

Engaging with *Refuge or Refusal* to Assess the Impact of an Immigration History Exhibition

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Abstract

Public historians work in their communities to bridge the past and the present and help people make sense of the world in which they find themselves so that they can make better decisions about actions that will affect their future. This article assesses the impact of *Refuge or Refusal*, a museum exhibition created in 2018 to teach the public about U.S. immigration history. Building on findings about communicating history to the American public reported by the American Association for State and Local History, this article establishes the value of museum-based public history for sparking conversations, raising questions, and initiating a search for answers. After engaging with *Refuge or Refusal*, community members were empowered to think critically about the future they would inevitably help to create.

Whether working in a university environment or for a nonprofit organization, history museum curators see themselves as public historians. The National Council on Public History (NCPH) defines public history as “the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world” (National Council on Public History, 2023). Public historians try to work in their communities to bridge the past and the present and help people make sense of the world in which they find themselves so that they can make better decisions about actions that will affect their future. Nevertheless, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) and NCPH recognized that many Americans do not understand what history is or why it is valuable (Marks, 2020).

In their 2020 report, “Communicating about History: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations,” FrameWorks, in partnership with AASLH and NCPH, identified major goals for public historians. Among these are to show how “history can lead to social change by guiding decision-making and empowering people to think critically about and address present-day challenges in society,” and how “history supports a healthy democracy and civic engagement, by allowing people to use their knowledge of past policies to participate in the current democratic process.” One key way that they suggested public historians work to promote this understanding is to “improve collaboration between museums and historical sites and local communities in the creation and presentation of exhibitions” (Miller et al., 2020, pp. 3–4). In the *Manual of Museums Exhibitions*, Duncan Grewcock emphasizes

the importance of front-end, formative, and summative evaluation for ensuring the success of museum exhibitions as collaborative endeavors (Grewcock, 2022). Front-end evaluation takes place before the start of a project and involves the selection of an exhibition topic and definition of its goals. Formative evaluation tests preliminary content against the expectations and expertise of key stakeholders. Finally, summative evaluation assesses the impact of an exhibition on visitors who engaged directly with it. All three stages of evaluation are essential to museum exhibitions serving as effective public history.

Responding to these recommendations and best practices, this article assesses the effectiveness of *Refuge or Refusal*, an exhibition and public history project created by the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University. Addressing the project from start to finish, with attention paid to its front-end, formative, and summative evaluation process, the author concludes that *Refuge or Refusal* empowered community members to think critically about the future after learning about the past. The project was effective because it centered community engagement from conception to exhibition and beyond.

Public History as a Tool for Education and Community Engagement

The Museum of History and Holocaust Education (MHHE) in Kennesaw, Georgia, is an institution dedicated to documenting and disseminating public history. Since its establishment in 2003, the MHHE has served

multiple communities including primary, secondary, and post-secondary students, especially those at Kennesaw State University, as well as curious adults who are lifelong learners. As a museum, the MHHE also has a fiduciary responsibility to preserve and present the past with sensitivity and integrity (Langer, 2022).

In the summer of 2015, the MHHE had recently hired a new curator, Adina Langer, whose first order of business was to update permanent exhibitions about the Holocaust and World War II that had been on display for more than a decade. After that, her task was to create a new traveling exhibition that would amplify themes related to the museum's core mission of interpreting World War II and Holocaust history. *Refuge or Refusal: Turning Points in U.S. Immigration History* was born from that effort, conceived in conversation with the museum's community stakeholders. Like how others have documented the significant impact of museum exhibitions about immigration and community dialogues around critical issues that such exhibitions facilitate (Harden et al., 2015; Schuch et al., 2018; Schuch et al., 2021; Schuch et al., 2023), the resulting exhibition and related programming achieved the goal of promoting intergenerational understanding around the formation of immigration policy and the effects of the legal landscape on would-be migrants. It also sparked community conversations around evolving ideas of American identity in relationship with immigrant heritage, leading people to think about contemporary immigrants and refugees from a place of empathy and humanity.

Creating an Exhibition to Serve the Community: Addressing the Echoes of History

Museums are guided by their missions, and following best practices requires museums to assess and adjust their missions carefully and dynamically (Langer, 2022). Since its inception as a Holocaust Education Center in 2003 and development as a History and Holocaust Museum in 2006, the MHHE has undergone a series of strategic planning cycles that have resulted in modifications to its mission statement, most recently in 2021 with the expansion of its chronological and thematic coverage of civil and human rights topics as well as a codification of its emphasis on personal stories. However, when developing *Refuge or Refusal* in 2016–2018, the MHHE defined its mission (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2017) as to:

Present public events, exhibits and educational resources focused on World War II and the Holocaust in an effort to promote education and dialogue about the past and its significance today. Through educational dialogue about World War II and the Holocaust, our programs emphasize:

- Multiple and complex human experiences
- Ethical and political consequences
- Respect for difference and diversity of life
- Acceptance of civic and personal responsibility.

Starting her job in the summer of 2015, curator Adina Langer understood that there were many ways to think about the “significance of the past today,” but the 2016 presidential election season supplied a topic of salience.

