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## MAINTAINING CONTINUITY IN CONTEXTS OF EXILE: REFUGEE FAMILIES AND THE «FAMILY NOVEL» PROJECT

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# **MAINTAINING CONTINUITY IN CONTEXTS OF EXILE: REFUGEE FAMILIES AND THE “FAMILY NOVEL” PROJECT<sup>1</sup>**

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## RÉSUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS

Le projet décrit dans ce rapport s'est intéressé à la transmission familiale des valeurs chez les familles réfugiées et sur la façon dont elle maintient une certaine continuité entre le passé, le présent et le futur. L'équipe de recherche a utilisé à cette fin le roman familial, une approche biographique qui consiste à reconstituer l'histoire d'une famille. Douze familles réfugiées, de diverses origines, ont donc accepté de raconter leur histoire, processus au bout duquel elles recevaient leur roman sous forme d'un document « publiable » d'environ 10 000 mots. De ces entretiens, plusieurs thèmes sont ressortis : origines de la famille, parcours migratoire, croyances religieuses, éducation, etc. Aborder ces dimensions et les voir mettre par écrit a permis à ces familles de reprendre du pouvoir sur leur propre histoire et de lui donner de la légitimité.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational conflicts faced by immigrant and refugee families are approached from different angles in the literature. For some researchers, parent-child relations are apprehended through a psychological dimension, captured by such notions as “asymmetric levels of acculturation” (Rick and Forward, 1992; Beiser, *et al.*, 1995; Ghuman, 1994) and “intrapsychic conflicts” (Nguyen, 1992). For others, they are situated in larger frames of analysis which take into account social determinants like migration history, socio-economic status, gender roles in the family, education, and ethnic origin (Meintel and Le Gall, 1995; Noivo, 1993; Hines *et al.*, 1992; Xenocostas, 1991). Many studies place emphasis on the conflictual nature of parent-children relations in immigrant families, focusing more specifically on ways in which the values of the host society sometimes enter into competition with those of the country of origin. Other studies remind us that these relations may also be characterized by significant spaces for consensus and respect (Xenocostas, 1991; Meintel and Le Gall, 1995; Vatz Laaroussi, 2001). Whereas the former perspective perceives the immigrant family as an impediment to integration, the latter proposes that the family can be seen as an important resource for supporting youth facing the challenges of integration, notably through the intergenerational transmission of values (Bertaux, 1995, 1997; Miller, 2000; Segalen, 1988; Meintel and Le Gall, 1995; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Vatz Laaroussi, 2001; Montgomery, 2002).

According to data provided by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 98 604 youth between the ages of 15 and 24, 17 530 of whom were young refugees, immigrated to Canada between 2000 and 2002 (CIC, 2002). In several respects, the situations experienced by young refugees are similar to those of other young immigrants who have recently arrived in Canada: loss of country, social networks and the cultural familiarity of day-to-day routine, as well as discrimination and an uncertain future. In addition to these challenges, young refugees are also confronted by other obstacles largely

attributable to their immigration status. The initial period following immigration can be further aggravated for these young people, given the often very abrupt and radical departure from their country, the shock or trauma endured during the pre-migration period, the anxiety engendered by waiting for recognition of their refugee status, and the fact of belonging (or not) to a visible minority (Beiser, 1995; Montgomery, 2002). It is in this context of great instability that the valorization of family ties can prove to be particularly significant.

This project examines more specifically the way in which the family transmission of values can help refugee families maintain continuity between the past, the present, and the future, and identify family strengths which may facilitate long-term integration and be mobilized in intervention as means of reinforcing links between parents and youth. The following questions further oriented the study: In what ways do parents and youth recount the stories of their origins and of their migration projects? What are the principal identity markers that structure family ties, as identified by parents and youth? What are the educational and work values passed on in family transmission? What are the hopes projected for the future of these young people? In addition to these research objectives, we also had an objective that was tied into intervention practices with immigrant and refugee families. In this respect, we wanted to explore the possibilities of using a particular form of biographical narrative approach—known as the “Family Novel” approach (de Gaulejac, 1999; Poupard, Rhéaume, 2002; Rhéaume *et al.*, 1996; Mercier et Rhéaume, 2007)—as an intervention tool for working with this population in clinical settings. This approach uses a mixed methodology of family narratives, genograms and other types of visual aids (drawings, photos, time-lines, etc.) as the basis for constructing “novels” with refugee families. The novels were produced in meetings with twelve refugee families, spread out over several sessions. In our project, the finished novels belong to the families themselves, but they also provide a valuable corpus for the analysis of family transmissions.

The project was carried out in partnership with the Downtown YMCA in Montreal and the Centre de santé et services sociaux de la Montagne (CSSS de la Montagne).<sup>1</sup> The Downtown YMCA provides shelter to approximately 250 refugees every month, including approximately 100 hundred children and youth. Through its “Covered Garden” program, it also offers a range of activities designed to facilitate the integration of new immigrants. More specifically, the Child-Family activities of the Covered Garden are offered to asylum-seekers. In this setting, a number of participatory activities are offered to help youth discover their host society and to prepare parents to assume their new

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly the CLSC de Côte-des-Neiges



roles in Quebec's social context. The CSSS de la Montagne is a health and social services institution located in a multiethnic neighbourhood in Montreal. A significant refugee population, originating particularly from Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia, resides in its territory. The CSSS is a university-affiliated centre (affiliated with McGill University, Université de Montréal and Université du Québec à Montréal) and has a research centre specialized in questions relating to health and social services in a multiethnic context.

The Family Novel Project is part of a broader reflection on the life situations of young immigrants and refugees who have recently arrived in Quebec (Montgomery, career grant FQRSC). There is a general tendency in research studies to consider the establishment of young immigrants as problematic. This "pathological" image of young immigrants and refugees has also been critiqued elsewhere (Simard, 1999). The perspective adopted here breaks with this tradition and attempts instead to consider these youth as actors in their own right, rather than as victims. We are particularly interested in identifying strategies that enable youth to make sense of their experiences, both in the past and in the migratory phase. In this particular project, we are interested in documenting the role played by the family in this process. The work of Vatz Laaroussi *et al.* (1999, 2001, 2003) on immigrant families constitutes an important contribution in this respect. Drawing on a conception of the family as a collective voice (the "*Nous familial*"), her work examines the way in which "family insertion strategies" orient family projects in contexts of migration. These strategies are defined both as "the links constructed by the family between its past, its present, and its future," and as "the logic that orients the practices, representations and attitudes of its members." The family transmission of values is an integral part of these strategies. This chapter looks more closely at existing literature on family transmissions in immigrant and refugee families and on the Family Novel approach in various disciplinary traditions. The literature review is followed by a brief discussion on the methodology used in the project.

### **Family transmission in the context of migration**

"The past leaves traces. It is like a tapestry of an individual's origins, woven from a countless number of threads, upon which each child draws in order to lay out the framework of his or her own existence" (de Gaulejac, 1999: 148-9; our translation). Family memory may be composed of pleasant or unpleasant memories, marked by conscious or unconscious "forgetfulness" or reconstructed from disparate and fragmentary referents. Muxel (1996) identifies three primary functions of family memory: 1) the transmission of a frame of reference and values, 2) the

reminiscence of image-memories that remind us of past sentiments and events, and 3) the reflexivity that enables individuals to learn from the family experience from a removed and sometimes critical perspective. Several researchers have focused on the role of family networks as a vector for the transmission of values, projects, skills, and capital between generations (Bertaux, 1995; de Gaulejac, 1999; Bertaux-Wiame, 1993; Segalen, 1998; Chamberlayne, 2002). At the same time, however, they note that the family transmission of values is in no way a linear or even deliberate process: it is a highly complex phenomenon.

Family transmission is an important foundation for understanding the trajectories of young refugees and determining how to intervene on their behalf. The migratory project is often a family project, developed to ensure a viable future for children, upward social mobility, and economic or physical security. As Vatz Laaroussi (2001) suggests, although the migration project is most often carried out by the parents, it is nonetheless the children who become the vectors of this project. In some cases, the migration project is already anchored in familial and collective history through the concrete experiences of family members who have already migrated from one region or country to another, or through anecdotes relating the migration experience of someone belonging to the extended network. Helly, Vatz Laaroussi and Rachédi (2001) and Autant (2000) stress the way in which the construction of narratives on family and migratory histories becomes an important element in the process of family transmission. In a study on Congolese refugees, Rousseau *et al.* (2004) demonstrate how family separation engendered by migration can represent a kind of continuity in families for whom the life cycle has already been marked by other forms of separation for reasons of war, work or schooling. In another study on young Somali refugees, migration is perceived as a collective experience expressed as myths that already exist within the community. The internalization of such myths by young people helps them to better manage the losses relating to their own exile (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998a, 1998b). In a study on young refugees separated from their families (unaccompanied minors), Montgomery (2002; in press) elaborates on the role played by the family in the post-migration trajectories of youth, even in contexts of family separation. Despite the physical distance that separates these youth from their families, continuity is maintained in diverse ways. For some, it is maintained by adhering to parental desires to embark on a specific career path. For others, it involves investing in education in order to bring honour to one's family lineage. For others, the importance of family may be symbolized by objects or photographs. These studies demonstrate that a deeper understanding of a family's past can contribute to making sense of a migratory project, both for the families who have experienced migration and for the practitioners

## *Introduction*

who work on their behalf. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to further examine the way in which parents and youth recount the story of their origins and their migration project.

In the context of migration, each member of the family must come to terms with different systems of values and practices, some belonging to their past and others to their country of adoption. According to Helly, Vatz Laaroussi and Rachédi (2001), the transmission of identity in immigrant families is not linear, but can rather be described as a negotiation of practices and values. The identity markers involved in this negotiation are, of course, multiple. In a study on mixed marriages by Meintel *et al.* (2005; 2002), this transmission is expressed in terms of “parental identity projects;” in other words, projects that parents formulate in order to transmit cultural and identity markers to their children. Many aspects of the extensive content of this transmission have been well documented: the history of given and family names, the transmission of mother tongues, the valorization of family ties, adherence to religious practices and values, the maintenance of contacts with family members remaining in the country of origin, and the knowledge of genealogical history (Autant, 2000; Helly, Vatz Laaroussi and Rachédi, 2001; Mohammed, 2000; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001; Rhéaume *et al.*, 1996). Through these diverse forms of transmissions, identity is reconstructed from disparate elements that draw simultaneously on past and present experiences. In this study, we look at the significance of identity markers for the participating refugee families.

Questions of social mobility play a particularly important role in family relations in a context of migration. Several studies have emphasized the obstacles encountered by new immigrants regarding access to employment (Montgomery *et al.*, 2007; Ouali and Rea, 1997; Silberman and Fournier, 1999; Potvin, 2000) and training (Barthon, 1997; Zhou, 2001). Literature on discrimination as an important barrier to social mobility is also abundant (Potvin, 2000; El Yamani, 1997; Agocs, 2001). Chamberlayne (2002) examines the way in which strategies for managing racism are integrated into family transmissions. While some families use a discourse of racism in a political way as a means of giving voice to social injustices, others refuse such discourses in an attempt to play down their minority status. The role played by family transmissions in the process of social mobility is addressed more directly in a study by Meintel and Le Gall (1995) on young immigrants’ transition into adult life. In this study, the influence of parents is clearly felt in the choice of program of study and career orientations. At the same time, the authors also emphasize the way in which some youth reject such transmissions: refusing, for instance, to follow in the steps of their parents who have held jobs in the manufacturing and restaurant sectors. Other studies have focused on the

educational values transmitted by immigrant families to their children (Francequin, 2004). According to these studies, the educational success of children is intimately related to parental projects of social mobility and, often, to a sense of frustration over the barriers encountered in their own socio-professional trajectories (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Vallet, 1997; Autant, 2000). Vatz Laaroussi *et al.* (1999) also note the importance of the culture of origin in the transmission of educational values. Several authors maintain that children often view success in school as a way of paying back their parents for sacrifices they made by settling in a new country (Phan, 2003; Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2003; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Fuligni and Yoshikawa (2003) relate this idea of sacrifice, and the sense of duty that comes from it, to the more collectivist traditions of certain countries of origin, where emphasis is placed on family members’ responsibility and obligations to one another. Moreover, they maintain that, in many cases, immigrant parents and children see education as an incredible opportunity that must be seized, as it is not available to everyone. According to some authors, the migratory experience of immigrant families dictates an approach to education that values an openness to the world, as well as a mobile and transnational perspective (Dagenais, 2003; Waters, 2005). Others emphasize the importance for some families that children develop instrumental skills and credentials that will ensure economic stability for their families and children (Fuligni and Yoshikawa, 2003). Subjects such as mathematics are thus valued, while “a more abstract, humanistic value of education for self-exploration and improvement” is devalued (Fuligni and Yoshikawa, 2003). Overall, the literature on immigrant families and educational values shows how immigrants draw on past and present experiences to pursue future opportunities. The interplay between the past, present and future, deeply shapes the educational values and aspirations passed on by parents to children. Thus, education becomes a major playing field in terms of projects for social mobility in immigrant and refugee families.

The immigration process is a trying one, particularly for refugees. Coping with migration, loss and grief while negotiating one’s identity and aspiring to professional and educational advancement are very real issues for immigrant and refugee families. Having to deal with any one of these issues, never mind several at once, can be overwhelming at times. At the same time, these families carry with them an incredible heritage of personal and familial resources that can be mobilized, consciously or unconsciously, in the process of becoming established in a new country. The family transmission of values and projects is part of this heritage. In the following section, we will make a brief incursion into the literature on the “family novel” as a means of accessing this heritage.

**The family novel in psychoanalysis, literary studies and in the study of social trajectories: A comparative perspective**

The idea of the family novel is not specific to sociological or anthropological enquiry, but is also well known in psychotherapy and literary studies, with notably different applications. Despite these differences, significant parallels exist across disciplines which can be related to themes addressed in this project: 1) the slippage between truth and tale when affective experiences such as aspirations and dignity are involved, 2) relationships between family members and to normatively prescribed family roles, and 3) the search to make personal sense out of social situations and inequalities. Nevertheless, definitions and functions of the ‘family novel’ have been distinct enough within these fields of study to merit a brief review of disciplinary orientations here.

*The Familienroman in the psychoanalytic tradition*

The idea of the family novel is rooted in Freud’s concept of the *Familienroman*, first published in 1909 (Freud, 1941[1909]), but theorized as early as the late 19th century. This tradition draws on a very specific meaning of the term “family novel” as an elementary form of fictionalized experience that is typical to humans in early socialization. A mechanism that children use consciously and normal adults, unconsciously, this type of family novel is a sort of unwritten narrative of one’s personal circumstances that is composed with desires, not words. This makes the fantastic stories of children’s fantasies and fairy tales much more than passive entertainment. For children especially, fictional stories are seen as a means of overcoming early disillusionments as they become aware of some of the injustices that mark their world. The family is implicated in this theory, because an individual’s first experience of difference is considered to be gendered, witnessed in the unequal relationship between father and mother. In early childhood, children’s humble experiences generally lead them to believe that their parents possess an endless capacity to teach and bestow love upon them. As a result, very young children see parents through a lens of infinite, almost superhuman perfection (Robert, 1972; 44-48). Through this idealization of primary caregivers, children find the security they would otherwise lack as small beings unable to fend for themselves. However, as Freud proposes, this idealization becomes challenged over time, as continual attention from one’s parents diminishes, as parental love becomes shared with siblings, and as children come to realize that their parents are not so different from other parents—possibly not even the most generous, kind, or responsible. It is at this transitory moment of becoming a truly social being that children turn to magical and imaginary stories as a way of preserving the paradise and

perfection of the world they once knew and in which they felt secure. They understandably seek refuge in a world of dreams, escaping from disillusionments experienced in a real world in which they are not only powerless, but still quite vulnerable.

While his early work treated the family novel as pathological, Freud later considered this “denial of reality” or escapism to be a general condition of any child’s coming-to-terms with the imperfections, injustices, and disappointments of their social world (cf. Lacadee *et al.*, 1991; Saiz, 1986). Therefore, in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, the family novel is a normal and universal part of childhood, only becoming pathological in adults who continue to believe in and exercise personal fictions in their daily lives. Overall, Freud’s concept of the *Familienroman* reveals how fiction, with its varying degrees of realism, is evocative of real experiences, and how imagination can be a therapeutic device, especially for people who are disillusioned or disorientated by changing social roles.

This concept of the family novel has immediate applications in psychoanalytic therapy, where accessing the emotional realities of patients naturally involves addressing how they perceive and deal with impossibilities in the real world. Borzykowski and Meyfroet (2001) illustrate a clinical application of the family novel from a psychoanalytic perspective, using a video which presents interviews between a psychiatrist and school-aged children primarily from broken homes. While the children are asked to detail relationships with their parents and various step-family members, it is when they are asked to explain, critique, and imaginatively reformulate their circumstances that the impact of parental separation on the children’s sense of right and wrong becomes more apparent. The film concludes that children need a space where they are not expected to be small adults who are “reasonable and resigned to reality.” However, one could equally argue that in the face of normative pressures to socially conform, adults too need a space where being reasonable and resigned is secondary to being able to dream, to retell one’s past in more favourable light, and to attempt to create sense and continuity out of disparate and fragmented experiences.

### *The family novel in literary studies*

Where Freud’s theory is constrained by heavy focus on the individual—principally the child—literary studies have taken an almost opposite approach. Considered a sub-genre not unlike science fiction or mystery and detective novels, the family novel in literature generally deals with the evolution of a family across several generations (Ru, 1991). Beyond very general agreement that the subject of a

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family novel is the family and its inter-relationships, rather than the personal trials of any single member, there is little consensus on the family novel's literary value. In fact, throughout the 20th century it was largely lamented for being conservative, traditionalist and regionalist. Somewhat unsurprisingly, male-dominated academia of previous generations dismissed the family novel in literature as apolitical, predictable, domestic and, therefore, uninteresting (see Boyers, 1974; Keith, 1987; Tody, 1969, for example). More recently, a small number of scholars has pointed out that such perspectives are based on misguided notions that literature as social and cultural critique is produced only in times of political and moral crisis (Dell, 2005; 7). Attributing critical literature solely to times of war and civic conflict presumes that fiction merely mirrors the social milieus in which it evolves, neglecting the possibility that fiction does much more than simply reflect reality. Perhaps most importantly, fiction operates in reaction to the economic, political, social and cultural landmarks of its time. This is a point that Kerstin Dell makes in her doctoral thesis, which traces this literary genre from post-war to post-millennium in America. She argues for recognition of the family as a key site of important social and political tensions, and posits that the family novel is a dynamic genre that is particularly adept at engaging the subtleties of inequalities and normalized injustices. Far from normatively upholding traditional family roles, she considers that these novels provide insight into repression in public life. Citing Don DeLillo's *White Noise* as an example of a post-modern family novel, Dell explains that characters in it "suffer from the dictatorship of consumerism and the totalitarian influence of the media" (Ibid; 25 fn. 29), metaphors for American culture today. In her view, academia has paid scarce attention to the family novel, generally underestimating its ability to experiment with form and its capacity to render social criticism. One family novel of recent years that Dell finds particularly critical is Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, which happened to be published on September 10, 2001, the eve of one of the largest global political crises of recent years. A month later, the author of this book would explain that his family novel emerged from the challenge of living in a time when it is difficult to be idealistic about anything at all. In his words:

Even when you do manage to achieve idealism for a few moments, you immediately start examining it and become ironic. In a prosperous post-great-society era, there aren't so many places to find meaning... But family does remain an enduring generator of meaning. Since the fiction writer is trying to tell stories that have meaning I think it's natural to be looking at the family (Franzen, *et al.* 2001).

In sum, in literary studies too, the family novel seems to be a reservoir of meanings that are particularly significant to authors facing uncertainty and disorientation associated with a sense of loss of one's origins.

*The family novel in the study of social trajectories*

Although the concept of the family novel that we have drawn on for our current project is similar to both the traditions described above, it also has its own particularities that are largely the result of its grounding in sociological thought. Generally speaking, this approach can be situated in the biographical perspective in social science research. From this perspective, social change and social processes are studied through the collection of biographical narratives in which individuals recount their life experiences, or portions of them (Bertaux, 1997; Miller, 2000; Thompson, 1993). The biographical approach became popular during the period between the two world wars, especially through the work of the Chicago School of social thought. Within this tradition, for instance, W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki combined a biographical approach with the study of Polish immigrant communities in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. The theme of the intergenerational transmission of values and resources has also been a particular focus in this tradition. *The Children of Sanchez* (Lewis, 1963), which follows the life history of a family living in a slum area of Mexico, is a classic work on this theme, as is Bertaux’s (1995) work on intergenerational relations in a family of artisan bakers. As Bertaux notes, sociological interest in family narratives stems not so much from a desire to understand personal trajectories in and of themselves, but rather to link them to other trajectories within the family or within any given collectivity. Their goal is to broaden the focus of individual narratives in order to gain a better understanding of social processes of a more global nature.

The Family Novel approach that we used in this project was inspired by the work of Vincent de Gaulejac and collaborators (de Gaulejac, 1999, 2007; Mercier, 2007; Mercier et Rhéaume, 2007; Rhéaume *et al.*, 1996). According to de Gaulejac, the family novel “allows us to reflect on the dynamics of transmission processes, on adjustments between prescribed, desired, and acquired identities, [and] on family scenarios that show children what is desirable, what is possible and what is threatening” (de Gaulejac, 1999: 11-12; our translation). Over the years, the work of de Gaulejac and collaborators has mainly been in the form of group seminars whose objectives are both clinical and research-oriented. In a series of seminars entitled “Family Novel and Social Trajectories,” participants were invited to share elements of their personal and familial trajectories with the group. Guided by seminar facilitators, the group members collectively reflected on the commonalities of their stories and the ways in which their individual stories were situated within the larger perspective of social mobility processes. Two case studies based on a participant in these groups, called “Jean,” clearly illustrate the interrelationship between the individual narrative and its wider implications for



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understanding social mobility. Although Jean comes from a modest family background, through studies and career advancement, he comes to hold a prestigious and enviable professional position. His narrative, which draws on elements of his family and individual trajectories, recounts both his pride and his uneasiness with his acquired social standing. On an individual level, Jean's personal introspection and the reflections that emerge from the group discussion enable him to better understand the logics that guided his own trajectory:

By comparison with his birth milieu, he had become too different, he experienced a sort of dissociation [from this milieu]... The second milieu isn't natural to him... He is able to distinguish himself in his first milieu, but not in his second, because he has never really interiorized the class habitus in the sense of Bourdieu. (Mercier, 2007: 229)

Jean tells the group, "I am very pleased. I have learned a lot about myself, about my own family history and that of others" (in de Gaulejac, 2007: 207; our translation). At another level, Jean's narrative and those of the other participants enable the group to discover that there are significant similarities between many of their professional and personal trajectories. In the analysis of these seminars, there is a clear connection between individual achievement and broader class conditions. As de Gaulejac states, "What is important is to encourage participants to reflect on the social positioning of each person, issues relating to class distinction, and the articulation between affective, familial and social processes" (de Gaulejac, 2007: 203; our translation).

This approach to the Family Novel is not limited to studies on social mobility, but has also been used in other intervention and research contexts to further reflect on other types of significant life transitions. Mercier and Rhéaume (2007), for instance, examine the transition into retirement of individuals who have had fulfilling professional careers. Through the use of group seminars structured primarily around personal narratives, they demonstrate how the group setting enables them to reconcile the concept of retirement as a social phenomenon with their own personal experience of retirement. Once again, through introspection, the participants obtain a deeper awareness of their own professional trajectories. At the same time, the multiplication of narratives within the group, combined with the guided group discussion, helps participants to situate their personal trajectories within a wider perspective.

Immigration is another important life transition that has both an individual dimension (the events, people and memories that make up a trajectory, the way in which immigrants give meaning to their trajectory, etc.) and a collective dimension (global contexts of political instability and war, forced

displacement, barriers resulting from to immigration status, etc). Moreover, migration stories are almost always linked, in one way or another, to family stories. It is primarily for these reasons that we were interested in experimenting with the Family Novel from this type of perspective.

Although we have discussed some of the guiding principles of the family novel approach in the study of social trajectories, we have not yet specifically touched on the more concrete question of the family novel format. In practical terms, the family novel does not refer to one single method, but rather to the integration of several types of tools designed to facilitate the process of narration. Generally speaking, it entails reconstituting a family’s history in the form of a novel (Rhéaume *et al.* 1996), focussing on themes that have meaning for participants, such as the story of their origins, their migration project, identity referents or socio-professional trajectory. For the working group on the Family Novel and Social Trajectories, the family novel is based on the narration of individual trajectories in a group setting (de Gaulejac, 1999; Rhéaume *et al.*, 1996; Poupard and Rhéaume, 2002; Rhéaume, 2000). It is interesting to note that Vatz Laaroussi does not use the term “family novel” as such, preferring the more generic “family narratives” (*récits de famille*, 1999). These narratives are produced in a family context characterized by the co-presence of family members. Laaroussi has also worked with other forms of narratives produced in a group setting, such as the socio-biographical narrative of refugees (2002). Other tools and visual supports can be included in the : participants might also compile a genogram, draw a parental project, track a socio-professional trajectory, or include photographs, collages and even theatre and dance.

As we noted earlier, there are both similarities and differences between the social trajectory approach to family novels and those of the psychoanalytic and literary traditions. Like psychotherapy, the social trajectory approach can be used in a context of clinical intervention. On a personal level, family narratives can help individuals “to legitimize their past, with its often painful choices, to pass on family memories, identify landmarks for socialization, [and] project into the future” (Vatz Laaroussi, 2003: 4; our translation). For example, such narratives can help refugee families become aware of the logics that have oriented the course of their migrations, and thus see themselves as dynamic actors in their trajectories. For practitioners working with this population (social workers, community organizers, professionals working in schools), the Family Novel approach can be used to 1) identify the biographical resources of families (talents, sentiments, family and community resources), 2) recognize that the experiences of refugees have commonalities that can be acted upon, and 3) identify models for action that could strengthen families’ capacity for action (Chamberlayne, 2002). Unlike the psychoanalytical tradition, however,

the research objective underlying this approach goes beyond individual trajectories in an attempt to provide new understandings of larger social processes—family transmissions in refugee families, in our case.

