"Our house there is ugly but still we happy": An ethnographic study with women navigating displacement and resettlement.

Bridget Kearney

University of Louisville

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“OUR HOUSE THERE IS UGLY BUT STILL WE HAPPY”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY WITH WOMEN NAVIGATING DISPLACEMENT AND RESETTLEMENT

By

Bridget Virginia Kearney
She | Her | Hers

B.A., University of Louisville, 2011
M.A.T., University of Louisville, 2014

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

Department of Elementary, Middle & Secondary Teacher Education
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

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A Dissertation Approved on
March 29, 2023

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DEDICATION

To Kassala, Tesha, and, especially, to Amira: it has been the honor of my life to record your stories. Thank you for always making me laugh. I am so deeply grateful for our friendships.

And, to Jackson. I love you so, so much.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel so lucky to have had the support of so many people throughout this changeful season of life. I began my PhD studies at age 28 and wrote this dissertation from ages 31 to 33. This work was done throughout many relational, social and professional transitions and upheavals, including new jobs, new partnerships, and a pandemic. I am forever grateful to those that supported me along this journey and encouraged me as I became the writer, researcher, educator, and person I am today.

First, I must thank Amira, Tesha and Kassala. Working with you to create this dissertation has been the most meaningful and fulfilling experience of my life. I know we will have a lifelong friendship. I respect you; I admire you; I love you. We were meant to do this together.

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To all my family, near and far: your support means everything. To all my grandparents: I wish you were here for this moment so badly. To Chels and Alex: I feel so lucky we view the world in the same way; thank you for always being interested in my work.

To my parents: thank you for being the first people who told me I was a writer and a reader. You always, always encouraged my love of reading and writing, even when I wouldn’t stop reading at the dinner table, or when I was hiding around the house writing about everyone in my journal, like Harriet the Spy. Your love and encouragement have formed the foundation of this work. Dad, you will always be the coolest person I know; I’m so glad I inherited your need to question everything (especially those with power).
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To Jackson: I quite literally could not have done this without you, my biggest supporter and best friend. Sometimes I still feel so amazed that life led us here, together. But, it did, and we did it! As I write this, you are studying for your last test to become a licensed architect. Next week, you’ll take the test, and I will defend my dissertation two weeks after that. The past three years, we have proved we are stronger together, as you took six tests, and I wrote this dissertation. Soon, we will never again have to say I need to write or I need to study. This experience has been so much better with you by my side, as we took breaks together to go on walks, watch shows, play games, go out to dinner, or just lie around and laugh. I am so excited for everything that is to come, and so lucky to spend my life with you. I love you with everything I have.

Finally, to our pets, Crumb, Lima, Kitty and Dillie: thank you for being our little study buddies. Thank you for encouraging me by purring in my lap or sitting at my feet while I wrote, especially during the late nights. Thank you for showing me I needed to take a break by jumping on my keyboard or bringing me a toy. I love you, my sweet babies.
ABSTRACT

“OUR HOUSE THERE IS UGLY BUT STILL WE HAPPY”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY WITH WOMEN NAVIGATING DISPLACEMENT AND RESETTLEMENT

Bridget V. Kearney

March 29, 2023

In academic and public discourse, narratives surrounding refugee camps and the conditions within them typically depict experiences of sorrow and hardship. And, although the stories of struggle are certainly a part of the refugee experience, they are not the only part. This dissertation is a critical ethnographic study with a participatory research lens that focuses on the life experiences and storytelling practices of women in a resettled Sudanese family. It investigates the action of storytelling within displaced groups, the link between stories and community, and the importance of materiality and relationships in storytelling. This dissertation finds that storytelling can be used as a strategy to create community, understand loss, and make sense of identity and relationships throughout the process of displacement and resettlement. In addition, this research offers a counter-story — rooted in community and freedom — to the academic and public perception of refugee camps.
Due to the myriad protracted conflicts and climate disasters worldwide, which show no sign of abating, it is increasingly obvious that refugee camps — largely designed as temporary — are becoming much more permanent (Betts & Collier, 2017). Despite the fact that there are now entire generations growing up in camps, there are few studies that examine perceptions of refugee camps in the residents’ own words, and even fewer focusing on recollections of camps in resettlement; in particular, the memories of those who grew up in a refugee camp and view it as home. This dissertation aims to remedy that gap. It is theoretically grounded in postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy as a form of academic resistance to the essentializing discourse that often surrounds those that have been displaced. In the same vein, certain sections of this work are written in a narrative style for the dual purposes of highlighting the voice of the collaborators and increasing the accessibility of this research. Within this project, I committed to examining and deconstructing power, hegemony and bias throughout data collection and analysis, as well as within my own researcher positionality. This dissertation, which took place over the course of thirty-one months, illustrates the significance and effects of deep, personal relationships between researchers and collaborators in ethnographic research. Lastly, this research offers — and demonstrates the necessity of — a more nuanced story of refugee camps, displacement, resettlement, and refugees themselves.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Amira opens the door, takes my arm, and pulls me inside. “Hey, Miss,” she says, exasperated, rolling her eyes good-naturedly, “you just come inside.” My hand is raised in a fist, preparing to knock. I lower it and smile, “I know, I know. I forget sometimes.” She always jokes that Americans “need appointments” for everything. I kick off my shoes inside the threshold and she flops down on one of the plush couches lining the walls. I join her as she calls for one of her little sisters to bring us water. “Come close, Miss, sit here,” she gestures at her feet, holding up a hairbrush and some tiny rubber bands. I’d forgotten; during our last visit, she’d asked to braid my hair. As I move to the floor, Amira begins brushing, separating strands, “this make me remember my grandma making my hair, in Gaga.”

I lean back against her legs, listening.

This dissertation describes a qualitative, ethnographic study that focuses on the life experiences and storytelling practices of three women in a Sudanese family resettled in a midwestern city in the United States: the Adams. My relationship with Amira, the oldest daughter living in the United States, is the heart of this project, with all other connections and relationships growing from its core. Kassala, the matriarch of the family, and Tesha, Amira’s younger sister, are also main characters in this story, as well as the
youngest children of their close-knit group. Other Sudanese women, not blood related but nonetheless considered family in their resettled world, weave in and out of the pages. Above all else, this dissertation is a story. It is a story of how community and belonging are both the reasons to laugh and the reasons to grieve. It is the story of how those that have been displaced carry multiple homes within them, and how remembering this together can heal and connect generations of people (Kellas & Trees, 2009; Kohli et. al, 2021; Perry, 2008). It is the story of relationships: of Amira and me.

Although she and I previously held a friendship, the details of which will be described at length later, this project intensified it to one that will undoubtedly be lifelong, as both of us experienced the deepening of relationships that often manifests from ethnographic research (Bardzell et. al, 2016). From July 2020 to February 2023, amidst a global pandemic and much societal unrest, we met together to talk and share stories. Although I started this project with certain ideas and goals in my mind, I quickly discovered that this story belonged to Amira and her family, not to me. As my relationship with, not only Amira, but the women surrounding her, became safer and more trusting, so too did the amount and types of stories that were told. I learned where their thoughts tended to drift as they recounted long-ago experiences and observed the spaces in which their memories gained sharper focus. I am forever grateful for the way she and her family welcomed me into their homes and lives, and how comfortable it became to sit together in her mother’s living room, telling stories, braiding hair, drinking tea, and doing homework. I was not a passive observer in this project. I was a part of it; we all were. The four of us engaged in an “interactive and dialectical” (Park, 1993, p. 2) collaborative relationship, and what developed from this dissertation was a sense of
safety, trust, and deep love between myself and the three women. To me, that is the
greatest possible reward.

This chapter commences with a description of my relationship with Amira, Tesha
and Kassala. This is followed by a description of the women’s homes in resettlement,
their native country, first country of asylum, and their refugee camp, Gaga, which all —
but especially Gaga — feature heavily within their stories. This is followed by a brief
biography of the women themselves, as I believe this is the foundation of the dissertation.
After that, I describe the background of the study and what led to its formation. Then, I
outline the purpose and questions guiding my research. Next, I briefly delve into the
theoretical framework, methodology, and ethical implications of this study. Finally, I
share the outline and trajectory of the remainder of this dissertation.

The Beginning

I met Amira in 2017, when she was sixteen years old, in my ESL 1 class at a large
urban high school. She sat in the front row of my classroom, with her pencil, eraser and
notebook stacked neatly in front of her, eyes expectantly following me around the room.
During that year — the only one in which I was actually her teacher — I watched Amira
learn how to use a computer, begin to joke in English, and become accustomed to life in
the United States. I was drawn to her; we all were. Other students would move their seats
closer to hers and flick their eyes to her face after saying something funny, gauging her
reaction. Now, I see it when I am visiting her home: Amira, Amira, Amira, they say. It’s
often the only word I can discern through the Masalit, the language of her homeland.
The next year, I was not her teacher, but we saw each other in the school halls, lightly touching each other’s arms, or stopping for a second to chat. Sometimes, she would pop into my classroom after school and sigh about her new math class or bemoan the noisy Americans whose talking drowned out the teacher. Almost always, her sister, Tesha, was with her. One day, they came into my room very seriously. Amira took my hand and guided it to her belly, protruding under her baggy dress: *I’m pregnant, Miss, don’t tell anyone at school.* I discovered later that Amira was actually married in the Sudanese tradition, though not officially recognized by the United States government, in part because of her young age. She kept her pregnancy a secret for the entirety of it, hiding her growing stomach beneath increasingly billowing gowns. This ended on a still afternoon in early May.

_I opened my classroom window to let in the new summer heat and turned my back to clean up the day’s teenage debris, chatting with two of my older female colleagues. Suddenly, we heard a quiet, “Miss.” Looking through the narrow window, I saw Tesha, her small face peering inside the classroom. “Can you please come,” she pleaded, her voice clearly distressed. Leaving my coworkers inside, I rushed out to the faded, concrete parking lot. Tesha, wringing her hands, led me to Amira’s small, black car. Both of them were typically very composed, rarely showing strong emotions except humor. Amira was sitting in the drivers’ seat, knuckles whitening against the leather steering wheel. “Please don’t drive,” Tesha begged her. Amira insisted she was fine, sticking her keys in the ignition, then gasping with pain, sitting back against the seat. “Miss,” Tesha said, imploring me to help them, her eyes filling up with tears. I was one of their first teachers_
in the United States; they trusted me completely. They were certain I would know what to do. Calling 911, I listened as the operator informed me an ambulance was on its way, but just in case, did I have access to string, scissors, hot water, and a towel? Inwardly panicking but trying to stay calm: I definitely did not know what to do. I remember this moment so viscerally: squinting into the sunshine, blacktop glowing with heat, Tesha’s hitched gasps, Amira’s small hands clutching the wheel. Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Luckily, the ambulance arrived in time, but after I came close to delivering Amani, Amira’s first son, in our high school parking lot, she and I were bonded for life. That summer, as I met her baby and became closer to her family, I began bonding with them, too, and became more and more intrigued with their perspectives on displacement, resettlement, and everyday life. I asked Amira if I could have the privilege of recording her story, and those of her family. Yes, she said.

Here it is. This is their story.

Their Homes

Amira and her family are originally from West Darfur, in northern Sudan. After being displaced from Sudan when Amira was four, they made a home in Gaga Refugee Camp in eastern Chad. Gaga was created to alleviate the overcrowding of other existing camps, which became extremely strained following the massive influx of displaced people after Darfurians fled Sudan en masse starting in 2003 (Caux & Le Breton, 2005). The women would live in Gaga for eleven years. Gaga will come up often in this dissertation, as the nostalgic home that Amira and Tesha regularly evoke. For Kassala, home is slightly different, more fractured. She remembers Sudan more clearly than her
daughters, which means she also remembers the moment of leaving, the jarring shift of place and time. Their perceptions of home, culture and identity are negotiated constantly, and are often attached more to community than a physical place. This is a concept that will be addressed at various times throughout this study.

Briefly, I will describe the sociopolitical context of the country of their birth, Sudan, as well as Gaga, which is located in neighboring Chad.

Figure 1.1: Map featuring Chadian refugee camps.

Sudanese anthropologist Abusharaf (2009), in her ethnography centering displaced women in Sudan, writes of the various ongoing conflicts in Sudan:

In Sudan there is no static “before,” no golden era that was suddenly interrupted by armed conflict, as many analyses of the impact of war on civilian populations assume. Indeed, that model is singularly inapplicable to the African continent,
whose history of conflict extends nearly uninterrupted from generations of resistance to colonial regimes through the power struggles that mark so many postcolonial states. (p. 3)

The War in Darfur — the genocide that displaced the Adams — was horrendous and complex but will only be briefly described here. In 2003, a Sudanese rebel group called the Janjaweed embarked on a genocidal campaign to ethnically cleanse the Darfuri people (Conflict in Darfur, n.d). This included the non-Arabic speaking Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit tribes; the Adam family are Masalit. The Janjaweed terrorized the groups, prevented foreign aid from entering Sudan, and murdered an estimated 100,000-400,000 people, further traumatizing even more: “more than one million [people, including children] have been killed, raped, wounded, displaced, traumatized, or endured the loss of parents and families” (Reeves, 2005, para. 1). Of those who were forced into displacement, many made the long trek to find asylum in the twelve Chadian refugee camps that were hastily created for the fleeing Darfuris (Conflict in Darfur, n.d.). When the Adam women mention the word Janjaweed in passing, it is in a hushed tone.

Although the tragedy of the War in Darfur is a part of the Adams’ experience — particularly Kassala’s — it will not be referenced at length in this study. That is another story.

What the Adams do often discuss are their lives in the refugee camp, Gaga. Technical descriptions of Gaga are not common on Google searches and in academic scholarship, especially post 2005. It was the twelfth camp made for Darfuran refugees seeking asylum in Chad and began on May 3rd, 2005, by the United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its NGO (non-governmental organization) partners (Dalium et. al, 2006). As with all refugee camps, Gaga was created as a temporary solution. In 2023, after two decades of the still ongoing Darfurian conflict that began in 2003-2004, it is clear that Gaga, along with many other camps like it, are much more permanent (Herz, 2007). The Darfurian refugees are now, in general, largely forgotten in the public eye, especially in light of the myriad of other migrant crises happening concurrently worldwide (Steers, 2020). However, as of February 2021, the last known census taken of the area, there are still around 370,000 displaced people living near the Chad/Sudan border (Darfur Refugees, n.d). This lack of research and information make the findings of this dissertation — narratives of life in Gaga in Amira, Tesha and Kassala’s own words — that much more important.

*Figure 1.2: Chadian refugee camp for Darfuri refugees (Knobil, 2005)*
In 2023, for the Adams, the physical homes are Kassala’s house and Amira’s apartment. Kassala’s home is the central meeting place for the entire Adam family, plus much of the female Masalit-speaking Sudanese diaspora in their resettled town. The house is on a quiet street within walking distance of a Target and a Walmart (places the Adams refer to as *the market*). It is a boxy, brick, ranch-style house you might find in many American neighborhoods; the Adam family is very proud of it. When I first knew Amira, before this research began, she and her family lived within a large apartment complex, colloquially referred to as *Dena Drive*, in a tiny, two-bedroom apartment. Many newly arrived displaced families are settled there. “When we leave Dena Drive, it is so good for our family. We have house now, a big house,” Amira told me once. Now, many of the Sudanese families still residing in the complex off Dena Drive visit Kassala’s house and dream of what could be for them and their families.

*Figure 1.3: Amira and Amani wave hello as I pull up in the driveway of their house.*
The door opens to a large living room with faded white walls. They’re bare except for some stickers, a string of Christmas lights, and a few painted straw spirals, hand-woven by Tesha.

Figure 1.4: Kassala’s living room. Kassala is praying in the corner, next to Yusra, while Amira works on grammar homework.

Inside, couches line three of the walls, with a completely open sitting area in between. On the fourth wall rests a gigantic TV that is always on, usually tuned to a children’s cartoon with accompanying English subtitles, or a humming YouTube video depicting people kneeling in prayer. At Kassala’s house, the women gather in the middle of the room, feet bare, backs against the furniture. When they’re together, they often prefer to sit on the floor. The stories they tell at Kassala’s house are usually lighthearted and full of laughter, no matter the seriousness of the topic. They are transported to a
different place, a different time. As they talk, you can almost see what they’re describing: the dusty roads of Gaga, bright jugs of dripping water, barefoot children racing and playing tag. When they are all together, they verbally recreate the scenery of their homeland, the lives they lived in Chad and Sudan.

Figure 1.5: Watching YouTube videos with Amira and Amani at her apartment.

At Amira’s apartment, there are fewer decorations adorning the walls, fewer couches and chairs for hosting. Similarly to Kassala’s house, there is a gigantic television on one wall, always on. At Amira’s apartment, usually, it is only the two of us who are present, along with her baby. The conversations we have there are often more serious and emotionally honest. We talk about fears and anxieties she doesn’t typically verbalize when she’s with the larger group. “When I’m alone I feel boring,” she will say when I arrive, gifts in hand, in order to signify the hospitality that is expected and traditional to
their cultural visiting norms (Crofts, 2010). “I am happy you come to see me here, Miss,” she says. “It is not good to be alone.”

**Amira, Tesha and Kassala**

*Below is a description of the three main characters of this dissertation. I have also included a section about the men to whom they are married. The men do not appear much in this story and are not referenced often due to the study’s focus on the women’s stories and experiences. However, they are nevertheless present occasionally, and largely in control of finances, etc., due to traditional gender roles, so are therefore necessary to mention.***

**Amira**

Without a doubt, Amira is the main character in this dissertation. In many ways, she also serves as the main character in their family unit. She is charismatic, funny and intelligent, which is shown most in chapter 4 of this project. As of February 2023, she is 21 years old, and is a sophomore at the local community college, taking coursework with the eventual goal of becoming a nurse. She is highly expressive in both English and Masalit, and constantly makes the other women laugh in full belly joy as she regales them with stories in her mother tongue. I always found myself joining the rest of them in laughter, even when I didn’t understand what they were saying. Her bigger-than-life personality contrasts with her petite frame. Amira is tiny, around five feet tall, and often bemoans this fact. “Miss, I stay too small, why I not grow up?” she will say, especially

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1Although it has been years since I was Amira and Tesha’s teacher, they still call me Miss rather than by my first name. All the Sudanese women I meet through the Adams call me Miss, too. Amira and Tesha know my name; I'm in Amira’s phone as Bridget. When they’re talking to me, though, they say they can’t change the way they’ve always known me. I am forever Miss. I like it. It feels like a term of endearment.
after comparing her size to her younger sister, Tesha. As a child in Gaga, Amira’s nickname was *Button*, “because I am tiny, tiny, like a belly button, you know?”

![Amira's favorite picture of herself.](image)

*Figure 1.6: Amira’s favorite picture of herself.*

Amira’s husband is a commercial truck driver and is often gone for long stretches of time, typically two to three weeks out of every month. He provides for her monetarily. At the very end of the timeline of this study, she moved from her small apartment to a house, where she plans to raise her children for years to come. The marriage was arranged as per her family’s traditions; he is a few years older than she is. Amira doesn’t often speak of their relationship. I know this might seem unbelievable, but as of 2023, I have never actually met her husband. When I ask how he’s doing, where he is, she’ll say something vague like, *he’s good*. I know her well enough to know when she doesn’t want to be pressed, when she doesn’t feel like talking. What she *has* mentioned, on a deeper level, is how frightened she was when she had her marriage ceremony at 16 and moved out of her family’s house. She told this story (which is referenced in chapter four), then
immediately after, straightened up and said, “but it is different now. Now I can do anything by myself.”

Tesha

Tesha is taller than her older sister, around 5’6”, with a higher-pitched voice. As of February 2023, Tesha is 20 years old, and is a sophomore at the same community college as Amira, also working towards becoming a nurse. Every other sentence that comes out of her mouth is usually a good-natured joke, especially when she’s with Amira. She is a quieter presence than her older sister, but still an essential part of their female unit. Along with being funny, Tesha is very studious. Typically, you will find her with a computer on her lap, typing softly, even during community gatherings with the other women. If she’s not working on her school assignments, she is knitting, or creating the woven straw designs that adorn Kassala’s walls.

![Figure 1.7: Gathering in Kassala’s living room. Tesha knits.](image-url)
Tesha’s job, after Amira left to get married, became watching over all the younger children. “Tesha is always babysitter,” Amira often jokes, but Tesha enjoys it. “I don’t mind,” she says, smiling. She is patient with children, possessing the same soft kindness that hums around her mother. Once, I asked her how many babies she is planning on having, “oh, many, many, many,” she responded.

![Figure 1.8: Tesha's favorite picture of herself.](image)

Tesha got married in October 2021, after being engaged for a few years. I was able to go to the wedding, where I was treated like the guest of honor. This was due in part, I believe, to my partner and I being the only White Americans present (I deconstruct this power dynamic later in this dissertation). I met Tesha’s husband a few times; he was extremely friendly and liked to practice his English with me the three to

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2 Originally, when I wrote the first drafts of this dissertation, I did not capitalize the word white when referring to race as I did with Black. I defended this position to my committee chair, saying capitalizing white felt wrong. My committee chair, wise as always, pointed out that not capitalizing the word contributes to our ability as White people to disregard the power and privilege that comes with Whiteness, and that capitalizing the word holds White people more accountable. Ewing (2020) agrees: “when we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness — the things that it is, the things that it does — we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility” (para. 6).
four times I met him. Tesha told me he was a family friend long before her father arranged their union. She says they laugh together.

Kassala

Kassala, the matriarch and mother, has a voice that is as soft as her demeanor. She has given birth to eight children, beginning when she was just 14 years old. Being a mother is central to who she is. Mommy is not just her title; it is an embodiment. Children constantly come to her with their complaints, bumps and bruises, and she never loses patience. Others might be visibly frustrated, but not Kassala. She coos and scoops them up, folding their small bodies into her billowing dresses and her cushioned bosom. “Mommy was pregnant forever. Now she have operation so she cannot have more kids, because she will keep having babies,” Amira says, “Mommy is always Mommy.”

Figure 1.9: Kassala’s favorite picture of herself.

She and her husband, Amira’s father, recently agreed that it was time to stop having children. Kassala is now 46 years old. She did tell me once, translated by Amira, that in Gaga, she would never have quit until nature forced her to: “you don’t stop making
babies. There is always someone to take care.” It was apparent from their stories that raising children in Gaga epitomized the “it takes a village” proverb. In resettlement, largely due to hectic schedules and a car-centered society, this kind of support is often far from accessible, far from guaranteed. Although she is finished having children of her own, babies still cling to her. Now, though, the youngest ones are Amira’s, and soon they will be Tesha’s. She is, in a few words, tender and sweet-natured. Her oldest daughters are protective and gentle with her. “Mommy, she is innocent,” they often say.

Kassala’s husband, Amira and Tesha’s father, is the unspoken patriarch of the family. Although, again, I rarely saw him during this study, the three women mentioned him reasonably often. I met him when I was Amira and Tesha’s teacher, back in 2017. He came once to parent-teacher conferences; I remember because he looked so much like Amira. He is kind, soft-spoken and small in stature. In their house, I usually saw him only briefly; as I was coming in, he was going out, that kind of thing. He was always happy to see me, to say hello, how are you, practicing his English, smiling and clapping if I responded in Masalit, goya. Amira taught me this; goya means “how are you” in Masalit. Twice, during the two and a half years I spent with the Adams, he was gone for long periods of time, back to Chad to visit his other wife. I remember finding out he had two wives and saying, what?! , obviously shocked. This was an instance in which I had to pause, check myself before I expressed my opinions at any length. “Yes, Miss,” they said, reassuring me, they know how I am, “he have two wife, it is okay.”

I began this dissertation untraditionally, with personal introductions, for a reason: the women, their cultures, and the environments in which they lived and grew up in are
the foundation of this study. The reader will meet them again in this manner in chapter four, but the sections below — as well as chapters two and three — denote a tone shift into more technical, scholarly descriptions of this study.

In the next section, I will outline, in more academic language than in the previous pages, the context of this research.

**Research Context**

Before I collected data, I had — I now realize — a more surface-level view of the storytelling practices of the Adam women. That is, my initial research questions focused mostly on the ways the process of sharing stories would make the women closer, but as I engaged in ethnographic research, I understood the practice as much more complex. After spending 31 months being with the Adam women, I found that the process of storytelling is the *strategy* used to achieve something else, something deeper. It was an action that created what the women were yearning for with the deepest parts of themselves: community, connection, belonging, *home*.

This reflects the claim that storytelling is a culturally sustaining practice (Doucet, 2019; Hall et. al, 2017; Perry, 2008; Streklova-Huhes et. al, 2019). As the women gathered in communal spaces to engage in conversation about their life experiences, they passed these experiences on to the younger generation: “storytelling practices [intertwine] histories, cultures, and ways of thinking into intergenerational learning of [refugee] families” (Streklova-Hughes et. al, 2019). This was especially meaningful for the Adam children who are — and will continue to be — born in the United States. For the younger generation who have never been to Gaga, or barely remember it, the refugee camp exists through the recollections of their sisters and their mother. They form pictures in their
mind’s eye, beg to hear the stories again, then begin to retell it all in their own words. It becomes a new story, with new words and new emotions. A multi-generational telling, a recreation.

This dissertation also illustrated the materiality of storytelling within the Adam family. Their stories were not just conveyed through spoken words, but with objects and sensory materials, demonstrating that “objects also allow people to communicate across social, cultural, and linguistic divides” (Antle et al., 2010, p. 3). The Adams’ stories were visceral in nature, relying on tangible objects: food, smells, clothing, music and more. They were told through images and videos; they were told through the body.

The Adam family’s generally positive memories of Gaga contrasted with the common public perception surrounding refugee camps, which are often portrayed as tragic, barren sites of poverty and heartbreak (Jackson, 2013; Malkki, 1995; Owens, 2009; Turner, 2015). Amira, Tesha and Kassala’s stories of life in Gaga serve, in many ways, as a counter-story to the copious amounts of narratives surrounding refugee issues. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). The actual perspective of refugees is often absent from the dominant academic and public discourse (Edward, 2007; Malkki, 1995; Jackson, 2013). This, then, is another key purpose of this dissertation: to write the truth of Amira, Tesha and Kassala as it emerges in their own words as much as possible. When the women gathered to share stories about Gaga, much of what they remembered was feeling loved in their community, despite the lack of resources compared with what they have in their resettled life. Thus, this ethnographic study presents a more nuanced understanding of life in a refugee camp. It makes space
for happiness, and rejects an essentialized, “simplified representation” (Augoustinos et al., 2015) of displaced groups.

**Implications**

This dissertation research is valuable and provides a contribution to the literature due to the need for knowledge regarding the link between storytelling and community within marginalized groups, particularly those resettled after living in refugee camps. A key purpose of this study is to examine, through the lens of storytelling, the importance of community to the displaced (Besteman, 2016; Edward, 2007; Harris et. al, 2014; Williams, 2006). In addition, this research illuminates a perspective of refugee camps that is not often represented. It investigates how growing up in a camp affects residents’ — like the Adams — perceptions of home and identity, especially as they remember it in resettlement.

This study presents a critical ethnography that has implications in wider power structures such as the isolating structure and effects of American neoliberalism when juxtaposed with a more “interdependent collectivist [culture] where the norm is one of implicit support” (Hendrickson et. al, 2013), like that of the Adams. The family demonstrated to me, continually and often, that community is their highest value, which is something that is not the highest priority in many individualist cultures, including the meritocracy-driven United States. At the Adams’ house, things like knocking and calling ahead weren’t important. The front door was revolving; it welcomed, at all times, anyone belonging to the Sudanese community in their resettled city. Often, I would leave their house and feel a little lonely after being surrounded by so much laughter and conversation.
It is my deepest hope that this project has the potential to benefit a myriad of parties and audiences. In an academic sense, this ethnographic study will benefit researchers interested in the action of storytelling within displaced communities, especially when stories are used as a strategy to create community and alleviate grief, as well as make sense of resettlement, shifting identities and cultural dichotomies. It will be of interest to those that are interested in storytelling as a culturally sustaining practice, as well as a method of identity and cultural maintenance. In addition, it serves as valuable to those wishing to study the effects of growing up in a refugee camp on identity and perceptions of home, particularly in resettlement. Finally, this work will be valuable to those that provide services to immigrant and refugee groups such as educators, social and nonprofit workers, and others that serve in community-centered roles.

On a more personal note: I am, without a doubt, a better person and researcher after the more than two and a half years I spent with Amira and her family. Our friendship, which bloomed during this project in ways it probably would not have without it, is the greatest value in and of itself. When I asked the women, what was your favorite part about doing this book (they call this dissertation my book), Amira and Tesha responded, when you come over, and, when we are together all the time. I think, when the four of us look back on this process, that is the thing we will remember the most: talking, laughing, and friendship.

Research Questions

This dissertation study, in an academic sense, is designed to generate new knowledge pertaining to the following qualitative research questions listed below. The three central questions to this research study are:
1. How is storytelling used as a strategy to help three women navigate and make sense of displacement and resettlement?
2. In what ways does the shared experience of storytelling impact and build relationships and ways of belonging among the three women, their family, and the researcher?
3. How do the stories of the women in this study complicate narratives of displacement and refugee camps that focus solely on sorrow and loss?

**Theoretical Frameworks**

I conceptualized this study as situated within a dual theoretical framework. The stories and scholarship represented in this dissertation should be read and perceived through the overarching frameworks of postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1961; Gandhi, 2019; Kincaid, 1988; Lazarus, 2011; Said, 1978) and critical pedagogy (Anyon, 2009; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1997; Shor, 2012). Notably, the work of postcolonial theorist Spivak (1988) grounded the research of this study; in particular, her writing exploring representation of subaltern women in academic and public discourse. In addition, this work was heavily influenced by Freire (1968) and his conception of critical pedagogy and education as a practice of freedom; this was supplemented by intersectional feminist scholar bell hooks (1994), who views the concept of liberatory education through an intersectional feminist lens. The duality of these frameworks, which critique issues of power and hegemony, work in tandem to ensure that the words of Amira and her family are guaranteed authenticity and respect within this research.

**Postcolonial Theory**

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3 The term “subaltern” was originally coined by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1947) and is generally defined in postcolonial studies as a person whose voice and actions are ignored, or is otherwise marginalized or excluded due to the cultural hegemony of Western colonialism and, increasingly, neoliberalism and neocolonialism (Chatterjee, 2010). Spivak (1988) defines “subaltern” as referring to those who don't give orders; they only receive orders.
The application of postcolonial theory is essential to this work. It serves as both a critique of essentialist representations of refugees in the discourse (Agergaard, 2021; Jackson, 2013; Malkki, 1995; Simm, 2005) and as a marker of theoretical reflexivity (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Rankin, 2010; Spivak, 1988; Untalan, 2020). As a White American woman writing about topics that reflect a group marginalized by Western society and discourse, it is imperative that I consider questions of representation, in order to avoid epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) that might, inadvertently or not, further Other (Bailey & Harindranath, 2005; Hatoss, 2012) or essentialize (Daniel, 2019; Rajaram, 2002) Amira and her family. Using postcolonial theory to guide my own thinking and writing ensured that I was constantly reflecting on elements of power and hierarchy that were present in my body and Amira’s and address dynamics that are societally imposed on our existence (Faria & Mollett, 2016). To hold myself accountable in this process, which is both academic and spiritual, I did my utmost to engage in radical honesty. For example, asking myself questions such as, how might I be centering myself in this work instead of the Adam women? How does my Whiteness affect my reactions, however unconscious, however unwanted? How does the historical context of colonialism — as well as its modern iteration of global neocolonialism/neoliberalism — influence the sociopolitical context of this research? Referencing Spivak (1988), as well as the other aforementioned postcolonial scholars, throughout the entirety of this dissertation journey has helped me center those reflections at the forefront of my mind.

Using postcolonial theorists and studies as beacons for my research and thinking have proved necessary, especially when grappling with issues of representation. Spivak (1988) claims that there is no true, ethical way to represent subaltern groups. However,
she (1988) writes about such topics anyway, while carefully acknowledging “the precariousness of [her] position” (p. 271). I occupy a similar space as Spivak (1988) and this tension is a thread running through the pages of these stories. As a theoretical framework, postcolonial theory deconstructs power dynamics that exist due to aftereffects of colonialism and are perpetuated more indirectly today through neocolonialist\textsuperscript{4} practices (Drew, 2023). Since this dissertation is largely focused on the relational, to avoid acknowledgement of the influence of this hegemony on said research relationships would render this research unsound, or at the very least, irresponsible.

Gandhi (2019) points out that “[postcolonialism] can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath” (p. 5). In other words, many of those who hold power or exist in spaces of privilege have a history of “mystifying amnesia,” i.e., not recognizing the implications of large systems of oppression such as colonialism on — in a word — everything, but in the context of this study, on the academic and public discourse. In this sense, I see postcolonial applications to my research as a form of academic resistance to the essentializing discourse that often surrounds those that have been displaced (Barnett, 2014; Nyers, 2006; Pasha, 2020; Relaji, 2020; Vella, 2016). I, like Gallien (2018), always “return to one constitutive principle of postcolonialism, which is to intervene in and disrupt the power dynamics as embedded in [refugee] discourse” (p. 721).

\textsuperscript{4}Neocolonialism is defined as the control of lower-income countries by higher-income countries through indirect means: “[the term] is widely used to refer to a form of global power in which transnational corporations and global and multilateral institutions combine to perpetuate colonial forms of exploitation of [lower-income] countries. Neocolonialism has been broadly understood as a further development of capitalism that enables capitalist powers (both nations and corporations) to dominate subject nations through the operations of international capitalism rather than by means of direct rule” (Halperin, 2013, para. 1).
In the next section, I will discuss my choice and use of the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy.

**Critical Pedagogy**

Similarly to postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy examines learning, culture and society as it relates to systems of power and oppression (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008; Wink, 2005). However, it is situated within educational contexts, frameworks and situations, though not always formal schools. For researchers who belong to a privileged demographic and are working with one or more that society has marginalized, a critical pedagogy framework is imperative when attempting to engage in any kind of educational exchange, formal or informal: “those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (Freire, 1968, p. 60).

The commonality between all the theories and methods used in this dissertation appears here again: reflexivity and radical honesty. This is a bedrock of my philosophy of education, theory and research.

As a lifelong educator, over the years, my research interests became increasingly situated outside of brick-and-mortar classroom walls. Although critical pedagogy, in an academic sense, is often represented in scholarship surrounding the traditional classroom paradigm (Hinchey, 2004), in this study, I ascribed to Freire’s (1968) tradition of community-based learning, most especially, his concept of *conscientização*. Freire (1968) defines *conscientização*, or critical consciousness (1968), as becoming aware of one’s social reality through reflection and action. Both in this dissertation and in my personal life, I most often experienced true critical consciousness while I was engaged in learning in more informal settings. Often, my personal transformation happened outside the walls
of a school: traveling, meeting new people, learning a skill, participating in community organizing, sharing stories.

I believe critical pedagogy is a natural framework for research on the emancipatory power of storytelling, relationships, and community. Freire argues that dialogue between educator and student (in the context of my study, researcher and collaborator) is the surest way to establish trust and love, and, resultantly, transform relationships with each other and the world. The basis of storytelling and community is rooted in dialogue and conversation (Buck & Silver, 2008). To sit together, to talk, and to begin to know each other is a deeply human and connective practice: “to hear each other ... to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition” (hooks, 1994, p. 39). The process of gathering together in community, telling and retelling stories from home to each other and to younger children, aligns with Freire’s theory that “people are fulfilled to the extent that they create their world (which is a human world), and create it with their transforming labor” (Freire, 1968, p. 145). Storytelling and creating community are transforming labor; they create worlds. They are fulfilling, freeing, and liberatory (Duncan et. al, 2013; Henry & Ladson-Billings, 2017; Kaur et. al, 2022; Powell, 2013).

Methodological Approaches

In this section, I will briefly introduce my methodological approaches to this study. In chapter 3, the methodologies of this dissertation will be covered in greater depth.

I conceptualized this study through a tri-methodological approach: using critical ethnographic and autoethnographic methods viewed through a participatory action approach.

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5Echoing Hajjar et. al (2018), I refer to the Adam women as collaborators in this study, rather than using more conventional verbiage such as participant or subject. The rationale of this lies in emphasizing the non-hierarchical nature of my relationships with the women, the importance of the co-creation of knowledge in this work, and serves as a small effort to disrupt traditional research hegemonies.
research lens. All three share similarities and lend themselves to an effective structure of data collection and analysis for this study, which is addressed to a greater extent in chapter three.

**Critical Ethnography**

I identified critical ethnographic methodology as the most fitting research method for this project, due in large part to its nearly two-and-a-half-year duration, as well as the fluid, unstructured, and observational nature of my interactions with the three Adam women. Most especially, because of the necessity of reflecting on culture and its implications on the research, as well of the importance of the relationships among all collaborators of this study: “across disciplines, fields and purposes, ethnography is perhaps distinguished by the centrality of ethnographer-research participant relationships in the research process, and the aim of understanding cultural variation of/and human universalities” (Kendall & Thangaraj, 2013, p. 83). I situated this qualitative research as ethnography in the critical ethnographic tradition due to my deep commitment to examining and deconstructing power, hegemony and bias within the research and my own positionality. Critical ethnographers “probe [possibilities] that will challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge, and social practices that limit choices, constrain meaning, and denigrate identities and communities” (Madison, 2004, p. 5). In placing the Adams’ women’s stories at the forefront of this project as I attempted to break down traditional researcher-participant roles, I conceptualized my research firmly within this methodological framework.

**Autoethnography**
Autoethnographic methodology is also threaded through the pages of this project, particularly in chapter four. The basic qualitative touchstones of ethnographic and autoethnographic are similar, from a methodological standpoint. My style of writing autoethnographically is influenced by Ruth Behar’s (1996) view of a more humanistic ethnography. Behar (1996) argues that embodying a “vulnerable observer” in research — forgoing objectivity and embracing personal emotions instead of resisting them — makes for a more complete and true ethnography. She writes academic research much more narratively than is traditional (MacDonald, 1994), which is also my goal for certain sections of this dissertation, particularly chapter four. I believe that academic writing does not have to be boring or dry. In fact, I argue it should not be, in order to increase the accessibility of academic research, as well the possibility of research to be used as a catalyst for more community-based change (Johnson et. al, 2017). As a result, my thoughts and personality are openly written throughout these pages. In Ellis et. al’s (2011) methodological survey of autoethnographic methods, they note:

Autoethnographers foreground the writing process itself as the primary method of inquiry. Autoethnographers write to discover, inquire, explore and show rather than tell a reader what is known. [They] seek to produce an aesthetic and evocative thick description of personal and interpersonal experience. They accomplish this by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling (e.g., character and plot development), showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice. (p. 2)
In this project, I did not separate myself from my research as I analyzed data through writing about my place within it (Richardson, 2003). This dissertation is a story. It was largely written as one, especially in chapter 4.

**Participatory Action Research**

As a researcher, I embody a participatory action research philosophy. Namely, that of deep respect for the participants, as well as a purposeful relinquishing of control and hierarchy (Bruinenberg et. al, 2019; Brydon-Miller, 2007; Kidd & Kral, 2005). Researchers that ascribe to PAR do not position themselves as the boss or leader in a project (Datta, 2017; Ritskes & Sium, 2013; Bivens & Wheeler, 2021). They acknowledge that the participants are the experts of their own lives while they occupy more of a facilitator role. They allow for flexibility and change as a part of their methodological approach, recognizing that strict control will amount to less reliable, honest and rich data. A participatory philosophy that centers participant knowledge as truth is particularly effective when working with refugee, immigrant and Indigenous groups (Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Hallovich 2013; Starodub, 2017). In this study, I conceptualized the process of storytelling as an action, as the Adam women made sense of displacement and resettlement while gathering in community to share stories.

I am a White American woman. This identity and privilege cannot be ignored or glossed over. This is why the methodologies and frameworks used in this dissertation are *essential* for ensuring that issues of power and hegemony are continually recognized and addressed.
In the next section, I will deconstruct ethical considerations and delve into my researcher in greater depth.

**Ethical Considerations & Positionality**

During this 31-month study, I attempted to place ethical considerations and my own positionality at the forefront of the process. Much of the research surrounding those that have been displaced historically focuses on quantitative data and is commissioned by groups such as the UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM): “the aim of much ‘commissioned’ research is to identify and [categorize] displaced groups and ‘refugee issues’ in order to provide policy recommendations about how most efficiently to deal with the ‘problems’ ‘generated’ by refugees” (Halilovitch, 2013, p. 129). In other words, refugee groups are often reduced to statistics or political talking points and viewed as burdens on the state. Methodologies like PAR and critical ethnography used in research with the displaced, especially when viewed through frameworks such as postcolonial or critical pedagogy, emerge as counter-methodologies to the traditional research that institutions conduct on or to displaced groups (Caldas & Palmer, 2015; Udas, 1998). There must be a strong connection between ethics, epistemology and methodology with all marginalized communities. Historically, a Eurocentric view of research does not allow for any sort of representation and collaboration within research studies under the pretense of neutrality (Said, 1979). This is the academic myth of objectivity.

