

Identity Issues among African Refugee Youth in America

JEAN LUC DUSHIME

THESIS II

PROFESSOR FORREST INSLEE

*Author's Note: Portions of this thesis have been previously submitted from the following International Community Development coursework:

Fieldwork, Research for Social Change, Social Entrepreneurship, Community Development, Cultural Studies in a Global Context, Disaster Relief and Development, Social and Environmental Justice.

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Part One: Project Proposal

Context

When refugees and immigrants arrive in the United States of America, their stories are often told by organizations, media outlets, and individuals who live outside their communities. Time and again these stories are generalized or simplified which end up reducing the stories of refugees into sound bites. To cite a popular example, the story of the Sudanese Lost Boys has reduced multiple rich perspectives of Sudanese refugee youth into a cliché. This sentiment is echoed by the freelance writer Jina Moore in his paper titled *The White Correspondent's Burden*: “Being an object of compassion is not the same thing as being the subject of a story.” Most of the time refugees and immigrants do not have outlets to share their own perspective on what is going on in their communities, so they end up feeling marginalized and invisible in their own neighborhoods and towns. As a former refugee and current storyteller, I believe in the power of stories. Therefore, my thesis research focuses on understanding how African refugee youth in Vermont create and make sense of community. For African refugee youth and immigrant youth of color to find their place in a polarized American society, they have to understand the general narrative of what it means to be black in America, and intentionally position and even construct their own racial identity within and against that framework. In other words, refugees must understand the social construct of black American identity, and decide how to respond: to embrace it, reject it, or do some of both.

Proposed Intervention

To help African refugee youth in this process I am proposing a storytelling platform called *Refugee Voice*. This platform focuses on preserving and promoting refugee stories. The goal of this project is to foster and promote a sense of community among African refugee youth

around the country through storytelling. *Refugee Voice* aims to use these stories as a tool to fight ignorance and xenophobia towards refugees and encourage positive relationships between host communities and newcomers. Most importantly, by making spaces for African refugee youth to speak about their own unique, non-American cultural histories, they will be encouraged to embrace that identity in other aspects of their lives. They will be empowered to resist expectations and assumptions about their “Blackness” imposed by the dominant culture around them. They will learn instead to boldly differentiate themselves from the Black American narrative, and to love and express their actual cultural identity narratives. This thesis is divided in two major parts. The first is a project proposal called *Refugee Voice* that breaks down different components of the project and explains how it will be executed. The second part is comprised of three essays organized around themes of International Community Development.

Project Overview

Project name: Refugee Voice

Project manager: Jean Luc Dushime

Project Purpose

Refugee Voices is a storytelling platform that aims to amplify refugee voices in North America. The project is web based and will rely on crowdsourced stories. African refugee youth will be invited to record and share their stories. The goal of this model is to give these youth control over the stories that they share. The project will also have a website that will serve as a landing page and a media resource for youth. *Refugee Voice* has an Apple compatible app that youth can use to record stories. Once the story is recorded, the youth have an option of uploading it to the public online platform, or saving it for possible publication later on.

Project Objectives

- Give an outlet for personal expression to African refugee youth.
- Teach media making to the youth.
- Promote community building through storytelling.
- Raise awareness against xenophobia, racism, and islamophobia.
- Promote inclusion and tolerance.

Project Tasks

- Write a project proposal (Jan 4-10 2020)
- Write grand proposal (Jan 5-11 2020)
- Recruit an app designer (Jan 20-30 2020)
- Build the app (Feb-April 2020)
- Create a logo (March 10-15 2020)
- Get the app approved by the App store (April-May 2020)
- Acquire a domain name (March 2020)
- Purchase a website template-link to domain name (March 2020)
- Create content for the website (March-April 2020)
- Interview five youth (Feb-April)
- Create five stories (10 minutes each) (April 2020)
- License music/create own inhouse jungle (March 2020)
- Create social media accounts for the project (Facebook, Instagram, Spotify, Snapchat, Twitter) (April 20-30 2020)
- Launch the app with the first 5 stories (May 15, 2020)
- Share the launch on all social media (May 15, 2020)
- Track social media metrics (May 15-onward)
- Write a report to the team (May 30, 2020)
- Monitor for feedbacks (May 15, 2020-onward)
- Review and approve youth stories before they go live. (May 15-onward)
- Engage and recruit youth to participate

Excluded Scope

- No video interviews

Project Specifics

- Publish a story every two weeks
- Promote youth participation
- Solicit donations

Background

Storytelling is at the heart of community development. In the context of African refugee youth, storytelling is used to process the different experiences the youth face as they fight to preserve their culture *vis-à-vis* the host culture, or find a way to blend the two cultures. I am a former refugee myself—my connection to this project proposal. I resettled in Vermont in 2004 after years of traveling through different African countries. I lived in refugee camps and experienced homelessness and hardships. When I moved to the United States, I didn't speak English, so it felt like starting from scratch—something which I was accustomed to as a refugee.

In exile, life is in constant motion; the present is fleeting, and the future is always uncertain. The lessons learned and the habits of adaptability acquired, however, are in the long run advantageous for many who share these experiences, as they become adept at learning by doing in diverse contexts and circumstances (Kelly & Kelly 115). For my first job in America, I worked in a Cheesecake Factory. I worked a second shift cleaning machines where I disassembled and assembled production lines. After the two long years, I enrolled myself at a community college and subsequently transferred to a four-year college in my town, where I graduated in 2010.

When I was having a difficult time and moments of doubt, I was encouraged and energized by fellow refugees who shared their stories of resilience with me. I found comfort in knowing that I was not the only one feeling the pressure of acculturation, school and work

balance—of feeling out of place, and being considered “the other” by majority groups in the U.S. I stayed the course because I knew that others before me had done the same.

Foundational Research

The values and rationale for this storytelling platform (comprised of a website and a podcast app), are based on published literature featuring refugee stories, literature on social justice, and interviews conducted while in the field. It was during my research in Vermont in the summer of 2019 that the idea of a storytelling platform came to life. Refugee stories are absent in the Vermont media landscape. It is rare to find a brown or a black person on the cover of a Vermont magazine, and this subset of the population has no representation at all. While embedded in these refugee communities I got to witness incredible stories of refugee families and hear how they have learned to negotiate their lives in America. As an insider, I used the emic perspective to draw comparisons between events and stories (Merriam & Tisdell 30). I conducted interviews and engaged in participant observation with youth; in the ensuing months, I gathered data from and about those same youth online.