Like the literary approach, the social trajectory approach emphasizes intergenerational links and transmissions—an aspect that is largely absent from the psychoanalytic tradition. It is precisely these links and traditions that are at the very heart of our project. The literary perspective also highlights the way in which reality and fiction are not mutually exclusive universes, something that contemporary social sciences' current emphasis on factuality and realism tends to mask. Debates on the subject of art and literature as social and political critique show that “reality” is always a mediated experience, coloured and seasoned by individuals' affective responses to the world around them. This also is an important argument for the present study. The fact that the families involved in our project were asylum seekers implies that they have all previously had to fit their life stories into the framework of a drastically different narrative genre (imposed by the bureaucratic government system) in order to be able to give evidence of their persecution at a refugee hearing (Rousseau, *et al.*, 2006). Such processes focus solely on the supposed “proof” of persecution. Many of the hardships and humiliations present in the family novels we have collected simply had no place in the narratives of the asylum-seeking process, even though they were of critical importance to the narrators. Their family novels gave them a place where they could express injustice, and escape from the truth/lie dichotomy that characterizes the narrative genre in the refugee determination process.

We propose that a family novel approach to the study of social trajectories can give families a unique opportunity to confront personal questions that fill the uncertain present—a place in time somewhere between the past and the future, between truth and tale. What has happened? What *should* happen?

### **A few words on method: Constructing family novels with 12 refugee families**

During the project, we had the pleasure of working with twelve refugee families<sup>2</sup>, each of which had at least one child between the ages of 14 and 17 years old. The families were recruited from the Covered Garden Program of the Downtown YMCA, through the Program for Families and Children.

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<sup>2</sup> The families arrived in Quebec as refugee claimants, but had acquired accepted refugee status prior to participating in the project.

Originally, the novels were to be prepared in a group setting, where three different groups each composed of a certain number of families would participate in two three-hour long workshops during which the different aspects of the family novels would be discussed. However, as the project developed, it became clear that this structure was neither suitable nor realistic, largely because of the families’ reluctance to share intimate family details in a group setting, but also for reasons of confidentiality.<sup>3</sup> We therefore adapted the project so that an interviewer would meet with each of the families individually for a total of six hours, which was divided into sessions of two to three hours, depending on the families’ preferences and availability. The meetings took place in the families’ homes, at the Covered Garden or at the CSSS de la Montagne Research Centre. Not all family members attended every meeting scheduled with the interviewer. In cases where the parents were living in Canada, at least one, if not both, often attended the first meeting without the children, in order to get a better understanding of the project and its implications. Then, since the project was intended to be a real family project, the interviewer would schedule a meeting with the entire family, or sometimes met with the children alone (with the parents’ consent).

During these meetings, the families were given the choice of various themes to talk about: family history, memorable events and people, the meanings of family members’ names, important family traditions, migration, dreams and projects for the future, going to school, or any other topics that were of particular interest to them. They were also encouraged to include photographs, drawings or other objects that had particular meaning for them. The Facilitator’s Guide, which is described in detail in Chapter 5 and presented in Appendix 1, was intended to stimulate conversation and encourage narration, rather than to question the families directly on specific topics. The interviews were, in most cases, very fluid; the participants generally directed the flow of the conversation themselves. In the days following the interviews, the material was organized in order to respect the narrative form used by the families as much as possible (Vatz Laaroussi, 2001). The novels were then “published”: a semi-professional layout of the texts, genograms and other material was prepared for presentation to the families. The novels themselves range from 18 to 30 single-spaced pages and are divided into chapters. Within this structure, each chapter was given a title that reflected the significance the family had given its content. Some novels contain images, and several contain genograms.

Our six-chapter report presents some of the findings of the Family Novel Project. In Chapter 2, we present a general portrait of the refugee families and their stories. The two subsequent chapters

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<sup>3</sup> Details on recruitment and methodology are provided in Chapter 5.

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look more closely at the themes that emerged from the family novels: the history of origins, migration stories and influential figures (Chapter 3), and identity and family transmissions (Chapter 4). Finally, Chapter 5 provides an evaluation of the Family Novel Project as an intervention tool, from the point of view of both the research team and the participating families.



## CHAPTER 2

### FAMILY PORTRAITS AND NOVELS

From childhood stories to life in villages and cities, from family figures to family dynamics, from political situations to culture and values, the family novels bring to life a wealth of experiences that are rich in information and emotions. The families that participated in the project generously shared very personal thoughts about their families' lives, struggles, joys, hopes and dreams, as well as their strengths, weaknesses and coping mechanisms.

Although the time we spent with the families was brief compared to the lifetime of stories they told us, the interviewers were nonetheless able to develop relationships based on trust and confidence. The nature of the project and the generosity of the families gave the interviewers privileged access to another world of emotions, thoughts, relationships and worldviews. The families offered interviewers a multifaceted understanding of how immigration processes affect, shape and sometimes alter not only parent-child relationships, but also parents' and children's understand of each other. In this chapter, we would like to present a portrait of the twelve families who graciously participated in the Family Novel Project. Since, for reasons of confidentiality, we cannot present their novels in their entirety, we have summarized some of the principal elements of their novels in order to give the reader an idea of who these families are, where they have been and where their futures may lead them. All names are, of course, fictitious, and all identifying personal information has been deleted or slightly altered to preserve the families' anonymity.

#### **General portrait**

The families that participated in the Family Novel Project come from Mexico (3), Colombia (2), Rwanda (1), Burundi (2), Congo (1), Lebanon (2) and Poland (1). The families all originally arrived in

Canada as refugee claimants, but had acquired accepted refugee status by the time the study took place. All of the families from Latin America and Africa arrived between 2003 and 2006, while the first members of both Middle-Eastern families arrived in 2002, with their siblings following in 2006. The Polish family has been established in Canada the longest: they arrived as refugees in 1989.

The composition of the family units that were living in Canada at the time of the interviews was quite diverse. Only two of the families (one Polish and one Mexican) had all the members of their nuclear families living with them in Canada. The other families had children, brothers, sisters, mothers or fathers who were still in their countries of origin. Six families were planning to eventually bring children, and sometimes mothers or fathers, to Canada, while six others did not have any such plans. Among the latter, two families, one composed of two sisters, and the other of a sister and a brother, were still students and thus unsure of where they would eventually settle down. Others did not foresee any reunification of family members because of such circumstances as divorce, separation or death. Only one family included a grandparent among the relatives they hoped would eventually settle in Canada.

There were 24 parents in the participating families and one grandparent (12 mothers, 12 fathers and one grandmother). There were 37 children: 22 girls and 15 boys. The parents' ages ranged mainly from 40 to 50 years of age; only one younger mother was 30 years old. While at least 17 of the children were between 12 and 17 years old, there were five children between the ages of 20 and 27, and five children under 12.

Five of the families that participated in the project spoke Spanish as their first language. The novels for two of these families were originally written in Spanish and later translated into English for analysis purposes. One Middle-Eastern family spoke Arabic, French, English and Spanish, while the other was fluent in Arabic and English. Two of the families from Africa spoke Kirundi and French, another spoke Ndebele, English, and French, and yet another spoke Kirwanda and French. Finally, the only European family spoke Polish and English. Aside from the two novels in Spanish, all of the others were narrated in English or French.

Eight of the families in the project were Christian, of which at least five were Catholic, one was Mormon, and two were of unspecified denominations. One family was a mixture of Druze and Shia Muslim heritage. The three remaining families did not mention religion in their novels, or say whether they ascribed to any specific faith.



The parents who took part in the project had all worked in their countries of origin. The various professions represented among the families were teacher, carpenter, seamstress, businessman, physiotherapist, accountant, public administrator and human rights worker. Most of the children had been students before coming to Canada and continued their studies in Canada. While some of the parents were not working at the time of the interviews, almost all of them hoped to find the same type of work they had in their countries of origin. Two had definitively altered their career paths: one from public administrator to businessman, and another from physiotherapist to human resources consultant.

### **The family stories**

#### *The Ivanovich family (S1), Mexico*

Father: Roberto  
Mother: Alicia  
Daughter: Teresa  
Daughter: Liza  
Daughter: Roberta

**Origins:** Roberto was born in Mexico into a poor family. His father left when he was three years old and his mother barely managed to make ends meet. He was closest to his brother Augusto who, even though was born with an incurable neurological disorder, remained strong with the help of his Mormon faith. For Roberto, Augusto was inspiring as someone who suffered, yet had so much compassion for others. Whenever Roberto felt that life was difficult, he drew strength from Augusto's story. It was also Augusto's example that convinced Roberto to convert to the Mormon faith, which would become the cornerstone of his identity and that of his family.

Roberto eventually followed his dream of becoming a teacher, which was to lead to events that would change the course of his life. While teaching in Veracruz, he ran into problems with a drug cartel that wanted to recruit him into their ranks; he decided to flee to Chicago to escape joining them. There, he suffered greatly from loneliness, experiencing major culture shock and feeling disgust with American individualism. He eventually made a life for himself there, however, and married Alicia, a Puerto Rican woman who had grown up in Chicago.

**Values:** As parents, Roberto and Alicia believe in the importance of family. They place little importance in material desires, and value such personal strengths as honesty, self-discipline and responsibility. Their weekly ritual of attending the Mormon Church also brought them and their three daughters closer together.

**Migration:** In 2004, Roberto and Alicia began to have marital problems and decided to separate. Roberto began volunteering at an employment centre to occupy his time, and noticed that one of the centre’s clients was selling drugs in the neighbourhood nearby. When this information was reported to the centre, it soon leaked out that it Roberto who had “squealed.” When he received threats on his life, he once again had to flee the country.

**Future:** In coming to Canada, Roberto hoped to be able to fulfil his true potential as a person and as a father. He wants to maintain the positive things he has experienced while learning to forget the negative. Even though his experience as a refugee has been very stressful, he still hopes to obtain his teach qualification. He is planning to present the novel to his daughters so they will understand the reason for their names and realize how incredibly proud of them he is.

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*The Gutiérrez family (S2), Mexico*

Father: Jorge  
Mother: Rosa  
Daughter: Alaura  
Daughter: Carolina  
Daughter: Santa  
Son: Jorge

**Origins:** Alaura and Santa were born in Mexico. Since both parents worked a lot outside of the house, the children were raised by their grandmother. Alaura in particular spent every second she could with her grandmother in her kitchen, listening to the stories she would spin about the lives of her family. Her grandmother would weave fantastic stories, drawing on the lives of her brothers and sisters and her 14 children as an endless source of inspiration. The most shocking tale of all though, was her own. When she was a teenager, Alaura’s grandmother had been seized by a strange man

## *Family portraits and novels*

who locked her up overnight. When he released her, untouched, she ran back to her family, but they rejected her. Having spent the night, by all accounts, with a man, she had no choice but to marry him. He was a brute and an alcoholic. Essentially, she lived for her children; the joy that they brought her enabled her to endure everything else.

**Values:** The greatest influence in Alaura's life has been her grandmother, who always told her to be careful with men, advice that she follows very faithfully. Alaura also tried to pass on her grandmother's values of honesty, integrity and hard work to her sister Santa, whom she raised almost on her own. According to Alaura, however, her sister shaped her as much as she shaped her sister. Both admire their paternal uncle Santiago, who, even though he never received any higher education, is an avid reader. It was he who encouraged his nieces to think about their futures, telling them that their lives must have meaning. He also encouraged Alaura to follow through with her plans to leave Mexico.

**Migration:** When Alaura was nineteen years old she was held up at gunpoint in a robbery. The attack was a wake-up call that made her realize that anything could happen to anyone in Mexico. Still uneasy and restless months after the assault, Alaura confided in Santa that she was thinking of emigrating. Santa gave Alaura her full support. Her decision to follow her sister to Canada six months later was totally unexpected, however.

**Future:** One year/six months after their respective arrivals, both sisters are able to say that they love living in Canada. Alaura thinks that Santa's less than strenuous efforts to integrate may have something to do with the fact that she doesn't feel that she *needs* to be here. She herself, however, would love to revalidate her architecture degree and settle down here while putting her sister through university. Together again, Alaura and Santa may be unsure of what the future holds but they are sure that they will share it together.

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### *The Romero family (S3), Mexico*

Father: Gabriel Romero  
Mother: Ana Romero  
Son: Gabriel Romero

**Origins:** Ana is originally from a small village in Mexico, where she grew up in a conservative environment. Ana did not continue her schooling after primary school because her father did not believe there was any value in educating girls. However, when she realized that she wanted more from life than cleaning houses day in and day out, she moved to the big city to work while figuring out how to go back to school. Gabriel was born and raised in a small city in Mexico. His family had to struggle to make ends meet, so work took priority over schooling. Determined to study, Gabriel worked full time and went to school. It was at work that he met Ana. They found in each other the support they needed to pursue their dream of furthering their educations.

**Values:** Gabriel and Ana strongly believe in the following values: seriousness, vision, hard work and perseverance. It is their conviction that education is the most important thing that anyone can do for his or herself: education = opportunity. More than anything, they hope that Gabriel Jr. will continue his university studies, hopefully going on to the graduate level. Gabriel's greatest influence in life came from one of his professors who taught him that every problem has an infinite number of solutions. The key to solving problems is not to choose the path of least resistance, but rather the path that will lead to the most complete solution. Gabriel Jr.'s character is still taking shape, as is natural at his age, but he is very aware of the values of discipline, respect and gratitude that his parents hold, and aspires to maintain them himself.

**Migration:** The family was forced to leave Mexico very suddenly when Gabriel's life was threatened by a criminal organisation that had tried to recruit him unsuccessfully. Canada's cultural differences fascinate but do not frighten them. One of the differences they have noticed is that parents in Canada give their teenagers a lot of freedom at a very early age. This is not how Gabriel wants to teach his son to be independent. He sees liberty as a responsibility that children must learn to manage gradually. Gabriel Jr. is delighted to be here, saying that he still cannot believe everything that the country is willing to give so readily, and how easy it has been to communicate with other teenagers he has met who do not speak Spanish. It is Ana who is having the hardest time adapting to the cold and the language, even though she is happy to be here.

**Future:** Essentially, what the Romeros are looking for is the opportunity to have opportunities. Coming to Canada was one of the infinite number of solutions to the problems they had in Mexico. It was by no means the easiest solution they could have chosen, for it will take an immense amount of

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work to rebuild their lives here. They hope, however, that it is the solution that will open doors to a future they never imagined could be theirs.

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### *The Baranowski family (S4), Poland*

Father: Serhiy  
Mother: Isidora  
Daughter: Agnieszka  
Daughter: Anastazja

**Origins:** Isidora and Serhiy are from Poland and grew up under the Communist regime. When Isidora became pregnant, they were overjoyed to be starting a family, but suffered from the extremely repressive conditions, spending hours every day lining up for food rations. Isidora soon realized that she wanted to live in a more stimulating environment that would ensure a better future for her family.

**Values:** One of the principles of Isidora and Serhiy's approach to childrearing is the lesson that nothing in life is free or inconsequential. They firmly believe that hard work is the basis of all lasting success. Another principle is responsibility and trust. They have always made it very clear that they respect the fact that their daughters have their own lives and desires. Nevertheless, the girls are always expected to keep their parents informed of what they are doing and contribute to the household by helping out with basic chores. The final principle of Isidora and Serhiy's approach to raising children is tolerance: not only tolerance for other people's feelings and points of view but also with regards to race, religion and ethnicity. They strive to ensure that their children are intelligent and independent enough to make their own judgements.

**Migration:** In 1987, Isidora and Serhiy decided it was time to try to leave Poland. They were seen as traitors by some, but that only made the family all the more determined to succeed in its search for something better. Eventually, they moved to Canada and made their home in Edmonton. During the time it took them to settle into life in Canada and obtain permission to work, Isidora and Serhiy concentrated on learning English. Anastazja was born soon after the family's arrival, and while Isidora focused on the family's newest member, Agnieszka struggled in her kindergarten class.

There were no other allophone children in the class and she was teased mercilessly for being stupid. This period did not last long, and as soon as she was able to speak English, Agnieszka became a straight-A student. In 1991, when the family obtained Canadian citizenship, one of the first things they did was to extend an invitation to family members back home who had expressed interest in coming to live in Canada.

**Future:** Anastazja has no definite plans for the future, and is still unsure of what she wants to study in university. Agnieszka has many projects she would love to tackle, but there is only one that she is absolutely determined to realize: she wants more than anything to go back to Poland for a long stay in order to get to know her family and her country better. Finally, while the family is grateful for all they have been able to accomplish in Canada, they are also eager to move on. Isidora and Serhiy have the confidence that comes from success based on hard work, and are keen to try something new. With the money they have saved over the years, they have purchased property in Mexico. So, as soon as Anastazja leaves home to go to university, they will be heading south.

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*The Días family (S5), Colombia*

Father:	Carlos
Son:	Marco
Son’s mother:	Rubi
Daughter:	Lily
Daughter’s mother:	Joya
Grandmother:	Cecilia

**Origins:** As soon as Carlos had grown up, he went into business for himself selling furniture. He loved the independence his profession afforded him. It was during this time that he met and married Rubi. When they split up their son, Marco, lived with Carlos and Cecilia, but as he grew up, Rubi wanted a to have a more active role in his life, so the boy moved in with her. She neglected him terribly, however, and he became suicidal. Terrified, Rubi brought him back to his paternal family, where he has lived happily ever since. This period still haunts Carlos, and he shudders at the thought of how close the family came to catastrophe. Carlos then married again to Joya, with whom he had a daughter named Lily, but later separated from her as well.

**Values:** Carlos' parents were marked by their humble circumstances and were determined to transmit their work ethic to their children. They valued self-made success, respect for others and the ability to love regardless of one's situation. To these values, Carlos adds the sanctity of friendship and the importance of honesty. While he believes in God, he thinks that spirituality is a personal matter and eschews going to church. The family also values education; each generation has been more successful than the last, which the family attributes to educational opportunities. Carlos sincerely hopes to see both his children complete university, which is something he never did himself. Finally, he hopes that his children retain their culture even though they may not always live in Colombia.

**Migration:** When Carlos' business partner was found to be giving money to one of Colombia's armed groups, a rival group threatened the businessmen and their families. Carlos had no other choice but to leave the country. Once in Canada, he was pleasantly surprised by the diversity of Montreal's population, and was happy to see that the entire gamut of beliefs, personalities and attitudes was accepted here. He also truly appreciates living in tranquility, far from institutionalized violence.

**Future:** Carlos is nowhere near the end of his journey, and suffers terribly from loneliness, but is thrilled to be in Canada. He will do whatever it takes to bring his mother and son to where they can be safe, overcome the emotional violence that has been inflicted on him and his family, and leave bitterness and resentment behind. More than anything, he hopes to begin his own business here, regain the independence of a self-made man and, finally, offer his children the opportunity to live every ounce of their potential to the fullest.

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*The Khreiss family (S6), Lebanon*

Father: Hassan  
Mother: Mona  
Son: Mohammed  
Son: Rafic  
Daughter: Leila

**Origins:** Both grandfathers in the family followed similar paths. They were born into well-off families in Lebanon, but grew dissatisfied with their lives, moved to other countries and built successful businesses outside of Lebanon. Both married Lebanese women who, after a few years, convinced them to move back to Lebanon. When Hassan's parents decided to move from peaceful Ecuador to a Lebanon now rife with ethnic tension, it came as a shock to him and his brothers. Living through the war as a teenager was a surreal experience; he has many stories from this time that his children love to hear again and again. After they got married, Hassan and Mona moved to Iraq to work. Later, they moved back to Lebanon, but left the country again when Mona was almost killed in an explosion during the war in 1982. They moved to Saudi Arabia and then to Cyprus, before finally settling in Dubai.

**Values:** Raising a family in a secure community is challenging enough, but Hassan and Mona have had to do it while crossing borders and changing languages. Mohammed and Rafic agree that every decision their parents ever made was in their best interest. Both Hassan and Mona had fathers who started from scratch, building more for themselves and their families than most people ever could. This knowledge of their past has encouraged them to strive for the limits of their potential independently and honestly. They have impressed upon their children the importance of being responsible, independent, compassionate, generous, determined and ambitious. They have also taught them to make fair and informed judgements.

**Migration:** When Mohammed chose to continue his education in Canada, he loved the country so much that he convinced his brother Rafic to join him. The rest of the family is expected to follow in the future. Although Mohammed still fails to understand why people here are so cold and disconnected, sometimes apathetic, he still plans to complete his studies in Canada.

**Future:** Rafic thinks that he will probably go back to Dubai when he finishes his university degree. He would prefer to go back to Lebanon, but unless the economy improves it would be impossible to find a job. Mohammed is trying to decide whether to become a foreign correspondent, human rights lawyer or professional musician. Hassan and Mona will remain in Dubai until Leila goes to university, at which point the three of them will move to Montreal. The family will continue taking one step at a time, as they always have.



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*The Saad family (S7), Lebanon*

Father: Joseph  
Mother: Miriam  
Daughter: Samar  
Son: Émile

**Origins:** Joseph's father was born and raised in Palestine, but shortly after his death, the British authorities evicted his family from their home. Joseph and his family were thus forced to seek refuge in Lebanon. Unlike many dislocated Palestinians, Joseph considers himself to be Lebanese; he feels that living in Palestine is illusory. Miriam was born and raised in Jordan. As the political situation in the country became unstable, she started to have panic attacks, so she decided to go to university in Beirut. The couple met while studying and have been incredibly happy together ever since. Their children say that while no one is perfect, you might just create the perfect human being if you combined their parents into one. During the civil war in Lebanon, the family moved to Kuwait. When war broke out there, they moved to Dubai, where they settled down and built a life for themselves.

**Values:** While Émile was growing up, his father would often remind him of all his grandparents had accomplished. His grandfathers, who, through hard work, became successful businessmen, not only provided for their extended families but also gave back to their communities. These stories took on the form of family fables.

**Migration:** Samar chose to attend a university in Lebanon, saying that she wanted to learn more about her roots. While she was there, something went seriously wrong. She sought asylum in Canada, saying that she could not see herself living in the Middle East. She wanted to build her life in a country that had a future. Later, Émile joined her, a move that turned out to be one of the best he ever made. The brother and sister grew very close, and Émile says that his sister motivates and inspires him. Socially, the siblings have found wonderful communities here. Most of Samar's friends are Lebanese, while Émile's come from the four corners of the globe. While this makes them feel like they come from different places, they are just glad to know that they belong together.

**Future:** Samar will continue working and studying until she has found her niche. Émile wants to do a double major in finance and management: the former in order to have a stable, if not terribly exciting, career open to him; and the latter because in his heart of hearts, he longs to work in event management. Samar feels safe, and is confident that she can accomplish her goals. Émile loves meeting people from around the globe and exploring the equally international music scene that Montreal attracts. While experience has taught them not to get too comfortable anywhere, they agree that Montreal is a wonderful place to live.

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*The Sebugwiza family (S8), Rwanda*

Mother: May  
Daughter: Alice  
Daughter: Caroline  
Son: Paul  
Son: Mathew  
Son’s father: Alex (deceased)  
May’s niece: Jeanne  
May’s niece: Tessa  
May’s niece: Leslie

**Origins:** May lived in what is known today as the Democratic Republic of Congo until her ethnic group began to be persecuted. May’s father left her with two of her sisters in the Congo and relocated the rest of his family in Rwanda, their country of origin. Rwanda then descended into civil war. That year, May’s middle sister became pregnant, but the child’s father was killed and her sister fell into a deep depression. May adopted the child, Alice, as her own. Two years later, May herself had a daughter, Caroline. When a peace agreement was signed, the family reunited in Kigali. No one could have fathomed the horror of what was to happen next: full-scale genocide in which May lost many family members. After it was over, she returned once more to the Congo, where she met an Austrian man, Alex. He had lived through his own personal devastation: his wife and child had been killed in the conflict. Together, May and Alex began to heal. When the Congo descended once more into civil war, they moved back to Kigali and started their own business. The family lived happily in Kigali and even grew with the birth of two sons and the adoption of May’s three nieces. In

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2004, Alex died suddenly while on a visit in Europe and May began to be persecuted by the state. Fearing for her life, she had to flee without being able to take her two younger girls, whom she sent to live in Uganda.

**Values:** May thinks that children are given too much freedom and responsibility too early in Canada, and firmly believes that parental guidance is what they need the most. With the help of her Church, she strives to provide them with solid structure in their lives.

**Migration:** May appreciates that people in Canada are sincere. The children are attending school, are fluently trilingual and have friends from all over the world. May, however, suffers from the shame of not being allowed to work. She believes that to be independent is to be the master of one's fate; this is what May longs for most of all.

**Future:** May's long term goal is to take the Chartered Professional Accountant exam, but she first needs to bring all her children to Canada in order to be at peace. She hopes to see them graduate from university and hopes also that they will retain the best parts of Rwandan culture: communitarianism, faith and open warmth. Finally, she hopes that they come to understand, as they grow older, exactly what happened in Rwanda so that they will be able to help prevent such devastations in the future.

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#### *The Flores family (S9), Colombia*

Father: Francisco

Son: Ángel

**Origins:** Francisco grew up with a violent father, until one day he challenged him and his father changed his ways. Helping others became Francisco's passion, and he entered politics at an early age. Unfortunately, his passion for justice angered many powerful people, and over the years, there were five major attempts on his life. Refusing to be intimidated, Francisco devoted a period of his life to working for an organization that defended human rights. On one of his assignments, he was kidnapped and held hostage in the jungle by guerrillas, but was able to escape unharmed six months later. Francisco's son, Ángel, was also kidnapped when he was twelve years old and today, at sixteen, he still remains in the jungle.

**Values:** Francisco puts great stock in psychology and approaches life with an analytical mindset. He believes that people are usually far too quick to blame others for their problems instead of taking responsibility for their own role in the situation. He believes that the greatest sins are aggression, arrogance and judgment, and urges his children to embrace humility, service and forgiveness. He warns them, however, that they should not go through life believing that everyone will share their values.

**Migration:** Francisco's persecutors were insidious and tireless. Of his five girlfriends and five children, only one mother and daughter survive in Miami. Ángel has been kidnapped and the rest are dead. Two of his brothers and sisters were killed and the others exiled. In the last attack on his life, he too was nearly killed, and his colleagues arranged for his migration to Canada while he was unconscious in hospital. His earliest memories of Canada are therefore of the hospital, where he received care for serious injuries and discovered Canadians' openness, kindness and warmth. Once discharged, he began volunteering with refugee assistance organizations and set up many positive initiatives, including group therapy for addicts and social groups for single mothers. In spite of all Francisco does, he remains very solitary and suffers greatly from loneliness.

**Future:** This is not the first time that Francisco has been exiled from his country, but he believes that he will not return again. For three decades, he believed that Colombia could find peace but he now understands that it is far too convenient for the powerful to maintain conflict. All he wants from his country now is to be able to extricate his loved ones. The greatest threat to Francisco's future security is something very strange that is going on at the federal level with regards to his case, as the Colombian government has been doing everything it can to have him extradited. Once this mess is sorted out, he hopes to find paid work doing what he does now. Finally, he will continue to devote time to his poetry and to a larger literary project based on his experiences in Canada. This way, he hopes to contribute to the theory of migration and perhaps even encourage discourse on consistent psychological help for refugees.