When using counter-methodologies and epistemologies that challenge Western tradition, I hold sacred the view that the researcher must articulate some sense of radical views and be willing to challenge the status quo. Those who dedicate themselves to
pushing against ingrained hierarchies of power and uplifting those that have been systematically silenced through the discourse must own up to their own positionality and recognize that “language is never neutral” (Freire, 1968, p. 115). For too long, the oft-repeated philosophy of neutrality has pervaded research, “propped up by Eurocentric claims to ‘objectivity,’ or the emptying of our bodies and experiences from our scholarship” (Ritskes & Sium, 2013, p. iv). I firmly committed to anti-neutrality as an ethical stance in this research project, as I made it known to the Adam women through my words and actions that I was always on their side.

While working with Amira and her family, I vowed to keep in mind that “by exploring storytelling as a form of ethical discourse, we must, however, resist wanting to extract moral lessons from the content of a story, for the ethical is always an open question” (Jackson, 2013, p. 29). I largely identify with leftist ideologies. At times, Amira and her family would express opinions that were at odds with many of my core values and beliefs. This is in large part due to the conservative nature of the particular version of Islam to which they ascribe. However, throughout this study I resisted feeling and — especially — expressing judgment on any of their more conservative views, referring back to the previously mentioned quote, remembering that the ethical is always an open question (Jackson, 2013); thus, what I believe is ethical in this study is holding space for all of their beliefs, perceptions and opinions without forcing my own.

The issue of representation is key to the ethical implications of this study as I present and discuss its outcomes. If I consider tenets of postcolonial theory while collecting data and writing research, then I acknowledge that actual representation will never be achieved by anyone other than the collaborators, in this case, Amira and her
family. To claim true representation of a subaltern group if one is not a part of said group cannot be ethical and leads to a distortion of their position (Spivak, 1988). Spivak (1988) asserts that “a post-representationalist vocabulary [can] hide an essentialist agenda” (p. 27). In other words, those that claim to be representing the groups they’re researching can often fall into the trap of essentialization: the refugee as a victim, a martyr, a problem to be solved (Fernandes 2017; Nyers, 2006). The surest way to guarantee this does not happen is continual, genuine dialogue (Freire; 1968; hooks, 1999) and an abiding belief in the collaborator as the expert of their own life experiences, rather than the researcher.

The nature of my research methodologies lent themselves to a dialogic formula, but I constantly self-examined my notes and interactions and asked Amira if I was uncertain, in order to ensure that “collective discussion” (Jackson, 2013, p. 28) when making decisions was a hallmark of our process. After all, “if the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed” (Freire, 1968, p. 61). If I was unclear of the meaning behind a certain story, action or utterance, I checked with Amira, Tesha and Kassala, to collaboratively interpret the data and present it through that lens. In order to do this, I attempted to always remain accessible to the women in my words and actions, acknowledging that “if I do not speak in a language that can be understood, there is little chance for a dialogue” (hooks, 1989, p. 78).

Can I truly, ethically, represent Amira, Tesha and Kassala? Spivak (1988) would say no, and that therein lies the tension of Western scholars writing about — and even with — subaltern groups. So, although our relationships are authentic and deep, they cannot negate the power dynamics that are inherently present within an academic space and otherwise. My dissertation and my research, then, does not claim to represent the
Adam women. Instead, I support them and stand with them, as a collaborator and a friend.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. In this chapter, number one, I explained the purpose and background to the study, as well as presented its research questions. In addition, I described the homes, introduced the collaborators, and briefly outlined my positionality, theoretical framework and methodologies. Chapter two focuses on surveying academic literature and scholarship that illuminates the sociopolitical context and design of refugee camps, as well as examines narratives of refugees and refugee camps that are present in the public and academic discourse. In addition, chapter two examines literature surrounding the process of storytelling more generally, as well as when specifically utilized by displaced communities. In chapter three, I describe my research design, its procedures, and the study’s limitations, as well as revisit my researcher positionality and ethical implications of the study. In addition, chapter three outlines my methods of data collection and analysis. Chapter four offers a narrative interpretation of this study’s findings, written as much in Amira, Kassala and Tesha’s own voice as possible. Chapter five invites a discussion based on the findings and research questions, and chapter six offers suggestions, questions, and implications for future research. Per Amira’s request, a short personal narrative she wrote for a class project will be included in an appendix to this dissertation. I will not adjust or edit her words in any way.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to understand how storytelling impacted the relationships and community practices of one family of displaced women. In particular, what their memories and stories of life in a refugee camp — and how they chose to tell them — signified, as well as how the space of the camp influenced their identities throughout displacement and resettlement. In this study, I conceptualized spatial, institutional and relational issues of displacement and resettlement through the lens of narrative and storytelling (Esin, 2020; Jackson, 2013; Perry, 2008; Powell, 2012; Puvimanasinghe, 2014; Ritskes & Sium, 2013; Sawhney, 2009). The stories the women told almost always featured some aspect of life in Gaga; it was prominent in their memories even in resettlement. In this chapter, I evaluate how the literature further points to the way space and place affects the identity and relationships of refugees (Agier, 2011; Malkki, 1995; Peteet, 2005; Turner, 2005).

More specifically, the scholarship I include in chapter two is grounded in the commonality of the effects and importance of narratives, storytelling and community on displaced groups, particularly those living within refugee camps. First, I review literature surrounding the space of refugee camps in order to understand how the environment of
the camp influences its residents; in particular, the way the camp’s structure affects the
social and relational networks of residents. I also include literature that delves into the
connection between camps and humanitarian aid organizations and illuminates how
narratives that are created and maintained by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
can influence public perception of camps. The rationale for looking at studies examining
this connection is to highlight the prevalence of narratives constructed about refugees in
camps rather than by them. This leads to the next section of this chapter, in which I
examine scholarship focused on storytelling practices more generally, then specifically in
displaced communities. This piece of the review demonstrates the ways storytelling is an
integral strategy for creating and building communities amongst refugees, as well as
highlighting the importance of providing counternarratives to both public discourse and
academic scholarship surrounding refugees and camps. Finally, I present gaps in the
literature that led me to this study, as well as what my project offers to the body of
research surrounding storytelling, displacement, refugee camps, and the myriad other
issues that connect to both.

The Story of the Place

Sociopolitical Context

Refugee camps are stateless — officially belonging to no specific country — thus
their governance falls mainly to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or
UNHCR. UNHCR was created in 1950 as a response to the millions of Europeans post-
WWII who lost their homes or were forced to flee the country (Loescher, 2001). This was
long before the existence of such protracted conflicts as the War in Darfur, the Rwandan
Genocide, the Syrian Civil War, or countless other emergency situations related to war,
poverty, climate, or food insecurity that took — and are taking — place largely in Africa and the Middle East. In 1951, there were around 2.1 million displaced people worldwide. In 2021, that number was 89.3 million (see figure 2.1). In 2022, the number of forcibly displaced people has grown to over 100 million (UNHCR, n.d.).

Figure 2.1: UNHCR Figures at a Glance, 2021.

These numbers include those belonging to a few institutional labels: refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs.\(^6\) UNHCR and the international community have a limited amount of responsibility for IDPs that do not, or cannot, cross international borders. Borders themselves, and resulting categorizations, could be considered part of a state-created narrative: “in Africa, the boundaries of countries go back to colonial powers and are ignorant of social and tribal structures. This differentiation between refugees and IDPs is extremely problematic. The borders decide how an [asylum seeker] is treated”

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\(^6\) Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are those who have been displaced but remain in the borders of their native country; they have not crossed an international border to find safety.
(Herz, 2007, p. 13). When the decolonization of Africa began in the 1960s, the first wave of refugee crises began on the continent. This shows no sign of abating (United Nations, n.d.) and demonstrates, as Said (1989) argues, that colonization “is a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results” (p. 207).

Because of the prevalence worldwide of enduring situations of conflict and poverty, living in a refugee camp “reeks of lives on hold” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. xii). Still, camps are viewed institutionally as a temporary residence: “in response to emergencies, UNHCR came up with a quick fix: camps. Designed for transience, by default they became permanent” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. 5). International refugee policy has not adequately adapted to modernity and has a “pious adherence to dictums of a bygone era” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. 6). When UNHCR was created in 1950, they could not foresee the needs of the 21st century, when there is little prospect of an end to the multiple situations of protracted conflict worldwide: “[even in] the 1990s, on average 1.5 million refugees were able to return home each year. Over the past decade that number has fallen to around 385,000, meaning that growth in displacement is today far outstripping solutions” (United Nations, n.d.). The global system for classifying displaced people is also wildly out of date, in addition to being wholly arbitrary, often relying on an individual agent’s interpretation and their “evaluation of applicant statements” that convincingly show a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011, p. 11). In addition, these evaluations are not consistent across state boundaries, and, therefore, are ripe for exploitation: “when persecution has no coherent or consistent meaning, how can it be a credible threshold for
determining who gets to cross a border in search of rights?” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. 47).

When refugees cross the border into the first country of asylum, they must prove, through narratives of their experiences, why they deserve to be given refugee status. This status is entirely up to listeners of the narratives and is often heavily politicized:

“implications of this discursive representation have a profound impact on [a refugee’s] sense of identity. The person is the same, but the identity constructed must fit the ‘law’ of the UN [and] that identity could be taken away” (Powell, 2012, p. 308). Although the state-given label of “refugee” is beneficial in terms of shelter, benefits, etc., it may also be a method of Othering the displaced, and, to a certain extent, marking them as suspect. This is especially true when considering the general twenty-first century international opinion toward certain groups of “undesirable” immigrants. Considering the current global migrant crisis, there is a relatively recent “culture of disbelief” (Fassin, 2012, p. 115) surrounding the plights and individual narratives of refugees. Due to the massive influx of people attempting to cross borders to a new life, there is now what Fassin (2012) terms a “regime of truth” (p. 111). The state and humanitarian organizations scrutinize the language of refugees more than ever before in deciding how much aid they are warranted, or if they are deserving of resettlement. Previous education, and the ability to construct an eloquent and coherent narrative, can have a large role in determining if the refugees are able to converse in the dominant, preferred discourse of the state during their asylum interviews, even with an interpreter present (Betts & Collier, 2017). It can also help in drawing the public eye (and, resultantly, money) to the circumstances in which
the refugees live. Visible elements of trauma, such as scars, often help the case for resettlement. Then, the body speaks for itself (Fassin, 2012).

Taken together, this literature reveals how many aspects of the lives of refugees are entirely dictated by the state, as well as the vital importance of resettlement interviews and narratives in determining the life path of those seeking asylum.

The Spatial Design of the Refugee Camp

In light of the growing number of displaced people fleeing their countries, “it is not illogical [that] one of the first therapies routinely directed at refugees is a spatial one” (Malkki, 1992). UNHCR coordinates with the local governments of host countries to create a “safe humanitarian space… in rural settings this is often a camp” (UNHCR, 2023). Manuel Herz (2007), one of the architects of the twelve refugee camps in Chad, including Gaga, describes the layout:

When walking through the camp, one moves through an endless collection of tents, strewn in a seemingly haphazard way underneath the trees, with their latrines, their cooking platforms and their vegetable gardens. The camps themselves consist of an almost endless collection of tents that have taken on a uniform brownish colour from the sand of the desert, becoming virtually indistinguishable from the identical brown of the ground, all merging into a vast brown mass. (p. 8)

This structure and visualization are similar to most other refugee camps, like Dadaab in Kenya and Za’atari in Jordan, two of the largest (UNHCR, 2023). Herz’s description of the camps is undoubtedly what one would see if they were to walk through Gaga and other camps like it, in keeping with UNHCR design: “Refugee camps, especially in their
emergency phases, are places where everything seems to be similar, repetitive, and modular, [due to the] unified shelter unit that is usually distributed by UNHCR” (Dalal, 2017, p. 1). In his study on space and identity in refugee camps, Dalal (2017) notes that “[the design] generates an assumption that all refugees are the same” (p. 1). Dalal (2017) points out that the layout of the camp can contribute to perceptions of residents by camp administrators as well as the refugees themselves, as “a feeling of collective identity emerges” (p. 1) borne of the visible sameness of the environment, as well as a similarity in structure and routine.

New arrivals in camps come with a multitude of skills, talents and backgrounds. In spite of this, typically, a one-size-fits-all approach is used when determining what residents need and, resultantly, how the space of the camp is designed. In the case of the twelve camps of Chad, the architects of the camp allotted a certain amount of land for small vegetable gardens, with the ultimate goal of residents attaining greater levels of self-sufficiency. However, what seems ‘neutral’ and purely positive when viewed on a technical level, shows crucial demographic consequences when social and political aspects are taken into consideration: “[many of the refugees] don’t like vegetables, they don’t want to grow vegetables, and don’t want to eat vegetables” (Herz, 2007, p. 6). Those refugees that come from more nomadic cultures, for example, or lived in cities and worked in shops, must adopt a new way of being and learn an entirely new skill set (Herz, 2007). Of course, some camp residents are grateful for space to grow vegetables and feel empowered and connected to their culture through the act of farming (Turner, 2005). The point Herz (2007) makes, though, is that all residents of the camp are not the same, but structurally, refugee camps do not allow for those sorts of differences.
Individualization must be found in community, such as within the family unit and ways of relationally belonging.

Refugee camps are, in theory, meant to be temporary, but the state of global politics and continual conflict renders them into a state of perpetual limbo. Herz (2007) refers to how the architecture of the camps signifies an institutional unwillingness to admit camps have become more permanent dwelling spaces. He asserts that the tents are the chosen habitation for a reason. If NGOs like UNHCR procure funds for the creation of more stable homes, they are conceding that whatever conflict that has forced the establishment of camps will remain in a protracted situation. Their role is always that of emergency response:

By building clay huts, the transitory nature of the refugee camp changes to a more durable facility with a stable infrastructure that is able to host refugees permanently... If the spatial strategy of UNHCR limits itself to setting up tents as a means for habitation, it will always remain obvious and be visible that the situation is one of an emergency situation, which has to be solved not with architecture, but through politics. (Herz, 2007, p. 10)

Emergency aid seeks to separate itself from politics, in part so it can continue to operate in highly tense political states. It is a deeply complex situation that has no obvious solution. However, especially in the past few decades, it has become obvious that refugee camps are, and will continue to be, much more enduring: “with people sometimes being born in, growing up in, and becoming adults in camps” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. 54). Amira and Tesha are examples of this, having lived in Gaga from ages three and four to fifteen and sixteen, respectively.
Manuel Herz (2007) asserts that the temporary feel of the camps is due, once again, to who oversees the planning and funding of the camps, i.e., humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR. The key difference lies in the type of monetary solution offered. Specifically, the difference between developmental aid and emergency aid:

[Developmental aid] creates solutions that preferably should be permanent and improve a low level of development [such as after a natural disaster, etc.], emergency aid, as performed in refugee camps, has a different aim: it should supply people with the absolute necessary, serve as a safe-haven, and save the lives of refugees and the displaced. Emergency aid should not be permanent, as the solution for the problems should be sought on a political level. Thus, put in a simplified way, the difference between emergency aid and developmental aid can be read from their spatial component: emergency aid builds tents and developmental aid builds houses. (Herz, 2007, p. 10)

Emergency aid keeps purposeful distance from permanence, as that would require a level of political involvement that NGOs do not wish to become involved in. Humanitarian organizations fear becoming a political pawn in a corrupt government and/or the conflict that caused the need for camps in the first place. Hertz (2007) illustrates the ever-present dilemma of the residents of camps versus the local population. If emergency aid builds permanent hospitals or schools inside camps, then “on the other hand – and exhibiting the ambiguities of operating in these highly charged contexts – on what terms should one dare to reject help to local a population, when they come to refugee camps in conditions of need” (p. 10). This issue demonstrates the contentious space of the camp, and the
undeniable fact that they are almost always erected in under-resourced countries with fragile infrastructures. Herz (2007) later asserts that this version of aid is regressive in nature: “emergency aid that is performed by humanitarian organizations in situations of conflict, intentionally refrains from dealing with the causes of conflict and ‘only’ aims at alleviating the symptom” (p.10). As so many global conflicts show no sign of abating, with more refugees and IDPs than ever before, one must feel concerned about the sustainability of this solution.

Collectively, this literature illustrates the contentious, complex nature of the space of refugee camps when viewed through a structural and institutional lens. It demonstrates the increasingly salient fact that camps are built to be temporary in a world in which they are now forced to be permanent.

**Community and Identity in Refugee Camps**

The environment of the camp forms a sense of community identity between its residents. This is true of all cities and neighborhoods but is especially so for refugees who are generally restricted to the confines of the camp. The placement of the camps affects this as well: “camps are often established in peripheral regions, which leads to segregation and marginalization of refugees” (Abdi, 2005, p. 19). Still, “despite the initial visual/systematic homogeneity, the camp is a site for cultural diversity, contestation, and hybridization” (Dalal, 2017, p. 2). This diversity comes, not from the spatial layout of the camp, but from the residents, who arrive seeking asylum from all sorts of regions and backgrounds. The countless identities of residents amalgamate, rendering the camps “distinctive political, social, cultural, humanitarian and disciplinary spaces” (Ramadan,
In this way, the immeasurable cultural perspectives found in refugee camps result in a collective, yet unique, camp identity (Dalal, 2017).

The camp as an identity manifested due to the unintended permanence of the camps. By nature, the design and layout of refugee camps affects the ways in which residents gather and live; thus, their community and storytelling practices. For example, in the twelve refugee camps in Eastern Chad — one of which is Gaga — newly arrived residents are given tents and set up in separate areas with their immediate family and others they arrived with, typically those in their ethnic or cultural group. This arrangement lends itself to an open, communal existence between residents that live close to one another (Herz, 2007). Bulley (2014) observes that, paradoxically, the space of the camp encourages community, even as it is tightly controlled and sequestered: “far from making community impossible, the spatial structure of camps can go to great lengths to cultivate and capture a particular understanding of it, even with the restrictions on mobility it simultaneously enacts” (p. 70). With the absence of technology and without the ability to travel, reliance on each other is essential, and the chief form of entertainment is gathering to tell stories (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). This holds true in most other refugee camps as well, as their design and layout are similar worldwide (Cuny, 1977).

Those living within camps find themselves in a peculiar position, culturally. As a result, the camp becomes its own culture, reliant on memories of the past and a collective hope of the future to construct a new reality: “tales of the past, the organization of the present, and predictions for the near future make it possible for the refugees to consolidate their presence in these spaces” (Agier, 2011, p. 80). In Powell’s (2012)
research on the rhetoric of displacement, she observes that within camps, “bodies, and thus identities, [have been] forcibly displaced” (p. 300). Identity is restructured in order to adapt to the new environment. This happens in countless ways, such as through the creation of new social networks, micro-economies, gathering spaces, places of learning, and “in the complex interaction of identities that move across space and time as they are displaced from home” (Powell, 2012, p. 302). The insular nature of the camp, in many ways, determines the ways refugees negotiate their identity in exile: “the social, imaginative processes of constructing nationness and identity [are] influenced by the local, everyday circumstances of life in exile, and [the] spatial and social isolation can figure in these processes” (Malkki, 1995, p. 3). Refugee camps may physically exist in the first country of asylum, but residents maintain the culture of the homeland. In Malkki’s (1995) study of Burundian refugees in Tanzanian refugee camps, she notes that “the camp refugees saw themselves as a nation in exile, and defined exile, in turn, as a [trajectory] that would ultimately empower them to reclaim (or create anew) the ‘homeland’ in Burundi” (p. 3). Residents are not permitted to adopt citizenship in the host country; they internalize the insistent myth of the camp’s impermanence (Agier, 2011). The future of resettlement becomes close to religion — an afterlife — in the camp: an invisible dreamland that some reach, others do not (Rawlence, 2016). As children are born and grow older, their parents pass down the stories of their home country as a method of cultural preservation. Even if a lifelong resident of one of the camps has never seen their country of origin, the identity of that country is preserved within the camp; they are suspended in a liminal world. However, within this suspension, they create their own reality: “spatially bounded units of governance, [camps] are not necessarily spaces
of passivity in which refugees wait hopelessly. Refugees inevitably stamp their own imprint on camps” (Peteet, 2005, p. 29). The camp is not “bare life” (Agamben, 1998). It is a “dynamic [place] where everyday life unfolds” (Peteet, 2005, p. 29).

Residents of camps attempt to reclaim their autonomy and sense of self in this land of never-ending present, and “are constantly working on constructing their own political subjectivities” (Turner, 2005, p. 314) within community groups. During displacement, “camps replicate [the] entire support system” (Corsellis & Vitale, 2005, p. 115) of communities left behind. For all those that arrive in camps after forced migration, community is necessary, and brings a sense of comfort and control. This is especially true for those that come from traumatic situations of war or extreme climate events. Darychuk and Jackson (2015) observe, in their study of Palestinian women living in the West Bank, that conflict “has the effect of reinforcing people’s reliance on community networks and social ties” (p. 448). Many of these community members “highlighted how important a safe meeting space was to their social lives and ability to support each other through challenging times” (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015, p. 458). Creating meaningful spaces that reflect comforting rituals of home with those that crave the same familiarity is essential.

In his study of community in refugee camps, Bulley (2014) notes that “programmes are increasingly being developed by those administering camps [UNHCR and NGOs] that deliberately seek to build, encourage and foster community” (p 64). This includes discussions of culture and faith, in addition to the maintenance of identity through storytelling. As many host states are resistant to suggestions of permanence when discussing refugee camps, the unwillingness to perceive camps as anything other than a temporary solution can lead to a lack of formal opportunities for advancement as well as
a greater reliance on community, rather than government, as a support network (Betts & Collier, 2017). In a micro sense, this very tension of permanence versus temporariness often reinforces and strengthens the need for family and community networks within the camps. The residents must rely on each other (Malkki, 1995).

These various studies illustrate the importance of community and social networks within the camp, as well as the ways a lack of institutional support systems often strengthens the need for these networks.

**Global and Institutional Influences**

**The Refugees, the State, and the NGOs**

The residents of the camp depend entirely on NGOs for resources and the host state for space: “[camps are] stateless and wholly reliant on Western humanitarianism organizations and institutions for mere survival” (Wattenpaugh, 2015, p. 14). Nyers (2006) argues that “the concept of refugee, like the concept of state, is a construct, created and sustained through continual political activity” (p. xi). Even so, refugees living in camps are trapped within these constructs, relegated to a life in exile that is structurally entirely out of their control. In addition, the attitude (unspoken or otherwise) of the first country of asylum affects opportunities for upward mobility of camp residents (Betts & Collier, 2017). In fragile states in which many people are already struggling for resources, there can be increased tension between the refugees and the citizens. Akesson and Coupland (2018), in their study of issues of mobility in Syrian refugee families, find that there can be a “growing attitude of us versus them” (p. 9) between refugees and citizens of the host state. A lack of infrastructure makes it difficult to support refugees with an already strained social support system and can lead to resentment from the host
country and/or an inability to meet the demands of so many people, which is why camp administrators typically avoid building permanent structures (Herz, 2007).

Depending on the state of international political aid, public services in camps can be more stable than those of the host country, due to whatever UNHCR funding is available at the time (Nguyen et al., 2021). In the instance of Chad and its twelve camps: “80 percent of refugee children were enrolled in primary education but only 30 percent of children in host communities” (Nguyen et al., 2021, p. 19). The unfortunate reality is that refugees seek asylum in low-income border countries: “Global South countries hosted 80 percent of the world’s refugees. Almost five million refugees resided in countries where the per capita GDP was below $3,000. The forty-eight least developed countries provided asylum to about half of these refugees” (Sassen, 2014, p. 61). Often, it must be said, this is because the wealthier nations tend towards building walls and turning away boats.

Antonio Guterres, the former UN high commissioner for refugees, credits this inequity in refugee hosting to xenophobia: “Fears about supposed floods [of refugees] in industrialized countries are being vastly overblown… It is poorer countries that are left having to pick up the burden” (UNHCR, 2012). As various nations haggle over the ‘burden’ of displacement, the refugees themselves are constantly caught in political crossfire.

When refugees become residents of camps, their official, documented “identity” is completely dictated by the state. This causes tension about what determines their rootedness and where they belong (Malkki, 1995). They are not permitted to adopt citizenship in the country of resettlement and do not physically live in their country of origin: “they have no de-facto citizenship (neither that of the country they have left, nor
that of the country receiving them), and no other ‘right’ than that decreed by the individuals that hold power over their lives in the camps” (Agier, 2011, p. 81). Since the refugees are not permitted to adopt the identity of their host country, then they feel a stronger connection to the soil of their homeland, even if they’ve never physically been there. For refugees in camps, home becomes a “moral destination. And the collective, idealized return to the homeland is not a mere matter of traveling. The real return can come only at the culmination of the trials and tribulations in exile” (Malkki, 1995, p. 36). In other words, when the conflicts of their homelands are over, even though the reality is “protracted displacement of five years or more affects 7.1 million refugees— almost three quarters of the population under UNHCR mandate…. These are the expelled who are probably never going back to normal life [in their countries]” (Sassen, 2014, p. 56).

Due to the institutional assumption that camp life is ephemeral, residents typically negotiate one national identity: that of the place from which they came. Because of this, camps are singular recreations of home: stuck in an unattainable past, unable to create a future. For the displaced that live outside camp walls, however, it is a different story, which demonstrates “the very particular circumstances of the refugee camp” (Malkki, 1995, p. 58). Malkki (1992) gives the example of the city versus camp Burundian refugees, both living in Tanzania: “in contrast, the town refugees [didn’t construct] such a categorically distinct, collective identity… they [assimilated] and [manipulated] multiple identities… but more importantly, they [created] lives that were located in the present circumstances of Kigoma, not in the past of Burundi” (p. 36). Since reality in the camps is situated in a suspended limbo, identifying with past circumstances is necessary in forming a collective identity; thus, storytelling becomes a strategy that’s necessary for
cultural survival. In camps, identity is often attached to the past, to memories: “time seems configured by the waiting to return: back to the lost place that the exiles keep alive in their memory… by waiting, what they experience here, in the camp where they have ended up, has no meaning, no legible existence” (Agier, 2011, p. 72). However, some scholars have begun to critique this view that life in the refugee camp is bare and meaningless, claiming that refugees create their own forms of agency within their social and community networks, and call for more literature that addresses the nuances of life within camps (Owens, 2009; Peteet, 2005; Ramadan, 2013; Williams, 2014).

Still though, the influence of the outside entities that dictate decisions for camp residents have an immense impact on the refugees. In general, overarching rules and structures of the camps are not decided by the refugees themselves, and if “people are fulfilled only to the extent which they create their world” (Freire, 1968, p. 145), then the absence of refugee voices in the decision-making process can lead to a lack of fulfillment. As Spivak notes, when top-down, colonial practices govern subaltern subjects, there ends up being: “a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to [the] tasks or insufficiently elaborated… [the subaltern are] located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” (Spivak, 1988, p. 76). When residents are not viewed as capable of determining the systems of their environment, or asked for input in the decision-making processes, then the leadership is perpetuating hegemonic practices of colonialism (Bex & Craps, 2016).

Within the camps, the refugees have no real institutional agency: “the geography of a refugee camp is about two things: visibility and control- the same principles that guide a prison. The refugee camp has the structure of the punishment without the crime-
the crime is implied” (Rawlence, 2016, p. 113). Herz (2007) describes the relationship between camps and militarization in his survey of the twelve Chadian refugee camps. Since camps are almost always along or near borders and zones of conflict, UNHCR seeks proximity and contact with local military in order to protect their workers: “this contact has direct implications for humanitarian organizations [that are in charge of the camp] on three different levels: their language, their modes of action and their perception of the environment” (p. 11). Herz (2007) notes that aid workers speak in military language, are never without their radios or walkie-talkies, and drive in clearly marked vehicles (typically the only traffic allowed in the camp’s borders). This “military reasoning, which views the refugee as a potential source of danger” (Herz, 2007, p. 12), impacts the workers’ perception of the environment of the camp, and of its residents. Even if the walls of the camp are metaphorical, not physical, they exist: “even though the refugee camps in eastern Chad are not fenced off by a physical boundary, access to the facilities of the camp… [to] food, provisions and tents are [maintained] through systems of control, using the refugee’s registration cards” (Herz, 2007, p. 13). This type of organization of control and surveillance holds true for refugee camps throughout the world (Agier, 2011).

Bender (2021) critiques this system of state and NGO control and maintains that “since refugee camps have developed as near distinct entities from their host states,” and are often located in rural peripheries, they should be allowed to govern themselves, or at least have a greater say in structural decisions (p. 1). He (2021) argues that UNHCR and host states must acknowledge that many of the global conflicts and climate crises are much more long-lasting than previously thought:
We [must now make] the assumption that protracted refugee situations are just that: protracted, and that they will not change in the foreseeable future. Refugees in such situations are stuck. None of the three durable solutions outlined by the UNHCR are available to them. No option for repatriation is available, they will not be resettled and will not be locally integrated. (p. 2)

Subsequently, Bender (2021) asserts that camps should be viewed as states unto themselves, and thus, should have democratically elected governments with the refugees potentially being elected to leadership roles. Perhaps this would shift the power differential that exists between refugees, the state, and the UNHCR.

Collectively, these studies indicate there is a lack of institutional agency for refugees in camps, but a disproportionate amount of control over mobility and documentation. More research is needed that echoes Bender’s (2021) assertion that institutional acknowledgement must be made regarding the permanence of camps. Once this is recognized, then more studies are needed determining plausible solutions, preferably ones that center the perspectives of camp residents.

**Humanitarian Narratives and Representations**

There is a growing body of scholarship on the complex relationship between refugees and the discourse of humanitarianism (Agier, 2011; Barnett, 2014; Rajaram, 2002; Redfield, 2013; Sözer, 2018; Vella, 2016; Wattenpugh, 2015). In this section of the review, I examine that relationship, particularly as it relates to the language and narratives surrounding refugees that are put forth by humanitarian organizations and media.
Modern humanitarianism is generally more nuanced and complex than the archetypical charitable benefactor, and it is deeply entangled “in the past, with colonialism, and in the present, with neoliberalism and the corporatization and militarization of humanitarian action” (Watenpaugh, 2015, p. 19). This creates a complicated relationship between the refugees, the NGOs, the wealthy donors, and, of course, the ever-fickle influence of the global political environment (Watenpaugh, 2015). NGOs and wealthy donors are necessary in providing services and infrastructure for refugee camps. At the same time, they are instrumental in forming global-scale — often essentialist — narratives and stories told about refugee camps, and the refugees themselves, that are critical to deconstruct. According to Nyers (2006), “humanitarian discourses are complexly problematic” (p. 129), and often contribute to a “refugee as victim” narrative. In many instances, this is due to monetary reasons and the need for funding (Rawlence, 2016); yet, it perpetuates a certain public perception of refugees, as well as enhances the dependence that exists between refugee camps and NGOs. The imagery and media put forth by humanitarian actors often becomes the most recognizable depiction of camp life (Agier, 2011). Jackson (2013) addresses the prevalence of this method of portrayal, as well as his own evolution as a researcher, in his extensive work on narrative and storytelling with marginalized communities:

Before embarking on research among refugees, my views were heavily influenced by media imagery. I was struck by the drastic and tragic scale reduction of refugee lives. Reduced to a handful of possessions, a makeshift shelter, a patch of dirt on a treeless hillside or plain… they appeared to embody the very essence of abjection and loss… violence seemed to have robbed them of any place where
their actions mattered, their gestures were recognized, their voices were heard, and their plight understood. (p. 93)

Here, Jackson (2013) points out a view that people without close ties to refugees likely share. This portrayal — and thus, assumption — of refugees as victims perpetuates a certain focus on refugees as a collective rather than individual, as well as a non-focus on the systems and institutions that may have caused or influenced their plight. Malkki (1995) discusses this as she points out the narrative tendency to represent refugees as problems: “asylum states and international agencies dealing with refugees, as well as much of the policy-oriented, therapeutic literature on refugees tend to share the premise that refugees are necessarily ‘a problem’” (p. 8). She (1995) also notes that it is striking “how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its study locates ‘the problem’ not first in the political oppression or violence that produces massive territorial displacements of people, but within the bodies and minds of people classified as refugees” (Malkki, 1995, p. 8). In practice, Malkki’s (1995) point directly points to the contradictions of the modern system of humanitarian aid.

The necessary alliance of camps with donors and NGOs creates the paradox of modern humanitarianism: trust in those that are often responsible for taking the power. The system is built to create that paternalistic relationship. Michel Agier (2005) gives the powerful example of American allies flying over Iraq and Afghanistan, dropping bombs at the same time as medicine, and prematurely mapping out potential spots for future camps for the displaced. Camps act as a collective, under unified governments represented by NGOs like UNHCR. In his exploration of power and sovereignty in refugee camps, Turner (2005) asserts that in order for refugees to be acceptable to
governing bodies like UNHCR, “they are expected — in humanitarian discourse — to be helpless and passive… they are not expected to be political or strategic of their own accord” (pgs. 321-322). In other words, refugees — viewed as a monolithic entity — must largely be seen as docile, apolitical and pure victims in order to garner public sympathy and support, even though the body of a refugee becomes political in and of itself the moment they are displaced (Foucault, 1978). Powell (2012) explores rhetorical strategies of various displacement novels and documentaries and determines that “[the public] expect[s] refugee narratives to have certain components, including a stated need for institutional assistance. Ultimately, then, human rights discourse can function to create a distance between the so-called refugee and the public” (p. 308). That is, the actual lived experience of the refugee as an individual is rarely represented. Instead, public discourse typically presents the perspective of Western humanitarian actors, which, according to Spivak (1988) will always effectively silence the oppressed even through seemingly neutral or benevolent forms of representation.

Barnett (2014) investigates “how the discourse of humanitarianism contains elements of both emancipation and domination [and] that such seemingly contradictory impulses are best understood through the concept of paternalism” (p. 1). The contradiction that Barnett (2014) references is evident throughout the discourse and connections between refugees and humanitarianism (Agier, 2011). Vella (2016) echoes Barnett’s (2014) claim, utilizing discourse analysis to explain power in humanitarianism through the lens of paternalism: “[this is] the paradox of paternalism, which is at once constructive and destructive in its practical and moral implications. While “caring” in itself [is] inherently good, when that caring verges on control, the negative face of
humanitarianism is revealed” (p. 2). UNHCR, as administrators of refugee camps, have in many ways become the de facto spokespeople of refugees: “the underlying assumption… is UNHCR knows what is in the best interest of refugees—a population that is often assumed to be too uninformed to know what is in its best interests or too weak to act on them” (Barnett, 2014, p. 1). This, Barnett (2014) says, “is paternalism by any other name” (p. 1). Pasha's (2020) case study of Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan finds that, even if well-intentioned, structurally and systemically categorizing refugees as helpless “can ultimately diminish the scope for meaningful refugee empowerment” (p. 244).

In the same vein, in his study analyzing humanitarian workers’ narrative accounts, Sözer (2018) discusses the oft uttered, essentializing adjective *vulnerable* as a descriptor of refugees. He asserts that “the category ‘vulnerable refugee’ has escaped from critical scrutiny by academic literature [and the] the ‘vulnerable refugee’ category is constructed, appropriated and enacted by self-identified local humanitarian actors” (Sözer, 2018, p. 1). Vulnerable refugees, he claims, is a categorization that is “treated as self-evident” (Sözer, 2018, p. 1) and must be re-examined through a more critical lens. Rejali (2020) similarly calls for accountability in this discourse and asks the humanitarian sector to acknowledge the structural role colonialism has played in their institutions, as well as the effects of their top-down approach of language and marketing on those to whom they are providing services, good intentions notwithstanding.

In her study of humanitarian documentaries and imagery, Srinivasan (2020) argues that this pretense of “good intentions” is exactly the problem. Jackson (2013) agrees, asserting that paternalistic “good intentions” often erase the dynamic complexities of personhood into a “style of discourse [that] likens refugees to primates, peasants,
children or the elderly — categories of persons who are marginal to centers of power” (p. 92). Malkki (1995) writes of the tendency to immortalize “the refugee” as a “special” person through, not only text, but photographic representation. This is particularly prevalent among women. She gives the powerful example of a calendar of refugee women put out by the UNHCR, in which all the women are either cooking, sewing, or holding a baby. Malkki (1995) reflects:

Having looked at photographs of refugees over several years, one becomes aware of the perennial resonance of the woman with her child. This is not just any woman; she is composed as an almost Madonna-like figure. Perhaps it is that women and children embody a special kind of powerlessness; perhaps they do not tend to look as if they could be “dangerous aliens;” perhaps their images are more effective in fundraising efforts than men. (p. 11)

In humanitarian media, refugees are viewed as “the suffering silent victims, whom the humanitarian world designated as its true beneficiaries, or, to put it in terms of economic strategy, its targets” (Agier, 2010, p. 32). To a certain extent, the humanitarian organizations depend on the representation of “the absolute victim, who finds in the humanitarian camp the paradigmatic space of [their] survival and confinement” (Agier, 2010, p. 33), in order to garner sympathy from Western donors, whom they expect to have a certain horrified fascination with situations of tragedy. Said (2000) opened his essay “Reflections on Exile” with a caution against the aestheticization of displacement: “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (173).

In her extensive critical research on the use and impact of narrative and storytelling, Fernandes (2017) examines this connection between the global, neoliberal
economy and narrative, with what she terms curated stories, or narratives that are intentionally constructed in the media to achieve a certain outcome, which is often a utilitarian end. She describes a truth commission in South America that encouraged Peruvian and Guatemalan women to share tragic stories of sexual assault and trauma rather than focusing on their resilience or leadership in resistance movements, even if it wasn’t what the women wanted: “[the] women were often reluctant to tell stories of harm because they represented only one aspect of their lives… but these victim categories were seen as the kinds of capital needed to receive monetary compensation or potential redress” (Fernandes, 2017, p. 25). In the modern global era, neoliberalism and colonialism are inextricably, insidiously linked; in many ways, the latter has morphed into the former (Sefa Dei, 2019).

The problem with monetary fixes and global aid for protracted situations of poverty, conflict, or — increasingly — natural disasters and climate, is it is often reactive rather than proactive. Often, donors aren’t willing (or aware of a need) to donate until the most extreme circumstances, which is typically when publicized humanitarian narratives and photographic representation of refugees begin. Ben Rawlence (2016), in his ethnographic work in Dadaab camp in Kenya, gives the example of July 2011, after the United Nations officially declared a famine in Somalia, and pictures began to circulate on the internet: “suddenly the sleeping donors found their cheque books” (p. 102). However, when the response comes too late, the damage has already been done. During these highly-publicized times, when the media descends on situations of disaster and documents disturbing images such as — most commonly — pictures of women or children, especially those with distended bellies or other visible ailments, the
international community gasps. They move. They assuage their consciousness in the only way they know how: with money. Then, they forget. Life goes on for the refugees, but the reactive nature of donors and NGOs makes it more likely that a precarious situation could boil over again (Rawlence, 2016).

Taken together, this section reveals that refugees are often represented as victims in need of help within public and academic discourse, especially that which is put out by humanitarian media. It examines the relationship between neoliberalism and refugee stories and calls for more research and stories that represent refugees in a more nuanced, less essentialist, way.

In the next section, I examine the practice of storytelling. First, in a more general sense, and then its usage and importance within refugee communities.

The Importance of Storytelling

Why Storytelling?

The literature on storytelling is vast and staggeringly interdisciplinary. Miller (2008), who serves as director of the World Storytelling Institute in India, notes this broad academic application of storytelling: “[as academics] are especially aware, storytelling is considered in a wide variety of academic disciplines, including Anthropology, Communications, Computer Science, Creative Arts Therapy, Education, English, History, Library and Information Sciences, Performance Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Speech, Theatre, and Theology” (p. 1). Studies focusing on the historical significance of oral history projects, especially in the context of multi-generational families and communities, have been studied for decades and are still a vital contribution to the scholarship (Fobear, 2015; Leavy, 2011; Lundsfryd, 2016; Portelli, 2015).
Increasingly, storytelling is also applied in a business and entrepreneurial context, as a marketing and strategy tool (Denning, 2006; Ferndandes, 2017; Monarth, 2014), as well as in areas of political and community organizing: “historically, the power of stories and storytelling has been at the center of social change efforts. Organizers rely on storytellers to build relationships, unite constituencies, name problems, and mobilize people” (Canning & Reinsborough, 2010, p. 12). Methodologically, storytelling is applied in a similar malleable fashion; that is, in many ways and aspects across many disciplines (Boje, 2008; Lawlor et al., 2016; Lewis, 2011; Mandelbaum, 2012; Martin et al., 2019; Quinn, 2021). It is fitting, then, that storytelling is used to conceptualize a wide array of fields and disciplines, as the literature all agrees that the key feature of storytelling and narrative is its ability to build proverbial bridges by connecting people, places and things (Kurz, 2014).

