

Article

# A Snapshot of Ongoing Transculturalism in Britain: Refugee NGO Website Personal Narratives and Global Border Crossing—A Case Study<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** With a focus on refugees’ written personal narratives on refugee NGO websites, this paper examines ongoing transculturalism in Britain and its interplay with globalization and current international migration. Conceiving such personal narratives as cultural texts pertaining to refugee narratives as a broad genre that encompasses different storytelling modalities, those personal stories on refugee NGO websites are explored from a cultural studies perspective. CDA is employed as a methodology for this cultural studies-oriented piece. A qualitatively oriented case study is accordingly presented based on the detailed examination of an example of such written narratives on the website of one such refugee NGO in the UK so as to instantiate and contribute to disentangling the articulation of this characteristic form of ongoing transculturalism. Special emphasis is laid on the discursive construction of refugees’ transcultural identities in such narratives through their participation in those global border-crossing processes characteristic of the contemporary landscape.

**Keywords:** transculturalism; global border crossing; international migration; refugee NGOs; written personal narratives; cultural studies; critical discourse analysis; Britain



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## 1. Introduction

Taking NGOs as fundamental actors in the transit and relocation of refugees in the twenty-first century (Davies 2019b; Loescher 2021), this paper intends to cast light on the role of refugees’ written personal narratives—a recurrent section on the websites of refugee NGOs in the Global North—as a privileged cultural product (Baldwin et al. 2004, p. 175), which provides a snapshot of ongoing transculturalism in Britain (Schulze-Engler 2009) and its interplay with globalization (Steger 2020) and current international migration (Koser 2016). Conceiving such personal narratives as “cultural texts” (Storey 2001, p. 2) linked to refugee narratives as a broad genre that encompasses different storytelling modalities (Gandhi and Nguyen 2023b), the said personal stories on refugee NGO websites are explored from a cultural studies perspective, thereby “offer[ing] us frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way the social order is constructed” (Barker 2004, p. 131). Critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) (Fairclough 2014; Flowerdew and Richardson 2018b) is employed as a methodology for this cultural studies-oriented piece (Barker and Galasiński 2001) with a view to “understanding [...] the embedding of narratives within discursive and sociocultural concepts” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2019, p. 3). A qualitatively oriented case study is accordingly presented based on the detailed examination of a representative example—reproduced in Appendix A—of such written narratives, namely Abou Ali and Fatima’s story (Refugee Council n.d.) as presented on the website of Refugee Council—one such refugee NGO in the UK. The purpose of

this paper is thus to instantiate and contribute to disentangling how this form of ongoing transculturalism (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2021) is articulated—with a CDA-based three-fold conception of discourse, special emphasis is laid on the discursive construction of transcultural identities in NGO website personal stories, accounting for refugees' participation in global border-crossing processes via the said NGOs characteristic of the contemporary landscape (Schimanski and Wolfe 2007b, 2017a; Schimanski and Nyman 2021).

## 2. Transculturalism and Global Border Crossing

Transculturalism is a fundamental issue of concern for cultural studies, which, to quote a classical source, “accepts the dynamic and indeterminate nature of cultural formations. It seeks to move beyond notions of a singular or unitary culture, speaking always in terms of cultures and diverse formations of power” (Lewis 2002, p. 420). As pointed out by Michaels, to cultural studies, “cultures or cultural phenomena are therefore always in a relationship, and consequently, the boundaries are porous, open and fluid” (Michaels 2021, p. 99), which entails that the so-called transcultural approach “opens ways of studying processes rather than static forms of culture, and historically or locally special traditions of appropriation” (pp. 11–12).

Transculturalism is now regarded as a characteristic feature of the contemporary global context, where “cultural contiguity is inevitable [because] globalization processes bring together cultural formations together to form new hybrid formations at an international and micro-community level” (Lewis 2002, p. 437). In a piece where—see below—CDA is employed as a method for cultural analysis-oriented research, Fairclough's approach to the effect of globalization on language is most enlightening; to Fairclough globalization entails diverse types of “flows”, “networks”, and “interconnections” (2006, p. 3), which have a direct impact on language and specific genres.

