emerge from the data itself (Charmaz 2000). However, because governmentality is mostly concerned with the conditions that make discourses of power possible, I needed to avoid locating authority within subjects' voices and treat interview transcripts *as texts*, separated from participant subjectivities. In order to show relations between discourses, I used a qualitative data analysis program (QDA) to examine "code co-occurrence," a method useful for exploring relationships and hierarchies between codes (Gobo 2008, 253). QDAs, though, have been critiqued because their ease of use "can distance researchers from their fieldwork" (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 638). Code co-occurrence can counteract that distance by directing the researcher back to the text of collected data (Kelle 2007). So, interview transcripts have been useful artifacts in this case because, as Jayne Bye (2015), who also employs a governmentality framework, has concluded, "Participant accounts may provide instances in language of particular types of ethical work on the self, consistent with governing agendas or they may reveal something else, including moments of resistance" (401). Likewise, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) have used interviews to demonstrate how a Foucauldian analysis regards subjects and subjectivity as "unstable," as effects of power rather than as central authorities (52).

Particularly relevant to composition, rhetoric, and literacy scholars, Nicolas Rose (1999) has noted how a governmentality approach is intended to promote an "ethos of inquiry" and ask "questions that trouble" accepted truths (5). It is meant to "disturb" (57). In this way, Foucault's perspective could be said to reflect the teacher-scholar's "need or desire to render the familiar strange" (Sullivan 1996, 99). Composition, literacy, and education researchers continue to question previously "accepted" best practices, and it is in this tradition that this essay is framed.

Another guiding principle that has informed my methodology has been my ongoing understanding of the ethics of representation, particularly as described by Trinh T. Minh-ha (2004) in her

exploration of researcher self-reflexivity. Trinh has argued that reflection is productive only when it goes “beyond” the self and examines the self in relation to “established forms,” norms, and dominant discourse (235). As a sponsor of literacy, I keep returning to Trinh’s ideas with respect to my own positionality as a white, American, monolingual (I’m embarrassed to admit), academic, cis-gendered man, who was also a first-generation college student from a small town, working-class family. Governmentality supports Trinh’s argument about reflecting “beyond” the self in the way both perspectives work to understand how certain discourses are made possible in a given context.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 represents the codes that recurred or repeated most often in this project. Overall, nineteen different codes were identified in the interview transcripts. They were applied to excerpts 200 times. Code co-occurrence was used to narrow these results and show a strength of reliability between excerpts.

*Table 1: Codes and Excerpts*

Theme	Code	Excerpt
“Acceptable” Discourse	Culture (38)	“... but it’s hard for me to comment on specific cultural things because they are so different.” (Sara, Tutor)
	Learning Context (17)	“...the biggest thing was the structure of the school system there, or the lack of structure.” (Sara, Tutor)
	Tutoring (16)	“It’s harder for them than I would think it would be, but that’s just because I don’t have their perspective on that.” (Lisa, Tutor)
	Professional Development (12)	“I did a lot of reading. I was reading a book on trauma [and] working with students with trauma” (John, Aid Worker)

Contradictory Discourse	Culture (35)	“Reducing the accent is kind of like telling someone to stop being who they are.” (John, Aid Worker)
	Tutoring (25)	“...there’s a lot to learn from these students.” (Nikki, Aid Worker)
	Professional Development (19)	“I did a lot of reading. I was reading a book on trauma [and] working with students with trauma” (John, Aid Worker)
	Learning Context (19)	“ESL classes take away from them being able to participate in the regular classes.” (Nikki, Aid Worker)

The themes of *acceptability* and *contradiction* came about because I kept wondering why some statements persisted in being repeated and “accepted,” even while other statements might be more critical or reflective. John’s statement about “trauma,” for instance, seemed to reflect both categories because the idea of “trauma” can cast students as difficult to work with. At the same time, John was taking it upon himself to learn more about the contexts from which the students were resettled.

