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Refugees in the News: A Representative Anecdote of  
Identification/Division in Refugee Media Coverage

Sarah Steimel

*A refugee worker conflict at the JBS Swift plant in Grand Island, Nebraska serves as a representative anecdote of the dominant media discourses about refugees in the United States. This study adopts a critical cultural perspective and applies Burke's (1969) concepts of identification and division to the ways in which refugees are described in comparison to other immigrants in the media coverage of the conflict. These identifications and divisions generate ideologically powerful official roles for refugees in American society. This study finds that refugees, especially refugees who are also Muslim, are defined in the media coverage of the Grand Island conflict as the 'least preferred immigrant' because of their perceived distance from the ideal American immigration myth.*

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On September 15, 2008, about 500 Muslim workers, most of whom were Somali refugees, walked off the line at the JBS Swift & Company meatpacking plant in Grand Island, Nebraska over the refusal of managers to allow them to take breaks to perform evening prayers during Ramadan (Overstreet, 2008a). They marched a mile to Grand Island's City Hall with handmade signs calling for religious freedom. Over the following days, Swift negotiators first reached a deal with the Union allowing those prayers, but then broke the deal after protests from non-Muslim workers and fired as many as 150 Muslim workers for "repeatedly leaving work without authorization" (Overstreet, 2008). Since this event followed the firing of 100 Muslim workers the previous month at a JBS Swift plant in Greeley, Colorado, it quickly captured media attention (Semple, 2008).

More than simply a workplace dispute in a town of 47,000, the Swift saga as it continues to play out (as the fired workers are now suing Swift for wrongful termination) highlights deep-seeded American cultural tensions inherent in our understanding of the role migrants – including refugees, non-refugee immigrants, and illegal immigrants – ought to play in our society.

Though human migration is certainly not a new phenomenon, globalization has allowed an increasing proportion of people to live outside their country of birth (Sassen, 2006). According to the most recent US Census Bureau Survey (2006),

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there were over 37 million foreign-born migrants in the United States in 2006, which represents 12.5 percent of the total US population. The proportion of this migrant population that can be rightfully called *refugees* is a matter of dispute. In fact, refugees (and by implication non-refugee immigrants) and their official roles in society are discursively constructed in the interaction between migrants, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and host communities (Hardy, Phillips & Clegg, 2001; Leudar, et al., 2008; Phillips & Hardy, 1997). Though several articles have examined the construction of refugee labels and their prescriptions for migrant social roles (e.g. Gale, 2004; Hardy, 1994; Phillips & Hardy, 1997; Pickering, 2001; Robins, 2003; Thweatt, 2005), these articles have yet to understand how media discourses might define refugees by identifying them with and differentiating them from other immigrants in the United States media

Given the news' role in shaping social and political policy (Meyers, 1997; Shah, et al., 2002), the discourses surrounding refugees in the American news will likely impact not only how refugees and their roles are defined in American society, but will likely impact public discourses on immigration and refugee policy, the development and availability of social programs for refugees, and to a large extent, the very social climate refugees face in their everyday lives. An examination of the discourses surrounding refugees in the news, therefore, will reveal one manifestation of the dominant social discourse about refugees in the United States, as well as its implications for shaping public perceptions of refugees.

This study applies Burke's (1969) concepts of identification and division to the ways in which refugees are described in ways similar to and differently from other immigrants in the media coverage of the conflict at the Swift Plant. These identifications and divisions generate ideologically powerful official roles for refugees in American society. This study finds that refugees, especially refugees who are also Muslim, are defined as the "least preferred immigrant" because of their perceived distance from the ideal American immigration myth.