Vermont is the second whitest state in U.S. with 93% of Vermonters identifying themselves as such (StatisticAtlas). In an article written for Vermont Public Radio titled “Why Is Vermont So Overwhelmingly White?”, the writers argue that the reason for the low numbers of non-white people is connected to a theory of immigration that is referred to as “push and pull”. Simply put, people often move to places where they have a community and Vermont has historically never had strong communities of people of color. It was not until the late 80’s Vermont started receiving refugees.

Refugees are of course diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and religion. I reflect at times on my own resettlement journey from the Republic of Congo to Burlington, Vermont. My

family and I arrived in Vermont at the end of November 2004 and I started working in January the following year. I spoke no English and had little understanding of the culture of the place. My obstacles were mundane things like how to use the bus, how to open a bank account, and how to fit in as a person of color in one of the whitest states in the nation. And there was little help coming from the resettlement system: Many resettlement programs use generic programs that mainly focus on employment and housing. As soon as a refugee obtains employment and finds housing, they are left to figure out the rest on their own. A lucky few have community members volunteering to show them how to navigate their new lives, but most must figure it out as they go.

My own experiences, and subsequently the research I carried out in that contexts led me to start a storytelling platform for refugee youth. This storytelling app gives a platform to youth interested in sharing oral stories of their daily experiences, and a way to connect with other youth, and even a way to *reconnect* with members of their own family. In their book *Social Entrepreneurship*, Bornstein and Davis write that "social entrepreneurship 3.0 is concerned with building platforms that enable more people at every age to think and behave like changemakers and to help them work together powerfully in teams and teams of teams" (xxi). It is this idea of collaboration and cooperation that led me to start this storytelling platform for refugee and immigrant voices. As people start connecting over their hardship, with the right guidance, they can gravitate toward finding solutions for their individual and collective problems. By using storytelling skills, this app will serve as a guide to ignite people's resourcefulness and creative energy to share solutions and reclaim their agency.

Refugee Voice has two components. A website that will serve as the gateway to the podcast, and an information/resource component. Youth will be able to find tips on how to

record stories using their smart phones and tips on how to prepare an interview. The website will also feature all the stories shared via the podcast. Every week, the *Refugee Voice* team will roll out story themes and will use social media such as Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to invite youth to participate.

The podcast will feature accounts of refugees going about their day as well as showcasing young folks interviewing their parents and elders about their experiences in hard places, stories of leaving their homeland, and stories of resettlement. One can also hear reflective stories of the past, stories of hope and dreams, and stories about the present. In essence this podcast is for an audience that wishes to create a more tolerant community and challenge hate and xenophobia.

The short-term goal is to build a strong following for the first year, while collecting feedback and adapting services to meet the demands of our demographic. The long-term goal is to get sponsors, open the programs to advertisements, sell merchandise, and create fee-based programs. This route will allow the business to reach a level of income at which point it can hire a full-time producer. In time, the goal would be for the podcast to generate funds to support refugee youth artists, both locally and globally, through small grants.

Products

Lynch and Walls urge those interested in social entrepreneurship to "have a big vision and small plans; coordinate, inform, learn, depart, don't drift, and roll" (60). *Refugee Voice* is a social media platform with the primary goal of sharing refugee stories. The current product is a platform for user-generated content. It is a participatory and collaborative app that the youth can use to record and share stories. As the app starts building a following, the plan is to start monetizing the platform by selling merchandise such as t-shirts, stickers, and buttons. Then the

goal will be to scale up to hosting talks and live record sessions of refugee stories with refugee guests.

Market

My primary target market is the African refugee youth demographic in North America; however, considering that the project is web based, I am anticipating involvement from refugees around the world. According to the High Commissioner for Refugees, there are about 70.8 million displaced people around the world, and each one of them has a story (United Nations). As more people around the world gain access to the internet, the *Refugee Voice* platform will serve as an opportunity for refugees around the world to share their stories, encourage each other, and build communities.

From this platform I can develop storytelling modules that refugees around the world can use to learn how to share their stories straight from their phones. Additionally, I can apply for grants that teach refugee youth storytelling skills such as podcasting, radio production, photography, vlogging, and filmmaking. The other opportunity is the possibility of translating the platform into different languages to reach more audiences.

The secondary target audience is members of institutions serving refugees directly or indirectly. Some of these institutions are nonprofits in charge of resettlement programs while others are schools that run English as a Second Language programs. These are prominent institutions such as Human Rights Watch and institutions of higher education. These organizations depend on refugee stories to fundraise, conduct research, and to promote their work. Of course, these organizations would need to first request permission from the authors before featuring any stories.

The competitors are other social media platforms such as StoryCorps that focus on sharing human stories. Most institutions working with refugees have a platform on their website dedicated to refugee stories; however, none give control for the shaping of the narrative to the authors themselves. I recognize the opportunity to collaborate with these other storytelling platforms in sharing resources and stories.

Strategy

My competitive advantage is that I am a former refugee telling stories of other refugees. Customers will, I predict, come to my platform because they feel heard and seen. Refugee stories are more needed now more than ever because countries are politicizing refugee stories and criminalizing their lives.

Financial Information

Starting a podcast can be expensive, depending on how much stakeholders are willing to invest. The expenses of beginning a podcast include building a platform, purchasing recording equipment, and editing the content. I was fortunate to have a friend build the platform for free. Otherwise, he would have charged me about \$5,000 to build the platform, the typical cost for building an app. I already have the gear for recording. I have microphones, a laptop with free software, and a digital recorder.