In Foucault’s (1991b) terms, an examination of discourses that appear to be “acceptable at a given moment” means the “target of analysis” is more about analyzing discursive practices, or a “regime of practices,” than, say, specifically looking at “institutions,” “theories,” or “ideology” (75). In this case, the discourses that sponsors used to describe their work with refugee students shed light on practices that, like English teaching on a global scale, tend to position sponsors as donors and students as recipients (see Phillipson 1992, 12). For instance, it was “acceptable” to sponsors to have opinions about the perceived “lack of structure” in the places from which refugees are resettled—opinions that only reflect dominant First/Third World narratives. It was also “acceptable” to describe students as both a “challenge” and an “inspiration,” a common refrain when education is linked to empowerment. These discourses represent practices that sometimes cast the student as a problem to be diagnosed. Such

diagnoses involve a kind of labor that might make sponsors feel like they have done “good” in the community. According to Cruikshank (1999), one characteristic of this kind of “empowerment” is that it “is typically initiated by one party seeking to empower another” and “it is dependent upon knowledge of those to be empowered” (72). A diagnosis of problems (like educational background, trauma, etc.) and a subsequent prescription of so-called best practices rely on and produce certain forms of knowledge about refugee students. It is this knowledge that helps guide what discourses are “acceptable” or not.

Contradictions include discursive formations about sponsorship and empowerment that, on the one hand, reproduce various ethnocentric biases, and on the other, question those same problematic perspectives. In this way, sponsors, might speak on behalf of state-sanctioned resources, but can also inhabit contradictory positions between government and community. Whether they are aid workers who manage case files or tutors who do one-on-one literacy work, they at least partially represent governmental agendas. At the same time, several of the aid workers I met had been refugees themselves, while some of the tutors, like Lisa, told me that as a woman of color, it mattered to her “that people from Africa get adjusted to American life and have every opportunity to succeed.” Likewise, two of the aid workers (John and Nikki) had been trained specifically in race relations and urban education. Sponsors can at once speak for the state *and* for the community, a diffusion of power that helps show why some governing discourses can be both seen as “acceptable” and challenged through different forms of activism and cross-cultural communication. That is, the discourses sponsors use can reaffirm certain discourses as well as provide alternative perspectives to the powers of governmentality, and in turn, create spaces of resistance.

Awareness of contradiction can signal the possibility of resistance (MacLeod and Durrheim 2002; Grewal 2005; Ong 2006). And, as Ong (2006) argues, contradiction can foster “unexpected possibilities and resolutions” for the problematic dominance of governmental power (17). Contradictions can help identify and possibly challenge the discourses that are taken for granted as “acceptable.” For example, participants often acknowledged that “African culture” could not be generalized, which reflected an important multicultural perspective.

At the same time, education in the same contexts was often overgeneralized. In this way, the contradiction allowed me to see how sponsors might simultaneously reproduce and question discourses of power. Working toward a critical awareness of contradiction can open up opportunities for sponsor self-reflection and the consideration of alternative viewpoints that would run contrary to a unidirectional model of sponsorship.

*“But, that’s one of the biggest differences”: Acceptable Discourses Governing Sponsorship*

In two of the excerpts in Table 1, tutors indicate that working with refugee students is “hard.” Sara, for instance, found it difficult to talk about her work with the students because their experiences were so “different” from her own. Lisa emphasized that students struggled with learning and that it was “harder for them” because of their backgrounds and circumstances. These statements speak to neoliberal discourses that construct the refugee figure as an object of aid who is Othered by perceived differences (Malkki 1996). As Kaia Simon (2017) observes, refugees are often depicted through “reductive assumptions” that can limit their “access to public resources of literacy” (1-2). Perhaps such resources could include relationships with the sponsors themselves. In that way, assumptions about a student’s ability or background could emphasize a perceived distance that limits the act of sponsorship.

Assumptions about students’ educational backgrounds are undoubtedly wrapped up in perceptions of the places from which they are resettled. In this case, tutors like Mary expressed a degree of cultural awareness when she commented on other people’s assumptions: “I think people get the misperception that Africa is third world country, that they don’t have enough food.” At the same time, Mary often constructed students as a challenge to work with and made assumptions about their backgrounds. I also remember observing one student-tutor exchange in which the tutor was helping with an activity and said, “You’re from Africa, so you can write that down about yourself,” and the student replied, “I’m not from Africa, I’m from *Eritrea*.” Occasionally, descriptions of Africa as a violent, homogeneous place were expressed openly, such as in the

introductory excerpt above where Mary uses the phrase “bows and arrows.”

Sometimes these “acceptable” types of discourses were subtler, especially in regard to the topics of culture and education, like when Sara told me about her experience as a teacher in Ghana. She had gone there just after she finished college and emphasized in her interview how difficult the teaching conditions were:

It was my first experience and the biggest thing was the structure of the school system, or the lack of structure, from what I’m used to with the education system here in the States ... I was just put in front of a classroom of forty students, high-schoolers, so it was very difficult, but that’s one of the biggest differences about learning here and learning in a lot of developing countries that maybe a lot of refugees come from.