One of the principal assumptions of transcultural studies is, in Wenzlhuemer's view, that “culture is constantly changing, moving, adapting—and it is doing this *through contact and exchange beyond real or perceived borders*” (Wenzlhuemer 2021, p. 39; emphasis added), which has resulted in research that, among other issues, “has examined the border-crossing movements of people, things or ideas” (Wenzlhuemer 2021, p. 40). Transculturalism is, to a great extent, articulated through people's border-crossing processes. As Abu-Er-Rub et al. contend in this regard, “individuals or groups are the real ‘protagonists’ of transcultural interaction determining—with their intellectual background, social role, expectations and interests—the character of border-crossing processes” (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2021, p. xxxii). The transcultural may, therefore, occur, according to Lull, because of a number of factors including the physical movement of people, the effect of mass media and cultural industries, for “some of the most significant and vast cultural territories and movements are mediated, symbolic lands *and migrations*” (Lull 2000, p. 42; emphasis added). Assuming international migration to be a major dimension of globalization, in addition to the increase in flows of goods, ideas, information and capital across borders, “many commentators argue that globalization is also increasing the flow of people across borders too” (Koser 2016, p. 25). So, global border-crossing processes may be taken to be a privileged opportunity for exploring ongoing instances of transculturalism, especially to shed light on the role of individuals participating in such processes and their transcultural identity-construction processes: “such transcultural vantage point on such border-crossing agents brings in new considerations with respect to mobilities, temporalities and space” (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2021, p. xxxiii).

In this context, the domain of border studies (e.g., Schimanski and Wolfe 2007b, 2017a; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan 2012; Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez 2019b; Pereira-Ares 2019) has been recently conceived as “a vast and thriving field that makes sense of the widely different, sometimes incompatible and constantly changing definitions of the border” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 1). According to Schimanski and Wolfe, “borders have tended to be part of b/ordering processes of exclusion and inclusion, becoming fixed as lines of demarcation” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017b, p. 149). With a special focus on research on

borders within the humanities and the social sciences, Rosello and Wolfe highlight that “borders exist both within and outside of discourse, but also have shaped the subjectivity of those subjects who encounter borders in their everyday life” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 1). This view is consistent with the theoretical and methodological stance of this piece of research, where border-crossing narratives are approached employing discourse analytical resources with a broader cultural studies focus in mind. As Rosello and Wolfe insist in this respect, they said “approach is in synch with the spatial turn which, within the field of cultural studies, aims to connect topographical spaces with the medial spaces of culture specially through the use of discourse analysis” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 2).

In line with research on border-crossing narratives (Boer 2006; Robinson 2007; Sadowski-Smith 2008; Black 2009; Viljoen 2013; Mills 2023; Schimanski and Wolfe 2023), this paper provides an insight into refugees’ written personal narratives on NGO websites accounting for the border-crossing dimension of their transit and resettlement in Britain: “The border-crossing narrative [...] can thus be apprehended as performative renegotiations of nations and their narration, as well as the border itself” (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 2).

### 3. International Migration, Refugees and Globalization: The Role of NGOs

International migration has become a key process of the contemporary global age. While the concept of globalization is sometimes more narrowly conceived in strictly economic terms as “the extension of cross-border economic ties, leading to greater integration of societies and economies around the world” (Hartley 2020, p. 148), the notion is also often taken to involve “the increased compression of the world and our growing consciousness of those processes” (Barker 2004, p. 76).