For the first year, I am anticipating losses as I will be building a following. In the world of the podcast, there are a few ways I can monetize my platform. I can, for example, ask for donations straight on my website by putting a PayPal donate button. In addition to monetizing the app, the podcast team plans to apply for art grants through organizations such as the California Arts Council. Moreover, I can sell sponsorship and ads. Depending on how many listeners a podcast has, it is possible to sell ads at the beginning, middle, or the end of the stories

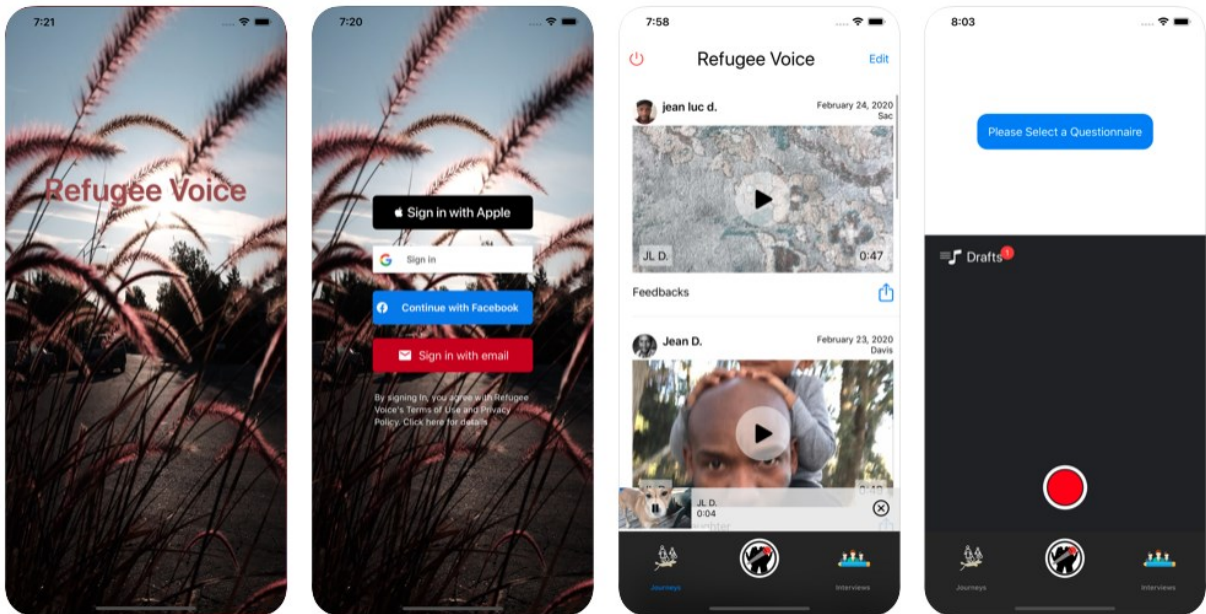
for each different payment amount. According to Castos and Castos Features, a platform advising podcasters on how to monetize their work, once the podcast reaches more than 1,000 listeners per ad, then it can join an advertising network. Once your podcast reaches 1,000-2,499 listeners per episode, a 30-second ad may reach \$23 cost per mille (CPM). Cost per mille, also called Cost per thousand, is defined by “the price of reaching one thousand impression for your ad (Basumallik).

Summary

The long-term goal for *Refugee Voice* is to fund art programs in refugee camps across the globe. As the platform scales up and grows its following, I will use the power of measuring social media to refocus my target niche (Lynch and Walls 140). The goals of this app are to help refugee youth assert their voices through audio storytelling, build confidence in their own convictions, and find innovative ways to communicate with each other and create community while making art. Kate Willis in her book *Theories and Practices of Development* talks about the concept of ethnodevelopment, and the possibility that an ethnic group can maintain its diversity through cultural pluralism. Willis defines cultural pluralism as “the existence of and mutual respect for a number of cultures within one society” (134). I sincerely hope that these stories will help contribute in promoting a more tolerant and welcoming society.

App Store Preview

Screenshots [iPhone](#) [iPad](#)



Refugee Voices is a social platform designed for refugees around the world interested in sharing stories and building community.

Figure: *Refugee Voice* application screenshot available in the Apple store.

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Part Two

Contextualization

Introduction

Between 2009 and 2011, the United States took in nearly 100,000 refugees. Through the resettlement process, refugees are often scattered across the countries in urban and rural settings. These refugees receive support for the first few months as they settle into their new life and new home. For the host communities, it is often a new experience to welcome foreigners in their neighborhood, school, playground, and churches. Hofstede describing this phenomenon in his book *Culture and Organizations*, states, “the people in the host culture receiving a foreign culture visitor usually go through another psychological reaction cycle. The first phase is *curiosity*- somewhat like the euphoria on the side of the visitor” (387). From my own experience with resettlement, I vaguely remember seeing people staring through their windows as my mother, brothers and sisters were getting out of the car on a cold November day. I wonder what they thought of us then. The newcomer goes through a similar phase as well that Hofstede calls the Euphoria stage on the Acculturation curve (384). It is a stage of excitement and hope for what the new place and stage of life may bring. For many refugees and immigrants, this stage is memorable because whatever unfolds in that first phase of resettlement is positive improvement compared to where these newcomers arrived from. How does contextualization fit into this process of resettlement? When it comes to refugee resettlement, it is important to think about how communities and organizations can help refugees feel welcomed in their new communities and also make sure that these refugees are empowered down the road to have a voice in the decision making on what is going on in their neighborhood or city. To set the refugee youth up for success, access to programs and information that take in consideration of their cultures,

traditions and values, is critical. These youth, particularly those with dark complexion, need outlets to wrestle with their new reality of being ascribed as Black. Refugees have to understand the social construct of Black American identity, and decide how to respond to it, embrace it, reject it, or do some of both. In this essay, I am going to explore how contextualization can help shine a light on how African refugee youth analyze and interpret their newly ascribed racial identity and how storytelling can give these youth an outlet to reflect, share, and form community around diverse and unique stories.

Why Contextualization is Important

Contextualization is important because it challenges the notion of community. Often when refugees are mentioned, they are referred to as one community which does not reflect the true reality. Since 1989, Vermont has received around 8,000 refugees from different part of the world (SEVENDAYS). Starting in the 90s it was Vietnamese, then Bosnians, Somalis, Bhutanese and Burmese came in 2010. The most recent group to arrive are the Congolese families from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition to nationalities, refugees are also diverse in terms of their religious affiliation, education, and ethnic and racial makeup. Myers in his book *Walking with the Poor* points out the danger of looking at a group of people as just one community. He writes, “Communities are made up of men, women, children, and old people, and these groups do not all have the same voice or concerns” (Myers 274). Myers points out a critical flaw in the resettlement programs and in many other programs designed for refugees. Refugees are seen as a homogeneous group of people. This is where contextualization plays a role in program design. To serve people, you have to understand their cultural background, their specific needs, and how they view the world. Contextualization starts with listening to the needs of the community. For example, this learning process can take place through the participatory learning

and action process (PLA). Myers describes PLA, “As outsiders help the local people to the questions and then find ways to answer their own questions, the local people are the ones who learn, who are empowered” (Myers 255). While doing my fieldwork, half of the refugee youth I interviewed felt exploited as they never saw any of the suggestions that they voiced implemented.