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*The Bombai family (M1), Congo*

Father:            Georges

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Mother: Marie  
Daughter: Sara  
Daughter: Madeleine  
Son: Marc  
Daughter: Agnes

**Origins:** Marie was the youngest of eleven brothers and sisters who grew up in a warm and loving family. Her father spent as much time with his children as possible, and Marie remembers him most as a wise friend. He was determined that all his children go to school, an opportunity he did not have himself. Marie therefore pursued her education all the way to university, which was remarkable for a woman at the time. She wanted to study medicine, and indeed was accepted into the program. She studied for three years before she had to leave the country because of political instability. Georges had also studied medicine. He graduated before Marie and had even practised a little before the couple had to leave.

**Values:** The family derives its core values from religion. They aspire to filial love, a strong work ethic and piety. Religion also defines their most treasured traditions: Christmas and the daily prayer the family says together in the evening. Marie uses lessons from the Bible to guide her children, and stresses the importance of education.

**Migration:** Georges and Marie left the Congo in the mid-1990s for Zimbabwe, moving to Botswana five years later. Marie and her four children eventually came to Canada in 2005. The children, who were always urged to try and fit in at school, learned English and Ndebele quickly after arriving in Zimbabwe. It was not always easy for the children, but they have always been able to excel. Ironically, they have been able to grow closer to their Congolese origins in Canada. This is because of the enormous Congolese community here and the fact that they have cousins in Montreal. The family's constant migration means that the children have different identities: Zimbabwean, a mix of all cultures, and citizen of the world. Marie does her best to keep her children grounded in the African francophone culture and in their faith. She is very proud that her children are doing so well here and credits their success and happiness to strong family unity and the grace of God.

**Future:** Marie's fondest dream is to be able to go back to school. For her, knowledge is the surest path to self esteem. In keeping with this philosophy, she will do everything to encourage her children to get university educations.

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*The Sinankwa family (SN1), Burundi*

Mother: Béatrice  
Father: Auguste  
Son: Arnaud  
Son: Carl  
Daughter: Simone

**Origins:** Born in a village in Burundi, Beatrice’s father was a respected catechist and her mother was an equally respected midwife. Although her father was against her getting a formal education, she and her sister were able to devise a plan to register Béatrice in primary school. This was just the beginning of a long and successful educational journey for Béatrice. At 23 years old, she started working for the government tax department, where she met her husband, Auguste. Their marriage was so grand that even the President of the country commented on it.

**Values:** Raised in an extremely religious environment, Béatrice has kept a strong faith in God. She uses God to guide her and encourages her children to do the same. Béatrice also tries to instill strong family values and a sense of community in her children. Loving and helping others, as well as unconditional family support, are values that she hopes her children will carry with them all their lives.

**Migration:** Béatrice had to leave her country suddenly for personal reasons related to the political situation. She chose to come to Canada because she had heard wonderful things about this country. She brought Simone with her, but Auguste, Carl and Arnaud stayed behind. This family separation is one of the hardest aspects of her migration. She finds it very difficult not to be parenting her two sons, and worries that they might fall under bad influences in her absence. Béatrice and Simone both miss their community sorely, as they have not succeeded in finding a social circle for themselves in Canada. They feel that people here are too busy and too individualistic, and that relationships are hard to develop. Beatrice is especially worried about Simone, who is becoming increasingly despondent without her friends and family, and who is struggling at school.

**Future:** The entire family is waiting eagerly to be reunited in Canada. When this dream is realized, Béatrice hopes that all three children will attend university. She feels that education is opportunity and that a qualification from a Canadian school will open all sorts of doors for her children and give them a better future, whether it is in Canada, back in Africa, or somewhere else. At this point in her life, Béatrice admits that she is unable to imagine a future for herself. She knows very well that until her entire family has been reunited, she will remain paralyzed and unable to see what the future holds for her.

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*The Bizimana family (SN2), Burundi*

Father:	Felix
Son:	Pierre
Daughter:	Sara
Pierre & Sara's mother:	Louise
Felix's niece:	Jeannine
Felix's godson:	Julien
Felix's son:	Armand

**Origins:** Felix was born and raised in Burundi. He lost his mother at the age of 7, an event that had a major impact on him and on the life of his family. His father was consumed by grief, and remarried quickly to fill the emptiness he felt in his heart. In addition to losing his mother's love at a very young age, Felix's new stepmother made life difficult for him and his siblings. Felix, who thus felt that he had to grow up very fast, got married and started working at a young age. Like his father, Felix loved carpentry, so he perfected his skills and opened his own workshop.

**Values:** The importance of family, including children's respect for their parents, are values that both Felix and his son Pierre want to hold on to. In fact, Pierre admits that he wants to raise his children in Burundi, as he is taken aback by the rights that children have in Canada and the lack of respect that they show to their elders.

**Migration:** Unfortunately, Felix's marriage ended in 1996. He suffered a great deal from this separation, as well as from the stress of having been left with the responsibility of the couple's two

children, Pierre and Sara. His private life, combined with a personal financial crisis, Burundi’s worsening political situation and death threats made against him, rendered his situation in the country quite precarious. It was at this point that Felix realized that the lives of himself and his children were changing so drastically that the best thing to do would be to leave the country. He left with Pierre and came to Canada where he hoped to rebuild a life for himself and his children, and eventually work as a carpenter again.

Both father and son are happy in Canada. In fact, in this country where all different communities and ethnic origins mix and live peacefully together, Felix appreciates the fact that he can finally live in a place where human beings are more important than ethnic origins. Although Felix is happy that Pierre has been able to develop a good network of friends, he worries that his son may fall under bad influences.

**Future:** Throughout the years, Felix has taken four other children into his care, and would like all of them to have the opportunity to come to Canada. What he wants the most is for all his children to have the chance to live the Canadian experience. While he would like them to take advantage of the country’s education system, he is reassured by the fact that even though his children might not want to study once in Canada, they will still be able to build a life for themselves in a country where anybody can make a living if he or she has the will and the perseverance to do so.

The previous pages provide us with a brief glimpse of who our participating families are and what they have endured in the process of migration. We have also learned something about their pasts, their present situations and their aspirations for the future. Although each family trajectory is unique, there are commonalities that unite them. In the following two chapters, we would like to move from these singular experiences toward a transversal analysis of the way in which these families have constituted vectors for the transmission of familial memories, values and identity.



## CHAPTER 3

### FAMILY TRANSMISSIONS: INFLUENTIAL MOMENTS AND FIGURES IN FAMILY TRANSMISSIONS

Immigration is often thought of as starting over again, a *tabula rasa*. In many ways, this is certainly true. It is a new beginning in a new context, but immigrant families do not arrive empty-handed. Through their past and present experiences, they have accumulated an incredible wealth of resources on which they are able to draw. These may be material resources (objects, savings, investments, etc.) or personal resources (educational achievement, work and life experiences, hobbies, etc). The family itself is another important resource which can be mobilized when circumstances warrant. In this chapter we would like to look more closely at the role of family transmissions in a context of migration. Through an analysis of the family novels, we would like to look more specifically at the way in which the migratory project, the history of family origins, principal identity markers and influential figures structure the narratives. The pages that follow therefore turn any notion that immigrant families are impediments to integration on its head, underlining how a sense of social orientations and renewal of aspirations are frequently rooted in the family context.

#### **Changing places: migration as a family project**

The families who participated in the Family Novel project are all refugees. Violence, political upheaval and generalized situations of chaos made their countries uninhabitable for them. They could have relied on safe houses or the closest border crossing in the hope that the situation would improve, yet they did not. Instead, they chose to take a very serious gamble on a new country, a new language and a new life. For these families, the experience of migration is often traumatic for the events that precede it, frightening in its uncertainty and yet, at the same time, empowering, as families begin the search for a place that is not just habitable, but somewhere where they can really live.

*Migration and family secrets*

In the Family Novel Project as a whole, migration proved to be the theme most fraught with tension and silence. It was clear that some families did not want to recall the traumatic events leading up to and surrounding their exile. No pressure was placed on the families to talk about unpleasant memories, and moments of silence or contradiction were respected by the interviewers. The difficulty of talking about the migratory period can be illustrated in the Romero family novel (S3). In this particular case, Gabriel's reluctance to talk about migration was not linked to a specific event, but rather to a feeling of guilt that he had imposed migration on his family because of circumstances that involved only himself. He considered his wife and child to be victims, in a sense, of a situation that he felt he was responsible for. Other participants, particularly those who had survived genocide, did not want certain facts related to their migration to be made known to other family members. There is one case, however, in which the migration process not only brought the family closer, but actually erased silences as well, as is illustrated in this excerpt from the Sebugwiza family novel (S8):

A trial at the border was that the issue of Alice's adoption, never formalized in Rwanda, inevitably came up. The authorities insisted that the entire family be there during May's interrogation and it was under these circumstances that Alice found out she had been adopted. True to her culture, May had never thought that Alice needed to know these details before adulthood. Blood was taken for a DNA test while May tried to explain that she had not seen it important to tell Alice of her true parentage because as far as May was concerned, Alice was as much her daughter as Caroline. Alice did not take it well, but it is almost a non-issue now. There was another surprise waiting for Caroline. Nearly as soon as the family had landed in Montreal, someone in the extremely cohesive Rwandan community, a community with very few secrets, put two and two together. Apparently, Caroline's father had been here for years. He and May spoke on the phone and he was unrepentantly casual, offering no excuses for his evaporation. Against her better judgement, May let him talk to Caroline, who was astounded when she heard of his presence. Mother and daughter no longer discuss the issue, but May knows that whatever lingering doubts as to their possible roles in her father's departure Caroline had kept locked away inside her are gone. Though the encounter was not easy for either of them, in the end it helped expunge the greatest white elephant of their relationship, and for that May is very grateful. (S8: 17)

*Migration as strategy*

With the exception of one family (Gutiérrez, S2), Canada was not the first migratory experience to become part of the family story. Migration is rooted in the families' pasts, a strategy used multiple

times in an effort to flee from danger and improve their quality of life. One example is that of the Khreiss family (S6), for whom migration had marked the life paths of several generations. Lebanon, Iraq, Cyprus, England, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Wales and Canada have all been sites of transit. The Khreisses hope that the entire family will eventually reside in Montreal. While some families migrated frequently in response to immediate conflict, like May Sebugwiza (S8), who moved back and forth across the Rwandan-Congolese border, for others displacement was particularly about seeking out opportunities. Roberto Ivanovich (S1), for example, moved his family from Chicago to Orlando, to Mexico, back to Orlando, back to Chicago and to South Carolina before leaving for Canada on his own.

Because the participating families had immediate and pressing motivation for their departure, many have feared, and still fear, for their safety. Roberto Ivanovich (S1), Alaura Gutiérrez (S2), Gabriel Romero (S3) and Francisco Flores (S9) were attacked, Carlos Díaz (S5) and May Sebugwiza (S8) were told that the demise of their family was imminent, and Mona Khreiss (S6) nearly died during a war. All of these families display patriotic values, and sometimes experience nostalgia. Yet in several cases, their homelands are gripped by “interlocking trends of spiralling violence, endemic corruption and debilitating brain drain” (S3: 19), and feelings of loss for the homeland are inevitably framed in complex, ambivalent discourse. As these words are put to page, there is war in Lebanon, Columbia and the Congo—the original countries of four of the twelve families. In Mexico and Rwanda, where another four of the families are from, there is daily violence on a major scale; the only reason these cases are not deemed “war” is because there is no organized opposition to the brutality.

It is more than understandable that these families “prefer to wait for stability from the tranquil safety of other countries, praying for their country while taking the necessary steps to better the lives of their children” (S5: 14). Or, as we read in the Saad family novel (S7), like other families, Samar “wants to build her future in a country with a future, that will always have a future” (S7: 14). Generally speaking, the choice of Canada was neither random nor rushed for the participating families. Canada has a reputation as a place of refuge, provided families are able to get here. Some, like Marie Bombai (M1), knew little about the country itself except “that it was a place of peace and hospitality” (M1: 12). Roberto (S1), Gabriel (S3) and Serhiy and Isidora Baranowski (S4) did research on Canada before coming, and Alaura (S2) was advised by members of her community. They all chose this country for its reputation of tranquility and social mobility. May’s novel describes her thoughts about life in Canada, how she is experiencing what she once thought

was too good to be true: “In Rwanda, she once read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and thought its provisions a fantasy: here, she lives them every day” (S8: 24). Carlos, on the other hand, was worried that a new country might demand an entirely new Carlos, but was “happy to see that the entire gamut of beliefs, personalities and attitudes is accepted here” (S5: 15).

The initial experiences of the participants on Canadian soil, however, were not all positive. Alaura (S2) will not soon forget the situation of utter confusion that marked the day of her arrival. Alaura spoke neither French nor English when she arrived in Montreal, and not understanding what she was saying in Spanish, the airport officials stamped her passport with a tourist visa and escorted her out into the regular arrivals area. She walked around the airport, eavesdropping on different conversations in hopes of finding a Spanish speaker who could explain her situation to an airport official. When night fell and the airport was nearly empty, she curled up on top of her luggage, burst into tears and eventually fell asleep. In the morning she continued pacing the arrivals terminal and finally heard someone speaking Spanish on the phone. She approached the man and asked for his help. Although he was not a native Spanish speaker, he helped her communicate with an airport official. Unfortunately, her passport had already been stamped with a tourist visa and she couldn't apply for refugee status at the airport any longer. She was told that she needed to go to the Immigration offices in downtown Montreal. Her new found friend was kind enough to drop her off there, but she soon learned that she was not at the right office. She was first sent to another downtown office before being referred to an office situated slightly north of the city. At the time of the Family Novel Project, she had been in Canada for close to a year and says that she loves the country, but her arrival story has become part of her family legacy. Although Alaura's experience was particularly traumatic, most families lived through stressful arrival periods; they were, however, particularly grateful to find themselves on safe ground.

#### *Parenting during the migration process*

In her field notes, one of the interviewers observed that migration seemed to have a positive effect on the participating families.

Parents talk with their children about the process behind their own actions. This strengthens the family's bonds and the members grow closer during the migration process, turning inwards. Obviously, there are many families that scatter outwards as a result of the stress, but these are not families inclined to participate in such a project. Nostalgia also plays a part as parents recount anything they can think of that evokes the old country and the family left there. With this home environment, the teenagers are

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dealing with the dislocation admirably and none have “rebelled” against the triad of responsibility, sacrifice and cultural fidelity [that parents expect] except for the younger Polish girl (S4) who was born and raised in Canada. (field notes)

The phenomenon of rebellion was observed in one other case as well, and is explored further in Chapter 4.

The process of migration often demands that the youth mature more quickly than they would have otherwise. This is the case in the Romero family (S3), where the son, Gabriel Jr., has had to become his parents' voice as he absorbs French and they remain near pure Hispanophones. It is now Gabriel Jr. who deals with most of the family's interactions with Canadians, for everything from renting movies to speaking with immigration officials on the phone. Growing up fast is also the fate of several youth who experienced family separation at some time or another during the migratory process, such as Teresa, Liza and Roberta Ivanovich (S1), Marco and Lily Días (S5), Rafic Khreiss (S6), Émile Saad (S7), Alice and Caroline Sebugwiza (S8) and Sara, Madeleine, Marc and Agnes Bombai (M1). During periods of separation, the young people spoke only rarely with their parents on the telephone. Although they gave the children a sense of security, these conversations were also a major source of anxiety, particularly for those who could sense their parents' distress. Marco (S5), for instance, had to take on a comforting role with his father, reassuring him constantly when circumstances were difficult. This is a heavy responsibility for a fourteen-year-old boy. At the same time, however, the family narrative reveals that the inversion of roles has also had the advantage of bringing the two closer together again. For other youth, the negative effects of separation were minimized by the strength of the support networks that welcomed them. This was the case for Alice and Caroline (S8), who spent a year in the United States waiting for their mother, who they knew to be in grave danger in their country of origin. In addition to the difficulties of separation itself, they were also suffering from the recent and unexpected loss of their step-father. Despite these situations of extreme adversity, they found security and stability in the family of their mother's friend who was already living in the United States. We can read from their novel:

After three months in the United States, they were speaking English fluently and gushing about the large community that their caretaker had made sure kept them busy. It was this network, as much as May's friend, that welcomed the children and saw to it that their life differed as little as possible from the one they had enjoyed in Rwanda. (S8: 14)

The year spent in the States gave them a good introduction to North American culture, especially as seen from the heart of an African community. At the time of the narration of their family novel, they

had been reunited with their mother in Quebec; the novel bears witness to their relief of being together once again. Family separation appears to be less difficult for some of the older youth, such as Santa (S2), Rafic (S6) and Émile (S7), who were able to join family members already living in Quebec (brothers or sisters in each case). If anything, these adolescents’ separation from their parents has been compensated for by strengthened relationships with their siblings. This type of situation is particularly well illustrated in the novel of Émile and his sister Samar (S7):

While before their cohabitation, the two had become perfectly comfortable in each other’s company, now they actively seek it out. They make a point of spending at least a couple of evenings in with one another a week. Samar jokes that the hardest part was “house training” Émile to live without their mother; now that this particular stage is over she thinks her little brother is a doll. (Much to his consternation, she actually uses this term in front of her friends on occasion). Émile remains unsure of whether his sister was always the person she is now; or whether it is that her recent experiences have brought out a different side. Whatever changed, he is so glad it did. (S7: 15)

#### *Strategies for coping with the disruption of migration*

Migration has been, of course, a stressful process for all of the participating families, and is accompanied by feelings of loss and nostalgia for their homelands. One of the ways in which many have dealt with this nostalgia is by immersing themselves in extended community networks. The importance of community networks is illustrated, for instance, in the Ivanovich family novel (S1): “Whenever they moved to a new city Roberto would concentrate on establishing a large social circle. These friends could not replace the family he had left behind but they went a long way to diminishing the sense of separation from his origins that he felt” (S1). Similarly, May (S8) has taken great care to root her children in the Rwandan community here in Canada. The importance of contact with the community for immigrant youth is very present in the Bombai family novel (M1). Through the community network, the daughter Sara was particularly happy to renew links with extended family members, some of whom she had never met:

Once in Canada, Sara was able to reconnect with certain family members she hadn’t known before, such as cousins, aunts, and uncles. Some were already familiar to her, as she had had the opportunity to meet them previously. For Sara, in Canada, it’s the family and all the values that go along with it that is the most important; that is to say, love and the perseverance to work ever harder. (M1: 11)

Another way in which some families cope with the feelings of loss due to migration is to return to their homeland, or another country, from time to time. This is the case for the Saad and Khreiss families from Lebanon, which visited home frequently during their children's youth. These visits were seen as an important way to give their children a sense of heritage and ensure they knew their grandparents. Continuous contact with friends and family in the homeland has been one of the greatest positive forces in these families' migration. These visits strengthened ties with extended family and furthered the transmission of traditions (both of these benefits are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4).

Despite the mitigating effects of community, culture shock is inevitable. In some family novels, participants commented on what they considered to be the "coldness" of Canadians in comparison with people in their homelands. They are particularly critical of what they see as a form of individualism that contrasts with their past experiences. This is illustrated in a description of interactions in the subway, as described in the Khreiss family novel (S6):

After four years here, Mohammed still fails to understand why people are so cold and disconnected. His favourite example of this is the metro, where the only way you will ever know anything about anyone riding in your car is by peering over their shoulder to discern the title of the book they are reading, or by trying to gauge what their shoes might say about their personality. Riders get on and off as quickly as possible as if desperately trying to escape the awkwardness of collective space. Usually Mohammed feels like starting random conversations or doing something weird enough to get a reaction, any reaction, out of anybody: anything to break the glacial silence (S6: 23).

For refugees more specifically, the immigration process is riddled with obstacles; it is a process that is both humiliating and disempowering, as one of the interviewers wrote in her notes:

While each of these families loves Canada's tranquility, multi-culturalism and freedom of thought/speech/action, they have just been through a difficult system. The system is backlogged and so people wait months to learn their fate and this is very stressful. The system criminalizes their actions and the families know very well from their fellow refugees they have met here that it is very hard to prove your innocence. The system disempowers them by making it illegal for them to work without a work permit. This removes their autonomy and in many cases, exposes them to exploitation by the scouts for illegal labour that canvas in community organizations, apartment buildings, churches and dispensaries.  
(field notes)

This loss of independence usually carries with it a sense of humiliation, especially if there are family members back in the country of origin who are counting on those who have immigrated to effect

positive change quickly. May (S8), who has been unable to get her three youngest daughters out of the Congo, is struggling with this.

Besides the culture shock and missing her family, she has suffered shame due to not being allowed to work. Not only has this diminished the standard of living she can offer her loved ones, both in Canada and abroad; but it has also meant dependency... It often pains May to speak with her family because she wishes she could do so much more than support them financially. Her mother tells her to stop worrying; that just knowing that May and her children are safe is more than so many grandmothers have. While May can recognize the wisdom of this statement, she has yet to reconcile herself with the situation. She has not been able to call her daughters in Uganda for a long time because she cannot face telling them that she cannot bring them over yet. She does not believe she will be at peace until they are here with her and every day she devotes herself to coming a little closer to that goal. (S8: 23)

These trials and tribulations notwithstanding, the families share the belief that it is not only "worth it," but the only way to truly ensure their children's safety and prosperity. The positive future they see for themselves more than outweighs the difficulties they have experienced.

Finally, these families have realized that they may not stay in Canada forever. Should they be rejected as refugees or should they hear of opportunities elsewhere, they will be off once more. The Baranowski family (S4), although established here for several years, already has plans to move on. "While the Baranowskis are grateful for all they have been able to accomplish in Canada, they are also eager to move on. Isidora and Serhiy have the confidence that comes from success based on their own hard work and are eager to try something new" (S4). This is not to say that the families are not happy here, but they are accustomed to urging themselves forward, always searching for a more fulfilling solution. Regardless of their permanence, they speak warmly of this country. The Romero family novel (S3) perhaps encapsulates this feeling best:

Whether they stay in the long term or not, they are already very grateful for what this country has given them. They equate seeking refuge to knocking at the door of a complete stranger who does not speak your language without an invitation and throwing yourself upon his mercy. Under normal circumstances, the stranger would turn you away, or make you sleep in the shed in the yard, but Canada offers a warm bed and a month's worth of meals, translators to help you communicate your needs, and a chance to present your case. Essentially, what they are looking for is the opportunity to have opportunity. If they are allowed to stay in Canada, it will be like a challenge; they will take the responsibility to live up to the opportunity being offered to them very seriously. If they are forced to leave, it will not be to go back to Mexico, of that they are certain. (S3: 22)



### **Stories of origin: The lives of ancestors**

The families that participated in this research project were invited to tell their stories of origin, a central theme in the construction of each family novel. These stories produced different types of narratives of origin—some legends and even myths—but the majority illustrated the lives of participants' parents and, in some cases, those of grandparents. Even though the latter category seem closer to reality, the stories are still based on recounted facts. The traits of certain characters are chosen for the meanings and messages that the tellers, often parents themselves, want to transmit to their children, particularly in the context of migration. Through this selection, which hints of reality itself, but which is not without fictional elements, these narratives can acquire the status of mini-fables that carry strong symbolic weight for family members. Some novels even employ the terms “family fable” or “family legend” in reference to certain stories about family origins. Here are two examples: “As Émile grew older, however, these stories, which earlier had taken the form of family fables, became first exhortations and then reprimands” (S7: 12), and “Things improved greatly after that exchange, and the story has become family legend. Francisco had not dared to hope for such a dramatic turnaround in his father’s behaviour” (S9: 4).

Among the stories told, some contain tragedy. In the majority of cases, the tragedy was provoked by historical events linked to a context of organized violence (war, guerrillas, genocide, etc.). Sometimes, the tragedy is more personal, caused by the loss of loved ones. For example, Félix (SN2), who is from Burundi, describes the dramatic impact on his life of the death of his mother and his father’s remarriage while he was still a child. His novel explains:

Having lost his mother too soon, and having then inherited a stepmother with whom he did not get along, Félix keeps an image of himself as a young boy who had to grow up too soon... Félix transformed himself into a nervous child, who ate poorly and who grudgingly went to school. (SN2: 3-4)

#### *Myth, legend and realism: Types of narrative*

As mentioned above, some stories of origin are inspired by myths or traditional legends. However, the majority are more realistic, relating to life or significant moments in the lives of family members of earlier generations, particularly those of parents.

Mythical types of narrative are found in only one of the novels, that of two young sisters of Mexican origin whose childhoods were filled with stories told by their grandmother, who “would weave fantastic tales, drawing on the lives of her own brothers and sisters and of her 14 children as an endless source of inspiration” (S2; 6). One such story involved the tragic experience of one of her brothers, into which elements of popular legends are interwoven. The story can be summarized as follows: the brother found a golden goblet that had been buried several centuries earlier in a mountain by a people called the “People of Gold.” Disregarding the legend’s counsel, he failed to have the goblet blessed by a priest. Therefore, as the legend predicted, he was possessed by the devil and not even the village priest could exorcise the demon. The brother sank into alcoholism and died within a few short years.

Their mythical stories read in a poetic and elaborate fashion, once even serving to explain the origins of one of the sisters’ names. It is with great pride that this girl explains that her name is actually that of a princess who reigned over a people who went head-to-head with both Aztec and Spanish invaders. Thanks to her courage (among other things, she would become the first woman of her people to mount a horse) and the courage she inspired in her subjects, they were able to retain their dignity when the Spaniards finally succeeded in subduing the population.

On the other hand, the characters at the centre of the more realist narratives are generally men—usually the father of the storyteller. The life of the mother (and in some cases, the grandmother) is also often a subject of the narratives, but in general these are related more superficially. In one family novel, the story of origin draws less on the ancestors of the storyteller than on life episodes that foreshadow the far-from-ordinary man the narrator has become: a tireless defender of human rights. These more realist stories of origin can be divided into two categories based on the function of the main theme of the narrative: 1) the impact of historic events on the lives of protagonists and their own exile, and 2) the state of flux itself.

### *Historic origins*

In some cases where the narratives relate the lives of parents or grandparents, emphasis is put on the way in which history, or more specifically certain historical events, have marked the family’s trajectory and their relationship to the world. Serhiy (S4), of Polish origins, describes the trauma that the Second World War caused his mother and father. Serhiy’s father, who was deported as a child with his family to a Siberian gulag “would not speak of [those traumatic years] for fifty years

afterwards” (S4: 3). Even though his mother did not like to evoke that time in their lives, she would sometimes tell stories “about the abject terror she felt at the hands of Nazi soldiers... She still remembers seeing their boots going by as she hid under the stairs leading up to her house” (S4: 3).