This compression is often characterized in terms of the accelerated “mobility of people as migrants” and hence, the increased “flows of images and representations and interactions through contemporary media and communications technologies” (Fairclough 2006, p. 3). Taking international migration as a global phenomenon, Koser maintains that “throughout the world, people of different national origins, who speak different languages, and who have different customs, religions, and ways of living are coming into unprecedented contact with each other” (Koser 2016, p. 10). Whereas Koser claims that “whether they are willing to admit it or not, most societies today are characterised by a degree of diversity” (Koser 2016, p. 10), cultural analysts like Lull go as far as to hold that, because of the transit of peoples between geographic locations—very much through migrations—this “fusing of cultural forms” (Lull 2000, p. 243) results in processes of transculturality. Steger likewise underscores that “[...] hardly any society in our globalized world possesses an ‘authentic’, self-contained culture. In fact, cultural hybridity seems to be ubiquitous in today’s globalizing world” (Steger 2020, p. 90).

In the context of the international migrations characteristic of the global age, a major sector of international migrants is constituted by individuals who are displaced for various reasons. Of those, “most are refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons who are fleeing violence, conflict, religious or ethnic discrimination, and persecution” (Loescher 2021, p. 1). Refugees are “people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees n.d., para. 1).

Together with asylum seekers and other internally displaced persons, refugees are dispensed invaluable assistance and support by NGOs all over the world, for instance, in their traveling from their countries of origin and while starting a new life in their countries of destination. As underlined by Loescher in his analysis of such a global phenomenon today, “there currently exist thousands of national and international NGOs which provide assistance to refugees, IDPs, and other people who have been forcibly displaced” (Loescher 2021, p. 93).

Davies highlights that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) “are among the most prominent features of contemporary international life” (Davies 2019a, p. 1). As reported in Götz’s (2019) literature review, the breakthrough of NGOs in the world dates back to

the 1945 Charter of the UN Refugee Council and was established as a registered charity in the UK in 1951 coinciding with a period of what Götz refers to as “intensification” in the emergence of NGOs worldwide between 1971 and 1991—preceding the apogee of those in the twenty-first century. Based on Westwater’s (2022, n.p.) report in the digital version of *Big Issue*, in addition to Refugee Council, other major refugee NGOs in the UK include—sometimes focused on different categories of refugees—UNICEF, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Refugee Rescue, #Help Ukraine Emergency Appeal, Save the Children, the British Red Cross, Safe Passage, NACCOM Network, Refugee Action, Refugees at Home, Women for Refugee Women, or Care4Calais.

#### 4. Exploring Refugee NGO Website Written Narratives: Discourse, Cultural Studies and CDA

With a central focus on discourse, this paper approaches refugee NGO website narratives from a cultural studies theoretical stance, drawing upon CDA methodologically with a view to “understanding [...] the embedding of narratives within discursive and sociocultural concepts” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2019, p. 3). Cultural studies have been defined, to quote classical sources, as “an interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary field of enquiry that explores the production and inculcation of maps of meaning” (Barker 2003, p. 437). Enlarging on the fundamentally interdisciplinary nature of cultural studies, Baldwin et al. maintain that “it is this configuration of collaborating disciplines around the topic of culture that we see constituting both the substance and the methods of cultural studies” (2004, p. 41).

NGOs—including those responsible for them, refugees themselves and individuals who access their websites, sometimes to donate—have substantially benefited from digital communication in the global context. As Roth claims, “access and use of digital communication is another recent development that has changed the relationship between those who offer and those who receive (or are meant to receive) humanitarian assistance”, NGOs “us[ing] websites and social media to inform the public about their activities in order to obtain donations” (Roth 2019, p. 278).

