

On the Edge of the City:  
Immigrant and Refugee Stories of South Seattle  
Geoff Sheridan  
Northwest University

*Author's Note:*

*This document was submitted as part of the requirements for the thesis project in the Master of Arts program in International Community Development at Northwest University. Portions of this paper were written for the following classes: GLST5503 Culture Studies; GLST5962 Practicum IV; and GLST6243 Social and Environmental Justice.*

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## On the Edge of the City: Immigrant and Refugee Stories of South Seattle

*I write out of faith. I believe it's the faith of every refugee, every migrant, every expatriate, every traveler, every wanderer, and every citizen. It's the faith that if I tell my story, whether it's of a man running away from his home in Ethiopia, or Russia, or France, or Seattle, it won't be just an interesting curiosity. It's that it will somehow be relevant and maybe even meaningful to your own lives.*

—Dinaw Mengestu

### I. Introduction

Immigrant and refugee stories of strength, hope, and resilience are marginalized from popular discourse. Mainstream media outlets typically portray migrant communities as having fled some war-torn region or some impoverished hellhole that has become of their homelands. After that, immigrants are conveyed as recipients of aid. Having landed in the arms of the merciful welfare systems of the Global North, migrant workers are depicted eking out a new life in a warehouse or a taxicab, all under the auspices of the American Dream. And today, an increasingly common political narrative is that these populations pose national security concerns and therefore require special monitoring and scrutiny. All of these “deficit-based” narratives work in tandem to tell biased stories about immigrants and refugees. Ultimately, these narratives shroud immigrant and refugee populations in stigmatization and shame.

Meanwhile, social welfare programs that cater to immigrants and refugees, such as ESL classes, job training programs, and resettlement agencies, mostly try to address the perceived deficits of these populations. If limited English skills are a bar to employment, they prescribe

ESL classes to overcome the language barrier. If someone has no relevant work experience (even though they ran a successful business in their home country for 20 years), a vocational training course is recommended. But in the process of equipping their clients with training and skills, organizations that try to help immigrant and refugee populations have also become mechanisms of acculturation and assimilation. In other words, by helping someone fill out a job application, or teaching an ESL class about American culture, or by showing a newly arrived refugee how to catch a bus toward downtown, those who work with immigrant and refugee populations become cultural “gatekeepers” who encourage their clients to understand and adopt the norms of the majority culture. In this way, case managers, ESL instructors, and other “gatekeepers” are like cogs in a giant acculturation machine, who show immigrants and refugees what to do and how to do it, and then who, after a hard day's work, return home as the advocates, the saviors, and the heroes of the day. In her bestselling book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, Anne Fadiman describes an extreme and unfortunate case of acculturation:

During the late 1910s and early '20s, immigrant workers at the Ford automotive plant in Dearborn, Michigan, were given free, compulsory “Americanization” classes. In addition to English lessons, there were lectures on work habits, personal hygiene, and table manners. The first sentence the memorized was “I am a good American.” During their graduation ceremony they gathered next to a gigantic wooden pot, which their teachers stirred with ten-foot ladles. The students walked through a door into the pot, wearing traditional costumes from their countries of origin and singing songs in their native languages. A few minutes later, the door in the pot opened, and the students walked out again,

wearing suits and ties, waving American flags, and singing “The Star-Spangled Banner. (182-3)

How can community development practitioners who are dedicated to the welfare of these populations work to recast immigrants and refugees as the true heroes? What practices can be implemented by resettlement agencies, ESL classes, and vocational training programs so that they can look beyond acculturation and assimilation? How can workers in these settings move toward affirming and appreciating the lived experiences of the people they serve? How can the voices of immigrants and refugees triumph against popular narratives and discourses that disempower and stigmatize their own life stories? Finally, how can refugees and immigrants rewrite the deficit-based, condescending, and disempowering histories that have been written for them and, in turn, how can they begin to relate the stories of strength, resilience, and dignity that more accurately portray their own life experiences?

Language, narrative, and storytelling are powerful actors within the social world. They construct and sustain individual and collective identities (Schiffrin et al. 3). They can hold multiple identities and discourses in tension, making sense of complex experiences and histories (Levine et al. 13). They “make meaningful connections and provide order and continuity in a rapidly changing world” (Cruikshank xiii). They voice collective experiences and create common understandings, shared realities, and communities (De Fina 1). They can be therapeutic and cathartic, offering “experiences that restore us to a feeling of being fully alive” (Levine et al. 30). They are transformative and can be used to change attitudes within a specific community or culture group (Wong and Poon 15). They challenge dominant and hegemonic discourses and empower marginalized groups (Blum and De la Piedra 6). They provide pathways for authentic

voices to emerge amidst the acculturation and assimilation pitfalls mentioned above (Roberts and Cooke 639). They spark dialogs about racism, classism, and sexism (Bell 5). They make claims about social justice principles and they fuel social movements and civil rights initiatives (Solinger et al.). Finally, they help to imagine a better world.

Immigrants and refugees can benefit from the transformative power of language, narrative, and storytelling. Professionals who serve immigrants and refugees have achieved positive results by incorporating storytelling opportunities into ESL classes, community meetings, and workshops. Based on these successes, this paper is a call for teachers, caseworkers, and community leaders to create authentic opportunities and spaces for self-expression and storytelling as they provide services to their clients. Professionals in healthcare, education, and social services should therefore incorporate storytelling and narrative as therapeutic, positive identity-forming, life-affirming tools in their work. Viewed from a social justice framework, storytelling can validate previously disempowered refugee and immigrant narratives. It can also spark important conversations and even social movements about important issues that concern these populations.

Co-authored by immigrants and refugees in South King County, my book project *On the Edge of the City: Immigrant and Refugee Stories of South Seattle* is a collection of real-life immigrant and refugee migration stories. I have been a teacher in an adult basic education (ABE) program in South Seattle for the past five years, and each of the stories in the book were co-written by students whom I have taught there. As a whole, the book illuminates marginalized histories and creates community around stories of hope, strength, and resilience. Through the use of artistic sensibility and poignant real-life stories, the project acts as a catalyst for social change

that will inform future attitudes, policies, and practices concerning refugee and immigrant populations. To reference the quote from Ethiopian-American novelist Dinaw Mengestu at the beginning of this introduction, this collection of migration stories won't be just an “interesting curiosity” (Mengestu). Rather, those who read it will see themselves implicated in its themes, and they will find its stories relevant and meaningful to their own lives. And, for reasons described here, readers of this book will have actively participated in a powerful testament to the transformative power of stories.

## II. Criticism of ESL Practices and of Dominant Discourses

Organizations that cater to immigrants and refugees have underlying conventions that create difficulties for the people they serve. Since I work in an ESL program, I will mainly discuss problems in the ESL realm. There are three difficulties ESL programs commonly face: 1.) biased and condescending storytelling, 2.) the need for a *critical approach* to evaluating immigrant and refugee stories, and 3.) allowing opportunities for *authenticity* in the classroom and beyond. Although I offer criticisms of ESL practice, I will give examples that are surely applicable to other disciplines.

