

Terra Firma and the Digitally Co-Present Migrant:  
Exploring the Significance of Landscape for the Newcomer

by

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### Abstract

This thesis presents an interpretative phenomenological analysis in anecdotal narratives of several digitally co-present migrants' agency, access, and attachment process in the context of their new geography, the landscape of the Pacific Northwest in the Seattle, Washington, area. Interviews, enhanced by photo elicitation of interactions with local landscapes and images shared by sending communities, probed for ways participants made embodied connection with new landscapes for continuity and identity while sustaining profound emotional support through disembodied real-time communication with distant family. In their process of creating belonging, immigrants' practice of eco-presence, a neologism for connecting with restorative natural landscapes, ranged from acute to subtle. Desire for knowledge of natural environments was universally expressed but learning was hampered by lack of time and access due to resettlement stresses. Digital or virtual co-presence was a tool, not a detriment, in establishing a new home, expanding identity, and reflecting a transnational habitus. Insights offer potential for enhancing resettlement agencies' communication and program development that directly addresses the benefits of connecting with new physical geography to newcomers' identity, well-being, and belonging.

**Keywords:** Topophilia, landscape, place attachment, human geography, communication, eco-presence, digital co-presence, virtual co-presence, Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, migrant, refugee, immigration, immigrant, resettlement, transnational habitus, Pacific Northwest, Seattle, interpretative phenomenological analysis, photo elicitation, anecdotal narrative

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Now, to my mother, thank you for making your brave passage. Mom, I think of you often, your bare legs bracing against the Canadian January as you stepped onto Halifax's Pier 21 years ago. You have since created a life of belonging. Well done, Marika. This is for you.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Paradoxically, the idea of human attachment to place has gained increasing academic attention during a time of unprecedented global mobility and digital connectivity. As mobility and migration increase, questions arise about how humans foster a sense of place, identity, and home, the underpinnings of human meaning making. Internet communication platforms, such as Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, or Facebook, digitally enable a sustaining sensation of co-presence, the phenomenon of “*feeling the presence of people and places*” (Baldassar, 2008, p. 252), for migrants through continued, in-the-moment, and often visual communication with their original homes, or what are known as sending communities or countries in migration literature. The emotional support afforded by these platforms has influenced migratory decisions, as migrants are reassured of being able to maintain a virtual co-presence with loved ones despite vast geographical separation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013). Despite the digital world compressing distance and enabling emotional support from the sending community, however, there can be quiet trauma for migrants when reorienting geographically. For newcomers and soon-to-be citizens, interaction with and knowledge of local flora, fauna, and soil can ease this discomfort and increase a sense of belonging. I contend that, with current attention on immigration, investigation of how newcomers develop a relationship with landscape is timely.

As a researcher, my interest in landscape’s role in creating a new home springs from being the daughter of a refugee, as well as my own much simpler migration experience—moving from Canada to the United States’ subtropics. Although I was a seasoned traveler and had lived for a while in Africa, this experience was different: I had committed to live long term in this new place, arriving with children and possessions in tow. From the brittle grass beneath my feet to the rustling hedge by my new front door, I was profoundly aware of the absence of a familiar

landscape. I sensed if I was to truly settle in this strange place, I had to know the flora and fauna by name. I immersed myself in naturalist books and guided walks, and, for the first time ever, began gardening. This intuitive process was powerfully instrumental in my transition to a new landscape and community.

Curious about the possibility of corroborative parallels between my own experience and that of others undergoing much greater—incomparable—stresses of change, brought me to the research question, “What is the significance of landscape for the digitally co-present migrant when establishing a new home?” This inquiry has taken me on a literature survey of widely ranging topics, from ecopsychology and place attachment to anti-essentialism in immigration psychology. Acknowledging that profound meaning making occurs in virtual space for migrants, I explored the significance of new physical terrain to the identity of four migrants, what they communicated about that landscape to those in their digital co-presence, and what agency they exhibited for practicing *eco-presence*—a neologism for connecting with restorative natural landscapes—in their process of creating belonging and home. The term “migrant” can hold various meanings, depending on context (Anderson & Blinder, 2015); for the purpose of this study, it means simply someone who has left their country of origin and has arrived in a new geographical location with the intention of establishing a home. My goal in researching the phenomenology of the digitally co-present migrant’s attention to new geography is to help broaden understanding of migrant place attachment—the affective bond between people and place—in particular, as it is built through interaction with natural environments, or *eco-presence*.

Phenomenology, a branch of philosophy concerned with embodiment and affect—being-in-the-world (Heidegger, (1927\2010)—and its concern with the subjective construction of meaning and knowledge, informs my interpretivist research of this question of human

relationship with landscape. Originating with Husserl (1962) and expanded by Heidegger (1927/2010) and others, phenomenology is about paying attention to what we take for granted in our surroundings. Heidegger's term 'being-in-the-world' expresses an existential inseparability of humans' action or thought from their environment. Conversely, "place is not the physical environment separate from people associated with it but, rather, the indivisible, normally unnoticed phenomenon of person-or-people-experiencing-place" (Seamon, 2014, p. 11). Phenomenology's goal is to heighten our awareness as we make sense of the world through our bodies' experience and entails a qualitative approach to research that focuses on individual lived experience (van Manen, 1984).

Martin Buber, religious philosopher and a defining phenomenologist, viewed relationships—not only with God and human beings, *but also with the natural world* [emphasis added]—as dialogic encounters wherein we traverse "the narrow ridge" when we enter genuine mutual exchange (Buber, 1947/2004, p. 184). To explore the narrow ridge of "a conversation between body and world" (Fisher, 2002, p. 12) in the digitally co-present migrant's connecting with new geography, I undertook a qualitative study, using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Through semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation with four migrant women who engage regularly in digital co-presence with their sending communities, I collated data thematically for attitudes and interactions with landscape, then, through a hermeneutic writing process, worked to present these in accurate and richly descriptive narratives.

Exploring the significance of new landscapes for the digitally co-present migrant—examining their interaction with unfamiliar natural environs and its very soil—uncovered findings that were particularized to individual participants in this phenomenological study. The witnessed call-and-response patterns between human and landscape in the participants' bid to

create belonging were widely varied, influenced by personal reckonings with the havoc of displacement, tensions of war, and traditions of their childhoods. These idiographic accounts provided glimpses into subtle meaning making through landscape's role in connecting past with present for continuity and identity; the conscious and unconscious seeking of nature's restorative properties; as well as illustrating ancillary effects of digital co-presence on migrant place attachment. However, despite unique perspectives, there was consensus on several points: all participants reported a concern for environmentalism and planetary well-being, often with an acute awareness of the effects of climate change in their sending communities; a desire to learn more about features of the natural environment (as expressed by their interest in visiting parks and travelling to state regions or participating in naturalist-led programs); a disappointment in their limited ability to explore their new natural surroundings and landmarks because of the time demands of financial pressures; and a vociferous appreciation for digital connectivity with their sending communities, regardless of any tensions experienced as a side effect.

### **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This literature review briefly illuminates my research's conceptual framework, where a constellation of scholarly spheres converges on topics of phenomenology and benefits of eco-presence; theories of place attachment, which is the affective bond between people and place; and debates about the digital-age migrant relocation processes. These topics form a foundation for my phenomenological exploration of the digitally co-present migrant's connection to new landscapes. Eco-presence and place attachment weigh in on issues of migrant well-being, identity, and a sense of belonging in relationship to landscape. At the same time, to ensure avoiding interpretive falsehoods it is critical that the researcher have an understanding of

invalid—and valid—notions of essentialism, an across-the-board thinking that certain intrinsic and static truths apply to all digitally connected migrants' experience of mobility and relocation.

### **Culture and Communication: Humans and Landscape in Dialogue**

In this thesis, I propose that human and landscape interaction is a communicative relationship. While such a stance might invite the criticism that this is little more than anthropomorphism, culture and communication theory provide ample evidence of this presupposition. For example, political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) argues that on our fragile planet we can no longer afford to be dismissive of what has historically, since the Age of Reason, been considered inanimate or passive objects in landscape; from vegetation to minerals, these entities have a form of vitality with which humans have a reciprocity of affect and effect. Decrying critical theory's tendency to reveal and deliver constant critique of human agency underlying societal and environmental ills without offering creative political alternatives, Bennett encourages the “need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi). We are in communication with nature—humans and the elements of landscape are in a dialogic exchange as we affect change upon the other. Surveying the sensory origins of human speech as a physical response to nature, cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram (1996) contends that “in the untamed world of direct sensory experience *no* phenomenon presents itself as utterly passive or inert. To the sensing body *all* phenomena are animate” and as such, “we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*” (p.81). Noting this human and natural world reciprocity, landscape architect and scholar Ann Whiston Spirn (1998) likens landscape's dialogue with humans to be similar to that of music or dance; it is a performative dialogue, where “every landscape has a

distinctive set of sounds, smells, and textures” (p. 81), imprinting and recalling memories, connecting people with place. Whiston Spirm (1998) refers to landscapes as the first human texts and reminds us that they have not only provided timeless metaphors but also the shapes used for communicating in earliest writing. Abram (1996), emphasizing the reciprocity between bodily perception and the natural world, points to replicative sounds of nature in human vocabulary such as, for example, in English, the *splashing*, *rushing*, and *gushing* of water. He asserts that “our discourse has surely been influenced by many gestures, sounds, and rhythms besides those of our single species” (p. 82). Recognizing that the natural landscape acted as primordial text, supplied the nascent symbols for a distinguishing form of human communication, and still influences assonance within our contemporary speech, it is unwarranted to dismissively assign anthropomorphism to the idea of a dialogic encounter between humans and landscape.

As Bennett (2010), Abram (1996), and Whiston Spirm (1998) have indicated, theories of dialogue are expansive enough to invite a reframing of how we think about human and landscape interaction. Geographer Mireya Folch-Serra (1990) delves deeper into communication-theory territory, tapping into philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s epistemology as she perceives the human-landscape dialogic as being one in which the two entities act upon each other, producing culture, economies, regions, and history. For Bakhtin, dialogue is the fundamental human condition of constant, ongoing exchange, whether with an external other or within oneself (Folch-Serra, 1990). A proponent of diversity, Bakhtin refutes the possibility of universal understanding, contending that *heteroglossia*—his term to describe the infinite number of interpretations, contexts, and voices, even within any single given language—is enriching because participants never fully understand each other, thus continuing the dialogue (Folch-Serra, 1990). The model of Bakhtin’s dialogue is portrayed as the exchange of voiced utterances

between two humans (Bakhtin, 1981). However, compatible with his “extraordinary sensitivity to the immense plurality of experience” (Bakhtin, 1981, xx), Bakhtin indicates that profound dialogue has the ability to extend beyond language with sensory and nonverbal aspects: “To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, ... [with] eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293). Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue as being the defining state of human existence and an experience inclusive of full sensory perception opens the way for a nonanthropomorphic consideration of the dialogic possibilities between humans and their landscape that is explored in my research.