### A Critical Cultural Perspective

According to Saukko (2003), adopting a critical cultural perspective pushes a researcher to be interested in how meanings are constructed at the intersection between life experiences, texts and meta-discourses, and the material context in which people live. Rather than analyzing a text only for its aesthetic features, Saukko (2003) argues that cultural criticism is unique in its investigation of the way in which "texts emerge from, and play a role in, the changing historical, political, and social context" (p. 99). Essentially, all things function as signs, constituted by

the signifier (e.g. the word “black,” the image of a high heel, the sound of a bell) and the signified (or mental image, e.g. “dirty,” “sexy,” or “peaceful”). Cultural criticism understands the link between the signifier and the signified to be arbitrary and indicative of power (Foucault, 2000). Studying discourse from a cultural critical perspective involves examining texts not only for their forms, but also for their cultural signification(s) (Edelman, 1998). By critically interrogating the links internal to signs (between signifier and signified) and between signs, cultural criticism seeks to understand the power relationships constituted by, morally legitimated by, and perpetuated in cultural discourses.

As a result, this perspective, when applied to refugee depictions in the news, allows us to move beyond accepting descriptions of a conflict like the JBS Swift conflict at face value. Cultural criticism allows these discourses to be interrogated, revealing powerful definitions of migrants and their social roles sanctioned by such public discourses.

#### *Refugees in the United States Context*

The United Nations defines refugees as persons who have crossed national borders due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Convention, 1951, Article 1). While 14 million refugees met this formal definition in 2006 (Schweid, 2007), there are another 50 million intra-national refugees, environmental refugees and refugees whose governments are not recognized as “persecutory” under the UN definition (see Lee, 1996; Myers, 1997; Pipher, 2002).

However there are defined, formal refugee resettlement programs approved by the United Nations that are carried out by 10 countries - Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States (Mitrofanova, 2004). Of these countries, the United States accepts more than double the number of “official” refugees than the other nine countries combined (Singer & Wilson, 2007). As a result, more than 2.6 million “official” refugees have resettled in the United States since 1970 (Austein, 2007). This means that the number of refugees experiencing life in the US resettlement context will continue to increase for the foreseeable future. Given the United States’ role as the primary destination for refugees resettled “officially,” it is critical that the discourses surrounding refugees in the American news be critically examined.

*Refugees in the News*

The extant research on refugee depictions has found refugees occupy two primary roles in news coverage – frauds or victims. Initially, refugees are often depicted in news coverage as deviants or frauds, requiring that the State act to protect local communities from the instability and vice brought by refugees. Pickering’s (2001) analysis of news coverage in Australia found that “refugees and asylum seekers have been routinely constructed not only as a ‘problem’ population but as a ‘deviant’ population in relation to the integrity of the nation state, race and disease” (p. 169). Gale’s (2004) analysis of media coverage in Australia, however, found that refugees were also positioned as victims. In addition to displaying the problems caused by refugees, the media ran human interest stories which simultaneously attempted to show the “human face” (p. 327) of refugees by telling their harrowing stories of victimization. Similarly, Robins’ (2003) analysis of American newspapers’ coverage of the Sudanese Lost Boys found that refugees were presented as coming from a situation beyond understanding and as vessels waiting to be filled by US material culture. Robins details the ways that common news descriptions like “a *child-man* with glowing dark skin . . . who was clad only in tattered rags [emphasis original]” creates an image of “helpless” and destitute refugees in need of American protection (p.35).

Likewise, in their analysis of the United Kingdom’s refugee system, Phillips and Hardy (1997) found that media constructions of refugees often identify some refugees as bogus claimants undeserving of protection while granting others legitimate victim or “genuine refugee” status (p. 176). Likewise, Hardy and Phillips’ (1999) study of Canadian political cartoons found that the most common depiction of refugees in political cartoons (at nearly half of the cartoons) were as frauds with no need for government protection. On the other hand, Hardy and Phillips found that about one fifth of the refugees depicted in political cartoons were victims in need of genuine protection. Interestingly, another fifth of the cartoons presented the refugees as simultaneously victims and frauds. Thus, news coverage of refugee resettlement often positions refugees as either frauds or victims, or as some combination of both.