At the school where I teach, the narratives found in the ESL textbooks describe “typical” immigrant stories:

My career is most important to me. I plan to study nursing and work part time as a home health-care aide. Then, I am going to get my degree in nursing and become a registered nurse—at least, this is my plan. I will save some money because I want to get married soon. My boyfriend's name is Jean. After we get

married, we plant to have children. Maybe there will be money to go to the movies sometimes, too. I will work hard to make my plans happen. (Jenkins 141)

These types of narratives extolling the virtues of hard work, goal setting, and success are generally found throughout most other adult ESL textbooks as well.

However, the textbook stories paint a one-sided picture of immigrant and refugee experiences. This is because they fail to portray other experiences that are perhaps more meaningful and resonant for the people who read them. In a paper titled *Success Stories in ESL Textbooks*, Trevor Gulliver argues that the immigrant stories found in ESL teaching materials “overwhelmingly represent hard-working immigrant newcomers as successful and appreciative of the opportunities offered to them” (725). A quick glance at one of these textbooks will reveal stories of immigrants and refugees who are working hard and are successfully adjusting to life in a new country. The omission of other details about these characters—their lives in their home countries, the wisdom they garnered over the years, the people and places that inspired them—reduces the typical immigrant or refugee narrative to that of a diligent, hard-working, and grateful goal-setter. These stories simply do not convey the diversity of refugee and immigrant experiences and can lead to stereotyping. In her popular TED Talk, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete” (Ngozi Adichie). Furthermore, through imagined stories of immigrants and refugees who are appreciative of their new circumstances, the textbook narratives condescendingly suggest that a migrant's adopted country is a “redeemer of immigrant others” (Gulliver 725). Such a biased view paints the ESL teachers, caseworkers, and community development practitioners as the stewards of hardworking



and appreciative immigrants and refugees.

Teachers of ESL should be also aware of the power dynamics at play when using these types of immigrant and refugee stories in the classroom. If these “literacy sponsors”—ESL teachers and other ABE educators—are unaware of their own presumptions about refugee stories, then, as Michael MacDonald writes, “not only do we risk reproducing discourses of power in our efforts to support literacy, but we might also reproduce them in our classrooms when reading and discussing stories of refugee experience” (411). Both MacDonald and Gulliver are advocates of a critical approach to analyzing and interpreting the stories that immigrants and refugees tell. Regarding power dynamics, such a critical examination of the ways in which migrants tell their stories “can reveal how refugee students and writers critically resist and strategically accommodate dominant expectations of what it means to be a refugee” (MacDonald 412). In other words, if educators (and others involved in helping these populations) fail to critically evaluate these stories in the classroom and beyond, they risk glossing over the strategies that immigrant and refugee storytellers use to resist hegemonic discourses and power structures. In addition, failure to adopt a critical approach could perpetuate existing power structures.

ESL programs recognize that immigrants and refugees are at a disadvantage when going to a job interview or a medical appointment. The power dynamics and discourses at play within recruiter-interviewee or doctor-patient relationships are compounded by the difficulty of navigating these encounters in a language that is not one's own. For example, Anthea Vogl has identified specific narrative conventions that immigration officials expect to hear during refugee resettlement interviews. During the interviews, refugees are expected to tell a compelling story if they want to gain refugee status in the host country. However, “the problem with these demands

for narrativity,” writes Vogl, “is that neither a refugee applicant’s experiences (life as lived), nor the person’s subsequent accounts of them (life as told), can necessarily meet these expectations” (64). Although ESL programs equip English learners with vocabulary and phrases that will help them through these situations, they do not provide immigrants and refugees with opportunities for much of an “authentic voice” during these interactions. Roberts and Cooke write that “developing an authentic voice in a new language can help to revive a sense of agency and conviviality which may have been threatened or lost in the migration process” (639). Beyond understanding the language skills and cultural norms necessary to navigate job interviews and medical appointments, I share Roberts' and Cooke's view that non-native English speaking immigrants need more authentic ways to express themselves. This is a call not only for ESL teachers to provide opportunities for “authentic voices” in the classroom, but it is also a recommendation that teachers, immigration officials, doctors, and other “gatekeepers” recognize the power dynamics at play in their interactions with people from diverse backgrounds.

### **III. Narrative, Storytelling, and Identity**

Language and stories help to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. In fact, stories constitute an ongoing process of identity formation. After analyzing a story told by an Ethiopian-Israeli student in a language learning program, the authors of one study concluded that “identities are not cognitive structures but are carefully constructed in discourse” (Shiffrin et al. 3). Looking at a different Ethiopian-Israeli's story about his multiethnic neighborhood, the authors of a similar study showed how the storyteller's inclusion and exclusion of certain events represented an ongoing strategy for identity negotiation (Schiffrin et al. 3). This is to say that we

are not separate from the stories we tell; our very identities are slave to how we talk about ourselves and about others. And, with regard to the emerging phenomenon of multiculturalism worldwide, Miroslav Volf keenly remarks that “it may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference” (20).

The realization that stories are a powerful force behind identity formation has great implications for using storytelling as a transformative tool within immigrant and refugee communities. The notion that language, narrative, and stories underpin who we are means that immigrants and refugee storytellers have a powerful means of claiming their identities, contesting oppressive power structures, and rewriting their own histories through storytelling. In the same study of the Ethiopian-Israeli's story about his multiethnic neighborhood, “the authors argue that the presence, absence, or level of detail of orientation serves as a strategy to include or exclude the listener as an in-group member” (Schriffin et al. 3). This means that storytelling strategies can establish in-group and out-group membership, identifying the listener as someone who either shares or who does not share the storyteller's experience. In his essay on ethnocentrism, Donald Kinder writes that “members of in-groups . . . are assumed to be virtuous: friendly, cooperative, trustworthy, safe, and more” (8). Therefore, there are advantages to being part of an in-group, some of which are the positive effects of ethnocentrism. Identification with a group “makes the individual perform altruistic acts to the point of self-sacrifice,” and it also creates patriotism, solidarity, identity, and pride among in-group members (van der Denren 1). With regard to the importance of group membership, Hofstede et al. write that “religion, language, and other symbolic group boundaries are important to humans, and we spend much of our time establishing, negotiating, and changing them” (15).

This process of claiming identity and establishing group membership is the first step toward utilizing storytelling opportunities as social change tools. After skillfully negotiating their identities and establishing solidarity through in-groups, immigrant and refugee storytellers can begin to subvert the “deficit-based” narratives that misrepresent their experiences. Using techniques such as “counter-storytelling,” immigrants, refugees, ESL teachers, and “gatekeepers” alike can actively challenge these hegemonic discourses.