Sensory, or nonverbal, communication lies at the heart of the human dialogic relationship with landscape. Affect is the crux of nonverbal communication and when distinguishing affect’s properties, communication and culture scholar Eric Shouse (2005) urges communicators to be aware of its power as a preconscious communicative force. As stimuli, affect registers on the recipient with biological intensity, and it precedes feeling or emotion. Affect, as illustrated by an initial encounter with music (and as intimated by Whiston Spirn’s [1998] concept of landscape’s performative dialogue), produces physical response. It is prepersonal, whereas feelings, occurring subsequently, are based on prior experience and are biographical; in turn, emotions broadcast feelings and are therefore social (Shouse, 2005). In the dialogical sense, affect is the language of landscape as it triggers stimuli that the perceiver preconsciously absorbs and from there gradually develops the biographical feelings and emotional responses that characterize place attachment, a central premise of my research question and research design.

### **Eco-presence: Dialogic Benefits**

Understanding the significance of embodied interaction with the natural environment and subsequent benefits of eco-presence is key to my research of the co-present migrant who sustains

deep emotional bonds in virtual media's disembodied experience while balancing the demands of geographic relocation. Themes of identity and well-being (discussed in greater detail below) readily emerge in the writings of geographers, philosophers, and psychologists as they focus on the human experience of place and the significance of the physical senses in developing a sense of belonging with environments. Humanist geographer Tuan (1977) emphasized kinesthesia, sight, and touch as sensory capacities essential for human spatial appreciation, or *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974), an emotional bond with place. Total sensory experience creates our concrete reality of place, enabling a reflective consciousness; our perception of where we are physically matters to our identity and well-being. Place philosopher Edward Casey (2001) writes, "The body comes first ... when it comes to philosophical (and specifically phenomenological) meditations on geography. Yet the body is not the last word concerning an expanded sense of the geographical self. Requisite as well is *landscape*" (p. 416). Casey, rejecting Cartesian dualism of mind and body and echoing Tuan's emphasis on sensory integration and place in human identity, describes body and landscape as "so deeply ingredient in the experience of the human subject as to pass unnoticed for the most part" (p. 417). Attempting to elevate an awareness of landscape's 'deeply ingredient' role in human experience, cultural historian Theodore Roszak (1992), in his landmark treatise *The Voice of the Earth*, proposed the post-industrial tenets of ecopsychology as a foundational approach for mental health. Reorienting away from the Western preoccupation with "self as text," Roszak instead posits there is a "synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being" (p. 79). For human health and that of the planet, ecopsychology guides practitioners toward a dialogic Buberian I-Thou relationship with the natural world—and beyond, to a humble recognition of the landscape's own life-force attributes. As a researcher whose purpose is aligned with these phenomenological perspectives, I investigated how migrants

who sustain deep emotional attachment in the virtual world may develop a sense of belonging and identity in communicative exchanges with the natural world of their new physical location. This study sought to describe participants' consciousness of landscape interaction, in particular, the rare moments of prereflexive experience rising into thought.

In researching the digitally co-present migrants' perception of and interaction with new landscape, I was sensitive to the potential tensions that accompany the benefits of their co-present ties and whether these affected their accessing natural environments for restorative purposes. Sociologist Wilding (2006), in a broad qualitative study—ranging from Australia to Iran—of families who digitally maintain close transnational bonds, raises the question whether this new, intense connectedness may actually heighten anxiety when distant family members are in need.

A number of studies demonstrate natural environments' power to reduce stress. In a frequently cited example, Ulrich et al. (1991) found physiological testing and participant reporting to support this theory when participants were exposed to nature scenes for a calming effect after viewing a disturbing film clip. In an earlier study, Ulrich (1984) observed surgery patients and noted less pain-medication use and faster healing times for those who had a window with views of trees rather than those who did not have a view of nature. With regard to emotional stress as a byproduct of mobility and domicile upheaval—a familiar experience for the migrant—Wells and Evans (2003) found that children in rural environments intuitively accessed nature as a buffer against stress when experiencing upheaval such as moving to a new home. These disparate studies demonstrate the healing capacities of nature, a consideration worth examining in light of potential heightened anxiety for the digitally co-present migrant.

More specifically, studies focused on migrants' access and response to nature point not only to stress reduction but also the natural environment's power for creating connections to new places. Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2012) examined immigrants' engagement with gardening, discovering this interaction with nature not only alleviated stress but also helped with connecting the present with the past as it harnessed nostalgia for restoration and meaning making via literal new roots. Main (2013), in a three-year study of immigrants frequenting Los Angeles's MacArthur Park, reported that more than one-half of respondents mentioning the park's nature elements—from birds to trees—did so in the context of being reminded of their sending communities, a finding that “supports the importance of landscape to continuity and identity” (p. 297). Sampson and Gifford (2010), studying place-making and the therapeutic landscapes sought by a group of 11- to 19-year-old refugees in Australia, had participants create photo novellas illustrating their significant places. Parks ranked among the top four favorite sites, and vegetation was among the most commonly referenced restorative concepts, occurring more frequently than mention of friends, classmates, or family. My study takes a deeper, individualized look into several migrants' conscious and intuitive well-being interactions with landscape as they cope with establishing identity and home while dealing with the added layer of both the support and the demands of digital co-presence.

### **Place Attachment: Theory and Landscape**

With roots in theories of identity and self, the concept of place attachment—defined as the affective bond between person and place—is of primary interest when examining aspects of migrants' sense of belonging and well-being in their relocation process. Scannell and Gifford (2017), in a place-attachment study of 97 Canadians, specifically examined the psychological benefits of place attachment. An overwhelming majority of participants (69%) reported the

benefit of memory support, that place attachment served to “connect them to the past or evoke memories” (Scannell & Gifford, 2017, p. 259). The next most-reported benefits were the sense of belonging and relaxation or stress relief, which included experiences of comfort and restoration. These psychological benefits of place attachment are pertinent when investigating newcomers’ relationship with landscape in their process of creating home.

Lewicka (2011a, 2013), analyzing place attachment through surveys conducted in Poland and Ukraine, found evidence indicating that the greater the sense of attachment, the higher the expressed level of life satisfaction. Differentiating between active and passive attachments, Lewicka’s findings also reveal that one need not be in place for long to begin experiencing attachment: study participants who took deliberate action to learn about a place and its history reported greater satisfaction than long-term residents who did not make these efforts. My research attempts to give additional nuance to these findings of active place attachment’s value through its investigating migrants’ agency for connecting with their new physical landscape.

There is a deceptive simplicity to the definition of place attachment, but the phenomenon is a complex web of dynamic processes, as is evident throughout a range of literature. Noting this complexity, Scannell and Gifford (2010) offer an organizing framework of three dimensions—people, psychological process, and place—when studying aspects of place attachment.

Discussing the array of components in place-bonding, they acknowledge that “the tapestry that describes the nature of one’s relationship to a place is unique for each individual” (Scannell & Gifford, 2010, p. 5). Place scholar Lynne Manzo (2003) further highlights that experience of place has a multiplicity of meaning, cautioning that “without recognition of the negative and ambivalent feelings related to places, we risk exploring only eulogized space” (p. 57).

Additionally, she points out that affective bonds to place “exist within a larger socio-political

milieu” (p. 48). These points were important to keep at top of mind as I listened to the individual accounts of this study’s cross-cultural participants.

Biologist E. O. Wilson (1995), in his compelling biophilia hypothesis, posits that humans have an innate response to natural environments and an attraction to other living organisms that in likelihood are stamped on our genes; he reminds us that “the brain evolved in a biocentric world” (p. 32) and from “psychological phenomena that rose from deep human history” (p. 40). This hypothesis is foundational to natural-environment place-attachment research and, yet, the role of landscape in place attachment is admittedly an understudied area. Although landscape is generally considered to be secondary to social factors in the attachment process, Lewicka (2011b), reviewing several hundred studies in place attachment literature from the past 40 years, points to findings that indicate natural settings and landscape as frequently mentioned places of attachment. She hypothesizes that such natural-environment place attachment may actually take place sooner than the primary social-factored attachment because it is less time-demanding. This hypothesis is relevant for this study because it examines migrants’ agency for practicing eco-presence and the role it plays in their process of attaching to a new home. Highly individualized responses revealed this to be a potentially fruitful consideration but also to be one fraught with the complexities of socioeconomics, with access to landscape interaction being tied to time and money.

As a phenomenological researcher focused on landscape interaction and attachment and conscious of the romanticizing influences of Western pastoral literature, I had to be wary to avoid traps of sentimentalist expectations. Landscape architecture scholar Riley (1992), in an overview of the history of biological and cultural importance of landscape attachment, cautions social scientists and writers devoted to the topic of place to resist potentially invalid traditional

ideas or nostalgic notions when considering landscape as a place of attachment. Foreseeing an imminent and dramatic technological shift in human relationship with landscape, Riley states that, “a watershed in the history of human interaction with the environment is at hand. Landscape experiences in a global, information-, and image-handling society are different from earlier societies” (Riley, 1992, p. 29), from a flood of digital images to real-time satellite imagery pinpointing topographical detail and human activity. Riley encourages us to heed the validity of new technological ways of encountering landscape, and he recommends doing so by thickening research description of landscape attachment in a way that will contribute to a rich interdisciplinary understanding of new phenomena. He advocates these descriptions should leave room for the “sublime” (Riley, 1992, p. 31), encouraging expressive language that captures important intangibles in human experience.

Lived experience has now arrived at that predicted watershed moment, where the digitally co-present migrant handles information and images—from GPS coordinates aiding refugee flight to live-streamed family-event participation across multiple time zones—connected to a virtual world in a way that either challenges the natural world’s landscape role in place attachment or underscores its importance. This phenomenological study offers a glimpse into whether there is increased or decreased occasion for landscape place attachment in the digitally connected migrant’s place-making, while working toward the thickened descriptions Riley prescribes and being alert for expressed intangibles in the balancing of co-presence and eco-presence.

### **Digital Co-Presence: Resisting Essentialism and Fostering Multiple Attachments**

Researching the digitally co-present migrant’s place attachments and response to landscape requires a careful reconsideration of traditional understandings surrounding

immigration, which commonly tend to view the phenomenon through a lens of loss and grief as well as one of acculturative stress. Bacigalupe and Camara (2012) counter this interpretation in their assessment of a US-relocated Salvadoran family's use of information and communication technologies as they tap into emotional support despite transnational distance; Bacigalupe and Camara recommend that mental-health clinicians be aware that communication technology is transforming immigration psychology away from a model of uprootedness to one of continuous connection. Supporting this idea, Diminescu (2008), through a comparative study of migrant and non-migrant use of information and communications technology in Europe, found that there was little difference between how the two groups use technology for maintaining supportive relationships. She rejects traditional binary thinking of migrants, such as being in a state of "neither here nor there" (p. 566), and she views digitally connected migrants not as uprooted victims but instead as "actors of a culture of bonds" (p. 566), who exercise agency in the extreme as they maintain supportive relationships through communication while resituating. Ehrkamp (2005), in a study of Turkish immigrants in Germany, witnessed a complex interplay of local and transnational ties that refuted the idea that maintaining transnational connections hindered the building of a local identity. She insists scholars should avoid the essentialist tropes of immigration and view migrants' identity as an ongoing negotiation, recognizing their agency for successfully creating multiple attachments. Nedelcu (2012), observing Romanian professionals in Toronto and their fluid digital interaction with transnational relatives, speaks of an "emergence of a new transnational habitus" (p. 1340), or way of being in the world, that is changing the concept of immigration. Nedelcu refers here to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) influential idea of *habitus*, which is composed of predispositions that are the result of historically determined social behaviors and influence our present decisions and inform our futures. Habitus

is core to the individual like “an embodied internal compass” (Asimaki & Kouistourakis, 2014, p. 125) and manifests in action, emotion, thought, and speech without conscious recognition.

