

Piecing Together Narrative Puzzles: A New Scholar's Reflections on a Community Partnership in an Attempt to Reconcile the Research Teaching and Outreach Triad

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This essay explores the ways in which narratives pieces (beginning with my own personal narrative, moving to the community outreach project that I have been working with, and finally through the narratives of my students) fit together to inform my work and I hope the work of other emerging scholars interested in community outreach. Ultimately, when read in conjunction with and respect to one another the narratives help to illustrate the ways in which community partnerships provide a wonderful merging of civic engagement and situated practice that makes the triad of teaching, outreach and scholarship dynamically interact and complimentary.

Introduction

Just as the reasons people enter the academy vary greatly, the reasons academics become involved in community partnerships and community-based scholarship likewise vary. For some, community partnerships and community-based scholarship provide opportunities for being involved in, creating, or in some way effecting change. When I first read the call for this special edition of *Reflections*, I was excited because I recognized an opportunity to reflect about my own motivations for engaging in the work I do. I welcomed the opportunity to reflect about the impact of community partnerships on my scholarship, teaching, and general academic identity. I knew that there were connections, but without reflection, they did not emerge instantly. I found myself looking for a way of framing the personal and the public in such a way as to come to some new insights. What I ultimately concluded, through piecing together the fragments of my personal narrative, my community partnership work, and the narratives of my students, is that community partnerships provide a wonderful merging of civic engagement and situated practice that makes the triad of teaching, outreach and scholarship dynamically interact and complement each other.

First Fragment: My Personal Narrative

I became an English teacher because I felt driven, or even called, to find ways to reach those who struggled with language. I wanted to help educate and demystify some of the opacity associated with language, writing, and language instruction. As I saw it, by making language and writing more accessible, I could empower people who are often made to feel less valuable or worthy because their language patterns and usage may not meet what has been established as the “standard.” I wanted all students with whom I worked to understand how they may be manipulated by the language used around, about, and even at times for them, and to move from that understanding to a place where they could use language to effect specific changes in their own lives.

With this “call” in mind, I began my academic career teaching students for whom English is one of many languages as well as students who had been classified by the university as “developmental” and/or “basic” writers. My classes were made up of students from a range of cultural, ethnic, social and economic backgrounds; many of them had known little success in English classrooms. While I found this work wonderfully rewarding,

with time I also found a drastic reduction in my university's—and my state's—commitment to both the populations and the programs that supported this work. Ultimately, the university ceased offering ESL and what they considered developmental English classes, moving students to the local university-affiliated English Language Institute or the local community college system.

As a result, the cultural make-up of my writing classroom began to change. As the university became more and more selective, the students in my writing classrooms were more and more affluent, and more homogeneous. I found that I was no longer teaching students who struggled with issues of language access or empowerment; instead, I was teaching students who had experienced great success and even privilege when it came to issues of language and writing. I still had wonderfully bright and insightful students, but they were not exactly the students that I had entered the profession to work with or had felt called to help. I found that my classroom work was becoming somewhat separate from what I saw as my scholarship and that my scholarship was moving farther and farther from the work that I wanted to do. For many years before this change in student demographics, my classrooms had provided me with reflective opportunities that generated the research that ultimately informed my understanding of what could be accomplished through language. I then, of course, applied the knowledge and understanding from my research to my classroom environment, beginning the process anew; my teaching and research fed each other in a wonderfully symbiotic relationship. But with the new population of students I began to teach, I found myself struggling to find ways to reconnect my teaching and my scholarship. Ultimately, the key to that reconnection came from my decision to involve myself in community-based programs and partnerships, where I once again enjoyed the opportunity of teaching a more heterogeneous population.

Because of an influx of refugees into the region, I was invited to work with the university Office of Service Learning's partnerships program to help address the language and literacy needs of the refugees in our local and extended communities. This opportunity provided me with a range of instructional possibilities outside the traditional university writing classroom. I was excited and reenergized by the opportunity to play a part in having language and literacy contribute to an individual's success and ultimately to the success of a community. I quickly became involved with local and regional efforts to help African refugee families with language instruction as part of their acclimation to the area. In the process of doing this work, I also began to help my students in these community-based classes record their stories of placement, displacement, and relocation, through which they also explored how these changes helped to shape who they were.