However, these existing studies do not attempt to understand how refugees are positioned in the media more broadly in relation to other non-refugee immigrants (legal or illegal). Thweatt (2005) grouped together refugees and immigrants in order to examine how “New Americans” are depicted through ten years of articles in a Midwestern newspaper. Thweatt reveals that all new Americans (both refugees and immigrants) are evaluated negatively relative to their character, norms, values, and goals. However Ruud Lubbers, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, told

the *BBC News* that “refugees and migrants are fundamentally different, and for that reason are treated very differently under modern international law” (2004). Given their different treatment in many nations’ social and political policies, it is critical to examine how refugee media discourses may identify refugees with or differentiate them from other immigrants (both legal and illegal). Thus, this study examines one social context in the United States to understand how refugees may be defined through being identified with and differentiated from other immigrants in the United States media.

### *Identification and Division*

Burke (1969) sees identification as a process that is fundamental to being human. He argues that humans are born as biologically separate beings and are further separated by factors like social class or position. Burke assumes we not only experience this separateness but are provoked by a need for order and hierarchy to feel guilty about the differences between ourselves and others. To overcome our division, therefore, we look for ways in which our interests, attitudes, values, experiences, or perceptions are shared with others. We then voluntarily identify with those others, defining ourselves as “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.” (Burke, 1969, p. 21). However, in order for this identification to be meaningful, division must still exist. Essentially, we cannot define who is “with us” without some conceptualization of those who are not. As Burke asserts, “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division.” (Burke, 1969, p. 22). Thus, as humans make sense of the social world, we simultaneously create identifications and divisions which define and position actors within it.

Of course, these identifications and divisions are far from ideologically neutral. In Burkean theory, communication is the only reality accessible to humans, and only means we have to interpret the world to ourselves. Symbols, thus, do not mirror the world, but rather, in giving it meaning, constitute it. In Burke’s (1969) words, “Wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is ‘persuasion’” (p. 172). This means that when individuals create identifications/divisions, they are not simply labeling the world, but are giving it meaning. As such, labeling groups of people as like or unlike others creates power structures and hierarchies that have real material consequences for those who live within them. Thus, this study argues that the ways refugees are identified with and differentiated from other immigrants in the United States media places them in ideologically laden social hierarchies.

## Analyzing the Grand Island Conflict

This study focuses on the Nebraska media coverage of the Grand Island refugee worker strikes, which I have selected as a representative anecdote of the ways refugees social roles may be defined through identification with and division from other American citizens and non-refugee immigrants. According to Burke (1969), a representative anecdote can be selected for any human experience that is preferable to a random sample because a certain set of circumstances, spaces and discourses are common to the experiences of some group of human beings. The representative anecdote is in a sense a “summation” of similar experiences (p. 159).

Grand Island, Nebraska is in many ways prototypical of the cultural tensions faced by many moderately sized communities facing an influx of immigrant and/or refugee workers. Grand Island is a small Midwestern, conservative, White, agricultural community which is economically dependent on meatpacking and other agriculturally-based industries that need an influx of cheap labor that the town alone cannot supply. Such industries keep the community alive but also draw in immigrants and refugees from across the globe, people radically different than the historical demographics of the locality and disrupt the traditional ways of life therein. I have decided to focus on the worker strikes in Grand Island, Nebraska, which began on September 15, 2008 because they provide a rich anecdote of the ways that refugees may be identified with and juxtaposed to American citizens and non-refugee immigrants. As Burbach (2008) summarized, “The controversy is a complicated one involving religion, culture clashes, refugee resettlement, immigration, union contracts and factory demands in an increasingly diverse American work force.” The media coverage of this event not only implicates a great deal of the larger American discourses on immigration and race, but similar strikes and conflicts have occurred in a number of communities throughout the United States (Semple, 2008). Thus, the Grand Island conflict, while not generalizable to all depictions of refugees in the media (as it is grounded in a particular time and place) can be used to highlight one way in which media coverage depicts refugees through the processes of identification and division.