Nedelcu sees migrants’ digital communication patterns as the advent of a new set of predispositions and recommends that we understand the connected migrant as having multiple identities, embodying a cosmopolitanism that supersedes territorial roots.

However, as these numerous researchers find reason to reject traditional thinking about migrant identity and place attachment, there is room for pause. For example, although Brun (2001) agrees with avoiding essentialist cliché, she sees in her refugee and forced-displacement research a need for reterritorializing in place—that there is an importance to fully establishing oneself physically in a new location while still maintaining translocal ties. In her observations of Sri Lankan northern Muslim refugees’ relocation, Brun (2001) found that physical territory establishment, as it was expressed through land purchases, was deliberately sought to create a sense of belonging in a new society, re-emphasizing a need for place attachment in immigration identity and certain contexts. Aware of contested concepts and competing voices surrounding the psychology of migrant relocation, my research was sensitive to discoveries of what the influence of digital connection had on participants’ efforts or desires to establish belonging with respect to interacting with and adopting a new landscape.

Within the study’s scope, I probed to discover potential multiple and transnational landscape attachments and how they may bridge from one to another in restorative ways for the migrant. Gustafson (2001), in a study of Swedes that further contested traditional pathological views of mobility and uprootedness, looked at routes (among participants who were mobile) and roots (among those who stayed in place); his participants demonstrated that attachment and mobility are not mutually exclusive—that people are capable of managing multiple place

attachments. Enlarging the discussion, however, Gustafson noted that despite ongoing academic interest in place attachment, there is some skepticism among social theorists about the phenomenon, because “everyday experiences are increasingly disembedded from physical locations” (Gustafson, 2001, p. 668). In some ways, the connected migrant’s practice of co-presence would appear to support this skepticism. For example, Madianou (2016), in a longitudinal study of UK-based Filipino migrants, found her participants were no longer registering their online co-presence as a “distinct state” (p. 186) while they followed distant family through webcam calls, text messages, and geolocation of social media postings. As a phenomenological researcher curious about this purported blurred line between embodied and digital presence as well as the suggested emergence of a transnational habitus (Nedelcu, 2012), I listened carefully for participants’ expression of multiple place attachments with regard to landscape, the ways they communicated their new natural environment to those in their digital co-presence and what significance that communication held for them, and how the disembedded experience of digital co-presence affected relationship to place and awareness of landscape in their relocating process.

### **Summary**

This synthesis of literature invites the phenomenological study of intensive digital co-presence and its possible effect on the landscape interactions and attachments of migrants to deepen understanding of identity and well-being in our mobilized world. Despite the discussed benefits of eco-presence for the well-being of migrants (Sampson & Gifford, 2010; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2012; Main, 2013), questions arise regarding place attachment’s value with respect to the embodied experience of landscape for the digitally co-present migrant. With strong place attachment indicating higher levels of life satisfaction (Lewicka, 2011a; 2013) amid voices

rejecting the migrant narrative as being one of loss (Bacigalupe & Camara, 2012; Diminescu, 2008; Ehrkamp, 2005; Nedelcu, 2012), researching the digitally connected migrant's negotiation of new geography provides insights as to where—or whether—a balance is struck for identity and well-being. In addition, although natural settings and landscape have been frequently mentioned places of attachment in the literature of the past 40 years (Lewicka 2011b), it is acknowledged that landscape's role in place attachment is an understudied area, as is the idea of human and landscape dialogic communication (Bennett, 2010). My goal for conducting research of the digitally co-present migrant's relationship with landscape is to provide a small plank toward bridging these gaps.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methods**

My examination of migrants' subjective experience as they relate to the phenomenon of place is a qualitative study within the interpretivist-constructivist research paradigm. "Concerned with matters of knowing and being" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 222), inquiry within this paradigm seeks to understand the meaning of lived experience from the subjects' point of view through the mechanism of interpretation. In the process of elucidating or portraying what is understood as uniquely individual experiences, the researcher is a co-constructor of meaning with participants (Schwandt, 1998). As an interpretivist researcher, I chose the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) because it is well-suited for exploring the embodied relationship that the digitally co-present migrant develops with the physical landscape in his or her process of adopting new territory. With its ontological holism, phenomenology's aim is to draw the preconscious lived experience of body and place into our awareness (van Manen, 1984). These subjective experiences are filled with uniquely enriching knowledge that raises individual and societal awareness and develops empathy through its deft interpretation.

As a research practice, IPA was formalized in the 1990s by psychologist Jonathan Smith for its value in exploring personal stories within health, social, and clinical-psychology contexts (Smith & Eatough, 2011). IPA is idiographic because the individual's peculiar lived experience of making sense of the world is central in the recording and interpreting of data. At the same time, IPA is an intersubjective undertaking, where the researcher and participants are co-creators of data through the interplay of open-ended questioning, subsequent thoughtful narrative, and final thematic analysis. The researcher must be open to discovery, willing to have assumptions challenged, and avoid imposing preconceived patterns on the data. For research of subjective concepts such as identity, belonging, or place attachment, IPA's "rich experiential descriptions grounded in participant's own words" (Smith & Eatough, 2007, p. 3) offer powerful accounts of rarely examined phenomenon within everyday life. Additionally, IPA's emphasis on astute listening in semi-structured interviews, researcher empathy, and intense reflexive assessment of data identifies it as a beneficial method for research where a long-term and embedded ethnography is not a practical possibility for capturing everyday lived experience. IPA served my research of the digitally co-present migrant's connection with landscape well in that its emphasis on participants' encouraged, thoughtful narrative allowed me a window into moments and situations in their lives where I could not otherwise have access.

Through a series of multiphased, in-person, semi-structured interviews enriched with photo elicitation, I worked with verbatim transcripts for a deductive analysis of human-landscape dialogue themes derived from the eco-presence literature as well as an inductive analysis that allowed me to capture additional themes that participants revealed.

## **Data Gathering**

My IPA research used purposive sampling, mainly limiting participants to a population recruited through contacts at refugee resettlement offices. The rationale was that this group, when compared with other migrant or transnational groups, was perceived to have a more pronounced need to establish a home and could thus offer a rich opportunity within this study's limited time frame for learning about landscape perceptions and practices of eco-presence among those who are sustaining strong emotional bonds in digital co-presence.

Because of the detailed data typically gathered for IPA, it is a method more effectively applied to smaller numbers of participants. To do justice to IPA's deep exploration of data, this study followed the advice of Smith and Osborn (2008) for the fledgling practitioner, which is to limit participants to fewer than five. I was particularly interested in interviewing mothers of young children to learn of these women's experience of landscape and what they may reveal about its relationship to memories and aspirations, and what of its significance they communicate to their children.

Recruiting was more challenging than originally anticipated. After initial attempts to connect with two British Columbia resettlement offices, I considered the study's time constraints and turned my focus locally, approaching resettlement agencies in Seattle, Washington, where I live. Systematically, responses were encouraging but I soon encountered speed bumps, as, for example, a national-office policy prevented research at the first agency, to the disappointment of local staff. To have an agency broker the recruiting process was critical for imbuing a level of trust in the researcher's veracity and giving potential recruits the confidence to volunteer. Eventually, a second agency invited me to an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom to recruit directly, after first being introduced. Language barriers and the challenge of acquiring

first-hand narratives through an interpreter soon became apparent. Additionally, participants were often sick and unable to attend or sit through an entire interview, causing frequent rescheduling or eliminating them from the study. At the third and final agency, I met two staff members who were recent arrivals to the country and who volunteered. This was particularly advantageous, in that language was not an issue and because they were staff, not clients, there was no potential conflict with the agency's policy for protecting clients.

The first one-hour encounters were semi-structured interviews designed to establish rapport with participants. The aim was to create an environment that facilitated and expedited detailed accounts, and where the researcher could use judicious probing (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Participants were invited by open-ended questions framed with phrases such as "Tell me about ..." and "Can you describe ..." to launch their narratives on topics surrounding their relationship with landscape in their past and present. Topics ranged from accounts of their initial perceptions of their new geography to accounts of their habits within the landscape of their new and former homes, and also addressed their practices of digital co-presence. The interviews were audio recorded, observational field notes were made, and verbatim transcripts were created after each session. A second 45- to 60-minute, in-person interview followed within the next two weeks. This second meeting was for examining concepts from the previous interviews' transcripts and reviewing participant-generated photos of places they visited in our meetings' interim and images that were shared with their sending community or on social media.

These photos counted as a primary form of data for this study, as they were used as texts to be examined specifically for natural environment settings and to hear the related narrative that the participants offered regarding those pictures' significance. Sociologist Bennett (2014) discovered that the use of photo elicitation during her research of multigenerational family

members' attachment to place enabled her as researcher to figuratively accompany participants to meaningful places and capture more pertinent data despite the study's time limitations. This technique offered practical benefit to my researching participants' access and connection to landscape. In the context of researching belonging and attachment to elements of the natural world, photo elicitation held promise for deeply enriched data. For the participant who practices digital co-presence, images are already an integral part of her daily communication. As an added benefit, photo elicitation could reduce researcher misunderstanding of participants' intended communication, as was the case with Collier's (1957) insertion of photos into an anthropological study of a Canadian maritime community undergoing socioeconomic change. Additionally, Collier (1957) reported that photos served as "a language bridge" (p. 858), triggered emotional responses, increased subjects' ability to express themselves, and helped overcome interview fatigue. These benefits held promise for stimulating productive interaction with participants, as we established rapport and grappled with perception and language differences when narrating emotional associations with landscape. However, in practice, there were mixed results. Some participants forgot to bring their phones (which stored the photos) to the interview and sent the photos later via text or e-mail, although we did discuss during our meeting their experience of gathering or creating the photos and what the photo subjects were.

Additionally, a brief word metaphor activity was introduced to stimulate participants' thought and expression in relationship to their attachments and interactions with landscape. The activity consisted of the participant making a choice and giving a description: "If you had to be a tree or a cozy house, which would you choose, and what would be your surroundings?" This was a poetic device intended to free the participants to imaginatively enter and express themselves in a natural setting of their choosing during the actual interview, for the purpose of gaining deeper

insight into their landscape responses or attachments. This simple exercise, suitable to our interviews' relaxed conversation, has its roots in arts-informed qualitative research, which art and education scholar Elliot Eisner (2008) notes is aimed at expressing the ineffable, as it provides "a means through which feelings can come to be known" (p. 7). Social work researcher Rich Furman (Szto, Furman, & Langer, 2005), who has used poetry to explore experiences from grief to adolescent identity (Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo, & Kulkarni, 2007), uses poetry "as a means of data reduction, compressing rich narratives into tighter pockets of meaning" (Szto et al., 2005, p. 139), and recommends this art form "as a good tool with culturally diverse populations" (Szto et al., 2005, p. 152). Presenting the metaphor choice to my study's participants was a way of encouraging them to expand on imagery as a means for distilling aspects of their lived experience in relationship to landscape perceptions and interactions.