Increasingly, researchers are investigating stories and narratives outside of the traditional verbal and written binary (Hildebrand & Lewis, 2019). Studies using narrative in the context of arts-based or digital methodologies found that using arts-based methods inspired feelings of empowerment and autonomy in research participants7 (Abdullah et al., 2020; Djikic & Oatley, 2017; Pierce, 2018; Ravitch, 2020). For example, Budig et al. (2008), in their Photovoice study engaging women living in low-income neighborhoods, discovered participants felt “change[s] in self-perception by the provision of a space where [they felt they] could express themselves” (p. 18), as well as a freedom in communicating in a medium other than written and oral language. There is a widening

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7In this project, as mentioned in chapter one, I use collaborators when I am describing the Adams specifically. However, when describing other studies (such as in chapters two, three and five) I still use the more traditional term participant.
body of scholarship focusing on the use and benefits of participatory storytelling projects (Bruinenberg et al., 2019; Bruckman et al., 2013; Meijer, 2012; Spurgeon, 2015). Bivens and Wheeler (2021) conceptualize storytelling as action in their study with bush doctors in South Africa, focusing on the ways the process of storytelling facilitates the intersection of action and knowledge: “[storytelling] prompts us to consider how action taken to change wider structures is connected to and sustained by the knowledge that emerges through individual experience” (p. 4). They (2021) maintain that the reflective process of telling stories is action-based as experiences are internally examined, then verbalized: “the relationship between action and knowledge becomes legible through the story itself… the act of telling stories is what enables [people] to ‘know’ what has happened and be able to describe it” (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021, p. 3). This type of critical storytelling and narrative is viewed as a decolonizing research methodology when working with refugee, immigrant and Indigenous communities, by intentionally valuing Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, and ways of communicating, as well as offering counternarratives of groups marginalized by Western culture and academia (Chaw-win-is et al., 2009; Datta, 2017; Iseke, 2013; Lenette, 2017; Ritskes & Sium, 2013).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate the interdisciplinary uses of storytelling more generally, examining the effects of a few key methods of narrative and storytelling used within various groups and demographics. In addition, they illustrate the importance and effectiveness of using storytelling as a methodology with groups marginalized by Western institutions.

**Storytelling in Displaced Communities**
Narratives, stories and individual experiences are often some of the only things that one can control in times of displacement. When people are forced to leave their homes, often suddenly and traumatically, outside entities, such as government bureaucracies or NGOs, possess the final authority on issues of movement and personal agency. However, meeting to tell stories and remember home provides normalcy and a familiar routine, when all else feels tenuous and fragile (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). Stories create deeper relationships and ways of belonging across families and communities (Kohli & Lonette, 2021). This holds true across all cultures and demographics; as we tell stories, we recognize new truths; storytelling is an act of connection (Kurtz, 2014). New environments, languages and cultures are unfamiliar and overwhelming. Stories, and those who share them, are usually not. The reasons to tell a story are myriad, but for the displaced, it often correlates to recapturing a shifted sense of self and culture: “we also tell stories as a way of transforming who we are, recovering a sense of ourselves as actors and agents in the face of experiences that make us feel insignificant, unrecognizable, or powerless” (Jackson, 2013, p. 20). In both displacement and resettlement, gathering as a community to share memories of home and culture can be a method of navigating the disruption and loss relationally, as well to access a familiar, joyful routine (Perry, 2008). In her autoethnographic exploration of the narrative practices of refugee women, Hua (2000) illustrates the importance of storytelling in identity negotiation: “through memory, rememory, forgetting and reconstruction, storytelling allows refugee and immigrant women to refashion, reinvent, and remember their personal and collective identities and identification” (p. 114). Bhabha (1994) explores this concept in his theories on the hybridity in identity that manifests from
mixing multiple cultures; the constant negotiation of home and identity is deeply woven into stories told by refugees as they unpack emotions surrounding displacement and being in-between cultures (Kohli et al. 2021).

Stories are verbalized extensions of the self; a vessel through which all humans are permitted to create their own world (Freire, 1968). Augoustinos et. al (2014), in their study examining essentialist representations of refugees, claim that “the stories we tell become rich sources of ourselves, our identities, as well as of the changes to identity that occur across time and context” (p. 69). They can be a way for refugees to access a shared identity of displacement across cultural lines. In addition, storytelling as a community allows displaced groups to reframe experiences of trauma and marginalization together, as “shared difficulty becomes joint accomplishments” (Kellas & Trees, 2009, p. 3). In their study analyzing the stories of a group of refugees resettled in Australia, Puvimanasinghe et al. (2014) use narrative methodology to examine meaning-making and identity reconstruction in the context of storytelling:

Refugees may need to reconstruct their identities to encompass their losses, embrace new environments and position themselves between home and host cultures. Telling stories can repair the ruptures to refugees’ identities, thereby assisting them to recreate new and more acceptable self-identities, restore order in the aftermath of disruption, gain control of their present lives, and find meaning in the incomprehensible. (p. 70)

This points to the use of storytelling as a strategy to make sense of the loss of displacement, especially when in community with others experiencing similar circumstances. Feminist scholar bell hooks (2001) reflects on this idea: “rarely, if ever,
are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion” (p. 215). Ritskes and Skim (2013), in their study conceptualizing storytelling as an act of resistance within Indigenous communities, write that “[the] connectivity that is embodied in storytelling is a continuation of Indigenous existence” (p. vi). When told in multigenerational family groups, stories are culturally sustaining and have the additional value of increasing understanding and empathy among family members (Strekalova-Huges & Wang, 2019). Preserving identity and culture from the native country can be accomplished “through narrative representations of [the] identities” (Powell, 2012, p. 302). In other words, through storytelling.

In a study examining digital storytelling as a narrative process for refugee women, Brough et al. (2018) found that using nonlinguistic, multimodal tools to transmit stories more deeply and ethically involved refugee participants in the story, by using “photographs, sound, music and words [to talk about] traumatic events… [and] engaging in digital storytelling — or, perhaps, digital story making — contributes to the women being present in the research in ways that interviews and questionnaires cannot fully capture” (p. 17). Brough et al. (2018) claim that using alternative forms of media offer refugees more of a collaborator role in the research process and move away from the binary of the “refugee as victim stories,” which, they remark, “are all too familiar in refugee studies” (p. 17). They highlight the benefits of more arts-based storytelling instead: “we learn about the unique ways in which the [women] make sense of disrupted lives, using their own frame of reference… These are their ‘preferred’ stories in narrative terms, which highlights the usefulness of this methodology with marginalized participants” (Brough et al., 2018, p. 17). Hua (2000) echoes this sentiment: “storytelling
can be empowering for refugee and immigrant women when told amongst their close kin and friends, and when told in a language or talk style that is comfortable to them, for it gives them the space to voice themselves” (p. 113).

In refugee camps, engaging in the practice of storytelling is crucial for refugees to protect a part of their identity that may feel lost, as well as a method for parents to pass on a sense of pride and heritage in the homeland to their camp-born children (Malkki, 1995). Sawhney’s (2009) study of the role of digital storytelling with youth in refugee camps shows how community initiatives, such as narrative projects, are “important not only for [the youths’] sense of identity and recognition by others, but as a form of creative expression and advocacy of issues in their lives” (p. 1). Similarly, Fisher and Yafi (2018), in their exploratory storytelling research conducted in Za’atari camp in Jordan, discovered that residents found the experience of group narrative workshops to be “cathartic” and “emotional” (p. 10). Recreating narrative representations of community and identity in camps pushes back against the “[seeming] priori expectation that, in crossing an international border, [refugees have] lost connection with his or her culture” (Malkki, 1995, p. 11). Indeed, stories are a method for residents to negotiate their place within the confluence of cultures present in the camp, as “the camp-society is not a monolithic body with a single pure identity, but a diverse, dynamic and at times divided assemblage in constant motion” (Ramadan, 2008). It is empowering for refugees in camps to engage with the environment around them, and make sense of their lives within the camp, which, Sawhney (2009) argues, can often be accomplished through storytelling.
In an academic and discursive sense, the stories and narratives of refugees are an essential contribution to what Limbu (2009) terms as the “restrictive discursive field in which the refugee as object of representation and knowledge is constructed… it is necessary to find alternative narratives that provide different perspectives on the refugee experience” (p. 1). Unfortunately, “too often, an overemphasis on refugees’ pasts can position them as victims who need help” (Daniel, 2019, p. 71). Although the stories of struggle are certainly a part of displacement and resettlement, they are not the only part. More personal stories are needed in academic and public discourse which challenge these views. By overemphasizing trauma and deficits “and failing to acknowledge their agency and contributions to society, [rather than] recogn[izing] their rich identities” (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017, p. 81), refugees are unfairly reduced to a homogeneous group of sufferers, as was previously cited in the review on humanitarian narratives. Within their communities, “[refugees] may need to reconstruct their own counternarratives of healing and control, preserving the value of themselves, their family, and their community” (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014, p. 70). Hua (2000) asserts that storytelling and narrative are a key strategy for displaced women to gain a sense of agency within the dominant discourse:

Storytelling might be one of the few sites in which refugee and immigrant women can claim political voice and epistemic terrain. Storytelling can enable refugee and immigrant women to subvert hegemonic historiography with their narratives of resistance, thus developing an oppositional consciousness necessary for the collective struggles of politicized communities. (pgs. 113-114)
Sharing stories is a method of pushing back against the essentializing rhetoric that demonstrates narrative can be used to emphasize “harmful hegemonies and colonial agendas” (Fernandes, 2017, p. 11). Rajaram (2002), in his analysis of refugee representation in humanitarian narratives, notes that — discursively — refugees are reductively represented as mere bodies: “humanitarian agencies represent refugees in terms of helplessness and loss…. this representation consigns refugees to their bodies, to a mute and faceless physical mass” (p. 257). Echoing Spivak (1988), Rajaram (2002) maintains that “narration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western ‘experts’; refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced” (p. 257). This depiction is simplistic, lacking in critical thought; it is what has always been. But, “if the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed” (Freire, 1968, p. 61).

Jackson (2013) considers this dilemma. That is, that the perspective of the refugees themselves is so often missing from the literature: “given the plethora of academic essays, white papers, and compendious monographs devoted to refugee issues, why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experiences of refugees themselves?” (p. 17). Williams (2014) maintains the necessity of engaging in conversation with refugees when attempting to label them: “if abstract terms like “the refugee” [and] “the camp” … [are] analytically productive and politically progressive, they must be drawn into a sustained conversation with particular refugee communities … which shape how their voices are and are not heard” (p. 122). Jackson (2013) and Williams (2014) demonstrate why it is imperative for storytelling research with the displaced to be conceptualized through a critical lens that confronts power
dynamics and academic hegemonies, such as postcolonialism: “to what extent do we…
strip away the rights of refugees to speak and act in worlds of their own making?”
(Jackson, 2013, p. 17). He urges that those working within refugee communities
understand the ethical responsibility of their research: “doing justice to refugee
experience also demands that we reflect critically on the tacit links between the way
refugees are conventionally constructed in academic and bureaucratic discourse, and the
ways [they] are stereotyped in vernacular discourse and the media” (Jackson, 2013, p.
91).

Collectively, these studies illustrate the power of using storytelling in research
with refugees, as well as with immigrant and Indigenous communities. Taken together,
this research shows that storytelling is an ethical, empowering methodology, and that
more research is needed on the counter-stories of refugee groups that illuminates their
personhood and lived experience.

The Untold Stories

Implications for the Current Study

I have written at length in this chapter of the myriad ways the lives of camp
residents are, essentially, in the control of the global and national political environment.
How the biopolitics (Foucault, 1978) of refugees in general, but especially those
displaced to camps, can be fraught and multifaceted. Humanitarian narratives are often
curated, relying heavily on tragic portrayals in order to garner sympathy of donors. The
archetypical Western donor tends to essentialize refugees in camps, assuming the mantle
of the White savior, inadvertently or not. Residents of host countries often resent camps,
and right-wing populists preach fear of undesirable immigrants above all else. This is
especially worsened by the increasingly apparent reality that camps are permanent, and that more people will continue to be displaced, not less. So many stories are told. So many, except those of the residents themselves.

In this chapter, I reviewed literature that examines the sociopolitical issues that face the space of camps and those that reside within them, the implications of the spatial design and environment of the camp, and the dynamic negotiation of community and identity by residents within the camp. In addition, I examined scholarship focusing on the relationship between the state, NGOs and refugees, as well as the narratives — largely perpetuated by humanitarian organizations and media — of refugees that are present in academic and public discourse. Lastly, I surveyed literature that focused on the process of storytelling generally, and then more specifically within displaced communities.

The current study aims to add to the literature that pushes back against essentialist portrayals of refugees (Besteman, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Lenette, 2017; Pasha, 2020; Perry 2008), as well as the more limited scholarship that rejects Agamben’s notion of refugee camps as “bare life” (Dalal, 2017; Malkki, 1995; Owens, 2009; Peteet, 2005). This study agrees with Williams (2014) in that the assertion the literature portraying refugees in camps as nuanced, agential figures is scant. It also concurs with Tobin’s (2019) assertion that ethnographic research is of vital importance in shifting the dominant representation of refugees in the literature, but more specifically, “policy-irrelevant research” (Tobin, 2019; Blakewell, 2008). That is, research that shifts from ethnographic research such as Agier’s (2011) which is often funded by NGOs, private sector, and academic institutions in what (Tobin, 2019) terms “relevant” research. Tobin (2019) claims that “relevant research” focuses overly on the considerable policy and institutional
failures of the global system of displacement, thereby erasing lived experience: “in policy-specific or “relevant” research, the individuals’ status as refugee oftentimes becomes the defining characteristic, over and above other important aspects of personhood, agency, and action” (Tobin, 2019, para. 4).

This sort of depiction is reductive and is the basis of what this study attempts — in small part — to remedy. In addition, I have found little research that examines memories of the camp in resettlement in the way this study does. This research is unique in that it offers insight into women that grew up in a camp and view it more as home than their native country; as such, their memories of the camp are largely nostalgic. My study seeks to fill this gap as it acknowledges that generations growing up in refugee camps is becoming increasingly common – and will continue to be — as the myriad conflicts and environmental catastrophes around the world show no sign of abating.

In the next chapter, I explain the design of this study and accompanying methods of analysis.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I describe the methodologies used in the project, as well as other information related to my study design. To begin, I revisit the purpose of this study and the overall research aims and questions. Then, I provide an overview of the ethical considerations and my positionality as a researcher, as well as my research approaches. This is followed by details of the study’s design, methods of data collection and analysis, and finally, a discussion of the limitations present within this study.

Essential to the theoretical and methodological foundations of this chapter, and this study, is the acknowledgement that I am a non-Sudanese woman writing about Sudanese women. Thus, to understand this study, it is imperative to understand its methodologies, chosen thoughtfully and intentionally, and largely based on the fundamental awareness of my own positionality in this research endeavor.

The goal of this study is to examine how the act of storytelling is used to understand belonging, relationships and community within one displaced family, the Adams. In addition, and above all, its purpose is to offer narratives of displacement and resettlement told as much in the words of the women as possible, resisting essentializing discourse and categorization.
Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

- How is storytelling used as a strategy to help three displaced women navigate and make sense of displacement and resettlement?
- In what ways does the shared experience of storytelling impact and build relationships and ways of belonging among the three women, their family, and the researcher?
- How do the stories of the women in this study complicate narratives of displacement and refugee camps that focus solely on sorrow and loss?

**Researcher Positionality & Ethical Stance**

The foundation of the methodological approach to this study is my ethical stance regarding working within a culture that is not my own. Because I view this as the most important aspect of my research philosophy and positionality, I will address it first.

My ethical standpoint has its basis in ten years working with and in other cultures, the last eight of which have been specifically with refugee communities. It is rooted in my personal beliefs surrounding the importance of equity and accessibility in education and research, as well as a deep awareness of and respect for the value of culture within institutional, social and academic settings. Although these principles feel as important to my being as breathing, I can still trace their beginnings to certain instances in my life. First, my time living and working abroad. I worked as an EFL instructor in two different countries, Thailand and Colombia, for six months each, respectively. Living and working in different countries will forever cause me to possess a sense of empathy for others that are navigating overwhelming new cultural norms and systems. Second, my strong sense of ethics regarding working with refugees as an outsider was most deeply formed from my time spent in community with refugee groups in my city. Working for a refugee resettlement agency began this journey, as well as my time as an ESL teacher in a large,
within all these institutional and community settings, I did not simply go to work then leave for the day with no emotional involvement. On the contrary, I was incredibly attached. It became more of a passion than simply a career. I gave my students rides home from school often and would almost always be invited inside for a meal. I would stay for hours, meeting their families, sharing food, listening to their stories, and learning about their cultures. This felt natural to me; I think back on those times with a deep sense of happiness. When I was an educator, I truly loved knowing my students and their families, and kept relationships with many of them long after they left my classroom.

This love morphed into a fiery sense of advocacy and ethics regarding the treatment of immigrant and refugee groups, in academic spaces as well as social and political ones. As I began teaching, reading and researching more critically, I developed a distinct loss of patience and frustration with White researchers and educators who, inadvertently or not, essentialize those that have been displaced with paternalistic attitudes and verbiage. Out of this frustration came a desire to challenge, through my own research, those types of narratives, which are common in popular and academic discourse (Bex & Craps, 2016; Barnett, 2014; Jackson, 2013; Relaji, 2020; Srinivasan, 2020). Refugees are not a monolith. Different groups may share similar attributes, borne out of the common experience of displacement, but all of them are individuals with their own unique, dynamic lives, including the Adams.
Thus, my ethical stance is a central attribute of my research with the Adam women. It requires continual reflexivity, member checking, and honesty. I echo Esin and Lounasma’s (2020) position in their participatory research with refugee communities: “we took an ethical decision to be in solidarity with the refugee communities, and to channel their intellectual and methodological resources into an embodied and embedded practice” (p. 393). I committed to this practice through constant dialogue with Amira and her family, my ongoing digital field journal, and reading other scholarship and literature focused on ethical research with marginalized groups. Beyond literature and scholarship, though, I discovered that my natural interpersonal strengths became one of my best ways of ethically approaching Amira and her family. By that, I mean my propensity to form deep, authentic and lasting relationships; my ability to love. Over the course of over two and a half years, I learned to love Amira, Kassala and Tesha. I became comfortable with them. That love made it much more possible for me to set aside my own perspectives and observe and learn from the Adam women with an open and inviting heart. Throughout my experience working cross-culturally, I’ve found that transcending cultural boundaries is not as difficult as one might think. It simply requires a strong sense of empathy, admiration and patience as you enter spaces that are not your own with the utmost respect.

Next, I provide descriptions of and rationales for my methodological choices in this dissertation.

**Methodological Philosophy**

**Participatory Action Research**
Historically, relationships between researcher and participants are approached with distinct hierarchical boundaries (Kidd & Kral, 2005). The researcher retains a certain appearance of aloofness and objectivity, while the participant understands that they are not the experts and that the researcher always gets the final say. This is constructed and communicated through documents such as informed consent and research protocols. The researcher is always in control of identifying problems and solutions, even if they come from outside the community in which they are working, which is often the case.

When I began formulating this project’s design, I found that one of the truest ways to epistemologically conceptualize my ethical beliefs was through my methodology. Namely, the overarching lens of participatory action research, which felt the most respectful method of research in terms of my relationship with the Adam family. In this study, using PAR was less about strictly adhering to a methodological framework and more about committing to a philosophy and way of being as a researcher: “many action researchers argue that action research — and participatory action research, in particular — is less a methodology than an orientation or stance toward the research process and the participants” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 1). To elaborate, if the researcher possesses a set of general principles that include dedication to collaboration, trust, and respect, then rich, truthful data will manifest itself organically, through the deep, multifaceted relationships of all involved. As Kidd and Kral (2005) assert:

PAR is not a method, per se… but rather the creation of a context in which knowledge development and change might occur… [the researcher’s] attitude is a
frame of mind that includes respect, genuineness, and a good dose of openness to experience. (p.188)

I believe that “creation of context” occurred within this study. I argue that the sharing and receiving of stories is action (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021), as Amira and her family used storytelling as a strategy to create community, solidify a sense of belonging, maintain culture, and more.

The deep relationships among myself, Amira and her family were necessary for this research; our closeness is what created this study and propelled it forward. PAR challenges the structure and status quo of conventional research and recognizes the need for trust in order for participants to feel comfortable sharing their innermost emotions. In participatory action research, the “close, committed relationships” (Brydon-Miller, 2007, p. 202) are a hallmark of the methodology. When working with participants, particularly those from marginalized communities, “neutrality” is rejected: “emancipatory action researchers [develop] a political stance and become aligned with those whom they are conducting research with” (Dimond et al., 2013, p. 4). I have spent years getting to deeply know the Adam women, especially Amira. I believe this is one of the main reasons they understand I am deeply aligned with their best interests. I am not neutral, and I own and embrace that lack of neutrality.

Many research methodologies are required to follow a certain rigidity of structure. Participatory action research cannot be meticulously planned out by the researcher, as is traditional with other methodologies. It must be flexible in nature because the control of the project ultimately lies with the participant, in an “interactive and dialectical” relationship (Park, 1993, p. 2). As a result, “every PAR project is a custom job” (Kidd &
Kral, 2005, p. 187), and is dependent on the participants, as adherence to strict prescriptive rules would, in a sense, be dictating the course of the research: “a participatory research project is carried out in principle… no single project is expected to faithfully follow it in practice” (Park, 2005, p. 2). The nature of my study renders strict prescriptions impossible. Storytelling is, by nature, fluid and flexible. Any attempt on my part to control the course of the narratives would render the data valueless.

An honest awareness of power dynamics is central to this dissertation. In chapters one and two, I discussed how the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory are necessary to understand this research, especially when considering issues of power and privilege. The unequivocal goal of PAR is transforming and liberating communities, challenging inequities, and inspiring a greater sense of agency within research participants. PAR has many similarities with community activism initiatives aimed at empowering the oppressed, but it is also markedly distinct. The key distinction lies in the generation of knowledge that precedes action, which is a hallmark of the PAR methodology. The process of gathering and creating knowledge collectively with the participants is, essentially, the method.

For all the aforementioned reasons, in this dissertation, participatory action research was a methodological philosophy that informed my use of ethnographic methods.

Methodologies

Critical Ethnography & Autoethnography

I spent over two and a half years with Amira, Tesha, and Kassala. This length of time together — especially when sharing personal stories — naturally lent itself to a few
things. First, a certain commitment towards the *critical* school of qualitative research. In this chapter, I have referenced the fact that many of my life choices and interactions are driven by my passion for advocacy and social justice. My research is much the same. That is, distinctly value-driven, which is a commonality between all researchers who consider themselves criticalists:

Criticalists find contemporary society to be unfair, unequal, and both subtly and overtly oppressive for many people. We do not like it, and we want to change it. Moreover, we have found that much of what passes for “neutral objective science” is in fact not neutral at all, but subtly biased in favor of privileged groups… critical epistemology does not give us recipes for helping the poor and downtrodden; it rather gives us principles for conducting valid inquiries into any area of human experience (Carspecken, 1996, p. 8).

My values, principles, and commitment to equity will always be an important part of any research I pursue, but especially so in this study, given the nature of my relationship with Amira and her family. As Carspecken (1994) pointed out, I am aware of how socially and historically constructed power dynamics are at play and examining them critically makes this research more valid. In practice, an understanding of this inspires greater researcher reflexivity on my part, as well as a determination to place Amira, Tesha, and Kassala as the experts of their experience, above myself and as the scholarship and literature.

The second thing our relationships and time spent together influenced was the use of ethnographic methods — using the aforementioned critical lens — as my method of data collection. I chose ethnography because of its anthropological grounding in a desire to understand culture, as well as “its common use of participant observation as the central
research method” (Kendall & Thangaraj, 2013, p. 82). “Participant observation” is not quite the word for my involvement with the Adams, though. For the purposes of this study, I adjust the traditional term of “participant” to “participatory.” In many ways, I felt as if I became a part of the family’s routines and daily life: “the ethnographic method demands not merely an imaginative participation in the life of the other, but a practical and social involvement in the various activities, both ritual and mundane, that articulate and condition the other’s worldview” (Jackson, 2013, p. 254). When I was spending time with the Adams, I observed “those moments between stories” (van de Port, 1999, p. 10) as well as the stories themselves. I recognized that “stories are not told in a vacuum” (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021, p. 651) and that the whole of a person and their experience must be considered. I resisted quantifying the women in numbers and essentialist phrasing and, in addition to their words, examined the environment, the emotional context, the nonverbal gestures, their backgrounds, etc. I will expand on this more in this chapter as I detail my collection methods and study design.

In addition, in my interpretation of the data, I integrated autoethnographic methods within my fieldnotes and throughout this dissertation — particularly the findings chapter — in order to include myself and my thoughts in this work: “autoethnographers actively engage researcher reflexivity grounded in systemic introspection, bringing personal insights to the project of ethnographic research” (Poulos, 2012, p. 16). As the theoretical frameworks of this project demand a continual examination of the power and privilege that accompany my role as a researcher, active self-reflexivity is essential in this work: “[autoethnographic self-reflexivity] refers to the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers’ past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same
researchers’ interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene” (Tracy, 2020, p. 2). The awareness of myself within this project manifested during both data collection and analysis, which will be referenced later in this chapter.

In the next section, I outline this study’s conception and design.

**Study Design**

This qualitative, ethnographic study was designed to collect data in three overlapping phases, as shown below in table 1. There was not necessarily a set start to each phase, but identifying each phase kept my research structured and progressing. In the first phase, I spent more time one-on-one with Amira, the second phase had more time with the whole family, and the third consisted of more follow-up interviews, member-checking, and focused data analysis.

Phase one lasted about six months, from June 2020 to January 2021. It included proposing the idea of this project to Amira and her family, gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission from the university, and initial data collection. In June 2020, I suggested the idea of this research to Amira, Tesha and Kassala. They all agreed to participate. I then created and submitted my IRB proposal, which was approved in July 2020. After that, from July 2020 to January 2021, I conducted the first phase of data collection. This took the form of ethnographic field work, consisting chiefly of interviews and participatory observations. I identified these first eight months as phase one because they were pre-COVID-19 vaccines. Because of this, I spent much more one-on-one time with Amira, and if I was with the rest of the family, it was outside.

I considered phase two to begin in February 2021, after vaccines became available. I was able to collect data in an ethnographically “deeper” way for the next
year, from around February 2021 till February 2022. During that time, I attended larger gatherings, and remained indoors with the women for longer periods of time. I’d typically go to Amira’s apartment and Kassala’s house weekly, sometimes more. At the very least, I went three times a month. At times, I would record more formal interviews. Other times, I would simply be present with them, engaging in whatever activity or situation they happened to be in. Immediately afterwards, I’d always record a voice memo on my phone, just to make sure my thoughts and observations were fresh in my mind. I think I will always think fondly of these months. They were less about writing and reading and more about being. It was during these months that my bonds with the Adam women were truly solidified. Now, they feel unbreakable.

From February 2022-February 2023, I completed follow-up interviews as needed while I analyzed data and wrote my dissertation. During this time, I went to the Adams’ house about once a month. I consider member-checking to be a vital component of my writing and analysis process, so I was still regularly in contact with the women. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, "research is a collaborative document, a mutually constructed story out of the lives of both researcher and participant" (p. 13). Throughout this process, I collaboratively interpreted the data with Amira and her family by requesting feedback and constructive criticism about the study, as well as engaging in discussions that allowed new questions and trajectories to emerge based on our conversations.

Phase One
(June 2020- Feb. 2021)

Phase Two
(Feb. 2021- Feb. 2022)

Phase Three
(Feb. 2022-Feb. 2023)
Covid-19

I would be remiss not to mention the pandemic in the context of this research. The above timeline was, in many ways, determined by existential events happening globally. I am speaking, of course, of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, for me, at times made the process much more uncertain and anxiety-inducing. The interviews and gatherings represented in the three phases didn’t change in structure, but rather by frequency and number, due to whatever COVID surge we happened to be living through at the time. Amira and her family have always had a different level of comfort with the pandemic. They didn’t overly worry about COVID, saying things like, “if it’s my time, God will take me.” I reflected on this often, as they would wave their hands when I’d wonder aloud, “do you think we should stay outside?” They were respectful of me, understanding that I might feel more comfortable socially distanced, or wearing a mask, but I could always tell they were mostly humoring me, and as soon as I left, they’d be back to normal, shoulder to shoulder with all their Sudanese sisters, blood related or not.

I received IRB approval for data collection in July 2020. Looking back, that time of life feels blurry, strange, and urgent, all at once. In the summer of 2020, vaccines were
still about eight months away. Everything felt so uncertain, so risky. It was mostly due to the pandemic that my first stage of data collection usually took place in smaller groups. Pre-vaccine, our gatherings were slightly more stilted and shorter. Mostly, I would go to Amira’s apartment alone, since Kassala’s house was always the place where large groups gathered. At the time, I worried how this might affect my dissertation completion timeline. In retrospect, I regard these six months as extremely valuable, and necessary, to the project. They deepened my personal relationship with Amira in ways I might not have accomplished had I initially started mostly meeting with the entire family. After vaccines became widely available, I felt much better going to Kassala’s and being around more people. I began attending more large family and community gatherings. Although the pandemic was far from over, after vaccines, everyone felt a little more comfortable.

In the ensuing sections, I will outline certain logistical aspects to this study, such as the consent process, procedures to ensure ethical consideration, and data storage and organization.

**Consent Process**

The consent process for my study’s collaborators was very intentional due to the language barriers within the collaborator group. The women are not literate in their native language, Masalit. Amira is fluent (oral and written) in English, and acted as a translator between other collaborators and myself. The consent forms were written in English and Amira verbally translated an unsigned consent form to Masalit for Kassala. I explained to all three women that they were able to leave the study at any time if they no longer wished to be involved with the project. I outlined this carefully in my approved IRB.

**Ensuring Ethical Considerations**
Data collected has been kept in password-protected, encrypted online files. There were no foreseeable risks for the collaborators other than possible discomfort in answering personal questions. Since storytelling, by nature, could pertain to past experiences that may have been perceived as traumatic, I prepared for possible negative reactions to topics. If some stories uncovered past tensions and trauma, my aim was not to skip questions unless the collaborators were actively distressed and requested not to respond. I believe people have the right to engage in processes that might be painful to them if they are informed and choose to do so (Datta, 2017; Ellis; 2017; Esin & Lounasmaa, 2020). I made plans to respond with empathy and understanding if the collaborators recounted traumatic experiences. I also made sure to have identified resources available, such as counseling services, to assist them if they requested access to those services. However, in order to make it clear they did not have to answer anything they felt uncomfortable with, I echoed Ellis’ (2017) work on compassionate research and relational ethics of care: “allowing time and silence, without rushing into narrative, makes us aware of the conditions that need to be in place for new kinds of stories to emerge” (p. 4). I paid particular attention to the women during interviews about what could be perceived as uncomfortable topics, including their body language and hesitancy to answer. If I noticed they seemed uneasy, I would reassure them they didn’t have to answer if they chose not to.

**Data Storage and Organization**

I used Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, to manage data, ideas, and visually model the information collected from the interviews, fieldnotes and other qualitative instruments which I applied to this study. I also used my personal
research digital/written field journal and voice memos, kept in a secure, password-
protected Google Drive, to inform the analysis. I met with the collaborators often to show them my notes and ideas in order to gain valuable feedback and make the analysis more authentic and collaborative.

Luckily, when I started this project, I had experience working on a long-term research project through my university, so I knew the importance of managing data and proper data hygiene. As my study is a multi-year ethnographic study, I had large amounts of qualitative data, so from the beginning, I was operating under the knowledge that this type of project can “get chaotic in a hurry if [it is] not well planned” (Huberman et. al, 2014, p. 51). With this in mind, I developed a data identification system for each type of transcription or audio, organized by type followed by initials followed by the date. For example, IA-AA-05.06.2021 (interview audio- Amira Adam- May 6th, 2021); IT- TA & AA- 10.18.2021 (interview transcription- Tesha Adam & Amira Adam- October 18th, 2021); VMA- BK- 04.12.21 (voice memo audio- Bridget Kearney- April 12th, 2021); VMT- BK- 01.09.22 (voice memo transcription- Bridget Kearney- January 9th, 2022). I kept these organized in separate files, entitled Interview Audios, Interview Transcriptions, Voice Memo Audios, Voice Memo Transcriptions.

In the following section, I will explain my process of data collection.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over 31 months (from July 2020-February 2023), generally at the homes of the women, but a few times, extended to the community (parks or restaurants, mostly). Three data sources contributed to the design of this project and assisted me in answering the three key research questions.
Next, I provide further details about the methods related to each data source.

**Participatory Observation**

In the ethnographic tradition, participant observation (in this dissertation, termed *participatory* observation) and informal conversation were the chief method of data collection (Tedlock, 1991). The women guided the stories, as “storytelling, as a PAR approach, is the process of enabling people to reframe their own stories and stories told about them as individuals or groups” (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021, p. 654). I believe that the environment and physicality of the setting and the teller are just as important as the story itself. However, carrying around paper and a pencil during our visits to record observations proved to be too distracting, as I was an active collaborator in all interactions. I had my iPhone with me to record quick thoughts or ideas, which I would do from time to time if it seemed appropriate. Amira, Tesha and Kassala got used to this. When we began, I carried a red folder with printed-out interview questions to start the conversation, if needed. After a while, I stopped bringing it around. I didn’t even know they noticed, until one day Tesha said, “Miss, what happen to the red notebook?” I needed the printed questions at the beginning. But later, I found that they took us out of the visceral nature of existing in the *present*, of talking, laughing, touching, and being. Instead of using the formatted questions, I would say, “hey, can I record this?” if our conversation took an interesting turn. I recorded something in this manner almost every time I was there. Sometimes, I would come over ready to record, with a question in mind from transcribing and writing other interviews at home. They began to ask me, at times, to “record this, Miss, listen to this!” Amira, Tesha and Kassala don’t need a script to talk and tell stories.
After I left the Adams’ residence, I would sit in my car before driving home, or drive somewhere close by and park. Then, I’d proceed to make a new entry in my “digital field journal”— i.e., my initial thoughts and reactions to the observation that extended beyond the language of the stories, and examined sensory details, body language, cultural implications, etc. I also found that talking it out — similarly to writing it out — was incredibly helpful for me to discover patterns, themes and new ideas. Usually, after a particularly rich time hanging out with the Adams, the beginning of my digital fieldnotes began with me expressing my amazement at how close I was becoming with the women. I would verbally deconstruct the experience, in sort of a stream of consciousness pattern. I made sure to do this immediately after leaving so the event was still fresh in my mind.

Here is an example from April 12th, 2021:

So I'm just leaving today. It is just crazy... I mean, I feel like now I understand how ethnographies work, because you truly get so close to the families. They love me now and I'm very much a part of it all. And, I don't know, they just get really happy that I'm there. And that's why it's like... [long pause] Yeah. I'm starting to really, really get to know the family dynamics. Let's see, what did we do today? I helped Amira with her grammar homework. And then we went outside, and I was like, "Are y'all ready for story time?" They were like, "Yay!" The little kids are learning from Amira and Tesha. They really look up to them. So I just feel like one of the biggest things I'm noticing in telling stories is kind of the cross generational bonding thing, and the community aspect, it’s always what they miss the most when they talk about Gaga. And yeah, recreating home, like we sat in a circle and Tesha was like, "There should be a fire, there should be a fire here." So
I really need to remember that, because she was comparing it to when they tell stories in their culture, like, "There should be a fire." I definitely want to go camping with them one day, they keep asking me. Aw, I love them. We were eating pumpkin seeds outside and spitting them out. They were trying to teach me how to eat them like they do, and telling me they want to braid my hair, touching my hair, and showing me the mint in their garden. Talking about their gardens in the camp... (Kearney, 2021, 00:01).

I have one of these recordings for every time I went to Amira’s apartment or Kassala’s house. When I got home, I immediately wrote expanded field notes based on the digital field notes and memories from the visit. It all proved instrumental for understanding my data in chapters four and five, which I will discuss in my section on data analysis.

**Interviews**

As I mentioned earlier, my red folder full of typed interview questions was essential at the outset of this project, but not so much at the end of it. Initially, the interviews consisted of 3-5 open-ended questions, each helping to understand the research questions that drove this study. They had titles such as, *Motherhood, Resettlement Journey, Life in Gaga*. Each interview loosely had a theme and corresponding questions but were adapted as necessary. The questions were meant to be guidelines, used to inspire specific memories and connections, but were not the deciding factor in determining the directions of the interviews; the three women decided that. I think these more structured interviews were helpful in the beginning, especially as we got used to talking to each other while being recorded. The guidelines proved unnecessary,
though. Amira, Tesha and Kassala are natural storytellers; they seem to be happiest when sharing stories.

Amira and Tesha are orally fluent in Masalit and English, but only literate in English. They can also read and speak in basic Arabic. Kassala is only orally fluent in Masalit, and not literate in any language. The interviews took place in English, with Amira and Tesha translating for Kassala. Although, generally, the sisters would translate if I was there, there were times they would speak in Masalit to each other. In those instances, I would simply listen, observing their body language and facial expressions. This seemed to feel more natural for the women. Esin and Lounasmaa (2017) agree with this sentiment in their research exploring storytelling spaces for refugees:

Many participants worked in their own mother tongue. These were sometimes translated into English, and at other times included in the original language as a reminder of the multilinguality of the space and the speakers. Life stories were understood broadly as any part of life the narrator wished to discuss. (p. 395)

Informal conversations and discussions were also included in this category of data collection, but I always asked before I pressed record. The trajectory of the interview design, in terms of formality, was not always linear. The flow of the conversations depended in large part on what the women seem to want and need, rather than what I may have envisioned. I made, and will make, my recordings and notes accessible to Amira and her family at all times.

Next, I will explore the material aspects of the Adams’ storytelling practices.

**Other Materials**
One of the research focuses in this study is the materiality of storytelling, as “using multiple narrative modalities to construct life stories [helped] work across language and cultural differences” (Esin & Lounasmaa, 2017, p. 393). As such, I consider the materials that accompanied and inspired the stories to be valuable, authentic sources of data that helped guide the conversations forward and assisted in my analysis process. I will list the most used materials below.

**Food.** Food is one of the greatest connectors to memory, a tangible reminder of native culture, and paramount in allowing displaced people to preserve their identity and culture in an unfamiliar world: “food in its very sensual dimension serves as a vehicle for the recreation of the abstract meaning of home” (Rabikowska, 2010, p. 378). Food often appeared in the Adams’ stories of home: Kassala’s grove of mangoes back in Sudan, waiting in line for heavy bags of UNHCR rice, cooking *iftar* in the outdoor kitchen as the sun went down during Ramadan, tasting sugar for the first time. Often, the stories would be inspired by whatever we were eating that day. If we were eating mangoes, Kassala’s mangoes would inevitably come up. Eating plates of rice might inspire: *I remember waiting in line for this…* To the Adams, sharing a meal is creating community, both with familiar cultures and new ones. I also found that it made them more comfortable to sit and share stories; their culture of hospitality is strong. Once, Amira said, “I will never go to someone house with no food. If I have no food, I do not go.” This hospitality, the reciprocity of it, seemed to set them at ease: “hospitality [with food] can be interpreted as a way to create embodied bonds; bonds which are particularly important for refugees as they are trying to start a new life and create a home in a new environment” (Sabar & Posner, 2015, 198). I learned to always stop and get something before I went to visit:
fruit, candy, something else special. Often, I would get coloring or alphabet books for the kids, as well as Kassala and other adult women who were also learning to read. When Amira and Tesha came to my house to visit me, they brought three bags of fruit, two two-liters of soda, and a 24 pack of bottled water. I recorded this information about food as data as reflections — later converted to narratives — in my ethnographic digital fieldnotes, and later my findings chapters.

**Pictures, Videos and Imagery.** I can’t imagine what it would be like for the Adams were it not for Google and WhatsApp. They would miss their home even more and likely feel that much more disconnected. Looking at photos sent by family members still living in Gaga and searching for images of home on Google were an integral part of our storytelling process. If I asked a particular question about Gaga or Sudanese culture, Amira might text her sister and ask for pictures, or scroll through her archives and find some. She loved showing me these. One of her younger sisters has a particular talent with drawing and would often sketch out memories of Gaga. My favorite is a pencil drawing of their grandmother’s house in the camp (see figure 4.12). I framed the picture and gave it to the Adams as a gift. Kassala often walks by and touches it.

Sometimes, we would sit on the couch and watch YouTube videos of stories and memories they wanted me to see firsthand. This is how I learned about Sudanese jumping, a traditional Masalit dance in which participants form a circle and go into the middle, one by one, to jump as high as they can. It’s also how I got to see many traditional Sudanese weddings, including Amira’s, since I wasn’t in attendance. Amira and Tesha loved to watch Sudanese wedding videos; they could do it for hours — and often do — as YouTube videos playing in the background. “See,” they’d say, “this is
what Sudanese wedding look like.” We often relied on Google during our conversations, especially when the Adams needed clarification on an English word, or I needed to visualize something they were telling me. Since Amira, Tesha and Kassala’s first language is not English, it can often be difficult for them to communicate as fully as they’d like, especially in terms of their memories before resettlement. At times, they would explain something that I couldn’t seem to get, and I could Google what I thought they’d meant, then watch their faces light up, yes, this! The same would happen if I were trying to understand something that only existed in Sudan or Chad, or within Islamic religious traditions. In this way, we were all learning together.

There were some limitations involved in this practice, as we could only view what was accessible on the internet. In addition, there were certain times when a Masalit word or phrase just didn’t translate, and we were unable to find a picture or video accompanying what they’d described.