Current Events and Past Experiences

In the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, then-candidate Donald Trump unleashed a torrent of anti-immigrant rhetoric which quickly saturated the media landscape. Echoes of the U.S. political climate of the 1920s and 1930s were apparent to the curatorial team at the MHHE as evidenced in the following quotations taken in reverse chronological order:

- June 16, 2015: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems to us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Donald Trump’s presidential campaign launch speech (TIME, 2015).
- June 7, 1939: “If you believe that America should be preserved for Americans then tonight write your Congressman and your two United States Senators and request them to vote against the Wagner-Rogers resolution. ... Let’s keep America for our boys and girls. Let’s give American jobs to American citizens. Let’s empty our prisons of alien criminals and send them back to their native lands. Let’s deport those alien agitators who are eternally advocating a change in our form of government. Let’s do our best to save our country from

destruction by alien-enemy forces which are boring from within. Let's save America for Americans. Our country, our citizens first." Senator Robert Reynolds of North Carolina, speech before Congress in opposition to the Wagner-Rogers bill that would admit 20,000 Jewish children from Germany following the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 9-10, 1938 (Facing History & Ourselves, 2019).

- April 9, 1924: "We had an experience just a few years ago, during the great World War, when it looked as though we had allowed influences to enter our borders that were about to melt the pot in place of us being the melting pot. I think that we have sufficient stock in America now for us to shut the door, Americanize what we have, and save the resources of America for the natural increase of our population." Senator Ellison DuRant Smith of South Carolina, speech before Congress in support of the Immigration Act of 1924 (DuRant Smith, 1924).

In a media landscape newly saturated with anti-immigrant rhetoric, immigration seemed like a prime topic for a Holocaust museum to promote education and dialogue about the past and its significance today; after all, it had been the anti-immigrant climate of the first third of the 20th century that prevented people hoping to flee the Nazi regime from finding refuge in the United States and other democratic nations around the world (Langer, 2019).

Hoping to create an impactful experience, the MHHE assessed its audience and identified community stakeholders. Front-end evaluation included informal surveys of museum staff and community members. Taking an intergenerational and interdisciplinary approach to the development of the exhibition, the curatorial team, consisting primarily of Adina Langer and Anna Tucker, identified key stakeholders as scholars, students, representatives of agencies that serve immigrants and refugees, and people with lived experience as immigrants and refugees ranging from the World War II era to the present. The curators also determined the primary audience to be Kennesaw State University students and professors, metro Atlanta residents, and high school students. They noted that immigration and cultural geography were included in the Georgia Standards of Excellence in Social Studies for high school, but

immigration was rarely mentioned prior to the high school standards.

Initially, the curatorial team intended to take a broad view of immigration and global conflict in their approach to the exhibition while connecting with topics relevant to Kennesaw State University. The original exhibition abstract stated:

This exhibit will explore the push and pull factors that impacted immigration in the 20th century with a focus on major conflicts, especially World War II. The exhibit will explore the causes of refugee crises of the past and will chronicle changes in U.S. immigration law that made the U.S. more or less appealing and/or welcoming for immigrants and refugees. The exhibit will also look at international patterns of refuge and resettlement in the wake of the major conflicts of the 20th century. Special attention will be paid to Morocco and North Africa to make the exhibit more timely for KSU's Year of Morocco. The exhibit will explore the topic of immigration and refuge from personal/social, political, geographical, and economic perspectives. (Langer, 2017)

The exhibition's primary goal would be to help people understand why people immigrate, what barriers and opportunities they face, and how attitudes and laws impact both potential immigrants and the places that do, or do not, welcome them. In endeavoring to explain the reasons why people choose to immigrate, and where they seek to go, the curators embraced the "push/pull" framework popularized by Everett Lee in 1966. Lee posited that decision-makers are influenced by "push factors" that can include everything from natural disaster to political persecution and "pull factors" that can include everything from economic opportunity to cultural affinity (Lee, 1966).

Curators and Scholars Working Together

To help shape the content of the exhibition, the curatorial team convened a scholarly advisory board to participate in a formative evaluation process. It consisted of Jennifer Dickey, director of the public history program at Kennesaw State University; Kate Wilson, a public historian and specialist in immigrant and ethnic history at Georgia State University; Alta Schwartz, operations director at the Alif Institute, an organization created by the Arab-American Fund of Georgia

to foster understanding and appreciation of Arab cultures; William Walker, director of the Cooperstown graduate program in public history and a scholar of race and ethnicity in the U.S.; Paul McDaniel, a geography professor at Kennesaw State University who researches immigrant integration and receptivity; Seneca Vaught, a professor of history and interdisciplinary studies at Kennesaw State University with a specialty in the global intersections of race, culture, and policy; and Darlene Xiomara Rodriguez, a specialist in immigrant integration and professor in the department of social work and human services at Kennesaw State University.

The advisory board was presented with a draft of the exhibition, then titled *Refuge or Refusal: Immigration and War in the 20th Century*. They were also told that the installation would include:

- Two artifact cases focused on family immigration stories.
- A vertical case installation focused on immigration and American culture during the Great Depression and World War II.
- A set of vinyl window-coverings that explore transportation methods used by immigrants.
- A wall installation that would help visitors visualize one or more “big stories” of immigration using maps, timelines, or infographics.