The family novel of the Saads (S7) from Lebanon tells of how Joseph’s mother was forcibly exiled with her children from Palestine by the English, not long after being widowed. Unlike Serhiy’s parents, she willingly relates her exile to her grandchildren, and not only because she draws great pride from having made it through such an ordeal while providing for the needs of her family (uncommon for a single woman of that era). She also uses this narrative as a “reprimand for whining grandchildren who might not appreciate what hard work and desperation really mean” (S7: 2).

The story of origin of the Rwandan Sebugwiza family (SN1) is composed of several tragic narratives of interethnic conflict between Tutsis and Hutus. The principal protagonists are May’s father, her sister (who is Alice’s mother, Alice having been adopted by May and Alex), and Alex, who is the father of two of May’s sons, but who died some years ago. May recounts how her father, depicted as a well-read and non-conformist man, was forced on several occasions to face exile with his family in order to protect them from the conflict. We also learn that during the most murderous periods of the Rwandan genocide, he was removed by Rwandan soldiers along with several hundred Tutsis, leading his family to believe for some time the rumours that he had been buried alive.

The story of May’s sister concerning the adoption of Alice is told in the form of a romantic tragedy. One part of the story reads as follows:

The same year the borders were closed, May’s sister fell in love... While neither of the other two [sisters] had any desire for romance in their lives, she had become enamoured of a young man who lived nearby. When her sisters discovered the relationship, they were horrified, but could say nothing to separate the couple. When May’s sister became pregnant, her boyfriend greeted the news with joy and the couple began to speak of marriage; yet as the conflict to the East intensified, the baby’s father began to feel an obligation to stand up for his people... Barely out of his teenage years, he left for battle, brimming with optimism and promising to return. All the sisters begged him not to go, but he was adamant. They never heard from him again... When Alice was born, her mother was still so distraught over her bereavement that it was May who cared for the child. (SN8: 6)

It is in describing the life of her deceased husband that May’s tragedies reveal her talent in using small stories to convey large messages. The narrative is full of developments, illustrating how Alex

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(of Austrian origins) had a passionate love for Africa, but also for three African women (of whom May was one). Yet the stories of this man are no less marked by the horrors of interethnic conflict and other scourges with which Africa has long been afflicted (AIDS, poverty, corruption, abuse of power, vengeance, etc.). His story begins with these words:

For its beauty, for its drama, for its life, there are travelers bewitched by Africa. Alex had no intention of staying past the duration of his contract when he first went to Rwanda in the early 1980s, but within months, he knew that he would remain. An engineer who had advised on projects around the world, he was used to travel. Yet in Rwanda, he fell in love with the country. He returned to Austria and tried to convince his wife to move with him to Africa, but she was horrified at the thought... It was a true measure of his obsession that Alex returned to Kigali despite her refusal to join him. (S8: 8)

*Origins marked by flux*

A strikingly significant number of the narratives relate how the lives of the protagonists (often the parents or the grandparents of participants) have been marked by flux. Unlike the stories analyzed so far, the displacements evoked in the following stories were not provoked by political conflicts or historical events, but motivated by personal drive. In the Khreiss family novel (S6), the two grandfathers are presented as sharing many affinities. First, they both left Lebanon to find a place for themselves where the inhabitants shared more than just values. It was in Ecuador that Hassan's father felt at home and was able to realize his dreams; in less than no time he had started up a prosperous business in the cinema and married a singer, with whom he had a daughter, in spite of the brevity of their relationship. Mona's father, like May's husband Alex (S8), fell in love with Africa. He built up a trucking company that led him to travel across the continent. The two grandfathers both also married Lebanese women who, in one way or another, would pressure them to return to Lebanon to live permanently. Mona's father eventually resigned himself to leaving Africa definitively after twenty years of coming and going between that continent and Lebanon, where his children and wife lived.

Carlos' parents (S5) both traveled extensively during different periods in their lives. His father, depicted as a rebel, apparently gave Carlos an out-of-the-ordinary childhood. His father travelled throughout Colombia between the ages of nine and thirteen. While Carlos' father always remained silent about the reasons for his childhood departure from Bogotá, Carlos remembers him reminiscing “often about his trips... recalling even the most trivial characteristics of the people he met. He says that he loved the independence he enjoyed during those years, but that what he loved

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even more was seeing for himself how people all over the country were living” (S5: 3). As for Cecilia, Carlos’ mother, it was only after her divorce that she would immigrate to the United States and travel throughout that country.

Cecilia began by working in discotheques, soon befriending the singers who performed there. Her charm appealed to these stars and soon she became a professional assistant, traveling around the country with celebrities. She returned to Colombia only when her grandchildren were born and has lived there ever since. (S5: 4)

*Origins of personal trajectories*

As we have already mentioned, some of the novels stand out through what their narrators briefly say about the lives of ancestors. The purpose of the few anecdotes told by Francisco (S9) about his parents seems to be to illustrate the impact that their personalities (his father was in the military and a violent man) and their lives had on the unusual course of his own life. Francisco is a dogged defender of human rights who left Colombia only after escaping several assassination attempts, the last of which took the lives of several members of his family, including three of his five children. His family novel is composed of several episodes that exemplify the strength of his commitment to defending the rights of oppressed people and building a more just society. The most notable of these episodes (and that which best reveals Francisco’s personality) reads as follows:

Francisco was the youngest of five brothers and sisters, yet it was he who finally addressed the problem [of domestic violence]. When he was twelve years old, he approached his father and informed him that if he ever hit his mother again, he would kill him. He said it looking straight into his father’s eyes and knowing full well that a beating that might kill him could follow. He did it because he could not take any more, and felt he had to confront his father. Understandably, Francisco Sr. was taken aback, and he demanded an explanation. The son replied that he had had it, that he was sick of this mother being so grievously humiliated... Sure enough, his father was the man of the house, but that day he was a man too. He went on to describe all that his mother did for the family... It was she who washed the clothes, changed the diapers, who fed, bathed and cared for the children, who looked after Francisco Sr. so assiduously; by hitting her, he showed himself to be nothing but an ingrate... They stared at each other silently for a few minutes, the father said, “Fine, are we friends?” and the son replied, “Fine, just don’t you ever hit my mother again.” They nodded at each other and Francisco Sr. began to drink. After about an hour of drinking, he went to his wife who was trembling, expecting to bear the brunt of the anger Francisco Jr. had feared would be taken out on him. Instead, her husband simply told her that perhaps things would be changing around the house... Things improved greatly after that exchange, and the story has become family legend. Francisco had not dared to hope for such a dramatic turnaround in his father’s behaviour. (S9: 4)

### **Personal qualities and other features of characters symbolizing family origins**

In analyzing the stories of origin, we discovered a number of similarities between the qualities of the characters described. They share personality traits that seem to be essential to surviving the migration process and remaking one’s life in a foreign country: courage, resourcefulness, perseverance, ambition, effort. and a sense of family.

#### *Hard work and tenacity*

The personality trait shared by most of the protagonists in the family novels is determination and tenacity. Many of them, by dint of their own hard work, managed to start their own businesses, which enabled them to give their families a higher status of living and greater security. The ideology of the “self-made man” therefore appears in many of the narratives. For example, as mentioned above, the Khreiss family novel (S6) tells of how both Hassan’s and Mona’s fathers succeeded in developing a flourishing business in a foreign country (the former in Ecuador and the latter in Nigeria). Describing Nabil, Hassan’s father: “He was by no means an instant success, but over the years, with diligence and a little luck, he built a thriving business that included film production, distribution and even his own chain of movie theatres” (S6: 4). In the Saad family novel (S7), Joseph’s father is presented as a “successful businessman who was known for his strict work ethic and his no-nonsense approach to everything” (S7: 3). Several anecdotes are related about Miriam’s father, Joseph’s father-in-law, to illustrate his business sense, unique personality and the important role he played in his country.

#### *Tradition and community influence*

Several leading characters in the narratives were presented as people who were influential figures in their communities and even, as in the of the Saad family (S7), in their country at large. For example, Miriam’s father, who died at 93 years of age, actually founded one of the first banks in Jordan. Here is how it is described in the novel:

Her father was a much-feted minister, lauded as much for his honesty as for his often bawdy sense of humour. He was also a risk-taker who would borrow huge sums of money for a myriad of projects. His intuition must have been remarkable, for his

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failures at business were more than outstripped by his successes. His greatest accomplishment was founding one of the first banks in Jordan. (S7: 5)

Beatrice (SN1), born in Burundi, also stresses her parents' influence within their community (where there is even a church named after her father). It was by being a catechist who was close to the colonizers that her father rose above many of his compatriots, securing his status partly through fear, according to Beatrice.

The fear and respect that residents had for him made him influential. Everyone in the community knew that Roger was being serious when he threatened to denounce to the State those people who did not listen to his orders and did not send their children to school. This denunciation represented a real threat, since it carried with it the consequences of forced labour. (SN1: 4)

Beatrice describes her father as a traditional man who valued the education of boys, but not girls. She describes how she nevertheless managed to convince her parents to let her attend school. Her mother, in comparison, became an important figure in the community through her midwifery practice. Even when she was older, she would not hesitate to go out in the middle of the night to help other women bring their children into the world. Beatrice appears very grateful to her parents for the values (love of one's fellow humans, faith in God) that they transmitted to her and that will help her adapt to life in Canada. In the case of Félix's father (SN2), who is also presented as an influential man, it is his education that makes him "not only become the 'chief' among his brothers and sisters, but equally among the descendants of his natal village... It was to him that everyone would go to find refuge and ask for help" (SN2: 3).

#### *Non-conformism*

Another admired characteristic of parents described in the narratives is their non-conformism. Apart from Carlos (S5), who told of his father being a rebel, this trait is presented as a positive quality in the family novels that are related by women. This leads us to think that non-conformism is particularly valued by women, as it often signifies access to education and, as a result, higher social status. For example, May (S8) recounts how her father, who was a doctor, expressed that he was happy to have a third daughter, contrary to those around him, who supported the traditional valorization of sons. Moreover, we learn that her father did not fear family division if it would allow all his children (girls and boys alike) to pursue a higher education. Marie's parents (M1) are also described in the novel as exceptional people. Her father, in spite of knowing "neither how to read nor write,

encouraged all his children to have an education. To do so, he followed closely the accomplishments of his children... He had a reputation for being a wise man and for being very observant” (M1: 3). Marie remembers her father’s funeral with great emotion, saying that it was attended by an “unimaginable” number of people. The non-conformist character of Marie’s mother is illustrated by the fact that she breastfed her children for a long time simply out of love, even though she was mocked for it.

### *Female role models*

In contrast, when these narrators stress their parents’ rigid and conformist personalities, it is usually to show what kind of obstacles the narrators themselves had to overcome in order to pursue their dreams. As we saw above, Beatrice’s father (SN1) was opposed to her going to school. Having a traditional vision of the role of women, he judged education for girls to be useless. With the support of an older sister, however, she registered in school in spite of her parents’ disapproval, and initially attended in secret. When she was discovered, she managed to convince them to let her pursue her studies by promising to participate in household chores. When Ana (S3) speaks of her parents, she describes how conservative they were, like their community in general. According to the Romero family novel, “Ana’s father, even more conservative than her mother, did not believe that there was need for a girl to get an education, and so Ana did not continue her schooling past primary school” (S3: 3). Ana would leave the family home of her youth “hoping to get out from underneath her father’s overbearing bellicosity” (*Ibid.*). She went to live with a sister in another town, where she found work and valued the independence she acquired. Her interest in studies developed later, when she moved to a larger city in the hope of finding better employment opportunities (See below, page 54).

When it comes to the lives of the narrators’ mothers, their principal qualities are hard work, devotion to family, and love. For example, here is how the Días family novel (S5) describes Carlos’ mother’s work ethic: “Carlos fears that [his mother’s] childhood was rather grim, but guesses that it is from her early experiences that [she] derives her incredible drive and nearly superhuman work ethic” (S5: 3). In the stories of the Romero (S3) and Saad (S7) family origins, it is recounted with pride how their mothers each managed with courage to single-handedly provide for the needs of their respective families (as both were widowed with young children). Another important female figure in these narratives is that of the mythic heroine mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, who



resisted the Spanish conquest with extraordinary courage. Other qualities attributed to her are beauty, intelligence and independence, all of which are poetically evoked in the narrative:

She was the king's daughter and her name... [meant] "she who smiles." Many warriors desired her for she was beautiful, dark and pure; but none of them ever received anything from her except a sarcastic smile as she brushed them away. One among them, Nanuma, the leader of the armies, was especially in love with her, not only because she was beautiful, but for her great intelligence as well. But the princess would love no one. She gave her love to the pastures, to the mountains of her Michoacán, to its air and sky, its lakes and valleys. When men would press her for her affection, she would reply that she had no need of a master, that she already belonged to the wind and the trees. (S2: 3)

### **Influential figures**

Most of the families place great importance on the influence they have received from other family members, such as parents, grandparents, and siblings. There are only two examples of non-relatives being given credit in this way.

#### *Siblings*

While influence often comes from one's elders (parents and grandparents)—and the families here are no exception—there is also a good number of influential sisters and brothers. In some narratives, the siblings have both been part of the migrating family, while in others, one has had to leave the other behind. In a few cases, two siblings were the only ones to migrate, either without or ahead of the rest of the family. In these instances, the siblings—a brother and sister in one case (S7), two sisters in another (S2), and two brothers in yet another (S6)—serve as each other's caregiver, support, family and, at least in the beginning, social network.

One of the best illustrations of this dynamic is the story of Samar and Émile (S7). Samar, the first to move to Canada, was soon followed by her younger brother. Although self-described polar opposites, they get along fabulously, and "while before their cohabitation, the two had become perfectly comfortable in each other's company, now they actively seek it out... Émile says that Samar motivates him without being quite as stern as their father, and is inspirational" (S7: 15). As can be expected of someone arriving in a new place, Émile hung out with his older sister's friends when he first came to Montreal, but it was not long before he had quite an impressive social network

of his own. Despite differences in personalities and social circles, "they are just glad to know that they belong together despite being unsure if they will ever truly belong somewhere" (*Ibid.*).

For the families who were able to immigrate all together, the bond between siblings has been different, but still strong, as they have been forced to grow up in a new environment that is very different from what they were used to. In one case, faced with the teenage rebellion of the younger sister, it was the older sister who stepped up and proved to be the only source of familial connection that made a difference (S4).

Because of the relationship the sisters enjoy, Anastazja says that Agnieszka has been the greatest influence in her life, both positively and negatively... Anastazja feels that her sister will always understand her better than her parents ever can because the sisters grew up living through the same issues. Issues like drug use and competitive consumer culture dictating a hierarchy of cool that their parents understand but never experienced as teenagers. Agnieszka has always had the position of mediator between her sister and her parents, and both sides recognize and appreciate this. (S4: 18)

In some cases, it was the emigrating parents who cited their siblings as highly influential, brothers or sisters who did not follow them to their new home. In these families, it is often an older sibling who had a significant role in the upbringing of their younger brother or sister. Such is the case of the Ivanovich family (S1), in which Roberto praises his brother, Augusto, as being an incredible inspiration. Augusto had a neurological disorder that resulted in increasingly impaired mobility as he aged. He turned to religion, and was the first of his family to convert to Mormonism, becoming a sort of counsellor in his neighbourhood and giving sympathetic advice to all who came to see him. "For Roberto, Augusto was inspiring, someone who suffered yet gave so much time and had so much compassion for the problems of others that paled in comparison to his own. Whenever Roberto felt that life was difficult or that he was about to be overwhelmed, he thought of Augusto and drew strength from his strength" (S1: 4). Ana (S3) uses her own experiences to illustrate a similar point:

For Ana, her first influence was her older sister, Francesca, who taught her the importance of independence. If Ana had not left her family home to live with Francesca, she never would have formed the resolve she needed to go back to school. She might have succumbed to the general community's views on the proper path for women to take and have gotten married before she was ready to do so. Francesca also taught her the value of hard work and the importance of adjusting one's lifestyle to the money that you are earning... Ana credits Francesca with giving her an orientation in what she calls "the real world," the world of self-determination and the resulting freedom. (S3: 12)

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In both of these cases, it is quite likely that the lives of these people would have been vastly different had it not been for their siblings, to whom they give great credit for their experience and outlook.

### *Spouses*

The Baranowskis (S4) are the only family in which the spouses cite each other as their primary influence. Serhiy and Isidora claim that it is due to the fact that they have had no one but themselves and their girls for so long; they have been something of an isolated unit and have learned not to rely on anyone else. This novel is different from the others in that it is the only one that tells of a family that has been in Canada for more than just a few years, having arrived shortly before their younger daughter, now a teenager, was born. While they do have ties with family and friends back home in Poland, returning for visits occasionally and extending invitations to their new home, they do not consider any of these relatives to be particularly influential in their lives.

### *Extended family*

Those who mention another relative, such as an uncle or a cousin, seem to take an approach similar to those who cited an older, left-behind sibling. Such is the case, again in the Romero family, with Gabriel's cousin, Julio, to whom Gabriel and Ana looked up so much that they chose him to be Gabriel Jr.'s godfather. "Julio was someone that inspired Gabriel for his incredible discipline and determination... It is his studiousness and his will to better his own situation by himself that Gabriel so admires" (S3: 6). It is Gabriel and Ana's hope that, by having Julio as a godfather, Gabriel Jr. will acquire the same qualities.

Interestingly, grandparents are cited slightly more often than parents as primary influences. In many cases, the grandparents were not a regular presence in the lives of their grandchildren, being included primarily in family vacations, celebrations or other special occasions. Grandparents were a source of fun, gifts and fascinating family stories, unlike parents, who represented discipline and order. Many narrators respected what their grandparents had accomplished, the obstacles they had overcome, and the challenges they had met head on in order to give their families the love, support and resources that had enabled them to be where they are today. Many stories of hard work were sources of inspiration for those facing equally difficult problems. This was also a reason why

children looked up to their parents; many of the children greatly appreciated what their parents had gone through so that they could all lead happier lives.

The grandmother of the Gutiérrez family (S2) was a strong influence on Alaura, the eldest child, who spent hours in the kitchen listening to her grandmother's stories about their family and their homeland, such as those concerning her own youth and especially her violent marriage. Through the retelling of such stories, she taught Alaura to be wary of men and how to defend herself. This lesson proved useful when Alaura herself was caught in a difficult situation and was able to get out of it unscathed.

Grandparents play an important influential role in the Khreiss family (S6) as well. Although they are living in Cyprus to escape the war zone of Lebanon, Hassan and Mona find it important that their children get to know their grandparents. So, in spite of the dangers of traveling in the region, the family goes to visit them on a regular basis. These visits evidently had an impact on the boys:

After their parents, the single strongest influence on Mohammed and Rafic has been their grandfather Hussein. Rafic says that his grandfather knows more than he himself will ever know and that he always gives perfect advice. He marvels at all the experiences Hussein has lived and loves to listen to the stories he tells...In addition to the man's experience, Mohammed extols Hussein's intelligence, creativity, knowledge and his compassion towards everyone he has ever met... Hussein's endlessly detailed stories have made Mohammed eager to explore the world and also other people's minds... Finally, Hussein has always believed in his grandchildren and made sure they knew it. (S6: 28)

In a very similar case, the Saad family (S7) travelled through war zones to make sure their children knew their grandparents, until death interrupted this tradition.

Sadly, Émile's grandfather passed away when Émile was just six years old, so beyond a few fond memories, he does not have much except the knowledge that his grandfather loved him and his sister deeply. His maternal cousins, older than Émile, remember much more about their grandfather and one of them...has made it his mission in life to become exactly like him. Even from the grave, what he stood for and the kind of life he lived remains a motivating example for the family and he is sorely missed by all who knew him. (S7: 10)

Parents also play an important role in many of the families, such as the Sinankwa family (SN1). Béatrice cites her mother as a major influence, talking about the many sacrifices she made so that Béatrice and her siblings could live happy lives. Her mother was kind and giving, not only to her

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family, but to everyone around her. Béatrice sees her mother as a prime example of how she wishes to raise her own family, with love and kindness and a strong sense of community. When faced with difficulty, she often asks herself, “If Mom was able to do it, why not us?” (SN1: 17).

*Non-relatives*

In two stories, a major influence came not from a familial source, but from a teacher or professor. In one case, a professor taught a young man not only how to think rationally and to appreciate academia, but also made sure that he knew that his thoughts and opinions mattered. In another story, a teacher reached out to a struggling schoolgirl, telling her that she could do whatever she wanted with her life.

The first example is taken from the Romero family novel (S3). While in university, Gabriel’s studiousness and true interest in learning caught the attention of a philosophy teacher, Professor Gíro. Over time, the two came to have regular discussions on diverse topics and eventually became good friends.

Professor Gíro was a very scholarly man who had earned many accolades during his academic career but who remained very humble nonetheless. Philosophy was one of his main interests, and he and Gabriel spoke often of how one should live their life... Gabriel was also very grateful that Professor Gíro would lend him his encyclopaedias so that Gabriel might photocopy them and continue learning about subjects raised between them... Finally, the professor instilled constancy and patience in Gabriel. (S3: 13)

The second case in which a non-family member was highly influential is that of Marie Bombai (M1). Marie was greatly inspired by her mathematics teacher, who was one of the few female teachers at the time in the Congo. Madame Dubois encouraged Marie constantly, telling her that she would do great things with her life. This support gave her the confidence that would prove important later in her life, when she was faced with increasingly difficult situations.

Stories of hard work, challenges, of giving and of hope are often connected with the people viewed as major influences in the lives of these immigrants. This is particularly true for those who cite their parents or grandparents as primary important figures. Many seem in awe of what their elder kin have accomplished, what they had to sacrifice, and what they gave so that their families would have more opportunities than they themselves had had. It is no surprise, therefore, that their children and

grandchildren, some of whom have made the life-altering move to another country, try to emulate them as much as possible.

Life lessons and mutual respect are among the reasons cited by siblings who look up to each other. For some, an older brother or sister taught them to be independent, to work hard, or to stay in school. For siblings closer in age or who immigrated together, helping each other survive in difficult or isolated conditions had a major impact on both parties. As has been shown above, siblings faced with a new land and a new life are often drawn together, their necessary adjustments eased by this bond.

The two cases of significant teachers illustrates a fairly common pattern of students learning to love learning—and life—from their professors, who opened doors to reveal far-reaching horizons of possibilities. As few of the parents of these immigrants had had extensive schooling themselves, it is not surprising that influences dealing with education and academic knowledge would come from extra-familial sources.

### **Narratives on love and the formation of couples**

Another recurring theme in the family novels is related to ways in which couples in the family were formed. Narrators sometimes draw on the first encounters of their grandparents or parents to tell the story of how they themselves fell in love with their life partner or with the parents of their children. Most of the narratives contain representations of and metaphors for romantic love: love at first sight, attraction of opposites, and love surpassing all obstacles. The narratives that make no reference to romantic love connect the formation of couples in preceding generations to having lived in a traditional society. These stories nonetheless all inspire similar life lessons.

#### *Immediate attraction*

When analyzing narratives about the creation of couples, we were immediately struck by the number that insisted on the immediate attraction, in one way or another, of one partner (particularly the man) for the other. As we will see below, these stories provide evidence of the men’s determination and patience in conquering the heart of their beloved. May and Alex’s (S8) immediate mutual attraction in the tragic context of Rwandan refugee camps was transformed into a love that would help them to heal after the genocide was over.

Unable to stay in Kigali, but unable to leave Africa, Alex left for the Congo and threw himself into his work translating for Rwandan refugees and the German staff running aid stations there. When he and May met at work, neither was prepared for the immediate attraction they felt. Although they hid it well, neither was any less traumatized than the people they were helping. They developed a cordial professional relationship and each wondered how to deal with their nascent feelings. Yet it was when Alex and May finally acknowledged their emotions that they began to believe it possible to leave their past behind them. They got married in a traditional ceremony and began living together. May says that their greatest triumph of hope over despair was to have two beautiful children together. (S8: 11)

In some narratives, the authors emphasize the lovers' great dissimilarities, sometimes presenting them as the source of love's momentum. For example, in the Saad family novel (S7) it is said: "In their case, opposites attracted and they began to date. Much to the mystification of their friends, who could not understand how two such different people could be together, they fell deeply in love and knew that they wanted to marry within months" (S7: 5-6). Their differences enables each lover to find a complementary nature in the other: Joseph offered security and devotion to Miriam, while she brought him escape and laughter. This novel also tells us that the couple is still very much in love today, and that their children consider that "while no one is perfect, you might just get the perfect human if it were possible to combine their parents into one" (S7: 6).

In the case of the first encounter between Serhiy and Isidora, a direct link can be made between Serhiy's attraction for Isidora and their opposite personalities. As we read:

Isidora and Serhiy met through friends and Serhiy noticed her immediately. He was outgoing and a joker, nearly always the centre of attention for his humour or his guitar playing. In contrast, Isidora was more staid. She took her courses and her sports very seriously and did not pay him much attention. (S4: 5)

It is easy to conclude that Serhiy must have exercised great tenacity in order to get close to Isidora.

### *Perseverance and determination*

Another story that highlights the differences between couples is the one that Alaura and Santa (S2) tell about their parents' relationship. We learn that their father was, at the time of meeting their mother and possibly still today, quite a sociable person, often strumming his guitar to the great pleasure of others, while their mother was extremely silent and studious. It would seem that with the

years, their differences have not diminished and that “they are happy together and, for the most part, find their differences amusing rather than irritating” (S2: 5).