#### **IV. Counter-Hegemony and Counter-Storytelling**

Hegemony is a process by which a dominant group exerts control over another group, often through ideological propaganda. Cornell West writes that hegemony is “a culture successful in persuading people to consent to their oppression and exploitation” (qtd. in Moe-Lobeda 87). For author Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, hegemony is a learned process “constructed to normalize and rationalize existing social and ecological conditions” (85). The stories portraying immigrants and refugees as deficit-based, dangerous, or unequivocally hardworking and appreciative all constitute forms of cultural hegemony. The stories are mechanisms of *structural* and of, more specifically, *cultural violence*, which are “those aspects of culture . . . that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (Moe-Lobeda 75). For example, the increasingly common narrative about refugees who could potentially commit terrorist acts is a form of *cultural violence* that subjugates refugees to scrutiny and control by the majority culture.

Counter-hegemonic counter-storytelling techniques have been used in classrooms with positive results. Blum and de la Piedra define counter-storytelling as storytelling that challenges the “dominant discourse that tends to see those who are of a lower socioeconomic class,

immigrant status, or non-English speaking as deficient” (6). In their study, they showed how counter-storytelling was used by ESL teacher trainers to “identify and understand deficit majoritarian stories about marginalized people and revise some of their internalized hegemonic ideologies regarding families and students who were different from them” (6). Another study followed a community of senior Chinese immigrant women in Western Canada who used storytelling and art to create “powerful and counter-hegemonic transformations” (McLeod 37). In the study, the researchers advocate for “narrative as a tool for empowering marginalized groups . . . as well as embracing cultural histories and lived experiences” (31). A different study about counter-storytelling using African proverbs in classrooms noted that counter-storytelling “enables students to appreciate diverse perspectives in the search for solutions to social, political, racial/ethnic, religious, and economic exclusion” (Asimeng-Boahene 434). In her book, *Storytelling for Social Justice*, educator Lee Anne Bell observed counter-storytelling communities and found that they “promote more critical and thoughtful dialogue about racism and the remedies necessary to dismantle it in our institutions and interactions” (5). Importantly, she also noted that “the storytelling process can be used to critically examine other issues of social justice [such as] sexism and anti-immigration” (6). The examples above show that counter-storytelling is a useful technique for immigrant and refugee communities to subvert the hegemonic discourses that oppress them.

## **VI. Case Examples of Successful Storytelling Interventions**

The examples below highlight successful interventions that use storytelling and narrative to engage refugee, immigrant, and IDP (internally displaced person) communities. These case

studies show how storytelling opportunities empower the storytellers themselves, rendering them as active participants in the community development process. They also demonstrate the power of storytelling as a cathartic and therapeutic tool in situations of trauma or displacement. In some instances, the examples cast storytelling as a reconciliatory force in times of disagreement or conflict. Finally, these interventions make the case for storytelling as a universally accessible activity that can help envision a better future.

### *Storytelling with Ethiopian Refugee Youth in Israel*

Storytelling workshops have had a positive impact among Ethiopians living in Israel. Members of this population often struggle to express the horrors of their migration stories and the challenges of starting a new life in Israel. In 1983, a famine struck Northern Ethiopia and a flood of refugees traveled by foot into neighboring Sudan. In response to the crisis, the Israeli government initiated massive airlift campaigns that transported several thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Today, it is estimated that there are about 100,000 people of Ethiopian descent living in Israel, and this is in large part due to these rescue operations (Speiser 210). Unfortunately, Ethiopians in Israel experience disproportionate difficulties in their attempts to absorb into Israeli society. This is due not only to the traumas associated with their migration, but also to racism, discrimination, and even doubt as to the authenticity of their Jewish faith (Speiser 212). As a result of these factors, Ethiopian-Israelis experience high levels of unemployment, school dropouts, and drug abuse (Speiser 210).

In the Israeli town of Nes Ziona in 2007, community leaders joined with Lesley University educators to create a series of leadership and storytelling workshops directed toward

Ethiopian youth. They hoped to use storytelling to address the concerns that the youth faced. In addition to the difficulties they experienced integrating into Israeli society, the youth also expressed frustration that their traumatic migration stories had no empathetic audience or venue. The workshop facilitators, who recognized that many aspects of Ethiopian culture are rooted in art and music, “hypothesized that building on these artistic traditions inherent in the culture could strengthen resiliency and improve self-esteem” (Speiser 218). Fifteen Ethiopian youth participated in a series of twelve storytelling and arts workshops delivered by the facilitators. Whereas before the workshops the participants felt that their migration stories had no place in Israeli society, afterwards they “appreciated having a mainstream Israeli audience interested in hearing this narrative, sometimes for the first time” (Speiser 225). In addition to the opportunity to voice their personal histories to others, the workshops also created new connections among the participants through discussions about their shared experiences and about their future plans (Speiser 220). At the end of the workshops, 86% of the participants felt positively about the experience, and 90% expressed interest in participating in similar workshops in the future (Speiser 220).

The success of the workshops illustrates how the coordinated efforts of educators, program facilitators, and community leaders can have a positive impact on marginalized immigrant communities everywhere. It highlights the power of storytelling and narrative to reaffirm voices that had previously been silenced or ignored. It also shows how storytelling opportunities can provide a therapeutic, community-building experience for those involved. Finally, the experience demonstrates how community storytelling efforts can work to subvert larger issues such as racism by creating new avenues for understanding and empathy.

### *Immigrant Stories and Playback Theatre in the Hudson Valley*

The Mid-Hudson Valley is a mostly rural area of New York State that is the site of an ongoing transformative storytelling project called *The Immigrant Stories Project*. Several years ago, a local theatre group called the Hudson River Playback Theatre partnered with a Head Start program to deliver interactive storytelling and theater performances to Latino immigrants and the general public. One of the facilitators writes that the partnership seeks to address “the extreme stresses that face many immigrants in our area: language barriers; poverty; isolation; distance from family of origin; the anxiety of living without legal immigration status; discrimination” (Salas 111). The performances use a technique known as *Playback Theatre*, wherein audience members are encouraged to tell their stories, which are then interpreted through improvised performances by actors and musicians.

Interestingly, program facilitator Jo Salas reports that audience members are eager to share even the most painful and horrific immigration stories at these events. Some of the stories even pose danger to the storytellers because they can reveal their undocumented immigration statuses. However, Salas writes that the supportive atmosphere, with its “invoking of a heightened, aesthetic ritual allows stories of considerable sensitivity and pain to be told safely” (113). Indeed, the audience members tell their stories to non-immigrants who happen to be in attendance, but they also tell “their stories to each other, to their fellow-immigrants, friends, and family members—making use of Playback Theatre's form of public storytelling with its inherent extension of resonance and meaning, which renders it quite different from private, conversational storytelling” (Salas 113-114). In other words, the artistic conventions of theater as well as the



opportunity to relate their shared experiences to fellow immigrants allow participants to tell their stories freely.