Refugee narratives, a recurrent feature on the websites of refugee NGOs, are here taken to be “cultural texts”, a notion employed by cultural theorists like Storey (2001). Echoing Raymond Williams’s (1983) prior conceptualization of the term culture and its different meanings (1983, p. 90), Storey focuses on a conception of “culture as signifying practices [...] [which] would allow us to speak of soap opera, pop music, and comics, as examples of culture” (Storey 2001, p. 2). Refugee personal stories on the websites of NGOs might accordingly be considered cultural texts pertaining to a view of cultures as signifying practices different from alternative conceptions of the term involving what Storey regards as “lived cultures or cultural practices” (Storey 2001, p. 2). Written personal narratives on refugee NGO websites may be taken to be a characteristic type of cultural texts classed as “refugee narratives”, recently approached by Gandhi and Nguyen as a broad category encompassing different storytelling modalities, by and large, constituted around “the different ways refugees are imbricated with narrative or how they are understood and produced *through* narrative” (Gandhi and Nguyen 2023a, p. 1). As illustrated by the chapters in the collection edited by Gandhi and Nguyen (2023b), refugee narratives take shape in a wide range of narrative productions including “novels, poetry, memoirs, comics, films, photography, music, social media, data, graffiti, letters, reports, eco-design, video games, archival remnants and ethnography written by, alongside, or in conversation with refugee cultural producers” (Gandhi and Nguyen 2023a, p. 1).

The said personal stories on refugee NGO websites are, herein, explored from a general cultural studies theoretical perspective, assuming that narratives “offer us frameworks of understanding and rules of reference about the way the social order is constructed” (Barker 2004, p. 131). As cultural studies theorist Chris Barker adds respecting the relation between personal narratives and cultures, the former “are always already a part of the wider cultural

repertoire of narratives, discursive explanations, resources and maps of meaning available to members of cultures" (Barker 2004, p. 131).

The notion of discourse is central to cultural studies, where, largely based on Michel Foucault's conception of the term as "the practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972, p. 80), a discourse has come to refer "to the production of knowledge through language which gives meaning to material objects and social practices" (Barker 2003, p. 439). However, as Barker himself acknowledges, despite cultural studies' concern about "discourse and its role in the construction of meaning, [it] has only rarely engaged with the detailed analysis of discourse itself" (Barker 2002, p. 40)—Barker consequently recommends drawing upon disciplines like CDA, which may be particularly useful "by deploying the tools of micro-linguistic analysis to show just how 'social construction' is achieved in the flow of everyday speech and interaction" (Barker 2002, p. 44). This interdisciplinary collaboration of cultural studies and CDA proves to be particularly effective from a methodological point of view. As Baldwin et al. (2004, p. 41) stress in this respect, apart from production-based studies and studies of lived cultures, cultural studies engage in text-based studies as part of their research.

CDA—increasingly referred to as critical discourse studies (CDS)—is "an inter-disciplinary approach to language in use, which aims to advance our understanding of how discourse figures in social practices, social structures and social change" (Flowerdew and Richardson 2018a, p. 1). According to Paltridge, CDA "explores issues such as gender, ethnicity, cultural difference, ideology and identity and how these are both constructed and reflected in texts" (Paltridge 2006, p. 179). Therefore, CDA happens to be particularly compatible with cultural studies, which, in a similar manner, "coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns that include articulation, culture, discourse, ideology, identity, popular culture, power, representation and text" (Barker 2004, p. 43).

Among the different traditions of CDA (cf. Wodak and Meyer 2016; Flowerdew and Richardson 2018b), this paper largely draws upon Fairclough's (1995, 2003, 2006, 2014) approach, since—considering the purpose of this piece and the methodological use of CDA for cultural studies-oriented research here—this analytical framework embeds the strictly textual dimension of discourses within the socio-cultural via discursive practices or interactions. In accordance with Fairclough's three-fold conception of discourse, drawn upon in this paper, "discourse, and any specific instance of discursive practice, is seen as simultaneously (i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice [or interaction] (text production and text interpretation), [and] (iii) sociocultural practice" (Fairclough 1995, p. 97).

In advocating such utilization of CDA as a method for cultural studies, Barker and Galasiński argue that "CDA is able to provide the methodological tools by which to demonstrate the place of language in the constitution and regulation of cultures and cultural identities" (Barker and Galasiński 2001, p. 27). In connection with the type of research undertaken in this paper, CDA has been similarly employed as an analytical instrument for cultural studies and transcultural studies research in studies to a certain extent comparable to the present one (e.g., Downes and Kim 2018).