As mentioned already, in several narratives treating the formation of couples and the beginning of love, emphasis is placed on the man’s perseverance and determination in obtaining the affection of his beloved. This often intensified the very strong attraction he already felt—an attraction that was sometimes only a physical one that was sparked when he saw her in the street or in some other public place. The Días family novel (S5) relates with plenty of romanticism the force of attraction of Carlos’ father to Cecilia, and the long distance she made him run:

One day, returning from school... she crossed Antonio in the street and he threw out a “piropo” [*Unique to Latin American culture, a piropo is a flowery compliment that while signalling interest is said to in no way be lewd or overly suggestive*]...that on that day Cecilia smiled at Antonio and went on her way, thinking nothing of the exchange. Normally, Antonio would have done the same but Cecilia stayed with him. He says that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and began to lurk in the streets of their neighbourhoods in the hopes of seeing her again. His persistence paid off and he began to run into her more often. Cecilia, in her usual concise manner, says that he “pursued her with pretty words, and two years later they were married.” (S5: 3)

As mentioned above, Serhiy’s attraction to Isidora was not reciprocated at first. He had to employ different strategies in order to get close to her. His first tactic consisted in writing articles for the student newspaper that she edited. However, given his lack of talent for writing, she refused them all. He therefore changed his tactics to “a more straightforward approach, asking Isidora out. Although she did not agree at first, he won her over in time and they began seeing each other regularly. Slowly but surely they became more serious and, after a few years, Isidora became pregnant.” (S4: 5)

Georges’s love for Marie (M1) was not weakened by her many refusals of his advances and a number of years apart. A dialogue re-enacting their encounter is transcribed in the novel, in which we learn that Georges would tell Marie, “Today you will not run from me as you have escaped before”. After having exchanged a few words, he added, “I have found you. It is like destiny. I want very simply to marry you.” (M1: 9)

The story relating the meeting of Auguste and Beatrice (SN1) also insists on Auguste’s patience in waiting for his feelings to be reciprocated. As we are told in the novel, “Auguste proved himself to be



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very patient, waiting for his cherished one for two years, while she was involved in a relationship with another man.” (SN1: 10)

#### *Love against all odds*

In two of the novels (SN2 and S6), both lovers were challenged to prove their patience and perseverance. The Bizimana family novel (SN2) describes a number of obstacles that the two lovers had to overcome in order to unite their lives, including Félix’s father’s and stepmother’s opposition to the marriage. The novel tells us that “The young couple, madly in love, said to themselves that nothing could stop them from getting married, and that the best solution was to leave it to their own means” (SN2: 8). In order to do so, Félix built a house for himself that was equal to that of his father. The future couple had to use several strategies in order to celebrate their nuptials and other marriage rituals in as traditional a fashion as possible. For example, they had to ask a priest they didn’t know to marry them because, on top of everything else, not a single member of their families would agree to sign the official documents. Even though Louise was to leave Félix sixteen years later (something he still sees as a personal failure), he likes to retell their story when “he has doubts over the behaviour of his son Pierre” (who was a teenager when he immigrated with him to Canada), in order to show him the importance of courage and determination.

In the story of their meeting, Hassan and Mona (S6) recount how their love, which was intensely shared right from the beginning, survived several years of distant separation. When they first met, Hassan had just accepted a job in the United States. “They were drawn together from the start but the timing could not have been worse” (S6: 12). Although they both dated a few other people during their years apart, they had no serious relationships. Neither Hassan nor Mona could erase the memory of the other. Upon returning to Lebanon, Hassan asked Mona for her hand in marriage, and she accepted immediately.

#### *Love built on commonalities*

There are also more restrained narratives where similarities, rather than differences, are presented as being the reason for love. In two stories, this takes the form of a shared tragic experience. As we saw above, Alex and May (S8) were both devastated by the Rwandan genocide. In the case of Félix and Louise (SN2), they both lose a parent at an early age: Félix’s mother died and Louise was abandoned by her father at birth. Here is how the novel describes the beginning of their relationship:

Very quickly a relation between Félix and Louise developed that resembled love more than friendship. Even as a child, Louise never knew her father. Félix, having himself lost his mother early in life, quickly felt in a way connected to this young girl. In this sense, he does not stop himself from admitting that his love for his wife developed in part from the fact that they had this rather tragic experience in common. (SN2: 7)

In the case of Gabriel and his wife Ana (S3), their love was based on a shared intellectual curiosity. Here is how the novel tells it:

Gabriel appealed to her because he was serious and responsible and because he spoke with her about whatever it was he was reading at the time. No one had ever taken her seriously enough to engage her in conversation about subjects like history, physics or technology before, and she was flattered. It did not take long for them to realize how compatible they were and after a year they began to live together. (S3: 4)

This quality becomes a central theme of the Romero family novel. For example, in explaining the origins of his name, Gabriel mentions that it belonged to one of the four archangels in the Bible—the one who represents knowledge. Here is how the archangel is presented in the novel:

From the moment of his creation, Gabriel was voraciously curious and God gave him the mission of amassing all knowledge. He was to use this knowledge objectively, and to encourage and watch over all mortals who devoted themselves to the pursuit of knowledge, whether the information they sought be harmful or positive. Most importantly, it was Gabriel who spread the word of God amongst humans, fermenting the concept of literacy in the minds of those that were to create the written word as the perfect conduit for the divine will to be passed from generation to generation. (S3)

### *Forced matrimony*

In two narratives, we learn of marriage that were imposed: one by tradition and the other, through violence. In the story of origin of the Sebugwiza family (S8), it is mentioned that even though the marriage of May’s parents was arranged by their own parents, according to tradition, they lived together happily and would go on to have eleven children. The marriage of Alaura and Santa’s grandmother was quite different. Among all the stories that she recounted to her granddaughters during their childhood, her own was the most shocking. Here is the story of her first encounter with the man who would become the girls’ grandfather:

Growing up in the same small Mexican town, but in the 1930s, she lived in an ultra-conservative community. One day, she was walking down the street and she was

literally seized by a man she did not know. Kicking and screaming, she was dragged to his house, where he locked her in a room without having said a word to her. That night, he went out with his friends, leaving her unfed, alone and confused. In the morning, he opened the door to the room like nothing out of the ordinary had happened and told her she was free to go. She ran home and threw herself into her mother's arms in tears, explaining what had happened. Her mother released her perfunctorily once she had heard what had happened. She told her daughter that she had dishonoured their household by spending the night at a strange man's house and that she would no longer be welcomed there. Forsaken by everyone she knew, she had no option other than to return to the house of the man who had stolen her in the first place. Her family and friends held fast to their extreme disapproval and rejection, and eventually she capitulated to their expectations and married her kidnapper. (S2)

We learn that even though the grandfather was, as his acts indicate, a cruel man, his wife was able to find comfort and happiness in their numerous children. She explained to her granddaughters that this practice of bride kidnapping, while unknown to her prior to her own abduction, was not uncommon in those times. She would then conclude by saying that her children and grandchildren were fortunate to live in a time when such practices are no longer acceptable.

Love stories retold in the family novels are cast in the image of the lovers themselves, evoking passion, tenacity, fidelity, authenticity, courage, self-determination and resilience. The values expounded in the narratives usually correspond to those of the families in general, be it in connection with love (conjugal or familial), perseverance in the quest for a better life, the importance of moving forward, and living according to one's deepest convictions. The scope of these narratives and the tellers' enthusiasm in relating them shows us how much these memories—happy for the most part—are a source of comfort for these families who have been through so much.

## **Conclusion**

As the anecdotes presented here demonstrate, the mobilization of family values through the remembering of shared experiences and reflection on important figures offers rich insight into the values and meanings that immigrant families are intent on transmitting to their children. In addition to being cultural harbours where immigrant youth may find comfort in speaking their own language or an escape from racism or other social pressures, family connections offer the wisdom of experience and the courage to cope with the ruptures of forced migration and adapt to new and uncertain contexts. It is interesting to observe here how varying degrees of planning were involved in the decisions that eventually brought members of each of these families to Canada. This is just part of the projects that parents are continually constructing for their children, which is also the

reason for the various strategies they use to reconcile their home and host countries. Engaging with familiar cultural and linguistic groups in Canada and frequent visits to extended family abroad are strategies that have been relatively effective in passing on some sense of cultural heritage to the children in the family. Other strategies are applied specifically to aspects of daily life that seem strange or unresolved. These strategies may take the form of initiating conversations with strangers in the public transit system in order to feel less isolated, or avoiding making long calls to family back home because of distress at not being able to provide more help to family members left behind.

In the case of stories of origin, these strategies were colourfully illustrated through the personal qualities of the characters described. Whether marked by significant historical events, perpetual flux, or shaped by predecessors’ lives, the novels all highlight the ambition and drive of their strategic actors. Personal qualities such as courage, resourcefulness, perseverance, ambition, effort, and a sense of family are not just character traits, but virtues that the narrators hope will be emulated. In this sense, these novels are by no means restricted to the narration of past events. The stories are told against a backdrop of what the families imagine or expect their future—and that of their children—to be. Stories about influential figures in the narrator’s personal development and the formation of couples show how the narrators view normative social roles. Gender is a significant theme, illustrating whether conforming to tradition is perceived as personally appropriate. The emotive dynamic of these intimate stories serves, in general, to inspire a sense of continuity in family trajectories.

## CHAPTER 4

### FAMILY TRANSMISSIONS: IDENTITY AND TRADITION

In the previous chapter, we looked at the transmission of stories and anecdotes relating to family origins, the migratory project, amorous relations and influential family figures. In this chapter we would like to look more specifically at the transmission of identity referents and traditions in the participating families. Several themes came across strongly in each of these novels, and while the details as well as the importance placed on each varied, we were able to highlight a number of ways in which the transmission of identity and traditions figure significantly in the lives of these immigrant families. This chapter highlights some of these themes, examining the ways in which the phenomenon of transmission is represented and discussed in the family novels. We also explore the topics of religion, familial and/or cultural tradition, language and education, family values and identity.

#### **Religion**

There are varying degrees to which religion is discussed in the novels. To some, faith and religious activity are a central part of daily life, serving as a guide in decision-making, as well as providing a support—both personal and communal—for people in a strange new land. For others, religion is observed, but in the role of a cultural heritage, a connection to—and at times, nostalgia for—the country of origin, rather than an active lifestyle. In these cases it appears as though few boundaries exist between religious, cultural and family traditions. For still others, the question of religion takes on a peripheral importance, such as the cases where faith in God is mentioned in passing, where religious belief is viewed as uniquely personal, or where the Bible is treated as a source of morality and important life lessons, but is not otherwise a part of day-to-day life. Finally, there are three

cases in which religion seems to play no part at all: one novel in which no mention is made of religious beliefs, one in which the only mention is a Koran and a Bible in the family's possession, and another in which the image of God is only poetically invoked in passing. In any or all of these cases, it is possible that religion is a part of the lives of the families, but that it is extremely personal and did not come up in the interviews. It is also possible, however, that these families are simply not religiously inclined.

*Religious belief and belonging as a central part of daily life*

Four of the participating families place a great importance on the regular practice of their religion, on religious traditions and education, and on the transmission of their traditions and values to their children. For many, religion is a family affair, and going to places of worship, celebrating holidays and praying are family traditions in which everyone takes part. In this way, children are taught through example; they see that religion is important not only to their parents, but to the cohesiveness of the family.

The Ivanovich family (S1) is one such case, and the only family represented here to be of the Mormon faith. Roberto's brother, Augusto, was the first to convert, finding in his religion solace and relief from health problems. When Roberto saw how it changed his brother, with its emphasis on kindness, sharing, and on helping people, he decided that it was right for him as well. Like all young male Mormons, Roberto completed a two-year mission. Later, when he married, he felt that it was important for his whole family to belong to the same religion, so his wife, Alicia, who had been raised Catholic, converted and they brought their children up in the Mormon faith. Before Roberto and Alicia's separation, the family made a ritual of weekly church attendance.

Religion is also very important to the matriarch of the Sebugwiza family (S8), May, as her Christian faith and religious community helped her deal with many problems and issues by providing support and a sense of redemption on many levels.

May firmly believes that she is one of the luckier survivors of the Rwandan genocide, and that it is only by the grace of God that she is alive today. She feels fortunate that, unlike so many people who lost everyone they loved, there are still many people for her to love and to be loved by. Furthermore, she believes that God gave her this second chance for the good of her children whom his divine will also protected from evil; during the genocide, parents were helpless to protect their children and it was only the ones God himself protected that survived. (S8: 19)

In Canada, May has been taken in by an African church, in which she has found joy, stability and family. The ability to forgive and move on, which she cherishes and hopes to pass on to her children, is another value she attributes to her Christian faith.

May is not alone in her approach. The church has become the people's refuge and the greatest force for reconciliation in the country. In Africa, church is not the staid affair it is in North America, and African communities have replicated their more joyous ceremonies here. Church is like visiting with your family, and pastors have the role designated in Canada to psychiatrists. (S8: 19-20)

This phenomenon has been observed elsewhere within African immigrant communities in Canada. "Religious communities represent one of the most open and accessible welcoming organizations for new immigrants... They generally offer material and financial support, in addition to dispensing legal advice" (Mossière 2006: 47, our translation). Mossière, who conducted extensive fieldwork with an African Pentecostal church in Montreal, argues that these communities are more than places of worship, and more than religious communities as they had been imagined previously. In addition, they do not, as has been contended elsewhere, necessarily hinder the insertion and integration of the immigrant into the host country. They provide a replacement for the community left behind in the country of origin, and facilitate the installation process by placing new immigrants in the centre of a social network based on (although not entirely) weekly church services and other social gatherings. Mossière also raises the question of religious versus ethnic identity, particularly as such churches generally cater to immigrants from similar ethnic backgrounds (the church in Mossière's study does have some Québécois members, albeit very few). Such questions are important to examine in light of this "surrogate" community, in which the religious can be seen to take the place of the ethnic. It also become more of an identity marker, as recent migrants may choose to identify more strongly with the congregation and belief structure of their church than with the traditional or symbolic system of their culture of origin, or with the immigrant community in the host country (aside from those who also belong to the same church). In many cases, this represents a complete reversal of the pre-migratory situation.

The *Bombai* family novel (M1) illustrates syncretism not only between religious systems, but also between Christianity as a religious system and as a cultural heritage.

According to Marie, it was not the White Man who introduced the Catholic religion and the concept of God as it is taught in the church today. The Congolese people who

believed in their customs already knew how to worship and pray to God. Their language already included a vocabulary with which to glorify God... God was a part of their language and customs well before the arrival of Christianity. (M1: 3, our translation)

Marie’s Catholic faith is extremely important to her. Although she frames it in its colonialist history, acknowledging the fact that colonization and the proliferation of missionaries affected the ways in which the Congolese people conceptualize their faith, she also, at the same time, denies that it had made any difference at all. Thus, while she considers herself to be a Catholic, was raised Catholic and raises her own children as such, she does so in terms of applying Catholicism (and all its rituals) to her traditional ancestral religion. Marie’s children all received their first communion, and the family places a great deal of importance on other religious ceremonies, such as marriages and baptisms. Marie has always devoted a substantial amount of time to worshiping as a family: when she and her husband were separated by the Atlantic Ocean, they would regularly pray together over the telephone. Although Marie is conscious of Christianity’s colonialist history, she views the culture of the Bible as more important than her culture of origin. She feels that its stories provide the best life lessons, and it is these traditions that she hopes to pass on to her children more than those of their home. This is particularly interesting when viewed in connection with the replacement of ethnic identity with an identity that promotes religious belonging, when people are no longer in their original ethnic community.

#### *Religion as cultural heritage*

There are two families in the project who express their religious convictions in terms of a cultural heritage or tradition, rather than an active, faith-based lifestyle. In these families, the children’s spiritual education also takes place in this context. Religion is learned through the celebration of traditional holidays and festivals in addition to occasional attendance at regular church services. In some cases, the celebrations themselves are the primary means of transmitting religious education and values.

The Romero family (S3), for example, readily acknowledges that their celebrations of Christian holidays are based much more on culture than religion.

One thing the family enjoys is the making of a crèche every Christmas. While Ana’s family never did this when she was growing up, it is a tradition that she started with her own family because she thought her son would enjoy it. In Mexico, people not only



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build crèches, but on Christmas Eve, they take baby Jesus out of his manger and sing to him. All in all, the family isn't overly religious, but they do enjoy the festivities that surround the holy days in Mexico. For them, as for many Mexicans, the significance of these holidays is more cultural and familial than spiritual. (S3: 10)

While their son was baptized in a traditionally elaborate Catholic ceremony, neither Ana nor Gabriel felt very strongly about the religion in which they were raised, and opted for a civil ceremony rather than a religious wedding. Still, they did retain certain aspects of their upbringing, and they look to Christianity as a source of morality and ethics that they are intent on passing on to Gabriel Jr.

For the Baranowski family (S4), regular church attendance and observance of Catholic holidays is extremely important, but the Polish traditions associated with these events are equally stressed.

On Good Friday, the family would go to the Our Lady Queen of Poland church with a basket of food they had prepared beforehand. The basket would always include traditional breakfast foods: hardboiled eggs, rye bread and sausage. The family would also place the *pisanka* eggs they had made, similar to Ukrainian painted eggs, in the basket for a festive touch. Arriving in church, Isidora would place her basket at the front, alongside many others, and the congregation would sit down to a full mass. At the end, the priest would bless the baskets with a drop of holy water and the families would collect them. The foods were kept overnight and in the morning, for Easter breakfast, they would enjoy their sanctified meal. (S4: 10)

One particularly interesting aspect of the Baranowski holiday celebrations is their Christmas Eve meal. The first of twelve courses (representing the twelve apostles) is a soup made from a certain mushroom only available in Poland, one that must be picked by hand. Although similar in taste to the shitake mushroom, substitutions are not acceptable, so the correct mushroom must be shipped by friends or relatives still residing in Poland. Those with loved ones living abroad always remember to pick extra, so that they can mail them overseas. This act illustrates the transnational aspect of religious and cultural tradition, highlighting the spatial exchange of information, commercial goods, and traditions that can occur in migratory contexts, even when the people involved are separated by half a world, different lives and different citizenships.

#### *Religion on the periphery*

Three families view religion more as a peripheral function. There is more emphasis on spirituality than dogmatic religious belief, and on the moral and ethical aspects of religiosity rather than church attendance.

Although the Gutiérrez sisters (S2), Alaura and Santa, were raised in a Catholic household, it was their grandmother's superstitions and belief in the supernatural that made the greatest impression in their lives. Always the family storyteller, she told them of family members who had had run-ins with spirits, and the girls remember how she always had a traditional remedy for everything. Alaura and Santa had their own encounter with a spirit after arriving in Montreal, and while they do not share all of their grandmother's superstitions, they are grateful for what she taught them.

Another example of a more peripheral religiosity is that of Carlos Díaz (S5), who believes that religion is an extremely personal matter. While he has retained many of the tenets of the Christian faith in which he was raised, he does not go to church and feels very strongly that no one should be forced to do so against their will.

Carlos says he has a "Catholic manner" but that his dialogue with God is direct. As his mother and Joya [*the biological mother of his second child and adoptive mother of his first*] are more traditionally Catholic, he knows that his children are being raised in a more formal religious environment, but does not mind. He believes that religious views are good ones and that as his children grow older they can choose for themselves how much to adhere to the Church's doctrine. (S5: 11)

There is little talk of religion in the Khreiss family (S6) novel, which is interesting as the circumstances of the family history evolved around religious conflict in the Middle East. The parents come from different traditions: Hassan's family is of Druze origin, although they are non-practising, and Mona is from a Shia Muslim family, although they too were not very observant of their religion, seeing it more as a cultural heritage than a religious or moral obligation. As for their offspring:

Hassan and Mona refuse to define their children's religion for them, expecting Mohammed, Rafic and Leila to do it for themselves. They certainly never pushed their religions on their children, although Mohammed remembers a funny conversation where Rafic asked his parents whether he should be Druze or Shia. Hassan explained the tenets of his faith and then Mona explained hers. Rafic, eight years old at the time, thought for a bit and then told his parents that he would be Druze because if he made mistakes in this life he would get to try again [*due to the Druze belief in reincarnation*]. (S6: 26)

Three family novels make virtually no mention of religion, and in each it is impossible to determine whether this is due to a lack of belief or practice, or a reluctance to share information that is seen as extremely personal.

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One such novel is that of Francisco Flores (S9), which is unique in many ways. Francisco arrived in Canada in a coma, after the most recent of several attempts on his life had left him severely wounded and all but two of his children dead. One remaining child had been kidnapped by guerrillas a few years earlier and was still being held captive in the jungle at the time of the interview. There is no indication of whether or not Francisco was raised in a religious environment, if he ever practised or is practising today, or if religion is something he hopes to pass on to his son if the two are ever reunited (which he is sure will happen some day). The only mention of religiosity in this novel is in a poem written by Francisco during his long rehabilitation in a Canadian hospital, in which the image of God as Creator is invoked in passing. While this could be an indication of belief, it could also be just a simple acknowledgement or acceptance of the common term used in his—and our—culture when referring to a supreme being or creative force.

#### *Questioning faith*

There was only one mention of a child questioning or breaking with the faith of his parents, and that is the case of the Sinankwa family (SN1).

Today, Béatrice still encourages her children to continue with the family tradition of prayer. She sometimes prays with Simone [*the only one of her children currently with her in Montreal*] for Carl, Arnaud [*her sons*] and Auguste [*her husband*] to make it to Canada as quickly as possible. Carl tells his mother that while he continues to pray, he feels more and more discouraged. God, he says, has not responded to his prayers, referring to the fact that despite his prayers, he has still not been able to join his mother and sister in Canada. (SN1: 14)

Béatrice and her husband both place great importance in their Christian faith, and she tells her son not to be discouraged. Still, she herself feels that she will not be at ease until she knows her whole family is safe.

These examples, drawn from the family novels, demonstrate some of the ways in which religious belief and belonging, moral lessons and spirituality figure in the lives of immigrant and refugee families. Although different religions are represented, as well as different degrees of adherence to dogma, church attendance, and prayer, religiosity comes across as highly important in the lives and in the future goals of several families. For many immigrants, the church takes on a vital role as a surrogate community, providing support and guidance to new arrivals and, as we have seen, even helping to shape and transform identity.

### **Maintaining and negotiating traditions**

For families and individuals who have experienced a rupture with their past, their home, their culture, and often with other family members, traditions inevitably play a large role in coping with change and adapting to a new environment. For some, however, particularly those who have left close family members behind, their traditions have been interrupted; it is their memory that endures and helps to keep them going. This is not surprising, as families that are torn apart and whose members are isolated from each other may not feel it is appropriate or even possible to continue traditions that they had once celebrated all together.

The novels reveal several different ways of conceptualizing tradition and the ways in which traditions are celebrated, observed and transmitted. Some of the themes that are represented as tradition in the family novels are naming conventions, leisure, sport and travel. Although families that have been able to immigrate to Canada in their entirety appear to have more traditions they continue to practise, other immigrants who arrived alone or with a small part of the family have, in some cases, found others with whom to maintain certain cultural and familial customs. There is inevitably significant overlap between tradition and religion, particularly since many families use religious tradition as a primary vehicle of cultural and familial transmission.

#### *Naming conventions*

One of the activities in the Family Novel project, called “What’s in a Name?”, addresses the meaning of names and traditions for naming children. Some cultures have naming conventions that many families adhere to, while others are familial rather than cultural. By naming a child according to custom, parents automatically impart that tradition to their child, as the child grows up with the knowledge of a cultural or family tradition (provided they know the meaning of their name) that they may choose to perpetuate by naming their own children in a certain way.

In both the Romero family (S3) and the Saad family (S7), first names are passed down from generation to generation. For the Romero family, in keeping with Mexican tradition, it is customary to give the first-born son the same name as his father; thus, there are several generations of Gabriels. Although the name originates from the biblical story of the archangels, its significance within the family is based more on a hereditary tradition than a religious one. The Saad family does

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this a bit differently: their tradition involves naming the first-born son after the paternal grandfather, and so the names Émile and Joseph have alternated throughout the generations. As with the Romero family, although these names may have once had another meaning, any such connotations were forgotten long ago, replaced by the importance of familial tradition.

The Saad family has recently added another element to their hereditary naming convention: Joseph's daughter, Samar, bears the name of her paternal grandmother, thus starting the potential for a new tradition in the naming of the women of the family.

Rwandan tradition often bestows names on children that reflect the conditions of their birth, and even those of their mother's pregnancy. The Sebugwiza family (S8) has kept this tradition alive, as well as incorporating a more recent one, that of using biblical or Western names. For example, one of May's daughters, who is actually the biological daughter of May's sister, was born to a mother who was terribly depressed following the recent death of her husband. Thus, she gave her daughter a name that means "she who follows your soul" which, according to May, is a common name given to girls whose mothers experienced incredible emotional hardship during pregnancy. She also carries the name "Alice," which she uses as her first name, especially here in Canada.

Traditions of naming are practised in various ways in many families and societies around the world. While they sometimes reflect family lineage, they can also reflect religious or cultural identity; they can also signify parents' hopes and aspirations for their offspring. All of the families represented in these novels are fairly recent immigrants, and at the time our data was collected, none of the children in these families had begun having children themselves. An interesting topic for further research in this area might be to examine the names given to the children of immigrants, the first generation to be born in Canada. Are naming conventions more or less commonly practised than in their country of origin? Do immigrants adhere to tradition as a way to remember their cultures or family left behind? Or are they more likely to choose Western names to reflect their new lives or identify their offspring with *their* place of birth?

### *Family activities*

One of the common ways that parents pass on family and cultural traditions to children is by simply perpetuating them themselves, recreating them in their new home and including the children in the

celebration or activity. Several family novels provide examples of group activities (recreation, sports or travel) that are passed down from parents to children.

The Ivanovich family (S1) has a history in dance. Roberto and Alicia met at a dance club, and made sure their three daughters received traditional Latin dance lessons. Sports are another important activity for the family:

Since both parents loved to dance, especially Roberto, it was something they taught their daughters. In fact, Roberto started a dance group in South Carolina for the entire community that anyone could join to learn traditional Mexican folk dances, salsa, meringue, cumbia from Colombia and even tango. The entire family danced together for a while, until Alicia was diagnosed with cancer... Roberto acknowledges that he was a bit of a fanatic, sometimes scheduling the group's practices early in the morning to accommodate everybody's schedules (S1: 15).

A great fan of soccer, Roberto would watch matches, follow his favourite team's progress in the leagues and take his daughters out to play in the park. None of them ever joined formal leagues, but soccer in the park became one of their favourite traditions. Remembering these happy times [*now that he is, for the time being, alone in Montreal*], Roberto has begun to do the same with the children of the friends he has made here in Canada. (S1: 15-16)

For a few families, traveling together was an important tradition. Family trips can accomplish goals on multiple levels: they serve as a vacation from the ordinary, as a revitalizing experience, and they allow family members to become closer, bond more deeply, and learn more about each other. Some of the families represented here talk about the trips they took for fun, while others began traveling together more out of necessity than pleasure. The Romero family (S3) started taking regular trips to the beach while still in Mexico.

At first they took the night train, despite its circuitous route, arriving early in the morning. They would spend the day enjoying the sun and the sand and return the same night. Though they might have been able to afford to stay in a hotel from time to time, they recognized that the exorbitant prices were geared towards tourists and saw no reason to spend their money when one day was vacation enough. They did, however, start taking the journey by bus, a much shorter and more comfortable ride. Gabriel Jr. especially enjoyed these day trips that began when he was about seven years old. (S3: 10)

Although trips to the Mexican coast is obviously not a tradition that the Romeros uphold here in Montreal, the memories still have a special place in the minds of the parents and their son.