I soon began to see the possibilities of my outreach and scholarship coming together but I did not initially see any way to connect what I was doing to my teaching. Because of my inability to see the connections and in spite of my personal commitment to this outreach work, my career still felt fragmented. The refugee students were so very different from my students at Virginia Tech, and the work that I did with them was drastically different from anything I did at the university.

Second Fragment: My Work with The Pilot Street Literacy Partnership

For two and a half years, I continued to volunteer at several community partnership programs designed to assist the literacy development of a community of Somali Bantu, Ethiopian, Burundian, Rwandan and Eritrean refugees.ⁱ Then, in 2006, I began to work with families who are part of the Oak Grove Apartment Complex on Pilot Street in Salem, Virginia.ⁱⁱ Each week when I turn on to Pilot Street, I feel as though I have traveled much farther than the forty minutes the trip has actually taken. The housing structure is somewhat familiar; it is an older horseshoe of apartment buildings built during the 1970s, but the faces and interactions seem quite out of the ordinary from my daily activities or encounters. The faces that appear from behind doorways, the men I see sitting on entrance stoops, and the many children running about seem more like a picture of an African township than a Southwestern Virginia apartment complex. This community—its social structures, practices and lifestyles—is drastically different from the university environment in which I work daily. Yet even though I have worked at the university for several years and Pilot Street only a short time, I feel equally (if not more) comfortable in this environment. Becoming comfortable on Pilot Street took more time than I initially imagined it would. Many of the refugees were very suspicious of me because I am African-American. As a result of a previous outreach experience with a similar refugee population at my daughters' school, I knew that I would have to spend a great deal of time actively being a part of the community in order to be trusted enough to really be effective with any literacy initiatives and ultimately with helping them to gather and record their identity narratives (this substantial time investment is an issue that I will return to later in this essay). I understood that I was initially associated with the problematic images and perceptions of African-Americans that are exported and accepted, even by those with whom we share historical roots.

At first glance, this community seems very similar to refugee communities in major metropolitan areas. Audrey Singer and Jill H. Wilson of The Brookings Institution recently conducted a comprehensive study documenting the numbers of refugees, the reasons for their refugee status, and similar trends among refugees, who settle in and/or relocate to major cities in the U.S. In their report, "Refugee Resettlement in Metropolitan America," Singer and Wilson suggest that because of family connections and community needs "refugees have overwhelmingly been resettled in metropolitan areas with large foreign-born populations"; they also go on to say that "the US refugee program aims to disperse refugees throughout the country so as not to place a burden on specific localities or agencies" (5). Oak Grove Apartments is one of several "dispersed populations" located in Southwestern Virginia.

Kevin Jernegan, a staff member for the Migration Policy Institute, argues that "these non-traditional receiving states have seen significant growth in their foreign-born populations, ushering in a new era of integration challenges across the country" (4). Yet while more and more refugees are settling in more semi-urban or rural areas, the support and opportunities that they are provided may be limited, including support from local agencies, churches, and civic support services. While work with this growing refugee population is often perceived as challenging, particularly in terms of the expansive needs

often associated with the resettlement, the program with which I have been working most recently actively meets these challenges. The Pilot Street Literacy Partnership (PSLP) not only assists the literacy practices of the participants in this community, but also provides them with opportunities to utilize these literacy practices to enhance themselves and their community. Up and running since February 2006, The Pilot Street Literacy Partnership (PSLP), named for the street on which the apartment complex is located, is a collaborative community literacy program coordinated by the Virginia Tech Office of Service-Learning and Refugee and Immigration Services in Roanoke, Virginia. The program has also received foundation support as well as support from the Office of Service-Learning's Global Neighborhood Project/Learn and Serve America grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service.

PSLP provides English Language Learning classes, after-school homework help, reading and writing classes for adults, and child-care services for those adults who are enrolled in the language and literacy classes. To make the program more accessible to participants, classes are located in one of the Oak Grove Apartments. The Oak Grove Apartments are home to approximately thirty Somali Bantu, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Rwandan, and Burundian refugee families with new families arriving weekly. Amy Nasta coordinates the activities at the PLSP, working with local community volunteer teachers, student volunteers from Virginia Tech's College of Engineering, and faculty and student volunteers from the Departments of History, Human Development, and English. Amy also coordinates assistance from student and faculty volunteers from Hollins University and Roanoke College, both located near the Oak Grove Apartment site.