Data from both interviews with each participant were recorded and stored on a USB drive, along with any permission-granted photos, which participants shared electronically. As mentioned, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, each in close sequence to the interview, enhancing the fresh data's opportunity to further penetrate the interpretive researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

A multiplicity of hermeneutics is at play in IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2007): while the participant grapples with making sense of his or her world in response to the researcher's probing, the empathetic researcher in turn is trying to experience the participant's vantage point. At the same time, the researcher circles in and out of this mode in an attempt to maintain the necessary distance for a properly functioning interpretative lens; this circulation occurs during both the interview and the later process of analysis.

In a hermeneutic cycle of examining parts and the whole, I followed Smith's four-step process (Smith & Osborn, 2008) for analyzing the textual data generated by the interviews. First, I gave participants' text several deep readings, and annotated freely with insights and direct observations on the left side of a line-numbered transcript, revisiting the text frequently. In the next phase, noting and coding emerging themes of phenomenological human dialogic encounters with natural environments, I recorded themes and interpretation in the right-hand margin. The conceptual framework guiding coding entailed three main categories for analysis: the practice and expressed benefits of eco-presence, as well as related unfulfilled yearnings (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2012); expressed place attachment to natural environments (Main, 2013) and explorations of multiple geographic landscape attachments (Gustafson, 2001); and, in addition, themes related to digital co-presence. Grouped data and themes were exhaustively sifted for a comprehensive analysis and annotated transcripts were available to enable a third-party audit to verify the credibility of my analysis. In IPA, the fourth step of textual analysis involves the final write-up, and discussion of the research itself counts as a continuation of the analytical process, with the presentation containing extensive quotes from the participants, ensuring their voices of lived experience remain central and corroborate the researcher's interpretation (Griffin & May, 2012). I carefully followed this reliance on participants' quotes to tell their story, preserving the integrity of the idiographic reporting that is key to IPA.

### **Ethical Considerations**

A primary ethical consideration for this research was that migrants and, in particular, refugees and asylum seekers can be a vulnerable population. With this awareness, I worked through resettlement agencies and trusted parties to ensure that potential participants understood that there was no obligation at any time to participate. The process for securing consent involved

meeting participants in a setting of their choosing, for personal introduction, where they could clarify my intention and inform me of any required cultural protocol that I would need to follow. In addition, securing standard informed consent was not all that was required to reassure or protect participants for this IPA research. Expectations for anonymity in published material and future public access to the study's data necessitated detailed clarification and follow through. Taking steps to eliminate identifiable information to a level where identities could not be deduced, I assigned fictitious identities to participants. (It is interesting to note that I discovered the best of ethical intentions surrounding protecting participant identity has the potential to backfire: An Afghan woman inquired why I would *not* use her real name. I explained this was an intentional, protective stance of the study's design, and she dropped the subject. However, later I was brought up short when I recalled a recent campaign where women in Afghanistan had been struggling to have their names literally spoken aloud in public as an assertion of their identity.) Additional security measures included protecting the study's data on a password-protected USB drive, scheduled to be destroyed after the thesis's publication to DSpace and ProQuest. A post-study debriefing was offered and participants were notified when the study's content was complete and available to them.

Secondly, ethics surrounding photo elicitation can be complex; if the researcher retains images as data, attention to permissions is mandatory. Also, consideration of other legalities and the researcher's own moral obligation to vulnerable participants (Pink, 2004) must be made when weighing whether images of people are to be avoided, included, or occluded. To appropriately address these matters, participants gave their express, written permission for the retention or publication of specific photos and it was agreed that no personally identifiable images would be published. In the long run, and after putting these ethical considerations into

place, none of the photos were published in this study. The photo elicitation served well to enrich the interviews; however, it was determined that beyond those conversations the images on their own did not enhance the written report.

#### **Chapter Four: Findings**

After listening carefully to participants' accounts and piecing together the salient themes, data is presented here as individual participants' anecdotal recollections and insights for cohesive and memorable idiographic stories. Van Manen (1990), in his discussion of writing about lived experience, refers to anecdote "as a device in human science to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us" (p. 116). The findings are reported in anecdotal narratives, each reflecting on themes of eco-presence, place attachment, and digital co-presence and concluding with a review of participant-generated photos as well as the outcome of the metaphor exercise. Themes will be further parsed in the Discussion section.

##### **June: "When I Go to the Water"**

The term "newcomer" is applied somewhat loosely to June, a Tanzanian who arrived in Seattle via Uganda in 2003. Having met June several years ago, I contacted her for help recruiting referrals from her East African community in Seattle. Instead, she offered her lived experience as potentially valuable for this study. An avid practitioner of digital co-presence, with her iPhone always on the draw, June offered a retrospective that spans the communication technology shift among the immigrants of the past fifteen years.

Listening to her account of establishing a home in the Pacific Northwest sounded more like a resignation to place rather than an attachment or a sense of belonging, despite her 15 years in place while raising a family of three children. She admits, "What we miss is the belonging," speaking of her former home. "It's like the people knock on your door, the neighbors. You're all

together. It's togetherness. Here [Seattle], it is like individual. I think that's the most thing that I miss." She further disclosed, "I've always wanted to go home because if it wasn't for those issues [referring to her reason for asylum in the United States, a topic she withheld from our conversation], I would never leave home. Because I NEVER, never wanted to go anywhere."

Asked at what point she had felt like she could call this part of the world home, June replied, "When my eldest went to middle school. Because I knew now I cannot take her away. [...] and when I get my second child. [...] Yeah, I say, OK, we belong here." Throughout our conversation, June displayed a reluctance to express attachment, framing her making a home in Seattle as an experience of exile. June's narrative is a mix of regret, longing, and indecision, all battling attachment within her circumstances, revealing traces of the traditional model of migrant uprootedness. Referring again to the time of her second child's birth, she thinks that is when she "became settled and that's why I've never been home. I always tell my husband I wish we bought a house a long time ago when it was cheap. But because we thought we'd go home one day ..." It is evident that this lack of house or land ownership contributes to her malaise, further distancing her from a sense of permanency, hinting at essentialist strains observed in migrant place attachment (Brun, 2001).

June spoke of efforts to ease her discomfort within the context of her communal and natural settings, displaying attempts of active attachment (Lewicka, 2011a, 2013), by drawing past experience into her current life. Socially, she "engage[s] in communities, my home people, African people, the African communities. Because we always tell each other that we are brothers and sisters here." Additionally, she tries "my best to cook home [traditional] food. I never stop that cooking our home food and I pass this to my kids too."

With regard to connecting with her landscape or elements of the natural environment, she takes her children to the park as often as possible, and regrets that the previous summer she was on pregnancy bedrest. Looking forward to this year, she says, “Oh, my goodness. God give me strength, I just take the kids out. I want them to explore. We go to the park, mostly the parks, because we don’t have to pay anything.” However, accessing the parks is still a production: “The problem is where we live [...] it’s not pedestrian-friendly, the roads. [...] So we always have to drive, even if the park is just three minutes away.” June finds the experience rewarding, nevertheless, as she expresses her satisfaction in her children’s access to the outdoors and she feels she is passing on an important value.

*I always feel like they are living the real life in what it’s supposed to be like. Always when I take my kids outside to play [...] I become proud of myself, that I’m teaching them. [...] My daughter likes to pick up flowers and that’s when I was little, I would pick up flowers. I loved flowers [...] And I just feel sooo happy, I just feel so nice. I don’t know how to describe it. I just feel that’s how life is supposed to be. And to get the time to do that, with our busy schedule, I feel happy. When I go home, I feel like we did accomplish something.*

Her joy stems from connecting the past with the present, a transference of heart-felt values and an overcoming of odds—the demands of her schedule—in favor of living life as she senses it is meant to be lived. Words fail her in an attempt to express the sublime.

When asked if there were elements in the local landscape that she found familiar or that gave her comfort, June replied, “I would say [...] where I was born and lived there until teenager, we had a lot trees. So that reminded me of home, gave that sense of ...” and here her voice trailed off. She remained silent for a few seconds, bringing to mind what Van Manen

(1990) refers to as an “epistemological silence, [...] the rich domain of the unspeakable that constantly beckons us” (p. 113). Despite the allure of trees connecting her past with present, June admits, “I talk more about the water. Although I love trees, mostly because I study about the environment, they’re important—but I love water. Anything to do with the water, I love it so.” She explains that her husband knows this and takes her to a favorite park on Lake Washington when they have time together. “Where I was born there is a lake. So [...] when I go there, it always reminds me of where I was born and grew up as a child. Yeah, it is a happy place. I love that place.”

June’s environmental and landscape awareness has an interesting twist. She thinks of trees as environmental protectors and is interested in transferring knowledge, wanting her children to learn the benefits of a garden and growing trees. However, there is a purpose in this for her that extends beyond stewardship of environment: she wants her children to belong to the Pacific Northwest landscape even though she feels barriers that prevent that attachment for herself.

*I was interested because of my kids. [...] To learn about them [local flora and fauna] because to tell my kids more. Because I always think one day I will go back home and leave them here when they grow up. Because I want to get old back home. I want to get old back home, not here. But it depends.*

June happily discussed her digital co-presence activities. She occasionally does face-to-face calls: “It depends. With some people, they do have good phones. Not everyone.” She is in several highly active WhatsApp groups, mostly friends and old school companions. Her brother, out in the country, does not have a smartphone, only a flip phone, and he is the one she connects with, via text mostly, for updates on her immediate relatives, including her mother. An early

adopter, June purchased her first smartphone in 2010. For the two years prior, she had been texting her family and friends with a less sophisticated device. When I ask whether she has a communication schedule, she says, “I go to WhatsApp all the time [...] When I’m off at work or sleeping, that’s when I don’t do it.” Regarding whether she experiences a sensation of being physically present with her far-flung friends and family, she answers, “Totally!” and her emotions interfere with her verbal articulation:

*I don't miss them the way I used to miss them. Now it's like friends, my brothers, and my cousins, my relatives ... it's just like when—I don't even—It brought a lot of connection. You don't feel like we are this [spreading her arms] apart. It's like you know everything nowadays. In a minute, we have groups, groups of relatives, groups of what ...*

She revealed that being cut off from the political news and man-on-the-street information was an earlier stress for her, which real-time digital communication now alleviates. “When we connect with WhatsApp, we could hear the news, we could hear the stories [...] That made me to not worry a lot about home, [...] my people. I feel like I know everything, what’s going on.”

However, it becomes clear that there are tensions that this connectivity introduced, ranging from anxiety to guilt. She admits that there is some upset involved, “When you hear about things: people are sick, people have died. [...] When we are here, we get a lot of ...” and she hesitates, before carrying on: “Because we are in America, they think we make money easily and then they are poor there, so they ask for money, most of the time. So those are the tensions I get.” The complexity of balancing remittances to sending communities with the pressing needs of her family here in the Pacific Northwest is intensified by the immediacy of digital co-presence.

*When I need to send money and I feel so bad. I feel like here we have medical, and the medical is good. The water is good. And then you hear that there are people suffering from diseases just because of lack of [...] clean water and everything, it's really disturbing.*

Asked if she feels a pressure from these communications, June's voice dips to a very low murmur, "Very much, very much." To deal with that, she says, "Sometime I don't look." She demonstrates, placing her phone face down on the table. "I avoid. My mind just takes it out," she says, gesturing a sweeping motion with her arm, "Until the next event." To cope, she tries to get together with local Seattle friends and go out, "if I'm going through a lot. Or I will take my kids to the park [...] or I told you, I go to my water park [meaning the Lake Washington park]. I like to go to the water."