Audience storytellers, non-immigrant observers, facilitators, and actors alike express positive feelings toward the *Playback Theatre* experience. One storyteller noted a feeling of relief after telling her story, saying, “I felt good that I'd told the story and I still feel good. I feel relieved now about those things that I told. The untold parts are still painful” (Salas 115). A white non-immigrant at one event said, “I came to a greater understanding of what immigrant life is like. It's really touched my heart and it's given me some ideas of things I can do for this community as an American, and as a deacon in my church” (Salas 116). Likewise, the performers and facilitators of the Hudson River Playback Theatre also reported feeling transformed as a result of the experience:

We ourselves learned a great deal about the growing immigrant community, and we saw with clarity the contribution that these newcomers are making to American life. As well as the vital role they play in the economy, they bring a whole-hearted commitment to family, education, community, and work—deeply-held American ideals which tend to be eclipsed by the pace and preoccupations of modern life. The presence of so many new residents who embody these values offers the rest of us, perhaps, a chance to remember and recapture what we claim to treasure. (Salas and Gauna 14)

The performances are a testament to the power of storytelling to relate aspects of the immigrant experience that otherwise go unnoticed by the majority culture. “The shows themselves are a form of activism,” writes Salas. “Telling one's story in public space is a crucial

step in claiming recognition and justice, and having one's story heard and comprehended by majority-culture members is another" (118). In this way, the performances show how storytelling can challenge the deficit-based narratives ascribed to refugee and immigrant populations by popular media outlets and by anti-immigration rhetoric. Lastly, this account of the Hudson Valley Immigrant Stories Project demonstrates how storytelling can showcase the resilience and humanity that lie beneath even the most harrowing life stories of immigrants and refugees.

### *Healing with IDPs in the Philippines*

Over 150,000 people have died and at least four million people have been displaced since a series of violent wars hit the Mindanao region of the Philippines starting in the early 1970s. Under the auspices of Catholic Relief Services (CRS)-Mindanao, Dr. Al Fuertes facilitated a storytelling workshop in 2004 among twenty-one IDPs who had fled their ancestral homelands as a result of the conflicts. The participants, who worked as community leaders, health workers, and farmers, were members of different ethnic and religious groups that had been fighting for over thirty years. The workshop was conducted over two 3-day sessions about two weeks apart from one another. Individual storytelling took place during the first session, and then facilitated opportunities for discussion and interpretation occurred during the second.

The storytelling experiences helped participants make sense of the traumas associated with the conflicts and with fleeing their homelands. "What the storytelling did for IDPs," writes Fuertes of the workshop, "was to maximize the potential for personal expression in the form of catharsis by associating meanings and new interpretations to the experience of war and displacement" (345). Not only did the workshops help individuals deal with their experiences of

violence and loss, but they also forged new connections between people from different ethnic and religious groups who had been on opposite sides of the violent conflicts. Fuertes writes that

The storytelling experience established a sense of interconnectedness among the participants. Their shared traumas became a common thread that brought them together. They realized during reflection time that everyone's story is worth telling. (345)

In this way, the workshops served as opportunities for healing as well as mutual understanding between warring communities. When storytelling is used to facilitate dialog in this way, Dwight Conquergood writes that "the ideal is for the two cultures . . . to enter into a productive and mutually invigorating dialog, with neither side dominating or winning out, but both replenishing one another" (202).

The success of the workshop with IDPs in Mindanao has positive implications for the use of storytelling and narrative as effective community development tools. First, it demonstrates that victims of trauma and displacement can become powerful actors through the stories they tell. Fuertes writes that the example of the Mindanao workshops shows how storytelling "enables a community to plan and implement the course of action that people want to undertake, and further affirms their being active participants in social healing and community building" (333). The workshops indicate that storytelling is not only empowering for the storytellers themselves, but that it is also a catalyst for greater connectedness among members of shared culture groups. In light of Fuertes' workshops, storytelling can even be an avenue for peacemaking in situations of intergroup conflict. "Storytelling as a tool in conflict transformation," writes Fuertes, "enable[s] people to identify, promote, and build on the resources and mechanisms within their own culture

for constructively responding to their situation” (346). With this in mind, storytelling can become a mediating force, a pathway toward conflict resolution, and a shared vision of mutual understanding and respect.

## **VI. Storytelling and Research**

Storytelling and narrative have mutually beneficial effects on both subjects and researchers. In the case of academics who study immigrant and refugee populations, narrative analysis of the stories people tell can reveal hidden data about research subjects that numerical facts and figures simply cannot show. The study of immigrant and refugee stories can also subvert researcher biases that overlook or distort certain truths about the experiences of these populations. For immigrants and refugees who volunteer their life stories to researchers as part of the research process, they not only experience the catharsis and positive identity-forming effects of storytelling, but they also participate in a mutually beneficial relationship between researcher and subject that has the power to unearth forgotten and marginalized histories.

Indeed, narrative analysis of immigrant and refugee stories is an ethical and mutually beneficial endeavor. Although immigrant and refugee subjects could be asked to recount traumatic experiences to researchers, most recognize the importance of this type of storytelling. In their survey of 74 Bosnian refugees living in Norway, the authors of one study found that the interviewees generally reported “a positive attitude toward participating in research about their experiences” (Dyregrov 422). Moreover, the participants experienced therapeutic effects as a result of the interview process and they “hoped that others could learn from their stories, both professionals and other people in general” (Dyregrov 422). The subjects I interviewed for my

storytelling project expressed a similar positive attitude (which I will describe in the next section), in spite of having to relive their somewhat harrowing migration experiences through storytelling.

The mutually beneficial effect of storytelling on both researchers and their subjects comes as good news, especially since there has been a surge of qualitative narrative analysis within the social sciences in recent decades. This new interest in storytelling has to do with “a longstanding concern with the ways in which personal experience and expression interweave with the social, structural, or ideological” (Cameron 574). This means that an analysis of the personal accounts of immigrants and refugees can provide answers to the question of how individual lives are affected by larger societal issues. An analysis of the stories people tell is particularly well suited to answering this question, since storytelling is generally concerned with “the problem of personal and collective experience and expression, and the ways in which modes of organizing, assembling, performing, and interpreting those experiences and expressions exceed the personal and particular” (Cameron 574). In other words, analyzing immigrant and refugee stories helps to relate singular life events to larger truths about the collective human experience.

The study of stories has many positive implications for the social justice causes that concern immigrants and refugees. In addition to combatting hegemonic discourses, narrative analysis can recast marginalized people as the writers of their own histories. Miles and Crush see “personal narrative techniques . . . as a way of recovering hidden histories, contesting academic androcentrism, and reinstating the marginalized and dispossessed as makers of their own past” (84). In their research, Miles and Crush found that by collecting oral histories of Swazi women in

their geographic survey of Swaziland and South Africa, they had also included alternative voices that had been marginalized during the writing of the region's geographic history many years before. Their example advocates for the collection of personal histories as a means of both including marginalized voices and of challenging ingrained academic presumptions.

Finally, storytelling can be a powerful action research tool. With its potential for intimate collaboration between researcher and subject, storytelling opportunities allow for transformation and development at the same time that the research unfolds. In her essay about her efforts to help homeless Natives in the Northwest Territories of Canada, Julia Christensen writes that storytelling “is particularly well suited to community-based participatory research, as we explore methods to present findings in ways that are more culturally appropriate to the communities in which the research takes place” (231). Drawing on Christensen’s ideas, we can make the case for storytelling in action research as a tool to enhance the cultural competence and overall effectiveness of community development-based action researchers.