Traveling for the Khreiss family (S6), while equally a family tradition, took on a different flavour owing to the current political situation:

During their vacations, the family would return to Hussein's [*the maternal grandfather*] in Lebanon, and the contrast was extreme. The civil war was still going strong, and whereas in Cyprus the boys could wander anywhere, in Lebanon they were confined to their grandparents' garden... Hassan and Mona returned with their children to Lebanon over and over again despite the fighting so that the siblings would always carry a sense of their heritage with them, but more importantly, so that they would know their grandparents. (S6: 18-19)

Like the Romeros, Mohammed and Rafic, currently living and studying in Montreal, no longer make regular trips to Lebanon. They have many memories and stories about the time they spent there, however, both about their relatives and the mischief they got into at their grandparents' house.

### *Renegotiating Traditions*

Traditions are not always maintained in the same way in a context of migration. As the novels suggest, they may be interrupted completely or renegotiated to emerge in a new form. Such is the case in the Sebugwiza family (S8). May was excited to find out that a well-known Rwandan music group was to be performing in Montreal, but was surprised and saddened when her children refused to attend, preferring Western music over the music of their culture of origin. What was even more surprising to May, however, was the fact that her children flatly refused to go.

That they did so politely certainly mitigated the fact that they stood up for themselves and their views, but it nonetheless caused Mary a bit of a double-take. It is a small example, but an illustrative one, and in the end, May has gotten used to their intellectual independence. She says that in Rwanda, social norms imposing submission and respect to your elders, whatever the costs, have caused a very hypocritical approach to life. While she cannot deny that her children's directness still grates occasionally, she grants that it probably saves a lot of time and energy. (S8: 19)

It may perhaps be surprising that this is the only example given in the novels of an outright rejection of cultural tradition, particularly given the number of teenagers and young adults who immigrated to Canada with one or both of their parents. While the family migration process can provide a framework in which parents and children (or siblings) are united or bonded in a way that precludes conflict to a certain extent, it is also important to keep in mind the context of the interviews themselves. As we pointed out earlier, the family novels contain only the information that the families decided to disclose, that they wanted to remember. There may very well be omissions in

areas of negativity, conflict, or anything else the family did not feel was pertinent (or anyone else's business). In some cases, the families have invented their own traditions since arriving in Canada. Such is the case with the Baranowskis (S4):

One day, Serhiy outdid himself [*by eating a particularly large meal*] and needed to lie down afterwards. For some reason, he chose to do so on the floor instead of the couch, and his whole family followed suit. The half hour they spent digesting on their backs was so enjoyable that from that day on, whenever they had the time, the whole family made this a ritual. Now that Agnieszka has moved out of the house, she has introduced this custom at her own dinners for friends and says that it is catching on. (S4: 10)

While this is perhaps the only case of an invented ritual in the novels, it points the way for future projects to look into the invention of new traditions as a potential theme of analysis, as it is obviously a part of many immigrants' migratory experience.

Familial and cultural traditions play an important role in the lives of refugee and immigrant families. As we have seen in these examples, some traditions are continued, some are modified to fit a new life in a new country, some are abandoned but remembered fondly, and some are rejected outright. By exploring ways in which families and individuals remember, carry on, and break with tradition, we have gained insight into the processes of tradition and custom propagation as forms of family transmission.

### **Transmission of language**

In addition to the transmission and negotiation of religious and cultural traditions, the novels also reveal how important it is for several families to encourage their children to preserve their mother tongue. In some cases, only the maternal language is spoken at home while the children learn English and/or French in school, while in others, whole families participate in learning languages together. In one case, a child is attending classes in Canada to learn the language of her parents. The Baranowski family (S4) immigrated to Canada much earlier than the rest of the families. Their elder daughter, Agnieszka, was just entering kindergarten at the time, and the younger one was born shortly after their arrival. In addition to attending school in English, Agnieszka was also enrolled in Polish classes as her parents were adamant that she retain and develop her knowledge of their language, which they also spoke exclusively at home. Her younger sister Anastazja, on the



other hand, was never made to perfect her Polish, which is one of the reasons why she identifies quite differently from the rest of her family.

Anastazja has always felt a bit separate because she was born in Canada, and has never been fully immersed in a Polish environment. This was compounded by the fact that her parents did not insist that she go to Polish school on Saturdays like Agnieszka because she had music classes all weekend. It was a vicious circle: Anastazja's Polish was not very fluent so her parents occasionally relented and let her speak back to them in English, and because she did not have to force herself to speak it, her Polish never got better. (S4: 13)

In the Ivanovich family (S1), Spanish-English bilingualism is highly valued. Having moved extensively between Mexico and the United States for years, the children were brought up to be fluent in both languages.

Remembering how torturous he found learning English, Roberto wanted to do everything possible to make his first daughter, Teresa, fluent from the beginning. She went to school in English and often tried to speak it at home, but he would pretend not to understand so that she was forced to translate. It worked as hoped, for now she is a professional translator who speaks both languages fluently. Roberto pretended to be equally uncomprehending with his other daughters, and they too feel perfectly comfortable in either language. (S1: 10)

In this case, Roberto feels it is extremely important to grow up bilingual because of his own experiences. While the preservation of mother tongue is referred to in several novels as an important marker of cultural identity, parents are also crucially aware of the need for their children to learn French and, in some cases, English. French and English in particular are identified as languages of opportunity, inextricably linked to the parental project to provide a better life for their children by migrating to Canada. In reference to the opportunities offered to study Canada's official languages, Alaura Gutiérrez feels lucky because she had "never imagined that a country would literally give its languages to you as a gift; for that is how she sees the government courses in French and English she is taking for free" (S2).

### **Transmission of educational values**

The narratives present a portrait of families that have high expectations and great faith in education as a path to a better future for themselves. This is because the parents were either not able to obtain as much education as they would have liked, or that they were the first generation in their families to have an educational opportunity, and want even more for their own children.

*Education and high expectations*

A number of novels recount family stories about how parents had to struggle to get education in their homeland, or about how they simply did not have the option to study at all. As a young woman, Ana Romero (S3) made a living cleaning houses, but longed for something more stimulating.

Whenever she had the day off, she would walk around the neighbourhood for hours, looking for a better job. She canvassed the entire area, but wherever she went, she was told that at the very least, she needed her certification of having been through secondary school, which is the Canadian equivalent of having passed grade 9. (S3: 3)

Knowing that what she really wanted was to return to her studies, at the age of twenty-two she enrolled in classes with twelve-year-olds. Even though this situation was not ideal and at times difficult, it was the only option that was available to her. Her husband, Gabriel, was incredibly supportive of this move. According to their family novel, he believes that

...education is the most important thing that one can ever do for oneself, for education is opportunity. It is all very well to work hard, but to accomplish things in life, you need the proper tools. Education opens doors and creates possibility where once there was none. (S3: 11)

These days, however, Gabriel and Ana do not entirely agree on the subject of education in general, and their son’s education in particular. Gabriel Sr. places an extremely high value on knowledge, learning and analytical reasoning, and pushes his son to study his hardest—and then even harder. Ana, on the other hand, believes that children should spend more time outside, saying that “they have the rest of their lives to work” (S3: 14). Gabriel has taken it upon himself to tutor his son, and attempts to instil in him his own stringent work ethic and insatiable appetite for knowledge.

Many novels refer to education as an opportunity that is not accessible to everyone, or that has had to be abandoned because of precarious circumstances in the country of origin. A number of narratives express the fact that people are lucky to be able to get any education at all. May (S8) talks about the way in which educational opportunity is limited in her country (Rwanda). In the past, colonizers measured craniums in order to ensure that only the truly “worthy” were given education or responsibility. She also tells of how she managed to fare relatively well for herself in her homeland, despite the fact that she had no formal education. Once in Quebec, however, she developed the firm belief that her children need to graduate from university. Ideally, she would also

like them to specialize in such fields as medicine or biology in order to get good jobs and work their way up in society (S8). Carlos Días (S5) talks about his hopes to “see his children complete university, which is something he never did” in Colombia (S5: 11). This sense of opportunity is also present in this Días family novel, which places emphasis on the upward mobility of the family thanks to educational advancement: “Each generation of the family has been more and more successful than the last thanks to increasing levels of study” (*Ibid.*).

Marie Bombai (M1) also places a lot of importance on education, as did her parents: her father, who never went to school himself and did not know how to read or write, made sure that all of his children took advantage of the opportunity he never had. Thus, in a time and place where girls were not often encouraged in academic pursuits, Marie followed her studies all the way to the university level, planning to become a doctor. Unfortunately, after studying medicine for three years, she had to quit because of political unrest in the country.

Because she never finished her studies, she was never allowed to practise in her country, and today she is cynical about returning to continue studying medicine. For Marie, knowledge is something extremely important, something that brings her pride. She feels ashamed that she was not able to finish what she started, and she cannot describe how hard it is to have one's most precious dream destroyed. Today, she works a night job in a nursing home, caring for the elderly residents. (M1: 7).

Marie tries her hardest to instil in her own children the importance of sticking with educational goals, and is particularly concerned that her daughters get as much education as possible. “Concentrate on your studies,” she tells them, “because boys won't give you anything” (M1: 13).

Unlike Marie, who was lucky to have been encouraged to attend school as a young girl, Béatrice Sinankwa (SN1) was forced to take measures into her own hands. With the help of her older sister, who had been denied an education because she was a girl, she registered and began attending primary school without her parents' knowledge.

On the first day of school, Béatrice's sister woke her up early and helped her prepare for the big day. Once at school, Béatrice learned, through a relative, that her parents were searching everywhere for her, and that her father was furious by her absence. When she returned home, she was forced to confront him, saying, in spite of her father's threats to beat her, “I have the right to go to school just like the others.” (SN1: 6)

Béatrice held her ground and promised that her studies would not interfere with her household chores, and her father finally relented. Now with children of her own, she values the education of each one of them, and hopes that they will all be able to attend university in Canada.

Because of the limited number of universities in Burundi, and their mediocre infrastructures, Béatrice is convinced that a Canadian education could open lots of doors for her children. While an education received in Burundi is not internationally valued, a diploma from a Canadian university would certainly permit her children to work anywhere in the world, even to return to Burundi or elsewhere in Africa. (SN1: 19)

It is indeed interesting to note that, while for many families the prospect of remaining in Canada and taking advantage of its employment and educational opportunities is an important factor, for Béatrice it is the prospect of being able to return—or for her children to return—to Burundi that is more significant. Because of this goal, she also puts great emphasis on her children’s retention of their mother tongue, in hopes that they will not lose the ability to communicate fully with their extended family. She sees her time in Canada as somewhat temporary, but also as the catalyst that will allow her to realize her dream of returning home.

In a number of narratives, stories of origin play an important role in creating this strong belief and faith in education. As discussed previously, many novels tell stories of parents and grandparents who struggled to build their lives through hard work, and who now have high expectations of the advances they will be able to make in Canada. The children are quick to internalize these views, likewise expecting a lot from their Canadian education. Many narratives evoke the sense of the children being proud of their family history, and of understanding the worth of education from that point of view.

May (S8) tells the story of her own father who, as a Tutsi, was well aware that his children would be denied education past primary level.

He knew the supreme value of schooling, and for this reason he felt he had no choice but to have his family split. The two boys he and his wife had taken in had become men and to them he entrusted the care of his three eldest daughters so that they might continue their education. (S8: 5).

In the Khreiss family novel (S6), Mohammed and Rafic tell how their grandparents in Lebanon “started from scratch and built more for themselves and their families than most people could maintain if they were handed a lot on a silver platter” (S6: 26). They explain how their grandfather,

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who was not trained as an architect, had “designed and built his house in Beirut that still stands today after surviving countless bombardments, sonic booms overhead, and even an Israeli platoon” (S6: 28).

On another note, the Romero novel (S3) tells the story of how Gabriel’s mother was not very encouraging when it came to her children pursuing their studies. Taking matters into his own hands, he ended up working full-time while simultaneously studying for two degrees. While some thought he was crazy, he had nothing but his future in mind (S3). These stories are often linked to a belief that you can only count on yourself to effect positive change. Overall, these families believe that they will be able to rebuild a life for themselves through hard work and determination. They consider themselves to be lucky to have access to Canadian education, and believe it will lead to a better future.

### *Education and responsibility*

In some of the novels, getting an education and being successful are not connected solely to individual betterment, but also to a sense of responsibility towards others. In the Días family novel (S5), for instance, Carlos explains that his family was very poor and that the sons all became tradesmen as soon as possible in order to help support the family. Similarly, the father in the Saad family (S7), Joseph, explains how as a young man he became a provider for his family. “Not only did he earn the money for himself to go to school and then university, but he managed to contribute a little each week to the household in general” (S7: 3). Marie (M1) explains how her brothers would use their educational bursaries to help support their family’s education in the Congo. Serhiy (S4) relates how he still helps out family members who decide to come to Canada from Poland in order to learn English. The acquired language skills are an important asset for social mobility in Poland. In the Khreiss family novel (S6), it is considered an honour to contribute to the well-being of the extended family. The family believes, for instance, that business studies are a wise choice for Mohammed and Rafic, because they will enable them to help support the family-owned land in Lebanon. The idea of education as a way of giving back to one’s kin is strongly anchored in these families’ values.

Closely related to this sense of responsibility is the idea of sacrifice. The Khreiss family novel (S6) tells the story of two brothers who are very much aware that every decision made by their parents, no matter how difficult, is taken in their best interest. Sacrifice is also present in May’s narrative

(S8). In order to advance professionally in Canada, she needs to take exams to recertify herself as a Chartered Accountant. This is, however, a very costly endeavour that she is forced to relegate to the bottom of her priority list while her energies are focused on bringing her children to Canada. Many of the family novels also illustrate the ways in which children have internalized this sense of sacrifice, making it a leitmotiv for their commitment to school. Mohammed and Rafic (S6), for instance, believe that doing well in school and in life is the only way to repay their parents for the sacrifices that they have made for them. In the Baranowski family (S4), the elder daughter, Agnieszka, has internalized her parents’ ideas in a less conformist way. Although her parents fled a Communist regime and came to Canada to ensure their children would be free, she does not necessarily see freedom in the same way they do. Agnieszka has decided that freedom means not only the freedom to get an education, but also the freedom to choose not to finish her studies. Her parents were not entirely thrilled when she decided to drop out of university, but they trust her judgment and respect her choices all the same.

#### *Education and autonomy*

Another important educational value present in the family novels is that of autonomy, the idea being that if ever a family will need to migrate again, they will always be able to fall back on their education to rebuild their lives. This is suggested, for instance, in the Sebugwiza family novel: “to be independent is to be master of one’s fate... To be responsible for oneself, to be the author of your own well being is the only way to have self-esteem and pride” (S8: 24). Gabriel (S3), himself a refugee because of the corrupt nature of the job market in his home country of Mexico, talks of wanting his son to get a job where he could become autonomous, with power and independence that he himself did not have.

While some believe this autonomy is more easily attained by enrolling in very instrumental fields of studies, such as business and mathematics, others believe that simply getting a higher education is a guarantee of independence in and of itself. The Romero novel (S3) tells of how Gabriel encouraged his wife, Ana, to follow her dream of going back to school—not only to improve her job prospects, but to broaden her horizons in general. Gabriel still continues to believe that education is important in order to develop independence of thought. For a time, he insisted that he, his wife and his son read for an hour every day. As a student in communist Poland, Serhiy (S4) was very involved in politics at an important time in his country’s history. He learned that developing a critical perspective was crucial, and that people were fools to think that they could not have an impact on

### *Family transmissions: identity and tradition*

politics and on society. His goal in coming to Canada was to live in a country where a person can become educated and use this education to develop an independent voice, vote and contribute to shaping society.

A more utilitarian approach to autonomy through education is seen in the actions of Roberto (S1), who “has decided to spend the time he has here learning French so that if he must leave, he will leave personally enriched, if not materially so” (S1: 21). In a number of narratives, education as a practical avenue to independence is opposed to a less instrumental view of schooling in countries of origin. Prior to the migratory experience, schooling for some families did not necessarily represent a means to a circumscribed and pre-determined goal. For example, Alaura (S2) explains how, in her homeland, she randomly chose a field of study one day when she was walking around the university campus on the day of registration. However, it seems that the migratory experience of these families have, in many cases, transformed more humanistic views of education into something more instrumental. In the Saad family (S7), young Émile was uninspired by the prospects of further study in his homeland, but he is beginning to understand the logic of his father’s wisdom. He has decided to channel his passion for music into a something more instrumental by doing a double major in finance and management: “the former in order to have a stable, if not terribly exciting, career open to him; and the latter because in his heart of hearts, he longs to work in event management” (S7: 16). His sister, Samar, who has inherited her father’s pragmatism, decided to study finance, viewing it as the most international of qualifications, and one that would allow her to establish herself anywhere she might end up.

### *Education and safety*

While parents often refer to education as a secondary concern, something that comes after they have assured their children’s safety in a new land, some novels also evoke schools as a safe space. May (S8) recounts how, in Rwanda, her children were exposed to details about the genocide at school. Their novel relates that “though the children do not know the specifics of how their own family was traumatized, they know all too much of the country’s devastation as a whole” (S8: 12). Her eldest daughter, Alice, juxtaposes this constant reminder of the fear and horror to the feeling of security she has at her school in Quebec. She talks of the comfort of being surrounded by friends who do not understand what happened in Rwanda the same way she does, and who do not constantly remind her of the sadness felt by the Rwandan community.

In the Saad family novel (S7), Miriam speaks of the security threat involved in attending school in Lebanon. She recounts the time when she felt that the country’s situation was going into a violent downward spiral, and so “began to dread the fast approaching day when her daughter was to enter primary school and be required to stay in Lebanon for long stretches of time” (S7: 7). Hassan (S6) also evokes this association between education and lack of safety in Lebanon as he recounts how he would drive “from his home through the city to the university, often praying that a stray sniper bullet would not hit him on his way” (S6: 5). When this drive became too dangerous, he and his sisters moved to an apartment in the city. A few years after this, the Lebanese authorities initiated crackdowns in the schools. Hassan’s son Rafic recalls a time when anyone with long hair was arrested after the authorities discovered a group of Satanists who wore chains and spikes and had long hair. Rafic contrasts this story with the openness, security and freedom that people have in Canada. In particular, he has noticed the freedom with which people are allowed to express themselves, and how they are free to dress the way they want to go to school. These stories show an understanding of Canadian and Quebec schools as being a secure and safe space.

### **Family values**

One aspect that stands out in most of the novels is the transmission of the values, morals and ethics that come from the family, its history and the culture of origin. Most families talk about the importance of hard work and sticking to personal goals. Small wonder that these are the families who were able to leave their country of origin—in spite of life-threatening opposition in some cases—to try their luck at obtaining refugee status in Canada. The image of the “self-made man” is used in several novels, often in reference to the parents or the grandparents of the immigrating family, as has been discussed previously. The strength, will and strong work ethic that were responsible for the success of the previous generation are often mentioned as important values that parents hope to pass on to their children. Not surprisingly, these same values are often among those mentioned by the children themselves as influential factors in their own lives.

Many families also value trust, unity, cohesion, and supporting one another in any endeavour. Being a part of a strong community is also extremely important to some, particularly for those who left extensive community or extended family networks behind them when they moved to Canada.



*Social networks and surrogate communities*

Having immigrated to Chicago from Mexico before beginning a family of his own, Roberto Ivanovich (S1) was quick to establish extensive social networks wherever he lived.

Roberto sorely missed the many relatives he had in Mexico, of whom only one ever joined him in the States. He felt all the more displaced because of his loneliness that only began to dissipate once his own family began to grow. Missing the easy, warm atmosphere of the traditional Mexican social gatherings, where everyone is so relaxed, friendly and there for the company rather than the flashiness, he has always tried to recreate something similar. Whenever they moved to a new city, he would concentrate on establishing a large social circle. These friends could not replace the family he had left behind, but they went a long way toward diminishing his sense of separation from his origins. (S1: 13)

For Samar and Émile Saad (S7), who immigrated to Montreal without their parents, social networks are extremely important, but so is the bond that they share as siblings. Due in part to the difference in their ages, and in part to the different cultures with which they identify (Samar identifies as Lebanese, as does her father, while her brother identifies with Jordan, his mother's homeland), the two have very different circles of friends.

Socially, the siblings have found wonderful communities here. As had been the case before, most of Samar's friends are Lebanese, and Émile's come from four corners of the globe... Émile is very aware of the difference between the siblings' circles, and he does feel guilty sometimes that he does not take more of an interest in all things Lebanese. This is especially true when his sister and her friends have settled all over the couch and floor to hotly debate the latest political developments and all he can do is sit and listen. He finds it strange to be sharing more and more with Samar, yet for them to feel as if they come from different places. (S7: 15)

*New freedoms*

Family unity and trust is a vital factor in the lives of most of these families, but while many parents stress the importance of holding on to their children so that they do not grow up too fast, Isidora and Serhiy (S4) see the value of giving their children the freedom to explore and forge their own paths.

The girls' parents always made it very clear that they respected the fact that their daughters had their own lives and desires... They would say "no matter what you have done, if you need a ride in the middle of the night we will come pick you up without a fuss and talk about it in the morning." This openness meant that Agnieszka felt comfortable enough with her parents to discuss things *before* they happened. (S4: 15)

Contrary to this view, many of the families were surprised at how Canadian children are brought up, and the different parent-child relationships that seemed so different from those of their home culture. In over half of the novels in which parents were part of the immigration to Montreal, they expressed displeasure, disapproval, and shock at not only the liberties given to children, but the legal rights as well.

The Romero family (S3) recounts an episode that greatly shaped their impressions of Canada, as it was one of the first things they experienced upon their arrival.

As they were waiting in line to see immigration officials after their plane had landed, they noticed a woman who had been on their flight, also Mexican, having some trouble with her three very young children. The kids were fighting all together, screaming and really hurting one another. The mother had already told them to stop a number of times, and she was getting a lot of stares from those around her. Frustrated after what must have been a tiring flight with the three little troublemakers, she grabbed one who was being the most antagonistic and shook him enough to shock him. Equally cranky, he began to cry and an official began to make his way towards the family, screaming in French. Neither the mother nor the Romeros could follow what he was saying, but his tone and gesture made it very clear that he found her behaviour unacceptable. It was not until Gabriel Sr. and Ana attended a workshop given by the police at the YMCA residence that they put two and two together. These workshops always begin with children’s rights, and it was upon hearing this that they realized that the officer was chastising the mother at the airport for what he saw as brutality. They both maintain that the woman had few other options left at the time, and are a little flabbergasted at how sensitive people here are to this issue. (S3: 13-14)

While the Romeros feel that the harsh punishment of children is not acceptable, they are still surprised at the extent to which Canadian law protects children’s rights, this being a completely new concept for them. They also have been quite surprised at the freedom that Canadian families give their teenagers, and as parents of a teen themselves, they hope that their son will not be too influenced by his peers. Gabriel Sr. in particular “sees liberty as a responsibility that children must learn to manage gradually” (S3: 14) and strongly disapproves of the families that cut their children loose without guidance. Félix Bizimana (SN2) has also noticed the cultural differences in how children are raised in Canada as compared to his home in Burundi.

A child’s respect for his or her father is a tradition that Félix certainly does not want to abandon, and that he hopes to transmit to his children at all costs. To know one’s father, to obey him, and to ask for his permission before leaving the house, these are the values that he learned from his own childhood, and that he hopes to pass on to the next generation... For his teenage son, Pierre, having been raised in an environment

### *Family transmissions: identity and tradition*

where children must listen to and respect their parents, and where it is unthinkable to insult a professor, he is surprised to see that kids can be so insolent in Canada. Pierre states that he wants to raise his own children back in Burundi, so that they will grow up in an environment where the family and respect for one's parents are a part of each child's education. (SN2: 19)

Francisco Flores (S9) has similar feelings to those expressed above, and even though he built much of his life in Colombia around the defence of children's rights, he believes that Canadians have gone too far in this department.

Francisco charges Canada with not even having real, innocent children because they are given too much liberty from day one. Not only do Canadian parents not discipline their children, but the legal system removes the ability of stricter parents to properly discipline theirs. When Colombian children, who have lived their entire lives under strict control, not only from their parents but also from the state (which lets death squads clean the streets of drug users and prostitutes), suddenly find themselves in a society as liberal as Canada's, many go wild. (S9: 22)

Having established himself in Montreal as a counsellor for immigrant youth seeking help and rehabilitation, he sees cases like this all too often. For Francisco, the most important value to instil in these teens is the importance of their own culture, and he tries his hardest to help them re-discover their roots and learn to respect where they came from. He believes that "regardless of one's geographical location, culture is home. If you lose your culture, you will not belong anywhere and will be all the more vulnerable to the pull of substance abuse and despondency" (S9: 23).

One of the aspects of children's upbringing in Canada that most surprised Béatrice (SN1) is sexual education in schools. In Burundi, the subject of sex and sexuality is taboo, and according to Béatrice, topics associated with it are "not touched in school or in the family, and even very little between friends" (SN1: 19). Still, she was somewhat relieved when she found out what her daughter had been taught in class, as she had been unsure of how to broach the subject herself.

### *Ethnic diversity and women's rights*

Although many families appear to be uncomfortable with the rights and freedoms that children and adolescents have in Canada, they are very appreciative of the other side of the coin: ethnic diversity and tolerance. Even though Félix (SN2) is extremely critical of what he sees as Canadian children's lack of respect for their elders, he is glad to be able to give his own children the opportunity to "benefit from the Canadian experience," where "all the different communities and languages value

each other, where everyone gets a place on the bus or in the metro, without problems or hesitation” (SN2: 22).

Multiculturalism is also extremely important for Mohammed Khreiss (S6), who, from the moment he arrived in Montreal, “loved that he could walk down the street and speak English, French, Arabic and Spanish in the span of half an hour, not to mention hear so many other languages” (S6: 23). For the Baranowski family (S4), tolerance is something deeply cherished, and something that they had not been exposed to very much in their home country.

The final principle of Isidora and Serhiy’s approach to raising children is tolerance: not only tolerance for other people’s feelings and points of view but also with regards to race, religion and ethnicity. Serhiy and Isidora come from a culture that is very closed to outsiders, where few people ever consider anything on or beyond the boundaries of their reality. This aspect of living in a homogenous community was something they very much wanted to escape, and are adamant that their children appreciate differences rather than fear them. They have also experienced discrimination at times from being outsiders themselves, which only made them all the more determined to raise children who would operate with an inclusive worldview. Isidora would always remind Agnieszka, “you know what it’s like to be made fun of for being different—do not ever make other people feel that way.” Agnieszka and Anastazja were instilled with the principle of rejecting all stereotypes and being intelligent and independent enough to make their own judgments (S4: 17).