All too often, particularly in communities with ESL learners, literacy is seen as the process of acquiring and performing basic reading and writing skills. Issues of empowerment that include discovering narrative voice, exploring identity, and having the ability to question and change one's circumstances are often deferred. In contrast, the PSLP actively engages and applies the theoretical concepts generated by research in New Literacy Studies.ⁱⁱⁱ PSLP treats the process of developing literacies and engaging community members' sense of participatory community action as an integral part of the work they do. The PSLP asks its participants, teachers, and volunteers to bring the community into the program, "encouraging people to invent literacy practices and helping learners to adapt and expand their literacy practices" (Ewing 17, 18, 19). The PSLP works to develop and expand participants' literacies at the same time that it fosters an environment that encourages community members to be active agents in creating the community they want.

In his analysis of community literacy programs, Jeffrey Grabill examined the politically ethical possibilities for literacy programs to affect change within communities. My work at the PLSP was informed by Grabill, as I sought to actively question and engage the "meaning and value of literacy" by constantly assessing and addressing the needs of the community participants I worked with. Armed with the community-based practice and scholarship of Eli Goldblatt, Steve Parks, Linda Flower, Shirley Brice Heath, Linda Adler-Kassner, Ira Shor and many others, I readily and excitedly worked as part of the

PSLP teaching team to provide instructional opportunities that were informative and empowering.

An example of this sort of instruction occurred this past winter when many of the families were having difficulties because smaller and larger repairs to their apartments, although reported regularly, were not being attended to or fixed by the apartments' owners. Improperly sealed doors and windows that allowed in the cold weather, peeling paint that children might ingest, and lack of washers and dryers because of a fire in the building that housed the laundry facilities were all concerns that various members of the community brought to their literacy and language discussion classes. At about the time these concerns were becoming most pressing, the classes began a unit on letter-writing. Many families were distressed by their living conditions but did not know how to communicate their concerns. To provide those who were concerned with a venue for taking positive action, part of the letter-writing unit was modified to discuss a broader range of persuasive letter writing. The PSLP teachers addressed this specific community need by providing the class with the literacy tools to move beyond silence and acquiescence in the face of substandard housing. Many residents were hesitant to voice their complaints, however politely, because they were often reminded by the property owner how much better their living arrangements were when compared to the refugee camps. In fact, the story they would most often hear was that most of the refugee families were surprised and impressed with having running water and indoor toilets. Although the conditions were drastically better than those of the refugee camps from which they had come, the units in the Oak Grove Apartments are old, poorly maintained, and rented to the refugees because others will not live in such conditions. As teachers, we wanted to go beyond what was seen as the accepted literacy practice of merely providing the students with letter-writing skills useful for functional job literacy to "developing processes for making commitments to [the] local community, which are in various ways 'liberating' for them" (Grabill 46). With this in mind, the letter-writing unit was expanded to include discussions of the letters as a mechanism for persuasive communication. We provided concrete examples of how letters have been and can be used personally, locally, and even globally.

After our classroom discussion and practice in various forms of letter writing, a few participants in the class decided to write letters to the apartment complex owners. They wanted formally to document the repairs that were needed in many of the apartments. These participants used the letter-writing unit as a means to work through that communicative process. Despite some obvious connections to the rhetorical practices I teach in the university classroom, I did not initially see how my work with the people in the PSLP was actually directly connected and applicable to the students in my university writing classrooms. Instead, I continued to view my work with the PSLP as feeding my desire for activism, but completely separate from my work as a faculty member teaching writing at the university.

First Connection: Connecting My Teaching and My Work with The Pilot Street Literacy Project

The connections between my work at the PSLP and my university teaching began to become somewhat clearer later in that same year when I was forced to blur the lines between the two by bringing the two classes together on a dental hygiene project. Many of the parents and their children in the refugee community had recurring issues with dental care and a need for dental hygiene products. The issue was raised in the literacy classes so that the teachers and students could collaboratively think about possible ways to address this issue beyond the limited assistance that had been provided them by refugee services. Around the same time, a student in my composition course at the university told me about being very dissatisfied with the way she had been treated by university health services. In our before-class discussion, I happened to mention the parallels that I saw between her situation and the dental hygiene issues that my PSLP students were facing. Before long, our composition class was having an active discussion about how to effectively change the ways in which they were routinely treated by the university health center through multiple writing efforts. During the week that my PSLP students were working to organize a tooth-brush drive and in the process were using numerous literacy activities that likely would not have been learned or practiced until much later in the program's curriculum, my composition students were doing the same as they sought to, as they called it, "take on the student health care system." It was within this context of instructional environments that I had deemed so different that I began to see how mutually enriching they could be; not only was my work with the PSLP empowering my refugee students, but it also provided knowledge and understanding I could take back to my university students. While many scholars have spoken about the interconnectedness of their community work and academic teaching and research, my own first-hand experience of it was both new and exhilarating.