![Image of a garden](image)

*Figure 3.1- Kassala shows me the garden.*

**The Garden.** There were a few environmental factors that inspired specific memories and stories. The most notable of these was their large backyard garden. We spent countless afternoons out in the back of their house, walking through the neatly
planted rows of herbs and vegetables. Kassala, especially, loved to spend her days in the
garden, where she took comfort in the familiar routine of harvesting and planting
vegetables. Without the sisters to translate, it was easier for the two of us to communicate
there, simply by touching, smelling and tasting. It seemed that, for Kassala, gardening
helped provide a sense of belonging, of normalcy, in a new environment, because it was a
familiar ritual. For many refugees, gardening reawakens past positive memories and
maintains a connection to culture, while providing a recognizable sense of purpose in a
foreign world:

Being in the garden provides migrants the place to practice the skills and life
experiences they bring from their country of origin that can be harnessed to assist
adaptation to their new context. The freedom to express one’s cultural identity is
integral to adapting to new surroundings. (Harris et. al, 2014, p. 9202)

Kassala proudly shared her family’s plot with me, as her garden became a place where
she, “through food-related rituals, celebrate[d her] belonging” (Rabikowska, 2010, 381).
Yes, she’d say, gesturing out over the mint, squash, and tomatoes, yes, my country, yes.

In the next section, I introduce my method of data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

To begin data analysis, I transcribed all interviews and digital field notes, then
grouped each interview transcription, digital field note transcription, and extended field
note transcription by date. Then, I carefully read through each transcription and
highlighted specific pieces of each conversation that I felt particularly showcased the
women’s personality, their core values about identity and culture, or otherwise
contributed to the narrative arc of their story. After that, for each collection of data (a
collection of interview transcriptions, fieldnotes, and extended field notes for each visit) I began the process of data analysis through writing and writing a narrative interpretation of each set of data. These narratives were holistic stories of the experiences, of which I was an integral part. This sort of ethnographic writing differs from traditional, more “objective” reports, but this is becoming increasingly common in today’s academic writing: “modern ethnographers are producing work which contrasts with traditional ethnography texts, which separated researcher and research participants, often to mimic the ‘objective’ reports produced in positivistic research” (Reeves et. al, 2013, p. 1365).

A dedication to writing became a part of my process: “to sustain the life of an autoethnographer, the writer must commit to writing habits as part of daily research practice” (Poulos, 2021, p. 41). I wrote nearly every day during phase three of study (see table 1), which was about a year. Sometimes I’d write for ten minutes, or thirty minutes, other times I’d write for two hours. For half of this time, I was a full-time classroom teacher, so often, I felt exhausted and uninspired from the daily grind. Some days, I didn’t want to write. I made myself write anyway, and I found that when I sat down at my desk, I began to feel comforted. It became a spiritual practice as well as an academic one; it was a way to destress and to connect with myself and with the Adams. As Poulos (2021) notes, “autoethnographers use writing as a primary method of inquiry” (p. 32). On writing as a method of inquiry, Richardson (2000) explains her process:

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, however, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. (p. 924)
This “static writing model” (p. 924), she (2000) argues, is more fit for quantitative reasoning than, for example, the complexity, nuance and beauty of ethnographic writing. I echo Richardson’s (2000) claim; I analyzed my data through the writing process. The process of writing my findings chapter was dynamic, creative, and genre fluid, as I “[took] literary risks, seeking new and interesting ways to render research texts” (Poulos, 2021, p. 14). I wrote stories of every transcription, turning the interviews into creative nonfiction vignettes, which was deeply self-reflexive. This creative process allowed me to know my data — to understand it on a deeper level — than would ever be possible otherwise: “when using creative analytic practices, ethnographers learn about their topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytic procedures, metaphors, and writing formats” (Richardson, 2000, p. 931). These descriptive narratives were based, not only on the literal transcriptions, but also on my “thick” fieldnotes (Geertz, 1973), language, conversations, and interactions between the women. Narrative “thick description” was a part of my writing and analysis process: “thick description … does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another.” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). I found that as I wrote, I was able to make connections and generate theories: “writing is a process of discovery” (Richardson, 2000, p. 936). Sometimes I would read my words out loud as I was typing them and catch myself nodding as a proverbial lightbulb went off, quickly opening my “chapter 5 draft” tab and making a note for the discussion of findings chapter. I found that the lines I’d color-coded as particularly significant helped guide my thinking as I wrote through each transcription. I referenced my data sources often through
the analysis process, as ethnographers rely on various methods of qualitative data collection to create their narratives, including participatory observation, interviews, conversation, and imagery (Reeves et. al, 2013).

As Shafter and Schindler (2021) note, “writing does not simply communicate ethnographic insights, but—as a result of the activity of texts—it also generates them” (p. 11). As previously mentioned, while I was writing chapter four, I kept an open document of insights, connections and thoughts I’d generated during the writing process. After I finished the narratives, I printed off chapter four and, for the first round of coding, began line-by-line coding to uncover any emergent themes or patterns in the narratives. I created a long list of codes from this process. Next, I read through the narratives again and rejected many initial codes that had little repetition. After that, I read through the narratives once more and began the process of descriptive coding to “[summarize] in a word or short phrase- most often a noun- the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102). I compiled the codes together and continued to seek professional literature and scholarship that would guide my thinking. Although this will be addressed at much greater depth in chapter five, I will briefly list themes, within the context of the research questions, that manifested after the initial writing process, line-by-line coding, and descriptive coding: storytelling as a strategy (materiality, methods of narration), negotiation of relationships and ways of belonging (family stories, co-creation of stories) and counter-narratives of refugee camps (community, space, freedom). Again, these will be explored at length in chapter five, but are listed here so the reader has context for chapter four, the narrative of this study’s findings.

**Writer Positionality**
I remember myself as a young child, lining up my dolls against the wall as I took out my journal and a pencil. Studying them intently, I gave them all names, jobs, families, and lives. I remember hiding in closets and under tables, making notes about family members, studying them, writing their stories. I was always writing (and reading). I have always *discovered* and *understood* through writing; my journal is still never far away. As an English major undergraduate, I always felt happiest, most skilled and confident, in my creative writing courses. The same applied to this study. The two months writing my findings chapter as creative nonfiction were by far the most enjoyable moments of this process. For this reason, I was drawn towards rhetorical experimentation in research, as well as to the ethnographic and autoethnographic styles of writing: “as autoethnographers practice the craft of writing by engaging the methods and conventions of writers of fiction, creative nonfiction… [they use] storytelling devices… [they] foreground the writing process itself as the primary method of inquiry” (Poulos, 2021, p. 17). I felt connected with Amira and her family as I listened to their words on recordings, read the transcriptions, and converted moments into stories. I felt the most able to capture their personalities, their voices, their humor, who they truly are; that was my goal for this research. I believe that “all research is storytelling” (Poulos, 2021, p. 36).

After writing this dissertation, I belong even more firmly to the school of researchers that desire to push against the traditional genre of *academic writing* (Behar, 1996; Norander, 2017; Yoo, 2017). As Ruth Behar (1996) calls it, *writing vulnerably*, that is, engaging your emotions and your personal voice with your fieldwork writing and analysis. Behar (1996) insists that “writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does
writing invulnerably and distantly. I would say it takes yet greater skill” (p. 13). Instead of reporting the facts simply, as they were, I used “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) to put the reader as much as possible in the hearts and minds of the Adam women. As Poulos (2021) notes:

The richness of cultural lives and life practices of others cannot be fully captured or evoked in purely objective language… evocative autoethnographic writing extends thick description to allow the author to construct research texts that conjure, arouse, or elicit vivid images, deep meanings, and sometimes intense emotions and thus shows the world in a richer, “thicker” way than simple realist tales can accomplish (p. 9).

I abide by the belief that the human experience is too complex and beautiful to write about in dry, objective language (Richardson, 2000), and that “stories are, indeed, truths that will not keep still. And so, we write our stories to illuminate human social life” (Poulos, 2021, p. 14). In order to truly understand this research, one must truly understand Amira Tesha and Kassala. I believe that can only happen if their story is written as dynamically and expressively as their lives. Their lives are certainly not boring. Writing about them did not have to be, either.

To culminate this chapter, I address the limitations present in this study.

Limitations of the Study

Relationships are the core, the pulse, of this project. Although they bring a great richness, uniqueness and depth to this study, in the interest of preserving them, they also require some subjects to be left out. My close relationship with the Adam family is a hallmark of this project. I consider our bonds to be the greatest strength of this research,
but it also raises some limitations. There are issues I do not push because I don’t want to threaten our relationship, or make Amira, Tesha or Kassala feel uneasy. For example, there are some subjects we do not discuss at length because Amira isn’t comfortable speaking about them at this point in her life. Most notably, the issues surrounding gender. Obviously, this study is extremely gendered in nature, focusing entirely on the women of one family. The men are hardly present and rarely mentioned. Although including them could make for incredibly compelling research, it is not something Amira wants to discuss or acknowledge when I do bring it up. The Adam women are Muslim and largely identify with traditional patriarchal norms (i.e., the man is the head of the household). Therefore, for Amira to speak about her husband with me, negatively or otherwise (however close we are, I am still an outsider in their culture and religion), is a much more complex task than those who don’t live within strict gender roles would assume. When I asked questions pushing at gender norms, Amira responded almost fearfully, proving that certain subjects, when broached, uncover all sorts of tensions that exist around her identity; tensions that she is not yet ready, or able, to discuss openly. So, out of respect to Amira, I will not write about this subject at length in this dissertation.

Another limitation concerns the lack of conversations surrounding race. Amira’s youngest siblings, as well as her children and Tesha’s, who are growing up in the United States, will have an entirely different perspective on their racial and cultural identity. Their children and the youngest siblings are Sudanese-American. They will have a different view on all their racial and ethnic identities: Sudanese, American and Black. In this study, Amira, Tesha and Kassala very rarely mention the social construct of race. They are Black, but they consider themselves Sudanese above all; therefore, different
from Black Americans. As such, this is not a topic we often explicitly discuss in this dissertation.

As I mentioned at length throughout this project, I would like, above all, for these stories to remain in Amira, Tesha and Kassala’s perspective. As such, it must be noted that the way they speak of life in Gaga is typically very positive. Amira lived in Gaga from ages four to sixteen. She was a child. Children remember things distinctly differently than adults. Kassala too will speak, in general, positively about Gaga, but mostly in terms of referencing her family members that are still there. As such, there is a positivity bias, which cannot be avoided if I wish to honor the women’s stories as they are. In truth, I think the “positivity bias” fits in with the reality of counter-stories. Memories, and their resultant stories, do not follow any set structure. For Amira and her family, they remember Gaga simply the way they remember it. Those are the stories I will write.

Using the methodologies of data collection and analysis explained in chapter 3, I determined key findings and conclusions. In chapter 4, I present a narrative interpretation of the data and findings of this research, written as Amira, Tesha and Kassala’s stories of Gaga and resettlement. In chapter 5, I invite a further discussion based on these findings. In chapter 6, I discuss the implications and conclusions drawn from this research.

The end of this chapter denotes a tone shift. Chapter four is written as a creative nonfiction account of Amira, Tesha and Kassala’s stories.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE STORIES OF AMIRA, TESHA AND KASSALA

They arrived in Gaga from Sudan when Amira was four years old. She remembers moments from the journey in snapshots, single words: hot, long, dark. Kassala remembers, but so viscerally that she would prefer to forget. One day, when I ask for stories of the journey, she says something in Masalit, then quickly stands up and walks to the kitchen, grabbing a sponge and a dirty pan. “Miss, she don’t like to think about that,” Amira tells me, “but she tell me we come on donkey. All of us. She carry me on her back the whole way. My mom always telling me and I remember little, little. When we coming, my grandma give my mom all the donkey. And me and Tesha, we don't know how to sit, but we sit together. My mom tied us together.”

When speaking about the first year in Gaga, all Kassala, Tesha and Amira can say is hot hot hot hot. Repeating the word over and over, they describe the beginning of their time in Gaga as a sort of hellish initiation. “Everyone go through it there, Miss. In the beginning, we have no house. We just have tent. They call our name and give us number, then we go find our number and put tent on the ground. All through the night, we cry. It was so hot. I will never forget. And then, if you sleep outside, sometime a scorpion.”
Kassala laughs and points to her forearm. Both of them have been stung by scorpions. They tell the story as if it were an adventure. Amira pulls up a picture of a scorpion on her phone and Kassala says, yes, yes!

Amira moves two fingers to zoom in more closely on the arachnid. “My mom and grandma know how to stop scorpion bite. We don’t have medicine, you know, so they tie where it bite, so the pain is not gonna go all over your body.” Amira holds the phone up to her mother and they begin talking in Masalit, gesturing to different parts of their body, nodding and laughing. “But Miss, in one or two year the United Nations come and bring us… what they call… to build house?” I google bricks, show her a picture, and receive the affirmative. “So they bring brick and we build house, then it get better and better and better."

I am quiet for a moment as they speak in Masalit. During a lull in the conversation, I comment: “Amira, you know, it seems like life could be kind of dangerous, and difficult, in Gaga. But you all still miss it.”

“Yes, Miss. I still miss it.”

“Why?”

“Because my family there. So many people I love there. I want to go back. Maybe one day we can go together, you and me.”

“I have different thing to clean and different friends. It was difficult for some time. Then I like it.” She tells me that in Chad, there are only two seasons: rainy and hot. They arrived during the rainy season and learned how to use the UNHCR-provided buckets to catch rainwater to drink, cook and wash with. Long-time residents stopped by

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to welcome her family to the camp and explain essential information like the best times to get water from the well (very early in the morning) and how to make toothbrushes and brooms out of sticks. Kassala quickly found a group of women that grew vegetables on a small plot of land next to their house. “That is how Mommy is, Miss. She make friends easy.”

There was only one problem: they didn’t speak the same language.

Kassala didn’t let that deter her, though. Over the course of twelve years in the camp, she not only became extremely close with the women, but learned to orally communicate in another language, Mbaka, while they harvested the vegetables together. Some months, they worked with mud squishing beneath their toes. Others, they wrapped their hijabs around their faces to keep the dust from drying out their mouths. The grown-ups would chatter in Mbaka and, sometimes, they would fall down because they were laughing so hard.

“I think sometime we happy there,” Amira says.

In their resettled home, Amira, Kassala and Tesha try to hang on to all their languages. Kassala still struggles to speak English, so Masalit is passed down to the youngest children in some ways by necessity. They want to communicate with their mother. As for Mbaka, Kassala was ecstatic to realize she still had a way to practice outside of Gaga. Amira explained this to me once as she was describing the evolution of their languages, homes, cultures: “My mom don't forget because one guy is here. He from Chad but he speak Mbaka, so when he comes to my house, they speak together. She is so happy for that.”
Arabic, the tongue of their religion, is spiritually important to Amira, especially as she becomes worried about American secular influence on Amani. She pays to learn Arabic in weekly online classes. Although she speaks some due to the convergence of Masalit with Islam and the Quran, she wants to read and write more fluently. “Miss,” she asks me one day at her apartment. “Can you show me how to buy- you know, a board to practice my Arabic? I want it in my house. I want Amani to know.”

Figure 4.1: Tesha making Amira laugh.

“We have nobody but each other,” Amira reminisces as she stares at the wall of her apartment, which is adorned with pictures of her siblings and her baby. Tesha is beside her, lying face down on the rug, eating a green apple.

“At night in the camp,” Amira says, “my mom come with her friends to the house. But I stay with Tesha, my best friend, my best sister.”
“Really?” I say, “so did you share a room?” I am speaking from my experience, from a culture in which sharing a room is something that is not always guaranteed. They fall against each other with laughter.

“Miss!” yells Tesha. “The house is only one room!” Amira adds, “remember, Tesha, in Gaga, they tell Mommy- if you go America you never see your daughter, because they give you different building. Well, same building but one room and then another room. They say you never see your family.”

They shake their heads and start talking in rapid Masalit, slipping into their shared culture and their sisterhood. They are best friends. They complete each other's sentences and absentmindedly rest their bare feet on each other’s laps. Amira grabs one of Amani’s bottles and waves it in Tesha’s face as Tesha giggles. “Miss, I tell her that I am so small and Tesha so big because she drink my milk when we kids, this is what I say.”

Tesha, although she is thirteen months younger, towers over Amira, who often laments her tiny frame. I imagine them walking barefoot along dusty dirt roads in their camp — maybe before their bodies grew so differently — balancing dripping jugs of water on their small heads. My best friend, my best sister.

The house was made of straw, mud and some bricks, they tell me. They mixed up the bricks themselves. Amira describes the construction process, until I interrupt her—“wait, did you build your own house?” She shrugs. Of course she did. This often happens with Amira, Tesha and their mother. They describe something nonchalantly that, to me, would be impossible: building a house, skinning a goat, making brooms, toothbrushes, stoves.
“Mommy and friends, they talk. We play games with rock, then sometimes hide-and-seek. Somebody hides, you need to go find that, where they hide.”

There were rituals, daily routines: “we wake up in Gaga and drink tea with our mom every morning. But if you don't have it, it's okay, you can ask a neighbor too, you can say can I have hot water? They will give you and then you do whatever you need to do, and then you can go to the tap or well. Every day walking, walking, walking for water.”

Days began and ended similarly, with the sun. “So you didn’t have an alarm or anything, right?” I ask Amira without thinking. She laughs: “alarm? For what? Yeah, we don’t have alarms. You know, when it’s morning time, sunrise, you see sun, wake up. Sometimes we hear the rooster, and sound of that, it wake you up. When we work or we’re out playing or whatever, we just do by sunset. When you see it start going down, it’s time to go. We go home.”

There were no clocks, no deadlines, no appointments or meetings. This, I think, is perhaps what they miss the most when they speak of the freedom of the camp. It makes me realize how bound we are by time here, how my phone, with its blinking digital numbers, is never far from my hands. “Only when we come in America, only then I touch phone. Can you imagine? Never see phone. Time. They say this open at 3:00 PM. I know only that but I don’t know exactly time- how is the time work? But when I come here, everything technology, phone. In my country, it not the same.”

In Gaga, the tents and houses were arranged in blocks. When Amira arrived with her family, they were all kept in one central location. After a while, though, they were assigned to different areas within the borders of the camp. “Because before, people all
together, but now they do like group instead. They do some small city here, another here, another here, you can go walk. Like neighborhoods.”

I ask what her neighborhood was called. “Mine, they put this number. Mine’s thirteen. So if somebody says, even somebody come from another country, if ask you _talatasher_, is thirteen, camp thirteen, you say that so they can come in your area. They name the areas by number so people cannot lose, you just stay all together.”

Every night, Kassala gathered in one corner of their courtyard with her friends. They chewed on thick pieces of grass and sticks while they told story after story. “We stay up late and listen,” the girls tell me. “Sometime we play game with rocks right outside, but always we listen. Sometime we learn about Sudan, and about our great-grandma. Our mother talk about her a lot. They do a tea, we sit in room together. Some people join, then sometimes they talking about their life, what happen.”

With the absence of technology, stories were the entertainment. They were the community activity, especially for the women. I ask what the men did while the women were gathered together. “Men, I don’t know what they do. They just sit in whatever.” A few houses away, Tesha adds, the men sat around one very tiny TV and watched soccer. Ten cents per person to watch a game. All crowded around a TV the size of a book. Sometimes the women would join them, but usually, they came together and talked and talked and talked.

They do that still, here in their resettled world. Women gather in Kassala’s living room with their hijabs off and babies attached to their breasts. Now, they tell stories about the ridiculousness of American grocery stores ("why I need ten different oil- oil is
oil!"), or the downstairs neighbor that complains about cooking smells emanating from the kitchen ("he should be happy for us- we have food! I give him sambusas if he ask!"). Above all, the women bemoan the fact that American life is much more arduous and complicated than they’d ever assumed.

Amira, now that she is a mother, is one of them. She sits in the living room with the others, participating in the multigenerational confluence of gossip, fears and conversation. "You know, Miss," she turns to me. “In Gaga, they think life gonna be very easy here.” She shakes her head and listens closely as Kassala begins talking.

“Mommy say she really misses Gaga, because her mom lives there, and her sisters, all her big brothers live there. But in Chad, they say, Kassala, if you go America, you don’t do nothing. They tell us, if you go America, there's money in the ground. Go collect and bring home.” Amira translates for Kassala, and all the women slap their knees with mirth.

Tesha brings in some sambusas on a tray, dripping with hot grease. Amira puts a paper towel over her hands and grabs one, blowing on the steam. “So Amira, was America what you thought it would be?” I ask.

She takes a minute to respond, yelping a little as the fried dough burns her lips on the first bite. “These good, my sister. Miss, eat one sambusa. You know Miss, in Gaga, life good because all, most of my family, we’d all be together, like this, at the end of the day. But sometimes bad because here in America, if we are hungry, we have freezer food, take food when we want, alhamdulillah. In my country they don't have a lot of jobs. But here, it's good to work. Job or school or food is good only. But otherwise, no good.”
Kassala got a part-time job at UPS, over the American Christmas holidays. She loved working, having never been to school or had a job in her life. Amira tells me about this while good-naturedly tapping her mother on the head: “Mommy get job just to send money home. She keep nothing for us, for the house, for herself, only send back to Gaga, all of it.” “When they come with more food, we know because everyone start running to the gate,” Amira recalls. She remembers when UNHCR workers would arrive in large trucks, and throw down white sacks of rice and flour, emblazoned with the UNHCR sky-blue and white feathered logo. Although there was technically a system for doling out supplies and food, often, the camp residents would disregard calls for orderly lines. “Sometime they call me- the girl who fight. They call me that, and- how you say in English- Button, because I am, tiny, like a belly button, you know? My grandma call me that.” I picture a smaller Amira, then smile, remembering her first weeks in my classroom. A boy tried to pull off her hijab and she punched him. Amira laughs when I remind her: “yes, Miss, like that. Everyone fight over rice. Sometime if you can’t get home, because everyone fight, you can dig a hole and hide the rice. You can come back later and get it with your brothers. I was small, so I can take rice away fast and hide it. My mom always send me because she was at home with the babies.” She sets a plate of tea and shortbread cookies in front of me. “Eat,” she says. I pour tea into a cup and follow her into the kitchen, where she is preparing something else that contains sugar and flour. I lean against the kitchen counters, eating
slowly and watching her remember. She pours sugar into a pot: “Wow, that’s a lot of sugar,” I say without thinking. I try to avoid sugar, which is so easy to find hidden within American food. Amira knows this, and now doesn’t ask before she hands me tea that is clear and black, instead of filling half the cup with sweetness, as she does for the rest of her family.

“Miss, listen. Here if you have sugar, we don't care. You can do whatever you want. But there, in Gaga, sugar is very expensive. If you buy sugar, you hide it. Your mom is supposed to hide somewhere so you cannot find. My father gave us the bag sugar, and then my mom, she don't hide, because she forget and go to get water.” Amira bangs a spoon on the side of the pot, tapping it till all the clumpy white mixture falls off.
“But me and Tesha, we find the sugar, Miss. You know, people call us twins because we never separate. But here, no more twin.” She begins telling the story as she licks what’s left off the spoon.

When Amira discovered the bag of sugar hidden under their outdoor stove, she had never seen anything like it. Tesha, who was never far behind her, hadn’t either, and was the first to carefully tear open the bag and try a few of the white grains sticking to her fingertip. They knew that this must be sugar, having tasted it before mixed into tea, but always rationed by their mother. Kassala was out with her friends, deciding to make the daily trek to get water more enjoyable as they all walked together, gossiping about their husbands and children, balancing jugs on their heads and shoulders. The sisters figured they had some time before they were discovered, so grabbed a metal plate from the stone shelves nearby. “We put the sugar on the plate, all the sugar, we don’t even leave anything. Then we put oil mix onto that, and it is all expensive. Then we eat it.” Kassala came back to find Amira and Tesha sitting on the ground naked, covered in sugar. Amira, always the tiniest and lightest on her feet, jumped up and began running to her grandmother’s house. Tesha was not so lucky and got caught by her mother’s outstretched arm.

“I don’t come home for three days, until I know my mom forget,” Amira laughs.

“And it don’t matter because in Gaga, it’s like everyone is the mother.”
In Gaga, there were clearly defined tasks and roles that fell to each person, depending on what they enjoyed or seemed naturally skilled at. Tesha, for example: “I used to stay with the kids. I had to stay with the kids and take care of them. I used to catch grasshoppers sometimes, too. I was too lazy so I didn’t work. I was just tired. Amira, she worked a lot. She worked herself to get money to buy everything on the list.” Amira puffs up her shoulders a bit, “I do it all by myself.”

“You’re a hard worker, huh Amira?” I say, feeling that urge to embrace her small, fierce body.

She nods vigorously, but Tesha, lovingly, shoots back, “Hmm, *maybe* she is hard worker.”

Amira makes her typical *ahh* sound, scoffing a little at her sister: “you said maybe? Look at me, here.”

“Yeah,” I laugh, “she has a baby!”

“Miss,” Amira turns to me. “We went out to run today, I go faster than her, my sister. She don’t even run, she’s lazy.”

“You guys run for exercise? Did you do that in Gaga?”

They laugh, “Miss, no! In Gaga, we are walking every day for water. We don’t need exercise.”

Of course.

Kassala’s small, boxy home proudly displays a *Congratulations- Class of 2020!* yard sign by the front stoop. Amira usually points it out as we enter her home. The family typically quickly moves from the small living room to the backyard and back again: their
favorite spaces. They rarely spend time alone in their bedrooms, and during sunny days, rarely inside at all.

“Do you want to see garden?” Amira hoists Amani up into her arms and beckons me to follow with a tilt of her head. We walk outside, blinking in the shimmering summer afternoon. Today, she is wearing a long, pink dress with bright blue flowers. She, along with Tesha and Kassala, almost always wears vividly colored clothing. When we are out walking through dull, fluorescent department stores, they remind me of bright birds, too beautiful and rare for the muted monotony of Wal-Mart and Target.

Figure 4.3: Sitting in a circle in the backyard.

“Go play, baby,” she says, setting Amani softly onto the freshly mowed grass. He totters toward the large vegetable garden, falling, then getting back up again. Amira shows me a row of sproutlings: “I plant this by myself. My mom, we dig it together, but I plant. We do this in my country. We know how to do this.” We bend down and Amira
points to a leafy stalk, telling me it’s okra, and describing the way she cooked it in Chad. The side door slams and Kassala, Tesha and the kids follow us outside.

Kassala is proud in the backyard. She is comfortable here, in their garden that takes up nearly half of the yard. Kassala, the two sisters, and I are walking amongst the plants, telling stories. Tesha plucks a ripened cherry tomato off the vine. Chewing thoughtfully, she says: “our tomato are sweet but in this country, they are sour. And then, oh my god, so many fresh things. Tomato. How I spell tomato?” Amira sounds it out for her, to-mae-toe, and hands me three rosy fruits. As juice explodes into my mouth, I comment on how rich it is, how delicious, then wonder aloud what tomatoes must taste like in Chad, with its never-ending summer heat. “You remember garden in Chad?” Amira asks her sister, popping another tomato between her lips.

In Gaga, Tesha and Amira rose in the morning excited to work in the garden, to dig, plant, taste: “Tesha, you remember we used to go over there, oh my god, wallahi, I sometime miss... me and Tesha we go early, before my mom wake.” Afterwards, they would finish their morning chores, then go to the fields again to help their mother: “at first, my mom say, Amira, you can’t do this. She say, you are small, but I say, no Mommy, I have to help you.” Today, Amira possesses the same attitude towards Kassala. It’s almost maternal in nature; the protectiveness is threaded through all her stories. Kassala, with her soft-spoken demeanor, at times seems childlike; yet she is also the grounding center for the entire family. Her voice is quiet, high-pitched; she is nearly always smiling. Amira rests her hand on Kassala’s shoulder, telling me, “yes, I’m always
with Mommy. I was working with my mom in the land all the time, yeah. My camp, everything, we plant it.”

“It sounds like a good life, a simple life,” I say.

“Yes,” responds Amira. “It’s very simple, for kids, but if you maybe adult it’s hard a little bit.”

I ask, “what is the most beautiful thing about Sudan?” I hear the word mango through the Masalit. When we are around the vegetables, or talking about Sudanese food, mangoes are often threaded through the stories.

Kassala says something to Amira, who translates: “Mommy say mango, because is what she grow best. In my country, you can eat without washing. We let mangoes to grow in trees.” She googles the fruit, holds up her phone: “look here, those are the mangoes trees… this is how we used to have a lot of mangoes.” I ask if they ate mangoes in Gaga, “no, Sudan, she talking about Sudan. Chad is not her country.” I reply: “Right, okay, it’s your country more.” She nods, “yeah, my country more.”

As the sisters translate, talking over one another in their comfortable, familiar way, they describe the significance of mangoes to Kassala and her family. The words sour and sweet are used again to juxtapose American fruits versus the ones grown in Sudan. “People would come from far away to buy her mangoes, Miss,” says Amira, “You know, mango trees, because they own this, in their own gardens. They have trees, like hundred of them. And then, a lot of mangoes in the ground. Just, you can go take it, very sweet. Mommy say, I miss all those the most.” Amira explains that when Kassala was displaced from Darfur and had to make the long trip to Gaga, she lost all her mango trees.
She misses them deeply: “Even in Chad, we have mango tree, but those are not ours. We can go see, but it’s different. And these kids, the ones born in America, they never see a mango tree. They never see.”

When it was time for her to be married and leave her family’s home, Amira was young, only 17 years old. She talks about how afraid she was, how anxious. Her husband, a commercial truck driver, left on long trips for weeks. Inside her apartment, with its beige walls and beige carpets, she realized she was truly alone for the first time in her life. She remembers calling Tesha from the small, warm bathroom, afraid to move around the darkened, empty apartment. “I was not used to this,” she says, laughing, “I was crying all the time.”

Often, Amira laughs when recounting sad stories. It’s as if, when her pain becomes a story, it is more bearable for her. I think back on her many stories of life in Chad, how she fell asleep to the cadence of voices, of humans all around her. I bite my lip. She must have felt so jarringly alone. “But now I am okay,” squaring her small shoulders. She is always okay.

One day, Amira is unusually unresponsive in her texting. “Come to my apartment, the door is open,” she finally texts me back after a long hiatus, “I want to see you.”

When I go inside, she is curled up on the couch, a blanket spread across her knees, watching an Arabic-dubbed movie. She doesn’t get up to greet me or offer me anything. I don’t care about this in itself, obviously, but it is a departure from the normal
Sudanese hospitality routine. She waves her hand at me, “I feel so boring today. I lost myself today. I lost myself today. When I don’t see people, I lost myself.”

I tell her it’s okay to feel lazy sometimes, “I love being lazy,” and sit down next to her, watching the actors’ lips poorly match the Arabic words. “When I stay inside,” she says, “only inside, I feel weird. I have a headache too much, whatever. If you stay always inside, you will become crazy, you know. If you’re not around people or just you don’t go outside, fresh air, whatever, you get sick.”

We sit quietly and watch the movie. She explains what is happening and I’m happy I can sit with her today, on a day she obviously feels low. In the 2020s, most Americans would know how to identify a particularly fragile mental health day. I wonder how Amira and other displaced people, who haven’t had the privilege to diagnose such things as anxiety and depression, understand these emotions. Perhaps just as she has today: “I feel boring. I lost myself.” I think back to how she describes Gaga: bright and busy, like a beehive. People coming in and out, constantly. Being alone isn’t just not desirable, it’s not possible. Houses are one room and doors often don’t exist. “It’s very different here. In Gaga, the place where you sit, the like, living room, it is not covered like American house. It just open, you know. They make walls, only walls, they don’t cover.”

“In English,” I say, “we call that a courtyard.”

“Courtyard. Courtyard, yes. Only if you want to sleep, you go inside. Otherwise, you stay outside, fresh air. Always with other people. I am never alone in Gaga. In Chad, summertime is rain and all the trees get green too and then the people go farming outside, whatever. It’s fun. I want to go back. I wish.” How empty, how dull, it must feel
sometimes for Amira, inside her lonely apartment. “Today, I don’t even call Tesha. You know, sometime me and Tesha, we stay on phone with each other for hours and hours. We do this many time.” I have seen it before. She calls Tesha, puts the phone on speaker, then continues with whatever she’s doing. They will occasionally talk to each other, but not constantly. They carry the phone around with them, so it feels like they’re together.

Sometimes, I think Amira needs people to feel truly content. I notice, as we sit on the couch, how she starts to ignore the TV, lean away from it and into me. “How are your classes going?” I ask. She is taking classes to be a nurse, “so I can help people in my country,” she will say. She looks down at her hands and is quiet for a minute before answering, good. She is always thinking about her country, always. They all are. Once, she told me, “we take our culture with us wherever we go.” It’s an invisible, almost tangible idea that whispers beneath every utterance and thought, reminding them of people they love, of times that feel connected and free.

“You know, in my country, we can never think we will have TV this big,” Amira laughs, staring again at the 55-inch screen that takes up the majority of her living room wall, “In Gaga, the TV was same as book.” The laugh seem to energize her, and she hops up to get me cookies. She turns on YouTube and a video comes up under her recently watched category. “Oh, look Miss, let me show you. This is Masalit jumping. It’s our culture.” She chooses a video depicting a circle of people chanting. After a few moments, they began taking turns running to the center of the circle to jump at a height that nearly seems impossible.

“Oh my gosh, wow, Amira. So in your country, you’d go to these jumping circles?” She sighs, “I wish I know how to jump. Jumping is Masalit culture. It’s
exercise. It’s good. My sister Ayeesha can jump, maybe she can show you. My friend from school is in this video. See, that’s her husband. They jump together. Me, I don’t know how to jump, but my husband, oh my God, Allah.”

“He’s good?”

“Yes, he know how to jump very much.”

“Where is your husband?” I ask, as I often do. I have never met him, and that is continually odd to me. It is so gendered, their world. I am always around women, always. I think they prefer it that way, though: “I like when I am with Mommy and my family, but sometime I’m happy when he is not home. He drive truck, he is away for weeks. When he home, I have to cook for his friends,” she straightens up a little (she is so tiny), “when he travel, sometime I don’t cook for two weeks! I go out and get chicken!”

This is a big deal to Amira. Her prescribed role in the Sudanese social structure is to cook, to clean, to have children-- not cooking and going out to get chicken is a little rebellion. There is a sense of pride when she says this; it is an extreme departure from what her culture dictates. I try not to push her about this, but it comes up sometimes. When she mentions her husband, she does not want to talk deeply about their relationship. I can tell; I know her by now.

Amani is lying on the floor, chin in his palms, watching a cartoon on Amira’s iPhone. “And Amani, he was young young, new baby, when I move to this place. Sometimes, to make baby sleep tonight- when you are sleeping. Sometimes babies wake up. That time of life feels so crazy.” She shakes her head, then smiles down at Amani’s two-year-old independence. “This boy, Miss. He start to call me by my name. Because he want to say Amira, but he can’t pronounce it, so he say Mir. Sometime Mommy,
sometime Mir.” We both laugh, and the laughter seems to rejuvenate her, as it always does. “I say, what, you calling me by my name? Then, if he get caught, he change and say Mommy. You know, last night, he wake me up and say, Mommy, Mommy. He do like this, my eyes.” She opens her eyelids wide with two fingers. “He say, Mommy, take me to supermarket, I want ice cream. I pretend I was sleeping, but he say, Mommy, wake up, wake up, we go to supermarket, I want chips. I say, go back to sleep, what supermarket? At 12, midnight! And after that, he cry all night.”

I am genuinely laughing now, the way I do with my girlfriends, full belly laughs. So is she. When we stop laughing, we’re quiet for a minute. The background noise of YouTube videos has ended, and when it stops, the silence is ringing. Amira grabs Amani from off the floor, habibi, habibi, my son, I love you, habibi habibi.

![Figure 4.4: Amira and Amani.](image)
“Eat this, Miss,” Tesha hands me a bowl of orange-tinged chicken floating in broth, cooked and seasoned. It tastes of something that has become recognizable during my time spent with their family, but nothing I could name in English. Today, I am alone with Tesha, which is something that doesn’t often happen. Even though Amira has moved out, into the apartment with her husband and Amani, she stops by Kassala’s house nearly every day. Still, I ask Tesha, do you miss Amira today, she replies, of course.

“I miss my sister. She mostly used to cooked and I just washed the dishes and clean the house. That's all I used to do, but now, everything is all on me. I cook everything.” Tesha sounds a little wistful, and I imagine that, in addition to the added workload, she misses living with her sister, and tackling the daily routines together with laughter, as they’ve done all their lives. “So Tesha, do you actually like to cook?” I ask.

She pauses for a second, hovering over the stove. “Well, in my country, all girls, they learn to cook from young age. So even if my mom, when she went to farmer, we cook. Prepare dish for them to come back. Especially in my country, we all cook our soup together, like with Amira. Amira and I. I have good memory of cooking. One is going to be washing dishes, one making soup, and then one cleaning, one going to go get water. The water is one mile away, something like that.”

I tell her that walking one mile to access water, to someone born in the United States, is practically unheard of. She laughs, “there is a lot different here.”

I’m exhausted today, worn out from teaching, feeling subdued and overwhelmed. I tell Tesha this, then mention that Americans eat chicken soup when they feel sick or sad. “How did you know?” I ask her, laughing a little. She pats my shoulder and says, “I
am happy you came here today. For soup.” I’m happy, too, and am starting to realize how much I love being with them, how deep our relationships have become, how they always make me feel better by making me laugh and telling me stories.

Kassala wanders into the kitchen. She sees me and cries out her usual greeting: *I love you! Mommy good? Family good?* Kassala always asks me, *mommy good?* She has never met my mother, but, to them, the mother is the beating heart.

“In my country,” Tesha comments, after handing Kassala a slice of dripping watermelon, “everyone learned how to make dishes from their mom. All the women, in the kitchen, together. No men. My mom too, with her siblings. She cook today then the other one cook tomorrow, and then one going to get water. Turn by turn. Here, Miss, have bread.” I try to get up to grab the bread from her, but she rushes over before I can stand. It’s still warm from the oven; homemade. I take a bite and exclaim over its richness.

*Figure 4.5: Tesha teaching her younger brother, Kazim, how to cook.*
“Thank you, Miss. You know, at that time, in Gaga, there were no machines that make flour. The cooking flour. We used to do with something like a rock.” She translates, and Kassala nods vigorously, miming a pounding motion, fist hitting palm. “We always do this. Many things. It’s better to cook in Chad and Sudan than here.”

It is one of the first truly warm spring days after a frozen winter. I slam my car door shut and inhale deeply. It feels like a rebirth, a renewal: warmer air, hope. *Inshallah:* God willing. Faint laughter drifts lightly toward me from behind the house. As I walk towards the backyard, Ayeesha appears in the driveway. “We’re back here!”

In the backyard, Amira, Tesha and “the kids” are sprawled out in various positions around the deck. There is a small, plastic wading pool filled with cloudy, brownish water and toys strewn across the red stained wood. Ayeesha is bent over a math workbook while Bebe watches, giving tips, “no, you subtract that. Move that number over.” Tesha spreads out a towel, on which there are various types of makeup: foundation, lipsticks, eye shadows. She squirts tan liquid on her hand and rubs it onto Amira’s cheek, “this too light for you, my sister.” When they see me, the kids jump up and surround me, “Miss! Come here!” They grab my hands and pull me to their older sisters, motioning for me to sit.

Pulling chairs around in a circle, Amira and Tesha sit on either side of me, patting my shoulders. Tesha brings out a brush and begins brushing my hair, calling for Ayeesha: “braid Miss’ hair!” Ayeesha scuttles over to stand behind me, exclaiming over my strange, slippery hair, *it won’t stay,* as Amira admonishes me and how much I dye it, “Miss, you play with hair too much.” They talk about my appearance constantly, staring
at me intently as they comment on my hair, my body, my skin. I think it’s because I look different; I sound different. I am different. I am American; I am White. As close as we’ve gotten, I still fascinate them. I’ve become used to it.

“But Miss,” Amira admits, “I want to bleach my hair too.”

Tesha asks, “Miss, your hair never grow?”

“It does,” I reply, “but I cut it.”

“Why are you cutting? You need to let it grow.” Tesha rummages in her makeup bag and brings out a rhinestone necklace, placing it around my neck, “wear this on my wedding day, Miss. And style your hair in wedding, okay? Style it. You never style your hair.” Ayeesha, with her hands full of my hair, says, “oh, your head is so small.” Amira nods in agreement, “it look like one of the twins’ head.” Tesha comments, “she will be funny when she fat. You know, the head is very small. I think you have become a little more fat, Miss.”

I take it all in stride, laughing. I know this is how they speak to everyone, not just me. Still, sometimes, after I leave their house, I go home and stare at my stomach in the mirror, sucking it in, trying to be smaller. It goes both ways, though; they will say, you have become skinny nearly as often as they say you have become fat.

“Hang on, guys. I know you think that people get fat one day, like when they get older. I don’t want to, though. You know, Americans are really scared of getting fat.”

“I know, right?” This is Tesha, who has recently picked up the popular Millennial phrase.

Amira adds, “I want to be fat.”

She says this often. “I know you do.”
“And one lady tell me, if you are three, four, kids, you change, you become fat.”

Tesha shakes her finger, “depend, depend.”