Just as some families and individuals appreciate Canada’s openness towards ethnic minorities, some of the women are extremely grateful for the independence and liberty that they see as a welcome change from their home countries. Alaura’s desire (S2) for a more independent life was intensified when she survived a traumatic hold-up at gun point: realizing that she had to get out of Mexico, she left for Montreal. She values her freedom greatly, and has taken care to ensure that her younger sister Santa (who immigrated shortly after Alaura) demands the respect of others. Also heavily influenced by her grandmother, Alaura is extremely cautious of men, and has learned to take care of herself without relying on anybody else.

The Ivanovich family (S1) also values equality, and both parents have been highly aware of gender issues since before the time they met. At one point, after they had been dating casually for a just few weeks, Alicia was upset when Roberto referred to her as his girlfriend, as she greatly valued her independence. Her feelings towards him soon changed, however.

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When Alicia met Roberto, she had a very fixed idea of what men were like. She had grown up knowing many who were very macho, and it appealed to her that Roberto would unabashedly tell his friends that he couldn't join them because he wanted to spend time with her. Not only could he cook, but he felt strongly about responsibility and egalitarianism. Most vital, they shared a belief in the importance of family and fidelity. (S1: 9)

Having three daughters was a delight to both of them, and they worked hard to instil in their children the importance of equality and their value as human beings.

In a somewhat similar case, Ana (S3) was interested in Gabriel, her future husband, primarily because he treated her as an equal. "No one had ever taken her seriously enough to engage her in conversation about subjects like history, physics or technology before, and she was flattered. It didn't take long for them to realize how compatible they were, and after a year they began to live together" (S3: 5). Gabriel was also instrumental in convincing Ana to follow her dream and go back to school. Although her older sister had taught her invaluable lessons about independence and making a life for oneself (rather than simply following the path that was expected of women), finishing school was a goal she had let slide until Gabriel's encouragement and belief in her incited her to do what she really wanted.

There are certain moral and ethical transmissions that come across as important to only one or two families. For the Romero family (S3), one of the key values that the parents hope to pass on to their son is the importance of following rules, particularly those of the culture in which one is living. This, to them, is the epitome of respect.

#### **Mixed identities**

Several of the families represented in the novels have moved around a great deal, or have members of different origins, which results in different family members identifying more closely with different countries, languages, and cultures.

The Baranowski family (S4) immigrated to Canada just before the birth of their younger daughter, Anastazja, who automatically became a Canadian citizen. Having never been immersed in a Polish environment, she never become completely fluent in Polish. Her older sister Agnieszka, in comparison, was already four when the family left Poland, and in addition to having memories of her home country, continued studying Polish in Canada. When Isidora took her two daughters on a trip

back to Poland to visit family when they were 14 and 8 years old, it was only Agnieszka who felt truly connected.

She discovered a huge extended family she had never really understood having, and found that despite the grimness of the people she met in Poland, her family were incredibly positive people... It was after this visit that Agnieszka began to really care about her "Polishness." She began not only to correspond regularly with her family there, but also to work on her Polish by reading the books her parents had in the language. She was determined to return. (S4: 20)

Four years later, Isidora and Agnieszka returned to Poland, but Anastazja decided to remain behind. The elder daughter, being eighteen this time, was able to get even more out of the experience than she had the previous trip. Particularly as she had recently begun studying anthropology, she noticed more about the perspective that her relatives had on the world, and had a framework in which to put the cultural attitudes, such as ethnocentrism and political apathy, that she noticed among people there.

For the Bombai family (M1), living in several countries significantly influenced their children's identities. Originally from Congo, the parents left for Zimbabwe with their two eldest daughters, Sara and Madeleine, who were very young at the time and have few memories of their first home. Having spent several of her formative years in Zimbabwe, Sara identifies primarily with this country, although since arriving in Canada and becoming reconnected with relatives, she has begun to feel more Congolese as well.

Madeleine never felt as comfortable in Zimbabwe, however, and never excelled at the language as did her older sister. The family's next stop, in Botswana, was rather short, and Madeleine does not feel particularly drawn to this country either. While she likes Canada, she hasn't been here long enough to really feel at home yet. All of this adds up to her not necessarily identifying with any country in particular.

The girls' younger brother, Marc, has fond memories of playing soccer in Zimbabwe and of his friends from Botswana, and he now enjoys connecting with his extended family in Canada. Since he feels that each of these places has marked him, he chooses to identify with every country in which he has lived.

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The siblings of the Saad family (S7) identify differently from each other, although for different reasons than the Bombai children. With a Lebanese father (of Palestinian origins) and Jordanian mother, civil unrest kept the family moving around the Middle East. They moved from Lebanon, where Samar was born, to Jordan, Émile's birthplace, then to Cypress, Kuwait, and finally the United Arab Emirates. Samar is said to take after her father so, wanting to explore his country (of which she had a few early memories), she decided to return to Lebanon for her studies. Émile, on the other hand, allies himself more with his mother, and even though it was in Dubai that he spent a large part of his formative years, he identifies as Jordanian. Even now that they are both in Montreal, Samar spends most of her time with a circle of Lebanese friends, while gregarious Émile has friends from all over the world.

May Sebugwiza (S8) married an Austrian man, Alex, with whom she had two children before he died suddenly while on a trip back to Europe. Although their time together was short, they raised a family that consisted of May's two daughters, their own sons, and three other adopted daughters.

For years, the family lived in Kigali peacefully, their greatest challenge being how to combine Rwandan and European parenting styles into a coherent whole. Alex was incredibly open with the children, allowing them to ask any kind of question that might occur to them and seriously weighing his replies. In Rwandan culture, children have no place inquiring into the business of their parents and May saw no need to explain to her daughters why, for example, they were black but their brothers were brown. (S8: 12)

The aspect of mixed parentage in this family comes out later in the novel as well:

One thing that May had not counted upon was that her children would absorb so much of Canadian culture so quickly. Assuredly, the children had a much earlier exposure to Western culture through Alex, yet in Africa they had remained essentially African. They lapped up Alex's foreign music and movies, and loved that he would answer any and all of their questions, but they remained completely obedient children. Here, they have become much more direct, expressing their opinions in ways that would have been unthinkable for May as a child. (S8: 18)

The influence of the two cultures presents a bit of a dilemma for May, as was explained earlier in her story about the Rwandan music group. Negotiating traditions within a family is always a complex issue, which we can see in each of the examples mentioned here. Whether they are the result of different ethnic backgrounds of parents and grandparents, crossing boundaries and borders, moving between different countries and cultures, the memories associated with certain places, or the country of birth, the different identities people create for themselves shape the lives and

experience of immigrant families. In some cases, this inevitably causes conflict. In others, it serves as a reminder of the fantastic diversity of the human race, and demonstrates how people can respond to that diversity with love and respect.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored several aspects of family transmission revealed in the novels at great length. Although identity referents and traditions are transmitted in many ways, at many levels, and for many reasons, each of these novels illustrates at least some of the themes considered to be highly important in the lives of their children, and in their immigration projects.

Exploring the phenomenon of transmission invites further inquiry into the notion of continuity between past, present and future. The ways in which parents remember traditions from their country of origin, preserve them in a new land, and pass them on to their children in the hope that they will do the same in their own families suggests a certain permanence, but also raises questions of tradition invention and modification. When working with immigrant and refugee families, it is important to consider the dynamic nature of traditions that are transformed in the context of migration. The ability to negotiate new practices and traditions—to integrate the new with the old—is an indicator of the “actor” status of these families and their ability to adapt to new circumstances. As we suggested above, questions of memory are also at play, as are the ways in which families choose to share information—not only with their children, but with researchers during the interview process. The family novel is a particular form of biographical narrative, and although this has already been discussed at great length, it is nevertheless an important point to bear in mind when exploring the stories told by these families about their traditions and other identity referents. Memories may change, be lost and found, exaggerated or minimized. Individual memories may also be influenced by collective memories of events or traditions that are perpetuated by communities or transnational networks. Ana Romero (S3), for example, remembers a Mexican Christmas tradition that was *not* something practised by her own family, but something she thought her son would enjoy. Her memory serves an interesting function here, helping her to transmit a cultural and religious tradition with which she herself had little experience, but that she felt was important to observe in a new home, where it was not a part of the Christmas celebration as observed by others around her.



Another theme that emerged in the novels is the role of children in the transmission of traditions. As is made clear in these novels, the young people in these families are not simply passive observers, soaking up religious values and tradition, but actors in their own right. In some cases, they exercise their agency in opposition to their parents, as when May's children refused to attend a Rwandan music concert (S8). More often, however, this agency can be seen in the ways in which immigrant youth carry on traditions themselves or in association with their parents. In several novels, the children or young adults who were interviewed talk about of the enjoyment they received from being an active part of the transmission of cultural tradition, religion and family values.

There are many avenues that could be explored further within the framework of the family novel. For example, although this project enabled us to make broad comparisons with respect to family transmissions in migratory contexts, we were not able to observe generalized differences based on culture or nationality, as our sample was too small and the families' origins too diverse. An ongoing project based on the Family Novel approach with families from the Maghreb will allow us to more thoroughly examine complex culturally related issues of transmission.<sup>4</sup> This project has nonetheless given us a taste of the issues associated with the migrating family, the identity aspects and referents that families seek to transmit to their children, the religious, cultural and familial traditions that are remembered and passed down through generations, and the ways in which such transmissions are carried out and received. Beyond this, the Family Novel project has also given us incredible insight into the family itself: as a site where the past and present are constantly negotiated, and where projects are cast for the future.

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<sup>4</sup> *Parcours d'insertion et roman familial. Les jeunes familles maghrébines nouvellement arrivées au Québec.* Grant accorded by the Social Science and Research Council of Canada (2007-2010). C. Montgomery, S. Xenocostas, J. Le Gall, L. Rachédi, C. Rousseau, M. Vatz-Laaroussi, J. Rhéaume.



## CHAPTER 5

### REFLECTING ON THE FAMILY NOVEL PROJECT

As we explained in the introductory chapter, the Family Novel Project emerged in response to our interest in working more closely with immigrant and refugee youth and families. It was designed as an exploratory project to evaluate the potential of the family novel methodology as a tool for both intervention and research purposes. In this chapter we would like to examine this potential more closely.

#### **Origins of a project**

As the participating refugee families so aptly showed us in their novels, it is worthwhile to delve back into the history of our origins to better understand how we ended up where we did and where we hope to be in the future. This holds true not only for personal and familial histories, but also for project histories such as the Family Novel Project. Understanding the genesis of our study reveals a great deal about our own aspirations regarding the use of this type of approach with immigrant and refugee families, both in research and in intervention.

The Family Novel Project emerged out of a very particular institutional context, that of the Research and Training Centre of the CSSS de la Montagne, a health and social service centre in Montreal. Founded in 1992, the research centre has always encouraged strong links between research and social/clinical practice. In an era when university-based research more or less dominates the knowledge scene, research done outside of that context—with the exception of hospital-based medical research—is viewed with some suspicion. The epistemological premises behind the creation of the research centre provide for an innovative way of doing social research. These premises are largely grounded in an approach known as clinical sociology (Enriquez, *et al.*, 1993;

Mercier and Rhéaume, 2007). The word “clinical” here is used in the sense of proximity, and “clinical sociology” implies engagement with both individuals and collectivities. This engagement is strengthened by strong partnerships between researchers and practitioners that encourage dialogue and the co-production of knowledge. This type of partnership can be seen as a form of action-research that values the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge: scientific (researchers), practical (health and social service practitioners) and experiential (client participants) (Rhéaume, in press).

The objectives of the Family Novel Project are broadly situated within this general framework. The project began to take shape after several encounters with Myriam Hamez who was, at that time, the Director of the “Covered Garden” at the YMCA, a program that organizes activities for refugee families. Ms. Hamez played an active role in the formulation of the original project, was involved in putting together the Facilitation Guide (see Appendix 1), was responsible for leading one of the training sessions on the family novel method, and co-signed the original grant application as a co-researcher. The research-practice partnership was further consolidated with the hiring of two interviewers with extensive experience as volunteer facilitators for activities with refugee families within the context of the Covered Garden program. Their understanding of the refugee experience combined with their engagement in social action intervention also strengthened the partnership.

The Family Novel Project also has a connection to clinical sociology in the way it values different forms of knowledge. From a research perspective, the project draws on current academic knowledge in the fields of immigration, social biographical methods and family transmissions. It also advances new knowledge on the nature of these transmissions in refugee families. For the participating families, the production of the family novels in written form provides an important record of their experiences. The fact that the families received copies of their novels also demonstrates the bi-directional objective of knowledge transfer. In academic research, individuals are often used as sources of information, but their role ends once they have participated in the interview or answered the questionnaire. In our project, the narratives remain the property of the families that produced them. They constitute personal and familial legacies that have value in and of themselves. Finally, from the perspective of practitioners, the Facilitation Guide used in the Family Novel Project can be used as an intervention tool for working with immigrant and refugee families. We will now look at the possibilities of this tool.

### **The Family Novel toolbox**

Since it is our hope that this project will also be used in intervention contexts with immigrant and refugee families, it is worthwhile to revisit some of the more technical considerations related to the implementation of this type of project, such as the Facilitation Guide, intervention setting, and recruitment.

#### *Working with the Facilitation Guide*

In the early phases of the project, the research team organized four group sessions to familiarize the team members with the family novel approach. The first was animated by Jacques Rhéaume, Scientific Director of the Research and Training Centre at the CSSS de la Montagne, and long time collaborator in international networks working with the family novel approach in a perspective of clinical sociology. During his session, he presented some of the basic working tools used in family novel workshops: timelines and socio-professional trajectories, social genograms, narratives on family origins and family names, the potential integration of visual supports such as drawings, photos, collages, and even theatre and dance. These working tools were then adapted to the particular context of immigrant and refugee families, drawing on current literature and intervention practices in this area. The resulting Facilitation Guide (see Appendix 1) was validated at two subsequent training sessions, during which members of the research team used the guide to produce segments of their own family novels. This process, undertaken in a group setting, was particularly intense and productive.

Talking about our own family pasts and memories triggered a rush of emotions, mostly happy ones, but also difficult ones. Through this process, we realized the delicate balance between thoughts we are ready to express and those we are not yet ready to confront. Up to this point, these considerations had been largely abstract or theoretical. However, since we would be working with a vulnerable population, it was important that we be able to manage these shifts between the admissible and the non-admissible. We therefore organized a final training session on ways to manage such situations in interview and intervention contexts. In addition to covering such basic considerations as confidentiality, it was also emphasized that the Family Novel Project was designed to be a positive experience that would value family experiences. Families were to be told at the outset, and throughout the meetings, that they were the masters in the process. Their novels would belong to them and they could structure them as they wished. Since the families might have

to deal with uncertainty or painful memories during the process, the facilitators were given practical techniques for intervening based on the specifics of the situation (subtly re-directing the focus, mutually acknowledging the situation, or inviting the families to choose a course of action by changing the subject, interrupting the session or pursuing reflection). The fact that all of the facilitators had had previous experience in intervention with refugee families was also reassuring. Overall, these techniques worked well; we did not encounter any significant problems in the fieldwork phase of the project. In the evaluations of the project, the families themselves expressed their appreciation for facilitators and their respect for the intimacy of the family stories, as you will read further on.

The Facilitation Guide itself is structured around nine proposed activities or themes. Families were invited to choose from among the suggested themes or add their own based on family interests and priorities. The sessions with the families were largely unstructured. Since the facilitation activities and themes were provided only to facilitate and stimulate narrative process, not to create a question and answer dynamic, the demarcations between the various activities are not always clearly defined in the written novels. Although there were instances when one activity was completed before another was introduced, the different themes contained in each activity were usually developed simultaneously. Table 5.1 summarizes the proposed activities:

**Table 5.1 - Summarized version of the Facilitation Guide used in the Family Novel Project**

- Activity 1: Drawing the family past. You may draw a picture or use words to describe your family’s past.
- Activity 2: Describing memorable events, anecdotes, and important family figures. You may choose to describe particular events, memories or anecdotes relating to your family’s past.
- Activity 3: Creating a genogram. You may create what we call a “genogram,” which is a chart or diagram that represents your family history. Today we will draw the genograms on paper, but they will later be printed in your family novel.
- Activity 4: What’s in a name? We all have names: first names, last names, diminutives (nicknames), and other surnames which have been attributed over time. In this activity, we would like to look at the meanings of these names.
- Activity 5: Family events, values and traditions. In this activity we will look at important family events and significant values and traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation.
- Activity 6: Changing countries. Immigration is an important event in a family

### *Reflecting on the family novel project*

history, both for parents and for children. Although it is a period of adjustment, it is also a period of new beginnings. This activity tells the story of your migration.

- Activity 7: Dreams and projects for the future. This activity looks at the future. Obviously, it is impossible to know what the future holds in store for any of us. What we are interested in here are your dreams for the future, your aspirations and your projects.
- Activity 8: Going to school (for young people). This activity, specifically designed for youth, looks at perceptions of schooling and differences between educational values in the country of origin and in Quebec.
- Activity 9: Personalized theme or topic (participant's choice). Perhaps you would like to include another theme or topic in your family novel that is important to your family, but which hasn't been covered in the topics proposed in the guide. Please feel free to add any other theme of your choice and we will include it in your novel.

In addition to these activities, you are invited to add other material to your family novels, such as photos, drawings, texts, etc. Materials will be scanned and all originals returned to you.

All of the families interviewed chose to participate in Activity 2 (Describing memorable events, anecdotes, and important family figures), Activity 5 (Family events, values and traditions) and Activity 6 (Changing countries). Although Activity 4 (What's in a name?) and Activity 8 (Going to school) were not chosen by every family, they figure in an important number of novels. Although Activity 3 (Creating a genogram) and Activity 7 (Dreams and projects for the future) were chosen less frequently than the others, they still appear in six of the novels. Finally, Activity 1 (Drawing the family past) was chosen by the least number of families (only four).

In the case of the first activity, Drawing the family past, not only did the participants appear less interested in it, they also seemed to have difficulty understanding the activity and were unclear about what was expected of them. The suggestion of adding textures, colours and objects to the picture was rarely taken. Another activity that was problematic was Activity 8, Going to school. While this activity was mainly meant for the children and youth in the families, the information on school and education came most often from the parents. In fact, throughout their own narratives, parents often shared their own experiences with schools, what education meant to them, what they expected out of education for their children, and how they felt about schools in Canada. The young people seemed less willing or less comfortable sharing this information. This activity often ended up being conducted based on a question and answer format, with the youth providing only short answers, without elaborating too much on the subject. As such, the objective of the activity, which

was to understand young people’s views on school and education, was not achieved—what we got was an understanding of the parents’ point of view. Moreover, while activities pertaining to the family’s past and histories were well developed, Activity 7, Dreams and projects for the future, resulted in less elaborate answers, mostly staying in the realm of working hard, learning English and/or French and hoping that the children would go to university. For families who are still going through the settlement process, and who have been in Canada for such a short period of time, conceptualizing the future and its possibilities is more difficult. They are still very much caught up in the emotional turmoil of migration and the uncertainty of their futures.

The theme of separation, which was not included in the Facilitation Guide, was brought up by several families. In fact, with the exception of two families, all the families have members whom they consider to be part of their nuclear family unit who are still living in their countries of origin. Since these separations play an important role in the families’ everyday lives, both emotionally and for practical reasons (trying to bring about reunification), this theme became a crucial part of their narratives. It would be worthwhile to include this theme in subsequent projects. Another theme that was added by a few families is the high expectations of family members not living here with respect to the potential for success in Canada. Such a theme could be related to transnationalism and the continued links that refugee and immigrant families maintain with significant persons in their homelands. It should also be considered for future projects.

Finally, some activities and themes were avoided, touched on only briefly, or left unspoken. While many families responded to Activity 6 about changing countries, many participants remained vague about the specific reasons for their departure. Several attributed their migration to broader issues, such as political instability, war, genocide, corruption, or a more general threat of violence and danger in their country of origin. A few participants were purposely vague about their reasons for departure because of the painful memories that their exile brought back, and because they did not want their children to know the details of these stories. In one family, the migration story was particularly confusing. The participants themselves were still grasping with what they were willing to admit and to whom. These types of contradictions, of course, can be an intimate part of any personal narrative. The role of the research team was not to confront contradictions or information that was deliberately omitted, but rather to encourage the families to construct their own meaning out of their experiences.



*Intervening in a group or familial setting*

In the tradition of the working group on the Family Novel and Social Trajectories developed by Vincent de Gaulejac and collaborators (de Gaulejac, 1999; Poupard and Rhéaume, 2002; Rhéaume *et al.*, 1996), activities generally take place in group settings. In our own project, therefore, we proposed to meet the refugee families in group settings, spread out over two or three sessions. Two reasons motivated our original choice. First, we wanted to remain as close as possible to the structure and functioning of the above-mentioned working group. Second, we thought that a group setting would encourage the families to share their experiences with one another and, in so doing, break their isolation and encourage the creation of support networks. Prior to organizing groups with the families, we first tested the Facilitation Guide in three group sessions attended by several members of the research team. In these initial encounters, a group setting seemed appropriate. However, when the team members from the Covered Garden program began talking about the project with potential refugee families, we soon realized that a group setting was not the best choice. In fact, the participants themselves asked to meet with the facilitators as family units; that is, in meetings where only family members would be present. They clearly explained that they felt uncomfortable sharing intimate details of their family stories with other families. It is possible that their status as refugees added to their reluctance. There are very real and valid reasons why they might not want to talk about their experiences in a group setting: timidity because of language barriers, family secrets, painful experiences relating to migration or loss, political allegiances and involvement, fear that other refugees from the same region might relay information to extended community networks, and so on. We respected these misgivings, and agreed to meet the participants as family units. Our encounters were spread out over two or three sessions, depending on the families.

At this early stage of the project, we thought it might still be worthwhile to organize one group session at the end of the process, with the objective of bringing the families together to share moments from their novels without having to reveal intimate or compromising details. We also intended to use this meeting to ask the families to talk about their perceptions of the Family Novel Project. Several factors, however, made this final encounter difficult. First, the interviews were spread out over a period of several months. Families who were among the first participants had moved on to other things by the end of the project. Second, many families were still caught up in the “survival” phase of the early migratory period. They understandably had other more pressing issues to attend to, such as finding a job and trying to understand the school system. Third, as we have

already mentioned, three of the principal researchers were on leave during this part of the project, dealing with their own day-to-day parenting issues. Despite these constraints in organizing a group meeting, the majority of the participating families very graciously responded to a few questions, which gave us an impression of their perceptions of the Family Novel Project. In future endeavours, however, we still believe that a final group meeting to wind up the project might be worthwhile. For the families themselves, the fact of sharing chosen aspects of their experiences (rather than details and family secrets) with others might be beneficial in creating links and in understanding the similarities and differences in refugee experiences. For the project itself, such a meeting could help us to better understand the similarities and differences in narratives and to obtain participants' impressions of the experience.

Another challenge we faced in the familial setting was related to the place of young people in the project. As mentioned earlier, the interview process was carried out in the presence of both parents and children. While some of the older children truly contributed to the content of their family novels, the participation of others was limited. This is partly attributable to the dynamics within the families themselves. Young people may feel shy or uncomfortable expressing their opinions in front of their parents. In some cases, silence may also be a sign of fear or resistance to parental authority, or simply indicative of this stage in development. Generally speaking, it is more difficult to interview children than adults. To offset this problem in some families, the interviewers sometimes met with the children alone. Even in these situations, however, the dialogue was often limited to questions and brief answers. Whether these young people did not understand what was expected of them, or whether they felt intimidated and did not feel comfortable saying things to a stranger or in front of other family members, the end result was that the children's voices are less present in some of the novels. For a project that is intended to be a family project, this challenge needs to be examined more closely. In the future, it might be useful to try to set up more one-on-one interviews with older children, or maybe group meetings bringing together several young people without their parents. In such contexts, the types of activities and interview techniques proposed could be better adapted to their particular experiences, rather than to those of their parents.

Despite these challenges, the encounters with the participating families were incredibly rich. “Flexibility” is the watchword for future research or intervention projects of this type. As a tool, the Facilitation Guide can be adapted for use in individual, familial or group settings. In intervention contexts, in particular, it could also be used at different stages of the intervention process (evaluation of an individual or familial situation, needs analysis, elaboration and realization of an

intervention plan, final evaluation). We have also recently experimented with this approach in more informal settings, such as gatherings set up by community organizations.

### *Recruitment issues*

One aspect that worked in favour of the recruitment process was our collaboration with the Covered Gardens Program at the Downtown YMCA, since several families had stayed there during the period immediately following their arrival in Quebec. Not only had they come to know the workers, residents and services offered by the YMCA, they had also lived there for a while, and had often developed a positive, lasting rapport with members and staff. The Covered Gardens was a familiar environment in which they felt comfortable. For that reason, they did not approach the project with suspicion, and were willing to participate and share their stories. In such a setting, it is not surprising that word of mouth quickly became an important recruitment tool, one whose effectiveness was the result of the trust and confidence it generated. The fact that families they knew had already participated in the project allowed other families to feel more at ease and less wary about the objectives of such a project.

The fact that many of the interviews were held in the families' homes, at a time that was convenient to them, also facilitated the recruitment process. Most of the families lead busy lives taking care of their children, finding employment and dealing with the immigration process. Sparing them time-consuming travel was the least we could do. Moreover, the fact of entering their homes levelled the playing field, creating a safe and comfortable environment for the participants. Other interviews took place in the Covered Gardens, which was a setting that the ex-residents of the YMCA trusted and with which they had developed a personal connection. The father and son in the Bizimana family (SN2), for example, remained on-site after the meetings to socialize with friends among the staff and residents. Clearly the establishment of a relationship of trust and confidence is vital to the success of this type of project. Our collaboration with the YMCA greatly facilitated this aspect.

The recruitment process also presented a number of difficulties which could have relevance for future projects of this type. These difficulties are partly related to working specifically with refugee populations. Many of these families are still devoting all their time, energy and emotions to settling in, preparing to bring the rest of their family to join them, and reuniting after long periods of separation. As the mother in the Sinankwa family explained (SN1), she is consumed by a single thought: being reunited with all of her children and her husband here in Canada. Until that time

comes, she will have great difficulty finding employment and building a life for herself here, not to mention beginning the emotional and psychological healing process. Moreover, many of the refugee families approached for the project had just been through the very gruelling refugee determination process in which they were asked to tell their story over and over again. Some refugee families may not be willing to participate in such a project for this reason, fearing that they will be forced to relive this experience yet once again. For all these reasons, and because the families were unfamiliar with this type of project, the recruitment process was at times complicated and very lengthy. Finally, as the project demonstrated, these families devote a great deal of time and energy to their children’s future and well-being. They have other priorities and demands on their time that must be taken into consideration. These are important issues to take into account when considering this type of approach. The families who participated in the project greatly appreciated the experience (see the following section), but it is crucial that participation be on a voluntary basis and geared towards families that are available (both psychologically and in terms of time) and interested in this type of activity.