Among the three organizations I visited and spent time observing while in Vermont doing my fieldwork, one organization stands out as a model of contextualization. The Multicultural Youth Group (MYG), a group launched by SPECTRUM Youth & Family Services, is a program dedicated to serve refugees and immigrant teenagers and young adults. According to their website, their goals are to help youth connect to community resources and services, help youth develop leadership skills and support youth achieve academic success. MYG offers programs such as a youth conference, bike club, indoor soccer, and a girl’s group, to name a few. What I found inspiring is that all of the programs staff have life experience related to their work. Most of them are former refugees and immigrants. The staff is young and come from different countries which makes them relatable in age, cultural background, and languages and by default they are cultural brokers. According to their pamphlet, the programs run by the multicultural staff collectively speak over nine languages. I was embedded with the Bike Club program, where a group of middle school refugee kids go on bike rides to local businesses to learn how things are made. On one of the trips, I observed Aden Haji, the outreach coordinator interact with young people from Burundi, Bhutan, and Congo. “We pick them up right after lunch”, he said pointing at the kids picking up their bicycles, “then we bring them straight here. He continued, explaining, “They are excited today because we are visiting a chocolate factory” (CITE). The Bike Club is successful because the young people often go on a long bike ride around the lake and get ice

cream afterward. While I was putting on my helmet, a young man from Burundi learned that I was from Rwanda and he got excited because we speak similar languages. I became the tour translator on that trip and the kids loved it very much. I could see in their eyes that they felt seen and heard as the staff at the chocolate factory explained what how cocoa beans are transformed into chocolate. They may not have understood any of that information or asked questions without a cultural broker. However, at this point they had only been in America for five months and detested the taste of chocolate. By hiring a diverse staff, The Multicultural Youth Group made sure that every single youth who walks through their door is heard, seen and served. Because the staff understands the cultural differences between the refugee youth population, they are able to design programs that are catered to specific needs that refugee youth may have.

Creativity and Innovation

When a program understands the diversity of a group and recognizes that it is often impossible to attend to the needs of every targeted population, then the program can build a network with other programs to better serve the community. The Multicultural Youth Group realized that not all youth came to their programs but they attended the Association of African Living In Vermont (AALV)' youth program called The O.N.E Youth Center, they reached out to AALV to build a partnership. This action lead to shared resources and knowledge which serves the youth better. These two programs launched annual leadership workshops titled "AALV Summer Leadership Workshop for young People of Color". I got to attend the 2019 leadership workshop during my fieldwork. Throughout the five days, youth attended workshops on topics such as community organizing, leadership, and behavior management. The youth also toured the local the community college and state university.

Contextualization related to my project

My project proposal is an app that African refugee youth can use share their stories as a way to build community, encourage each other, and educate their host community about who they are as human being. The African refugee youth voices are critical because they are as Myers asserts, “the future of the community” (277). Myers advances this idea of the value of seeing children or youth as “potential agents of transformation” (277). In many refugee and immigrant families, the youth are already playing crucial roles in their families as cultural brokers. From early on, most refugee youth are heavily involved in answering calls, reading mail, and answering the door because they pick up the host community culture and language faster than their parents. Lule, a 22 year old Somali woman answered my question over the loud bar music about continuing to help her parents even after moving out for college, saying:

It hasn't, I started, my parents still depend on me, stuff like that, because I speak the language, I know more, I know more about the culture here, but I'm able to like help them like reading now writing the bills. I kind of like communicating and translating things. (Lule 2019)

I have heard similar stories from other youth I interviewed. On top of the pressure from school, athletic activities, and social pressure, the youth still have to act as liaison between their families and the world outside their homes. Contextualization in this case can allow a teacher or a guidance counselor know how to support a student who is in a similar situation by helping them succeed in school.

Contextualization can help parents, service providers, and care takers of African refugee youth recognize the influence of race and racism on the youth of color. Drawing from personal experience, I came to the United States as a refugee from Rwanda. I left Rwanda with my family

when I was 13 years old—brutally forced to wander around in different countries stateless—homeless, living in refugee camps when we could—reliant on begging and the kindness of local people. My family and I were eventually resettled in Vermont through the International of Migration (IOM). We arrived on a gray and cold day in November 2004, it was our first winter. Still, we had new hope as we landed in Vermont. I remember being excited about finally being able to stop running and the possibility of living the American dream-of working and living in the “land of the free and home of the brave”. I was finally free from the misery of endless wanderings and the oppression that came from being stateless. For the first time since I was 13 years old, I had a home, a home that took me in with open arms and with love.

However, it took a couple of years to slowly wake up to the reality that the United States of America might not want me after all. Ethnically speaking, I am a Black man—and being *Black* implies an enormous complexity of history and culture that I was not aware of before coming to America. It is easy to find stories in the papers highlighting success stories of refugees who came to America and overcame language barriers and adversities to become successful business owners. It is those stories that reinforce the American people’s determination to continue the tradition of welcoming refugees from all over the world. Emma Lazarus captures this spirit so well in her poem titled “The New Colossus.” She writes:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Haine and Rosenblum write in their article “Perfectly American: Constructing the Refugee Experience,” refugee stories often celebrate the city and residents that welcome them as good people. These stories contrast other stories of discrimination and the race war, causing the refugee’s success to become the host’s success” (Haine, Rosenblum 396). Refugees are always described as hard-working folks with a high level of adaptability and with contagious perseverance, these details paint refugees as “nothing short of extraordinary Americans” (Haine & Rosenblum 396).

On December 30, 2019, the Vermont Public Radio published a multimedia piece highlighting three Vermont residents who became citizens in 2019. All three stories are structured the same way: an account of the hardship prior to coming to America, coming to U.S. and enjoying the freedom and opportunities that their new country offers, then the gratitude that refugees feel towards their host community. Even though these stories are extremely important to highlight refugee resiliency, often these stories fail to amplify the hardship, heartbreak, and the unsurmountable challenges first generation refugees face when they resettle.