Reviewing her photos, it is clear that June consciously accesses the outdoors for her own therapeutic benefit, not just her children's. The warm, sunny weather of Dar es Salaam was something she took for granted, but in the Pacific Northwest, she does her best to capitalize on days of sunshine. She shows me a photo of an open park area, saying, "I love this park [...] when the sun is there, it really makes me feel home." She explains that because of the openness and absence of shade, the sun warms her there the way it did in Dar es Salaam and she is transported. June has photos of her apartment's playground and a tree at the edge of her walkway, where she and the children catch breezes when it is hot. She then shows me a number of photos from Tanzania of the beach and environs that her friends have shared on WhatsApp. "I miss home," she says quietly, followed by a long silence. I inquire whether she ever finds herself talking to the landscape around her.

*I think I do that. When I came to this country, I talk to myself a lot. [...] I think that here I talk a lot to myself. Like when I see something I don't have to look for someone to tell. I will talk to myself and I will be done with it. Not too much but ... Is it because not having a lot of people to talk to here? My husband say, sometimes, he say it's a sign of craziness.*

I ask her if she recalls any of these moments occurring specifically while engaging nature, or her landscape. After a considerable pause, she replies,

*I think when I go to the water I talk. When I go to the water. Just water, there's something water does to me. It feels so calm. It always feels like whenever I go there with my burden [...] it takes away my burden. [...] That's what I feel at the water.*

This comforting dialogic encounter with a Pacific Northwest landscape indicates that despite her reluctance to accept her new home, June has proactively found a place within local nature where she can sense acceptance or belonging—a place that is free of human tensions and acts as a restorative viaduct connecting the waters of her past and her present.

In closing, I asked June if participating in the study had been a help to her, acknowledging the request to assemble photos had likely added stress to her busy life. During our meetings, it was easy to pick up on the tensions and pressures in her life, as she was essentially functioning as a single parent for three children while her husband was on the road for weeks at a time with long-distance trucking. Her reply was surprising. “No! That’s so interesting!” She confessed that she had at first wondered about the request to create a record of her natural-world encounters and sites of interest for our discussion, but discovered that she enjoyed doing it. “I would tell my friend, ‘Oh, I’m going to take these pictures and interview,’ and I would say it in a positive way—I was excited.” The research exercise gave her an opportunity to more deliberately understand the role of her interactions with the landscape. “You

bringing those questions, it made me to realize how much I love the water. I would have stress and would go to the water, but I never [...] analyze it [...]. It [the photo exercise] helped me to understand myself some.”

For June, her attachment process is always guarded by a weighing of the circumstantial pros and cons. Presented with the metaphor exercise where she could choose to be a tree or a cozy house and then describe its surroundings, she first asked, “It doesn't care about the cons or the pros, just you don't care what will happen to you?” Guaranteed that she was free from the weight of consequence, June's choice was to be a tree “in my home country,” surrounded by “the beach, the people—my people—and everybody I grew up with. That's what I would like. My family.” June's honest, emotive responses to this exercise and throughout the interviews revealed an intense longing to feel at home that was always framed with a sense of impossibility, despite her fifteen years in the Pacific Northwest. This is in sharp contrast to the embracing enthusiasm of the next participant.

**Farzana: “Safety First”**

Farzana is a 23-year-old woman who had arrived in the United States from Afghanistan only six months before I met her at an ESL classroom, where she was accompanied by her 18-month-old son. The class's interpreter, an Afghan-American woman, facilitated our conversation because Farzana's English-language skills were not yet at a conversational level. Interviews with Farzana were abbreviated—her baby needed attention and the interpreter was sporadically required in the neighboring room. At first, I questioned the value of the ensuing transcripts because of their brevity and a perceived lack of depth to our conversation. Also, I was aware that the interpreter—a native Dari, or Farsi, speaker but not a certified interpreter—relayed the interview questions' intent but, at times, truncated Farzana's narrative responses. There were

also moments of awkward switches between the interpreter's first-person and third-person framing of Farzana's account, which are apparent in some of the data presented here.

Nevertheless, on reflection, Farzana's short story revealed several critical considerations when pondering questions surrounding migrants' digital co-presence and their relationship to the land when creating a new home.

Farzana was born in 1994, exactly midpoint between the Russian military withdrawal and the American military invasion of Afghanistan. Her identity and migration account are shaped by war. When her husband made the life-altering decision "to work with the American people [...]" their life was not safe. That's why they decided to come here. For safety first." The words "safe," "safety," "peace," and "peaceful" were dominant recurrences in Farzana's conversation.

Violence is an acute preoccupation as she speaks about her family back in Kabul:

*In Afghanistan, you know it's so bad, the situation, it's not safe. Lots of suicide bombing going on. Like last week there is so many [...] suicide bombs, lots of people died. My brother was also on that area but he was inside. Thank God he was safe. So these things I like here, much more than, because of the safety first.*

Farzana's interview responses were, in fact, so dedicated to safety references that I sometimes wondered if the interpreter was missing the landscape, natural-environment, and "outside" thrust of my questions. I quickly realized that references to the "outside" had for so long represented danger to Farzana that safety was her foremost consideration when thinking of the landscape. To a query whether there were features in her new landscape here that she may find frightening or triggered fear, her response was quick, indicating an eagerness to embrace her new circumstances: "No. Nothing. Not such a thing. I am happy. [...] the people are really kind and

they respect you, and it's safe when I go outside shopping with my son. I feel safe. That thing, I like about it.”

Interestingly, the color green has strong significance in the context of peace for Farzana, as it surfaced recurringly when talking about what she had first noticed upon her arrival in the Seattle area:

*The thing I love in Seattle, [...] it's green! It's so green and neat, clean. And peaceful. Because back home in Afghanistan, you know, there's so many [violent, disorderly] things. But in here it's so peaceful and clean and the greenish. [...] The green gives me peace.*

When asked about her sense of belonging in her new home, Farzana said she really didn't like it for the first two weeks because she missed her family, but now she felt her new place was “100 percent” her home. About three-and-a-half months into her relocation, Farzana got her first very-own smartphone. Up until that time, she had relied on her husband's Facebook and Messenger accounts for communication with sponsors, caseworkers, and family members in the period before and after her arrival in the United States. She said the first thing she did with her smartphone was get on Facebook, because she wanted “to be in touch with the family and find out.” She made her first video call within a couple of days of owning the phone, contacting a brother who has a smartphone and who passed it around to family members during what she described as a happy call. Questioned about her sensation of proximity and presence during that first call—did she feel as though she were really present with them—she replied, “It was OK. Not that much the distance, not so much closeness. It's kind of an in-between.” This was hardly a description of a blurred line between physical and digital presence, and not yet any indicator of a transnational habitus. Instead, Farzana is caught up in the physical here and now with her daily

functioning; not only is she a mother of a toddler, but she also has an urgent need to learn a new language and adapt to new surroundings.

Indeed, this in-betweenness of physical and psychological closeness is very limited and not an ongoing phenomenon for Farzana. She texts throughout the week but limits her calls, either voice or video, to about once a week. She explained that internet connectivity in Afghanistan is not always reliable and she would connect when she sees that her brother is online. She shares pictures with the family, showing them scenery and locations that she enjoys in her new locale. Asked if that makes her feel closer to her distant family, she says, yes, and that her family appreciates seeing the pictures, saying, “I wish we would be there also with you, close to you.” She claims that there is no stress in her digital co-presence, that it is actually a relief: “When I’m talking with them and I see they’re happy, they’re good, then I don’t feel any stress.” (However, she did worry about possible charges that would be incurred if she were to send me photos via SMS and was conscious of her data plan’s restrictions and penalties.)

Farzana was eager to demonstrate landscape similarities between her new home in the Pacific Northwest and her former home in Afghanistan. During our photo review, Farzana showed photos she had gathered from her brother’s Facebook posts. She compared an aerial shot of a park and large traffic circle in Kabul with the greenery of Seattle. She also spoke of her recent visit to a park resort, MarDon, in Central Washington (she was disappointed to discover the photos had been deleted from her phone), and delightedly compared it with the Qargha reservoir recreation area near Kabul. However, it was her many photos and earlier conversational references to the Afghan province of Panjshir that dominated her interest and desire to portray. Panjshir, a visually stunning place of arid mountains, torrential rivers, and gardened plateaus, is her ancestral home. Earlier in our conversation she had said that her Washington State geography

prompted her to think about Panjshir. Although relatives are still farming in Panjshir, her father lost a leg in a land mine explosion there—the ultimate betrayal within the context of landscape—and moved to Kabul before Farzana was born. She had only encountered Panjshir during a couple of family vacations.

Farzana made quiet inferences to violence against her sex in the framework of interacting with the landscape. As she spoke of her affinity for the beauty of the Panjshir countryside, it was evident she revered the place, despite her limited presence there. Speaking of the region's agriculture, she said, "In Panjshir, there's lots of girls going there and working in the garden. And all of them, they enjoy and they go out [for the harvest]. But not in this," as she referred to the current conflict. Upon reflection, I realize she was deliberately making a notable contrast between the freedom of these women in the fields and orchards and the account of her own years as a girl moving into womanhood, when she was restricted to her Kabul home and its small walled garden:

*When she was small it was safe to go out, but when she grow up, that time it was [...] not a safe place [...] especially the kidnapping, the boys, small kids, and also they kidnapped girls—all the girls. So that's why it was not safe to go. That's why the family said, No, it's better you stay home.*

Farzana's contact with landscape seems to have always been curtailed by considerations of personal safety and it was hard to tell at what level it engaged her imagination. Considering the question whether she ever spoke to elements or organisms in nature, she looked quizzical for a moment, then firmly replied, "No, never." Later in our conversation, she admitted that although she thought "it's *very* important" to have knowledge of and feel comfortable with her natural environment and that she wished she had more time to be outside, her priorities are dictated by

demands of the immediate moment: “The first thing I want to do is learn the language, and then in the future ... because also back home in Afghanistan, I completed a nursing program.” She wants to resume her education and professional goals as soon as possible. For now, accessing the outdoors is mostly for visiting her apartment’s small playground with her son—something that she enjoys—or park-destination outings with her husband driving, which may occur “maybe in two weeks. Because I’m busy studying, my husband working, then I have to take care of my baby. So maybe once a week or maybe in two weeks.” Once again, time’s shortage is a major factor in a migrant’s familiarization with new geography and its flora and fauna.

Farzana’s response to the metaphor exercise was quick and simple, and depicted an idyllic scene: “I choose to be in a cozy house and my surroundings should be like my family, same thing [pointing to the greenery outside our window] like beautiful trees or water, these things. Like Panjshir.” She admits Panjshir is a place she has only been briefly. There is a nostalgia to her accounts that make them sound more like the retelling of a dream or family lore rather than her own firsthand knowledge. Throughout our meetings, the brevity of Farzana’s sincere comments and responses was symbolically appropriate to her situation. These echoed an abbreviated interaction with the Afghan landscape, which had been the tableau for Farzana’s experience of treachery and oppression for much of her lifespan. The effect of conflict and terrorism on one’s relationship with the natural environment—although experienced and expressed very differently—was a phenomenon shared by the next participant, a sophisticated Baghdadian.