Coverage collection began on the day the strike was announced (September 15, 2008) and proceeded for just over a month (until October 17, 2008). Specifically, the data were collected from three newspapers in the state. First, articles were collected from the *Grand Island Independent*, the newspaper in the Nebraska city where the strikes occurred. As a relatively small city (of about 47,000), most residents of Grand Island would also have access to (either in hard copy, or certainly online) one or both of the state’s major papers. As such, articles

were also collected from the *Lincoln Journal Star* (the paper of the state capitol, population about 226,000) and from the *Omaha World Herald* (the largest city in the state, population about 433,000). For the selected month time range, all three newspapers' internet archives were searched for the terms: JBS Swift, refugees, Somali workers, and Grand Island strikes. Articles were read and narrowed to those relevant to the conflict. For the month from September 15, 2008 to October 17, 2008, the *Grand Island Independent* ran 13 articles, the *Lincoln Journal Star* ran 9 articles and the *Omaha World Herald* ran 7 articles about the strikes. This gave me a total of 29 articles over this month period to analyze.

Once the articles were collected, the data were first synthesized into a detailed timeline of the Grand Island conflict. That timeline was then read carefully and repeatedly in order to understand the ways refugees were identified with and divided from other immigrants in ideologically powerful ways.

### *The Media Coverage of the Grand Island Conflict*

Though this timeline of the story does not contain all of the articles analyzed, it provides a picture of the trajectory of the Grand Island conflict.

#### *The Beginning.*

On September 15, 2008, the *Grand Island Independent* reported that a strike was underway at the JBS Swift & Co. meat packing plant. The article explained that a group of largely Muslim Somali refugees had, over the past week, been asking for break time so they could complete their evening prayers during Ramadan. When the company repeatedly refused, the workers attempted to complete their prayers privately. One woman claimed she needed to go to the bathroom, and prayed quickly "until the male supervisor followed her in and told her she was taking too long" (Overstreet, 2008a). Another woman reported that her supervisor "kicked her feet" as she attempted to pray (Overstreet, 2008b).

On Monday, the Somali workers walked out and proceeded a mile from the Swift plant to City Hall, and then continued into downtown Grand Island. Police officers stopped traffic "as the protesters peacefully weaved their way through downtown" (Overstreet, 2008a). When asked what the protest was about, Ahmed Abdi told the *Independent*, "The company said we aren't going to give you any time to pray, but this is a free country... We are Muslim and this country is about freedom" (Overstreet, 2008a). Ridwan Abbi agreed "The main point is freedom for religion" (Overstreet, 2008a). The articles also reported that Swift had fired nearly 100 Muslim workers at one of their plants in Greeley, Colorado the previous month for similar protests.

*A Compromise.*

On September 16, 2008, the *Lincoln Journal Star* first reported the protests, opening with a statement from Swift saying, “Workers who walked off the job at a Grand Island packing plant in a dispute about Muslim prayer time have not been fired” (‘Swift,’ 2008). The *Journal Star* then continued to report statements from both the Swift Company and from the Swift Union arguing that a compromise was unlikely. For instance, Dan Hoppes, Union President, was quoted as saying “I don’t know if I can agree to that [the breaks]” (‘Swift,’ 2008).

The *Journal Star* also described how the plant has “had problems” (‘Swift,’ 2008) with the Somali Muslim workers in the past. Meanwhile the *Independent* reported that negotiations about the breaks had been ongoing since “last Friday, September 12,” but then also quoted a Swift spokesperson who said, “Area religious leaders have been notified that restrictions regarding these breaks prevent us from precisely accommodating requests... It is our understanding that these leaders will notify employees” (Overstreet, 2008b). Interestingly, while both papers included verbatim company statements, neither quoted a refugee worker.

Then, on the evening of the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Swift refugee workers and the management came to a compromise in which the plant would change the time of the second-shift lunch break, shutting down the line for 30 minutes during sunset rather than allowing workers to take their individual 30 minute breaks in shifts (Ortiz, 2008a). The compromise was to last for the next nine working days, which would cover the remainder of Ramadan (Ortiz, 2008a). The *Journal Star* quoted Union President Hoppes as saying, “Hopefully we’ve put this one to bed” and again emphasized the company statement saying no workers had been fired (Ortiz, 2008a).