Talking to Kasongo, a 22-year-old Congolese mother resettled in Vermont, she expressed her experience with coming to America:

Well the first thing we African people or anybody who is an immigrant struggles here. The reason why I believe the first reason is because they were sold something that was not real. They were told something about how this was going to be, and it wasn't real. So, I feel like if you first come somewhere and you're already let down, you're already discouraged. So, the fact that if I like my family, like I'll talk about my dad. He came to America with a whole idea of how he was gonna be and what he was going to do in a whole plan. But the second he got here; it was the opposite of what he could have ever

imagined. So that let down, that discouragement, that kind of change mentality. And then you have to restart everything that you thought of. You know, how am I going to make it here? What am I going to do with my life here? You know, cause everything I thought I was going to do, I'm not able to do in America even though that's what I was told I would be able to do in America. (Kasongo 2019)

Kasongo recounts a painful experience watching her father share his disappointment realizing that life was not going to be as easy as he thought in America. What is often left out in this conversation on African refugee youth and their families is the fact that refugees of color face heartbreaking racism and discrimination as they look for work, apply for an apartment, and deal with law enforcement. Fadiman in her book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, recounts the story of Hmong arrival in the United States. She describes how the media portrayed the Hmong using words such as “primitive” “low-caste hill tribe” just to name a few (188). Even though Fadiman does not outright call this treatment racist, it is clear that the Hmong community felt the impact of this discrimination: “In America, we are blind because even though we have eyes, we cannot see. We are deaf because even though we have ears, we cannot hear” (Fadiman 187). This passage resonates with me because I know how it feels to lose agency and control of your destiny as you find your way in a new country.

Future Vocation

I learned from contextualization that I cannot assume that I know the issue in front of me unless I actively listen to those affected by the issue to get their perspective. My future vocation will involve storytelling and community development. I am extrovert and I deeply enjoy connecting with people. So I would like to be a community organizer, leading people toward bringing the change they desire to see in their community.

Conclusion

I strongly believe that there is a place for everyone in America despite the current anti-immigrant and refugee climate. Even if refugees and immigrants work hard, stay in their lane and aspire to be immigrant role models, it would not stop them from experiencing racism because racism is not something refugees or immigrants provoke or call upon themselves.

Charles Mills, in his book *The Racial Contract*, states:

What is needed, in other words, is a recognition that racism (or, as I will argue, global white supremacy) is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rules, social economic privileges, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits, and burdens, rights and duties. (123)

With contextualization in mind, refugee and immigrant youths and their families need support with programs that connect them to community resources, summer jobs, schools, internships, tutoring, English as Second Language classes, and art. To make all this work impactful, organizations that serve refugees have to commit themselves to participate in anti-racism work. Kendi defines an anti-racist as, “someone who is expressing an antiracist idea or supporting an antiracist policy with their actions”. Schwartz affirms this, defining “an antiracist idea as any idea that says the racial groups are equal” (123). Contextualization informs my project proposal in the sense that I realize the value of strong ties and strong connections between community members. Hence, I offer a platform that African refugee youths can use to build and strengthen their communities across the country through storytelling. Stories that make you feel heard and seen. As a counterpoint to what Groody describes as “conscientizing the poor” (186), I believe stories have the power to conscientize the wealthy and power to change their ways.

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Qualitative Inquiry

Introduction

Qualitative inquiry is one research methodology used by anthropologists and sociologists to understand an issue. In contrast to the quantitative inquiry method that heavily relies on data interpretation, Merriam and Tisdell explain that qualitative inquiry seeks to understand “people’s lives, the social and cultural contexts in which they lived, the ways in which they understood their words, and so on” (6). This quest usually sends researchers in the field where they get to observe people in their natural habit, take notes, collect artifacts, and conduct interviews. Qualitative inquiry puts a face on the data. The researcher gets to talk to a real human being which is much more enriching than just relying on data because numbers cannot capture everything. For my thesis research, I opted to use the qualitative inquiry method because I wanted to go beyond the statistics on refugee resettlement. Statistics are often used to demonstrate how successful refugee and immigrant families are in their new country. These numbers, for example, show how many refugees buy homes, get full timework, obtain a college degree, or achieve other markers of ‘success’. But what these numbers do not tell us is what these refugee families experience going through these different stages. For my thesis research, I focused on understanding how African refugee youth create and make sense of community in the U.S. while navigating issues around race and identity. In this essay, I will define what is qualitative inquiry and how qualitative inquiry helped me understand my research topic.

What is Qualitative Inquiry?

Merriam & Tisdell in the book *Qualitative Research* speaking on the definition of this discipline argue that there are many definitions that capture the essence of such a complex and continuously growing field of qualitative inquiring. The writers propose the simplest definition,

asserting, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam and Tisdell 15). I find this definition clear and easy to understand. In the development context, for an organization to implement successful programs, it has to grasp the deepest need of the community, this can be done through the qualitative research. Merriam & Tisdell put forth four characteristics of qualitative inquiry. One, the researcher has to focus on meaning and understanding. The researcher seeks to get an “emic” perspective, which means the insider perspective instead of just having an “etic” perspective, referring to the outsider perspective. Understanding the emic or etic perspective that the researcher is coming from can help deepen the analysis of the topic at hand. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument for information collection and analysis. The researcher has to be aware of their positioning in relation to the issue. Him/her has to recognize, identify, and monitor their own bias while interacting with their research. Third, qualitative research is inductive, meaning that the researcher builds hypotheses and theories as they gather and analyze data. Merriam and Tisdell describing the inductive process write:

Qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field. Bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations, or documents are combined and ordered into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general. (Merriam & Tisdell 17)

The final characteristic of qualitative inquiry is that the end product is a document composed with deep descriptive narratives that communicates what the researcher learned.

In the context of community development, the four characteristics of qualitative inquiry reflect the International Community Development values (ICD). ICD values which are

contextualization, copowerment and collaboration. Dr. Inslee, founder and chair of Northwest University's MA in International Community Development program, defines these values as follow:

- Cultural contextualization is the practice of designing programs and processes with attention to the particular cultural characteristics and inherent resources of a given people, place and time.
- Copowerment is a dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other.
- Collaboration entails frank acknowledgement of organizational limitations, the affirmation of another group's capacities, and the joining of abilities and resources in pursuit of mutually established goals.