“Amira will always be skinny, I think,” I look at her tiny frame, thinking of her nickname in Gaga, *Button*.

“Ah,” she scoffs. “Me? Never. I don’t want this. I want to be fat.” They begin arguing in Masalit, continuing till one of them makes a joke funny enough for the sisters to start choking with laughter. “Why is so hot, let’s go inside,” Amira gasps, clutching her stomach. “No, y’all,” I say, “I’m getting braided now, I can’t move.” Dramatically, Amira complains of the heat again; Tesha accusing her of lying.

*Figure 4.6: Bebe and Ayesha braiding my hair. Trying on the necklace Tesha gave me.*

Bebe brings us a bowl of pumpkin seeds from inside the house and Amira demonstrates how to eat, suck, then spit out the salty shells. Although we are gathered in a circle with nothing inside it, Tesha murmurs, *there should be fire here, in the middle.*

*Like home, telling stories.*
“You know,” I say, coughing a little as a seed becomes lodged in my throat, “it’s crazy that Kazim and Amani are Americans.” Bebe jumps up, spilling pumpkin seeds over the grass, “Yusra, too!” I ask her, “do you guys speak English or Masalit better?” She exchanges looks with Ayeesha as they both respond, “English. English.”

This is something we often discuss: who is born where. Tesha and Amira, in Sudan. The twins and Bebe, in Gaga. The three youngest, Kazim, Yusra, and Amira’s son, Amani, are Americans and will grow up with the largest cultural dissonance: one at school, one at home. Two in Sudan, three in Chad, three in America. Two in Sudan, three in Chad, three in America. Our family. The three youngest are always called “the kids;” even I call them that now. Their mother tongue will feel clumsy in their mouths as they acclimate to American schools, make American friends. The stories of Sudan will hum quietly in their subconscious but will be attached to nothing real, no matter how much their mothers will show them pictures and say, look, here it is. Look, this is your country. Sometimes, when we’re alone, Amira will look at me, biting her lips, afraid, and say: Amani will never be American. My son will not.

Amira thinks the kids born in the United States are intrinsically different from those who weren’t. Two in Sudan, three in Chad, three in America. Two in Sudan, three in Chad, three in America. This is something, in the Adam family, that will always be an identity marker, even as the three in America number grows while the others stay the same. She will tell stories of how the American-born kids are different, laughing about her youngest siblings, but there is an undercurrent of anxiety when she speaks of her own children, of Amani and her yet unborn children.
Watching Amani splash gently in the tiny wading pool, she says: “I remember when I was baby, my mom only, she used to take me bath. But now, those, I can’t give them bath.” She points at the three youngest. “What, really? Why?” I wonder.

“Even this one cry,” Amira says, grabbing Bebe (born in Gaga) by the shirt and pulling her into her lap, but she quickly jumps away. “She say, ‘no, no, I want to be myself.’”

“So what happened? Did America change it?” I ask.

“Yeah, I used to change her diapers, now it’s ‘I want to do myself.’”

“Why, though? Because we’re more independent here? Is that what you’re saying? You know?”

“Right. It not the same here.”

Amani steps out of the bright plastic pool, splattering water across the deck in a pattern of dark spots. He totters over to Amira, saying *Mama, Mama*. She wraps him in her billowing skirts, responding *habibi, habibi* in a soft murmur. She quickly dries his bare skin then pushes him gently away to go play with the other youngest kids, who are now lolling around in the freshly mown grass, chattering in mostly unintelligible baby talk.

“You know, Miss, the problem is like Americans, they don’t have a lot of kids. Even when you get old, they’re not going to take care of you, there’s nobody to take care of you. But in Africa, they have a lot of kids, and even their kids’ children, they can even help their grandmas. If one of your child is not around, other one can take care of you.” Amira recently learned she was pregnant with her second child. She rubs her growing
belly, the second of her children, almost certainly not the last. “You better have kid soon. Your time is running.”

“I know, I know, my time is ticking, I know.”

“It’s running! Maybe they would put you in a nursing home.”

“What? Not yet!” We have this conversation often. “Amira, you know this. I think I need just a little more time.”

“I know you are busy with school. But it’s okay. Bring it. Mommy will take care of your baby. I will take care of your baby. I will be here for you, Miss, always.”

Figure 4.7: Amani on Amira’s back.
During Ramadan, they miss Gaga. One day near the end of April, and the culmination of the holy month, Tesha lies down on the couch, with a hand resting gently on her eyelids. Through the window, we watch the kids swiveling their small bodies through hula-hoops. “In the day, I am tired,” she tells me. Amira stretches her arms and settles on the floor, back against the couch, “ah, my sister. Wake up!”

They begin talking to each other in Masalit. The conversation, as usual, ends in laughter. Tesha, rolling around the couch, good-naturedly admonishes Amira: “stop it, I am too hungry for this! Easy for you, my sister!” She reaches down and pats Amira’s still flat stomach. Since Amira is pregnant, she is exempt from fasting: “When we have baby, or when we have period, we don’t fast, but I like to fast. I like Ramadan, especially in my country. And for Eid- oh my gosh, wallahi, it was so fun. Cooking together.” They begin to tell stories about the holy month in Gaga, when, again, they didn’t have the same resources and technology they have in the United States, but they had each other.

“Here, my God, I don’t like it. Sometimes we stuck here, in the house. In my country, we can go to a place and come back, all together. Walk around, every house you can go. I don't know them, but I go knock on door. We pray and visit neighbor. Here, the neighbors are really far, you know. Here, people never coming to my house. I don’t like it.” Tesha lifts back the heavy curtains, peers out, and sighs. How lonely it must seem sometimes; how isolating. “You know, in Gaga, there are no homeless people. We never let people be without home. During Ramadan, and all the time. The kids might not remember this, so we need to help them remember. What Ramadan like in our country.”

Amani wanders in, speaking softly in high-pitched gibberish. Amira scoops him up, “you gonna remember, my baby. You gonna remember.”
One day, some roads are closed and driving to the Adam house takes longer than usual. When I finally pull up and park my car on the street, I am tired from all the traffic, the endless stopping and starting. I take a few deep breaths before getting out of the car. The weather is sunny and its warmth feels hopeful, the way late spring often does. Summer is coming. I repeat my thought out loud, *summer is coming*, as I round the corner of the brick house and see Kassala and Tesha lounging on the deck with the kids. “Hi, Miss! Yeah, it feel so hot. We are happy.” I sit on the edge of the wooden deck.

Kassala gets up, steps off the deck, greets me, “mommy good? Family good?” then walks over to the garden. I hop up and follow her, watching as she bends to pull out
some weeds that took root between the neat rows of okra. Behind the okra, leafy greens have begun to flower in tiny, squat bunches. Kassala smiles as I gesture a thumbs-up towards the vegetables.

Tesha yells from the deck, “we growing cucumber, too.” I ask where, and she walks over to point out more green sproutlings. “My country cucumbers look different from here. Don’t you think, Mommy?” She speaks to Kassala in Masalit. “Mommy say she is not able to find the food they used to have in the market here.” They continue to talk. Kassala sighs heavily and wanders back to the deck, heading for shade.

“She say she always thinking about home. Even during the day time, she just dream about back home. She dreaming that she’s there, you know?”

Awake, but dreaming.

Tesha’s wedding is happening soon, in just a few months. She begs me to come over and help with the preparations, so I stop by one night at 8:00, which is late for me. Not, it turns out, for them. I’m always surprised by how late Amira and Tesha stay up, seemingly “doing nothing.” What they are doing, though, is telling stories. Talking. Laughing. When I open the door, I am hit with a blast of heat as Amira yells, Miss, welcome! I kick off my shoes and move towards the huge group of women sitting on the carpeted floor. There are many more than usual and the room is buzzing with nonstop conversation in Masalit. Amira grabs me by the arm and introduces me to different people, as always, with a tone of pride. When we are alone, we forget, a little, our different roles in American society.
I settle on the carpet. I am content to drift into the background today, while they have so many people visiting. Kassala is glowing, surrounded by other women, friends from out of town. All the women are hugging each other, laughing, and, most of all, talking. The room is humming, full of smells, voices and activity. There is steam rising from a pot on the rug: sandalwood, hot water, pieces of wood, colorful spices and fruits like clove, nutmeg, apples, oranges. One of the oldest women is slowly stirring the mixture while others look on.

“This our culture tradition for wedding. It is very important for Sudan woman,” Tesha tells me, gesturing to the aromatic sandalwood and a box of ornate glass jars with gold stoppers sitting next to it. Tesha explains that when a Sudanese woman is married, she is given her own set of homemade perfumes, called *Khumra*, and women of the extended family gather to create the musky blend of spices and oils. “Oh, like the ones on Amira’s dresser!” I exclaim, having noticed these before in Amira’s apartment. “Exactly, Miss, and Mommy have it, too. We all have.” The air in the room is thick and hot, heavy with the rich fragrance, *bakhur*. 
Some of the younger girls and women, in their teens and 20s, begin speaking in English now that I am here. Sometimes, when I’m out at a restaurant with other Americans, I feel like no one listens, rather everyone is just thinking of what they will say next. Their conversation is different; it’s communal, like music, each voice gently layering and building upon the other. I am in awe of their conversational skill, how their stories are performative and interactive. I notice no one is scrolling or looking at screens, and I mention this to Amira. “Yeah Miss, it like that in Gaga. But here in America, everybody in phone, nobody talk what happened. It’s not good. How can you talk if you’re using your phone all the time?” I tell her, “that’s a good point.”

“But sometime, you know, phone can be good. For memory.” Amira pulls up a picture of her own wedding. I barely recognize her with such thick makeup. She normally wears little to none; her face bare.

“When was your wedding, Amira? You didn’t invite me,” I joke.

“2018. At that time we’re not this related.”

Tesha overhears and interjects, “Not this related? What you mean, is Miss your family or what?”

“Yes,” says Amira, “now, we’re related, wallahi.” She grabs my hand and I feel the truth of her words. “Amani, my son. Your aunty here, respect, okay?”

“Right,” I reply, “your aunty that almost birthed you.” She hands me Amani and I balance him on my hip for a minute, before he wriggles away to join the other kids.

We follow the younger girls into the kitchen, where Tesha is bent over another large stovetop, stirring it with a large ladle. “Miss, smell,” she offers, and I breathe in
deeply, mist lightly coating my face. It smells like them, I think to myself; the fragrance that always clings to Amira’s skin when I embrace her and lingers inside their houses at all times. The girls cluster around me and begin commenting on the perfume, praising the smell, telling me we make this in Sudan, we make this in Sudan.

“Let me show you my bottle,” Tesha leads me into her small, darkened room where a few of the bottles stand ready, in their traditional place, on a gold platter sitting on her dresser. I lightly touch the gilded glass and consider how proud Tesha is today. She is eighteen. For Americans in the 2020s, this is so young to get married, but for the Sudanese, traditionally, it is almost old. The girls gather on Tesha’s bed and pat the fabric, come sit with us. I settle in between them, and Amira lays her head on my shoulder, holding my hand. They are speaking mostly in Masalit, but the way they talk when they’re in groups is so physical I feel like I almost understand. Hands slapping knees, arms gesturing wildly, rolling on the bed with laughter, full body joy. There are no phones out. No music playing. No substances involved. Just talking, listening, laughing. I get the feeling they could do this for hours.

“Amira,” I whisper. “How did you meet all these people?”

She waves a hand, “Sudanese, we find each other.”

For weeks, Amira has been asking to come to my house. I think this is part of the culture of hospitality; I can tell she feels like it will deepen our relationship. “Miss, we need come to your house. I need to see where you live,” she has said. Finally, one day,
we plan for Tesha and Amira to come over one afternoon at 3:00. I spend a few hours cleaning up and getting ready for them. While I’m dusting, vacuuming and moving things around, I consider every object I pick up. How will they view the material manifestations of my life? I am so often around them; I sometimes forget what different lives we lead. I live in a shotgun house in a walkable, urban neighborhood, with brightly painted walls that are heavily decorated with art and framed pictures. There are Edison bulbs hanging from pendant wiring on the ceiling and lush, vining house plants in every room. On one wall, a built-in, floor-to-ceiling bookshelf holds hundreds of books arranged by color. My environment is so different from theirs.

When Amira and Tesha arrive at 5:00 — two hours late, of course — I see this realization of difference on their faces. At first, all they can say is wow over and over.

“Here, let me help y’all,” I say, as they lug bags of fruit across the threshold of my front door. “Oh my gosh, thank you, you got me a lot of stuff!” Amira holds three bunches of bananas and a large bag of pears, while Tesha is juggling a bag of apples in one arm and two 2-liters of orange Fanta in the other.

“Of course, Miss,” Amira replies, a little out of breath, “if I don’t have food, I do not come. We go to Wal-Mart before we come here and pick things we think you like. Oh, my sister, the water is in car, go get it for Miss.” I take the apples and soda from Tesha as she runs to the street and pops the trunk of their car, returning with a 24-pack of bottled water.

Right before they came, I was sitting on the couch waiting and suddenly remembered, “oh my God, the hospitality thing!” Frantically, I ran to the kitchen, searching for something to put out for Amira and Tesha. Luckily, I had some oranges, but
other than that, the only suitable snack I had was microwave popcorn. It sits in a glass bowl on my coffee table with the oranges beside it. The smell of burnt popcorn still lingers in the air.

I show them around my house. Amira, to herself, says, “there is so much new things for me to look at here. Wow, there is so much new things.” I see them lightly touch my plants, lean in close to examine a picture. Most of all, they are fascinated — and a little intimidated by — my pets. I have two cats and a rambunctious new puppy; they are not used to indoor animals. “Can I touch your cat?” Tesha asks, eyeing my sweet, docile long-haired Persian mix. “Of course,” I say, “she’s really nice.” Tesha gasps in happiness as my cat rolls over to let her belly be rubbed. “Wowwwww,” Amira exclaims, “I want a cat, Miss, where can I get?”

As I take them out back to look at my yard, Tesha comments on the layout of my house. “Miss, you know, this house is perfect for a Sudanese house because it is long and there are many doors, many different places.” Amira nods along agreeing, “It’s true, my sister. Men in one room, and women in the other. Miss, why you not tell us this? Oh my God, Allah, your dog!” My puppy runs in between her legs in a rush to get outside, nearly entangling herself in Amira’s long, billowing skirts. They are a little scared of her, but interested. Amira puts her hand on my shoulder to steady herself, laughing, “dogs are crazy, I never see a dog like this.”

When we get outside, I notice Amira keeping an eye on my puppy, watching as she sniffs around the yard. “Why is this dog so crazy?” she asks me as the puppy races around in circles. “Well,” I reply, “she’s a baby.” A look of understanding passes over the sisters’ faces. They know babies. “Do you give her milk?” Tesha wonders. Amira
asks, in a very serious voice, “and can you claim your pets on your taxes?” I always call my animals my babies; they are trying to understand me.

“Miss, what is that?” Amira points to a brick fire pit in the middle of the yard.

“Oh, we have fires here, at night sometimes,” I say. They walk over to peer inside it. “It looks like a well, like in Gaga,” Tesha says. Amira replies, “but it is not big enough. In Gaga they put me inside the well with a- what is the word in English? Something you tie?” I answer rope, “yes, they put rope on my stomach and I go down in the well for water. It is because I am so small.” I look at the ashy remnants of logs on the shallow bottom of the fire pit, imagining Amira’s tiny body being lowered into darkness.

Suddenly, Amira says, “Miss, we need to go inside. Your dog is getting cold.” I tell her she’s okay, she has long hair, but we go inside anyway. We sit on the couch and the sisters turn on YouTube, searching for videos to show me. “Allah, Amira, look!” exclaims Tesha, “there is your wedding.” We watch for a minute. On the TV screen, Amira sits stiffly in a large chair with people surrounding her, dancing. She is not smiling. “See,” she says, laughing, “you can see. I was so sad during this.” Tesha scoffs, “look at you! What happened to you, my sister!”

I ask to see some music from their culture, and the sisters happily oblige, humming along to a song I’d never heard, pointing out different landmarks and styles of clothing. We watch video after video for at least an hour, “you like this, Miss?” they ask, “this Sudanese culture.”
When it’s time to leave, I walk them out to their car. “I’m scared, there’s so many White people,” Tesha jokes. It’s a nice night, and she’s obviously noticing the number of White hipsters in their 20s and 30s who are out walking their dogs or on their way to a bar. I am struck by the realization that the neighborhood they live in doesn’t have sidewalks.

“Wow, look, they have a bookstore, too!” says Amira as she points to a house across the street with a large bookshelf that’s visible through the windows.

As I hug them goodbye, Amira looks behind me at the lights that shine from inside my house onto the darkening street, “Miss, do you worry about your bill? Every light is on! You are crazy!”

“Oh my God,” I say, “yeah, that’s true. I didn’t think about that.”
I go back inside and watch them drive away. After staring out at the street for a minute, I look around at all my decorative lamps, and begin to turn off the lights.

“Give me your hand,” Tesha instructs. She begins to squeeze ink out of a nearly empty tube. The end is cut off and molded into a point. She often does this with her henna ink to make it last. “I do the same with my toothpaste,” I tell her. She says something to Amira; they laugh. “We don’t have toothpaste in our country, you know?” I shift slightly and ink rubs on my new jeans.

Amira panics and screams Tesha! and they rush to the kitchen to grab damp towels, blotting at the blooming stain. I reassure them, it’s okay, but they ignore me. Amira makes me change out of the pants, put on one of Tesha’s skirts, and lay the jeans out to dry in the weak evening light. After the commotion, we settle back down in the
living room and Tesha grabs my hand again to continue the henna. I stay very still this time. They start arguing about something in Masalit, “what is it, y’all?”

Amira replies. “Miss, your house. It one bedroom, right?” Tesha cuts her off, “no, my sister, it’s three.” More good-natured arguing in Masalit.

“I mean, I don’t know, it has one room that we use for a bedroom,” I respond.

Tesha sucks her teeth, “I’m not saying that. I said, it have three bedrooms, the house, right?”

I shrug, “I guess so, yeah.”

Amira scoffs, “why are you guessing, it’s your house!”

We all laugh. “Well,” I say, “because I don’t know if you would call all of those bedrooms, you know what I mean?”

“Ah, you crazy, Miss. Our house in Chad- it was only one room! I never gonna forget it, oh. All the time, we in that house. We’re just telling a story to each other laughing in the night, you know? Our house there is ugly but still we happy, I don’t know why,” Amira says the last part in a tone of wonderment, like she is remembering a time that feels almost impossible in its simplicity.

Ayeesha, the little artist, is sitting with her back against the couch, drawing on a large white pad. I can draw the house, I remember it, she insists, and begins sketching lines, forming them into walls, windows, a roof.
“Ayeesha, she can draw the house. I miss it. I remember the day we leave it, you remember, Tesha?” Tesha nods in the affirmative and they begin telling me the story.

They were all gathered in and around the house. Tesha, Amira, Kassala, their large network of immediate and extended family, and other various community members. “In Gaga, we are all together, always. We don’t use doors, we just come in and go out.” Amira remembers cooking rice over an open fire in the packed-dirt front yard. The women were singing together, humming an Islamic prayer song. All of the sudden, “my cousins, they come to my house and they say we have only one week to go to America.” Tesha remembers the mingled excitement and anxiety as they began to make plans to
leave Gaga and start over in the United States. “You know, we realize we not see our grandma for two weeks, so we go to our grandma house, and she cries. She say, oh, you’re going to leave me, and she cried all the time. My mom, she was so sad. She still miss my grandma every day.”

They were given instructions. When they left Gaga, they would go to Cameroon, to wait for papers, visas, and other official documents. A few days before, everyone came together, as they always did, to talk, laugh and eat. “We were happy, but there was sadness, too.” Kassala quickly organized a circumcision ceremony for the youngest boy, Abdul. He was nine, slightly younger than the traditional Sudanese age of twelve, but she wanted to celebrate him with her entire family there. “My parents were crying that they don’t have a party. It was quick, you know? Very quick. They wanted a big party and they couldn’t have one.” Instead, they hurriedly gathered everyone together for one last celebration. The festivities were tinged with sorrow. This was the last one. This was the end.

Most of the leaving preparation involved saying goodbye. The Adam family was less concerned with the gathering of things than the gathering of people. Amira tells of trying to track down family members that lived farther away, on the other side of the camp. When the week went by, a mass of people were clustered around the house to send them off with a last farewell, salam. A car pulled up in front of the house and children ran to touch its shiny hood, blinded by the sun reflecting off the exterior. They knew it was time to go. They knew, but they clung to their aunts, cousins and neighbors in tearful embraces. A lifetime of goodbyes.
The kids are sitting at the older sisters’ feet, rapt with attention. “And then the car came and took us to Cameroon, right?” questions Bebe, who was only five when they left Gaga. Tesha blows on the drying ink on my hand before she responds. “It’s coming to take us to Cameroon. And my grandma, she was waving and following the car.”

Amira, lying languidly on the couch, eating a date, adds to the story: “Yes, everyone was running. And then my mom, she went to her sister’s house. She didn’t come, that’s why she go there. And we almost left her there.”

I exclaim, “you almost left your mom?”

“Well, her sister’s house is farther than ours. So she went there to see her. She have to say goodbye. So she have to run back to get in car, and the car, it really wanted to go fast. But my mom, she did get in. There was so many people in this car, they put chairs in it so they can fit more and more people. Especially in my country, when people are going, traveling somewhere, they get crashed because in the cars, they can’t see outside. Too much people. So sometime people they not alive no more after these cars.”

As usual, when describing something tragic out loud, Amira begins laughing, and Tesha joins in. They start recounting the packed Chadian cars, holding their stomachs as they slip back into Masalit. Sobering after a few minutes, Tesha says, “it was a hard time to live, for us. We didn’t want to leave our family.”

“We left a lot of our clothes,” Tesha recalls. “People were like, ‘you’re going to America, why do you have to take your clothes from here?’ Not our clothes, we left everything.”
Bebe sits quietly in between Amira’s legs, getting her hair braided. She is listening intently as Amira talks. “We take a lot of crops, too. Some of them, we made oil from the peanuts. Peanut oil.” My surprise must show on my face, because she laughs a little. “We can use it, Miss. To cook.”

“Mhm,” Tesha says, her mouth full of apple as she bites one down to its core. She has finished my henna and we are all eating fruit together. “It’s good for eight months.”

“Wait, wait. What? You all were traveling for eight months?” They begin talking over each other in their eagerness to tell the story. It’s hard to know where one voice ends and the other begins.

“Yes, of course eight months.”

“We came to Cameroon and stayed there for eight months.”

“It’s different on how long it takes the papers and the interviews. United Nations. My father—”

“He stay like two years.”

“Some for one year, some people three years. Us, eight months.”

I have heard this kind of story before, from other students of mine. Waiting in limbo in an in-between country, trapped between the old home and the new. They are talking again in Masalit. I listen, waiting, then Amira stops, wanting to confirm a fact with me. “We are not immigrants, Miss, right? We are migrants.”

I respond, “oh yeah, right, you’re refugees.”

Tesha, firmly, says, “we are not refugees. We are migrants, but not refugees.”
I pause, my hand halfway to my mouth, a small orange slice falling to the carpet. Bending to pick it up, I say, “oops, sorry. That surprises me, guys. So, that’s another question. Do you call yourself a refugee, like when you’re talking?”

“No,” Amira says.

“Why not?”

Tesha responds, “We were refugees in Chad, actually. And also we are immigrants here, Amira.”

“But why don’t you all say refugee?”

Tesha says something in Masalit. Amira asks me, “why do you call us refugees? What does refugee mean?” Tesha adds, “Like government, people who have war in their country so all groups of people came to live in a place with help from United Nations?”

“Mm-hmm,” I say, affirmatively, “exactly.”

Tesha says to Amira, “yeah, that’s refugees. We were refugees in Chad.”

Slowly peeling another orange, I am thoughtful. “Yeah, so guys, usually the government gives you that name to say you’ve come because there are problems in your country.”

They begin discussing again in Masalit. Turning back to me, we all start talking and answering questions.

Amira: “but now here, nobody call us refugees because, I don’t know why. We are refugees here, too?” Tesha: “no, immigrants. But not refugees, right?” Me: “I think America might still call you a refugee, like the government.”
We are all quiet for a second, mulling this over. For different reasons, I think we are all surprised.

America has given them names and identities that are not theirs, many times over.

It is an unseasonably warm afternoon and the kids have moved to the backyard to play, so the three of us follow them out of the side door. Settling on the edge of the deck as usual, Tesha continues our conversation. “You know, we wouldn’t have come if my daddy wasn’t here.” Amira agrees, “we were happier there than here.” I ask them why.

“We can see so many of our family members, we’re always together. Here, two months, three months go by. It’s too much time.”

“Yeah, well that’s the culture here in America. We take more time between visits.”

“I don’t like that,” says Amira. “Where I grow up, it’s always people. They don’t care about their kids, they can stay with the neighbors. But here, everyone close their doors. They need their time alone. Who put my son over there? My son is stuck over there.” They both jump up to extricate Amani from under the deck. Even in Masalit, I can tell they were admonishing Ayeesha and Bebe for not watching him closely enough.

A few weeks ago, we were outside discussing their neighbors. The neighbors to the right will often wave to the Adams. They are used to seeing me now too and say hello, which Amira appreciates. “These neighbors, they nice. Sometime they open and let the kids come play. It is right way to be.” Tesha nodded decidedly, agreeing with this. They are unsure of the house on the left side, though: “we don’t talk to these neighbors
and I don’t know why. It’s weird.” When, one day, the left-side neighbors erected a privacy fence without warning, the girls were even more miffed.

The sisters are always slightly uneasy when confronted with the tendency towards isolation, the privacy, of the United States. They will always prefer openness and community, *it is right way to be.*

*Figure 4.13: Amira and Tesha investigating the neighbor’s new privacy fence.*

Amira often remembers her life in Gaga in moments; emotional, sensory feelings and memories that are spun into stories, told and retold. One of these, I can tell, is the
story of Abdul and the donkey. “Do you remember…” she starts, then continues in Masalit. Tesha finishes in English. The memory is familiar to them. “He was about to do circumcisions. Before we come to America. And then we have our donkey in the backyard. My brother, he went there, and the donkey was eating, and he just kicked. He cried, then all the kids running and tell my mom, ‘oh mommy. Donkey kick Abdul!’ and my mom come running too, and she cry, and all the kids cry, and Abdul cry, and it is crazy.”

Thoughtfully, Amira replies, “maybe she more crazy because it’s almost time to leave.”

I nod. “That makes sense. I can’t imagine how she, and you guys, must have been feeling.” I add without thinking, “did you eat the donkey?”

They stare at me, shocked. “No! Eat the donkey?”

“I mean, I don’t know, I thought maybe…”

Tesha groans, “Miss, you’re killing us. Never eat the donkey. We did only lamb-”

Amira interjects, holding up her fingers as she reels off names: “goat, camel, cow…”

“Boar,” Tesha adds.

“That’s right, my sister. Miss, what do you call? Rabbit? And squirrel. I eat the squirrel, too. But never donkey. We use it if we’re getting water.”

Tesha, forever the more sensitive sister, says, “I feel sad for them, now. The people in my country. They eat everything. They eat grasshoppers.”
Amira ignores her, “let me tell you, what do I eat? Grasshoppers. Squirrel, lizards, snake.”

Tesha shrieks, “snake! Amira! Miss, I never eat snake, even though sometime I’m really hungry. I just let Amira do.”

Amira, always first, always fearless. “Maybe I sneak a snake into your soup tonight, Tesha!” using her pet name for Tesha.

“You crazy, girl,” Tesha responds, laughing as she grabs Amira’s bare foot and begins massaging her small toes.

January 5th. It was Amira’s real birthday, not the one on paper. There are so many discrepancies between the real and the paper, but for those that have been displaced,
what’s recognized is, essentially, what’s on paper. The spelling of her name, her birthday: she goes with what is easiest in America. In Cameroon, the refugee resettlement agencies added an “h” to the end of her name and recorded her birthday as April 15th, rather than January 5th. On paper, she is Amirah, born on April 15th. In her heart, she’s Amira, born on January 5th.

I imagine the rapid-fire questions her family had to answer when they got here, how disoriented they must have been. Kassala answered most of them. I wonder how many concessions of identity they’ve all made here, when dealing with overwhelming American institutions. Changing a birthdate or a name spelling might seem miniscule, unimportant. But yet, it’s her name. Her birthday. “I don’t care, Miss. I know it, inside. My mom, maybe she don’t even know the real birthday. She just say whatever came to her mind when we come to America, I think. And, you know, my mom, even today, she don’t call me Amira, she always say Shams.” They all have nicknames like this, used only within the family. Amira is called Shams, meaning sun in Arabic. Tesha is lovingly referred to as Rahma, meaning kindness in Arabic: “we all have nickname, sometimes three, four, five. A lot of name.”

I’m interested in this: “So you said once that they were in French? The interviews in Cameroon?”

“Yes,” says Tesha. “They were in French. We worked with a translator.”

“Oh, okay. Do you remember any of the questions?”

Amira and Tesha answer me in unison, talking over each other.

“They were checking our blood.”

“Asking if we gonna kill people in America.”
“Why we want to come.”

“Mostly they asked about disease.”

“Disease. And about the kids.”

“What kind of diseases you used to have, or no. If you have a history, or if you have a great, great parent.”

They were only 14 and 15 at the time of the interviews. “Were you guys scared?”

“Um,” says Amira, “I can’t understand what was happening. I was okay. But oh my gosh, Tesha, I felt for that.”

“You felt bad for what? What happened to Tesha?”

Tesha sucks her teeth and shakes her head, “when we were there, they took off our clothes, that’s why she said that.”

“They took off your clothes?” I put a hand to my mouth, imagining the sisters, tiny and afraid.

“Yeah, but not the underwear,” she says, patting my hand, assuring me.

“I would be so scared. I understand if you were, especially since you were kids.”

They look at each other, remembering something I can’t visualize, can’t imagine. I cannot be a part of this story. “Miss, we were. We used to cry. For days, scared of shots, especially that lady. It was so cold there.”

I went to Urban Outfitters to buy Amira a birthday present. I saw other 20-year-olds shopping and gossiping with their friends and was reminded again of the difference
between them: the simplicity of being an American in America, the ease at navigating systems. I gravitated towards lotions and soft things, pulling brightly colored scarves from the shelves and picturing Amira’s small frame, her proclivity for vividly colored styles and materials. Picking up a rose-scented lotion, I hoped the floral essence was redolent of Chad, somehow. I grabbed a glass tube of dried flowers and shimmering crystals, wishing she could find the time for a bath. Three face masks: one for her, one for Kassala, one for Tesha. Scented of aloe, coconut and rice. I realized I was subconsciously looking for things that signify luxury, time, and pampering, things I wish she could do more.

On January 9th, a few days after her birthday, I go to Kassala’s house. Immediately, we open Amira’s presents. She shows them to everyone in the room and squeezes lotion onto outstretched palms, including my own. Suddenly, she says, “you know, it’s Mommy’s birthday, too. Today.” I wish I’d brought Kassala something. We all start singing happy birthday to her, but Kassala starts clapping along too, and Amira and Tesha laugh and laugh, telling me she doesn’t know it’s her birthday today. Only we know. There is this kind of innocence to their mother that they laugh about, but not in a mocking or mean-spirited way. They deeply love and respect her, but their relationship seems more like sisters than friends, especially now that she relies on them so much for translation. They feel protective towards her. In many ways, Amira is the matriarch of the family in this new world- I hear Amira Amira Amira so often when they are talking in Masalit.

We focus on Kassala in our conversation today. I get the feeling that she doesn’t often put herself and her own needs first. *It’s a luxury to think about yourself,* I think.
Kassala’s posture noticeably changes when I ask her direct questions. She straightens up, with her hands placed calmly in her lap.

I begin the talk by asking about her house. Kassala has lived many lives. She’s started over in many places. So, Amira must clarify: “Which? Chad, or Sudan one? Ok, she want talk about Sudan one. She say she miss her house, the one in Sudan. She say it has two rooms, and it’s beautiful. It has the one ... You see, like dining room, but it’s different. It’s like, this one we just cover inside, and then that one outside. Like a square. Yeah. And then you put whatever you have in your house, and that’s all fun. And they made some decorations, in that house. With something like wheat. But it’s not wheat.”

She says something to Kassala, who responds. Tesha, sprawled out on the carpet and scrolling through TikTok absentmindedly while she listens to us talk, sounds out “sugum? Is that it?” She pulls up a picture, shows me. “Ohh, you guys mean sorghum.” Yes, they say, *drummondii*. We read about the crop on Google, also called *Sudangrass*. They are so attached to certain foods and plants. Again, I’m reminded of how the superfluous array of choices in the United States, and wonder if they cause us to be scattered, less connected to what we consume.

Somehow, their conversation has turned from sorghum to mangoes, Kassala’s mangoes; I hear the word threaded through the Masalit, *mango, mango, mango*. “So, with her mangoes, did she cook with them, or make juice, or what? Can you ask, Amira?” After a quick conference with her mother, Amira responds: “She say sometimes they take to the store to buy, for some people, yeah. And then sometimes people from cities, big cities, they come with their cars, take the mangoes, buy a lot. This how they make money. Okay, listen, Miss. Let me tell you.”
Kassala describes the mango groves of her childhood in Darfur, shady and sweet-smelling. Luminous green and orange, blazing sunshine. Colors so bright, they were almost visible behind closed eyelids. The ambrosial scent of ripe fruit so thick you could nearly taste it, even before cutting into the flesh. Kassala would wake early and walk to the groves with her siblings, preparing to greet the city people in their shiny cars. They sped down her dirt village road in a brown cloud, stopping to load heavy crates of mangoes into their trunks. Car after car, coming to gather the sweetest mangoes in Sudan. Kassala and her sisters climbed to the tops of the trees, shaking the leaves so mangoes rained down into baskets below. “All, whole family, we work together. Family only. Family together. I have eight brother and sister, and my mommy, and father. And each mango have different taste, and our mango the most sweet. It depend on the tree. But my trees, very sweet. People loved. If you eat the two or three mangoes, you’re not gonna eat another food. You sleep a lot after you eat. We are very rich over there. Here, not much.” She remembers sun-drenched days with her sisters, sticky hands from split fruit, and once, the taste of ice cream handed to her through the window of an air-conditioned car. These were happy days.

In the living room, the kids are listening with rapt attention. Amira tells me they’ve never heard this story. “Are you guys listening to this? They learning, too,” she says, smiling. Ayesha pipes up, “I remember Chad a little bit, just a little bit.” I wonder how often they sit and listen to stories like this, trying to contribute, perpetually on the edge of cultures, wondering where they fit. Amira gets up to go to the bathroom and
Ayeesh and Bebe scoot closer to me. “You guys want to help translate?” Like Kassala, they sit up straighter, nodding. Their oral English is fluent, even more natural than Amira’s and Tesha’s.

When I ask Ayeesha about languages, she responds: “I speak Masalit. And I got Arabic a little bit, too. Mommy, Miss is asking what languages you speak.” Repeats in Masalit. Kassala answers in English: “Masalit… Arabic. Masalit. Sudan. Sudan my country. I love. America cold.” She reaches out her hand to rub the top of Bebe’s head, looking wistful.

“I want to go to Sudan, I really want to go,” the girls say. Amira comes back, “one day we’re all gonna go, okay, I promise. We will go to Chad and Sudan.”

I ask Kassala, what is your favorite memory in Sudan? Amira translates, and Kassala thinks while she munches a small, buttery cookie.

“Mommy is telling story again, Miss, hold on, let me tell you. She said the day she remember is when her brother get married. A great day. They dance. Oh my gosh, decorate hair. And then even beautiful clothes. Everything. You have to dance, so everyone will know, you are the sister. They need to know you. And they cook a lot of food. All the people around the village, they come. Every people, they come dancing. Yeah, this is what she said.”

“Does she put on henna?” I know the Sudanese women decorate their body with henna for most ceremonies, but especially weddings. Even now, ink is fading on their arms, legs, feet, from a cousin’s marriage a few weeks ago.

Kassala and Amira are in conversation, comfortably talking over each other in Masalit, then English. “People who live in cities, they put henna like this, but Mommy
lives in village. She don’t care about henna. They just traditional there. Dance. Oh my
gosh, you know they have drum. The one that do like… drum. Drump or drum? Drum.
Yes. Some people do drums, some people there. And then dancing for three days.
Sometimes four days, wallahi.”

“Wow. Were you tired? Did you do it, too?”

“Me too, yes, you know? Like for other ceremony. We do circumcision for the
baby boy. Oh my God, Allah, big parties. One week dancing. Here it is so different. Here,
we don’t dance or do nothing. Not like Sudan. Here, they do boys small. Over there,
maybe 12 year. You need to be 12 year to cut, and everyone happy, they say ‘dance, for
you are a big boy.’ And if the boy cry, that is problem. They gonna say you not enough
man. So the boy try not to cry.”

“If I have a boy, I’ll let him cry, I don’t care about that.” Sometimes I can’t help
myself.

“Yeah, I run from that culture. Miss, I just tell Mommy that when you have baby
you will bring to stay with her.” Kassala puts her hands to her heart and smiles at me, “I
love you, I love you,” she says.

“Different tribe have different celebration, too,” comments Tesha. “We are
Darfurians, we are from Darfur, but maybe another person from even Darfur can be
different.”

“What’s the difference in culture?” I ask.

“Everything.”

“Hm, even from the same place? American doesn’t have tribes though really, does
it?”
“Yes, Miss. It do have tribes. Think about it. So many different people. Different states. Everybody have different idea here in America.”

“Huh,” I say to myself, thoughtfully. “You know, I guess you’re right, Tesha. I never thought about it that way.”

“Sometime you need to think about things Sudanese way. Hey, what is that called? The one you have in your skin?” Tesha asks me, lightly touching my forearm.

“My freckles?”

“Oh yes, freckles. Why you have this?”

“Gosh, I have lots. It’s Irish. From my family’s tribe, I guess. It’s just my skin.”

“Okay. Yeah, I see some American people have that.”

“And I also get sunburned really easily. So, if I’m out in the sun, I’ll turn red.”

“Go out in the sun then,” Tesha playfully pushes me towards the door and we all laugh. “I don’t like the sun because mosquito out. Two days ago this mosquito in work, still.”

They begin talking in Masalit for a few minutes, with only the word mosquito discernable. I listen to the sounds of voices, of languages, that have become familiar, rising and falling.

“Miss, Miss!” Tesha cries suddenly, laughing.

“What, what?” I joke back.

“Do you remember mosquito?” It’s one of her favorite stories lately; she begins to tell it again. Recently, we were sitting in the backyard and a mosquito landed on my forehead. Tesha, without thinking, slapped my forehead to kill the mosquito, the same way she would with her siblings. Afterwards, she looked at the smeared blood on her
hand and my head, not believing what she’d done. Then we all burst into laughter. It really was funny.

They’re talking in Masalit again for a few minutes, until Tesha switches back to English so they can share with me.

“Oh my gosh, my sister, I almost forget about that,” Tesha says in English.

“What happened?” I ask.

“We talking about the first time we see White people,” Amira explains. “And then my first day I see White person. It’s not American people. They are European. They speak French. Maybe it’s people from France. They come by airplane, and everyone- all kid, even little ones… Somebody say, some White people come, we going to see, and everyone running. And they drop candies, Miss. I don’t know. Those chocolate. They bring candies.”

“Oh my god, and look now, wallahi!” Tesha holds up a handful of chocolates wrapped in metallic paper from a bowl on the coffee table.

“They even bring some water,” Amira continues. “But we don’t know the water for bottle. Then we say, oh my god, look guys, it’s something real. We talking like this. Oh my god, and some of us cry. We say, let’s share. Let’s share together. All of us. It’s so funny, to think about this.”

Now, the Adams always, always have stacks of bottled water in their houses. As I am leaving, Amira will often insist I take one of the 24-packs off the top. I wonder if it feels unbelievable sometimes that they have an infinite supply of the most precious resource, the gathering of which took up hours of their day in childhood. It’s so funny, to think about this.
“What’s your favorite memory, Amira, in your country? Like, your best day,” I ask after a brief period of laughter.

Ayesha cuts in, wanting to prove she remembers, because Amira always says she doesn’t. “I know mine. Um, like playing mom, and building houses with mud.” I tell her I did this too, when I was young. Her memories of Gaga are so simple, so sweet.

“I used to do it too,” says Amira, “with Tesha when I was kid. But, yeah. My best day. Let me think. Okay, Miss. Let me tell you. My best moment. I have a best friend in Gaga, her name is Iftin. She’s just 16, but her family force her to get married.”

“Forced? Was she sad?”

“Yeah, she sad on her engagement day, but when she going home, her house, she happy. And then, first time I go to visit, I see car that day. First time.”

“First time, wow. So her husband came and got her in a car and took her away?”

“Yeah, because another wedding, they do. They don’t use a lot of cars in Gaga, but the guy who married her, he’s rich. He own a lot of malls and big buildings in Chad. And he have a big car. He come. Because we are neighbors, me and Iftin. So we best friends. That day, when she going to her own house, oh my gosh, everyone happy, jumping.”

“Because of the car?”