The advisors were told that the exhibition would be accompanied by a gallery guide offering definitions of key terms and a bibliography for further reading, a teacher’s guide, and a new “Immigration Stories” oral history project. The advisors were asked:

1. Is the exhibit understandable?
2. Is the breadth of interpretation appropriate, and is the story accurate?
3. Which terms might benefit from definitions in a supplemental gallery guide?
4. What would they most like to see in a related map/timeline/statistical visualization installation?
5. And what factors would they want to see in a visitor poll that would be used to create a “real-time” bar graph? Suggestions were given that included:
 - a. Seeking economic opportunity (pull)
 - b. Seeking religious freedom (pull)
 - c. Fleeing persecution in their home country (push)
 - d. Forcible removal (push)
 - e. Fleeing war/political conflict (push)
 - f. Seeking education (pull)

The feedback from the advisory board was eye-opening and crucial. It resulted in three major takeaways:

- The exhibition as presented was too broad in its global reach to be effective and needed to be narrowed to focus primarily on the United States context.
- The exhibition needed to engage honestly and directly with the history of race and whiteness in the United States; in particular it needed to differentiate the experience of enslaved Africans and their descendants, and Indigenous people, from that of immigrants in U.S. history.
- The exhibition needed to emphasize personal stories to better connect the past and the present and to connect to the museum’s mission of Holocaust education more directly.

Although it resulted in more work for the curatorial team, the front-end evaluation paved the way for the exhibition’s future success. Responding to the advisors’ critiques, the exhibition curators changed course. First, they adjusted the focus of the exhibition from *Immigration and War in the 20th Century* to *Turning Points in U.S. Immigration History* (see Figures 1 and 2). Instead of front-loading content focused on immigration theory and concluding the exhibition with a timeline of major world events and their effects on migration patterns, the curators selected five major legislative acts in U.S. immigration history and interspersed panels focused on their context and effects with panels exploring related themes. They also adjusted their plans to dedicate more exhibition real estate to featuring immigration narratives from the museum’s oral history collection. They launched a custom-branded “Immigrant Stories” site with clips related to “leaving home” and “life in a new world” drawn from existing interviews with World War II veterans, home-front workers, survivors of the Blitz in the United Kingdom, and Holocaust survivors who eventually emigrated to the United States (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2018).

To the interactive graph activity (see Figures 3 and 4), the curators added two open-ended questions:

1. How do you define American identity?
2. How long have you or your family been in the United States? What role, if any, does immigration play in your story?

Figure 1. *Refuge or Refusal* Exhibition Panels On Display at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education. Photograph by Adina Langer.



Figure 2. Artifact Cases Featuring Immigrant Stories from the MHHE Oral History Collection, 2018. Photograph by Adina Langer.



Figure 3. Definitions of American Identity and Descriptions of Immigrant Heritage Provided by Staff and Partners of the MHHE Prior to the Exhibition Installation, 2018. Photographs by Adina Langer.

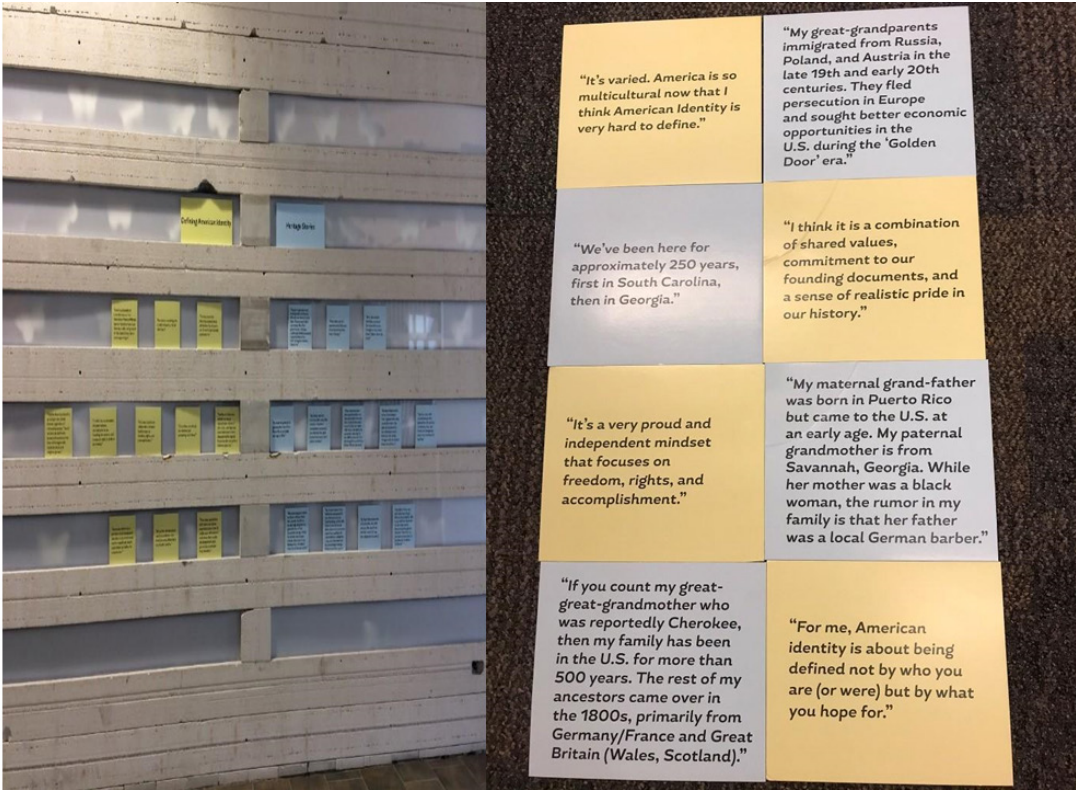


Figure 4. Interactive “Graph” Installed at the MHHE for the Refuge or Refusal Exhibition, 2018. Photograph by Adina Langer.