The four characteristics mentioned above informed my fieldwork research in the sense that the main priority of my research was to understand how the African refugee youth interpret their identity in a racialized America. The qualitative research was focused on how they create and make sense of community within what Hofstede calls culture convergence and divergence context (473). As a refugee myself I paid attention to my own biases, my own internal processes as I conducted interviews and observations in a community in which I lived and worked for many years. Then I theorized the data and findings to make sense of the narrative. Finally, I wrote a summary document that detailed my findings and thoughts.

Qualitative Inquiry in my Project Proposal

Qualitative inquiry played a crucial role in helping me formulate my project proposal. It is while conducting my interviews that a pattern started emerging. My informants mentioned the need of being heard and the need for representation. I met Kasongo, a 23 year old Congolese

woman, at a local coffee shop in Burlington. She came along with Cadou, another African youth who helped me arrange the meeting. After getting a coffee, we decided to find a quiet place to talk as the coffee shop was loud and bustling. We found a quiet place in the alley outside. Kosongo has a young boy so I thanked her for taking time to meet for an interview. When I asked Kasongo about how the community can help her achieve her dreams, her response was, “it's a good question. The thing is, is like whenever the question is asked and we give the answer, nobody really follows through with the answer. You, I answered the question, but you don't help me with what I, what I answered. You know?” (Kasongo 2019). She feels that most of the time, her opinions and suggestions are not taken seriously. This sentiment was echoed by other youth who felt that they have something to say but generally, society is not listening.

As I was doing my fieldwork research, I realized that African refugee youth are deeply invested in poetry, music, and spoken word as tools to express their realities. They use poetry as a platform to express their hope, frustrations, fears, and joy. I came across this group called Muslim Girls Making Change (MGMC), a youth slam poetry group started by four girls from immigrant families. Their poems focus on social justice issues in America, immigration, and identity. "We write poems about things that we can't keep inside of us anymore, so things that we care so much about," said Karin one of the members of the group (Rathke). The young poets, from a podium, deliver powerful messages that challenge the notion of citizenship, islamophobia, and what it means to be the other. Here is poem from a participant of Muslim Girls Making Change that captures the struggle of refugee and immigrant youth in America, it is titled “Chameleon”:

We will never be white only pretend to be. We hide behind big mirrors and lies unsure of who we really are.

African American or the other way around? Pakistani first, American?," they say.

"Tears roll off our face. The droplets form a perfectly curved rainbow. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, which one am I?" they say voices rising.

"Which one are we. Maybe we're a mix. Maybe we are many. A combination of colors ... Maybe we are one."

African refugee youth also use music to talk about their life experiences before and after coming to America. One example of this is a popular band in Vermont that got started by refugee youth called, Africans to Vermont (A2VT). This band is made of young men from different countries across the African continent. The group sings in Swahili, Mai-Mai, French and English. A2VT songs are a fusion of afrobeat with a hip-hop twist. One of their popular songs is called "Winooski my Town" a song dedicated to an old mill's town called Winooski that that has become home to refugees from all over the World. This group is often invited to perform in schools, churches, festivals, and community events. The reason why I mention poetry and music is because they are spoken words. The idea of creating a storytelling platform came from the need of outlet of expression, a need that the youth kept bringing up during our interviews. It felt right to go with this idea because it was something they are naturally gravitating towards.

Refugee Voice will heavily rely on social media metric to measure the project's success and collect feedback. Every time, a youth shares a story, the team will share the story on all of our social media accounts, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat. Then we will use social media platform metric systems to measure volume, the number of people talking about the story,

as well as the Reach, to measure the spread of the content on social media. We will also track engagement, how many comments, conversations take place on social media about the story. Social media metric systems track listeners' demographic, help figure out when, how, from where, and for how long people listen to a story. This information will help pinpoint interesting themes, the right length of a story and the ideal time to release new stories. The three project outcome markers are:

- For the first two months, the project wants to have at least 50 youth uploading stories
- For the first two months gain 200 podcast subscribers
- For first two months build a strong following on Twitter and Instagram

Project evaluation is crucial in shaping the product and services that the project is offering to the youth. Lynch and Walls believe in the importance of evaluating as a project moves forward, they assert, "Have a big vision and small plans; coordinate; inform; learn; depart, don't drift, and roll"(60). Feedback is key in growing the project and learning to get better at offering service to the youth.

Qualitative Inquiries Personal Impact

When I embarked on my fieldwork, I knew that a part of my research would be autoethnographic. In a way, as a photographer and filmmaker, I have always applied qualitative inquiry in my work. My past heavily informs my outlook on life. It is my curiosity to listen to people's stories that helped develop empathy towards those I once called my enemy. It is the same energy and hope I bring into the *Refugee Voice* project. The Arbinger Institute, in the book *Leadership and Self Deception* asks, "What can I do to stay out of the box toward them (people)? What can I do to sustain the change I am now feeling? That is the question" (131). To stay out of the box requires a desire to see other people's perspectives. This is what ethnography contributes

when done right in research. Studying qualitative research gave me more tools to approach the world not from my own perspective but as an observer to learn from the person and their culture and habitat. I am inspired by Holmes's dedication to understanding migrant farmworkers living and working conditions. He writes in his book, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, referring to his qualitative methodology, "we perform participation observation over the long durée, gaining field data from observations of and embodies participation in the conversations and activities of everyday life" (32). The short time I spent in the field gave me a sense of what is possible when a researcher listens to the people and he/her/they are in tune with the culture. I will be applying this skill henceforth as a storyteller to create well rounded stories that go beyond caricature's and cliché.