“Yeah, because car. Me too, I jump. And I sit with her. And I say, ‘oh my gosh. This is my first day I sit car.’ And then everyone is screaming. Some people jumping. Make a jump. That was my best day ever, because I was so surprise. But you know, now, I’m tired of using cars here. I miss Gaga, go store, walking, just walk around.”
She retells the story for Kassala in Masalit. I hear *car car car*, an English word peppered throughout many that I don’t understand. I am suddenly struck, remembering Amira’s age when she was married. Sixteen, just like Iftin.

“Also, Miss. The best day of my life. Maybe when I see my baby, too happy. You know, sometime when he get a fever or feeling bad, I feel sad. I cry too. But when he feel good, I feel special happy. Even if I see my family all together, I feel happy too. Here in America I feel happy but I miss the most my country.”

Kassala clutches at her heart when anyone speaks of her oldest daughter. It wasn’t until months after I began hanging out with the Adams that I learned that Amira, in fact, is not the oldest. There is one more, still in Gaga, named Samina. She didn’t come with the family when they left the camp, went to Cameroon, then the United States. I ask Amira, privately, why she stayed in Gaga. “She have family, Miss,” she replies, “five children and a husband. Too many people. She want to come here but how can she come? Who’ll bring her here and take care of those?” It seems to be a complication of the immigration process, and one that forever fractured the family. “You know, my sister in Gaga, she still believe America is like TV, so she think we all rich. We still send her money, but America is crazy. She cannot understand that.”

They communicate often through WhatsApp, and one positive of this is getting all the latest news from inside the camp. “Gaga have change,” Amira says, shaking her head. When I ask her what she means, she relays a message from her sister. “Yesterday,
Samina say, *if you come Gaga now, you don't even have to walk.* I say, *why?* She say, *because they have taxis."

“Really? In Gaga?”

“Yes, Miss! I say, *what? It's become that popular?* I'm laughing. She said, *now, whatever. You just take a taxi and go.* Yeah. I don't like this, because before, no traffic. I don't want to sit in the car, whatever. I just want to walk normal. I'm already tired of using cars in America. So why, if I go there, I need a car?”

One day, I’m helping Amira with one of her essays. I ask offhandedly, “are you liking school this year?” She doesn’t respond directly, but says, “in my country now, kids go to school.” I know without asking that she, specifically, means Gaga. “Wait, you mean they didn’t go to school before? You went to school, right?”

Amira commands Bebe to bring me some watermelon, which she immediately jumps up to do. “Yes, Miss, I go. But, before, it’s not good school, and not everyone go. Now, my sister say it become better. Yesterday, Salwa, she call us and say all her kids go, and she change from farm, and go to school, too. Mommy say she jealous.”

She pokes Kassala in the side jokingly and translates our conversation in Masalit. “Mommy never go to school in her entire life, did you know? But she ride with one American woman to work at Amazon, and she training her to speak Masalit, some words, and Mommy can learn more English. Mommy say, I am here five, six years, and I don’t know English. Why? My kids, grandkids, small ones, they speak English.”
Kassala nods along, picking up words here and there. I tell Amira, “That’s because you went to school here and learned.”

Amira grabs Kassala’s hand, “yeah, yeah. Mommy, she have no school. But Mommy,” she says, turning to her mother, “you are good. You know all, my mama.”

“Sesame and sunflowers,” I read aloud, flipping the pages of a Sudanese children’s book. I bought it for the kids, but Kassala and Amira seem to like it more than they do. When I bring it out, Kassala hugs the book to her chest, exclaiming in happy noises and raising her eyes to the sky. “Sudan, Sudan,” she says.

“Sunflowers? I never see,” Amira peers over my shoulder as she reads: 

*Sunflowers and sesame are some of the biggest exports from Sudan.* “But sesame, I love
it. Simsim, we say. I eat it because it help me with my heart.” Reaching into her purse, she pulls out a plastic bag full of sesame seeds. I put a handful into my mouth, knowing I will always think of Sudan when I eat sesame now, realizing they probably already do, every time they taste the nutty flavor.

We are quiet for a few moments. Amira is typing an essay for one of her college ESL classes and occasionally asks me for feedback. I look at the book, *Sudan’s weather conditions make sunflowers grow all year long*. I consider the concept of time, and how differently Amira and her family view this cultural construct. It’s something to which I am continually adjusting. Today, for example. I finished working and called Amira, “can I come over now?” She replied, *yes, come now to Mommy’s house, I am wake up Amani then I will be there*. I’ve become used to their version of time. *Now* means anywhere from thirty minutes to three hours. It is cultural to feel unease with this looseness of time; I experienced it before when living in non-Western countries.

Today, I made myself wait one hour before going to Kassala’s. Amira still wasn’t there, *she’s at the market*, one of the kids tells me. “The market” is what they call the Wal-Mart and Target that sit less than a block away from their house. Kassala was so happy to see me. It was one of the first times we were alone together. She handed me a slice of watermelon and took me outside to look at the garden, her garden, her creation. We bent to examine a thicket of mint leaves. She broke off a piece, smelled it, then offered it to me. I said, *yes, mint*, and she told me the word in Masalit, *nana*. “You eat?” I asked her, miming putting food to my lips, “no, tea,” she responded. We laughed, touched each other’s arms. We continually find gentle, simple ways to communicate.
“Where this sentence go, Miss?” I am back with Amira, on the couch. “Here, let me see your computer.” I grab it from her and begin clicking at keys, editing her grammar.

“You know, I’m not that much smart. But I’m trying to be smart.”

“Amira, what? You are definitely smart. You’re one of the best students I’ve ever had. Your mom and dad must be so smart too.”

She blows air through her lips, shaking her head. “My mom, she never ever go to school. How will she be smart?” I tell her Kassala is smart to me. “School isn’t everything, even though I’m so proud of you for going.”

“Okay, Miss. I’m so happy you are here, Miss. Oh my God, everywhere you are there for me.”

We are in the kitchen. I peer into whatever is boiling on the stove, but Amira shoos me away, gesturing to the large dining room table that sits near the refrigerator. As usual, a plate heaped high with watermelon is waiting. “Sit, Miss.” Tesha and Amira are cooking together today, handing each other spices, spoons and bowls. “I hate this Corona,” Amira comments. “You know, I thinking about Corona. In Gaga, with Corona, if somebody, if one person have it, everyone will have it because we all together.” She laughs fondly.

“Because you can’t socially distance,” I say.

“Yes, all together. All together, only your house here, one here. If I’m cooking here, if she cook here, you can see each other too. It’s just close.”
Mouth full of watermelon, I ask, “So what was the kitchen there like, was it outside?”

“You like the watermelon? You want water? Juice?” Before I can answer, Tesha yells for Bebe to bring me drinks. She scuttles in from the living room, setting two bottles in front of me, one of water and one of guava juice.

Figure 4.16: Tesha and Amira taking a break from cooking, wearing similar toubs.

“Kitchen,” says Amira, “if you are good enough to build, you can bring some wheats to build inside. If you are not good enough to build, you can just build outside. Cook outside. But if you don’t do fire good then it burn up everything.” She is very pregnant, and plops down next to me, letting out her breath in a whoosh, telling Tesha to finish up cooking, this too much for me, my sister.
“Wait, what? It can burn up your house? Does that happen often?”

“Of course, Miss! You see, me and Tesha, we were small, like I think I was uh, eleven or something. And then my house get burned, I don’t know who did it. Catch a fire and then we were in our neighbor house. I see a big fire, you know, and I said, oh my gosh!”

“And it was your house, your kitchen?”

“Yeah! I was crying. I look for my oldest sister, she gone to the market to bring some… what they call it?” Speaking to Tesha in Masalit, “flour for the fufu, I don’t know the name. But yeah, so then it’s burning, and my oldest sister, she come, she was pregnant for her first baby, and then she gets pale for the fire, you know?” Amira unconsciously rubs her own protruding belly as she remembers. “We get a lot of people, and no one has too much water. People say oh my gosh, everyone yelling and more people coming from stores, everywhere, come to my house, and then me, I was lost my mind, I’m just running around, I’m screaming, but I’m not bringing water, I’m not bringing anything.”

Tesha snorts over the soup, shaking her head. “And then Tesha, she was in the store, and the other kids saw our house burning, they just ran to Tesha and they tell her, oh my gosh, Tesha, your house is burning, and then she was, oh my goodness, she was lost her mind, too.” They are both shaking with laughter now, talking over each other as they recount the story more comfortably in Masalit.

The kids wander in from the living room, dragging their toys and sucking on their fingers as they listen to their sisters discuss a life that, to them, only exist in stories. Wiping her eyes, Amira calms down a little and says, “but Mommy... They run to her and
she was far from there, maybe two hours, in the farm. She was crying, my mom, she was worried, she thought we are burning with fire, too.” As Amira scoops up Yusra and rains kisses on her forehead, I think, *of course Kassala was worried. They were only eleven. Of course they were running around screaming. They were only eleven.*

When the weather is warm, the Sudanese women gather weekly. Every Saturday, one of them pays to rent out a park and have a barbecue. “It’s maybe one hundred dollars to have the park all day,” Amira says, inviting me on the day she paid for the space. I drive to a park about twenty minutes from my house, stop the car, look out the window. I’m not sure what to expect; I feel a little nervous. Quickly, though, Tesha finds me. “Miss, welcome to Sudan!” she jokes, running up to my car with two of her siblings following close behind. She grabs me, leads me to a huge gazebo, and begins introducing me. Again, there is an undercurrent of pride that exists when they bring me to large gatherings.

The women are scattered throughout the enclosure, talking and laughing. There are large foil containers of food spread out on the long picnic tables: whole cooked chickens, sambusas dripping with oil, barbecue shredded meat, brown spiced rice, fresh green salad. Behind the tables, bright blankets are spread out on the concrete with cross-legged Sudanese women selling jewelry, clothes, and other trinkets. “If you want to buy,” Tesha tells me, “you can buy, see?” I pick up a small purse, hand over a few dollars to a girl that can’t be older than 17, *thank you*, she says in English, *and I have more too, come see.*
Children are everywhere. They run freely from woman to woman, complaining about a stubbed toe or requesting a can of sugary juice, from the closest female. The children are not discerning. They know they will receive the same kind of maternal treatment from any woman present who speaks the comforting language of home or wears the vivid dresses typical of the Sudanese community here in our city. Amira and the kids are standing near a plastic slide. Tesha and I walk over to say hello. “So,” I say, “where are all the men? It’s literally all women and children here.”

“Miss!” Amira laughs, looking at Tesha. “At first we have men, but then we become too big. Now the men can go somewhere else together. We can be here. Okay, I am tired. Sit here with me.”

We move to a metal park bench, eating rice and meat from a styrofoam plate that the kids bring to us. Amira says, *Bebe! Ayeesha! Go get us food!* as she always does. As
always, they obey. We look around at all the children and one runs up to us, asking for a popsicle. Amira takes him by the hand and walks over to a large blue cooler. Tesha says, “see? Sudanese woman, we are all mother.” Amira returns, scoops up Amani and we move to a nearby tree, all of us beginning to sweat. “In Gaga, my grandma was like my mom, too. When I do something wrong, I just run and go to my grandma’s all night sometime. I don’t come back. Sometime, me and my grandma come home together after that and my mom, she forget by that time. This was a good thing I do when I’m small.”

We settle under the shady tree, leaning against its bark. “But it’s different here, isn’t it?”

She scoffs, “ah, yep, where you go? I don’t know.”

“That’s what I’m saying.

“And you guys, you only use car. It’s problem. I don’t like using car always.”

“Because in your culture, you run?”

“Yeah, and walking. That’s exercise too, you know? My mom, she say she is so bored at home alone. Not leaving the house, not moving. She want to go work. So I will take her back to UPS this Friday.”

“Why, because she needs some activity?”

“Yes. She say all immigrant, they work together there. So they can help each other. Because still, she have no English. Mommy, she never work in our country. Just like on the farm, the garden.”

“It’s crazy, o.” Tesha cuts in. Lately, the sisters have been adding the Nigerian “o” to the ends of their sentences. They see it in their favorite Nollywood movies.

“Americans work, work, work. Especially my supervisor Ida, o.”
I nod vehemently; I totally agree with this. “Exactly. I hate it. I don’t like my
culture sometimes, because people don’t work together as a community.”

“Yeah, that is weird. Oh my gosh.” Amira hugs a squirming Amani closer to her
chest, kissing his forehead.

“You work together in your country, right?” I ask them.

Tesha responds, “yes, together, like this. We working then we go eat together. If
you tired, take your stuff, just you work only one hour, you can come your home.
Because they don’t count up the hours. Like if you working in the garden, you can work,
but if you lazy, that’s okay. Everyone help. It’s your choice.”

“Yeah,” Amira adds, “Nobody care about what time is it. Nobody care about
time.”

Thoughtfully, I say: “Time is everything in America, isn’t it?”

“Yes!” she responds. “Sometime, I say, Miss, come to my house, and you say,
what time? And I’m like, why she always ask what time?”

“Yeah, my culture. I know it.”

“Your culture is weird. They use too much time.”

_Time, time, time_, they mockingly say, and we all laugh. Someone calls for Tesha.
She gathers her skirt and walks a short distance away, yelling in Masalit. Amira and I
continue talking. “Miss, you guys think about time too much. In my country, if you want
to visit somebody, like your aunt, your friend, whatever? You just go. You don’t call too.
Where is the phone? Go their home.”

“And they don’t care?” This is almost beyond my comprehension. Going to
someone’s house unannounced feels stressful and rude.
Kassala walks over with a baby on her hip. I don’t even ask whose baby it is. I am learning the Sudanese way. Kassala says, *mommy good? Family good?* and sits down with us, listening as we speak in English.

“No. They don’t care.”

“And what if they’re not home?”

She looks at me like, *duh.* “If not there, you come back to your house.”

“Wow, okay, Americans are not like that. We like scheduling times to visit.”

“It's good thing you guys have phones. From long distance, you talk. Right now, if I say, *Miss, come here, I'm home,* you call me and then you come because you know I'm here already. But that's how you know. In my country, you don't know because you just go. If you find them, you find them. If they went somewhere, you come back home again.”

“I like that. I want to do that. It sounds good.” It really does.

“Yeah. Miss, don’t worry. We go there together one day. Me and my mom, we plan to go back. You will come with us. You will love it. In my country, for fun, only talking. Sit around, move. You bring your carpet outside.”

“Just talk?”

“Yeah, especially my mom. For long time, even with nothing. No light.”

“I read a book that said Sudanese are some of the best storytellers.”

“Really? Wow.”

I ask her to translate this for Kassala.

“How I say story in my language? I don’t know it.” She talks briefly in Masalit. They both begin laughing as Kassala responds, Amira translates. “You know, I remember
my mom, she found a phone when she coming from well, right? Get water. She find a phone and then she put phone in the water. She don't know what it is. She put it in. She put the phone in the water. And then when she come home, she said, *Guys, I find something. What is this?* Let me see. It's already closed, the water everywhere. I said, *Mommy, why you don't tie it in your skirt or whatever, you put in water instead?*

There are phones clutched in both of our hands, always close to us. “That seems kind of nice though, right. Now there are phones everywhere.”

![Figure 4.18: Talking on a park bench.](image)

Tesha walks back to us, licking a bright yellow popsicle. I’m quiet for a bit as I listen to the sisters converse in Masalit, occasionally making classic scathing (but in a good-natured way) scoffing sounds in their throats, *ah, ah.* After a while, Tesha says, in English, “You know, Miss, in Gaga, we never have babysitter, because always there are
people. In America it is different. I tell you, we do not know about time, you know, we have no clocks or phones. So we just leave our baby with somebody and we say, we coming back later, and it is okay, because we know everybody.” Amani wriggles off her lap and totters over to another girl, who looks to be about two, same as him.

Amira wraps her arms around her knees and rocks back and forth. I always forget how small she is. “Even now, sometime I do this with Mommy. If I feel tired, I leave Amani with Mommy and say, okay, be back later, and sometime I come back next day or even day later.”

“In my country, they don’t say this boy, or this girl, we just put them all together. Boys, girls play together. You know?” Amani comes back and jumps in her arms, pink juice stains running faintly down his chin. I smile as Amira begins murmuring into his ears, habibi, habibi. “It’s interesting,” I comment, “because when you get older, you’re so separate, women and men. So like- when does it change?” She ponders for a second, “I don’t know, Miss. It just do. I guess when you become adult.”

She gently runs a finger along Amani’s velvety eyelids, which are lazily closing in the glowing autumn afternoon. Amira is only twenty-one. Sometimes she seems so old.

Amira is very pregnant with her second boy. She keeps working at UPS, saying it helps me, Miss, I swear, whenever I ask, Amira, when are you going to quit working, you need to rest and relax for your baby. She is tired and her movements have slowed, but when I go to her house on a November Thursday that feels increasingly wintery, she is still attempting to move furniture around her home. “Please,” I say. “Let me do it.” She pants and collapses onto a chair, holding her stomach, but you are guest. This culture of
hospitality is second-nature to the women of Amira’s family, we don’t mind, Miss, we love to share, she says whenever I protest that she’s doing too much.

I stretch my fingers tall to place a curtain rod on top of the window, “Amira, where do you want this? Is it okay here?” She tells me to choose, she doesn’t care, that she’s never had a- what you say in English?- curtain before. “So,” I say, jumping down, “in Gaga, do they have babies in the hospital, or just like wherever?” Amira laughs a little as she answers me: “yeah, there’s kind of hospital, but it is smaller and different. But it depend, if the baby coming fast, you can deliver at home. Me, I came in the street. I come too fast so my mom have me in the street. But, you know, in Gaga, everyone come to help her, so it is okay.” She stops talking for a minute, staring down at her swollen belly. “Amani come fast, too. Thirty minutes. But I was alone when he come. I was so scared. Not even Mommy with me.”

Suddenly, Tesha bursts through the front door, unannounced as always: “My sister, hello! And oh, hi Miss! What are you doing there?” I am still holding the curtain rod. I put it down to greet Tesha, as Amira says, “we are talking about the day Amani born. Remember?” How could any of the three of us forget?

I say that out loud, and she responds, “Miss, maybe I never tell you this but you know, when I feel Amani coming, in school, I was taking test. So, I finish, and I give to him. I say, Mister Teacher, now can I go? He say, no, five minutes left.” It’s true; I have never heard this particular part of what happened, even though Amira and I love to tell this story. I exclaim, “Amira! You finished your test when you were in labor? Did you say, can I go, I’m having a baby?” She is proud, “No I don’t say, because I feel like I just have to pee. So yeah, I finished test. Then I was in deliver.”
I cross the room to hug her. I can’t help myself. “You’re brave. You’re strong, Amira, I think.”

“I don’t know,” she shrugs.

“Don’t you think she’s strong?” I ask the room.

Tesha answers, uncharacteristically serious, “Yeah, I do.”

Amira is so tiny, but so tough. I remember the day she had Amani so viscerally. Images float to the forefront of my mind as she begins to tell the story again, in her words:

Amira, in the driver's seat of her unmoving car, telling Tesha and me, “I’m fine, I’m fine,” while I speak to the EMTs on the phone, her knuckles turning white as she grips the steering wheel harder. Tesha crying next to me. The woman’s voice in my ear, preparing me for delivery. The ambulance, pulling into our school’s parking lot, EMTs picking Amira up as she says, No, guys. Why you put me here? I don’t feel anything. Get me down. I don’t want to go. I want my mom.

Later, she will describe the experience as a blur, how she begged the healthcare workers to make Amani wait, until my mom come, I don’t want to deliver my baby. An older nurse sat by her bed and said, I’m your mom, I can be like your mom, but Amira wants Kassala, I know my mom is not like this. I know my mom. I need my mom. My husband keep calling me, I don’t answer. I want only Mommy. Then Amani come, maybe only like thirty minutes he take. The old woman by me say, “I’m here. You are very good girl, a strong woman.”
Shaking my head, I’m back in the present, and Amira is talking, admonishing me, as usual, on my slow pace in having children: “You know, in my country, if you count
step-mothers, sometime women have twenty children. Some people even thirty. A lot. A lot. Because in our religion too, men allowed to have four wives.” I make a noise in my
throat, *hmm*, then catch myself. It’s her culture, her identity. Carefully, I ask, “what about
the women? How many husbands?” She laughs, “only one husband, Miss. Of course.
Maybe if your husband die. But Miss, you need to have baby. Also, if Jackson don’t
propose to you soon I am taking you to Sudan to find a Sudanese man.” A 32-year-old
woman without a husband or babies is unfathomable to her. “Amira, come on, I’ve been
busy, you know. Teaching, and being in school.”

She understands this, somewhat. Amira has always been academically motivated.

“So having Amani, it changed your life?” I ask her.

He is sitting next to her on the couch, playing with my car keys, cooing softly.
She picks him up, cradling his tiny body. “Mmhmm. A lot. You grow. Growth is all I can
do. Even when your mom is saying something, before, you’re not gonna understand
anything. But when you have a baby, you change everything.” *Everything*, she repeats,
kissing Amani on his nose, eyelids, lips. “My baby is the best. The best ever was.”

There is a scent lingering in the hallway to her apartment, even before you go
inside. It’s heavy. It smells of the perfumes and oils Amira wears, mixed with the spicy
incense she burns when she prays. The more American scent of cigarette smoke is slight,
but the delicate, musky odor that hovers around Amira and her family is stronger.
It is December, and our city is inundated with a predicted holiday surge in COVID cases. I wear a mask inside, even though Amira says, “Miss, you can take it off, we don’t care.” Her family never seems to worry as much about COVID as I do. They say, “if God wants to take us, he will take us.” We talk for a while, and I help her take a grammar test for her college writing class.

“I came here in 2016, can you imagine,” Amira reflects. “2016 we come here, on February seventeen. Remember? It go so fast. Look at us now, Miss.” We have layered our relationships on one another now. Teacher, friend, colleague. I think we can both sense it: our own becoming. Our influence on each other.

I bring her a bag of small candy canes and chocolate peppermint Hershey kisses. Christmas is two weeks away. She doesn’t celebrate of course, but she likes these tangible aspects of American holiday culture, “this good candy, Miss,” popping one into her mouth, then handing one to Amani, “this American candy, baby,” as she takes him back to his crib. She comes back, goes into the kitchen and begins clanging dishware around. I yell to her, and she says, “come in, Miss!” I pull back the tapestry that separates her apartment living room. We cram into the tiny kitchen. She is more comfortable here, talking as her hands search for spices on a small shelf. The walls are colorless, matching the beige tones covering the rest of the apartment.

She lugs out a large bag of onions from beneath a rack in the corner, “Americans sometime buy one onion only, that is crazy. We always buy what we need.” I have noticed that Amira and her family do possess things in bulk: plastic packages of bottled water stacked high; bags of tiny, sweet candies placed on gold serving trays; large, netted
sacks of dirt-smudged potatoes. Amira opens the fridge, stares inside at its fluorescent lighting. She grabs a whole, blueish-green fish and plops it down on the bare counter.

She slices the fish and drops half of it in popping oil. Sizzling sounds fill the air as she moves the fish around with a wooden spatula, “be careful, Miss, it is hot. This is for my husband, he like it. He just get home. He is outside with his friends playing dominos.” She stares at the fish as she moves it from one side of the pan to the other. “I think this will not be good, I don’t know how to cook it. My husband, he like it. You know, sometime I think your culture is better.”

She has said this before, but also doesn’t talk like this often. Usually, only when we are alone. Amira is charismatic, fiery and funny. In class, people were drawn to her, and I think it is the same now with the Sudanese women that tend to scoot closer to her, to her family members that look to her for advice, guidance and laughter. “I am the only Sudan Amira in this city, everybody know me,” she proudly told me once.

“You know, I love my baby so much. The best. He gentle and calm.” It’s true. Amani rarely cries and often wanders up to me with something in his hand: gifts of candy wrappers, peanuts, or lint.

I ask her, “In your culture, is it important to be a mom?” She hits a spoon against the pot, one hand rubbing her belly. “Yes, of course. The problem… what do you call? Like what I call my husband’s mother. If you don’t bring a baby, they’ll say, ah!”

“Mother-in-law?”

“Yeah, mother-in-law. They say, go and marry another woman. Maybe this lady. They always want a kid. For real. I don’t know why. In my culture, they are some crazy people. In three year, you marry and no baby, then they will tell their son, go marry
another woman! Yeah. And then he will listen to the family, not me. No, really, like that.”

“Wow,” I murmur, unwrapping a tiny sweet she hands me, “that’s kind of scary. So then you feel like you have to have children to keep your husband?”

She blows air through her lips. “No, no, no. Me, I don’t care if I have husband or not. Yeah.”

“Sometimes you say that. That’s funny. That’s more of an American way to be.”

“Yeah.”

“You know? Not always, but sometimes Americans don’t care about that. Like me and some of my friends. It’s okay to be… independent, I guess. More independent, I think. You know what that word means?”

“Independent is when you… um…”

“You’re okay alone.”

“Yeah, alone.”

“I think you’re independent.”

“I am independent, actually. Yeah.” She straightens her shoulders a little.
She is simultaneously frying the fish and dropping potatoes and onions into a pot boiling for soup. Suddenly, the door flies open. Two women walk in, without knocking. When they see me, they cry out greetings, recognizing me from one of the barbecues or parties. They always have questions to ask me; today, it is about a driving permit test. Amira translates and I text them a link to the DMV’s website. They wake up Amani, who is napping, because they want to say hello. Amira asks them not to and they don’t seem to hear her. She smiles, resigned, and rolls her eyes at me, saying under her breath, “see, Sudan woman, they crazy.” She looks exhausted, even her loosest dresses stretching tightly around her stomach.

When I stand up to leave, Amira hugs me and whispers in my ear: Miss, did you leave because of them? Because of Corona? We are so close now. She knows me. To her, I can never stay long enough. She has told me when anyone Sudanese comes to visit, it is
for hours, entire days, weeks. As I open the door, I hear, *wait*, and, as usual, Amira shoves a bag into my arms. Today, it is filled with dozens of ripe, rosy persimmons.

After vaccines became widely available, I started to go back to work in-person. Back to the daily grind; the exhaustion of five days a week teaching large groups of students. Because of this, I was very tired, and didn't get to see Amira and her family as much as before. Instead of once or twice a week, my visits were cut down to once or twice a month. We still texted often, of course, and FaceTimed occasionally. In one of the last conversations that I formally recorded, we were discussing this. “Miss, you know, it seem like you more happy when your job is not so crazy, like last year.” I am quiet. It’s true.

Amira and I have gone through a lot together. For over two years, we have collectively lived through the pandemic, as I visited her more and more and began writing about her life; our lives. We have both changed since we began to truly know each other, since our bond began deepening to something outside of teacher, student, classroom. Soon before we started formally writing this dissertation together, I experienced a traumatic, abrupt ending of a relationship. A week afterwards, I went to Kassala’s house and sat with Amira, Tesha and Kassala, crying as I told them what had happened. Tesha gave me henna, Kassala told me to stay and sleep in one of their bedrooms, and Amira put a bag full of fresh sambusas into my hand as I was leaving. *Come back soon*, they all said. I will never forget this. It was only the third time I’d been there; I had no idea how close we would become.
In May 2019, Tesha tapped on my classroom window and said, Miss, the 911 phone operator asked me if I had scissors, string, hot water, a blanket, and Amani was born (in the hospital, luckily). Soon after that, I began a new relationship with one of my best friends, one that is supportive, peaceful and free. He knows Amira, Tesha and Kassala. He went to Tesha’s wedding, and they ask about him every time I talk to them. Literally, every time, and sometimes more than once, how’s Jackson? They will come to our wedding one day.

The pandemic began. Amira and I started this project together in July 2020, our relationship getting deeper and more secure. She had another baby, Amir. I became closer and closer to finishing my PhD and realizing, along with Amira, that working in public schools did not make me happy anymore. We grew in so many ways, separately and together. It seemed fitting, then, that the last recorded conversation we had, in 2022, was about the complicated relationships between home, identity, and culture; about how, no matter how much we achieve, how much we do, community and togetherness will always make us happiest.

“In your culture, the men and women are usually separate, and the kids are with the women, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, most of the time. That’s bad though. Me, I don’t like it.”

“Really? Why?”

“You know, for example, if tonight the baby cry, yeah? You only need to stay until baby sleep, then you sleep again. But when two take care of baby- it’s good like that, for really. Mine, everything for house, woman, you do it. Men only work.”
“Do you like that?”

“No.”

“What if you want to work?”

“You can work if you wanted, but what about the kids, who will take care of your kids? That is problem, problem. American culture is good like that. You know, sometime, they do different schedule. You go work, you come back home, and then the other will go.”


“But mine, oh my God, especially my husband, he work too much. In Gaga, this was okay, because all the women together, we can all watch kids, but it more difficult when you are alone.”

“So some things about American culture you like, and some things you don’t like, right?”

“What I don’t like?”

I think of all the times she has expressed worry about Amani growing up in America, the fear that he will lose the religion and culture of his family, of Sudan. “I don’t know, I mean, I feel like sometimes you’re like, American culture is crazy.”

“Oh, yes, yes. American culture is very crazy because kids, those technology make kids crazy. But this is very bad.”

“Hm, that can be true.”

“Food, work, everything good, but only that.”

“So, if you had to choose between living here and Gaga, what would you choose? That’s a hard question, I know.”
Instantly, she answers: “I choose Gaga.”

“Really?”

“Yes, because my family. Yeah, but otherwise, America is good. You can educate your kids, you can work. Sometime in Gaga, if the rain season is coming, you don’t do work, yeah. No farming. We just stay for doing nothing at home.” She pauses, thinking. “But that was good too.”

“So, what do you- you just sit together and talk?”

“Yes, Miss, and tell stories. Talk and stay at home, or you can go stores. You just go walk around, free.” As she talks, she starts to smile, remembering, ready to tell me another story. “Oh my God, I miss there so much. I miss there so much.”
CHAPTER FIVE  
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This dissertation is grounded in its exploration of deep relationships: of Amira and me, the entire Adam family, and the types of community networks created and recreated throughout displacement and resettlement. The previous chapter recounted the stories of those relationships, as told by Amira, Tesha, Kassala, and myself. This chapter will examine the key findings the narratives illuminated, and how those findings answer the project’s overarching research questions. As a researcher, this ethnographic study was personally transformative in myriad ways. Before I delve into the findings, I will briefly address this evolution.

Change as a Researcher

When I defended my dissertation prospectus, before I’d begun deep data collection, I wrote personal transformation as one of the chief themes and research inquiries of this project. At the time, I thought that Amira’s relationship with her family members would be the transformation I’d witness, assuming this to be due to the conversations and stories I’d facilitate. After spending two and a half years with the Adam women, this assumption feels very misguided. Amira, Kassala and Tesha allowed me into their lives, into their customs and routines, exactly as they were and had always been. I realized, throughout data collection, that “it [was] not a study by me of them, I [was] researching we, the relational,” thus I “use the term relational ethnography for speaking reflexively and
dialogically about and from within relationships” (Simon, 2012, p. 9) Before engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, I applied Freire’s (1968) concept of conscientização, or critical consciousness, to the Adam women. Conscientização (1968) is defined as the critical understanding of the nature of social and political realities, in order to transform said social and political realities. After spending months with the women, I realized that the person whose critical consciousness was most awakened was mine. I fully attribute my evolution as a researcher in this project to the power of ethnographic empathy (Archambault, 2011).

At the outset of my fieldwork, I decided I must shift focus, challenge any assumptions subconsciously held and more explicitly acknowledge certain power dynamics. I reorganized my theoretical framework and began viewing this project through a postcolonial lens in addition to one of critical pedagogy. Spivak (1988) asserts that for those writing about or conducting research with marginalized groups, a radically honest examination of power dynamics, as well as “the ethical issues that arise when representing and speaking for others” (Riach, 2017, p. 13) must occur. Throughout these two and a half years, I’ve had to internally examine much about the implications of my positionality, such as the inherent power that comes with my race, language, and culture.

The dialogic, collaborative nature of this project was enhanced by the deeply relational act of storytelling. Ranjan Dutta (2017) deconstructs his position as a researcher working with stories while recounting his experiences collecting data:

Storytelling is not only about sharing personal stories; it is also a contributory mode of engagement regarding how we want to be seen as researchers by our participants’ community and the world as well as how we can contribute to
change… the storytelling method created space for me as a researcher to find multiple identities in research. (p. 8)

Due to the often personal nature of sharing lived experiences, storytelling can help researchers in determining their positionality within the project, since it is likely that the researcher will share their own story in some form, as well as become invested in the stories of the participants. As Kidd and Kral (2005) note: “this consciousness entails the researcher to take on more ‘epistemological responsibility,’ and be willing to question and challenge established methodological tenets” (p. 188). I am no exception. I feel a sense of epistemological responsibility for the way I write their stories in this project; I view the women as collaborators and co-creators of this narrative. I intentionally reflected on my positionality, as well as the Adams’, throughout the entirety of this study, and aligned my methodological philosophy with Ruth Behar’s (1996) concept of humanistic anthropology, putting the individual woman at the forefront of this project. I am not neutral. My position is now, and forever will be, firmly aligned with Amira and her family.

**Basis of the Inquiry**

The purpose of this study was to examine how displaced women use storytelling as a strategy to navigate the complexity of displacement and resettlement. I sought to illuminate the nuances of their stories and demonstrate that the refugee experience is not a monolith, particularly as it pertains to narratives of life in a refugee camp. In this

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8 Fratto (1976) explains *humanistic anthropology* as: “the central focus, as we see it, of humanistic anthropology is the individual human being. Not culture, be it noted, and not society, which are vital and indispensable concepts but, after all, ultimately mediating factors. No, the focus is on the individual and, more specifically, on the individual’s striving for freedom and creativity within the confines and opportunities of nature, culture, and society” (p. 2).
project, I conceptualize storytelling in the Adam family as a self-making action that creates community, both in the refugee camp and in resettlement. The storytelling practices of the Adams directly create their community, and vice versa. This is a result of their lifestyle in the camp, the design of the camp, and continues in resettlement. In order to better understand the background of the Adam family, I reviewed literature focusing on issues of relationships, space, and community within refugee camps, as well as the effects and implications of the global political landscape regarding camps and wider refugee policy. In addition, I synthesized research surrounding storytelling and narratives within displaced communities, specifically those who reside, or resided, in camps. In both data collection and analysis, I utilized critical ethnographic and autoethnographic methodologies, viewed through a participatory action lens, and conceptualized within postcolonial and critical pedagogy theories. Chapter 4 was a narrative interpretation of this study’s findings, using writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2003), while this chapter serves as a deeper analysis of those narratives.

**Interpretation & Analysis**

In this chapter, I demonstrate how my interpretation and analysis of the data answer the following three research questions:

1. How is storytelling used as a strategy to help three displaced women navigate and make sense of displacement and resettlement?
2. In what ways does the shared experience of storytelling impact and build relationships and ways of belonging among the three women, their family, and the researcher?
3. In what ways do the stories of the women in this study complicate narratives of displacement and refugee camps that focus solely on sorrow and loss?
In order to analyze my data, I used descriptive coding and code categorization (Saldaña, 2016), line-by-line coding in transcriptions of interviews and conversations between the Adam women and me, my ethnographic fieldnotes and expanded field notes (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2002) containing records of my observations and thoughts, as well as a collection of pictures and videos depicting the women’s houses and community spaces.

As I wrote a creative nonfiction narrative of my data in chapter 4, I “discovered new aspects of [my] topic and [my] relationship to it” (Richardson, 2003, p. 923). I intentionally “wrote vulnerably” (Behar, 1996), in order to authentically and respectfully engage with the data, the relationships, and my own positionality within the research. After further analysis and coding, I identified emergent themes within the three overarching research questions. The figure below illustrates how I conceptualize these findings as interrelated.

![Image of a diagram illustrating theoretical conceptualizations.]

*Figure 5.1: Theoretical Conceptualizations.*
The following section of this dissertation includes my discussion of findings. I will explore how these emergent themes manifested in my data, as well as how they connect to the wider literature and scholarship.

**Storytelling as a Strategy**

Long before I started this study, when I worked with Amira and others with similar experiences in my classroom, I was fascinated with the ways my students — all of whom were newly arrived, learning English — were able to transcend barriers of language as they shared their life experiences. I noticed this especially in the moments they lit up when they brought food and objects from their culture to class. Telling their own story made my students feel visibly more comfortable and connected in an environment when so much else was unfamiliar. I noticed a similar phenomenon in Kassala’s living room, as the Adam women reflected on and sorted through their memories, experiencing realizations and creating meaning together, in real time. The first research question of this study reflects this conceptualization of storytelling as an action: the strategy used to recreate community, make sense of shifting identities, and alleviate the grief felt regarding the loss of community and culture (Abusharaf, 2009; Bivens & Wheeler, 2021; Hatavara et. al, 2020; Ritskes & Sium, 2013). The emergent themes regarding this inquiry of storytelling as a strategy were materiality in storytelling and methods of narration.

**Materiality in Storytelling**

One of the key findings that emerged throughout data collection and analysis was the importance of materiality in storytelling, and its contribution to the Adams’ strategy of storytelling. Specifically, the ways that the storytelling practices of the Adam women
were influenced by and expressed with materiality: using tangible objects and images to evoke memory, emotion, and, therefore, stories. Jackson’s (2013) research on narrative and story found that using materials in storytelling provided a physical connection to the past for the teller, as well as more intentionally and actively involved the listeners. In the Adam family, when one of the women began to tell a story, it was often inspired by some tangible object or sense (a Sudanese toub, the weight of a mango, rows of vegetables in the garden, the smell of incense, a Google image search of the word sesame), which reinforced the idea that “people use possessions and personal artifacts to construct personal narratives” (Hoskins, 1998, p. 10). At times, the family would only need to see or hold an image or an object in order to be reminded of a story or be mentally transported back to Chad or Sudan. This was especially true for materials that directly reflected their culture, and particularly so for any object they were able to bring to America directly from Chad: “possessions to which there is attachment help narrate a person’s life story… [and reflect] a person’s desirable connections with others. In this way, [objects] help narrate the development of a person’s life story” (Allen et al., 1995, p. 327).

Brough et. al (2018), in their study of multimodal methods of storytelling with refugee women, describe the empowerment of storytelling through meaningful cultural rituals and materials:

[One participant] finds purpose and connection in helping others, and [giving] henna connects her past and present, and connects her to others… [another participant] speaks of weaving in a similar vein: her identity, purpose and social connections, past, and present, are woven together along with her carpets. (p. 17)
In addition, Brough et al. (2018) points out the importance of imagery as a material catalyst for storytelling: “in a digital story, images support the narration; in all [the] stories, the women selected images that helped them articulate their story to act as ‘triggers’ for storytelling” (p. 17). This use of imagery as a trigger for stories often occurred during my time with the Adams; images and videos would remind them of a story, as well as support and propel forward their narration. In this same vein, materiality in the practice of storytelling connected generations of the Adams — as well as me to the family — because there was a visible manifestation of stories that existed only in the mind, demonstrating that “objects also allow people to communicate across social, cultural, and linguistic divides” (Antle et al., 2010, p. 3). The process of creating Khumra for Tesha’s wedding, for example, was a way to involve me — and the younger children — in the stories of their past without relying solely on language. Stories become, not just thoughts, but corporeal; something to share.

Aspects of culture, both tangible and intangible, are that much more significant to displaced families such as the Adams, who have left home over and over: “[a refugee’s] being is cathected and recathected onto many others and many objects in the course of one’s struggle to achieve a sense of security and viability. Thus, totemic species, inanimate objects… as well as abstract ideas and ideals may become, by extension, aspects of oneself” (Jackson, 2013, p. 33). Different parts of different lives can be found in sensory experiences. For those that have been forced into exile, objects and memories become structuring factors that aid in maintaining their identities. Sometimes, abstract elements of culture — such as song, rituals, stories and dance — are all refugees possess. To deny the importance of the abstract in forming memory is to deny the displaced the
right to guide their own stories. Therefore, abstract, intangible aspects of culture should still be considered materials that inspire memory and narrative. Kohli et al. (2021) describe how traditional poetry and song have a grounding and connecting effect on a group of Afghansis growing up in exile, who barely remember their country of birth even as it is the only culture they are permitted to adopt (similarly to Amira and Tesha in Gaga, with Sudan). In order to make sense of this dichotomy, “poetry becomes a way to negotiate contradictions, dualities, tensions, and questions of (non)belonging. It also then becomes a way of framing and articulating social identities and new forms of personhood” (Kohli et al., 2021, p. 246). In the Adam family, the women use things like storytelling, cooking, dancing, music and drawing to express and reconcile different identities within themselves, as well as relate to each other in both new and familiar ways. In particular, they used food.

Foodways\(^9\) — and, resultantly, food stories — are visceral connectors to culture. Sharing food through the culture of hospitality is a way to connect both cross-culturally and to cement social groups in resettlement: “hospitality [with food] can be interpreted as a way to create embodied bonds; bonds which are particularly important for refugees as they are trying to start a new life and create a home in a new environment” (Sabar & Posner, 2015, p. 199). Particularly for Kassala, who cannot communicate at length in English, this was important, as “food is an immediate vehicle of connection, more so than language” (Longhi, 2018). When she showed me her garden, or brought me food she’d cooked, she was confident: the expert. Her body language showed her pride in her “labor

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\(^9\) In social science, foodways are the cultural, social, and economic practices relating to food. Foodways often refers to the intersection of food in culture, traditions, and history. (Darnton, 2012)
and bodily power [from her work]” (Malkki, 1995, p. 243). She was able to tell me her story in a different modality, without relying on translation from her daughters. For Kassala, communicating through food aligns with Freire’s (1968) assertion of the importance – the right — for her to “say [her] own word” in whatever way she chose, “to name [her] own world” (p. 45). When physically growing and cooking food was involved in Kassala’s storytelling, her pride was visible, and Freire’s (1968) theories of autonomy and ownership leading to liberation were most evident.