Working with MHHE’s graphic designer, Zoila Torres, the exhibition curators created a timeline of major world events that affected migration patterns and maps showing immigration rates and restrictions in the United States during three key time periods: 1882–1924, 1924–1965, and 1965–2010. They also created a digital “time-mapper” that combined these elements (see Figures 5 and 6) (Langer, 2023). A new abstract was written as follows:

Born from a consideration of the effects of world immigration policy on people caught up in the tumultuous events of World War II and the Holocaust, *Refuge or Refusal* focuses most closely on the United States, providing context for understanding the relationship between immigration, conflict, and national identity before, during, and after World War II. Five key moments emerge as turning points in U.S. immigration policy: 1790, 1882, 1924, 1948, and 1965. This exhibit explores the impact of these turning points and the factors that influenced them, from global conflicts and economic conditions to cultural trends and social aspirations. Visitors

are invited to explore chronological and thematic panels, consider world maps that illustrate the effects of changing paradigms in U.S. immigration law, and relate those shifting paradigms to events around the world that led people to seek new homes. Visitors are also invited to reflect on the meaning of American identity and share stories about the role that immigration plays in their understanding of their heritage. A real-time poll will track the “push” and “pull” factors that visitors associate with their family immigrant stories for the duration of the exhibit (Langer, 2018).

With these adjusted elements in place, the MHHE was ready to plan the exhibition opening.

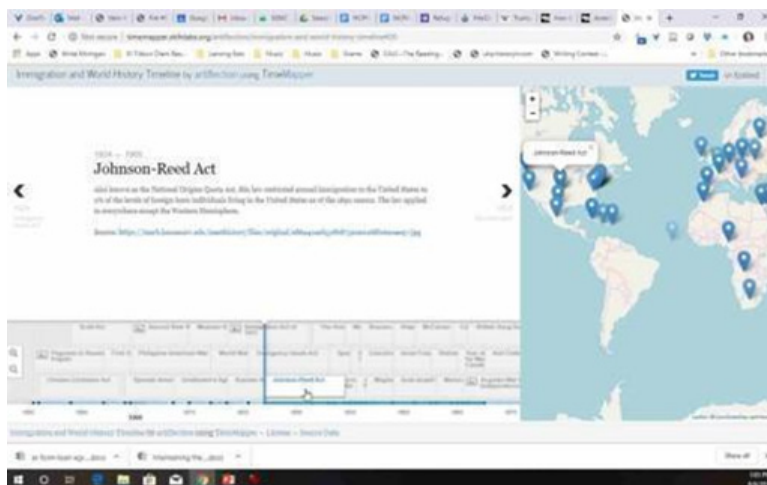
An Intergenerational Opening

With opening day set for Thursday, August 30, 2018, the MHHE staff endeavored to plan an event that would connect the Kennesaw State University community with organizations that served immigrants and refugees and would create opportunities for participants to learn about each other and celebrate immigrant heritage and contemporary diversity (Langer, 2018). The

Figure 5. Map Graphics and Timeline of World Events Installed at the MHHE for the *Refuge or Refusal* Exhibition, 2018. Photograph by Adina Langer.



Figure 6. Screenshot of the Timemapper Created to Relate World Events with Immigration Legislation, 2018. Screenshot courtesy of Adina Langer.



curators reached inward, partnering with KSU organizations including KSU’s Hillel Center for Jewish Life, the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, the Department of World Languages and Cultures, and the Georgia Immigration Research Network. They also reached outward, forging partnerships with Refugee Coffee, Green Card Youth Voices, the International Rescue Committee, the Georgia Asylum and Immigration Network, Walk a Campus in My Shoes, the Refugee Women’s Network, the Center for Victims of Torture, New American Pathways, and CivicGeorgia.

With table space provided for these various organizations, the opening event also featured an international heritage potluck dinner and a formal program. Moderated by Dr. Sherrill Hayes of the KSU School of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding and Development, the program featured a panel of immigrants and refugees, readings from metro Atlanta high school students whose essays appeared in the 2018 book *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School* (Green Card Voices, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2021; Smith-Sitton et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2022), and concluding remarks from members of the Clarkston High School Welcome Club (see Figures 7 and 8).

The evening program brought together more than 150 people whose experiences of the event were overwhelmingly positive. In their summative evaluations, participants described the

program using words like “excellent,” “delightful,” “educational,” “inspiring,” “informative,” “relatable,” “enlightening,” “enjoyable,” and from a member of the museum’s advisory board, the “best event ever.” Participant evaluations revealed a deep connection with the panelists who ranged from a Holocaust survivor who emigrated from the Ukraine to the United States in 1950 to an entrepreneur who immigrated from Syria in the early 2000s. The panel participants’ bios were as follows (see Figure 9 for a photograph of them):

- Hershel Greenblat has lived in Georgia since 1950. He immigrated to the U.S. after spending his childhood at Displaced Persons Camps in Europe. The child of World War II resistance fighters, Greenblat was born in a network of underground caves in the Ukraine.
- Gitte Toben has lived in Georgia since the 1970s. Trained as a nurse, she currently works as a flight attendant for Delta Airlines. Born in Denmark, Toben volunteers at the MHHE to tell the story of her father and other Danish resistance fighters during World War II.
- Awaz Jabari came to the U.S. from northern Iraq in 1997. She serves as the social adjustment and leadership program coordinator at the Refugee Women’s Network where she helps refugees from around the world settle into a new life in Georgia.

Figure 7. International Heritage Potluck Dinner at the *Refuge or Refusal* Opening, August 30, 2018. Photograph by Kate Daly.