*Breakdown.*

Conflict erupted on the 18<sup>th</sup>, when the largely Hispanic non-Somali workers at Swift walked off the line in counter-protest which “ended with police called to a reported riot in the Swift Cafeteria” (Overstreet, 2008d). One worker, Bernadino Orellana said, “Hispanics have worked at the Swift plant for 20-30 years... The Somali workers have been there for only the past year” (Overstreet, 2008c). She then continued “Nobody should have special privileges” (Overstreet, 2008c). As Hispanic protestors chanted “Si se puede – a Spanish rally cry that translates to ‘Yes, it can be done’” at the plant’s entrance (Ortiz, 2008b), the Swift company pulled the compromise, saying, “Everything will go back to the way it was” (Overstreet, 2008d). The *Grand Island Independent* reported, “[The protestors] were upset about what they perceived to be special treatment of the Muslims. The

reaction was understandable and predictable in many respects” (‘Tensions,’ 2008). However, the paper simultaneously told citizens of Grand Island “Chill, please,” and said that many in the community seemed to be saying “You are different than me. I don’t understand you. You must be bad” (‘Tensions,’ 2008).

As the protests continued on both sides, reports emerged that management tried to reign in the Hispanic protests through threats. Worker Jose Amya said, “They told the illegal immigrants they don’t have the right to express their opinion... A superintendent told people who don’t have documents that they don’t have the right to express their opinion or they will be fired” (Overstreet, 2008d).

The next day, September 19, the Swift plant released a statement firing 86 protestors, the majority of whom were Somali (though both the *Grand Island Independent* and the *Lincoln Journal Star* reports that the more accurate number may be closer to 150 Somali protestors; Overstreet, 2008e; Ortiz, 2008c).

#### *Aftermath.*

On September 20<sup>th</sup>, a Grand Island Public School worker told the *Omaha World Herald* that she was told that “Cuban families were being brought in to replace the fired workers” (Overstreet & Reutter, 2008). On September 21<sup>st</sup>, Stephens wrote in a letter published in the *Grand Island Independent* that stated that while she “had never been a prejudiced person” that it appalled her “to know that people come here from other countries and are just given the freedoms our citizens have” (Stephens, 2008). Boye wrote in a letter published in the *Independent* that we should “remember ‘Black Hawk Down,’ where 18 Army Rangers were killed by the warlords in Mogadishu Somalia” and were “desecrated” (Boye, 2008). As a result, Boye felt that the Somali refugees were clearly ungrateful. She suggested that they rather than protesting they ought to be saying, “Thank you for saving us from the warlords” (Boye, 2008).

The *Lincoln Journal Star* reported on the 21<sup>st</sup> that the Nebraska Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) had provided Hispanic counter-protesters with brochures – “printed in English and Spanish” – that explained their rights in case they were fired (Ortiz, 2008d). The Omaha Somali-American Community Organization alleged that no similar information was made available to Somali workers (Ortiz, 2008d). The *Omaha World Herald* also reported on the 21<sup>st</sup> that Sudanese refugees had not been as contentious in Grand Island as Somali refugees, as Sudanese refugees are primarily Christian while Somali refugees are predominantly Muslim (Burbach, 2008).

Both the *Independent* (on Sept. 22) and the *World Herald* (on Sept. 24<sup>th</sup>) reported that violence has been escalating between Somali and Sudanese refugees

in Grand Island, though both quote Police Captain Falldoft's explanation that there is no evidence that the violence had been directly caused by the Swift conflict (Coddington, 2008; Overstreet & Coddington, 2008). Also on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the *Omaha World Herald* reported that:

By a 100-to-1 margin, commenters [sic] have said Somali workers should be fired ... Still others wrote that Somalis were asking for special rights they didn't deserve. Another common opinion is that if the Somalis come to America, they need to adapt to American customs (Reutter, 2008b).

The *World Herald* continued by noting that after similar plant conflicts in Colorado and Tennessee, similar commentary appeared on their online newspaper forums, by the same margins.

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, the Union representing the Grand Island refugees fired for protesting filed a grievance on their behalf, again emphasizing that almost all of the fired workers were Somali and not Latino (Ortiz, 2008e; Schulz, 2008). At this point, the reporting trails off for over a week, until on October 9<sup>th</sup>, the *Omaha World Herald* did a retrospective on immigration in Grand Island – beginning with illegal immigration raids at several of the industrial plants last year, and continuing through the Swift conflict. Gonzalez (2008a) argued, “Some residents [of Grand Island] wrongly assume that the Sudanese and Somali refugees are here in the country illegally” when, in fact, they “are eligible for such public benefits as food stamps that are off limits to undocumented immigrants.”