## **VII. Current Literary Storytelling Project**

At the Hudson River Playback Theatre events mentioned above, the participants expressed a desire that their immigration stories be made into a book. The organizers of the theatre project supported the idea, realizing that a book of immigrant life stories could positively influence non-immigrant perceptions and serve as a positive outlet for the storytellers themselves. In a meeting with immigrant parents that solicited ideas for the book project, “their comments emphasized, above all, their passionate desire to let non-immigrants know who they are and why they are here” (Salas 116). Others added that the book would be a good way for both their own

children and their far-away families to understand their experiences (Salas 116). Several of the immigrant stories told at Hudson River Playback Theatre events were recorded and transcribed, and the book, *Half of My Heart/La Mitad de Mi Corazón*, was published in 2007.

I work at an adult basic education (ABE) program where, over the past few years, a handful of my students have approached me with a similar desire to tell their own stories. They felt that their stories had value and they wanted to express them to others. One of the students I chose to work with on this project said, “My story is very important. I just wanted to share it. I’m doing this because of my daughter. I want the whole world to know. I don’t want people to get confused about something that’s not real” (Ahmed). Another student chosen for the project said, “People don’t know about what the Vietnamese ‘boat people’ went through. They should hear my story” (Maas).

Many of my students remarked that they wished for their stories to be heard, but they didn’t know how this would be possible because of their limited English skills. One of the storytellers chosen for the project said, “I was thinking that I would be able to write the story, but can’t even read a book. My English isn’t very good, so maybe I should just write a children’s book” (Ahmed). Given the language limitations of these storytellers, we decided that I would co-author the stories together with them. This co-authorship ensures that the stories are readable for the general public and that they maintain a nuanced and fluid command of English throughout.

I sat with each storyteller for a few hours while they dictated their stories into an audio recorder. Occasionally, I asked questions to clarify points or to delve deeper, but the storytellers were given freedom to tell their stories in a way that was most comfortable for them. After I transcribed the audio recordings, I pieced together the historical backdrops of the stories by

researching the places and events that the storytellers talked about. This allowed me to write the stories in an informative style that helps readers who are perhaps unfamiliar with the political and cultural histories surrounding the stories.

The two short stories I completed are intended to be part of a larger collection of immigrant and refugee stories that I will continue to write in the coming months. It will stand as a valuable contribution to first-hand accounts of immigrant and refugee migration histories in the United States. Given the recent surge of immigrants and refugees in the Seattle area, this book of stories will also be a welcome addition to the literature about the cultural ancestry of the Pacific Northwest region. Using “counter-storytelling” techniques described above, the book will inform non-immigrants about migration stories while also challenging the hegemonic discourses that seek to rewrite these stories. Meanwhile, the process of telling the stories will offer participants a cathartic, therapeutic release through art, and the stories themselves will create community and bonding among immigrants and refugees with similar experiences.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

The title of my project, *On the Edge of the City*, comes from a part of one student’s story where she describes the glorious Al-Uruba Hotel in Mogadishu, the lavish and spirited dance parties that were held there, and the destruction of the hotel after the onset of the Somali Civil War in 1992:

The remaining structure was used as a command post by Al-Shabaab militants and later by Ugandan peacekeeping troops, who successfully forced Al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu in 2012. Today, the decaying shell of the Al-Uruba sits on the



edge of the city, a fading memory left to fend for itself. (Sheridan and Ahmed)

Like the Al-Aruba Hotel, the immigrants and refugees of South Seattle also sit on the edge of the city. They too are victims of war and trauma, and they have been radically altered by displacement and violence. Upon arriving in Seattle, gentrification and housing costs have left immigrants and refugees with little choice but to live and work on the edge of the city, often settling in nearby towns such as Kent, Burien, and Federal Way. Aside from being a geographical location, the edge of the city where most Seattle immigrants and refugees live is also a discursive and socio-political-economic place. The disadvantages that prevent these people from landing highly skilled jobs in Seattle's booming technology industry mean that most immigrants and refugees take warehouse, manufacturing, and janitorial jobs elsewhere. In their new jobs as cleaners, assembly workers, and drivers, Seattle's immigrants and refugees live and work on the edge and on the underbelly of a discourse that defines Seattle as tech-driven, educated, highly paid, and mostly white. Meanwhile, hegemonic discourses, cultural violence, and structural injustices perpetuate deficit-based narratives that cast immigrant and refugee populations as the grateful and dutiful stewards of the edge of the city. Finally, a most unfortunate narrative that has emerged from recent immigration debates suggests that immigrants and refugees should remain on the edge of the city for the safety of majority communities.

Given these discursive tactics pitted against immigrants and refugees, storytelling emerges as a powerful tool that can recast marginalized people as the writers of their own stories. Storytelling opportunities can therefore highlight forgotten and ostracized life histories that convey strength, hope, and resilience. As we have seen, counter-hegemonic storytelling techniques have been used in community gatherings, educational settings, and workshops to

successfully contest harmful and condescending narratives about immigrants and refugees. At the same time, counter-narratives told by immigrants and refugees encourage educational institutions, resettlement agencies, and medical facilities to avoid the pitfalls of acculturation and assimilation that often define their services. In this way, learning about the lived experiences of immigrants and refugees through the stories they tell can challenge professionals in these settings to provide more opportunities for authenticity and validation of the lived experiences of their clients. Finally, we have seen examples of the therapeutic effects of immigrant and refugee storytelling, which can serve as both a cathartic form of artistic expression and as a community-building tool that brings people together around similar experiences.

We have also seen how stories serve an important function as part of the ongoing construction and negotiation of human identities. Jo Salas observes the universal nature of storytelling when she writes:

Humans are storytelling beings: we make sense of our individual and collective experience by the stories we tell . . . Personal storytelling is also, for many of us, an act of claiming identity and affirming meanings by saying, "This happened to me, this is what I lived and witnessed." (114)

One of the storytellers who contributed to my book project also spoke about the universality of stories. After dictating her story into an audio recorder for a few hours, she said, "Everybody who reads the story should feel something inside, and it's something that feels like humanity" (Ahmed). It is safe to say that to be human is to be intrinsically tied to a story, whether it's a story of joy, pain, happiness, or sorrow.

*On the Edge of the City* should serve as a valuable contribution to the literature about

lived immigrant and refugee experiences. In addition to the positive effects it will have on its storytellers and on immigrants and refugees who read the stories, it will also work together with a growing body of similar emerging counter-narratives in order to subvert practices and discourses that marginalize immigrants and refugees. In contrast to “deficit-based” narratives, the book project will convey the stories of hope and resilience that more accurately characterize the real lived experiences of the people they are about. In this way, the book will contribute to a transformative process that is improving the livelihoods of immigrants, refugees, and even members of the non-immigrant majority culture. In the quote at the beginning of this paper, Ethiopian-American author Dinaw Mengestu specifically addresses non-immigrants, suggesting that reading immigrant and refugee stories can be a meaningful and relevant endeavor regardless of one’s background. This is because, as we have seen, it is impossible for humans to exist separate from their stories. We are storytellers by nature, and our identities are inescapably bound to the stories we tell. Importantly, we are also implicated in the stories other people tell us about their lives, for to be human is to be suspended in relationship, forever strung together by a complex web of stories about struggle, success, migration, refuge, longing, and love.