##### 5. Case Study: Refugee Council—Abou Ali and Fatima's Story (Refugee Council n.d.)

Written personal stories are a recurrent section in most refugee NGO websites, where narratives by refugees are often found presenting their experience and illustrating the assistance received by the NGO in question for starting a new life in the country of destination after fleeing their countries of origin because of reasons like war, conflict or violence. Such narratives are often representative of border-crossing experiences on the part of refugees as part of their transit and relocation, borders being not only physical but also cultural. For, as Schimanski and Wolfe underline, "borders can demarcate the edges of territories, or they can shelter for example the social imaginary of a community" (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017b, p. 149). As happens with the section entitled "Stories" on the Refugee Council's website, this type of section is similarly found on the websites of a number of other refugee NGOs in

the UK—to mention only a few—under headings like “Refugee Voices” in Refugee Action, “Volunteer Stories” in Calais4Calais, “We Are Here” in the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, “Our Interactive Stories” in Save the Children or “Stories” in the British Red Cross. Contrary to other types of refugee narratives, it is important to acknowledge that the narratives displayed on NGO websites consistently serve the purpose of advertising for NGOs. In terms of production, that is, from language to mediation, refugee narratives of this type are edited. Thus, it is imperative to bear in mind the fundamental role played by the potential translators and editors of NGO websites, which might contribute to making sense of the transcultural dimension of refugee NGO website personal stories.<sup>1</sup>

In the Refugee Council website’s “Stories” section, selected first-person refugee narratives are frequently updated dealing with issues concerning asylum support, destitution, children, integration, mental health or resettlement. The stories in this section of the website may, therefore, be claimed to be consistent with this NGO’s endeavor to “inspire change in attitudes towards refugees and people seeking asylum—speaking out for compassion fairness and kindness” (Refugee Council 2023, para. 2).

Although there are examples of narratives by refugees having arrived in the UK from various contexts of conflict and war (for example, the Middle East or Africa), there are a great number of personal stories related to the 2015 European migrant crisis—other NGOs specialize in different worldwide conflicts or specific categories of refugees (e.g., #Help Ukraine Emergency Appeal or Save the Children). In this sense, among the dozens of personal stories on the Refugee Council’s website, the story of Abou Ali and Fatima has been selected since it is a typical example, fully representative of the type of personal stories included in this section of the website—the story is reproduced in Appendix A. Methodologically speaking, Fairclough himself contends that any text counts as a form of discourse (i.e., text, interaction and socio-cultural action) “and can fruitfully be examined in terms of the co-presence and interaction of these constitutive processes” (Fairclough 1995, p. 6). The analysis of the above-mentioned narrative centers on the present case study, one that is grounded in “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case” (Dörnyei 2007, p. 171).<sup>2</sup>

Before proceeding to examine the discursive dimension of the narrative as text, it is worth mentioning that Abou Ali and Fatima (Refugee Council n.d.) are a young couple from Syria who had just had their first child when, in their own words, “the war started and the situation just got worse and worse” until “the UN said we could go to the UK”. As in most other refugee stories, the discursive construction of the narrative at a textual level is articulated on the basis of a contrast between a situation of sorrow, in this case in Syria (“We hid in the shelters just coming out to see if family members are alive or dead”) and the chance to start a new life of hope and opportunity in Britain thanks to Refugee Council—despite the uncertainties involved in crossing national and cultural borders (“It was a frightening decision—to be alone, without family, in a strange country, where we could not speak the language. But they were offering us a safe place to be”). The lexis of horror in the country of origin when the war broke out (e.g., “it was unbelievable”) gives way to one of adaptation in the country of destination, where, with the help of Refugee Council, Abou Ali, Fatima and their family could “feel independent”, thereby being “very grateful to the UK” for “a safe place to be”. The form of transculturalism “in the making” personified by this Syrian family once relocated to Britain is vividly described in their words after this border-crossing experience, “Our family are still in Syria [. . .]. We worry for them. Physically we are here but emotionally we are there”.<sup>3</sup> As it is, their new life in Britain does not prevent them from being hopeful that they “can one day go back to Syria”.