Kassala’s feelings surrounding foodways are common across many cultures, as food and hospitality traditionally encourages communication and creates community (Ray, 2004). However, this is especially true for refugees who wish to revive food practices from home in new environments: “being able to prepare and consume one’s
own food is often a critical issue for refugees in transit” (Liev, 1995, p. 107). For Kassala, Amira and Tesha, preparing traditional food, and sharing it with the younger children and myself, was telling a story: visible, sensory elements of lives lived before. Multiple generations of family were often together in the garden — the older generations telling stories of Gaga as they worked — reinforcing the idea of “food as a place-making practice and feeding as one of the processes by which we structure time and space” (Ray, 2004, p. 10). Comparative stories of food and cooking (Gaga versus the United States) were often a subject of their stories, since we were so often eating when spending time together. Kohli et al. (2021) note that “food [is] a recurrent topic [in refugee] narratives… food involves the negotiation of identities and rituals around food… for those who could cook, it also gave them the ability to bring people together. Food was therefore important for reproducing social ties” (pgs. 256-257). Hudson (2019) describes the importance of reintegrating food traditions in resettlement: “the first sign of returning to normalcy was the ability to nourish one’s own family; the sign of thriving was beginning to offer hospitality to others” (p. 160). Food is a strategy of connection and traditionally — for the Adams as well as many other collectivist cultures and refugee communities — is not meant to be experienced in isolation.

Methods of Narration

When I began collecting data with the Adam women, I assumed they would reference their experiences during the war and conflict, or the journeys between borders, or perhaps the hardships they experienced throughout, much more than they did. This assumption was most likely due to my own internalization of dominant narratives of refugee camps and displacement, of which I referenced at length in chapter 2, or perhaps
a certain familiarity with Western talk therapy (i.e., discussing issues explicitly and being encouraged to speak openly about traumatic events). However, the way the women retold their experiences of life in the camp turned out to be quite different. Jackson (2013) describes how, often, “life all but ceases to be narratable [in displacement] … [and] the very unities of space, time and character on which narrative coherence depends are broken” (p. 102). If life ceases to be narratable, then what does that mean for memories and storytelling? I argue that the women reinstated narration in resettlement through specific methods and strategies of storytelling, and how they chose to tell their stories is just as meaningful as the stories themselves.

When retelling their experiences, Amira, Tesha and Kassala nearly always laughed, and laughed expressively, with full-body delight. Even if they were subdued or upset before they began telling the story, once they began laughing, they always seemed happier and more relaxed, which reinforced that laughter in stories is a “cathartic reaction that relieves individuals from the tension of surplus bodily energies or repressed feelings” (Lynch, 2002, pgs. 427-428). They utilized the strategy of humor in most of their stories, but in the ones that could be perceived as tragic, demonstrated “what seems to be a paradox: the use of laughter in discussions of potentially traumatizing experiences” (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2019, p. 565). At times, I would realize retrospectively that a story Amira or Tesha told was actually about a difficult experience (walking to get water, limited resources, etc.). One of the most notable examples of this was the sisters’ story of the time their house burned down in Gaga. They were crying with laughter at details that were, objectively, not funny, such as Kassala’s understandable fear that her children had been inside the house while it was burning. Sandberg and Tutenges’ (2019) study on the
use of humor in storytelling explain the sisters’ method of narration: “stories that are fundamentally tragic, for example, are opened to alternative interpretations by laughter. Humor helps alleviate the pain associated with tragic experiences, turning them into stories that can be told and retold in multiple ways” (p. 574). Choosing to use humor in their retellings effectively turns storytelling into healing process, as well as a way to regain control: “stigmatized people can use laughter to rebel against a hopeless situation, launch social critiques, achieve parity, find relief from distress, or recount traumatizing experiences without appearing as a ‘victim’” (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2019, p. 576). I made sure, during our conversations, never to question this usage of humor, to show the sisters the respect and space to “speak and act in worlds of their own making” (Jackson, 2013, p. 93). Since the Adam women use laughter so often in their storytelling practices, it also served to make them feel closer to me, once they saw how I appreciated their sense of humor. Throughout the many months we spent together, we found that we shared an ability to laugh easily and often. I could sense that each time I joined in their laughter, they felt safer and more connected, which illustrated that “humor is important in interviewing and storytelling contexts because it can serve as a bridge between people who have different backgrounds and experiences” (Sandberg & Tutenges, p. 567). We were together — telling stories and laughing — for 31 months.

There were a few stories, though, in which even the sisters could not find humor. In those memories, “the event is not what happens. The event is that which can be narrated” (Feldman, 1991, p. 107). As all people do, the Adams had emotional attachments to certain times. Kassala would sometimes share stories of life in Sudan before the War in Darfur, before the genocide, before displacement. In her family,
Kassala was alone in this experience. However, she didn’t like to talk about the genocide, or the war, with me or even with her children. “Mommy, she don’t talk about that,” said Amira. For Kassala, the stories not told are just as important as the ones that are: “silence [is] the only way of honoring the truth of [her] experience” (Jackson, 2013, p. 108). For most refugees, when such difficult experiences are referenced, there is still very often a tension between what is told to one’s closest circle — or even to one’s own self — and to larger groups or institutions: “there may be a competition and dissonance between personal or private narratives and collective or official ones” (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyed, 2013, p. 685).

All of them have stories they do not speak about — or not at length — such as the sisters’ memory of their resettlement interviews in Cameroon. Amira’s institutional name and birthday error— her American identity — were due to a loss in translation during these interviews. Tesha briefly references her fear during the physical exam portion of the interview. They prefer not to dwell on these memories in resettlement because it was undoubtedly terrifying and overwhelming when it was occurring: “refugees find it cruel and ironic when the administrators of refugee camps and resettlement programs demand precise dates in order to authenticate stories and approve asylum, for in trauma, these are the very details refugees are incapable of collecting” (Bihi, 1998, as cited in Jackson, 2013, p. 104). Part of what Jackson (2013) means by “life ceasing to be narratable” (p. 102) refers to these countless moments of upheaval and trauma that refugees undergo surrounding their experiences of displacement: “there is no easy relationship between experience and its expressions” (Bruner, 1989, p. 6). Thus, their memories “become entangled and blurred, as repeated experiences formed one another but could not always
be pinned to an exact time or location” (Kohli et al., 2021, p. 250). In resettlement, the women choose — consciously or not — to mostly focus their memories on everyday life in Gaga.

Some facts are absolute, of course, but the form that stories of trauma and displacement take must always be left up to the teller, “to examine what is taken to be truth by different social groups, and why” (Malkii, 1995, p. 104). This concept is historically and systemically ignored (Spivak, 1988), but the negotiation of memory — of what actually happened and what is bearable to share— is a complex and self-protective process, as “managing and arranging memories then also becomes a bridge towards a sense of safety” (Kohli & Lonning, 2021, p. 251). In this way, for the Adams and other displaced people, speaking their truth becomes a method of transformatively naming their world10 (Freire, 1968).

In the next section, I examine the findings related to the second research inquiry, concerning relationships and ways of belonging.

**Negotiation of Relationships and Ways of Belonging**

The second research question references the ways storytelling affects negotiation of relationships, both within the family unit and among the women and myself. Storytelling is, ultimately, a relational action that connects tellers and listeners through the sharing of lived experiences; in fact, one of the key “purpose[s] of storytelling is to constitute relationships between people” (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021, p. 9). This is

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10 “Naming the world” is a process Freire (1968) describes as defining your own reality and your place of self within that reality. It is also a process in which dialogue between humans creates a shared sense of their own world, in order to change that world: “to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it… Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection” (p. 45).
particularly true in displaced families that are maneuvering multiple cultures and identities within a multigenerational household (Perry, 2008). In the Adam family, it is used for both entertainment and education; the sisters and Kassala laugh their way through narratives of life in Gaga while nudging the younger children and saying things like, are you listening? This is your culture! This study’s findings also showed that another result of storytelling is the deepened relationship between collaborators and researcher, i.e, the women and me. Due to the implicit traditional, hierarchical structure of research itself (Simon, 2013), a constant attention to the critical theoretical frameworks and participatory methodologies used in this project were essential. This awareness helped to both navigate and solidify authentic and trusting bonds among the women and myself, as I engaged in constant reflexivity and member checking. The emergent themes in regard to this inquiry of negotiation of relationships and ways of belonging were family stories and co-creation of stories.

**Family Stories**

The literature reinforces the importance of storytelling in refugee communities (Early et. al, 2022; Fobear, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Lenette, 2017). There is less research on storytelling practices specifically within refugee camps, as well as the effect the camp has on family narratives in resettlement (Malkki, 1995). Between the generations of the Adam family, storytelling is a culturally sustaining practice. As Amira once said, “we take our culture with us everywhere we go.” For refugees in exile or resettlement, a physical home has been disrupted and uprooted, often many times over. Thus, through the act of telling, stories help maintain this cultural identity: “family narratives preserve ethnic, relational, and social history of the family and its members. [Stories are] a means
of understanding and constructing identities as families and members of a larger immigrant community” (Huisman, 2014, p. 145). Storytelling differs from other forms of communication in “the significance of meaning making in the process of telling” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). In multigenerational displaced families, this passing down of memory often becomes an intentional act for older family members who wish to keep history intact: “stories about individuals or group experiences focus on examining those experiences and have significant implications for the ongoing shaping of identity of those who tell and those who listen” (Huisman, 2014, p. 146). Negotiation of identity within the Adam family relationships is a continual process of which storytelling is the action propelling it onward (Bivens & Wheeler, 2021), especially for the younger children, since so many of the family stories focused on a place they’d never been.

In their study focusing on perspectives of refugee children, Strekalova-Huges & Wang (2019) found that “children internalized culturally sustaining purposes of family storytelling, applied lessons from stories to their lives, and aspired to carry storytelling forward and pass it down to their own children” (p. 16). The women pieced together their past in familiar and oft-told narratives, demonstrating that “storytelling is an empowering tool for refugee and immigrant women to pass on a genealogy of stories, from grandmother, to mother, to daughter, to granddaughter, and so on” (Hua, 2000, p. 113). Although Amira would always lovingly demand that the youngest siblings needed to listen to their stories, she didn’t necessarily have to. The findings of this study showed that on many occasions the younger children wanted to learn about the family history and life in Gaga; they sat up straight, put away their devices, and tried to contribute what they could.
The three oldest Adam women’s use of narrative in their daily life reflect Perry’s (2008) research on the importance of stories and memory to Sudanese culture and that, unlike the United States, oral literacy is valued just as much — if not more so — than written. As one of Perry’s (2008) participants reflected, “storytelling is an important aspect [of Sudanese culture]... you pass [the history] from one generation to another through storytelling. It’s through storytelling that people learn about culture, the customs, about the traditions... [because] you could not find them in a book” (p. 16). Traditionally, Sudanese people — at least those from rural areas — have relied on their memory for things like record-keeping (Perry, 2008). The Adams tell a similar version of their experience. Kassala, who was born and grew up in a northern Sudanese village, never went to school in her life. Amira and Tesha learned to read and write in the inconsistent, UNHCR-funded school in Gaga, but it was not till they came to the United States that they truly began understanding other forms of literacy, since in the camp, they ascribed to the Sudanese cultural view that “the spoken word [was] very important” (Perry, 2008, p. 11). The youngest children are becoming adults with a completely different experience in American schools, but still participate in the Sudanese tradition: “storytelling happens in the evenings, when people sit together and share stories” (Perry, 2008, p. 16). In Gaga, this was by necessity; there was no other form of entertainment. In resettlement, it is both a habit and a choice.

Malkki’s (1995) extensive research in refugee camps discusses the “mythico-history” (p. 52) that developed among the camp residents. She defines the term as a collective story — based in the past— that is told and retold so often that it becomes the dogma of a particular group. In her study, this was the residents of Mishamo camp in
Tanzania. As I reference extensively in chapter 2, a commonality across refugee camps is that their inhabitants are not permitted to adopt the culture of the country of asylum, only the one of their homeland. I argue this what fuels the “mythico-history,” as described below by Malkki (1995):

In virtually all aspects of contemporary social life in the Mishamo camp, the Hutu refugees made reference to a shared body of knowledge about their past in Burundi. Everyday events, processes and relations in the camp were spontaneously and consistently interpreted and acted upon by evoking this collective past as a charter and a blueprint... it was unmistakable that history had seized center stage in everyday thought and social action in the camp (p. 53).

The Burundian refugees living in the camp, through storytelling, engaged in “world-making” (Goodman, 1978) within their “mythico-history [which] represented an interlinked set of ordering stories which converged to make (or remake) a world” (Malkki, 1995, p. 55). Malkki’s (1995) research found that, within the camp, stories were mostly situated in the past of Burundi rather than the present circumstances of Mishamo.

In this study, I cannot write about the storytelling practices of those in Gaga, only of the structure it takes within the Adam family in resettlement. In many aspects, the way the women talk about and remember Gaga as a family unit resembles the “mythico-history” that Malkki (1995) claims is present in refugee camps, likely borne of its insular nature.

In Gaga, they might have spoken about Sudan similarly to the Burundian refugees in Malkki’s (1995) study; they recreate and maintain this strategy in resettlement. In resettlement, Amira and Tesha’s perception of Gaga — what they choose to pass down to their younger siblings, children and beyond — constitutes “variations on a single, shared
grand narrative” (Malkki, 1995, p. 57). That is, their collective memory of the mostly positive aspects of everyday life in Gaga. Strekalova-Huges & Wang (2019)’s study found that refugee children in resettled families viewed “repeated storytelling as a culturally sustaining way of sharing stories within their family… [the children] credited their ability to retell stories to hearing them repeatedly” (p. 11). The repetition of the “collective memory” of Gaga ensures its preservation.

“We take our culture with us everywhere we go.” What comes with an attachment to something is also the fear of losing it. I found that the Adam women often expressed vulnerability when thinking about the younger generations forgetting their Sudanese culture, which made storytelling feel even more vital, and viewed “remembering aloud [as a] relational act that [would] stop their memories from fading (Kohli & Lonning, 2021, p. 251). As their children become more and more immersed in American culture, they will inevitably experience what Bhahba (1994) terms cultural hybridity; that is, the mixing of cultures, specifically a Western culture with a non-Western one. To some extent, this is natural, a phenomenon that occurs in all children of immigrants: “differing from their immigrant parents, immigrant children and children of immigrants lack meaningful connections to their ‘old’ world. They are thus unlikely to consider a foreign country as a place to return to or as a point of reference” (Zhour, 1997, p. 64). The Adam women attempt to provide these “meaningful connections” through storytelling — both material and verbal — as they hope to preserve the collective memory as well as intangible aspects of culture, such as their language. For Kassala, this vulnerability is hyper present — she expressed worry multiple times— since she can’t communicate fluently in English, and her youngest children admitted to feeling more comfortable
conversing in English than Masalit. Kassala’s experience is reflected among other women navigating displacement. Goodson and Phillimore (2008) found that refugee mothers, often due to their childcare commitments, were “constrained in the types of social capital they could access” (p. 9), and that all the women interviewed in their study “saw the learning of English as one of their main priorities in order to become self-sufficient” (p. 8). Kassala saw getting a job at UPS — and learning English with an American coworker — as a way for her to connect with her children and feel more comfortable in her new environment. She had to quit the job for childcare reasons, especially since Amira and Tesha are beginning to have more children while also pursuing college degrees, but she wants to return for seasonal employment. Even now, at the time of this writing, she is constantly asking Amira to help her apply for jobs so she can go back to work. “But who will take care of the babies?” Amira wonders aloud.

Co-creation of Stories

The sharing of stories inevitably strengthens bonds between the tellers and the listeners (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). We tend to think of storytelling as an individual act, but “stories more often than not are created in conversations with others, making them joint constructions” (Kellas & Trees, 2009, p. 2). There is literature that delves into the effects of personal narratives on the dynamics of family groups, some of which I referenced in the section above, as well as studies in which the researcher is a member of the community they’re studying (i.e, Chaparro, 2019; Goncalves, 2013). However, there is less research focusing on the researcher-participant relationship in storytelling projects, especially when there is an existing relationship between the two (Garton & Copland, 2010). My pre-existing relationships with the sisters — especially Amira— is at
the heart of this project, and I argue, has made the data more rich, authentic and collaborative.

I was one of Amira’s first teachers in the United States. Teachers play an essential role in supporting the adjustment period of newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth, and thereby earn a great deal of trust from their students (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). Because of this foundation of trust, we were able to continue a relationship after she left my classroom, including sharing some major life events, such as the near-birth of her son in the school parking lot. After that, we continued to grow closer and closer as our relationship slowly morphed from teacher/student to friends, the latter of which has only become stronger due to this study. Had I not been her teacher first, I believe I would not have been as readily accepted into, not only the Adam family’s lives, but the wider Sudanese community in our city.

I write candidly about our relationship for a reason. Iikkanen and Roiha (2022), point out that there is a lack of research that references in depth what Garton and Copland (2010) call acquaintance interviews: “familiarity is present in many interviews to one degree or another, [but] prior relationship[s] between researcher and participants remains largely unexplored terrain” (p. 3). Iikkanen and Roiha (2022) claim that, in existing literature, even if there is a prior relationship between researcher and participant, the specifics of said relationship are often not discussed in depth. Researcher-participant relationship, they (2022) argue, should be made more explicit in order to acknowledge aspects of reflexivity and positionality more ethically within studies; this is especially true for those in which there is a prior relationship between the researcher and participants.
When a previous relationship between researcher and collaborator exists — such as the case with Amira and myself — there is a lexicon of common experience that can be referenced. Since there is more familiarity among researchers and participants from the outset, there can be greater comfort in pushing the boundaries of traditional hierarchy, i.e., questioning the researcher or adding additional input, “as the shared worlds of the participants can be invoked and made relevant by either interviewer or interviewee and used as a resource to co-construct the interview” (Copland & Garton, 2010, p. 546). The sisters and I would often bring up something in our shared past during the process of storytelling, or they’d jokingly admonish me the way they did each other, saying things like, “Miss! You play with your hair too much!” in the middle of a story. There were many moments when I felt as if they were studying me as much as I was studying them, particularly my physical appearance and body movements. Although researcher-participant closeness is the goal for all ethnographic research (Gobo, 2008), “what marks these interviews [with prior relationships] out as different is the joint and on-going construction of shared knowledge and experiences, rather than each participant recounting their individual narratives” (Copland & Garton, 2010, p. 547). Sometimes, as the women and I sat together, telling stories, there were moments I would misstep in my understanding of events. Amira and Tesha were quick to correct me whenever this happened, like when I asked them — without thinking — if they ate donkeys in Gaga, and they responded, shocked: “No! Eat the donkey? Miss, you’re killing us!” I always tried to step back and refer to the women to guide the narratives, “sometime you need to think about things the Sudanese way,” Tesha once advised me. Our comfort level and deep trust with each other made us better able to co-create certain aspects of the stories. The
women felt safe to correct me — with humor, of course — or to point out when I might be misinterpreting something. This “relational awareness” (Simon, 2013, p. 8) was an essential aspect of this research; without it, this dissertation might have been more siloed in traditional, hierarchical roles of researcher and participant. Instead, we continually engaged in a process of reciprocal learning. They loved teaching me Masalit phrases and educating me about Sudanese cultural traditions or aspects of their life in Gaga. I learned from them — we learned from each other — while engaging in dialogue through the act of storytelling (Freire, 1968).

When working with those that are marginalized by society, such as displaced communities, engaging in dialogue is essential. Beyond just words, though, there must be a foundation of love and respect in order for the dialogue to be a truly reciprocal and equitable act (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994). I viewed the ethnographic “participant observations” (Kendall & Thangaraj, 2013, p. 83) — what I call participatory observation — that constituted my data collection as a process of collaboratively engaging in dialogue with the women. Freire (1968) views dialogue — which, in this project, I conceptualize as collaborative storytelling — as a method of naming the world:

Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation… the naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and the dialogue itself. (p. 89)

As a White researcher working with marginalized collaborators, this commitment to relationship and constant reflexivity is what Spivak calls an “ethical responsibility”
(Spivak, 1990, p.42). According to Spivak, “ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship” (Landry & Maclean, 1995, p. 5). Engaging in loving dialogue — creating stories together — undoubtedly strengthened my personal relationship with the Adams, which, in turn, strengthened the authenticity and depth of the data recounted in this project. “I’m so happy you are here, Miss,” Amira would say, “Allah, oh my God, everywhere you are there for me.” Once, as we looked at pictures of Amira’s wedding, I jokingly asked, “why didn’t you invite me, Amira?” She responded by saying, “it was in 2018. At this time we’re not that related.” I officially began this dissertation research in summer 2020, two years after she was married — she was right— at this time, we were not that related. This interaction further illustrates the effects of qualitative research — particularly ethnographic and participatory methods — on relationships between researcher and collaborators (Bardzell et. al, 2016; Copeland & Garton, 2010; Shah, 2017; Vieira, 2016).

In the next section, I investigate literature exploring counter-stories of refugee camps, as well as offer the findings of this study as a way to lessen the gap in this body of literature.

**Counter-stories of Refugee Camps**

As a researcher, I’ve been fascinated with refugee camps for a long time, particularly in the way they are represented in the media versus the lived reality of residents. In the media, refugees are often depicted in monolithic, essentializing terms (Jackson, 2013, Perry, 2008, Betts & Collier, 2011). Thankfully, there is a movement resisting that categorization within academic literature (Abusharaf, 2009; Besteman, 2016, Sium & Ritskes, 2013). However, there is less research that focuses on examining
the experience of refugee camps in a more nuanced way, and even less focusing on memories of camps in resettlement. The third research question of this dissertation explores the Adam women’s retrospective stories of Gaga, and the ways their memories resist and complicate public perceptions of refugee camps. It considers how the space of the refugee camp influenced the storytelling and community practices of the women, and, paradoxically, how the isolated, boundaried nature of the camp led to a sense of freedom, which will be explored in the sections below. The emergent themes in regard to this inquiry of the counter-stories of refugee camps were community, space and freedom.

Community

The stories the women tell about Gaga continually circle around the importance of community, and the joy they felt in community spaces. To Amira, Tesha, and Kassala, essentially, their community is home, which most likely comes as a result of constant movement. Home is not attached to any physical building or residence, but rather, to each other. Their mostly positive — verging on comical— camp memories that focus on belonging, space and time emerge as counterstories of camp life, as opposed to more widespread academic accounts of the difficulties of refugee camps (Betts & Collier, 2017; Harrell-Bond, 1997; Agier, 2011; and more). This is not to say that these difficulties aren’t true; they undoubtedly are. The findings simply offer the possibility of nuance — that joy can exist alongside hardship — as well as the complex interrelationship between memory and history. Peteet (2005) explores this dichotomy of refugee camps as she examines “the contradictory meaning of refugee camps… they were places of both hope for the future and despair” and the ways in which Palestinian refugees “created a sense of place, identity and meaning in new spaces, using the tools of
culture [and] memory” (p. 1). The Adams named their world (Freire, 1968) — their sense of place and identity — in large part through the social and community networks they built in the camp. In both the camp and in resettlement, these were formed through the communal practice of storytelling.

Creating community through the strategy of storytelling was empowering for Amira and her family in Gaga; it was a way for them to feel safe, and in that safety, free. The sisters remember storytelling as the main community event in Gaga when they reflect on their childhood and the memory of listening to Kassala and her friends talking late into the night: “they do a tea, we sit in room together. Some people join, then sometimes they talking about their life, what happen.” I conceptualize this practice through a Freirean (1968) lens: storytelling as worldmaking; community as a world. In Gaga, the Adams found strength in their community, and therefore power, for “power arises only where people act together” (Arendt, 1973, p. 30). Tesha remembers the communal style of completing tasks: “In my country, everyone learned how to make dishes from their mom. All the women, in the kitchen, together. She cook today then the other one cook tomorrow, and then one going to get water. Turn by turn.” Goodson and Phillimore (2008) write of the importance of these types of community networks, specifically for female for refugees: “in their home countries, many female refugees enjoyed the support provided by extended family members in helping to share their domestic responsibilities. These networks often formed the basis of their social lives” (p. 6). In resettlement, they write, “[female refugees] find themselves [much more] alone” an experience which is “intensified by the lack of extended family networks [in resettlement]” (Goodman & Phillimore, 2008, p. 6). A large part of what the Adam
women yearn for — what they express to miss about Gaga — is the support system that consisted of, not just their immediate family, but most everyone in the camp. Amira would often tell stories of walking into houses without knocking, or staying for days somewhere else. “We are all mother,” she said many times. When the Adams remember Gaga in resettlement, it represents much more than a physical place; it represents community and family.

**Space**

Refugee camps are specifically designed to be temporary (Herz, 2007). As such, there is a lack of personal space as tents and houses are constructed practically on top of each other, in order to maximize space and handle the constant ebb and flow of new arrivals. Within this chaos, though, emerges a strong sense of community, which Goodson & Phillimore (2008) mention in their study with refugee women: “primarily, community was about spending time together, often in an informal way because of the lack of space for formal social gatherings” (p. 8). The Adams often referenced this sort of informal social gathering, which seemed to be due in part to the connectedness of Gaga’s layout: “where space is polyvalent and its usage multipurpose and contingent, a public/private polarity is a non sequitur. For example, [in the camp] homes doubled as venues for political meetings and informal gatherings” (Peteet, 2005, p. 140). Malkki (1995) found that camp refugees had “no problem with the space itself” (p. 141); their issues instead lay mainly with camp administrators and governing bodies like the UNHCR. As the Adams describe, the communal space led to the possibility of task-sharing and group action: “[action] is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act” (Arendt, 1958, p. 51). It also served as a mechanism for
communication, as Malkki (1995) explores in her research on camps: “whatever happened in the camp, people said, all the refugees would quickly know about it… in this sense, the camp had become an inward-looking system” (Malkki, 1995, p. 140). The refugees created their own system of information, a “perpetual, self-conscious circulation of ideas or knowledge” (Malkki, 1995, p. 140). Because of the insular nature of the camp, stories and information were told and retold, so the communication “[acquired] a deeply narrative form… these paths of narrative production indicate one of the ways in which spatial isolation had become a positive technique of power” (Malkki, 1995, p. 140). The residents were able to construct their own narrative within the spatial enclosure of the camp as they “[walked] between the different villages of the camp, exchanging news and thoughts along the way” (Malkki, 1995, p. 140). Malkki (1995) compares the complexities of the community and narrative networks in camps to spider webs, however, a metaphor of a beehive seems more accurate to the way the Adams describe their life in Gaga. Everyone working collectively; facing issues together in a shared ecosystem.

However, the structural control exerted over refugees in camps is undeniable (Rawlence, 2016; Agier, 2011; Turner 2005). Camp residents are restricted in their movement and generally confined within the camp’s borders; by necessity, they live an existence of waiting for resettlement or repatriation. Both options are continually talked about but rarely achieved (Agier, 2011). Despite this, the Adams, like all of those living in refugee camps, did not simply live a meaningless existence of waiting, they “crafted meaningful places which in turn shaped [their] identity and subjectivity. This [occurred] within and against the constraints imposed by displaced state impulses, host state interests, and international institutions” (Peteet, 2005, p. 31).
The myriad of institutions, NGOs and media outlets continually categorize and label the displaced: “as an object of intervention, the refugee subject is constituted by an interlocking international and local network of power… aid discourses implicitly classified refugees as spatially and culturally liminal, as deterritorialized people in need of humanitarian intervention” (Peteet, 2005, p. 51). Remembering the joy and community within the space of refugee camps, then, becomes a form of resistance. It is a means of challenging the view of refugees in camps living what Agamben (1995) terms as “bare life,” a narrative which, in literature and media, effectively silences and ignores (Spivak, 1988) the individual stories of displaced people such as the Adams. There are multitudes of meaning within the camp, as “refugees and others exposed to the camp are at once excluded and marginalized while simultaneously being able to create new identities, communities and political projects” (Turner, 2015, p. 147). When the women think back on life in Gaga, they remember their community as their identity, which reflects Kohli & Lonning’s (2020) study on refugee narratives and memory: “the story about self, then also becomes the story about others” (p. 254). Finding agency within their community and social networks served as their own method of gaining control within the strict confines of the camp borders. An example of this is Amira’s many stories of the women in Gaga relying on each other for things like childcare and cooking. Since they were confined within the camp’s borders — without access to any social support or governmental programs that may have existed outside Gaga, in Chad — they found ways to create their own networks of support.

11Giorgio Agamben (1995) claims that refugees in camp live a ‘bare life’: humans as animals in nature without political freedom. When a human has no political agency, such as a refugee in a camp, he argues, they live a “bare life” with little autonomy or sovereign voice.
In resettlement, the Adams have much more physical space. However, for them, that doesn’t necessarily equate with happiness. Amira remembers their small house in Gaga, built from straw and mud, especially fondly: “Our house in Chad- it was only one room! I never gonna forget it, oh. All the time, we in that house. We're just telling a story to each other, laughing in the night, you know? Our house there is ugly but still we happy, I don’t know why.” This story gets at the heart of the gap in literature in terms of the counter-story of refugee camps. In the media, or in policy-driven research, the house — on its surface — might only be perceived as “ugly.” To the Adam women, they don’t see ugliness; they hear laughter and remember love.

**Freedom**

Since camps are stateless and institutionally controlled by NGOs, the residents exist in a state of “structural invisibility” (Malkki, p. 7). Within this invisibility, however, refugees can define themselves: “[refugees in camps] lived at some level within categories that were not of their own making, but they also subverted these categories, to create new ones” (Malkki, p. 8). The findings of this study show that for the Adam women, this manifested in many ways as a feeling of freedom. As Amira put it once, “we can do whatever we want in Gaga. Nobody care, nobody is thinking of us. I miss it there. I want to go back.” The so-called “bare life” (Agamben, 1995) created space for agency, albeit generally community rather than institutionally based, as “human agency intersects with global forces to shape the local” (Peteet, 2005, p. 23). In Malkki’s (1995) work with Hutu refugees in Burundi, she describes how the camp generates identities, rather than represses them:
Far from “losing” their collective identity — and far from living in an absence of culture or history — the Hutu refugees in the camp located their identity within their very displacement, extracting meaning and power from the interstitial social location they inhabited. Instead of losing their collective identity, this is where and how they made it. The refugee camp had become both the spatial and the politico-symbolic site for imagining a moral and political community” (p. 16).

In many ways, Malkki’s (1995) description demonstrates that camp residents had the freedom to negotiate an identity formed of the camp itself. They had the freedom to construct their own political allegiance based on memories of their homeland, amalgamated with the subjectivities of life in the camp. With a lack of an overarching set of government laws or mandates, refugees in camps make their own moral codes. Amira and Tesha expressed that, in Gaga, “no people are homeless, we never let them be homeless, not like America.” The way they describe the collectivist way of life in the camp reinforces this statement. Many refugees coming from camps continue this value of shared responsibility over the community in resettlement, attempting to pass it on to their children (Strekalova-Huges & Wang, 2019, p. 12), as Amira and Tesha do with their younger siblings.

Although the camp’s boundaries are heavily controlled, the residents were able to manipulate their restricted environment: “[some narratives] suggested that the refugees experienced their isolation as repressive; but there was another dimension to their experience of the ordered space of the camp” (Malkki, 1995, p. 139). While it’s true that “the geography of a refugee camp is about two things: visibility and control- the same principles that guide a prison” (Rawlence, 2016, p. 113), it’s also true that the
“inhabitants of the enclosed, compartmentalized, and visible space were nevertheless enabled to manipulate and subvert the interior space in more ways than would ever be possible in the panopticon… [and had] certain mastery of the space in the camp” (Malkki, 1995, p. 139). In other words, the residents had freedom over the space within the tightly controlled borders of the camp, even if they had relatively none outside of it.

The Adams often reminisced on the ease with which they navigated Gaga, moving seamlessly from house to house, area to area. In resettlement, they are miffed by concepts like privacy fences and closed doors. They crave the openness of the camp — the community — and how they used to move freely and informally around. As Tesha put it: “in my country, we can go to a place and come back, all together. Walk around, every house you can go. I don't know them, but I go knock on door. Here, the neighbors are really far, you know. Here, people never coming to my house. I don’t like it.” In resettlement, they miss the controlled freedom of the camp in their American life with infinite choices, cars, and neighborhoods separated by highways.

Another thing the women pointed to is the lack of structured time actually giving them a sense of freedom. By “time,” they meant that, in Gaga, they didn’t possess the technology that creates the construct of time, such as phones, computers, watches, etc. Thus, the women were blissfully unaware of time and schedules, and therefore, their lives were not dictated by either as they are in the United States. In refugee camps, the land of the limbo, “time seems configured by the waiting to return…Waiting becomes an eternity, an endless present. The common term for all these spaces could well be that of ‘waiting room’” (Agier, 2011, p. 72). Agier (2011) would likely view this idea of camps as a waiting room without a clear future negatively; as a kind of purgatory. Perhaps it is,
but in Amira’s memory, this ‘timeless’ existence actually meant that, in fact, time was endless and unstructured. There was an infinite amount of it for family, community, and celebration, which is something she yearns for in resettlement, as she tells stories of days-long celebrations full of dancing and jumping. The lack of technology ensured that the Adams were not bound by strict, Western constructs of time; they had no clocks. They had only the sun. In reminiscing on the lack of strict schedules, obligations and bills, the Adam women unconsciously observe potential pitfalls of a capitalist system, i.e., more competitiveness and more importance placed on work, rather than other aspects of life. In Gaga, they decided their own schedules of work based on need and survival. There was less standardization because there was no overarching government other than the far-away UNHCR, and no participation in the global economy. However, at times, Amira also does emphasize a positive aspect of work in the United States: “but [in the US] we make money. So much more money.” A give and take; time and money.

Still, though, the women were able to exert a sense of autonomy, to name their world (Freire, 1968) within the beehive of Gaga, as ultimately, “the camps could be seen as a built environment, as everyday abodes, and as places where possibilities for the future emerged, took shape, and were acted upon” (Peteet, 2005, p. 131). To say that the Adam women — and so many others — lived a “bare life” (Agamben, 1995) simply because they were forced into statelessness is an insult to their lived experiences. Their stories illustrate the dynamic, bittersweet complexity of their memories of the refugee camp: of community, relationships and home.

In the final chapter, I discuss the implications of this research and offer recommendations for future practice and research.
CHAPTER SIX

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I consider the implications and importance of my study in terms of policy, practice, theory and future research studies. I contend that this research has significant implications at the practical, theoretical and policy levels and will be of interest to scholars, practitioners, and wider community audiences alike. First — and perhaps most importantly — this study offers a more nuanced version of life in a refugee camp, with the findings written as much as possible in the voice of Amira, Tesha and Kassala. As Jackson (2013) wonders, “given the plethora of academic essays… why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experiences of the refugees themselves?” (p. 92). Echoing Jackson (2013) and Malkki (1995), I contend that there is a lack of academic work that offers an authentic perspective of those that have been displaced; rather, it tends to quantify and categorize refugees in homogenous groupings. In this project — in the spirit of Spivak (1988) — I resist that method of essentialist positioning by engaging in reflective analysis and member-checking while continually acknowledging my own positionality in relation to the Adam women, thereby furthering refugee scholarship viewed through a postcolonial framework. In this dissertation, I argue for the necessity of theoretical frameworks that intentionally deconstruct hegemonic constructs within research, such as postcolonial theory (Kincaid,
1988; Spivak, 1988) and critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1968), in studies that are conducted by White researchers working with marginalized communities. Resultantly, this study has vital interdisciplinary implications in fields that often focus on identity, storytelling, and cultural power dynamics like education, anthropology, political science, and sociology. These implications include — but are certainly not limited to — a greater understanding of the nuance and complexity of the lived experience of refugees in camps and in resettlement.

This study also contributes to the synthesis and understanding of storytelling as a culturally sustaining practice that creates and maintains identities and knowledge between generations of family members. Similarly to Bivens and Wheeler (2021), in this research, I conceptualize storytelling in the Adam family as self-making action that creates community, particularly in resettlement. This adds to the body of scholarship pertaining to community-based research with displaced groups in resettlement, particularly those using ethnographic and/or participatory action methodologies (Daniel, 2018; Eccarius-Kelly & Schaeffing, 2022; Ritskes & Sium, 2013). This study has roots in wider socioeconomic systems of power, as it illustrates the ways in which storytelling facilitates the creation and recreation of community. This is, in itself, a liberating process, as systems of colonialism and neoliberalism are designed to separate people: from themselves, from their community, from their environment. As the Adam women demonstrate, gathering in community to tell stories serve as an act of radical connection in opposition to systems that are designed to disconnect us. (Hancock, 2023)

My study makes a unique contribution in its acknowledged deeply close relationships between the researcher and collaborators (i.e., myself and the three Adam
women), which I believe provides richer, more authentic qualitative data in the literature surrounding refugee storytelling. In addition, my first findings chapter, as well as various other portions of this dissertation, are “written vulnerably” (Behar, 1996), in large part to promote the accessibility of academic research and writing, which I believe is of vital importance for greater community impact beyond academia. As Richardson (2003) writes:

We have a serious problem: research topics are riveting and research valuable, but qualitative books are underread…. Qualitative work could be reaching wide and diverse audiences, not just devotees of individual topics or authors. It seems foolish at best, and narcissistic and wholly self-absorbed at worst, to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and not making a difference to anything but the author's career. (p. 924)

While I was writing, I reflected on Vieira’s (2016) powerful, ethnographic work with undocumented migrants, as she noted: “in carrying out and writing up this research, I am bridging two worlds: the academic audience that I imagine as readers of this book and the migrant communities who are its subject” (p. 14). I push that further and wonder: what if there were audiences beyond the academic one? As bell hooks (1989) writes, “if I do not speak in a language that can be understood, there is little chance for dialogue” (p. 78). In order for research — particularly the long-form written version of it — to extend beyond academia, it must be accessible, understandable, and engaging.

In the next section, I propose suggestions for research and practice, based on the findings presented in this dissertation.

**Recommendations**
Based on this study’s findings, I offer recommendations for future research and practice.

**Recommendations for practice**

The current study illustrates the power and importance of story within groups of displaced women. As such, I have recommendations for practice, which focus on storytelling in community and educational spaces.

This study is conceptualized in a micro sense, examining the ways three women of one family use storytelling to make sense of displacement and resettlement. Operating with the knowledge that storytelling can be used to sustain culture and identity throughout generations and communities, I propose practical recommendations on a larger scale. A key implication of this study is for educators and community workers alike to recognize the benefits of storytelling for displaced women. As Freire (1968) attests, creation and ownership of one’s own environment and decision-making process leads to a sense of liberation. I invite practitioners to consider the formation of intentional storytelling spaces, either within classrooms, through nonprofits, or by developing community-based “radical informal learning spaces… that are critically reflective, dialogical, horizontal and mutual” (Elmore, 2017, p. 7). As Amira and her family show, gathering to tell stories results in a feeling of safety and community, and, resultantly, autonomy: “we also tell stories as a way of transforming who we are, recovering a sense of ourselves as actors and agents in the face of experiences that make us feel insignificant, unrecognizable, or powerless” (Jackson, 2013, p. 12).
As this study demonstrates, storytelling in displaced communities is more effective and comfortable for the narrator if it transcends language and literacy boundaries, such as the case with Kassala sharing her garden or food she’d cooked. Thus, recognizing the legitimacy of narratives outside of the traditional silo of written and verbal words — and acknowledging that things such as food, clothing, dance and music are also stories — ensure that refugee women will have greater control over the types of stories they tell about themselves, and therefore “are more likely to share their stories fully [as] they actively engage as co-constructors of knowledge and maintain ownership over their life narrative” (Lennete et al., 2018, p. 2). It will also encourage non-literate refugees, such as Kassala, to participate in the storytelling process in whatever way feels most comfortable to them. Eliminating oral language barriers by inviting material storytelling ensures that the process is more inclusive and empowering; it is a method of positioning the tellers as the experts, rather than the audience. This is even more vital if the storytelling spaces are formed in the countries of resettlement, in order to discourage the possibility of misrepresentation that arise from speaking in the country of the oppressor, “good intentions” notwithstanding (Spivak, 1988).