In spite of the new connections I started to make between my community-based work and my teaching, however, I was still unsure about how to reconcile the seemingly contradictory demands related to my community-based research and the publication requirements for tenure and promotion. One aspect of the challenges that I sought to reconcile was based on the ways in which various institutional entities view the type of work that I was doing. At our university, The Office of Service Learning coordinates refugee outreach programs for our area. The Office of Service Learning, while not housed in an academic division, does work across the university with many departments and programs. In many ways, the fact that these efforts are housed in this unit often affects the ways in which those academics who choose to do this outreach research are viewed. To many administrators within academic departments, outreach of this type may be viewed as loosely associated with, but certainly not central to, academic efforts or scholarship. Moreover, the research I was doing at the PSLP was very time-consuming; much of my research included lengthy interviews with community members and their children. I saw this work as a necessary precursor to and an important part of the research that I was to later conduct on refugee narratives of displacement. The pressure to do a particular kind of scholarship and a particular type of publishing was frustrating. I could not see in our tenure guidelines—both spoken and unspoken—an understanding of either the value or the nature of community-based research. Interestingly, I began to

see the need for my own scholarly empowerment in much the same ways that the PSLP students recognized the need to empower themselves to change their community. I wanted my community-based scholarship to effect change in my university community.

Second Connection: Connecting the Lines Between the Personal and Institutional, or Private Narratives and Public Change

Change, however, always comes with challenges, and institutional change comes with institutional challenges. While I was able to work through the ways in which my scholarship and teaching could and did dynamically inform one another, I was still left with working challenges faced by students and scholars choosing this specific type of work. I still don't have specific answers for everyone, but I did find commonality and renewed energy by looking at the lives of my PSLP students and the challenges that they faced within the institutions that presented them with personal and professional challenges.

At PSLP, as part of a unit on jobs and future goals, I decided to conduct tape-recorded interviews with my students. My feeling was that allowing them to articulate or speak their desired futures might give us a collective sense of how to better structure the classes and give them a sense of ownership of those desires. So much of what the members of the refugee community do on a daily basis is done because they are told they have to do it. They are often reacting to crisis events and little time is spent providing them with opportunities to give voice to who they are, to what they have come from, and to their hopes and dreams. This idea of using language to narrate yourself from your past through your present to your future is a reflective practice that the PSLP students have not been able to do in their new environment. They do not have such opportunities in either the refugee camps (where they previously lived for as many as five to twelve years) or in their processes of resettlement. But the oral tradition of storytelling is a vital part of many of the students' cultures, and I hoped to tap into that cultural tradition with my taped interviews. Many of the Bantu student participants do not have written literacy in any language, so they were particularly excited about telling and recording the stories of their journeys. Several of them were excited not only about talking about themselves, but also about the possibility of working with the recorded transcripts as "text" for the classes in this unit. As teachers (the program coordinator, Amy Nasta, worked with me to conduct the interviews), we were encouraged by their enthusiasm because the project quickly became one that they enjoyed, and their focus and participation increased. Personally, I was pleased with the reception of this smaller project of recorded narratives because after working with these students for a little over a year I believed that doing recorded narratives might help them become more comfortable and better prepared for a much larger "journeys" unit we were going to undertake later.^{iv} It also demonstrated a comfort level with me that I had not previously enjoyed.