Again, the coverage disappears for a week, until the *New York Times* published an interview with the Grand Island Mayor Margaret Hornady on October 16, in which she said that she had difficulty adjusting to the sight of Somali women in Muslim headdresses, saying that after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks it “gives some of us a turn” (Ortiz, 2008f). Furthermore, she said that seeing the Somali's traditional dress reminded her of Osama bin Laden and the attacks on the U.S. Hornady then admitted that her statement sounded prejudiced and asked, “Aren't a lot of thoughtful Americans struggling with this?” (‘Somali’, 2008). Somali leaders immediately called for her resignation, but as of the time of this study's writing (February, 2009), she remained in office.

### *Identifying and Dividing Refugees*

Given this story's trajectory, it might, at first glance, be easy to assume that the conflict in Grand Island is strictly about religion. But, a closer reading of the texts

demonstrates that in virtually every article about the conflict, attention is drawn not only to the workers' status as Muslims or Christians, but to both their national origins (as American, Somali, Sudanese, or Hispanic) and to their immigration status (legal, illegal, refugees or citizens). Though Hispanic, as a term, does not solely refer to a national origin, it is used in these newspaper articles to designate Hispanic immigrant (not Hispanic-American) and is most likely, given Grand Island's demographics, a reference to Mexican immigrants. Moreover, a close reading of the ways that the refugees are positioned in the articles demonstrates that refugees in this conflict are defined through three identification/division pairs: Americans v. Outsiders, Immigrants v. Refugees and Christian Refugees v. Islamic Refugees.

*Americans v. Outsiders.*

The first identification/division pair created by the media coverage of the Grand Island conflict is Americans v. Outsiders, with refugees clearly grouped with non-refugee immigrants and illegal immigrants in the outsiders' category. In this formulation, Americans (born in the United States) are worthy of rights and/or freedoms they have earned through sacrifices and experiences that the refugees (and other immigrants) have not endured. For instance, despite the Muslim workers' explicit claims that America's Freedom of Religion standards should protect their religious exercises, commentary both from the papers and from the letters/comments in response to the coverage consistently deny that right. In the articles surrounding the "Breakdown" phase of the Grand Island coverage, all three papers report some version of the story that: "The U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbids employers to discriminate based on religion. It says they must 'reasonably accommodate' workers on faith matters" (Burbach, 2008). However, the papers then all universally imply that the accommodation requested by the Somali refugees was not reasonable. Though no paper is explicit, they all provide ample evidence of the economic losses that would be sustained by shutting the plants down for extra time each day during Ramadan. However, despite the fact that the *Omaha World Herald* does report that the plants already shut down during Christian Holy Days, there is no discussion of the economic costs of that decision. The article (and presumably all of the others who fail to even mention Christian holidays) assumes that the Christian accommodations are reasonable, while only the Ramadan accommodations must be subject to a cost-benefit analysis which outweighs the discussion of rights.

Of course, the letters/commentary from citizens in the paper make this dichotomy between Americans and outsiders even more clear. For instance, Stephens wrote:

It appalls me to know that people come here from other countries and are just given the freedoms our citizens have and not have to serve one day in our military. Many have sacrificed it all on the altar of freedom to enjoy what we have in our country today. No one should expect to receive special rights when they were never earned (Stephens, 2008).

Thus, she clearly feels that immigrants and refugees should not be privy to the same rights or freedoms citizens have because they have not yet been earned. Similarly, the *World Herald's* analysis of citizen commentary on the *Grand Island Independent's* website found that many commentators believed "Somalis were asking for special rights they didn't deserve" and that "if the Somalis come to America, they need to adapt to American customs" (Reutter, 2008a). Thus, the refugees are first defined as part of a larger group of immigrants, which are non-American and thus undeserving of American rights.