Qualitative Inquiry and Effective Evaluation

Organizations rely on quantitative methods to collect data. Numbers are important as they often paint a picture of how many activities an organization is producing, how many youth entered a shelter program or how many of these youth obtained work. However, what numbers do not tell is the narrative. Are the beneficiaries of the program finding services relevant to their needs? Is the staff body trauma informed in their services? These are some of the questions qualitative inquiry can help the organization get answers to. When an organization uses a mixed method of combining quantitative and qualitative methods, data collected during an evaluation becomes more reliable. The mix method approach allows triangulation, a technique that allows researchers to compare information obtained from several methods. Patterns can then emerge, validating or invalidating the data collected (Bamberger 4). Community developers should use mix method approach to increase the possibility of collecting useful data.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented reality in which communities and societies are called upon to reimagine a new future. The uncertainty of going back to work and how people will continue living during the pandemic requires community level preparation and planning. Hence the value of qualitative inquiry. Even though quantitative inquiry is crucial in telling us which community and demographic is affected the most by the virus and the lockdown, numbers cannot tell us the innovative ways individuals or communities are using to mitigate the risk of the pandemic or support each other through this crisis. Now more than ever, we need to listen to each other and work as a team to plan for a better future.

Qualitative inquiry is critical in addressing social justice issues because it allows organizations and researchers access to human stories and it is those stories that truly inspire change and move hearts.

In my time conducting research, I met inspiring African youth engaging in civic work. The interviews I conducted and the time I spent observing these youth communities made me gain a deep understanding of the value of qualitative research as a tool that allows me to go beyond numbers and connect with people. These African refugee youths are committed to discovering who they are in relation to their new country and they are taking a stand to honor their heritage and identity and fight for their place in their communities. As Volf writes in his book *Exclusion & Embrace*, “It takes truthful life to want to seek after the truth, to see the truth when confronted by it, and to say the truth out loud without fear” (256). Many of these youths are involved in advocating for their community by accessing voting information in different languages. Other young people are running for the school board or a seat on the city council. They are also creating arts that celebrate their cultures and heritage. In their own ways, they are

standing up against bigotry and racism in their schools and calling for justice and equality. This is what determination is all about, rising to the challenge and claiming your place. As I reflect on positionality in relation to my fieldwork, I felt uncomfortable at times during my fieldwork because I occupy an “insider/outsider” position. I felt at times as exploitative, as I was extracting information without giving anything in return. I kept reminding myself of Marriam and Tisdell words, “The point of critical research is generally to do research with people, not on people” (64). My fieldwork experience was hard but educational and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to learn how to design and conduct meaningful interviews and observations through qualitative inquiry.

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To Be of Use

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm

when the food must come in or the fire be put out. (Pierce 12-17)

Personal Transformation

Following your dreams can be a scary act especially when your dreams seem to contradict the expectations of your family and community. I grew up wanting to pursue art, but art was something that my family and society at large deemed a non-career path; so my mother sent me to study agriculture instead. After surviving the genocide in Rwanda at 13 years old, and walking 3,000 miles across the Congolese Jungle, I emerged wanting to make the world a better place. When I moved to the United States of America, I rediscovered my passion for arts. In the last 16 years, I have been struggling to figure out how to bring my passion for social justice, arts, and community development together. I felt as I could do one or the other. It is during my time in the International Community Development (ICD) program that I discovered the connection between arts, social justice, the environment, and community building. While doing my fieldwork I realized my leadership potential to work along with youth of color bring change to their communities. In this essay, I will be talking about how the ICD values influenced my outlook on my future career and my personal life.

Reflecting on the last two years, the International Community Development Program has challenged me to look inward, to question my real passions, and to embrace my calling. Kuenkel, in *The Art of Leading Collectively*, writes:

Traveling the inner path prepares us for the outer path, traveling the outer path strengthens the inner path. Underlying both pathways are essentially human capacities: the capacity to love, to create, to collaborate, to reflect, to organize, to build, and to bring forth the world collectively. (23)

Kuenkel points out the fact that many educational institutions continue to fail to attend to the souls of their students. The writer urges those passionate about changing the world to dive inward to unlock profound passions for helping others that is not necessarily driven by financial remunerations and job security. When I started this program, I was at a crossroads. My wife and I had moved to the West Coast where she was pursuing her post-doctoral research. With the move, I left behind my social support network, and struggled tremendously to find purpose and meaning. Recognizing my passion for serving people, I decided to work with youth experiencing homelessness. Despite finding the work rewarding, I knew that I wanted to do much more. I was scared to take the next step because I did not think I could fully live into my calling.

When I enrolled in this program, I experienced strong imposter syndrome. I felt that I was not up to the task of writing on an academic level. Despite all of the doubts, I kept pushing through and I grew. Kuenkel points out the value of facing our fears, she states, “Structures of which we are unaware hold us prisoner. Once we see them and we name them, they no longer have the same hold on us” (39). I have been following Kuenkel’s advice by identifying my fears and working on overcoming them. It has not been a comfortable journey, but I have made

tremendous progress in overcoming my fears and staying focused on my deepest passions as my lighthouse.

Social Justice Narratives

During this program, I genuinely enjoyed learning more about the connection between social justice and spiritual calling. At times, I found it hard to engage my classmates in social justice related questions because it is hard to talk about social justice without addressing racial inequality. The social inequalities found in American society today can be traced to the beginning of this nation. Pellow in *Resisting Global Toxins* writes, "The conquest of Native peoples in the Americas was primarily racial project characterized by the domination of people and natural resources such as gold, sugar, and spices" (664). He continues, "Slavery was a system built on the conquest, characterized by African peoples working under coerced conditions on land stolen from aboriginal peoples" (Pellow 664). It would not be an overstatement to claim that the wealth accumulated on the back of enslaved Africans fueled the industrial revolution and launched the banking system that continues to safeguard the tainted money that sustains the descendants of former plantation owners.

In her book *Resisting Structural Evil* Moe-Lobeda writes, "The prevailing social order morally legitimates our exploitative ways of life by failing to effectively recognize them as such. Structures of exploitation persist and grow when people who benefit from them fail to recognize and resist them" (4). Across the world, despite countries gaining independence from their former colonizers, the majority of these countries are still subjugated to oppressive economic, military, and technological systems that keep millions of people in abject poverty. As a son of the African continent, I firmly believe that development projects alone cannot end poverty or the suffering of former colonies. The majority of people in the global south and any other marginalized groups

need to continually work on freeing themselves from old and new oppressive systems that impact people's agency and ability to take ownership of their future. It is these systems of oppression that continue to fuel forced migrations.