### **Fatemah: “Without That, I Will Never Be Surviving Here”**

Fatemah arrived in Seattle from Iraq via Jordan in 2009, accompanied by her husband and three children. She and her husband had been working for US agencies in Iraq when, in

2006, her husband's manager was kidnapped and murdered. Their agency evacuated them to Jordan, where the family initially waited for a return to law and order in their Iraqi home. When the situation worsened, they instead petitioned to migrate to the United States.

Fatemah's story is one of embracing new situations despite painful separations and the discomfort of change. She is a determined optimist. Yet, Fatemah freely expressed experiences of fear and her efforts to alleviate that fear throughout our conversations. She began with her arrival:

*Honestly, I was really so scared. Because I know, I am Iraq, I am Muslim, I am from Iraq. So I don't know how the situation here will be. How people will be welcoming me. It was really hard for me to send my kids to school because I don't know really [...] what things they will be exposed to.*

Fatemah was grateful for community support, her initial work at the airport jobs office that "helped her navigate the system," her husband's employment, and her children's success in school. She claims that it did not take her long to feel this new spot on the globe was her home: "To be honest, and to be not so exaggerating, after three or four months from that [her arrival], I felt that "Yeah, this is the place."

Asked about her initial impressions (following a terrifying first night in a bad neighborhood), she recalled, "Within time when we started to get out, it was really so impressing. When you see everywhere it is green, everywhere it is really clean." She explained:

*Because we miss all these things back home. [...] I really loved Baghdad a lot. I really consider it one of the beautiful cities. But everything after 2003 [the US invasion], it really changed to the worse and worse. So, I miss those times when you see the streets really clean, everything's organized, green everywhere.*

Answering my inquiry about the green she referred to in Baghdad, Fatemah said,

*We are really famous and known about the date palms and we have those everywhere.*

*We have really very huge and big areas with just these date palms. So, this is really something we are missing now, because after 2003 most of these places and farms have been burned out, so it's not there anymore. Also, we used to have many [...] parks, and even in the street we used to have trees, but not anymore. [...] This is not the same as Seattle, the green stuff, but we used to have something really nice outside. But not anymore.*

Fatemah's voice lowers and trails off as she says "not anymore." She continued, describing how people of Baghdad often had large lots where it was imperative to have a backyard filled with "many kinds of trees and plants [...]" So, even when you walk in the neighborhood, you can see the green everywhere. But not anymore." Once again, her voice trailed off. She explained that her mother's home with its large, gardened yard—where Fatemah grew up—was abandoned when Al Qaida occupied the area. She assures me that the differences between the landscape of Baghdad and Seattle leave her with no basis for comparison, although she does reference her appreciation for the presence of green in both places, while at the same time remarking that this too is peculiar to each place. She seems to be saying that there is little chance of connecting the past with her present with landscape as the conduit; in fact, the past of her sending community is also a bygone era, destroyed by the ravages of war.

Frequenting the parks of Baghdad was common for Fatemah, who describes herself as a city girl. Parks in the Seattle area are now a meeting place with friends from her Iraqi community, a place for companionship and sharing traditional food. "It's just a fun time for myself, and let's say, 'charging my battery.' [...]" Having this kind of environment and being,

say, on the ocean or some parks is really nice.” Expanding on why she enjoyed the outdoors for these occasions, she said it was the conversation free of the time constraints that meeting in a restaurant entailed. Instead, when outdoors, “You feel more free there. And having long time.”

When asked if there were any properties in her new physical landscape that made her anxious or caused fear, Fatemah replied, “No. I really feel so safe and I so appreciate [...] Once I arrived to USA, especially in Washington [...] I never felt that there is something maybe risky or cause any danger for myself, or even for my family.” Remembering watching her youngest play outdoors after their arrival in Seattle, is a moving recollection for Fatemah. He was six years old, and Fatemah first whispers, “Oh my god,” and pauses. “It’s really something I missed when—and sometimes I really feel sad [for] his oldest siblings. Because they didn’t have this opportunity to play outside and having this kind of freedom to play and do things what they really—all kids—they should do.” Today, they urge her—especially her youngest—to consider foregoing another summer visit to Iraq (they have been back for a couple of vacations) in favor of exploring Washington State.

Despite her claim of feeling safe in her new landscape, Fatemah gave a striking insight when she revealed that there had been a period where the local Seattle parks had been a locus of near-panic attacks for her:

*Especially at the beginning when we came here, every time when I go to the park I have this kind of feeling that my heart is really beating fast and I don't feel really happy. And I can't even enjoy the weather or even the beautiful view, because I remember my family: 'Now it's really hard there; now they're really suffering from an unsafe situation.' That was at the beginning, it was really hard for me. [...] But now within time it's become much easier.*

Parks, the showcased features of her new geography, triggered a complex mix of guilt and panic, as she feared for the well-being of her family in Baghdad, who she knew could not enjoy safety in a similar open setting. For Fatemah, the effects of violence in her past and its current shadow threatening her distant family blocked her from accessing any emotional solace in the safety of her new natural surroundings.

Fatemah's focus on her family's well-being is an overriding concern and it is the family remaining in Iraq whose landscape still holds terror for her. This is readily apparent in her habits of digital co-presence. Fatemah has seen the distance between Baghdad and Seattle—which she calls “the very far of the world”—compress dramatically since beginning her life in the United States. Three years ago, she purchased her first smartphone and this has been a transformative experience. She relies on Messenger, WhatsApp, and Viber on a daily basis to text with family or friend groups.

*Every morning I have to open my Facebook and check about the news. Even if I don't hear about it from them, but at least I can see their posts, so I can say, OK, they are fine. The difference of time, it's really sometimes hard for us to check on each other—especially if you hear there is a bombing or there is some kind of conflict or ISIS entered the country. So, you just want to check and make sure that they are safe. Checking their post, I see that they posted these things like two hours ago. OK, that means they are fine.*

Of this study's digitally co-present participants, Fatemah appeared to be at the top of the list of those most absorbed in this activity. She expressed, “Without this [digital connection], I would never survive here.” Now, survival is an emotional quest rather than one of physical safety.

Fatemah sees compressing the distance between her new Seattle home and her relatives in Baghdad as being critical to her well-being. She says it took a year to convince her mother in

Iraq to get an iPhone, but now they do a video call every Saturday, with Fatemah's sisters showing up at the mother's place to join in. The time-zone differences necessitate consideration and advance planning. Video chats may resume on Sunday if there are topics, such as family problems or decisions, that need to be resolved. "Sometimes because the net there is really bad and the connection is bad there [...] that [...] causes some challenges but we keep this rhythm, that every weekend I have to call them." An interrupted digital connection is the source of any stress related to her communication, as far as she is concerned. "Especially if you hear some news and you want to check on them and no one is answering your calls. Oh my god, it's really scary!" Fatemah is emphatic when she says her video chats are a lifeline:

*[That is] the time that I can really feel that I'm there. I'm with them. [...] Sometimes I just talk to my mom about some kind of food. Like traditional food, how I can make this, and how can I do that and asking 'What you cook today?' [...] we're having this kind of, let's say, daily conversation [as] if I be there.*

With her checking of time stamps of Facebook posts for reassurance and her description of co-presence as "I can really feel that I'm there," Fatemah approaches the blurred lines of physical and digital presence (Madianou, 2016) that begin to support the notion of transnational habitus (Nedelcu, 2012). With regard to her new landscape, she tells me because her parents were European educated and well travelled, she does not share photos of her new environs when communicating online with her family. But as she speaks, she has an epiphany, voicing something that had not previously risen to her consciousness:

*And you know what? Also, maybe because I really don't want to show them how really 'It's really nice here, more than what you are now.' So just focusing on them, making sure they are fine and safe, that's [...] my focus when I call them and check with them.*

Fatemah appears to take some satisfaction in the revelation that her restraint with photos shields her Baghdad family from visual reminders of the disparities between her daily life and theirs. This suggests an intentional, although previously unconscious, omission on her part as being an attempt to intensify the sensation of proximity in digital co-presence.

Whenever the interview turns toward the topic of landscape interaction, Fatemah is apologetic. She worries she may not be a good subject for the study because of what she sees as an apparent lack of interaction with elements of nature, that she had not consciously given much thought to connecting with the landscape. About time spent outdoors, it is not a reflexive experience for her. She says, “Honestly, I enjoy the time like the moment. I really don't plan for that or think about it when it's done.” However, when asked earlier if there was anything in her new landscape that she would like to know more about, she replied:

*Actually, everything. I've been here almost eight years but still I feel I'm new here. I didn't have the time to explore everything. When we came here, my husband, our focus was to find job and work and improve our life in general, so we didn't really have that much of time to explore the nature environment and going out.*

For the photo review, Fatemah had taken a single photo, but did not have her phone with her to show me during our second meeting:

*I have to walk every day just for exercising, so when I was walking with my daughter I found a small tree and it remind me of back home, and I say, Oh my god, this is a good, I think, picture for Kathy to show her what we have mostly in Iraq. Like what's something similar to here.*

Despite the legitimately proclaimed vast differences between Baghdad and Seattle, for a fraction of a second a small crack opens, connecting the past and the present with a thin thread of

continuity between the two landscapes of Fatemah's life. Additionally, it seems these daily walks—for a health benefit—bring her into some form of contact and encounter with elements of the landscape, even if it is not registering with her on a conscious level and is purely a byproduct of another pursuit, that is, exercise.

Fatemah smiles as she replies, “No,” to the query whether she ever finds herself addressing the landscape verbally—and she apologizes again, thinking this to be a shortcoming on her part as a participant. However, moments later during the metaphor exercise of choosing to be either a tree or a house and describing its surroundings—she leaps to an instant answer: “A cozy house,” she says and urges, “Don't laugh,” as she divulges a pleasure:

*We don't used to have fireplace back home because the weather does not require such kind of things. But I really love the fireplace, sitting there, having my hot chocolate, and it is snowing outside. [...] That's my best moment ever. [...] It's really my best time ever. Just relaxing and seeing the snow.”*

Asked if she feels the snow isolates her in a good way, enveloping her in the calm that snowfall brings to the city, she answers, “*Yeah. I just feel so peaceful and so relaxed when I have this thing. [...] Honestly, every time when it's snowing, I say, 'Yes, let it snow!'*”

Enveloped by the sound-dampening snow, Fatemah's imagery depicts a becalmed external world that mirrors her desired but rare internal state. She finds reprieve and a fleeting celebration of her new life, arriving in the form of a silent, white landscape. Fatemah's quiet, internal retreat stands in contrast with the proactive, energetic, and sometimes boisterous engagement with the land as described in the experience of the next and final participant.

**Vana: Balancing “at the Tail of the World”**

The final participant, Vana, also migrated to the United States on account of personal safety jeopardized by working with Western NGOs. She arrived in Seattle with her young family in 2012. She specified that she is from the Kurdistan region of Iraq, known as Bashuri Kurdistan. It was apparent in our interviews that there was a tremendous consciousness associated with her deliberate identification. The concept of “belonging to the land,” as she put it, is an ongoing consideration in her life, and I observed that this was not so only as her being a Kurd with geopolitical concerns but also as a woman who invests herself in the soil of her new home’s backyard garden. There was both a literalness and figurativeness to her dialogic encounter with landscape that was discernable in our discussions. Even when referring to the vast stretch in time zones separating her from her Kurdistan family, she personified the planet’s topography, saying, “I told my husband, ‘We are at the tail of the world.’”