The interviews for this unit were composed of five to seven questions conducted in a brief time frame—one or two classes—with each interview designed to allow us (both the teacher and the participant) time to stop and play back parts of the interview for information revision or clarification as needed. We (the teachers and some project volunteers) then took the interviews and transcribed them for the students to work with

for the rest of the unit. During these interviews, we asked program participants about what they hoped to gain from the classes, what they ultimately wanted from the language learning that they were doing, and how they had come to that particular desire. During most of the school year, the student composition of the PSLP classes often changed week to week. There was, however, always a core of about ten students in the level one class and six in the level two or advanced class. The students we interviewed were all from the advanced class, and as I discuss the interview results, I will only use their first names (Helima, Makagbeh, Fatima, Masa, Abdikadir and Muse). Through the process of doing the interviews, transcribing the tapes, and reviewing the transcripts, I was reminded of why so many of us in composition choose to engage in scholarship that is community-based or engages such a wide range of learners. The refugees' stories reminded me that the payoff for this sort of work can indeed be life changing, and that what we learn in the process can inform our understanding of the role, effect and power of language in a range of situated practices. The interviews and the work that I did with PSLP reinforced my belief that what we do as literacy volunteers and writing teachers can shape individual lives, family relations, and community experiences.

Nearly all of the men and women said that they wanted to continue their language study so that they could be more active in their children's schooling. For all of the participants who had children, this desire for literacy as a way to be involved in the education of their children was cited as one of their primary goals. Helima, Makagbeh, Masa and Muse all mentioned wanting to be able to better understand and correspond with the officials from their children's schools, while the others mentioned wanting to help their children with everyday school and life activities. Those whose children were not yet school-aged focused on acquiring literacy skills to help them with everyday needs from visits to doctors to buying and cooking the best foods. Abdikadir clearly articulated his desire to be better able to help with his children's schooling when he said, "I want to help children with homework and better know the papers that they bring from the teachers and the schools." He went on to say that this would help him as a father. His need for literacy as a means of clarifying and shaping his identity is particularly significant for Abdikadir, as he has emerged as an elder in the community and many of the men in the community come to him for help and advice.

The second most commonly mentioned reason for taking the classes was to further their own education and improve their job opportunities. Most wanted jobs with more responsibility, higher pay, and better job security. For some, this was not as much a matter of general literacy skills as it was an acquisition of English language skills. Makabeh had been a teacher before escaping to the refugee camp and she wanted to learn more English so that she could be certified to teach here in the U.S. She explained, "Before I was a teacher, but then my family escaped to Ethiopia during war, and then again we had to move to the camp in Kenya." Helima also wanted to get a degree so that she could teach. Masa wanted to continue her studies to eventually become a nurse. Hasaan and Abdikadir both wanted to be mechanics. Many of the Bantu residents at the Oak Grove Apartment complex were not literate in their own language of Mai Mai, which makes their literacy efforts more complex. ^v While they were doing quite well being a part of the advanced class, and their conversation had progressed significantly,

they often experienced a great deal of frustration with reading and writing. During both Hasaan's and Abdikadir's interviews, they expressed the desire to have jobs that would require limited reading and writing and that would allow them to utilize some of the skills that they picked up at the camps and have been using to help others in the community.

All of the students interviewed wanted to be able to move out of the apartment complex to houses or bigger and/or nicer apartments. In fact, all of those interviewed very strongly expressed a desire for professional and personal upward mobility. One particularly poignant point was raised by Fatima, a refugee from Eritrea. She wanted to become more literate to distinguish herself from her current surroundings. In her interview, Fatima stated, "I want to read and write good so I am not treated same as everyone here (she gestures to her classmates). I want to be woman in Roanoke with job and nice house and clothes, not always refugee in small apartment." Fatima's attitude was also reflected in her actions and was even being passed on to her two daughters, aged 17 and 20. Unlike the other adult women refugees, Fatima and her daughters do not consider themselves Muslim, even though Fatima wears a Hijab. She and her children are very active in a local Methodist church. Recently, after securing better jobs, Fatima's two daughters, Fatu and Sita, moved out of her Pilot Street apartment and rented an apartment on their own. An apartment with so few inhabitants is very uncommon, as all of the Pilot Street apartments house full and even extended families all living together. Usually the younger, working-aged women are part of the financial support system for their extended family. Unfortunately, Fatu and Sita's move to an apartment by themselves and away from Pilot Street has also meant that they are attending fewer PSLP classes. Ironically, their pursuit of the goal of non-refugee status is in some ways hindered the very opportunities that may help them reach their goals of upward financial mobility.