#### *Immigrants v. Refugees.*

Second, the refugees are clearly positioned in opposition to (and in competition with) other non-refugee immigrants, both legal and illegal. First, though the *Lincoln Journal Star* admits that the counter-protesters were "by White, Hispanic, Vietnamese and African-American workers," (Ortiz, 2008b) virtually all of the coverage of the counter-protests emphasized the Hispanic immigrant population of the plant as in opposition to the requests of the Somali refugees. In the 29 articles collected for this analysis, all but one "counter-protestor" interviewed was identified as Hispanic. In fact, when Union President Hoppes was asked about the counter-protests, he said, "I don't know what happened... I think we have problems between races" (Overstreet, 2008).

The *Journal Star* details the origins of these tensions by describing that Immigration and Naturalization Service agents had raided the Swift meatpacking plant in December 2006, arresting 260 illegal Hispanic immigrant workers. In the aftermath of the raid, Somali and Sudanese refugees were encouraged by the Swift Corporation to fill their positions. As Gonzalez (2008b) summarizes, "the demand for laborers to replace outgoing Latin Americans ushered in a new kind of cultural tension."

The coverage of the counter-protests further dichotomized immigrant and refugee labor by emphasizing public perceptions that Hispanic immigrants had been “trouble free” workers while the Somali refugees were uniquely problematic (Overstreet, 2008d). Similarly, the rumors that less troublesome Cuban immigrants were being brought in to replace the Somali refugees reinforced the perceptions that Hispanic immigrants were the preferred workforce. Finally, Somali activists reinforced the adversarial relationship with Hispanic immigrants by claiming that Hispanic immigrants were given greater advantages (like the EEOC brochures in English and Spanish on how to protect their jobs). As a result, the refugees in this story are clearly positioned first as different from American citizens (by identifying all immigrants as less worthy), but then secondly positioned as different from and in conflict with other immigrants.

#### *Christian Refugees v. Islamic Refugees.*

Finally, the Somali Islamic refugees in this story are positioned as in conflict with other Christian refugees, particularly from Sudan. For instance, Sudanese protester Gatluak Wuol told the *Grand Island Independent* that he “wanted to distinguish his culture as being different from the Muslims from Somalia... We have a different religion. I’m Christian” (Overstreet, 2008d). Similarly, both the *Independent* and the *World Herald* reported that violence has been escalating between Somali and Sudanese refugees in Grand Island. Though both articles quoted Police Captain Falldoft as saying that there is no evidence that the violence had been caused by the Swift conflict, (Coddington, 2008; Overstreet & Coddington, 2008) both articles explained the conflict in the article, which, at least spatially, links the conflict and the violence in the same column-inches in the papers.

Thus, the Somali refugees in this Grand Island conflict story are first positioned as divided from American citizens (by identifying all immigrants together as less worthy), secondly divided as different from and in conflict with other non-refugee immigrants, and finally divided as different from and in conflict with other Christian refugees.

### Discussion and Conclusion

These three identification/division pairs of Americans v. Outsiders, Immigrants v. Refugees and Christian Refugees v. Islamic Refugees are not simply a value neutral set of pairings. As Burke (1965) argued, identification and division processes are used in part to create order by establishing hierarchy by valuing one side of the dichotomy differently than the other. In presenting these pairings, the Nebraska

media implicitly sanctioned one side of each pairing based on its distance from the idealized American immigration myth, ultimately defining refugees, especially Islamic refugees, as a “least preferred migrant.”

In 1958, then Senator John F. Kennedy wrote a book titled *A Nation of Immigrants* which detailed the critical role immigration had played in United States’ founding and argued that immigration would continue to play a fundamental role in America’s exceptional successes. Jones (1992) wrote that immigration “was America’s historic *raison d’être*” (p. 1). The myth of the United States as a land of immigrants plays a significant role not only in the historical identity of the United States, but also in current conceptions of the role migrants should play in the United States.