The comparison made in this excerpt reflects a familiar assessment of education in Africa and implies a comparison to education in the United States. These kinds of comparisons constitute a common discourse of currency within the “refugee regime” because they are an effect of the neocolonial relationship. As Robyn Lui (2004) observes, discourses of development reflect an “assemblage of thought” that constructs a “primitive to advanced” global narrative, entrenching the idea that there is a progress gap between “the ‘developed’ First World and the ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped’ Third World” (128). According to a governmentality perspective, Sara’s statements do not overtly endorse this neocolonial relationship, nor are they necessarily inaccurate, as inequality is a colonial legacy. To me, it is the move to make *the comparison* between these geographic locations without attention to such legacies or relationships that is the “acceptable” discourse in this instance.

For instance, when I asked Sara about her previous knowledge of Africa, she wavered between acknowledging the complexity of culture and making generalizations about development:

It’s so hard because I think people generalize when they just say

“Africa,” but there are so many different cultures within Africa. There’s Western Africa, French West Africa, and I would like to say that I know and understand the communities that these refugees come from, but the truth is that I don’t. I’m sure it was very different from where I was, but there are similarities, like the lack of infrastructure that you would find in other developing countries, but it’s hard for me to comment on specific cultural things because they are so different.

Excerpts like this one (and Mary’s above) were difficult to categorize. I see some moves toward complexity, but at the same time, ideas of development and culture are approached with different sets of knowledge. This was one of the first contradictions to stand out to me during this project. Yet, upon rereading the interview transcripts, I can see how both kinds of knowledge seem to be “acceptable” currencies in this context. The larger narrative of development allows for generalizations about educational infrastructure, while liberal multiculturalism allows for the questioning stance toward generalization. Attention to the larger contexts of postcolonialism could help this sponsor identify the contradiction in her statements and would give her a greater awareness of the students’ backgrounds. It is perhaps unfair to expect tutors and volunteers to have studied postcolonial theory, but it points toward ways in which sponsors could develop awareness of contradiction.

The statements in the second excerpt seem to trend back toward generalization, like when Sara interrupts herself and states, “but there are similarities.” In this way, development and culture appear to work toward the same effect of power: to make comparisons between the First World and Third World that are ahistorical and acontextual. Often, such comparisons forget the reality of historical and local contexts. For example, even as this interview took place, teachers across Wisconsin marched on the state’s capital to protest their working conditions. Having upwards of forty students in a class was not unheard of as cuts to schools increased and workers’ rights were stripped. Sara’s excerpt could easily have described many U.S. classrooms. Perhaps pointing sponsors toward these moments of comparison could generate opportunities for reflection on what



authorities are being taken for granted, generating possibilities for alternative discourses of sponsorship.

Similarly, a focus on the struggles of refugee students, while well-intentioned, can produce a “deficit discourse” that appears to ascribe authority to those who sponsor rather than to those being sponsored (Shapiro and MacDonald 2017). Lisa—who said she could relate to the students because she, too, had moved from another country to the United States and understood the pains of acculturation—pointed to some of the problems the students faced. She emphasized a “language barrier” and felt that to be a successful tutor she needed to “simplify” concepts for students: “down to what you think would be probably a level that’s too small, but it actually is probably just the right level because they don’t speak English, naturally, so just simplify as low of a level as you can and still get the meaning across.” I am not criticizing Lisa’s tutoring strategy. Instead, I want to point to a general role of the sponsor to diagnose. This tendency becomes more problematic when Lisa comments on the high school students:

Well, sometimes especially with some of the older ones, I feel like they just have given up in some cases, that they don’t want to try. They’re just done, and not for the day, they’re just done, and they want you to more so do their homework for them than try and learn it for themselves. And, I was never like that, and my little sisters were never like that. They always really wanted to do it just for themselves.

Here, Lisa acknowledges students’ struggles and makes a more serious claim about motivation: “They’re just done.” The claim is coupled with a comparison: “I was never like that.” Lisa was one of the tutors who returned semester after semester, and as mentioned above, she felt politically motivated to work with this organization in particular. In my view, Lisa was an excellent tutor. She not only tries to identify with the students, she implicitly makes an important observation about the struggles of the tutors, that tutoring was sometimes difficult because students could be overwhelmed. Like Sara above, Lisa makes an important observation about students’ lived realities, but also like Sara, she then makes a comparison between the

students, her sisters, and herself. It is the move to compare that is the “acceptable” discursive practice in these responses.