In addition, there must be spaces set aside specifically for refugees who identify as women, given the patriarchal dynamics present in certain cultures that might silence female voices within shared spaces (Langellier, 2010; Shabbar, 2015). Although this study focused on the experiences of women who identify as cis-het, it must be said that the conception of a safe space to share stories also applies to other refugee, immigrant and Indigenous groups that are silenced and oppressed by intersectional systems of oppression, including LGBTQ groups (Brotman & Ou Jin Lee, 2014; Fobear, 2015).
Another recommendation is to invite audiences outside of displaced communities to hear the stories. In this study — again, in a micro sense — I was the audience for the Adam women, which, as demonstrated through the findings, greatly deepened our relationship by increasing my level of critical consciousness (Freire, 1968). On a larger scale, stories tend to invoke visceral, emotional reactions that can actually have an impact on policy: “[storytelling] can be extremely useful in policy-making processes where decision-makers are far removed from the realities they seek to address” (Wheeler, 2014, para. 5). This impact on audience members can serve as the “action step” of the storytelling process as those in attendance come together to advocate for social change:

The audience can respond with empathy [upon hearing the stories] because the storytellers openly share their emotions. When these stories concern issues of injustice, exclusion, democracy and human rights, different insights are generated – much more powerfully than when the same questions are presented in the abstract. The audience can feel the different dimensions of the issue through the head and heart of another person, and put themselves in their position, at least for a moment. Creative forms of expression can help illuminate deeper democratic truths. (Wheeler, 2014, para. 10).

Offering spaces for community storytelling also serves to push against essentialist discourse surrounding those that have been displaced, and challenge the “romanticized notion of refugees as ‘passive victim[s]’ who need ‘charitable sympathy’ because they are ‘voiceless agent[s]’” (MacDonald, 2015, p. 410). If displaced groups are given agency to express narratives of their life experiences in whatever way they choose, then the trap of “curated stories” (Fernandes, 2017, p. 5) – that is, stories designed to elicit certain
responses – can be avoided. Also, it goes without saying, as Fernandes (2017), Jackson (2013), and Spivak (1988) can attest, the people best qualified to lead projects with refugees are refugees themselves.

**Recommendations for Future research**

This ethnographic study followed Amira, Tesha, Kassala and myself for a total of 31 months. Although much was learned during the over two and half years we spent together, there are still ample directions and ways in which this research could continue or be expanded upon. This study focused on the three oldest women of the Adam clan. Conducting more data collection, such as interviews and observations, with Amira’s younger siblings, would add to the body of literature surrounding the 1.5 generation of displaced people (i.e, immigrants and refugees that resettled in childhood and early adolescence). The 1.5 generation of immigrants typically “are able to behaviorally operate proficiently within and between [dual cultures]” (Kim et. al, 2003, p. 153). Compared to first generation immigrants, those that belong to the 1.5 category are much less studied (Gindelsky, 2019; Jones, 2011). Linguistically and culturally, they are in an incredibly unique, and often difficult, position. In this project, the younger siblings listen intently to stories of life in Gaga, while attempting to add their own perspectives to the memories in order to feel a part of their Sudanese culture. At the same time, they are navigating the American school system and all that comes along with it. Recently, I noticed that one of the siblings (who just entered high school) has begun adopting speech that is characteristic of AAL (African-American Language), such as using the habitual *be*. AAL can be defined as “the variety of English spoken by many African Americans in the United States” (Van Hofwegen, 2015, p. 454). The younger siblings are losing the
accent of their mother and older sisters while gaining another one; they are perpetually straddling two cultures. This tension figures briefly within this study, but would be an important contribution to intersectional research on being Black and culturally Muslim, as well as a young, resettled refugee navigating school and community spaces in the United States.

In the same vein, a direction for this research could be a study with the second generation of immigrants in the Adam family, those born in the United States, such as Kassala’s youngest children, as well as Amira’s and Tesha’s. How will they view the experiences of their mothers and their own culture, as well as add to the family story? The oldest of the American-born children, Kazim, just started kindergarten and recently informed me that his English is much better than his Masalit. How will he, and the others, communicate with Kassala if their command of English becomes stronger than that of their Masalit? This research could further scholarship surrounding the ways storytelling sustains and maintains identity and culture across generations, strengthen the data already presented in this study concerning Kassala, Tesha and Amira, and as serve as valuable in constructing a longitudinal understanding of the family’s use of storytelling throughout the generations.

Another direction for future research concerning this project would be to replicate this study with a similar design, methodology, theoretical framework and research inquiry, but with a different displaced family coming from a different cultural background. From a phenomenological standpoint, this would demonstrate how the experience of displacement and resettlement unites cultural groups, as well as how it
might divide them, as well as challenge the tendency to categorize refugees as monolithic groups.

The identity of motherhood — an incredibly important role for all three women—is a consistent theme throughout this project but not explored in great depth. In September 2022, Tesha had her first baby, so she has joined the ranks of mother with Kassala and Amira. From an autoethnographic standpoint, if I have children, how would our relationship and this research deepen, as we navigate motherhood together? Amira brings up my not having children often; it is something she still doesn’t understand about me. How would a qualitative study about researcher and participant navigating motherhood together, across cultures, contribute to the literature on motherhood in general? What is phenomenologically universal? In addition, there is exciting potential in exploring how the way the three women view parenting in their resettled environment could contribute to research on refugee motherhood.

In addition, Amira and Kassala plan to return to Gaga to visit for a few months during the summer of 2023 (Tesha will stay home and watch the children). They have not been back since they left in 2016. I would be interested to see how their stories and memories might shift and change after revisiting the camp. They are new people now; they have lived in the United States for seven years. They’ve changed more than they might realize. This research would add to literature surrounding memory, narration, and displacement in a new way, especially if it was connected to the RQs and findings in this study.

Lastly, I believe further qualitative research surrounding refugee camps, resettlement, memory and narrative is worth pursuing, especially as it pertains to how the
displaced choose to share stories around both traumatic and everyday experiences. This study adds to the literature surrounding refugee camps in ways I believe are unique to the body of scholarship. It demonstrates how — to Amira and Tesha particularly — Gaga signifies something much deeper than a physical space. What they miss isn’t so much the physical space, but the way it facilitated feelings of connection, community, and belonging: time to relax, time to be with loved ones, time to dance for days. There is nuance to this, of course. But, in many ways, it is an observation on individualist culture, on the demands of capitalism and different sets of cultural priorities.

As the myriad conflicts and climate disasters worldwide show no sign of ending, protracted refugee situations will grow, not diminish. That means more and more people, like Amira and Tesha, will grow up — perhaps live their whole lives — in refugee camps. As such, in resettlement, the camp is their perception of home, not their country of origin. Due to this, the way they remember refugee camps in resettlement differs from those who grew up somewhere else, before arriving at the camp. This topic is vastly understudied — there is not much literature at all — in part because it is a relatively new phenomenon. It is my hope that scholars will add to this gap in the literature with a similar approach as my study. That is, not overly focusing on the sorrow and tragedies of camps and displacement, but rather on the memory and voice of the refugees themselves — whatever form it may take — which will always be more nuanced. Perhaps, one day, this type of research won’t be termed as a “counter-story” but rather, the story.

**Conclusion**
Kassala, Amira and Tesha are no strangers to upheavals, demonstrating through their ability to create community and find humor in the incomprehensible that “when everything is unsettled, space can be opened for positive changes as well as irretrievable losses” (Abusharaf, 2009, p. 2). I began this research assuming I would witness a critical consciousness (Freire, 1968) amongst the Adam women as I facilitated storytelling sessions. What I found was that the women did not need a facilitator, and that, for them, storytelling was — and had been — an act of community creation that was as natural as breathing. I quickly became “ethnographically entangled, newly aware of the privilege and responsibility of research” (Vieira, 2016, p. 20). It seems important to note, then, that what came of this project was the development of conscientização (Freire, 1968) in our relationships: of mine with myself, of theirs with me. This is one of the effects of “transformative storywork… [which] enables a deeper understanding of our lives and, importantly, ourselves in relation to others. This relational learning enables reflection on our own stories and experiences” (Derakhshani et al, 2020, p. 733). Though this project was mostly focused on the four of us, especially Amira and me, the message from this research has wider implications on the healing properties of storytelling, and the importance of holding space for displaced people to tell their stories exactly as they choose:

The sort of stories that refugees tell are different at different times. Needs change.

But without these stories, nothing would change. In particular, these stories enable refugees to move from private grief to shared experiences, from the solitude of I to the commonality of we. (Jackson, 2013, p. 91)
Without these stories, nothing would change. As this study showed, a yearning for community is at the heart of everything: the reason to gather, the reason to laugh, the reason to grieve. Perhaps this is what all of us are looking for.

I started this research in July of 2020. When I think back on that month — that summer — I get a strange feeling. I wonder how I will tell the story of that time in the future; it almost feels unnarratable (Jackson, 2013). I remember words and moments in visceral snapshots: the pandemic, Breonna Taylor, comprehensive exams, conflict, uncertainty. We were in our fourth month of COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions and had no idea that the effects of the pandemic were only just beginning. That was the summer of George Floyd’s murder and worldwide protests, and my own city was grappling with the aftermath of the murder of Breonna Taylor. I was going to protests multiple times a week, and at the same time, writing my comprehensive exams and dealing with a certain amount of relational upheavals. Going to Kassala’s house to tell stories began to feel like a comforting and safe routine amidst all the turbulence of summer 2020. “Miss!” they’d cry when I entered the house. “We are so happy you’re here!” In a world in turmoil, it becomes even more essential to create safe spaces to share stories.

The bonds that strengthened and developed from this dissertation are the catalysts of a lifelong relationship. Kassala, Amira, Tesha and I have already shared so many important life events together, and will continue to share more, as Amira pointed out one day when we were discussing one of her favorite subjects: me having children. “But anyway Miss,” she said, “drop your baby off with Mommy while you’re at work, then the
baby will teach her English and she will teach the baby Masalit, and they will be the most famous baby because no White person speak Masalit. I will take care of your baby, don’t worry. Now Miss, say goya, it mean how are you in Masalit.”

As I repeated goya goya goya, I felt emotional as always when I thought of us, how far we’d come. How, one day, my children would know Amira, Tesha, Kassala, Amani, and all the rest of the kids. “When I have my babies, you can give me tips,” I said, “you’ll be my teacher then.” We laughed.

“By the way, Miss,” she remarked, rolling her eyes, “are you finished with your book yet? Why it take you so long?”
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APPENDIX A

Amira’s Story

Amira wrote this story for one of her senior English classes. The prompt was about water insecurity, which is why many of the stories focus on water. She asked me to include this in the dissertation. I did not edit or adjust her words in any way.

My name is Amira Adam, I’m from Sudan but mostly I grew up in Chad in a refugee camp called Gaga. We always got up early in the morning at around 6am. The reason we went early is because there were a lot of people in the tap and if we don’t go early we don’t get water. We didn’t boil the water to drink when it came from the tap, but we boiled water from the well and when we were cooking. Sometimes in Chad (Gaga), the animals died because the water was not clean. When we went to the river and we dug a hole to get water, the first water that we retrieved we either threw away or sometimes we gave it to our cattle, donkeys, sheep and goats. I went to a place to get water that was a cement block with six taps. When I went to the place with the six taps, I used to fight a lot because some people didn’t let me get water.

They say things like, “the girl who is fighting a lot is coming.” The reason I went over to the tap was because my mother went to the well or tap and she didn’t bring water home because she didn’t like to fight with the people.

We had one security guard at the camp and he always stayed by the tap, he once gave my mom water. If the security was not there she just came back with an empty bottle. My mother always used to tell me that if I went to get water I shouldn’t fight with people but I did fight … a lot. When I went to the tap I always took my little sisters with me because I wouldn’t lose them and I didn’t want my momma to be mad at me. Some
people told my mother, “your daughter is fighting at the tap” and when I came back, I was in trouble. I carried water on my head and sometimes I put it in the wheelbarrow too.

When I was carrying water, I was seven to eight years old. I carried about two gallons on my head and I carried my little sister on my back. That was not easy to do but I did it. When I was twelve years old, I carried about 4-5 gallon of water on my head. When we went to the tap or well, we played with our friends and had a happy time. We had a rock slide close to the tap and we slid on there but sometimes we played for too long and the tap was shut off. When my mom went to the store or the farm, I was the one who went to the tap everyday because my biggest sister went with my mother and I was the babysitter. We just used the donkey when we went into the well because the donkey is the same as a car. When we go to the well, we put like 20 gallons onto the donkey’s back and sit on it. Sometimes kids hide in the corner in order to scare the donkey. When they scared the donkey, he ran from them and we fell off of the donkey.

We didn’t have a donkey of our own but we used to borrow my grandma’s donkey. When we went to the well, we took my aunt’s sheep, goat and our one sheep. My aunt’s children were shepherds because they have sheep and goats, they took them to the pasture. I always went with them and when I went I always lost my one sheep. Sometimes my one sheep went to other farms and they kept my sheep and charged my mother because the sheep ate their crops. When we went to the farm, I didn't take care of my sheep. I just let my sheep wander.

I didn’t know where my sheep was and I climbed up the tree to see if I could find it. When I climbed on the tree, I dropped my shoes down to the ground. While I was in
the tree, some kids stole my shoes. When I came back home without my shoes, I was in trouble. My mother always said I was not a good shepherd because I always lost my sheep and they charged her. My mother didn't want me to be a shepherd because we don’t have money to pay for the people who take our sheep. After that we just kept our sheep at home and we gave it grass and water.

In 2003, there was a war in Sudan and they killed a lot of innocent people. During the war, if you were a man, you had to wear women’s clothing because there were really bad people called Janjaweed. If they knew you were a man they would kill you. They would kill the man and take his land. Sometimes they killed kids. They would lock kids in a house and set it on fire. They even raped kids that were only 12-13 years old. Sometimes they took kids away from their parents.

When the war happened, they took some of my parents’ cows, sheep and goats. My mother was a shepherd. One day, she went to the well to feed her cows and the war began. She heard gunfire in the distance. This gunfire let her know that the Janjaweed were coming. She ran very hard to get home. She was thirty minutes away and ran at full speed while whistling for her sheep to follow. When she got home, her parents were already gone. She called for her mom but no one was there. I was only four years old so I was asleep in my mom’s room. The reason why my grandparents left is because they called for my mother but she wasn’t there. They didn’t see me sleeping.

My mom put my little sister on her back and me on the donkey. I didn’t know how to sit on the donkey because I was only four years old. My mom walked all day and into the night to a village in Chad called Tabri. My mom asked some strangers if we
could stay with them. The kind strangers offered us food, water, and a place to sleep. The next morning, when we awoke my mom heard her mother’s voice a few houses away. My mom ran to her mother crying. They hugged and said, “thank god we are alive!

After that happened, everyone In Darfur started migrating to Chad because they don’t want to lose more people they loved. When people in Darfur started moving, my family decided to move too. My mother and my grandma wanted to move but my mom's big brother refused to go to Chad. He just wanted my grandma to stay with him. My grandma said she wanted to go with my mother.

The journey from Darfur to Chad was very difficult. My mother and others walked miles to reach Chad. It was almost one hundred degrees and very sunny. Sometimes, they rested under the shadow of a tree. The worst part was the water problem. We didn’t have enough water or food to survive.

Some people were starving and some kids were crying because they were too young to understand what was happening. For the babies, the lack of food and water was especially difficult. When walking to Chad, some people tied gallons of water to their donkey. When we walked during the day, the water would get so hot in the harsh sun that we couldn’t drink it. Most of the time, we didn’t walk when it was night because we didn’t want to be seen by the Janjaweed people. We didn't wear colorful clothes. We only wore black so we could blend in with the darkness. We didn’t use lights. The moon was our light. The Janjaweed were looking, but they couldn’t see us. We spent four days or more walking to Chad.
When we arrived in Chad, the UNHCR welcomed the Darfur refugees. They registered us and showed us a place to sleep. My mom made a tent in the area they assigned us. UNHCR continued to register more refugees. We stayed in this camp for three months, until they moved us to Gaga, where we would stay for eleven years.

When we arrived in Gaga, we had no home to live in. Every refugee stayed outside. We slept under trees. When there were no trees we slept under the tall grass. Some little kids were crying and some were playing. People started building houses and my mom did too. They made bricks to build the houses and some people made the house with wood.

Early in the morning, neighbors and my mother went to collect wood for fire and for the houses. Some people who lived there a little longer helped my mother to make a little house to live in. When we were there for about two months the UNHCR called my parents names to register to move to another camp in Gaga.

I got stung by a scorpion at night while I was sleeping. On that day, nobody slept because I was crying, jumping and running around. When the scorpion stung me, people who lived in the same area all came to my house. Everyone said, “what happened to Amira?” My mother replied, “she got stung by scorpion.”

For two days I didn't sleep well. I got stung in my right hand. That was the worst pain I’ve ever felt in my life. I was holding my hand and doing nothing. It took me one week to heal. During that time, I ate with my left hand. Eating with the left hand is disrespectful in the Muslim religion. You can if you are sick or have an injury in your hand, but if you eat with your left hand and you don’t have any injury, that is disrespectful in my religion. If an adult gave you something and you took it with your left
hand, they would say, “what! This child is disrespectful.” Everybody in your neighborhood will say you are disrespectful to adult people.

I remember the day that my grandma sent me to bring water from the container for her. When I brought water, I gave it to her with my left hand and she said, “do you know in which hand you are giving me the water?” and I said to her, “no grandma, what is the matter, all the hands are the same. What is the difference between two hands?” When I said that to her, she replied, “the difference is when you say hi to the person you used your right hand that means you respect people and when you used the left hand you are disrespectful.” She threatened to put my hand into hot water so I wouldn’t do that anymore. She wouldn’t really do it, she was just trying to scare me. From that day on, I never used my left hand again. I used my right hand when I was making something or giving things to people.

When we were new in the refugee camp in Gaga, we didn’t know how to find the wells and river. Once we learned where everything was, we realized how far away everything was. Most adults walked to get water. They walked very fast. They didn’t play around like the kids did. When the kids went to get water, they moved more slowly. They would find ways to play first, and then would go to the well to get the water.

In the summer, we sold water in the street. In our camp, the kids would sell extra water to others in a bag. I did it with them, especially when my mother went somewhere else. We stole the water, went to the street, and sat under the shadow of the tree. We would buy candy with the money we made. I would also buy fresh, juicy mangoes if I could. There were people called Borgo. They came to our camp and brought mangoes for
us to buy. When my mother asked where all the water was, I would either say I washed my siblings or I gave it to the donkeys.

We used to go to the street and say, please buy from me! It wasn’t only me who sold the water. There were a lot of other kids who were selling the water, so we were all competing. Every kid who sold water in the street would run to people walking by. They would say, buy from me my water is cleanest, and there was always an argument between the kids.

Sometimes they bought from me, but sometimes not. Our parents didn’t even know we were doing this. Every day we came to the street and did the same thing. The kids would sit in a line with bowls of water for sale in front of them. Sometimes, I offered one bowl of water for free so that I could make more customers than other kids. From that time on, I had more business than the other kids. My growth increased more and more. When some people bought the water from me, I ran to the market to buy candy. We were little kids and we didn’t understand how hard life was. We didn’t even get $1 per day from the water we sold. We only made like 50 cents a day.

When my mother came home, she always asked my sister and me where the water was because we left the container empty after we sold some water. She always told us not to waste a lot of water because the water was very hard to get from the tap or well. This money was ours. We don’t show our parents how much money we got. Everyday when we get run to the market to buy the candy.

Life in the United States and Chad are very different. Let me tell you how different they are. When I got up every morning in Chad (Gaga), I always found my
mother in the kitchen boiling water for two reasons. First, she was boiling water tea, the second water to wash ourselves. She mixed water that she already boiled and cold water and put it into a small pitcher with about a quart of water. I got this water to wash my face and brush my teeth and get ready for breakfast.

My mother put water into the bucket so we could bathe. The reason she put it into the pitcher for us is because she thinks we will use too much water when we take a shower (a ten minute shower in America uses about 20 gallons of water). Sometimes my mother told me that I used too much water but I felt like I was the one who went to get water more than anyone in my house so I had the right to use more. Even when we went to school, we didn’t take water with us because we didn’t have a water bottle in my house and in our school we had only one tap in the whole school and there were more than a thousand students in elementary, middle and high school all together in the same building.

They would dump thirty gallons of water into a big water container and put a cup on it, so students could use these water to drink. But this water was not enough for us. Sometimes some students fought because of the long line to stand and drink water. Some students who were smart said the water from the container will make you sick because a lot of students were drinking from the same cup and container. Some didn’t drink the water from the container but I drank the water because I felt like nothing would happen to me. I drank water from the river, tap, well and the other people's houses but nothing happened to me. I never got sick from the water problem. Why would the school water make me sick? I always asked this question to myself.
When I came home from school, I didn’t do my homework because I had to go to the tap before more people came into the tap so I could get in line first for water. Sometimes when I came home from the tap my mom was at the market selling produce like tomatoes and mangoes. It was then my job to take care of my siblings. I had to bathe the little ones (twins that were 6, and a 3 years old sister) sweep the compacted dirt floor in the house and the outside sitting area and I also sometimes cooked so it was ready when my mom came home. I cooked something called asseda. Then sometimes I walked to the market and helped my mom carry back whatever didn’t sell at the market that day. After dinner I helped my mom clean up. In the evening I went outside and played games like hide-and-seek, piggy back rides, and duck-duck-goose. Sometimes we went to a person’s house in the village who had a TV and we paid about 10 cents to watch a show. The TV was about the size of an American printer and sometimes there would be about 20-30 people watching one TV.

The TV watching time was between sunset and around 10 pm. Because we had no clocks we were never sure of the time except on Fridays when my grandmother went to the mosque to pray. Actually other people in my village who had a phone know what time it’s and when the market is open. Except for me I didn’t know what time it was. At least one house would have a clock so as those kids left for school they would call to me...my nickname was “button” because when I was born I was tiny like a belly button. When they called me I just came out and we went to school together.

I was known as the girl who fought a lot at the tap. Also, I was the line cutter. I remember one day I fought with a girl named Asma. Asma and I were friends but we always fought a lot. One day Asma and I were in school lining up for water to drink from
the water container. I was first in the line but she cut the line and she came after me. I asked her, “why did you cut a line?” She didn’t say anything and I pushed her and kicked her and moved her from the line. Asma didn’t say anything to me.

After school, Asma and her friends were outside waiting for me to come out so we could fight when I came out. I saw a lot of students standing and Amsa’s friends said, GO! When I saw them, I was scared and froze.

When I came closer to them, Asma said, “why did you push in the morning when we were drinking water from the container?”

I said, “I don’t want to fight with you. Maybe next time I will fight but my mother is at the market waiting for me so I don’t have time to fight.”

Asma kept coming toward me. I took off my shoes so I could run faster and ran to the market so that people would help me. My mother was also at the market. I wanted her to know that I resisted fighting with Asma because she always said I fought too much with other kids. That day I didn’t fight with Asma. She was the one who wanted to fight with me but I refused to fight with her. Then, they came after me at the market and Asma told my mother I pushed her when we were at school. My mom said I was in trouble when we got home.

A few days later, Asma and I were at the tap getting dirty water to make bricks. My mom, my sisters and I made bricks often for our house, and for walls that would keep us safe animals and dangerous people. On that day, I cut the line again to get revenge on Asma. Asma asked, “why did you cut the line?” I replied, “I remember the other day when you cut the line in school.”
Asma threw the dirty water at me. I got up and started pushing her and she fell down. After that, I jumped on her and started slapping her in her face. I pulled two of her braids. She ran into her house crying with beautiful tears. Every kid at the tap said Asma was afraid of me. They began clapping their hands and said, “Amira, you are a strong, brave girl!” Some kids just wanted to see us fighting. When I saw Asma crying and ran into her home I felt sad, too. I suddenly went home because I didn’t want her mother to see me. Like an hour later Asma and her mother came into my house saying where Amira is but I was hiding under the bed in my mother’s room.

They explained everything that I had done to my mom. After they explained to her, she called my name Amira twice and said where are you Amira but I was under hearing everything that they said. They were talking and looking for me everywhere, slowly I came out from the room step by step and ran to my gran house.

I told my gran what happened and why I came to her. She loves me so much and she doesn't want mom to be mad and I love her too. I never hide something from my gran, I told her everything but not my mother at that time. When sunset my gran makes food so we can take that food into my mother's house.

WHAT SURPRISED ME WHEN WE CAME TO THE UNITED STATES:

When we came to the United States I was really surprised about what America had that we didn't have when I was in Chad. The most surprising thing was water because we didn’t have a lot of water or our own tap or well in Chad but in America everyone has their own in their houses. Other things that everyone in the U.S. had that we didn’t have
in Chad were showers and toilets. In Chad we took a bath by putting a little water in a bucket.

The first time we arrived in the United States, my father and his friends went to pick us up from the airport. I said to my mom when we got off of the airplane, “we are in America.” but there was no one that we knew in the airport or anyone that spoke our language (Masalit). I was really scared about it and I said to my mom and siblings, “maybe we are here in America but not the city where my father lives.” When I said that even my mom got scared about it. We stayed a little while and no one came yet to the airport to get us. Ten minute later, everyone was moving out and some were coming into the airport. Many people found a ride when their family came they just ran and hugged them but us we just stayed in the corner and we didn’t know where to go. We saw people talking but we didn’t understand anything they were saying. I said to mom, “we should move from here because everyone is leaving.” When I turned around I saw my father wearing a nice suit and looking very handsome. When I saw him I screamed, “oh my gosh!” (in my language) and all my siblings screamed with me too but my mom didn't say anything. We ran to him and hugged him because we hadn't seen him for a long time. My sister and I knew him before but my twin sister, brother and my little sister didn't even know him well because my twin siblings were little and my little sister wasn’t born because my mom was pregnant when my dad left.

After we met each other, we went out into my father's car. I asked my father a lot of questions like, “is this our car?” “Do we have our own house?” He replied, “yes we do have a house to live in.” When we came home, I was very surprised how the apartment looked because when we were in Chad we didn't have beautiful houses like that.
Everything in the house surprised me, the bedrooms, kitchen, sitting room and bathroom because they looked different than what we used to have.

When we came home, there was nothing to eat at home. An hour later my father said he was going to the market to bring food to eat. When he said that, I wanted to go to see what the market looked like. My father said that I could go too. My father got ready and we came outside together and got into the car. When my father started driving the car, I asked him, “when will I learn how to drive a car?” He replied to me, “no no, it will be a long time before you drive.” I asked why and he said, “because in this country you must be 18 years old to drive a car.” Also you are little and you need to have a driver’s license to drive a car in America. I never knew people needed a driver’s license to drive a car because I thought in Chad no one used a driver’s license to drive a car. I thought anyone who entered a car could drive.

The first market that we went to was Kroger. When we went to Kroger, there was fresh food and a lot of fruit and vegetables. There were some kinds of fruit that I had never seen before like cherries. I didn’t know which to pick first. I told my father, “I love all these fruits and vegetables.” We bought fruit and chicken. Even the chicken looked different than the one we used to eat when we were in Chad. I thought that we were going to buy a live chicken and take it home and kill it and pull the feathers out. This chicken was already plucked. The chicken we bought was already roasted and it tasted yummy. In Chad we never buy food that was already cooked.

When we came home, my father said, “guys go take a shower and rest.” I know you guys are really tired from your trip. I replied to him, “ok daddy. I will go first and then I will help my siblings to take a bath because they are little and they can’t take baths
well by themself.” I headed to the bathroom holding my clothes with me, I entered and started to turn on the faucet in the bathtub. I didn’t know how to turn the knob. I came out and asked my father what to do. He showed me how to turn it on. My father turned on the water for me and when he went out I took a bath but I didn’t know how to turn off the tap. The tub kept getting fuller and fuller until the water ran out onto the floor. I ran out of the bathroom in a towel yelling for help. My dad ran in and shut off the water. My dad showed me how to shut off the tap and from that day on I never again flooded the bathroom.

In Chad, the bath is also different than that we have in Chad because In Chad we took the water in the bucket into the bathroom and sat on the rocks that we put in the middle of the bathroom and shower floor. To build the bathroom we went to the jungle and collected some tall grass and then built a structure with poles and grass. The reason we put rocks in the middle of the bathroom is because we didn’t want to sit in the mud and get dirty as we washed. Also the water that we washed was all over the ground. The toilets were built over a deep hole in the ground. Sometimes many people complained about the toilet because it was very difficult to use it. People were afraid to fall in.

I had a neighbor who had a baby girl between two to three years old. Baby mother wanted the tap to get water and the baby walked out looking for her mother. When she walked out she didn't know where to go because she was just a little baby and she walked into the bathroom. She fell down in the toilet and two hours later the baby mother came home. When she came home there was no baby at home and she called the neighbor to see if the baby was there but every home she went to the answer was not always. After
that she started crying and ran looking for a baby and everyone in the neighbor was flowing her even little kids were flowing them. In Chad, if someone is crying or yelling neighbors adults and kids come there to see what is happening there but the kids want to see everything that is going on. They did two hours but the baby still had not found where she was. Later on the baby mom's neighbor went to the bathroom and she heard the baby cry and when she looked down there was a baby. When she saw a baby there she ran and came out to tell baby mom where the baby was. When she heard that she was scared because she thought the baby was not ok. Men and women came to her house and helped to pull the baby out for the toilet. The baby was totally fine and nothing happened.

Is not only that baby falling into the toilet. It is common for a lot of kids to fall in while looking for their momma when they went to get water. When we have our own tap at home, kids will not fall into the toilet because their moms will stay with their children and watch where the kids are and know what they are doing. Also if we have the opportunity to build the same bathroom as American do, kids will not fall into toilets because all their moms are busy looking for water to feed and wash them. We don't have enough money to build that kind of bathroom because if we built that bathroom we needed an electronic device also we needed more and more water to flush and take showers and we don't have that much water to waste. I thank God when we moved to the United States because we don’t have any problems about water or bathroom issues that we had when we were in Chad but I still feel bad about my sister and people who live in Chad (Gaga). I really miss them.
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Mother/Daughter Interview # 1: Introduction

During this interview, I want to know more about you. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.

1. Tell me about yourself.
   - What is your name? Do you like your name?
   - How old are you? When is your birthday?
   - How many siblings do you have? Who are your best friends?

2. How would you describe yourself?
   - What words would you use to describe yourself?
   - How do you think other people (teachers, family, friends) view you?

3. What are your likes, dislikes, hobbies?
   - What food do you like? Hate?
   - What about music? Do you only listen to Sudanese music? If not, what other kinds do you like? Can you show me?
   - What do you like to do in your free time? Has this changed as you’ve grown?

4. Tell me about your hopes and dreams.
   - What/who makes you feel happiest?
   - What/who makes you feel strongest and bravest?
   - Describe the best day of your life.
Follow-up questions as needed.

Mother/Daughter Interview # 2: Sudan and Chad

During this interview, I want to know more about your life in your country. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.

1. Tell me about life in your country.
   - Describe your country in your own words.
   - What is the most beautiful thing about your country?
   - What do you miss the most?
   - What is your favorite memory of your country?

2. Describe a typical day in your country.
   - What was your daily routine? What did you do for fun?
   - Did you go to school? Cook? Get water?
   - Can you tell me about the people you were around most days?

3. Describe your home in your country.
   - Can you tell me about your home in Sudan? What do you remember?
   - Describe your camp in Chad. Do you miss it?
   - Describe what your house looked like.
   - What smells do you think of when you remember your country? Tastes? Sounds?
   - Describe the most beautiful place in your country.

4. Tell me a story about your country.

Follow-up Questions as needed.
Mother/Daughter Interview # 3: Resettlement Journey

During this interview, I want to know more about your experiences during resettlement. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. *These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.*

1. What do you remember about leaving Sudan?
   - Can you describe the journey?
   - What do you remember about the day you left?

2. What do you remember about leaving Chad?
   - In your own words, describe the experience.
   - What do you remember about the day you left? What did you do? Who did you see? How did you feel?
   - What did you take with you? What did you leave behind?

3. What do you remember about the process of resettlement?
   - Do you call yourself a “refugee?” Why or why not? What does that word mean to you?
   - Describe the process of applying to come to America. What did you have to do? Was it difficult? Did someone help you?
   - Describe the interviews. What kind of questions did they ask you? How did you respond?
   - Do you remember the day you got called to come to America? How did you feel?
   - What do you remember about the journey to America? The plane ride? Your first thoughts when it landed?

● Follow-up questions as needed.

Mother/Daughter Interview # 4: America
During this interview, I want to know more about your life in America. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.

1. If you could describe America to people back home, what would you say?
   - Imagine you are talking to your family in Chad and Sudan. What would you tell them about your life here?
   - What would you tell them about the people? The government? The stores? The schools? The weather?

2. What is your favorite thing about America?
   - What makes you happiest about being here?
   - What are you grateful for?

3. What is the most difficult thing about America?
   - What can you tell me about learning English? Was it difficult? Do you want to learn more?
   - Do you think the systems are difficult in America? (explain this more)
   - How is American culture most different from yours?

4. How has your opinion changed, the longer you’ve been here?
   - What did you think about America when you first came?
   - What do you think now?
   - What do you hope for your future here?

● Follow-up questions as needed.
Mother/Daughter Interview # 5: Water

During this interview, I want to know more about your experiences with water in your country. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.

1. What is the difference in “getting water” in America and in your country?
   - How do you get water in America? How do you get it in your country?
   - What did you think the first time you turned on water in America?

2. Describe the process of getting water in your country.
   - How long did you walk? Where did you walk? Who did you walk with?
   - Was it dangerous? Was it ever fun?
   - Did you have to get water every day?
   - What did you use the water for?

3. What would you like Americans to know about getting water?
   - Do you think most Americans understand what it’s like to get water in other countries?
   - Do you think they should understand?

4. Tell me a story about getting water.
   - Describe the craziest/funniest/scariest memory you have while walking to get water.

Follow-up questions as needed.
Mother/Daughter Interview # 6: Holidays, Stories and Traditions

During this interview, I want to know more about the traditions of your countries. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. *These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.*

1. **Tell me about food in your country.**
   - What did you usually eat for breakfast? Lunch? Dinner?
   - What is your favorite Sudanese food?

2. **Tell me about holidays in your country.**
   - What is the most important holiday in your culture? How do you celebrate this holiday? How is it different in American than it was in your country?
   - Tell me about cooking during this holiday. Who do you cook with? What do you cook?

3. **What are your favorite traditions in your country?**
   - What is a tradition that is special to your country?
   - Will you teach these traditions to your children? Do you think it’s important to continue cultural traditions? Why or why not?

4. **Tell me a story that you heard as a child.**
   - Who told it to you? What was it about?
   - Are stories important to your culture?

   ● Follow-up questions as needed.
During this interview, I want to know more about you. This will be recorded unless you’re not comfortable with that. You have the right to skip questions if you don’t wish to respond. *These questions are guidelines in case you need them. It is fine (and exciting!) for you to digress on any topic of your choosing while telling your story.*

1. Tell me about your children (child).
   - Describe your children (child). What are their names?
   - What do they look like? What do they like to do? How are your children different?
   - Do you want more children? Why or why not?

2. Tell me about motherhood.
   - What is the most difficult thing about being a mother?
   - What is your favorite thing?
   - Did you always want to be a mother?

3. Tell me about your mother.
   - What does she look like? How does she smell?
   - What is your first memory of your mother?
   - Tell me a story about your mother.

4. Tell me a story about being a mother, or about your child. Your favorite memory, or a funny day. The first thing that comes to mind.

- Follow-up questions as needed.
APPENDIX C

Field Notes Protocol

Field Notes (for observations of informal gatherings and interviews)

A. Data Overview

1. Date:
2. Time:
3. Observer:
4. Place:
5. Brief Context:
6. Anything of Special Note:

B. Abstract of Observation (a brief overview of this data set)

C. Detailed Field Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>Researcher Interpretations</th>
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D. Analysis of Focus Elements

1. Examples of critical objects/materials/sensory details:

2. Non-verbal communication (Attention, Moves, Affection):

3. Interaction patterns (Woman to woman. Woman to researcher. Changes in interaction patterns.)

4. Discussion and reflection- Focus on the research question(s)

6. Reflective Notes:
CURRICULUM VITA
Bridget Virginia Kearney
Pronouns: She | Her | Hers

EDUCATION
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Curriculum and Instruction May 2023
Languages, Literacies, Cultures and Communities
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
Dissertation Title: “Our House There is Ugly but Still We Happy”: An Ethnographic Study with Women Navigating Displacement and Resettlement

Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T) December 2014
English Education, English as a Second Language
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English Literature May 2011
Creative Writing and Communication
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE
Senior Research Associate January 2023-present
Ohio Policy and Evaluation Network, University of Cincinnati
- Manage and organize large amounts of data across a complex, multi-university research collaborative focusing on improving reproductive health for women across Ohio and surrounding states
- Engage in qualitative fieldwork, collect data via interviews and focus groups, and manage data from surveys
- Lead IRB applications and amendments; facilitate collaboration and analysis across a complex, hybrid research consortium
- Synthesize and disseminate research findings at conferences as well as to community partners and local stakeholders

Graduate Research Assistant June 2019-August 2020
Early Childhood Research Center, University of Louisville
- Served as a research assistant on a qualitative research grant study conducted in early childhood community centers, sponsored by Metro United Way
- Conducted interviews and focus groups using grounded theory and phenomenological methodologies, coded data, and wrote memos
- Refined research and learning objectives based on input from stakeholders and community partners
- Created culturally responsive evaluation for participants and used it to inform the course of research
- Organized large amounts of qualitative data using software such as Dedoose, OneDrive and NVivo
- Synthesized and disseminated research findings to community partners and local stakeholders

CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS
Kearney, B. “Our House There is Ugly But Still We Happy, I Don’t Know Why”: How the
storytelling practices of displaced women are used as a strategy to make sense of resettlement, negotiate identity, space and community, and provide counternarratives to life in a refugee camp. International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2023.


**Kearney, B.** “Using Narrative as a Venue for Agency and Empowerment in Teenage Refugees,” JoLLE @ UGA, Athens, Georgia, 2020

**Kearney, B.** “Creating Inclusive Curriculum for Multilingual Learners in Community College Settings,” Jefferson Community and Technical College, 2020

**Kearney, B.** “The Compassionate Classroom: Welcoming and Engaging English Learners,” JCPS Deeper Learning Symposium, 2019 & 2018

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**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), Louisville, KY**

*Resource Specialist*  
*May 2022 to January 2023*

- Coordinated onboarding efforts of new students
- Organized culturally responsive evaluation of families and students, placement testing, and assessments
- Supported and mentored educators in 10+ schools within JCPS with curriculum, evaluation, and organization
- Developed and disseminated culturally responsive curriculum and evaluation to JCPS ESL teachers

*Community Curriculum Coordinator*  
*August 2021 to May 2022*

- Designed learning experiences between community organizations and public schools
- Evaluated effectiveness of programs using individual and group performance results
- Designed and led professional development for stakeholders and professionals interested in the benefits of community centered, project-based curriculum
- Utilized models of adult learning theories and andragogies

*Educator of Multilingual Learners*  
*August 2015 to August 2021*

- Entirety of teaching career spent in Title 1 Public Schools
- Educator of teenage and adult multilingual learners
- Created blended training and curriculum tailored to diverse audiences
- Evaluated effectiveness of programs using individual and group performance results
- Created culturally responsive and authentic curriculum and evaluation based on adult learning theories
- Managed large groups of people; engaged with many community stakeholders on a weekly basis
- Led professional development trainings regularly; adjusted trainings based on feedback from students, families and stakeholders

**Jefferson Community College (JCC), Louisville, KY**

*Instructional Coach*  
*August 2019 to August 2020*

- Advised faculty on making curriculum more accessible for MLLs as well as instruction based upon Bloom’s Taxonomy
- Created blended trainings that were both live and self-guided
Developed a training program designed to assess client needs; developed and evaluated learning objectives after receiving feedback from stakeholders

**Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM), Louisville, KY**  
**June 2014 to January 2015**

*Family Center Coordinator/Educator*
- Lead educator and coordinator in the KRM Family Center, a center for adult female refugees with young children
- Designed all curriculum with limited resources meeting the needs of many cultures at once
- Organized extracurricular activities focused on family literacy

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE – CONTINUED**

**Various Technical Colleges, Thailand & Columbia**  
**2012 to 2013; 2014 to 2015**

*English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Trainer & Curriculum Writer*
- Served as a foreign language trainer and curriculum writer in two different countries, Thailand (2012-2013) and Columbia (2014-2015)
- Created innovative English language curriculum; organized English events and training for the community
- Evaluated EFL programs and curriculum; organized large amounts of data to demonstrate measurable results

**TECHNICAL SKILLS**
- Dedoose, Infinite Campus, Ed-Teach Engagement Platforms
- Google Docs, Classroom, Sheets, and Forms
- Microsoft Office, Teams, Outlook, PowerPoint,
- Social Media Platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok)

**HONORS AND AWARDS**
- Graduate Assistantship, University of Louisville, 2019
- Best Foreign English Curriculum, SENA Colombia, 2015
- OVEC Teaching Award & Scholarship, University of Louisville, 2014
- Creative Writing Award & Scholarship, University of Louisville, 2014
- Creative Nonfiction Workshop Award, Louisville Literary Arts, 2012

**LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

**Wear Your Story, Inc., Louisville, KY**  
**October 2020 to Present**

*Co-Founder/Director*
- Designed the concept for complex, interactive storytelling events
- Lead grassroots fundraising; co-lead event planning
- Handled all 501(c)3 non-profit business alongside colleagues
- Coordinated live events for the participants and the community

**LICENSES**
Kentucky Teacher’s License (Rank 1, 6-12 ELA, ESL)
TEFL Certificate, Volunteers Colombia