Copowerment

Dr. Inslee defines copowerment as “a dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other” (ICD). As a social justice minded person, mutual exchange is the ideal in the process of building a more sustainable world. As an African who grew up in colonized countries and as a black man living in America, I often wonder if this ideal is achievable. To dismantle the system of oppression, one has to recognize it first. Unfortunately, people who are in positions of privilege are unlikely to resist and fight a system that sustain their livelihood and many are not yet aware of it. Moe-Lobeda sees awareness as key in social justice work, positing, “To repent of structural evil, we must recognize it” (192). To reverse this system of oppression will mean returning stolen land, restitution, justice for crimes committed, etc. I do not see this happening in my lifetime and therefore feel conflicted about the possibility of a mutual exchange when we do not share equal power and access to resources. Groody in his book *Globalization, Spirituality and Justice* refers to liberation on the social level. He writes, “Liberation on the social level deals with the transformation of our relationships. It involves eliminating the domination, abuse, and subjugation that degrade human interaction (186). To work alongside each other requires one to relinquish their power and privilege. Unfortunately, I do not see this happening in the church or in our communities. To be able to achieve the ideal of copowerment, communities that have access must open up their doors to the less privileged not out of pity but out of obligation.

Environmental Awareness

When I started this program, I did not know how to deal with natural disasters in the context of community development. I vaguely knew that prevention could be one of the steps in mitigating the impact of natural hazards. However, I did not know how to conduct vulnerability assessments or how to identify and strengthen community resiliency. The International Community Development program helped me to develop the capacity to see intersectionalities between community wellness, environmental degradation, and natural disasters. As African refugees resettle in America, they mostly gravitate to high density and diverse metropolitan areas. Some of these areas have old houses that have a lead problem. According to an article published in 2013 by Charles W. Schmidt in the *Environmental Health Perspectives*, “nearly 30% of 242 refugee children in New Hampshire developed elevated BLLs (Blood Lead Level) within three to six months of coming to the United States” (Schmidt). The research revealed that most of these families were living in zip codes of houses that were built in the 1950s. According to a recent article by Emily Holden and Nina Lakhani, the coronavirus is hitting hard in vulnerable communities already struggling with environmental pollution. The journalists name several metropolitan areas that are hot spots to the pandemic. One of them is Harris County in Houston, Texas. This county is experiencing a high number of coronavirus cases and two-thirds of the deaths are African Americans. According to Capps et al. writing in the Migration Policy Institute, Harris County has more than 1,064,000 foreign born residents.

The International Community Development prepared me to approach complex issues through a holistic lens. Kyte, in her TEDxSendai talk titled "From disaster response to disaster prevention," argues that, "we have to move from a tradition of response to a culture of prevention, a culture of resilience" (7:04). I learned that to do sustainable work, we have to

anticipate and prepare communities for disasters yet to come. By involving communities, they take ownership of their wellbeing; after all, they know their culture and resources best. Not only do preventative measures save lives, but they help communities bounce back more quickly after a natural disaster. Mohamed Jafar, one of the youth I interviewed during my fieldwork, has taken a leadership role in the refugee community in Vermont by organizing a coronavirus sensitization campaign in multiple languages. The purpose of this movement is to educate refugee families on how to stay safe and healthy during the pandemic. During an interview that aired on April 9, 2020 on Channel Three News, Jafar expressed that many African families were left in the dark regarding information about COVID-19. With the help of a friend, Jafar created a website called Newamericaninvermont.com to communicate health information about the virus in more than 10 different languages.

Social Entrepreneurship

One of the classes that had a profound impact on me was on social entrepreneurship. In this class, I learned how to harness the power of social entrepreneurship to find sustainable ways by which people can support their families in a more impactful way without depleting their limited resources. Talking about creativity, Kelly and Kelly, in the book *Creative Confidence* suggest that creatives surround themselves with supportive networks. The writers exhort us to "Surround yourself with like-minded innovators" (Kelly and Kelly 250). In this class, I decided to put into practice what I was learning by creating a social media application (app) that focuses on helping refugees share their stories. Kelly and Kelly remind creatives that "the best kinds of failures are quick, cheap, and early" (130). In the process of creating this app, I befriended people with experience in designing social businesses and people who know how to run social entrepreneurship. At the end of the class, I had a working prototype. The experience of

designing, testing, collaborating, and making this platform has had a profound impact on the way I want to approach future projects. The idea of creating a platform where African refugee youth can share their stories is deeply rooted in the notion of claiming ownership of one's narrative.

There is no one more qualified to talk about the power of storytelling than Chimamanda Ngozi. The acclaimed Nigerian novelist in her TED Talk titled "The Danger of Single Story" recounts her upbringing devoid of stories in which she felt represented. As she started writing at age of seven, she states "I wrote exactly the same kind of stories I was reading" (0:54). Ngozi's take on the need for diverse voices and perspectives in storytelling encouraged and validated my desire to start the *Refugee Voice* app as a meaningful contribution to the movement of educating those who never met a refugee before. My goal is to challenge assumptions and stereotypes of those who are forced to flee their homelands and land at the shores of foreign countries seeking refuge.

Moe-Lobeda states, "Theories of justice start with injustice as described by those experiencing it" (200). I have always been uncomfortable with the idea of giving a voice to the voiceless. It implies a power imbalance and top-down approach. People around the world who live in abject poverty are not silent or ignorant; it is just that the rest of the world is not listening. In response to this, my idea is to create indigenous media programs run by and for local youth. The goal is to support African refugees as they build coalitions across race, ethnicity, class, and nationalities to address issues surrounding ecological, environmental, economic, democratic equity. Moe-Lobeda writes about the two streams of action for social change: resistance and rebuilding. In the case of African countries, there is a need to resist the way the rest of the world tells stories about those living on the continent. By taking ownership and authorship of how the stories of refugee youth are shared, these individuals can shape their collective imagination.

Conclusion

In the last two years, I have read, listened, interacted, and grown alongside my classmates. I have learned a significant amount through feedback from professors. I learned to consider other people's perspectives on issues and worked on gaining understanding. This program helped me rekindle my spiritual journey in the sense that I finally understood that my intellectual and spiritual journeys do not have to be mutually exclusive. I can talk, care about the planet, and still believe in God. I can care about social justice issues and still believe in the afterlife. The version of Christianity that I knew before said that I should not care about this world because heaven is where we belong. Despite that, I recognize that I will need time to process the information I have absorbed over the last two years. I feel much more equipped to pursue my passion for helping people in a more professional capacity.

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