Figure 8. Participants in the *Refuge or Refusal* Opening Watching Presentations from the Students in the Clarkston High School Welcome Club, August 30, 2018. Photograph by Kate Daly.



Figure 9. Panelists at the *Refuge or Refusal* Opening, August 30, 2018. Photograph by Kate Daly.



- Ahmad Alzoukani immigrated from Syria in the early 2000s. He is the catering director at Refuge Coffee, a Clarkston, Georgia, based non-profit company dedicated to providing employment and job-training opportunities to resettled refugees and to providing a welcoming gathering place for the global community of metro Atlanta.

Dr. Hayes moderated a robust intergenerational conversation by asking each of the panelists the following questions:

1. Briefly describe the situation surrounding you leaving your homeland.
2. Tell us a short story about a person or place that had a positive impact on you after you arrived in the U.S.
3. Tell us about your view on America now compared to what you pictured America to be like before you came.
4. What is one thing you want someone born in the U.S. to know about their country that you think they don't know.
5. Do you feel like an American? What do you think that means?

On the heels of this successful event, the MHHE curator wanted to maintain the exhibition's momentum and extend its reach further into the community.

Curating Community Engagement

Adina Langer first connected with Kevin Sinha, principal of CivicGeorgia, in his capacity as advisor to the Clarkston High School Welcome Club, a student organization consisting of recent immigrant high school students willing to share their knowledge with other students who had arrived in Georgia even more recently (CivicGeorgia, 2023b). Sinha founded CivicGeorgia in 2017 as a "BIPOC-led advocacy organization striving to amplify the voice, frequency, and impact of community-led efforts for progress" (CivicGeorgia, 2023a). Sinha learned about *Refuge or Refusal* and its exhibition opening from the club's co-facilitator, Fiona Freeman, the communications and external relations manager for the International Rescue Committee Atlanta office.

With the success of the exhibition opening as an exercise in community engagement, Sinha and Langer discussed partnership opportunities in the spring of 2019. Their efforts included a grant application for use of the exhibition to support engagement with the 2020 census, and an opportunity for CivicGeorgia to serve as a consultant to plan a five-stop exhibition tour in the fall of 2019. Each stop would be accompanied by the design and delivery of a customized launch experience geared toward the local community with support for marketing and evaluation.

Together, Langer and Sinha conceived of a tour schedule that would emphasize engagement with key demographics in the Atlanta metro area with an emphasis on diverse communities. The original plan for the exhibition tour included Clarkston, Buford Highway, and Gwinnett County, Covington, and Westside/Downtown Atlanta. CivicGeorgia offered the following justifications for each area (CivicGeorgia, 2019):

- Clarkston, Buford Highway, and Gwinnett are home to some of the South's greatest densities of refugee and immigrant communities and culture. Through *Refuge or Refusal*, we can share more about the history of immigrants and immigration policy in America. This may help add historical context to the related experiences of these community members, as well as better inform non-immigrants in their communities about what immigration might mean to those who have traveled from elsewhere to call America their new home. Starting with these locations may also help us gain insight and feedback we can layer into future exhibit travel/activities.
- Covington has rapidly become the "Hollywood of the South" increasing the presence of visitors to Georgia both participating in and curious about the burgeoning film industry. This creates a diverse audience for *Refuge or Refusal*,

extremely unique even within the metro Atlanta region.

- Westside/Downtown Atlanta continues to be core to civil rights awareness, education, movements, and culture in metro Atlanta.

The tour coalesced throughout 2019, with the following stops:

- Party with the Past at the Clarkston Community Center, sponsored by the Atlanta History Center, followed by a stay at the Clarkston Branch of the Dekalb Public Library (see Figure 10 and 11).
- Welcoming Week Kick-off Party in Decatur Square sponsored by Welcoming America and the City of Decatur followed by a stay at the Toco Hills Branch of the Dekalb Public Library (see Figure 12).
- Leadership and Multifaitth Program (LAMP) Symposium at Georgia Tech.
- Together Empowering Asian Americans (TEA) Walk sponsored by the Center for Pan Asian Community Services (CPACS) followed by a stay at the Chamblee Branch of the Dekalb Public Library.
- Bearing Witness Program at Peachtree Corners City Hall followed by a stay at the Norcross Branch of the Gwinnett Public Library.
- Lunch and Learn at the Dekalb History Center followed by return to the Museum of History and Holocaust Education.

Figure 10. Participants in the Party with the Past Event at the Clarkston Community Center, August 15, 2019. Photograph by Isabel Mann.



Figure 11. *Refuge or Refusal* On Display at the Clarkston Public Library, August 2019. Photograph by Kevin Sinha.



By the numbers, the tour was a rousing success. Event attendance ranged from 25 at the most intimate venue to more than 400 at the CPACS TEA Walk. During its stay at libraries in Dekalb and Gwinnett counties, the exhibition was seen by more than 45,000 people. Yet at the same time, the final set of host venues compared with those aspired to in the original plan revealed certain challenges. In particular, it proved difficult to connect with the majority-Black communities of Atlanta's South and West sides.

To gain a better understanding of the exhibition's audience and assess its impact, as well as to provide an interactive opportunity for visitors, the exhibition tour was accompanied by a visitor survey which asked summative evaluation questions about the exhibition as well as a reprise of the same interactive questions asked of visitors to the exhibition when it was installed at the MHHE in 2018 (see Appendix A). More than 60 individuals participated in the evaluation process over the course of the exhibition's tour. For evaluative purposes, Langer and Sinha sought to learn about where visitors encountered the exhibition, what they'd like to learn more about, what kinds of programming they would like to see

accompanying the exhibition in the future, and what other topics they'd like to see addressed by the Museum of History and Holocaust Education.