This written narrative bears witness to a form of ongoing transculturalism whereby this family progressively adapts to the UK lifestyle while preserving much of their own Middle Eastern culture (“We were like little children. We had to be taught everything. [. . .] Everything we needed in the beginning”). In this connection, a sequence of material processes<sup>4</sup> (e.g., “to get on a bus”; “to find halal shops”; “setting up bank accounts”; registering with a GP”; “going to the opticians and health checks”; “pay for things at a supermarket”;

“get signed up for English classes”; “go to college”; etc.; emphasis added) comes to construct the family’s gradual adaptation to the culture and society of their new country in the form of actions that they needed to learn (“We had to be taught everything”) as part of a border-crossing process involving linguistic and cultural barriers of different types in a new country. In this regard, the words of Hannah—a member of the Refugee Council welcoming and offering help to the family on arrival in Britain—significantly reported in direct speech (“We are here for you. If you need anything you can always call us”) result in feelings of relief and gratitude (“It’s like when you are very thirsty and someone gives you a drink of water”)—the use of second-person generic “you” may be claimed to universalize such an experience, and hence, contributes to a process of cultural fusion. Although the present analysis is not multimodal in nature, it is worth considering the picture of the couple that accompanies the story, which captures the happiness on their smiling faces as they sit in a luminous living room—Fatima is dressed in the characteristic apparel of many Muslim women.

At any rate, the type of cultural hybridization experienced by Abou Ali and Fatima is not necessarily a story of full contentment, as graphically encapsulated in the sort of dissociation which they certainly endure after having started a new life in Britain: “Our family are still in Syria and we are constantly checking the news. We worry for them”. Their narrative makes it clear that the type of transculturalism captured in the lifestyle depiction of refugees like them in Britain is one in process and we cannot make sense of it without considering their lives on both sides of the cultural border they have crossed. This is, as grammatically shown by the use of adversative “but”, showcasing that their relocation and beginning of a new life in the UK is closely intertwined with the vivid recollections of their place of origin in the Global South (“Physically we are here but emotionally we are there. We are very grateful to the UK for giving us a home but we will never lose hope in God that we can one day go back to Syria”). Using Schimanski and Wolfe’s vocabulary of border-crossing aesthetics, like many other refugees, Abou Ali and Fatima are border crossers “crossing borders [...] [whose] crossings are regulated. [...] some border-crossings are unsuccessful. Border-crossers may be migrants, displaced persons [...] etc.” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017b, p. 153).

As substantiated by Abou Ali and Fatima’s written story, their transcultural identity-construction process—albeit under way—could only start to be accomplished through the mediation of the NGO which assisted them, bearing particularly in mind the language barrier (“Refugee Council helped us get signed up for English classes and helped get the kids into nursery and school so we could both go to college. They helped us a lot in every way. Helped us feel independent”). As they illuminatingly verbalize through the use of comparison, “It’s like when you are very thirsty and someone gives you a drink of water”. In the case of narratives like Abou Ali and Fatima’s on the Refugee Council website, the NGO acts as “threshold”, that is, “an in-between and transitional space of waiting” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017b, p. 164) indispensable for the ongoing transcultural process embodied in refugees and to a significant extent articulated through their border-crossing experiences.

For CDA, in general, and Fairclough’s (1995, 2003, 2014) approach, in particular, texts—for instance, personal stories like Abou Ali and Fatima’s on the Refugee Council’s website—are part of wider interactions entailing processes of discourse production, interpretation, distribution and consumption. Such interactions are in turn embedded in broader socio-cultural processes. In this sense, social practices of international migration have become part of the global age, where refugees’ relocation process in the Global North has started to have a bearing on the personal lives of nationals, thus facilitating contact between different national and cultural communities (e.g., Syrian and British, as happens in Abou Ali and Fatima’s narrative in Refugee Council). Surely this is the result of the growing visibility of a process, to a large extent, managed by NGOs across the world.