Employment for many adults in the Oak Grove community is problematic because their work efforts are constantly placed in conflict with their literacy efforts. When they arrive in the U.S., the refugees are provided with four months of financial and social support by the U.S. government, directly and indirectly through governmental grants to local agencies. After the four-month period has ended, physically-able adults are required to secure employment to pay for bills, rent, and food. Sometimes, ongoing assistance (often for several additional months) is made possible through support from special state and federal programs, grants from private foundations, and contributions from individual donors. However, it is the expectation that long-term support will come from community resources and the refugees themselves. Because of their limited literacy skills, most of the jobs that are available to the refugees are those in facilities that require extensive manual labor, often on the night shift. In this particular community, these jobs include positions as cleaners in a local nursing home, launderers for a local medical center, and various assembly-line jobs at local plants. Since few of the refugees read well enough to pass a written driving test or have access to transportation to practice driving, job choices become even more restricted to places that can be accessed via public transportation, or to locations where others from the housing community work. The institutionalized system that is encouraging them to succeed is also hindering that success by placing unrealistic time constraints on the preparation necessary for success.

While very differently framed and enacted, my experience and that of my PLSP students are somewhat similar. We are both working to reconcile our sense of who we want to be while working within specific institutional structures that make that process challenging. For them, the work that they need to do makes it challenging for them to acquire the literacy skills needed for reaching their personal and professional goals. For me, the work that I am doing by engaging in community-based research has its own institutional challenges. I began this piece with a narrative of my journey to the writing classroom and composition studies, and I do not see that journey as particularly unique. For many scholars in composition and writing, as well as those in the field of education, the work that we view as most meaningful may not provide recordable outcomes at the rate that is often expected for successful progress through tenure and promotion. While composition scholars are likely to see the value of this work to the overall discipline and to specific communities, those outside of our discipline too often denigrate such community-based research as mere “service” or “outreach,” two categories of academic labor that are not as highly valued as research. While the scholarship that is produced from community-based research is published or disseminated in forums that are more broadly accessible to the communities in which the work takes place, however, these forums may not be given the same weight as more traditional research that is published in more traditional (and thus more valued) journals.

While initially the process of writing and revising this essay provided me with an opportunity to piece together my own fragments, by describing and reflecting on the research and teaching that I have been doing as part of a community, I have also described why new scholars in the field should not only undertake but also advocate for this type of work. This work is fundamental not only to our own identities but also to the growing and expanding identity(ies) of the discipline. While there are challenges in the ways that such community-based research and teaching are viewed, the value gained by working within these multiple contexts ultimately provides opportunities for cross-disciplinary work that allows new scholars to actively live the change and empowerment that we are trying to effect outside as well as inside a 21st-century university.

Notes:

¹ In general conversation, many people use the terms refugee and/or immigrant interchangeably to refer to a general foreign-born population who has resettled in the U.S. The Pilot Street Partnership works specifically with what is legally considered a refugee population. With this in mind, I felt that it would be best to have an official definition. According to Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) at section 101(a)(42), a refugee is: “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/geninfo/index.htm>).

² The names of the apartment complex and the participants have been changed.

³ My reference to New Literacy Studies is based on such works as Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives*, 2001; Paul Gee’s “The New Literacy Studies; From ‘Socially Situated’ to the

Work of the Social”, 2000; Brian Street’s “Literacy Events and Literacy Practices”, 2000 and others. My definition of NLS takes literacy beyond the traditional notion of skills acquisition to considering what it means to be literate and the ways in which literacy is a social practice and as such is community-contextual.

⁴ Composition studies, anthropology, and cultural studies are among the disciplines that employ methods of discourse analysis to examine relationships between the language of identity and the language of place. Although identity has historically been associated with one’s affiliation with place (i.e., location, state, or nation), more recently, instead of assuming a fixed sense of identity, researchers across disciplines think in terms of multiple and more fluid identities. The situation of displaced peoples highlights this more fluid understanding of identity because their identities are transitional across space and often do not unfold uniformly (Lavie and Swendenburg 1996). While studies have examined displacement and the geographic identity of Diaspora, no research to date explores the ways in which the narratives of multiply relocated persons—particularly refugees—show evidence of their transitional identities. Part of my work with recording their journey stories over time is focused around exploring the narratives of these transitional identities while capturing them in their words for future generations who may not have memories of or an understanding of the lives of their parents.

⁵ Most of the Somali Bantu who live in Oak Grove Apartments are resettled from Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya after fleeing ethnic persecution in Somalia. They descended from six African tribes originally living in what are now Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi. More historical information on the Somali Bantu can be found on the following websites: The National Somali Bantu Project <http://www.bantusupport.pdx.edu/>, and MUKI: The National Somali Bantu Organization <http://www.somalibantu.com/>.

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