The visitors most likely to engage with the survey included people who attended the Welcoming America Kick-off event in Decatur, attendees of the LAMP Symposium, attendees of the Party with the Past event sponsored by the Atlanta History Center, members of the Dekalb History Center, and Dekalb library system staff. This subset of the visitors represented a group of people with a high interest in history and an active engagement with historical sites, museums, and multicultural community events.

Some highlights of what respondents wanted to learn more about included: current immigration policies and how to influence them, the interaction between race and migration, and local immigration stories. Many wanted to see programs on current immigration policy accompany the exhibition as well as programs related to other civil rights issues, including those for LGBTQ+ people, and opportunities to advocate for immigrants. Some wanted more educational materials for younger students while others advocated for food and other multicultural exchange opportunities. Building

Figure 12. Adina Langer and Kevin Sinha In Front of the *Refuge or Refusal* Exhibition On Display in Decatur Square for the Welcoming Week Kick-off Event, September 13, 2019. Photograph by Anthony Sallas.



on the museum's coverage of immigration and migration, participants wanted to see future programming on genocide and crimes against humanity around the world.

To help the planners learn quickly about the effectiveness of the exhibition, the survey also included a set of statements participants were invited to rate on a scale of 1–10. For the first, “I learned something new about American history,” more than 90% of participants rated the statement above a “6” with the largest cluster of participants (62%) rating it a 10. Similar distributions existed for the statement “I learned something new about immigration policy.” The main area where fewer people rated the statement at “10” was “I learned something that helps me better engage

with contemporary debates about immigration.” Although more than 80% of participants still rated this statement above a “6,” only 48.8% of participants rated it a “10.” This was consistent with the requests for additional programming related to contemporary policy and how to effect change. Thus, the exhibition planners took this to heart when planning future programming described in the section below on “Assessing Effective Community Engagement.”

Given that the exhibition was conceived during the lead-up to the 2016 election and the evaluation was conducted in the middle of the Trump presidency in a part of Georgia that had overwhelmingly voted against Donald Trump (New York Times, 2017), there was a sense of

urgency among the participants who shared their feedback, overwhelmingly in favor of increased openness toward U.S. immigrants and refugees.

Participants' answers to questions related to American identity and immigrant heritage were anonymized, coded, and added to a digital exhibition entitled "Stories of American Identity and Immigrant Heritage," using Neatline mapping technology (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2019). Neatline mapping helps people to visualize the connection between participants' answers to questions about what motivated them and their families to seek a new home with their definitions of American identity, the length of time they or their family have been in the United States, and the role that immigration does (or does not) play in their story (see Figure 13). Many people shared statements about American identity without indicating what motivated them or their families to seek a new home, but for those who did indicate push or pull factors, the breakdown was as follows:

- More than 80% indicated that they were seeking economic opportunity.
- About 30% indicated that they were seeking education.
- More than 30% were seeking religious or social freedom.
- About 15% were fleeing persecution.
- About 20% were fleeing war or conflict.
- And about 5% were fleeing natural or environmental disasters.

In general, more people indicated pull factors than push factors by a significant margin. And the areas with a higher percentage of refugees (especially Clarkston) included more people indicating that they were fleeing persecution or war/conflict (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2023b).

Assessing Effective Community Engagement

The *Refuge or Refusal* tour ended in December 2019 with the exhibition put on display at the Athenaeum Gallery in the Howard W. Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. At the time of the tour's close, the MHHE and CivicGeorgia were planning to continue their partnership by bringing the exhibition to the Welcoming Interactive, a conference sponsored by Welcoming America set to take place in the spring of 2020. Instead, the exhibition remained on display at the Athenaeum Gallery for more than a year as the COVID-19 pandemic derailed, and ultimately rerouted, plans around the world.

The MHHE took some time to create virtual versions of its exhibitions, including a virtual tour of the *Refuge or Refusal* exhibition enhanced by audio guides, gallery guides, and links to immigrant oral histories and map-based digital exhibitions (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2020a). To date, more than 800 people have viewed this virtual tour, but that number pales in comparison to the numbers who interacted with the exhibition during its metro Atlanta tour.

Figure 13. Map Showing Participant Responses to Surveys About American Identity and Immigrant Heritage. Screenshot courtesy of Adina Langer.



Note. Color-coded to indicate push and pull factors described in the surveys and located on the map based on immigrant heritage locations identified in participants' responses.

In the fall of 2020, CivicGeorgia and the MHHE undertook one more partnership around *Refuge or Refusal*, a webinar hosted during Welcoming Week (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2020b). Like so many other institutions and organizations across the country, Welcoming America was responding both to the COVID-19 pandemic and to calls for reckoning on the U.S. history and legacy of racism in its choice of theme for Welcoming Week in 2020. The theme they decided on was “Creating Home Together.” Responding to that theme, the MHHE and CivicGeorgia worked together to create a webinar that would build from the history illuminated in *Refuge or Refusal* and offer participants a chance to engage with topics in breakout rooms that resonated with their interests. These topics were developed from the areas where people indicated that they wanted to learn more in earlier exhibition evaluations, including:

- Refugee Resettlement and Immigrant Empowerment
- Intersecting Identities: Race, Migration and National Narrative
- Making Change: Affecting Policy Through Civic Engagement
- Citizenship and Civil Rights: Documentation, Status, and Protection Under the Law