Abou Ali and Fatima’s narrative on the Refugee Council website is an instance of the construction of this type of discourse—as discussed above—aiming to advertise the

NGO and obtain donations accordingly. Abou Ali and Fatima's identities are discursively constructed by fusing together—rather than merely assimilating—cultural elements characteristic of both their origin in the Global South (e.g., the Middle East) and their destination (e.g., Britain), so that they may be possibly explored as transcultural in nature. In refugee narratives like this, the NGO acts as a “threshold” enabling the transcultural process embodied in refugees' identities and substantially articulated on the basis of their border-crossing experiences. In this regard, according to Stuart Hall, identities are “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions that discursive practices construct for us” (Hall 2000, p. 19). So, embedded in a wider layer of discourse as interaction, the textual dimension of refugee narratives on the Refugee Council website comes to be simultaneously interpreted by website users as being culturally coherent. In reading such personal stories, those users are positioned within the transcultural discourses on refugees of the global age—in this instance, triggered by the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. If only when considering donating, NGO website consumers in the UK become temporarily infused with the transcultural values represented in refugee personal stories, thereby partaking of the said form of ongoing transculturalism—indeed a bidirectional phenomenon—in Britain triggered by global border-crossing in the context of international migration.<sup>5</sup> In participating in the border-crossing experience of the refugees whose personal stories they access, website users themselves arguably become—at least momentarily—what Schimanski and Wolfe refer to as “border subjects” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017b, p. 153). Interestingly, as is often the case in other refugee narratives on NGO's websites, the stories seem to be slightly biased, since they are all stories of happy resolutions for refugees, comfortably settled in the UK in happy conviviality—possibly in connection with the edited character of such narratives and the purpose of this genre.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe claim for “more analytical work around the structure of border narratives, both those of border crossings and of the processes of border formation: the creation, maintenance, change and erasure of borders, involving both state institutions and individuals” (Schimanski and Wolfe 2007a, p. 25). In stories like Abou Ali and Fatima's (Refugee Council n.d.), refugees come to cross borders—both in their geopolitical and ontological dimensions—as the NGOs assist individuals to flee the horror of war in their countries of origin and settle down in host countries like the UK. Such a border-crossing experience leads to a process of relocation involving the subsequent fusion of refugees' culture of origin and destination, thus articulating a characteristic form of ongoing transculturalism in Britain. As the case study has unveiled, refugee narratives on the websites of NGOs like Refugee Council—edited to serve the purpose of advertising for the NGOs—manifest an intricate interplay between personal stories, cultural identity and global migration processes in the context of the contemporary refugee experience in the UK. Firstly, the discursive construction of refugees' transcultural identities points to the significance of specific features of language usage at a textual level (e.g., lexis, material processes, generic 'you', adversatives or comparisons). Secondly, in the specific type of discourse as the interaction produced on such NGO websites, the transcultural has an effect not only upon refugees' identities but also upon website consumers—in accessing refugee personal stories, website users on the other side of the threshold that refugees have just crossed are similarly made to negotiate—at least momentarily—their own identities as British citizens with the subject positions offered by refugees having settled down in the UK, thereby becoming transcultural subjects as well. Thirdly, as a characteristic form of interaction constructed in refugee NGO websites, refugee narratives are embedded in transcultural discourses as a socio-cultural practice linked to global migration and border-crossing—hence, the complexities inherent to the study of refugees' written personal narratives on NGO websites.

Personal stories like the one examined here instantiate the potential of refugee NGO websites for “capturing” the dynamics of transcultural identity-construction processes—

indeed in progress—via the snapshots provided by specific cultural products involving, as in the present analysis, border-crossing personal narratives. As stressed by Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez, “borders—and related concepts like ‘boundaries’, ‘thresholds’, ‘liminality’—are central in organizing the human lifeworld, people’s experience, thought, understanding of themselves and their place in society” (Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez 2019a, pp. 3–4). Transculturalism—in social and discursive processes like the one explored in this paper—may thus be best-made sense of as being often inextricably connected to border-crossing processes characteristic of the global age—as evidenced by the activity of refugee NGOs not only in the UK but also all over the world (Roth 2019).