Questioned how long it took her to feel like she was at home, belonging in her new location, she laughed: “Until today.” Vana explained her realizations, which also echoed other study participants’ concern for safety: “We really found the peaceful life that made us think, Yes, our children will have a better future here, because there is law, there is not war anymore.” However, she qualified her adult sense of belonging, “We tried to dig our roots in the country. But, [...] we didn’t come as children, we have still our roots back home.”

The search for continuity and identity tied to the landscape is a conscious pastime for her: *All the time, with my husband, we will look for areas, like in the natural scenery that will remind us of home. Like type of trees. And even we really enjoy going to Vancouver, BC, because we find that some—like the roads and then the kind of trees we see around Bellingham—is very close to what we have back home in my [...] area that I came from.*

This form of comfort, seeking the visual pleasure of relatable landscape, is part of Vana's acknowledging and accepting the balancing act her identity now requires.

*After a while you learn to balance. Yes, you know, I learn here. I love here. It gave me that kind of place to restart a new life. But at the same time half of me is still back home, and this is who I am [emphasis added].*

Vana has planted a garden with seeds that she acquired from families who have brought traditional seeds from their homeland to the Pacific Northwest and who are "more than happy to share." The earth's bounty translates into the traditional dishes that Vana and family prepare together. She explained during our first interview that "even with my new home, we try to plant the trees that we have back home." She had also planted grape vines with the hope of cooking *doma* with the leaves, but mentioned, "Unfortunately, the grape leaf does not come out at the same time we have it back home." Her awareness of her new position on the planetary axis was heightened by her gardening experience, as she watched the seasons play out differently. However, at our second interview, she was pleased to report a surprise in her garden: "Both my grapes got leaves out, which was really fun!" Her engagement with the earth gives delight as she realizes the seasons of her past have a form of continuity in her new location, helping to bridge the past and present of her identity.

For Vana, the seasons are personified and her connecting with the landscape is enlarged beyond the private experience into a collective one, which has an ancient history:

*In March it's our [Kurds'] time where blooming will happen and then it will be all picnics. We are in love with picnics. Until spring says goodbye [emphasis added], all the people, every weekend they are out. And we have like a national feast on March 21st, which is like really important to us. It's called a New Day [Nowruz], so all the people*

*will be out celebrating the day by picnicking, barbecuing, dancing—like traditional things. So, for us, it's just like we love nature.*

Vana's springtime is personified, as it beckons her people and permits itself to be claimed until bidding adieu. In her current location, and in her opinion, the experience of visiting parks is best as a collective experience. She laughs, "Whenever we go to picnic, it will be an army going, too many families." She regrets that she has little time to pursue her interest in visiting the orchards and crop fields she has heard of in Washington State. She and her husband would like to pick fruit as they had done in Kurdistan. Similarly, she expresses a desire to see the wildflowers in season on Mt. Rainier—"because they remind me of home"—but she has not had the time yet to visit. Not surprisingly, on the point of whether she speaks to elements in nature, Vana does not find the query strange, saying she has done this while watching her youngest girl play:

*"If there is something distressing me and I cannot tell it to anyone, I would like to do that. It will be like passing out the negativity, but I feel like I'm very safe in this environment. These plants, flowers, they are really relaxing me and they are really listening to me without really judging me or [...] doing something that will go against what I want to say. So, I am doing this, actually. Yes."*

Vana's account is one of a dialogic encounter with landscape, where she pours her distress out into a safe and accepting environment and, in return, nature's stimuli gives her relief.

Drawing comfort from the landscape for her well-being and identity is but one aspect of Vana's balancing "at the tail of the world," as she seeks out critical connections with her past home. Addressing her practice of digital co-presence, she says, "I couldn't really imagine myself surviving maybe even the first year if I didn't have that kind of connection." She talks about the shock of having fled her home—its disruption across an extended and tightly knit family—and

that it is a choice she would never have made under normal circumstances. She has family and friend groups on Viber, which she checks regularly. The 10- to 11-hour time-zone differences are necessary considerations that she makes adjustments for: “I make sure every night to send them a Good Morning, with something positive feeling. They will do the same, [...] it’s your [Vana’s] Good Night. I kind of keep doing that to just be able to survive emotionally.” As an example, she shows a photo of her mother at that morning’s breakfast table in Erbil, Iraq. Vana’s parents and siblings all have smartphones, with video calls being the norm on weekends. It is not unusual for her to take her phone out into the garden to show how her plants are growing. There are times during her family park outings, when she will disregard the time zones, she laughs, saying, “I will just call them and if they will be awake I will show them: ‘Can you see how beautiful this is? It’s really beautiful here, like 100 percent [...] you cannot really find such a thing back home.’” The collective experience of landscape is an inescapable part of Vana’s identity, even in her digital co-presence. Occasionally, early on weekday mornings before Vana goes to work, she will have a face-to-face chat with her parents or other distant family, calling this “one of my self-care things.” She explains that afterwards, “I feel like one of the things that I love got done and I am relaxed and I am ready for my day here.” The only potential source of tension that she cited surrounding her digital connection, was the chance of there being no digital signal: “I will get panic attack if there will be no, like, that kind of online connection.” She states the benefits of her connectivity are quite the opposite of stress: “It’s reducing the amount of anxiety, you know, for me. It makes me calm down and feel concentrated here.” Ultimately, she is claiming that digital co-presence has given her an ability to focus, allowing her to be productive in her new surroundings. She is alluding that this opens, rather than hinders, an avenue for multiple place attachments.

Real-time digital communication enables balance for Vana; nevertheless, it has its shortcomings for her. She admits she still experiences a lack of presence: “The Viber call [...] it’s not really that kind of real attachment, you know, the real experiencing ‘here.’” When she gives her distant family live video tours of her new house, virtual space has its limitations:

*We built every piece—you know, that much care and love. But for whom? Who will come to see? And I will be wishing for them to come and visit and see and experience the life that I have built here but it will be all virtual.*

The photos Vana collected or created as part of her participation in the study supported observations of her commitment to a culturally collective life within the context of landscape, as well as her personal agency for investing in a sense of belonging to the Pacific Northwest earth beneath her feet. They included images of Nowruz activities, family picnics in Kurdistan, and burgeoning life in her Seattle-area garden.

Discussing her participation in the study, Vana said that “thinking about this belonging to the land idea and then to the nature, to the plants” launched her into contemplating what war had done both to the landscape and its human inhabitants. Earlier she had spoken of the hazards of global warming, having witnessed increased dust storms and flash floods in her homeland. “The lack of green coverage, which all got destroyed by war—that really affected the weather.” She brought war’s destruction into the context of many of her Kurdish people’s experience of the landscape—and into the context of the refugees with whom she works in the counselling field:

*Because the parts of nature got destroyed, you know, as a kind of result [of war], I feel people's appreciating and sense of belonging to the land became weak. You know? And I have been wondering maybe that's one of the reasons. There is really not that much green coverage like before. And then there is not that kind of appreciating the nature sense.”*

She points, as an example, to the 1980s, a time when her grandparents refused to leave their farm during Saddam's campaign of genocide against the Kurds. Five thousand Kurdish villages were destroyed in this era. At the time, Vana was 10 years old and could not understand her grandparents' stubbornness, which in the end required her father to pay a large ransom for their freedom. She now understands it as the land and the "thousands [...] of fruit trees" being her grandparents' identity, their essence, something they could not—and did not know how—to give up.

*The peoples, those people, those generation who really survived from this massacre, then they got resettled in the cities and they started a new life. But it was not like before. It was all concrete, you know, not really that green coverage, not really that connection to nature like before. People really, I feel, lost their purity. [...] Why? Because that connection got lost, got destroyed.*

Her use of the term "purity" is a reference to what she sees as a crucial primal connection, a give and take with the land that is key to her people's identity and well-being. When we first met, Vana told me, "For us [the Kurdish people], [...] belonging to land—belonging to somewhere is very important." It was clear from her account of her grandparents and the genocide's aftermath, that she believes interaction with physical land is essential to her countrymen's identity and that meaningful engagement with landscape holds benefits for all people. In her transplanted, urban American life, working with refugees, she has had further opportunity to ponder war's abruptness in people's response to the landscape: "For sure, [these people] are the products of war time, so I am not expecting that they will be perfect. But then, even when they are in nature why they cannot really engage?" For Vana, the idea that people are somehow blocked from appreciating

and benefiting from what she sees as the goodness of the earth mystifies and intrigues her. This alienation is foreign to her and she thinks of it as a puzzle in need of a solution.

Vana is consistent, bringing her creative interactions with landscape into the metaphor exercise. She responded with an almost-immediate in-depth answer, introducing an interesting twist: she chose to be two trees, instead of one, each with its roots in a very different setting.

*I will like to be a walnut tree [...], we have it in [...]the Kurdish area in Iraq and it's famous by being the best type of walnut. [...] It's just close to waterfall, and still the people are the original people there—they never left. [...] So, I would like to be that walnut in that kind of setting there. And in here [the Pacific Northwest]I would like to be this evergreen tree that will be maybe by the side of lake. You know, I would like the water, that calmness of water. [...] Those very tall evergreen, you know that they have been there for maybe hundreds of years.*

In her poetic description so readily told, Vana engages the landscape in an undeniable pursuit of continuity and identity. Despite her homesickness and her reliance on digital co-presence, she is committed to carving out a sense of belonging wherever she is, even if it is a split or dual phenomenon. As she says, “I am proud of where I came from [...] and I am really proud to say that I am half Seattle.” At the same time, her sentiments also give credence to qualities of essentialism associated with persecuted peoples in their search for belonging and creating attachment (Brun, 2001).

### **Summary**

This recounting of participants' vivid recollections, demanding reflexivity, and discussed hopes and fears was presented in a manner intended to maintain the integrity of their stories and stay true to IPA's emphasis on idiographic narrative. From June's unburdening “when I go to the

water,” Farzana’s prioritization of “safety first,” Fatemah’s reconciling her embodied state with disembodied co-presence—“without this, I would not be surviving”—to Vana’s quest for finding balance “at the tail of the world,” a range of nuance is evident in landscape’s significance for the digitally co-present migrant creating a new home and sustaining identity. The study’s focus on themes of eco-presence, place attachment in the context of natural environments, and the impact of digital co-presence in place-making are further examined the following discussion.

### **Discussion**

Investigating the participants’ attitudes, awareness, and agency for incorporating their new flora, fauna, and topography within their identities exposed considerations for deepening understanding of place attachment in our mobilized world. These considerations touch on the study’s guiding themes of practicing eco-presence, fostering place attachment to natural environments, and gauging the impact of disembodied digital co-presence on belonging and identity within new geography.