Though some student statements could contradict sponsor discourse, others could be interpreted as supporting a neoliberal agenda, particularly in the connection students made between personal successes and learning English. For example, students said things like, “English is important. Because most of the jobs, they want someone that speaks English well,” and “English is a language for communication. That’s how important English is. It’s very important because most people are speaking English in business.” These sentiments may be accurate, but they also reflect the larger, unquestioning discourse that treats English as a language of opportunity. At other times during the interviews, however, students would identify English as a barrier to feeling “accepted” or comfortable in their surroundings, not just in the United States, but in the refugee camps as well (MacDonald 2017).

The interview situation itself could be responsible for generating this kind of asymmetrical expression of authority, since I was asking them about their own experiences. But, in a way, the interview was also a conversation between two sponsors (the participant and me), so I wonder how sponsors in these contexts would describe their work to others in their lives—to family, co-workers, other students—because those situations would be vehicles for circulating representations of refugee students to a wider audience. It is as if the “accepted” discourses here—in particular, comparisons made without important historical context—are the available means of persuasion in this rhetorical situation, and sponsors must work within those constraints.

*“One thing that stuck with me was how hard they all worked”:  
Contradictory Governing Discourses*

Discourses of power are not absolute, however. Though many excerpts of sponsor discourse confirmed “accepted” discourses in the regime of refugee sponsorship, other excerpts contradicted and sometimes challenged those governing mentalities. It is important to note that the authority of the aid workers was quite different from the tutors and volunteers. Aid workers were like liaisons; they were

the link between the mission of the organization and the day-to-day workings of the after-school program. For instance, according to the mission statement of the after-school program, the organization seeks “To provide academic support for African immigrant and refugee children and to help them refine their social skills while providing them with guidance in social integration without compromising their own values.” Education is considered a means for helping students integrate into American culture, but this mission statement also makes a point of helping students maintain a sense of their own cultural identity.

Parents’ perception of their children’s accents was tricky terrain for aid workers to navigate during the integration process. Several times, John, who directed the after-school program during the time of this project, talked about parents who asked him to help their children improve their American accents. He said, “That’s kind of difficult to discourage or say that a person from another language, that their accent in speaking that language would be wrong.” John knew that pronunciation was something that might help students integrate, but he also knew that students still might not feel “accepted” regardless of accent and then might lose a connection to their own identity. As he put it, “Reducing the accent is kind of like telling someone to stop being who they are.” This consideration of identity reflects at least one kind of sensitivity the organization wanted to see in its sponsors. John’s ambiguity is an effect of the power relation between sponsors and sponsored in that he felt he had to balance linguistic integration with identity preservation. The governing mentality that accent is connected to integration and assimilation creates a binary between identity and linguistic performance that then reinforces relations of power between language users. John’s hesitance implies a challenge to that binary.

Identity questions in the after-school program were made more rich and vibrant due to the incredible number of languages spoken there. Students often boasted of knowing four, five, six languages, including Mai Mai, a language the Somali Bantu students were particularly proud to know and use (MacDonald 2017). As one student said, “When I came to Kenya, people started speaking Mai Mai, so I picked it up from there and started speaking Mai Mai because it is my language.”

Students often did writing outside of school, too, and valued English in those contexts, not just as “the language of communication” but also as a language of self-expression. One student told me, “I like to write poems and songs. Those are two things I like to write. You put your thoughts into the writing and when I write songs, I put my thoughts into it, you know? I write in English and Mai Mai, my language. I write in those two languages.” Sometimes, the governing mentalities attached to English as a language of necessity and opportunity ignore or forget the lived realities of language users (see Canagarajah 1999).

Aid workers also combined neoliberal currencies of empowerment and critical discourses of sponsorship. One of the most striking ways these contradictory discourses were used was in descriptions of students’ work ethic. If refugee students are sometimes described as a “challenge”—perhaps because of histories of trauma or a perceived lack of formal education (Bigelow 2010; Shapiro 2014, 395)—then in response, aid workers made a point to emphasize work ethic, determination, and an overall desire for education that at times could be contradictory. In some ways, these values have been co-opted by neoliberal governmentality. In other ways, these values also articulate an important inroad to agency for the students. For example, John said:

One thing that stuck with me was how hard they all worked. I respected the work ethic. I couldn’t imagine doing it. I think I work hard, but I couldn’t imagine doing it to the extent that they do ... That’s where I think something that’s lost in immigration discussions is the amount of sacrifice people make just to do well here or just to be here and that it’s not always good for them.