Border-crossing has certainly become a global phenomenon characteristic of the contemporary landscape. As Weber and Pickering note in this respect, “although some pundits have forecast the dawning of a borderless world, the borders of nation-states are far from dead. In fact, they have become rejuvenated under the conditions of globalization” (Weber and Pickering 2014, p. 9). With a focus on refugee NGO websites in Britain as a case in point within an overall cultural studies perspective, this paper has shed light on the fundamental role of discourse in understanding refugees’ global border-crossing processes. In addition to building corpora of narratives of this type for obtaining quantitative results through follow-up studies or designing qualitative studies involving more samples, the present case study may open up research avenues exploring, for example, narratives of this type on the websites of NGOs operating in different national settings.

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## Appendix A. Personal Story Analysed (Refugee Council n.d.)

### Abou Ali and Fatima’s Story

Looking back, life was wonderful. It was peaceful with nothing to worry about. We were young, married and had just had our first child.

Then the war started and the situation just got worse and worse. There was constant bombing. Planes dropping bombs every day, slamming us from every side. It felt as if we were under siege. it [sic] was unbelievable. We hid in the shelters just coming out to see if family members are alive or dead.

When the UN said we could go to the UK they showed us a film about the country. It was a frightening decision—to be alone, without family, in a strange country, where we could not speak the language. But they were offering us a safe place to be.

We arrived in the UK. with [sic] one suitcase with all our belongings in. It was wonderful to see Hannah waiting for us. She told us [sic] ‘we are here for you. If you need anything you can always call us.’ It’s like when you are very thirsty and someone gives you a drink of water.

We were like little children. We had to be taught everything. How to get on a bus. What to say to the driver. What number to get to go to town. Where to find halal shops. Where the mosque was. Everything we needed in the beginning. Then things like setting up bank accounts, registering with a GP, going to the opticians and health checks to make sure that we had not caught any disease or virus during the war. How to pay for things at a supermarket. All about the currency.

Refugee Council helped us get signed up for English classes and helped get the kids into nursery and school so we could both go to college. They helped us a lot in every way. Helped us feel independent.

Our family are still in Syria and we are constantly checking the news. We worry for them. Physically we are here but emotionally we are there. We are very grateful to the UK for giving us a home but we will never lose hope in God that we can one day go back to Syria.

## Notes

- 1 NGOs' websites are examples of a genre of its own—the context of text production and purpose of NGO website refugee narratives has been discussed in this respect. Based on Blommaert's (2001) partly similar research on asylum seekers' narratives, his approach to context might elaborate on potentially significant issues like "linguistic-communicative resources, 'text trajectories' (i.e., the shifting of text across contexts) and finally 'data histories' (i.e., the socio-historical situatedness of 'data')" (Blommaert 2001, p. 13).
- 2 For follow-up research with a different scope—perhaps derived from this piece—work on data saturation might indicate how many narratives it would take to make generalisations based on a thorough examination of the genre as such.
- 3 Although there are examples of the analysis like this which might lead to consider "transnationalism" as an equally valid underpinning concept in the research, the main focus of the paper is on "transculturalism", as discussed in the theoretical framework—chiefly to narrow down the scope of the paper in accordance with its purpose and indeed due to space constraints. Subsequent research might thus explore the connections and differences between "transculturalism" and "transnationalism" in these narratives.
- 4 In Halliday's systemic-functional grammar, our perception of experience and linguistic construction of reality takes shape in the form of "goings-on" or processes of different types, material processes being processes of "doing" (Halliday [1985] 1994, pp. 106–10).
- 5 McLeod (2011) provides an enlightening discussion of transculturalism—the focus of this piece—versus interculturalism and multiculturalism in contemporary societies like Britain.

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