The team also partnered with P. J. Edwards, one of the co-founders of *El Refugio*, to facilitate the conversation on citizenship, legal status, and immigrant detention (El Refugio, 2023). *El Refugio* is a hospitality house and ministry serving the families of people incarcerated at Stewart Immigrant Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia. More than 150 people registered for the virtual event from across the country, and over 90 attended. Only eight people filled out an evaluation form after the event, but their responses were positive in similar proportions to the evaluations filled out as part of the 2019 exhibition tour. They described learning new things about whiteness, about the legal landscape for immigration, and about the Bracero Program, a 1940s guest-worker program for Mexican people to come to the United States. One person summed up their learning experience as follows: “I learned that this issue affects everyone in some way, shape, or form” (Museum of History and Holocaust Education, 2023a).

What changed the most between 2019 and 2020 were participants’ consciousness on racial issues, and their attitudes about American identity. In one participant’s suggestion for future programming, they said they wanted to hear “voices from the racially marginalized groups and comparisons of immigration policies between racial groups.” On the question of American identity, one person said, “I’ve been thinking about this a lot and I don’t really have a definition. Right now, I almost find any definition I could come up with would be negative.” Yet, on a more positive note, another person said:

American identity should reflect that of anyone who lives here—no matter how they arrived or how long they have been here. It should blend harmoniously with whatever other ethnic identities a person has, creating a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Refined through a process of community engagement, the *Refuge or Refusal* project set forth to “provide context for understanding the relationship between immigration, conflict, and national identity before, during, and after World War II” (Langer, 2018). Years after its launch, evaluation data demonstrated that the project had gone a long way toward reaching its goals.

On its own, the exhibition could provide the basic historical context, but the dedication of community partners enabled the kinds of facilitated conversations and resonant stories that helped visitors and participants make connections between the past and the present. Data reveals an appetite for more. Among those who chose to engage with the exhibition and its related programming was a marked desire to make informed decisions and recommendations for inclusive and welcoming immigration policy. Participants demonstrated empathy and a taste for learning more about people and experiences that differed from their own and from those that were more familiar to them.

Recommendations from the Field

This study reveals the *Refuge or Refusal* project to be an example of the kind of public history recommended by the AASLH and NCPH’s 2020 Frameworks Report (Miller et al., 2020). For institutions seeking to learn from the MHHE’s experience producing and programming *Refuge or Refusal* to maximize community

engagement, the curatorial team has the following recommendations to offer:

- Identify your target audience for engagement based on your institution's existing networks. Don't try to expand in too many directions but, instead, target key areas for growth and reach out to individual leaders to find support within the community for your efforts.
- Begin with front-end evaluation to determine the knowledge gaps of your target audience.
- Convene an advisory group consisting of a variety of stakeholders ranging from scholars to those with direct experience with your topic of engagement.
- Allow enough time to make changes to your educational/presentation plans based on feedback during formative evaluation.
- Take the time to celebrate your creation with those who helped to make it possible!
- Use both qualitative and quantitative analysis in your summative evaluation to assess the impact of your programming, and build subsequent programming based directly on that analysis.
- Community engagement is an iterative process. With the passage of time, the needs of the community change as does the emphasis in the prevailing scholarship. Don't be afraid to evolve!

Conclusion

Without providing all the answers, *Refuge or Refusal* sparked conversations, raised questions, and initiated a search for answers. Community members recognized differences and found common ground across generations. They grew to understand more about the economic and social drivers of migration and the legal landscapes that shape the experiences of would-be immigrants and refugees. Whether or not immigration was at the heart of their or their family's heritage, they came to see the powerful role that it has played in U.S. history and the role that people can play in a democracy to shape the future of immigration and citizenship. After engaging with *Refuge or Refusal*, community members were empowered to think critically about the future they would inevitably help to create. Would they help build a world of refuge, or of refusal? Their choices matter to real people seeking opportunities to build lives in a nation built on the possibility of freedom.

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About the Author

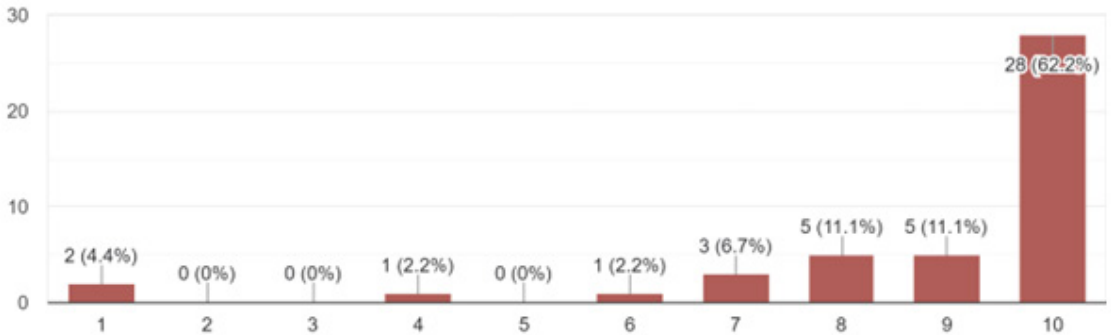
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Appendix A

Excerpted Evaluation Results for *Refuge or Refusal: Turning Points in U.S. Immigration History*