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## **X. Appendix: Storytelling Book Project**

### **ON THE EDGE OF THE CITY: Immigrant and Refugee Stories of South Seattle**

#### **AUTHORS:**

Geoff Sheridan, Naima Ahmed, Phuong Maas

#### **KEYWORDS:**

refugee, immigrant, storytelling, narrative, migration, immigration, stories, Somalia, Kenya, Vietnam, Southeast Asia, boat people, UNHCR, refugee camps, resettlement

#### **ABSTRACT:**

This collection of short stories traces the life histories of immigrants and refugees in South Seattle. Co-authored by the storytellers themselves, the stories in this book describe the factors that caused their migration, the details of their journeys to the United States, and their efforts to build new lives in South Seattle. It is a timely collection that illuminates immigrant and refugee stories amid contemporary debates about immigration policy and reform.

#### ***Prologue: Intake***

“Is your housing situation stable or do you need to move?” I asked the woman sitting across from me.

“It’s stable for now, thank God,” she replied. She gazed at the wall. “But I might need to move later.”

What did moving really mean to her anymore? Her entire life was in motion, she thought, waiting to be moved again. She was moving ever since she started walking from Atotonilco to Tlaxco to go to primary school and ever since she began working on her grandparents’ farm in Hidalgo. While she was in sixth grade her father took a job at a metal factory and moved his family to Puebla. When he lost his job, she followed him to Cuernavaca, then to Toluca, and finally to Mexico City. She worked at a clothing stand in Pueblo Culhuacán, cleaned hotel rooms in Acapulco, and baked bread in Morelia. She took a van through Michoacán, Jalisco, Nayarit,



Durango, and finally to Chihuahua, where she paid two *coyotes* one hundred thousand pesos to transport her to El Paso. She was a housekeeper in San Antonio, a dishwasher in Phoenix, and a nanny in Los Angeles. Now she cleans rooms at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Seattle.

I nodded and I checked the box that said “stable.” The “need to move” box would have been inappropriate here. That box is reserved for people who are homeless or about to lose their homes, and for victims of domestic violence. Without a pressing need to move, I had to check the “stable” box.

“Yes, it’s stable,” she repeated. She wasn’t exactly satisfied with this response, but she didn’t see the point in complicating things now. She had been given two options and she was expected to choose just one. She had to settle on the closest approximation of her situation, and there was no in-between, no room to elaborate, and no storytelling involved in her selection. Suddenly, she sensed that I didn’t think that the “stable” box accurately described her life’s trajectory thus far.

“I’m a very stable person,” she clarified. “A stable person who has moved around a lot.”

She smiled, completely satisfied with this response.

### ***Chapter 1: The Death That Masquerades as Freedom***

I looked over the railing at the choppy blue triangles of ocean below and I felt nauseous. I was anxious on the drive toward the ferry docks, but finally seeing the water beneath the boat caused a familiar queasiness within me. I have figured out that this feeling comes after realizing that I am once again powerless, left to float according to the whims of the captain and the currents.

The ferry sways slowly and it all starts coming back. I remember the overcrowded hull, the crying children, the two pieces of bread a day, the smell of piss, the soggy heat, and the painful uncertainty. I remember how beautiful the beaches of Pulau Serasan looked after spending twenty days lost at sea. I remember the nights spent sitting propped upright against the stiff bulkhead with a hundred other sleepless people, thinking about my mother and wondering if I'd ever see her again.

But this was only a 30-minute voyage from Seattle to Winslow, my husband reassured me. Still grasping the railing, I breathed deeply and the nausea started to fade. This was all part of facing my fears, I thought. I looked at the shrinking city behind us. Ten years ago, I took my first and only swimming lesson at a community center. I told the instructor that I just needed to learn how to float, and then I figured out the rest by watching instructional swimming videos at home.

The Fall of Saigon happened on April 30th, 1975. A few days earlier, my father took my five siblings and me to Tan Son Nhat airport as part of a last-ditch effort to leave the country. There we found a sea of people flooding the terminals, and no one was able to secure a flight. The Communists closed the airport a few days later, which meant that we would have to find another way out.

I tried to escape more than five times. I found men who promised boat rides to Indonesia or Malaysia, but after paying them and showing up at the appointed times and places, the men and their boats were nowhere to be found. One time I wasn't scammed, but somewhere between boarding the ship and landing safely on a distant beach, we were discovered and imprisoned.

I lost a lot of money trying to escape. My siblings and I couldn't afford these attempts together, so we traveled one-by-one. Viet Cong soldiers killed one of my sisters as she crossed into Cambodia on foot. Two of my brothers tried the same path into Cambodia, but one was captured and jailed for three months. The other found his way to a refugee camp in Indonesia. He was only 15 years old.

Several months later in the port city of My Tho, I stepped onto a 60-foot boat packed with 128 people. I was 22 years old. The Thai coasts were overrun by pirates, the captain of the boat said, so we would try for Malaysia instead. After four days and three nights lost at sea, we landed on the beach of an uninhabited island. It must have been one of the thirty-two hundred Riau Islands, but it's impossible to know exactly where it was.

Our boat was one of thousands that left Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon. It is estimated that over the next two decades more than 800,000 people fled Vietnam using similar vessels. Many of these boats were overcrowded and unsuitable for open waters, and the UNHCR reports that over 200,000 Vietnamese boat people died at sea during this period. If they didn't drown, those who fled via boat endured sickness, starvation, storms, and even looting and rape at the hands of pirates. Since there were busy international waters about 150 miles east of Vietnam, most boats traveled in that direction in the hopes of being rescued by shipping vessels or fishing crews.

We waited on that unknown island for ten days. The delicious coconuts that grew there were a welcome alternative to the two pieces of bread and the single glass of water we were permitted each day while at sea. The beauty of this tropical paradise should have offered respite

from the suffering we had endured on our journey, but the consequences of failure weighed too heavily on our minds. I suppose the captain hoped that we would be rescued there, but after ten days and no contact with the outside world, he and his 128 passengers ventured out into the open waters again.

Things were getting worse. The smell of urine and sickness in the cramped compartment where I slept became unbearable. Hungry children wailed as our food supply started to run out. I passed out repeatedly from the hunger and stress. When I awoke and climbed up to the deck for some fresh air, I saw the floating shoes and clothes of people who had drowned.