Another difficulty in the recruitment process was related to institutional politics, which can be an issue for any project. In our case, there were important internal changes taking place in both of our partner institutions at the time of the study. For reasons unrelated to the research project itself, relations between the two institutions were strained for several months. Mid-way into the project, our co-researcher from the YMCA left her job as the Director of the Covered Gardens program. During this rather tumultuous period, some families were recruited by word of mouth outside of both of these institutional contexts.

### **Perceptions of the Family Novel Project: The participating families’ point of view**

The evaluation questions we asked the individual families were fairly general. They were asked what they thought about the Family Novel Project, what aspects they particularly liked and what aspects they didn’t like. They were also asked if they thought that such a project could be useful in helping families who have recently immigrated, and if they had any recommendations for improving the project. Their responses give us a good idea of their perceptions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Unlike the family novels, which were written as second-hand accounts by the facilitators, the majority of the evaluation responses were written or dictated by the participants themselves. The majority of their responses are therefore first-hand accounts.

Several participants commented on the format of the encounters in which the family novels were produced. They were particularly enthusiastic about the use of a narrative form which they believed was an effective and amusing way of sharing their experiences. A member of the Baranowski family (S4) wrote:

The project, especially because it was in the form of a personal narrative, was an effective means of relation of information and experiences to people immigrating to a new place. The fact that the interview was slightly guided, yet allowed the interviewee to tell his or her story, made it easier to think in a flowing and consistent manner, rather than be interrupted by constant questions. (S4)

Another participant also expressed his appreciation that his narrative was not too guided by the interviewer, which enabled him to present his family in his own way. He also felt that this format allowed him to fully appropriate his novel so that it really belonged to his family:

I really liked that the questions were open-ended. [The interviewer] asked questions to guide me but never gave me questions to answer. She let us present the part of our family that we cherish. [...] [The interviewer] made me very comfortable and made me feel like the project was my project, not like I was part of somebody else's project (S6).

The ease with which the majority of the families narrated their stories had a great deal to do with the strong connection of confidence and trust that they were able to establish with the interviewers. The participant mentioned above, for instance, spoke about the awkwardness that he had felt at the beginning of the first encounter and how this feeling dissipated as he began to tell his story: "At first it is a little weird and awkward having someone so focused on you, but once you calm down it's great. It takes a good deal of trust but it is worth it" (Khreiss family, S6). Another participant expressed the relationship of trust that developed over the course of the project by saying to the interviewer: "You are part of the family now" (Bombai, M1).

The fact that the participants were not obliged to talk about certain moments of their lives or aspects of their families that they did not care to discuss allowed them greater freedom to structure their narratives in ways that made the most sense to them. These omissions, or "zones of silence" were acknowledged and respected by the interviewers, and considered to be an integral and valid part of the families' stories. Since these omissions and silences were not judged or questioned, the families felt comfortable narrating their stories. This situation is quite different from the confrontational nature of the refugee hearing process. Immigration lawyers and refugee board commissioners are constantly looking for gaps in stories; their decisions tend to be based on a narrative logic (or "non-

logic”) of truth versus lies. As one participant (Sebugwiza, S8) commented, she was initially a bit nervous about telling her story in the context of the project because she had become all too familiar with the confrontational aspect of narratives developed for immigration officials: “When [the interviewer] came over and explained what it really was I was a little nervous because I hadn’t talked about these things in a while except with my lawyer. I didn’t think I wanted to talk about them but once I started I did not mind continuing. I liked that there wasn’t anything I was obliged to answer and I was allowed to tell the parts of my story that I thought were important.”

Beyond the technicalities of the family novel method, most of the participants also expressed their enthusiasm for the content of the project and felt that they had made a personal connection to it. This idea of a personal connection was expressed in different ways. Many appreciated that the project gave them a personal and/or familial space to talk about their past. This appropriation of the narrative was developed not only through the act of telling the family story, but also in receiving a copy of their novel. For some, the process brought about a renewed sense of pride in their family history, which had been relegated to distant memory. One participant, who regretted having forgotten details about his grandfather’s life, expressed the desire to continue the project by going back to see his grandfather. He wanted to hear his grandfather’s stories once again and commit them to paper. This participant took ownership of his family novel, seeing in its written form a medium for the transmission of his family’s history. For another participant, the written form conferred legitimacy on his family’s narrative and its existence in printed form enhanced its value: “The project brings out segments that would otherwise remain unknown to every member of the family. On the one hand, it gave value to our narrative, it was really nice to see it all down on paper, official almost” (Khreiss family: S6). The idea of legitimacy was also expressed in other ways. The father of the Ivanovich family (S1), for instance, mentioned to the interviewer that he thought we were crazy to think that his family was interesting enough to talk about for six hours. By the end of the process, however, he said that he felt like he could “go on and on and on.”

Some participants described the Family Novel Project as having a cathartic function. Sharing stories with other family members and remembering past events allowed them to become aware of some of the reasons that had motivated their life choices and those of their families. In the case of one of the members of the Khreiss family (S6), the project enabled him to piece together fragments of his refugee experience into a cohesive narrative that had meaning for him:

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When you leave a country without wanting to, you spend a lot of time escaping reality, trying not to think about things. In a way, it is cathartic to have to talk about it. With someone in front of you asking for a cohesive narrative, you can't just skip the parts you don't like and you get to see the greater picture.

Another participant, from the Ivanovich family (S1), explained how he often felt submerged by day-to-day concerns and that the project allowed him to temporarily escape them. Through the process he realized how much he missed his daughters and that talking about them made him feel good.

Although the families generally enjoyed participating in the project, they did not all clearly understand the research objectives from the outset. Why it would be worthwhile to examine the transmission of family values in immigrant families, or how these could be mobilized to (re)create links within the family were abstract questions which, in the beginning, seemed to have little immediate relevance for them. Not only had the families never heard of such an approach, but most were more accustomed to the formal, interrogative approach of the immigration and refugee process. As a member of the Sinankwa family suggested, "At first, when you get involved in the project and you are asked certain questions, you do not see the usefulness of these" (SN1). It was only during, or even following, the narrative process that these questions began to take on meaning. Some participants specifically mentioned the way in which such a project could open up a space for dialogue within the family unit. While some considered that the family novel could be used as a tool to work collectively on family dynamics and greater understanding, others saw benefits on a more individual level. The Bombai family (M1) provides a good example of the former perspective. The mother was particularly pleased to tell us that she thought the project had brought the family closer together. Both she and the children had made discoveries through the construction of the narrative:

We have become even closer. We remember things from the past. It is good to remember things that they [the children] have put aside. The children are discovering themselves. They have appreciated sharing their experiences and being able to compare the ways of doing things here with the way things happen in our country. We talked about us [our family] even afterwards. They often ask me questions about the past and I try to explain to them as best I can. (M1)

In a similar way, the Romero (S3) family thought the project was particularly well adapted for families struggling with their situation as refugees or with other types of problems within the family dynamic. In their case, the construction of their novel was useful in clarifying some of their values with respect to their son, but they did not consider themselves to be a "problem" family. The

Baronowski (S4) family believed that the project was particularly useful for families that already enjoyed relatively open relationships between parents and children, as is their case:

The usefulness of the project really depends on the type of family and the relations within that family. Our family is fortunate to have grown in a very open family environment where almost everything was discussed. In that sense, the stories and experiences of others would be beneficial to a family like mine because we would be able to discuss and perhaps relate to another family member’s experiences.

Some elements of the Baranowski’s (S4) evaluation also demonstrate the way in which the project could be beneficial on an individual level. The elder sister, for instance, contemplated on what she had learned personally from the project:

The project definitely made me think more about my family and history than I had in a long time. I thought about the struggles my parents had to endure in order to create a new opportunity and a new life not only for themselves, but for their children. I learned many new things, especially about my younger sister [...]. I even ended up talking to her after for a sort of informal interview for myself, simply because I had never before considered her opinion on these matters.

Another participant explained that the family novel allowed her to take a step back, revisit her past, and analyze and compare the differences between her family’s life in their country of origin and the new life in Canada. This process enabled her to learn some lessons, and she hoped to be able to eventually present the novel to family members who are still waiting to come to Canada, to prepare them for the new life that awaits them (Sinankwa: SN1). Finally, another participant, whose family could not join him in Canada, found the family novel useful for allowing him to re-evaluate his family’s past and present, as well as each member’s role within the family unit. He was particularly pleased with the novel in its printed form that he could give to his daughters to show them how proud he is of them (S1).

Not all participating families, however, were as enthusiastic about sharing their reflections on the family’s past. For some, many past memories are too painful to be evoked. Parents also worry about the impact that some of their memories might have on their children. The father in the Días (S5) family, for example, initially thought that the narrative process would be much easier than it proved to be. Separated from his children, Carlos was reluctant to let them know how difficult things have been for him. He wants to protect them until they are older. Although the project evoked some pleasant memories for him, it also reminded him how much he misses his children:



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I thought I would like sharing my story but it was hard to talk about everything that has happened. I think maybe if the children are older and the parents can tell them everything then it would be useful, but I don't think I'm going to send [the novel] to my son because I don't want him to worry.

Similarly, the mother in the Sebugwiza family (S8) commented on the bittersweet memories that the Family Novel Project evoked:

Our family has always been very strong, but it did remind us of how nice it is to be in Canada now. I did not share everything that had happened during the genocide. Not only because I don't plan to tell my children soon, only much later, but also because I don't like speaking about it.

These comments remind us that the Family Novels contain not only what was related in the narratives, but also what was *not* related: the hesitations, silences and omissions. These too are part of the family legacy: they are zones of self-preservation and protection for the children. The silences that are treated as contradictions in the refugee determination process are, in the context of the Family Novel Project, treated with respect and understanding of the need for maintaining personal and familial intimacy and integrity. In the context of research and intervention, facilitators must be extremely aware of these types of issues, and capable of judging when it is necessary to pull back and provide the space needed to preserve these spaces of silence.

### **The Family Novel as research tool: The question of “voice”**

The middle chapters of this report have already given us a good idea of the potential of using the family novel approach for researching family transmissions in immigrant and refugee families. The format of the Facilitation Guide greatly assisted the narrative process, enabling families to immerse themselves in their family's past, present and future. Apart from being guided by general discussion themes, the narratives were relatively spontaneous. Overall, they comprise a wealth of information on the migration project, the history of family origins, influential figures, love stories, religious and other family values, traditions, identity referents and educational values.

The greatest limitation of this project, from a research point of view, is related to the question of “voice.” Budgetary constraints prevented us from having the sessions between the interviewers and the families transcribed verbatim. The novels are therefore second-hand accounts that were put into written form by the interviewers and, in most cases, later submitted to the families for validation.

This way of working was ideal for producing novels for the families themselves. Six hours of verbatim transcription, full of digressions and interruptions as all narratives are, would not have had the same appeal for them as the summarized versions that they received in a semi-professional published form. For research purposes, however, the second-hand accounts reinforce the distance between what was actually said (words, formulations, intonations, intended meanings, etc.) and what was retained by the interviewer (prioritization of information, organization of material into a coherent and/or chronological order, personal interpretations, etc.). This distance obviously creates difficulties in terms of analysis, so we have been careful in using interpretations and meanings which may have been introduced through interviewer bias. In future projects we hope to be able to work with dual formats: summarized versions for the families and verbatim transcriptions for research analysis.

### **General Conclusion**

The Family Novel Project was developed with the objective of helping refugee families cope with the transitional phase of migration, which is characterized by often abrupt departures from the home country and rapid ascension in the new host country. This transitional phase is invariably a tumultuous period filled with anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Our project has examined the ways in which the family itself can be an important resource during this period, acting as a vector in the transmission of values, memories and identity.

Even in a context of forced exile, migration can be understood in terms of familial strategy. For many families, the migration experience itself is rooted in family history. It is a strategy that has been used by past (and present) generations to secure protection and improve life conditions. Although these families are obliged to act in a situation of forced constraint, they nonetheless demonstrate their capacity as actors who are able to confront adversity. In some cases, ancestors' migration stories have become part of family myth and lore. The migration project is also inextricably linked to families' desire to secure the best possible opportunities for their children's futures. The strong valorization of educational achievement is a prime example of this desire.

Research often focuses on the dark side of migration processes: loss, grief, uprooting and violence. These are, of course, valid issues. At the same time, it is also true that refugee families do not arrive empty-handed. Although they may have lost significant material resources (home, belongings and

savings) and support networks, they nonetheless carry with them a significant familial heritage. The sometimes mythical or legendary nature of anecdotes that tell the history of origins and important family figures reveal the pride that most of the participating families have in their past. Even the most realistic depictions of family origins contain a heroic element that presents an image of the family as survivors. Courage, resourcefulness, perseverance, ambition and effort are recurring family qualifiers of “who we are.” Strong female characters presented in the family lore also bear witness to the changing roles of women in familial and social history, serving as inspirational role models for younger generations. Alongside tales of strength and resourcefulness, love stories reveal yet another side of these families’ life experiences that illustrate love, devotion and responsibility. These “universals” cut across cultures to reveal the very human and affective side of family life, which conflicts sharply with society’s often negative stereotypes of refugee populations.

The migration experiences of these families also exemplify the complexity of identity construction in a context of exile. Caught in the transitional zone between two worlds, these families must negotiate the identity markers that can connect those worlds. The transmission of religious faith and, more specifically, of traditions and rituals, opens up an important space for creating continuity between the past and the present. In some families, adherence to religious values constitutes a vital resource for coping with adversity. In others, it acts more specifically as a vector for passing on an important cultural heritage. The transmission of mother tongues to children, although not systematic in all of the participating families, is another significant means by which links are maintained between worlds. Processes of identity transmission are not limited to the family unit itself. The novels also powerfully illustrate the importance of extended community networks in the trajectories of the participating families. While these networks act as significant support mechanisms, they also provide collective grounding for maintaining contact with cultural transmissions within the community of origin. The families who participated in the study are still in the initial phases of establishment. Over time, their children will increasingly come into contact with identity influences outside of their family and community of origin. In some families, the process of negotiation has already begun, particularly regarding what is perceived as the exaggerated freedom young people are allowed in the North American context. Although some families apprehend such conflicts, most agree that dialogue is an essential tool for managing discord within the family. In fact, the Family Novel Project was developed as a means to encourage such dialogue.

The construction of family novels gave several families a space in which to tell their stories. By focusing on memories, values and identity referents, the novels captured strengths that the

participating families have relied on, and can continue to rely on, throughout the immigration and settlement process in Canada. Some parents commented specifically on the value of the Family Novel Project in creating an avenue for their children to express themselves. Similarly, for some children, recounting their family’s history and hearing the related stories and values, gave them a broader understanding of their parents’ trajectories and sacrifices.

Generally speaking, we can conclude that this initial Family Novel Project on family transmissions in immigrant and refugee families was a very positive experience. We are looking forward to beginning a second phase of the project within the next few months, in cooperation with practitioners who work with immigrant and refugee families in the school system. As is the case with any type of project, we have learned a great deal from this initial experience; we will be able to adapt this knowledge to other families and other contexts. We are proud that our Family Novel Project opened up a space for these refugee families to tell their stories, giving them power over their narratives and legitimacy to their legacies.

## APPENDIX 1

# THE FAMILY NOVEL AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION IN REFUGEE FAMILIES

## FACILITATION GUIDE

Catherine Montgomery, Myriam Hamez Spy, Josiane Le Gall, Michèle Vatz Laaroussi,  
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### PRIORITIZING ACTIVITIES FOR THE FAMILY NOVEL

Throughout this project you will have the choice of doing one or several activities, all related to your family novel. Think of these activities as “chapters” of your novel. You may do any or all of the activities, depending on your interests and the time available. This is your family’s novel and you may structure it as you wish. Which of the following activities interest you the most?

- **Activity 1: Drawing the family past.** You may draw a picture or use words to describe your family’s past.
- **Activity 2: Describing memorable events, anecdotes, and important family figures.** You may choose to describe particular events, memories or anecdotes relating to your family’s past.
- **Activity 3: Creating a genogram.** You may create what we call a “genogram,” which is a chart or diagram that represents your family history. Today we will draw the genograms on paper, but they will later be printed in your family novel.
- **Activity 4: What’s in a name?** We all have names: first names, last names, diminutives (nicknames), and other surnames which have been attributed over time. In this activity, we would like to look at the meanings of these names.

- **Activity 5: Family events, values and traditions.** In this activity we will look at important family events and significant values and traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation.
- **Activity 6: Changing countries.** Immigration is an important event in a family history, both for parents and for children. Although it is a period of adjustment, it is also a period of new beginnings. This activity tells the story of your migration.
- **Activity 7: Dreams and projects for the future.** This activity looks at the future. Obviously, it is impossible to know what the future holds in store for any of us. What we are interested in here are your dreams for the future, your aspirations and your projects.
- **Activity 8: Going to school (for young people).** This activity, specifically designed for youth, looks at perceptions of schooling and differences between educational values in the country of origin and in Quebec.
- **Activity 9: Personalized theme or topic (participant’s choice).** Perhaps you would like to include another theme or topic in your family novel that is important to your family, but which hasn’t been covered in the topics proposed in the guide. Please feel free to add any other theme of your choice and we will include it in your novel.
- **In addition to these activities, you are invited to add other material to your family novels, such as photos, drawings, texts, etc. Materials will be scanned and all originals returned to you.**

**Instructions for facilitators:** *Read over the list of themes to the participants you are working with and ask them which themes they would like to concentrate on. Six to eight themes per family would be realistic. Describe the themes to the family and encourage each member to express him/herself on the theme. **Detailed** notes will be needed to record the narratives. You can use a tape recorder as a memory aid, but only if the families agree. Allow approximately 40 minutes to one hour for each theme.*

## **ACTIVITY 1. DRAWING THE FAMILY PAST.**

Sometimes we remember the past through visual images like a drawing or a picture. In this activity, we would like to ask you to think of your family history as a drawing. You don’t have to be good at

drawing to do this activity. Any form of drawing is just fine, or even a verbal description of what you would put into the picture.

If we were to ask you to draw a picture of your family, what would you put in the picture? You might think of adding:

- People
  - Objects
  - Colours/textures
  - Images relating to your origins or culture
  - Other
- 

## **ACTIVITY 2. DESCRIBING MEMORABLE EVENTS, ANECDOTES AND IMPORTANT FAMILY FIGURES**

### **Memorable events and anecdotes**

We all have memories from our pasts which may or may not be related to a specific event. Sometimes these are funny stories about a family member, about a home or place where you may have lived, about a special friend or a childhood memory.

- Can you think of any particular memories or anecdotes from your past that you would like to include in your family novel?
- Can you think of any particular events or memories from your lifetime that you would like to share with your children by putting them in the family novel?

### **Important family figures**

Can you think of one or more people in your family lineage who have had an important influence on you? This could be a grandparent, a parent, an aunt or uncle, a cousin, a sibling, or any other relative.

If you like, you may also talk about other people who have been significant in your life even if they are not part of your family, such as a political or religious leader, a special friend, a media or sports celebrity, etc.

- Could you tell me about this (these) person(s): who s/he was, where s/he lived, what s/he did in her lifetime ?
  - Could you describe why this (these) person(s) have been important to you? In what way did they influence you?
- 

### **ACTIVITY 3. THE GENOGRAM**

**For Facilitators:** Using a lead pencil, mark out four levels of generations on a piece of paper. The bottom level is for the children of participating families, the second level from the bottom is for the parents participating in the workshop and their siblings, the third level is for the father’s and mother’s parents, and the top level is for maternal and paternal grandparents. Some families may not be able to go as far as great-grandparents, and some may want to go back even further. Additions may be made on a separate sheet, after the initial levels are completed. Use a “Δ” to indicate males and “O” to indicate females. Use a “?” if an information is incomplete.

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### **FILLING IN THE FAMILY TREE**



*Appendix 1: The family novel and intergenerational transmission in refugee families – facilitation guide*

First, we will begin by placing the generations of your children, yourselves, your parents, and your grandparents on the chart. Afterwards, we will fill in some social-demographic data on family members.

**LEVEL 1: Children of workshop participants.** We're going to begin by placing your children at the first level. How many children do you have? What are their names, sex and years of birth?

*On level 1, in the centre, place the children/siblings in order of birth, with the oldest on the left and the youngest on the right.*

**LEVEL 2: Mother/father (workshop participants) and their siblings.** We're now going to add you to the chart, immediately above your children. Could you give me your own names and years of birth?

On level 2, **just above the children, place the father on the left and the mother on the right.**

We're also going to add your own brothers and sisters to this level. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Could you give me their names and years of birth? Are they married or living in a couple? If yes, could you also give me the names of their spouses and their children, if they have any?

*Still on level 2, add the father's siblings to the left of the father. To the right of the mother, add the mother's siblings. Place the spouses' names immediately below in level 2 and indicate the number of children.*

**LEVEL 3. Paternal and maternal parents of workshop participants.** We're now going to add your own parents to the chart. Could you give me their names and years of birth?

**On level 3**, just above the father and his siblings, add the names of the father’s parents, with the father on the left and the mother on the right. Just above the mother and her siblings, add the names of the mother’s parents, with the father on the left and the mother on the right.

We’re also going to add your parents’ brothers and sisters at this level (aunts/uncles of workshop participants). Do your parents have brothers or sisters? Could you give me their names and years of birth? Are they married or living in a couple? If yes, could you also give me the names of their spouses and their children, if they have any?

**Still on level 3**, add the father’s siblings to the left of the father. To the right of the mother, add the mother’s siblings. Place the spouses names immediately below in level 3 and indicate the number of children.

**LEVEL 4. Paternal and Maternal grand parents.** We’re now going to add your own grandparents to the chart. Could you give me their names and years of birth?

**On level 4**, just above the parents and their siblings, add the names of the four sets of paternal and maternal grandparents of the workshop participants.

**Instructions for Assistants:** The following themes will be added to the family narrative, which will be further developed in workshop 2. Detailed notes will be needed to record the narratives. Allow approximately 15 minutes per theme.

### **FILLING IN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

We’re now going to go over the chart and fill in some basic socio-demographic information for each of the family members. We’ll begin with your own generation (level 2: workshop participants and siblings), then the generation of your parents (level 3: parents and aunts/uncles), then the generation of your grandparents (level 4).

For each of these people, could you briefly indicate:

- the villages/cities/regions/countries where they lived
  - the type of work they did or training that they had
  - significant events in their lifetimes (migration, social mobility, social engagement, distinctions, etc)
- 

#### **ACTIVITY 4. WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

Let's begin with the origins of names. We all have names: first names, last names, diminutives (nicknames), and other surnames which have been attributed over time. In this part of the workshop we would like to look at the meanings of these names. You may choose one of your names or several. The following questions may be used as a guide to help you begin:

- Who gave me this (or these) name(s)? (mother, father, grandparents, network, someone else?)
  - Why was this name chosen? (anecdotes about name choices, name existing in family lineage, name given by community network, peers or other family members, name referring to mythic or media figures)
  - What is the meaning of my name(s)? (etymology, personal meaning, community meaning)
  - Do you like this name? (why/why not?)
  - How is this name perceived by others? (within the family, within the community, by others outside the community)
-

## **ACTIVITY 5. FAMILY EVENTS, VALUES AND TRADITIONS**

Our families are important to us; it is through them that we experience important events and through them that significant values and traditions are passed down from generation to generation. This theme is quite vast, and may be defined differently by other families or even by members within your own family. The following questions may help you in your narration:

- Can you tell me about your favourite family holiday or vacation? Where did you go and for how long? What made this event a happy one for you?
  - What comes to mind spontaneously when you think of an important tradition or ritual shared by your family? Could you tell me more about this tradition or ritual? (for example, a religious or cultural event, a marriage)
  - What comes to mind spontaneously when you think of core values shared by your family? (educational values, spiritual or religious values, political values, moral values, etc.)
- 

## **ACTIVITY 6. CHANGING COUNTRIES**

Immigration is an important event in a family history, both for parents and for children. Although it is a period of adjustment, it is also a period of new beginnings. Would you mind telling me a little bit about your immigration? The following questions may help you organize your narration:

- What brought your family to leave your country?
  - Why did you choose to come to Canada/Quebec in particular?
  - Did you know anything about Canada/Quebec before coming here? What did you imagine Canada/Quebec would be like?
  - What was your first impression upon arriving in Canada/Quebec? Has your impression of Canada/Quebec changed since your arrival?
-

## **ACTIVITY 7. DREAMS AND PROJECTS FOR THE FUTURE**

This theme looks at the future. Obviously, it is impossible to know what the future holds in store for any of us. What we are interested in here are your dreams for the future, your aspirations and your projects. The following questions may help you organize your narration:

- What have you always dreamed that you might like to do? This could be in terms of work, education, hobbies or other personal projects, etc?
  - What are your hopes, dreams and aspirations for your family's future in Quebec?
  - What would you like to do later in terms of work and/or training?
  - FOR PARENTS: Do you have any particular hopes for your children in terms of educational or work opportunities?
  - FOR PARENTS: What do you consider to be the most important [markers of identity] that you would like your children to maintain in the context of migration (language, religion, sense of politics, sense of history).
- 

## **ACTIVITY 8. FOR YOUNG PEOPLE: GOING TO SCHOOL**

Let's talk briefly about school, both in your country of origin and here in Quebec.

- Can you tell me a little bit about school in your country? What level were you at in your country? What did you think about your schooling? Did you like school?
  - What were your favourite subjects? What were your least favourite?
  - Was any particular teacher or subject an important influence on you?
  - What are your perceptions of school here in Quebec?
  - What would you like to do later? What are your dreams in terms of work, education, hobbies or other personal projects?
-

**ACTIVITY 9. PERSONALIZED THEME**

Perhaps you would like to include another theme or topic in your family novel that is important to your family, but which hasn't been covered in the topics proposed in the guide. Please feel free to add any other theme of your choice and we will include it in your novel.

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**INTEGRATION OF OTHER MATERIAL: PHOTOS, DRAWINGS, TEXTS**

In addition to the diagram of your family tree and the narrative that you have developed today, you are most welcome to add other elements to your family novel, such as photos, drawings, texts, etc. We will make copies of these items and include them in your novel. All originals will be returned to you.

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