#### **Eco-presence: Requirements, Awareness, and Agency**

The commodities of time and access are fundamental requirements for gaining eco-presence’s benefits for place attachment and well-being. The lack of available time for engaging green spaces was a recurring theme for each participant. This factor potentially challenges the hypothesis that natural-environment place attachment may actually take place sooner than the primary social-factored attachment because it is assumed to be less time demanding (Lewicka, 2011b). The financial demands of establishing a new home severely restricted participants’ time available for exploring their new environs; additionally, all said they would appreciate the chance to learn more about local vegetation and geographic landmarks but did not know how they could make the time even if they knew of accessible naturalist-guided events. Compounding

the time factor, living in a pedestrian-unfriendly neighborhood made quick foot access to a nearby park impossible for June and her children. Additionally, the socioeconomics of having a yard for gardening or leisure was a differentiator, with June expressing frustration about the unaffordability of housing with a place to garden and Vana, the only homeowner, relishing her access to a patch of land where she can turn the soil. This observation points to essentialist parallels with Brun's (2001) study of refugees who sought a sense of belonging through physical territory establishment in the form of property ownership.

Participants displayed varying levels of consciousness about their interaction with landscape, and at first responded to questions about their habits of eco-presence in terms of environmentalism, including discussions of climate change they had witnessed in their sending communities, often as the result of war's destruction of vegetation and habitat. But as the interviewer gently probed, the study became a shared exploration for both the researcher and the participants, an advantage of the research's phenomenological approach. At times, it felt as though the interviews functioned like a psychotherapist's hour, with "Aha" moments not uncommon. Some participants (June, for one example) expressed appreciation for the carved-out time the interviews gave for articulating thought, bringing the "quiet attachments" (Tuan, 1977, p. 159) of landscape encounters to their consciousness. June's attraction to the water, which she says "takes away my burden," was a manifestation of her seeking comfort in the landscape, and, as she acknowledged, was something her participation in the study elevated to her open recognition. As Vana stated, "Your study really opened my eye and at the same time made me think about so many things. Although bad timing [meaning time pressures preventing exploration of the landscape], I feel like I miss enjoying them." As such, the study helped instigate a raised consciousness for some about their conversation between body and landscape

(Fisher, 2002), and its potential for increasing their sense of belonging. Interestingly, acknowledgments of literally speaking within the landscape as a form of solace were made by the participants most actively engaged with the landscape and who were interested in gardening. These same participants, June and Vana, chose to be trees in the metaphor exercise, identifying with elements of nature, whereas the other participants chose to be dwellings, with one expressly describing herself as being inside the dwelling. Their metaphoric responses paralleled the agency, affinities, and fears each individual had earlier indicated, working as an elaboration on their communicated relationships with the natural environment while at the same time poetically compressing their experiential data (Szto, Furman, & Langer, 2005). The exercise was a thought-provoking way to conclude our conversations, serving to inspire helpful reflection as participants considered their sense of place and belonging within their new landscape.

### **Place Attachment: Negotiating Identity via Landscape and Digital Connections**

The role of landscape in place attachment was evident in several accounts, acting as a bridge between past and present for identity's continuity and well-being (Sampson & Gifford, 2010; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2012; Main, 2013), from Fatemah's seemingly insignificant notice of a small tree while out exercising to Vana's deliberate search for and June's return to landmarks that have a familiar appeal. Relying on participants' reflexivity during this study revealed varying stages in the process of belonging and place attachment, as well as highly individualized approaches to meaning making. The recency of Farzana's arrival and the ensuing urgencies in her daily life made it clear that for a study of the "quiet attachments," interviewing participants with a longer retrospective, those who had cleared the hurdles of the first several years, provided more in-depth data. The longer-term residents made recurrent references to a consciousness and inevitability of roots in another place while committing to establishing a new

home. This dualism, or multiple place attachments (Gustafson, 2001), was considered by participants to be an expected condition, with the mothers looking to the welfare and rootedness of their children as their primary inspiration for creating attachment. Rather than dividing or diminishing the person, they saw multiple place attachment as an experience of personal expansion—a state of mind that is now fabric in their identity. As Fatemah stated, “I think that will live with us and we have to accept it.” Although her words may sound tinged with regret, Fatemah’s actions intimate an embrace of her new life. All participants in this study demonstrated agency in the extreme when discussing their efforts in establishing a home for their children and personal attempts to develop roots or at least a sense of being settled.

Echoing Ehrkamp’s (2005) insistence on immigrants’ agency and refuting essentialist tropes, these women see their identity as an ongoing negotiation. Their mindsets indicate that they are committed to their new situation, accepting whatever concept of place attachment that may require. At the same time, as truly “actors of a culture of bonds” (Diminescu, 2008, p. 566), they express their circumstances as being broadened by their transnational connections, which they nurture through digital co-presence. Regardless whether these women framed their newcomer identities with the language of exile or embrace, June, Fatemah, and Vana all spoke from varying cosmopolitan perspectives and their digital co-presence practices do allude to the suggested emergence of a transnational habitus (Nedelcu, 2012), making the idea of this connectivity inseparable from their place-making rituals.

For participants, digital co-presence plays a role in active place attachment, a place-bonding effort associated with greater life satisfaction (Lewicka, 2011a, 2013). Vana, regardless of time of day, will initiate a video call with her Kurdistan family when she encounters remarkable scenery, an act that is an extension of her people’s collective enjoyment of nature. In

a similar spirit, June shares photos of waterfalls, snowy landscapes, and outdoor Christmas lights “because there are people who will never come here, who will never see that. So, I just want to share the beautiful of that place that I admired.” In contrast, Fatemah consciously does not share landscape photos in digital co-presence for fear of heightening unpleasant emotions by displaying her new landscape’s safety and order as a contrast to the danger and destruction in the Iraqi landscape. Nevertheless, for Fatemah, digital connectivity with her Baghdad family is a tool that enables her to settle in her new location and helps set the stage for her to develop some form of attachment to the place where she has established her children.

### **Digital Co-presence: Dimensions**

As human beings in material bodies, being co-present has its challenges. The earth’s rotation is clearly a player in the intensity of these women’s experience of real-time, face-to-face digital communication. Time-zone differences influence when participants can schedule video calls, although they will scan and send messages or photos without fear of disturbing others in the dead of night. Evidenced by June, Fatemah, and Vana’s dependence on their Viber, WhatsApp, and Facebook accounts, there is support for the idea of an emerging transnational habitus (Nedelcu, 2012). However, only Fatemah’s report of connectivity exhibited features of the concentrated focus and blurred lines between embodied and disembodied experience reported in Madianou’s (2016) study. At the same time, when evaluating Fatemah’s seeming reliance on her video calls with family in Iraq, it is important to remember that this level of connectivity did not begin until she purchased her first smartphone two-and-a-half years following her arrival in the United States, after she already had begun to establish a home. Farzana, having arrived only six months ago, is the only participant who has experienced an ongoing connectivity from the beginning of her status as a newcomer, and her experience’s intensity is modified by time-zone

differences, unpredictable signals or connectivity, and few members of her distant family owning smartphones.

Digital co-presence adds a rich dimension to these women's lives, despite some of this contact elevating certain tensions as suggested by Wilding (2006). Clearly, participants believe that sharing in both the worries and joys of distant family and friends in real time, or its close proximity, is an enlarging experience and they would be distressed without this opportunity. They are not confused about where they live their own lives or where their immediate attention must be trained. Even June, with her expressions of malaise and reluctance to settle, lets comments slip, such as, "OK, we belong here." This directly refutes ideas that maintaining strong transnational connections forms a hindrance to newcomers when building local identity (Ehrkamp, 2005). Although participants track distant family via social media time stamps and ongoing messaging, their situation, due in part to technical interruptions as well as time-zone awareness, is unlike Madianou's (2016) participants reporting their online presence as no longer registering as a distinct state. However, it is interesting to note that Fatemah does make a similar claim about her sensation during weekend video chats with her mother in Iraq. From what these women indicate about their digital co-presence, certain aspects of immigration psychology may be moving from a model of uprootedness to one of continuous connection, as claimed by Bacigulupe and Camara (2012). However, there were observations that refute this as a generalization for the time being, such as unreliable digital signals and time-zone differences dictating levels of connectivity and socioeconomic divides governing who has access to connectivity and the expensive devices capable of popular communication and social media platforms. For those who do have reliable connectivity, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the

psychological model of the uprooted immigrant is moving to one of a model where there is an increased exposure or awareness of roots.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study uncovered varying manifestations of landscape's significance for the digitally co-present migrant. Despite technology's real-time ability to rematerialize our presence via image and voice in locations a half-planet away, human bodies still respond to the ground beneath their feet and the horizon that greets the eye. All participants in this study, regardless of their personal emphases and attachments to nature, expressed a desire for the gift of time to explore the possibilities of topophilia in their process of making a new home. As demonstrated in their reflexive comments, opportunities to discover the deeper significances of one's physical presence within a new home's landscape can lead to enriched self-understanding, identity, and sense of place.

Regardless individual participants' motives, there was no shortage of agency or desire to learn more about their local geography as part of their place-making. The commodity in shortage was time. The extreme demands on newcomers too often prevent them from exploring their new geography for knowledge, restoration, and increasing their sense of belonging. One effect of these pressures was informally observed during the study when interviews were frequently postponed due to sickness. Health was a peripheral topic during several of the participants' conversations, with June saying, "We end up being so stressed and we end up going to the doctor a lot [...] There's a lot of stuff, you know. Sugar. Pressure. And because of that stressful life we have of taking care of two homes," referring to financial help for her family back in Tanzania. Vana remarked on the pace of life as having a toxic intensity: "Here it is just packed to the degree sometimes you feel, Oh, I may just get intoxicated, you know, from the level of stress."

Of course, this high level of stress is not news to resettlement agencies, whose own staff are stretched to maximum capacity as was witnessed during the study's recruiting process. This research's goal in observing the digitally co-present migrant's access and attention to the landscape is to broaden, not burden, understanding of newcomer identity and place attachment. It is hoped that these findings present an opportunity for immigrant-supporting organizations to further develop communication and programs that help inspire identification with a new landscape and directly address newcomers' need for belonging in the context of natural surroundings, while exploring the therapeutic benefits of this body-world dialogic exchange (Fisher, 2002). Recommendations for future research include identifying effective methods and forums for viable-scale introductions to helpful, basic knowledge of local geography and its flora and fauna to newcomers, including opportunities for readily accessible, affordable, hands-on experience that raise awareness of well-being benefits.

An understandable skepticism of this study's IPA idiographic method is that findings do not lend themselves to normative or generalizable interpretation, a point that is true of all qualitative research. Ambiguity, nontransferable findings, influences of researcher subjectivity, and positivist-inspired labels of naiveté for what is a perceived balancing act between science and art are a few of IPA's received criticisms (Finlay, 2009). In addition, the study's small-sized sample limited the diversity of participants and its geographic focus. However, it was my aim to subdue criticism by employing IPA for its strengths, keeping participants' voices front and center in the study's intersubjective data gathering and interpretive reporting of the digitally co-present migrant's connection with new geography. In an impassioned call for expanding place-related experiential data, the humanist geographer Tuan (1977) prodded researchers to avoid "lazy communication" (p. 201) when reporting topophilia's "quiet attachments" (p. 159). He insisted

that these important lived experiences should receive rich descriptive treatment and that such profound knowledge not be undermined by quantitative boundaries. In exploring the significance of new landscape in the lives of digitally co-present migrants, my research sought whatever of these quiet attachments existed in the lived experience of participants and worked to richly honor them, while also reporting the importance they had in light of the disembodied, digital experience. In so doing, this study adds a minute but important strand of understanding to the complex web of human identity within time, space, and matter.

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