This message appears to resist *some* neoliberal discourses, while simultaneously reproducing others. An emphasis on work ethic troubles discourses of currency that construct refugees as a “challenge.” John also reminds sponsors that the struggle of displacement does not end with resettlement. At the same time, work ethic discourse draws on bootstrap narratives of meritocracy. As Lui (2004) argues, sponsorship programs can involve “the establishment of those negative and positive conditions that ‘empower’ refugees to

cultivate the self-governing attributes of citizenship, that is, autonomy and self-responsibility” (124). It was John’s insistence on this point that made me categorize “work ethic” as more of a contradiction than an unreflective “acceptable” discourse. His statements appeared to challenge “accepted” discourses, even while reproducing a somewhat neoliberal sentiment.

Adam, a case manager who had previously identified as a refugee and was a school teacher at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, expressed a similar message about work ethic. He explained how in the refugee camp, there were “so many dynamic students” who were excited about learning despite the extreme living conditions. He acknowledged the well-known lack of teaching materials, but also talked about how the heat and dust could affect a student’s ability to concentrate. Yet, he praised the work of students and teachers:

The education standard is very good because in the camp the students need to work hard and because of the low payment, teachers would work for their own satisfaction. I always did it for my own satisfaction. There were some students who would come and wake me up to go and teach because of their interest and their curiosity.

Educational practices in African refugee camps are often described as obstacles to success in American schools (MacDonald 2015). Descriptions of students’ educational histories likewise rely on a “deficit discourse” that overdetermines a student’s lack of contact with learning opportunities (Shapiro 2014, 397). This positions U.S. brands of education as superior to those in the “Third World” (MacDonald 2015). Adam’s statements directly contradict those discourses of currency by observing the work ethic of students and teachers in those settings. Both the above excerpts recognize students’ motivation to participate in and govern their own learning. Within the governmentality of sponsorship, aid workers seemed to see a need to use language that reflected the resources refugees brought with them to their encounters with U.S. education. In this way, discourses that emphasize hard work, sacrifice, and curiosity work to revalue discourses of currency about sponsorship. As sponsors, John and Adam must negotiate a binary construction

of power relations: responding to dominant discourse while reproducing another predominantly “acceptable” discourse. The discursive moments above appear to emphasize self-responsibility. Within a framework of governmentality, such discourses have been economized or imbued with market value in an effort, as Brown notes, to “facilitate economic competition and . . . economize the social” (62). At the same time, these discourses generate possibilities for refugee students to be represented as having agency within the sponsorship paradigm. Agency is an important dimension of refugee resettlement since so much of the struggle for refugees is to shed the image of the victim—the passive object of aid—and be recognized as agents of self-determination.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY SPONSORSHIP IN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES**

The sponsorship framework has been very useful for examining how literacy functions as a “raw material” (Brandt 2001, 171) and a “form of currency” (Prendergast 2008, 6), particularly in the contexts of refugee resettlement. However, the functions and effects of these sponsorship metaphors also show how the material effects of literacy can be extremely uneven, oscillating between critical awareness and neoliberal perspectives. A framework that also engages with the governing discourses surrounding literacy helps identify how, why, and where this unevenness occurs. My essay has provided only a limited view of the governing mentalities of sponsorship, but by highlighting seemingly “acceptable” discourses, I raise questions about sponsorship agendas that might desire to speak on behalf of a vulnerable population’s “best interests.” As Cruikshank (1999) observes, “The assumption that people do not know their own best interests is politically suspect” (86). Inquiries into these governing mentalities carefully ask sponsors to question “the emancipatory impulse” (Bye 2015, 395) of literacy sponsorship. A donor-recipient view of sponsorship reinforces what Trinh (2004) identifies as the “dividing line” between self and Other (215). Instead of placing responsibility on new refugees to hurry up and learn English and integrate, the responsibility might be placed on sponsors to try and understand the struggles of newly resettled refugees and the broader contexts of resettlement.