Already ravaged by the war, Vietnam plunged further into economic hardship after it invaded Cambodia in 1978. In retaliation, Chinese troops took over Hanoi in 1979. This series of conflicts destabilized Vietnamese civil society and prompted a mass exodus of Vietnamese citizens on jam-packed boats like ours. The United Nations was alerted of the crisis when thousands of Vietnamese refugees started landing on the shores of Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. After some authorities began turning away the throngs of boat people that were gathering on their beaches, the UNHCR agreed to help with the resettlement effort and established several refugee camps on beaches and small islands. Navy ships from the United States, Germany, and other European nations helped with the open sea rescue efforts. The German freighter *Cap Anamur* famously rescued over 10,000 boat people during this period.

A US Navy ship found our boat five days after we left the uninhabited island. Our food and water supplies had almost run out. After the crew gave us canned sardines and water, they

towed our boat to an Indonesian island called Pulau Serasan. There were hundreds of boat people on the island already, some of whom had fled Cambodia and Thailand. Pulau Serasan was one of many temporary locations that housed boat people waiting to be placed in proper refugee camps. It had a small store owned by an Indonesian man who paid me and another girl five hundred rupiah a week to clean and cook there. It wasn't much money, but it allowed me to send my family a few handwritten letters, which the man mailed when he traveled to Singapore to pick up supplies.

It wasn't a refugee camp, per se, but if you made it to one of these islands, the UNHCR gave you the usual fare each week: five pounds of uncooked rice, one can of meat (usually fish), ten ounces of cooking oil, and some water. This was enough for women and children, but men and adolescent boys were often hungry. I gave whatever leftovers I had to the men and boys, and they supplemented their diets with whatever

After two months at Pulau Serasan, I was transferred to Kuku Refugee Camp in the Ambalas Islands off the coast of Malaysia, and then to Galang Camp One in the Riau Islands a week later. About 250,000 refugees entered and left Galang since it was built in 1979, making it one of the biggest camps during that period. Camp One was designated for new arrivals who had yet to be offered resettlement abroad. I lived there for two years while my brother, who was now in Sacramento, advocated for my sponsorship with resettlement agencies in the United States.

I lived in a makeshift residential structure that housed twenty families. I shared a small room there with a woman and her three children. The entire camp was infested with rodents, so I slept on the floor surrounded by pieces of wood and rocks and a mosquito net that kept the rats away most of the time. Although there wasn't much privacy, the thin sheet we strung up to

divide our little room offered at least some sense of solitude. Outside, large trash cans collected water during the rainy season. There was a hospital, gardens, and administrative facilities for UNHCR personnel, but life at Galang One was generally filled with boredom and uncertainty.

I had almost finished my application for resettlement in Canada when I got the news that my brother had found a sponsor for me in California. After two years at the rat-infested Galang One, I was then transferred to the rat-infested Galang Two. This camp was reserved for refugees who had been approved for resettlement, and there were mandatory cultural and language training classes that I had to attend there. Sometime in April of 1980, after several interviews and medical examinations, I boarded a flight to Los Angeles and left Galang forever.

If one job isn't enough, you get a second job, and then a third. I cleaned hotel rooms, I checked medicine labels, and I cut hair. I changed bed sheets at an assisted living facility for old people, and when I had saved enough money, I bought a sandwich shop in Seattle with my brother. I received three hundred dollars a month in welfare payments during my first year in the United States, but now I was earning three hundred and fifty dollars a day making sandwiches.

I think refugees should get off of welfare as soon as possible. That's why, when I sponsored my two other brothers and my three sisters, I warned them that I would only support them during their first year. Now, they have careers in computer science, education, and finance. It cost a lot of money to support five people like that, and I worked so much that I didn't have the opportunity to go to college. But I made the sacrifice for my brothers and sisters, and later for my parents, and now I feel that it was absolutely the right decision.

I met my future husband at that sandwich shop. I think he became attracted to me when I

told him that he could save money if he didn't drink so many mocha lattes, and later when I offered him a discount on my sandwiches. My priority was to bring the rest of my family to the United States, and we finally married once that was sorted out.

“Freedom or die,” I told my mother. It was the night before I boarded that crowded boat in My Tho that would change the course of my life forever. I chose freedom, but I also chose a *particular* freedom. For some people, freedom means doing whatever you want. Others decide to drink or gamble with their freedom, and a few hurt innocent people with their freedom. When I see someone with the freedom to waste food, I tell them about how I starved on that boat for ten days. What I'm trying to say is that if you choose freedom over death, you also have to choose the *right* freedom. My experiences have taught me to recognize and avoid the death that masquerades as freedom, and my life has been fulfilling and meaningful as a result.

## ***Chapter 2: Al Uruba, Jomvu Kuu and the Cat***

“You're a disgrace!” I screamed as I struck the man to the ground with my embroidered belt. A few feet away, the camera operator winced as he struggled to contain the little squeals of laughter that threatened to shake his composure. His sole responsibility was to keep the actors in frame and focus, which meant steadying his hands even as the hilarity of the scene challenged his self-control. The show's producers, two normally dead-set and serious task-men with deadlines to meet and mounting budget constraints stood behind the cameraman grinning from ear to ear.

“Unbelievable!” I scoffed and thrashed the man with my belt again. “A laundryman!” I

swung at him repeatedly and cursed him for having led me to believe that he, who was now curled into a ball at my feet, was a member of the Saudi royal family. On this episode of the TV series *Sanqoole Iyo Dhagoolka* the character I was portraying, Shukri, had agreed to marry this man just a few days before. Shukri's mother, father, uncles, cousins, and grandparents were delighted that a man of such stature and wealth would soon become a part of the family clan. However, contrary to his dubious claims Shukri's future husband was never a distinguished guest at the immaculate Al-Uruba Hotel, which was visible in the background of the shot. Just moments before she started beating him in the hotel parking lot, Shukri discovered that the man she was about to marry was not a Saudi big-shot but was in fact a pathetic laundryman who worked in the hotel's dingy basement.

“*Doqon!*” I lashed him with my belt again. The cameraman and producers were laughing now but their giggles were too quiet for the microphones to hear over the loud screeching noises I was making.

In its heyday the al-Uruba Hotel in Mogadishu hosted rich tourists and foreign dignitaries. It was once a five-star venue, known as the best hotel in Somalia and one of the most luxurious in the entire Horn of Africa. Situated next to Mogadishu's Old Harbor, the Al-Uruba offered breathtaking views of the Indian Ocean and the old Italian lighthouse. It was designed and built by Somalis shortly after independence and it soon became a distinctive fixture along Mogadishu's waterfront with its large, white, four-story structure and its elegant Islamic-style arches. The hotel was also a hub of social activity among locals and foreigners. Almost every night, popular musicians like Iftin Band and Dur Dur Band provided the musical backdrop to the



raging dance parties of the hotel's nightlife scene. Nostalgia consumes those who remember the Al-Uruba in all its glory, who spent many wonderful evenings there witnessing the magic of the place, and who inhaled the cool breeze off the Indian Ocean the next morning when, after the party had fizzled, it was finally time to get some sleep. Nowadays, the gray skeleton that remains of the hotel is slowly crumbling into the sea. More than twenty years of bullets, mortar bombs, and looting have destroyed much of the hotel's magnificence. The lavish interior, with its bustling lobby and posh suites, has been completely gutted out. The remaining structure was used as a command post by Al-Shabaab militants and later by Ugandan peacekeeping troops, who successfully forced Al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu in 2012. Today the decaying shell of the Al-Uruba sits on the edge of the city, a fading memory left to fend for itself.