Wuthnow (2006) examined the idealized American immigration myth, and explained that immigrants are nearly always depicted as willingly and gratefully leaving their homes in search of better opportunities. Additionally, immigrants usually are depicted as crossing from their home to the United States through great struggle and sacrifice (often epitomized in the image of the difficult ocean voyage to Ellis Island). Finally, in the myth, immigrants are believed to be responsible for assimilating to and protecting American values once arrived.

Each pair of actors in the Grand Island conflict is implicitly judged against this immigration myth in the Nebraska media, and one side is sanctioned for its perceived distance from this idealized expectation. First, Americans are evaluated more favorably than outsiders because they are the guardians of the rights and privileges that all immigrants are portrayed as seeking. As a result, Americans are worthy of the rights and freedoms that several citizens deny refugees and immigrants have yet earned.

Second, non-refugee immigrants (ironically even illegal immigrants) are seen as more valuable than refugees because immigrants more closely conform to the preferred narrative of American immigration. As Moreno, Piwowarczyk, and Grodin (2001) explain, although immigrants often willingly leave their home and purposefully move to the United States, refugees are “forced to leave their homes because of persecution or threat of persecution” and may or may not wish to be resettled in the United States. Thus, refugees may not be willing migrants to the United States. Moreover, the refugees were often portrayed in the Nebraska media as trouble makers who were less thankful or grateful than other immigrants to their new nation-home. In addition to the commentary that the Hispanic immigrants had not been causing the same level of problems before the Somali workers arrived, several articles mentioned some of the Grand Island community members’ belief that the Somali immigrants were illegal immigrants. While this may seem like

a harmless mistaken identity at first, the power of the illegal immigrant label becomes clearer in the worker's comments that the Swift management "told the illegal immigrants they don't have the right to express their opinion" (Overstreet, 2008d). Clearly the illegal immigrants were preferred, in part, because they could be more easily controlled if they were not grateful to their new nation-home. Refugee status affords refugees more rights than illegal-immigrant status, which clearly upset the preferred power hierarchy in Grand Island.

Finally, when the Christian refugees and the Islamic refugees were divided in the news, the Christian refugees were preferred, largely because their faith made it appear that they had more willingly assimilated into American culture. Though again this is not made explicit, when commenting on the Somali request for prayers, Boye (2008) writes, "With that said...this is America! We have our ways of conducting our business and our personal lives." Her statement implies that public breaks for prayers are anti-American. Burbach (2008) further explores this sentiment when he quotes Carroll on the comparison between Sudanese Christian and Somali Muslim refugees:

The difference with the Somalis is the religious component," Carroll said. "The challenge for them is this is a country based in Christianity. The holy days we have off are Christian. Sundays off are based on Christianity. . . . That's absolutely going to pose some issues, and employers and employees need to find a middle ground.

In this segment, Carroll explicitly states that Islamic Somali refugees are likely to be challenged than Christian Sudanese refugees because of their religious beliefs' perceived deviation from American norms.

This study demonstrates not only that American news coverage of refugees might define refugees as divided from Americans and other immigrants, but that refugees might be further subdivided by their religious or cultural beliefs. Moreover, this study goes further to assert that these discourses are not ideologically neutral. Refugees are defined by identifications/divisions which are evaluated and then disciplined based on their perceived distance from the preferred American immigrant myth.

When I undertook this study, I believed there might be some difference in the media coverage of the events based on the particular paper from which the coverage emerged. Omaha, as a town of nearly half a million (with more diversity than Grand Island) often perceives itself as ideologically different from small-

town western Nebraska. Yet, a quick glance at the reference list demonstrates that several of the authors writing in the Omaha paper were also writing articles for the Grand Island or Lincoln papers. Thus, at least in Nebraska, the coverage appears to be uniform across papers.

Certainly, however, this conflict was not only covered in Nebraska. Future research should examine how different papers, situated in different material and cultural spaces cover this conflict in similar and/or different ways. Further, future research should look at other contexts in which refugees are defined in the American media in order to develop a more robust picture of the ways that refugees are portrayed in the United States. At the least, this paper encourages future research to examine the ways refugees can be defined through identifications with or divisions from other citizens, immigrants and refugee groups in order to more completely understand the ideologically powerful hierarchies which may emerge.

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