Normative suggestions for training and pedagogy would work against the flexibility of a governmentality framework. In this way, Brown (2015) argues that discourses of “best practices” should be examined more closely (131). When I have been asked what some of the “best practices” are for working with refugee students, I have never had a good answer. After talking with students, tutors, and aid workers, I have learned that it is not so much the method, but the attitude with which one approaches literacy learning that deserves the most attention (see also Duffy 2007). Nor am I sure if the local context of a refugee community requires a specific set of teaching practices. A discourse of best practices can often rely on a sponsor who seeks to “uplift” the sponsored. But, as Brown has observed, such agendas cast the “individual as the only relevant and wholly accountable actor” (133). As governmentality shows, the discourses of individual actors like aid workers and tutors are part of an *ensemble* of discursive formations that circulate from and through local and global actors. “Acceptable” discourses are easy to reproduce and agendas of resistance struggle to escape ensembles of authority, but identifying contradictions can help point toward possibilities for doing so. Thus, the cultivation of a self-critical attitude toward literacy learning would be a necessary means of identifying and making use of such contradiction.

A governing discourse of best practices also implies that students must be changed by acts of sponsorship while teachers and tutors only need to use the correct method of instruction without changing something fundamental about themselves—ourselves, really. This could very well be considered a colonizing perspective (for example, see Bawarshi and Pelkowski 1999). At the same time, sponsors interviewed in this project stated that they needed a great deal more support themselves. Aid workers often wished that they had better relationships with teachers. Nikki, who ran the after-school program before becoming a case manager, said that “without their [teachers’] help, we may not be able to reach as many students as we do.” John also commented that building relationships with teachers would help him “be a bridge between teachers and parents.” Nikki and John were already working to build such a bridge, but their time and resources were stretched thin. All actors involved would benefit from the local universities initiating these kinds of relationships.

Along those same lines, tutors told me that they did not receive specific training before being placed in the after-school program. According to Mary, her university “just said you’re going to be a tutor. You show up at your site, and they tell you what you’re supposed to do, so there wasn’t any training involved.” Lisa said that the after-school program was on a list of other possible work-study placements, and she did not receive training from her school.

In regard to service learning in particular, DeGenaro (2010) observes how students *and* instructors might be more self-reflective about the discourses they use to describe their experiences in the community (195). And, as Linda Flower (2002) notes, “outreach is itself a story of contradictions” and should be approached with a commitment to self-reflexivity (183). In future studies of literacy support in resettled refugee communities, it would be important to consider the relationship between university and community. Johanna Phelps-Hillen (2017) writes that we should work “with communities rather than for communities” (113-14), an important distinction that can be seen here in how tutors may appear to offer a service to the community, while in fact they are unprepared for the nuances of this rhetorical situation. Sponsorship risks, as Phelps-Hillen (2017) puts it, the “reassertion of the hegemony of the university” and “a reiteration of colonialism” (127).

If cultural competence and stronger relationships between sponsors are needed, then an important place to begin would be to collect and critique the discursive currencies and contradictions of sponsorship that circulate in local communities. However, it must also be acknowledged that self-reflection would not necessarily be able to take place *outside* of these governing mentalities. It would still be shaped by the discourses available in the given contexts of literacy sponsorship and refugee resettlement. In this way, sponsors and sponsored alike are in a constant negotiation and renegotiation with the roles of literacy, opportunity, and self-governance.

Rose (1999) has argued that a lens of governmentality should “ask if there were ways of organizing our concern for others that did not seek to set them free” (97). By questioning impulses to uplift and transform, sponsor self-reflection can be used to identify the kinds of



contradictory discourses that would generate alternative possibilities for literacy sponsorship projects. Educators like hooks (1994) and Freire (1997), who have seen education as the practice of freedom, worked to construct dialogic teacher-student relations in which context, history, and power are at the center of inquiry. In my own training as a writing center tutor years ago, I remember being asked to write reflections in a journal after each tutoring session. Perhaps sponsors in refugee communities could be asked to study the histories of the places from which the refugee students they are working with have been resettled. Then, they could also be asked to do some kind of self-reflection *before* engaging with the community, not only on their preconceived assumptions, but on where those assumptions come from and the governing mentalities that make them possible.

## NOTES

1. All participant names are pseudonyms.
2. Leshem 2015. For a review of Agamben's critique.
3. Wendy Brown's work (2015), cited in this essay, provides a unique view on uniting Marxist and Foucauldian theories of power.

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