The sad irony about this exchange between Shukri and the laundryman is that I applied to work at a laundromat in Seattle but I was refused. There I was thirty years earlier, berating a man on camera for lying about his occupation, and now in the United States I couldn't even land a job like his.

My first job was at the National Theatre of Somalia. I was seventeen years old. My mother was already a popular singer with her own music program on Radio Muqdisho so she helped secure me a job as the theatre's telephone receptionist. A few months later I accepted an invitation to join a performance troupe as a dancer and throughout the 1980s I danced at government banquets and private parties all over Somalia.

My mother's fame offered my family certain privileges that other Somali families didn't have. Her varied cultural background meant that she was able to sing in three languages—Arabic,

Somali, and Swahili—and this earned her a reputation as one of the most talented and versatile singers in East Africa. Her six o'clock program on Radio Moqdisho was broadcast in Kenya and her fans there huddled around handheld radios to hear her graceful command of Swahili *taarabs*. She often flew to Saudi Arabia and Yemen to sing at extravagant wedding parties, where she performed Arabic pop tunes effortlessly over *darbukah* rhythms. In Somalia she was an esteemed fixture at countless parties and functions hosted by Somali dignitaries.

Although we were by no means rich, our unique lifestyle and family history meant that most Somalis considered us outsiders. My mother's ancestors traced the Bajuni archipelago in the Indian Ocean, Lamu Island off the coast of Kenya, and the cities of Sana'a and Muscat on the Arabian Peninsula. My father was an Egyptian Air Force captain who met my mother while he was training Somali pilots in Mogadishu. Even as a young girl, my physical appearance and the way I spoke revealed my mixed identity. This, together with the constant labeling of my family's musical and artistic tendencies as *haram* (an Islamic term meaning "forbidden") would begin the patterns of exclusion from Somali society that I have continued to experience into my adulthood.

In 1991, as militias toppled Said Barre's dictatorship of over two decades and Somalia plunged into civil war, the Kenyan officials who were fans of my mother's singing kindly sheltered her at their homes in Mombasa. But since they refused to house my mother along with her five children, I remained in Mogadishu while the city self-destructed around me. For seven months I hid in the houses of various acquaintances and far-flung relatives as the sounds of mortar bombs, rifles, and burning buildings intensified outside.

I eventually scrounged up enough money to get to Kenya. Somali shillings were rendered

useless after the onset of the Civil War so I paid a few fishermen one hundred American dollars to ride on their boat as it sailed toward the Kenyan coast. For nine days I starved together with two hundred other hungry passengers on that smelly fishing vessel in the Indian Ocean. The boat had been packed with fish to be sold in Mombasa and my skin reeked of tuna, mackerel, and carp for several weeks after we landed.

Jomvu Kuu and St. Ann's were two camps near Mombasa that housed Somali refugees in the 1990s. When I wasn't attending one of my mother's performances I stayed at Jomvu Kuu. The juxtaposition between those ostentatious parties where my mother sang and the boredom of Jomvu Kuu made me feel as though I was living a double life. On one occasion after living in the camp for several months I walked face-first into a sliding glass door at a hotel party because I had become so unaccustomed to luxuries such as glass.

There were now more than a dozen makeshift camps established in Kenyan border towns to accommodate the growing influx of Somali refugees. As the camps swelled to capacity, the ensuing clashes between the townspeople and refugees prompted the Kenyan government to demand that the UNHCR close several camps. From 1994 to 1997, the UNHCR relocated tens of thousands of refugees to two primary camps in Kenya: Dadaab and Kakuma. Situated in Garissa County near the Somali border, Dadaab camp was said to house more than 300,000 refugees in 2015, making it the largest refugee complex the world has ever seen. In 1996, after four years at Jomvu Kuu, the UNHCR relocated me along with seven thousand other refugees to Kakuma, the second biggest camp in Kenya. A few thousand camp residents who refused relocation were alternatively repatriated back to Somalia.

I was emotionless when I received the news that I would be resettled in the United States. The people close to me were ecstatic and they relished the opportunities that awaited my now 3-year-old daughter, who was born while I was at Jomvu Kuu. I didn't speak English and the idea of building a new life in America seemed daunting. During my time in the camps I had learned to carry myself with humility, and so the glamor of the United States no longer excited me. However, I certainly didn't want to return to Somalia and my prospects in Kenya were dim so I had little choice but to go along with the resettlement and I arrived in Texas in 1996.

A few years ago at the opening ceremony of a new Benadiri Somali community center in South Seattle, I walked onstage and told a story about a woman and her beloved cat. It was a strikingly beautiful cat; it had a coffee-colored coat, piercing green eyes, and thick patches of whiskers that jutted out from its cheeks. It glided delicately around the woman's apartment and spent most evenings perched in the window over the kitchen sink gazing at the unremarkable alleyway below.

The woman loved her cat so much that when it disappeared one day she became completely distraught. She enlisted her husband to scour the neighborhood and to affix yellow flyers with "REWARD IF FOUND" in thick black letters over the cat's photo to every utility pole and tree he could find. In the weeks following the cat's mysterious departure, he dutifully surveyed the bushes, rooftops, and vacant lots surrounding the apartment complex but he found no signs of the cat. Meanwhile, his wife's mood deteriorated and she became increasingly bedridden and depressed.

The man was beginning to feel similarly perturbed because he knew the exact

whereabouts of the cat all along: one morning while his wife was out shopping he slammed the front door to his apartment (as he often did when he was late for work) and inadvertently crushed the cat's neck between the heavy door and its steel frame. When his wife returned he acted innocent and confused, as though he hadn't just killed her cat, wrapped its body in two plastic bags and deposited the evidence in a dumpster outside.

With his wife slipping further into darkness and despair, the man came home one day with a cat in a cage. "At long last I have found your cat, my dear," he smiled. He opened the cage and the cat probed the unfamiliar apartment. Indeed, this cat was strikingly similar to the original. It had the same chocolate fur, the same graceful posture, and the same twinkling emerald eyeballs, but the woman immediately recognized her husband's ploy. She rejected the phony cat and the remainder of her life was consumed with despondency and gloom.

This is a story about Somalia. Like the husband who offered up a flimsy solution to his wrongdoings, the same warlords and militias that brought havoc to my homeland continue to propose false lookalikes of the peace that once reigned. My life as a refugee mirrors this frustrating reality because the resettlement process has not restored what I have lost. My days are colored by an awkward struggle—and I believe this is the struggle of all displaced Somalis of the world—where I'm perpetually chasing after a cat that has already died.

*This story is dedicated to my daughter Asha Omar Salim, who was killed in Seattle in 2013.*