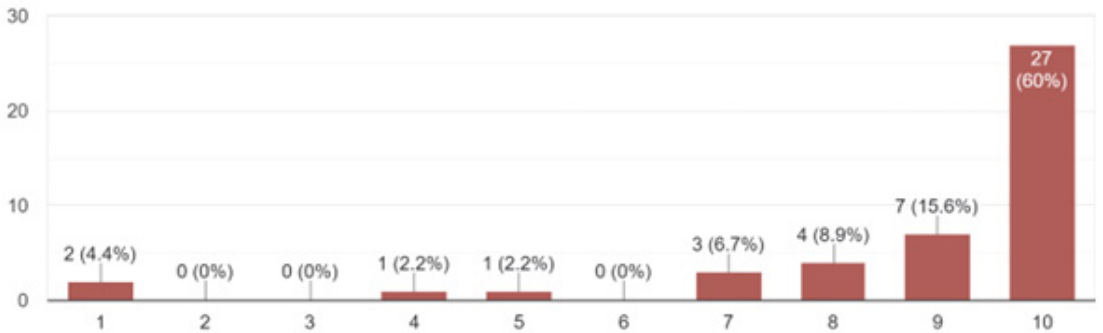
"I learned something new about American history."

45 responses



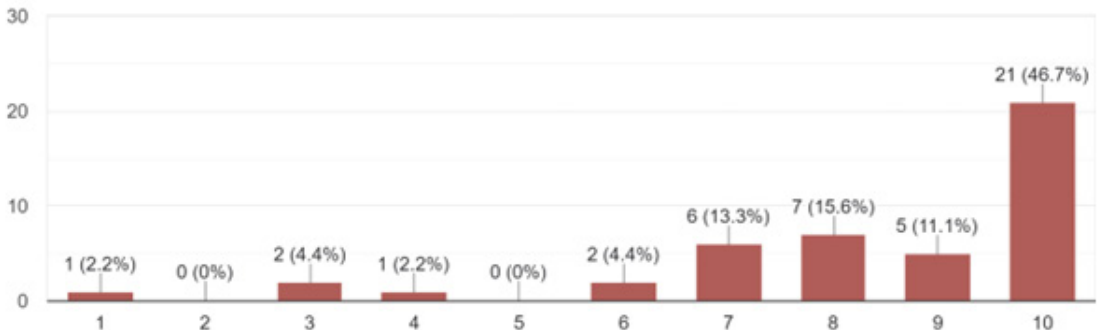
"I learned something new about immigration policy."

45 responses



"I learned something that helps me better engage with contemporary debates about immigration."

45 responses

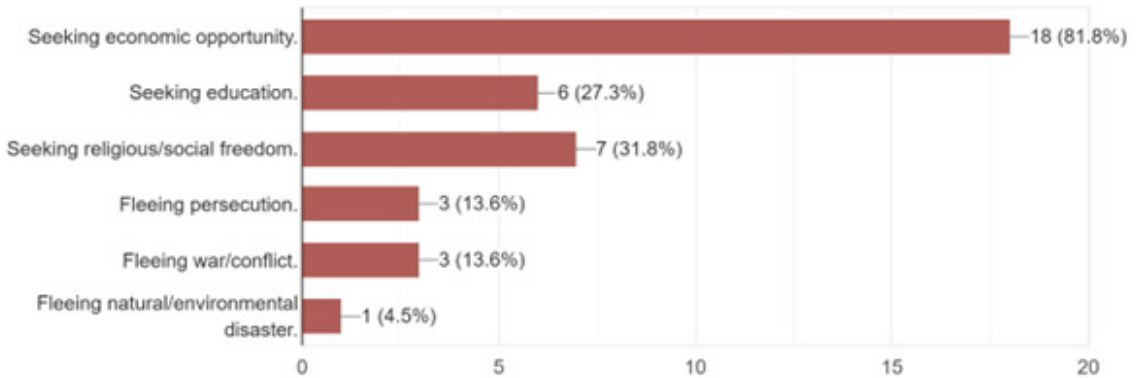


Appendix A (continued)

Excerpted Evaluation Results for *Refuge or Refusal: Turning Points in U.S. Immigration History*

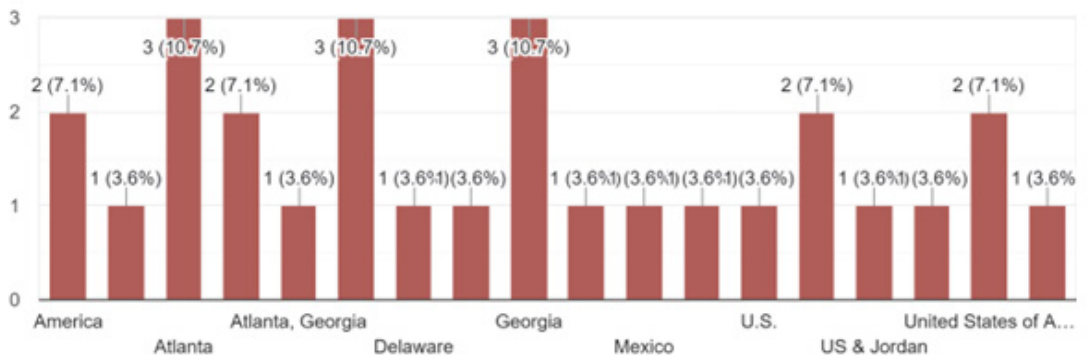
What motivated you or your family to seek a new home? Check all that apply.

22 responses



Where in the world do you call home now?

28 responses



Are you interested in recording an "Immigrant Stories" oral history with us?

22 responses

