

Chapter 13

New Voices and Narrative Participatory Photography: A Culturally Relevant Method for Intercultural Exchange

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ABSTRACT

This chapter per the author demonstrates how community arts' attention to collaboration, education and facilitating dialogue across cultures offers an advantage in addressing the many issues that arise when new immigrant communities form. Through the example of Dumarka Soomaaliyeed Voices Unveiled, a narrative participatory photography project with Somali women in Columbus, Ohio, this chapter theorizes and documents the impact of the project's new method for facilitating intercultural civic engagement with refugee and immigrant communities and fostering a reciprocal exchange between participants and researcher rooted in participatory action research (PAR) and culturally relevant arts-based methods.

NEW GATEWAYS, NEW ARRIVALS, NEW VOICES

The global rise of mass movements of refugees has led to the formation of sizable diasporas, many of which have consolidated in new and re-emerging gateway cities (Van Hear, 2009). This group of cities and suburbs, part of a new destination trend in U.S. immigration, are confronting wide-reaching effects of the resultant rapid changes to neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and local economies, and cultures (Singer, Hardwick & Brettell, 2008).

Policies affecting migration have not caught up with the changing migration landscape. They continue to draw a clear distinction between voluntary migrants and refugees forced to leave their homeland. This dichotomy does not take into account complex processes forming diaspora. Federal funding, for example, does not extend to those who, once officially settled, decide to resettle elsewhere. Similarly, assumptions that all diasporans are refugees ignore the diversity of migration stories and homogenize

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1727-6.ch013

their political identity. Therefore, rather than defining diaspora as a scattered population with a common origin, diaspora is defined as a community-building process with two major factors:

1. Self-identification of belonging to a diaspora, and
2. Interconnections between local, origin, and diaspora localities (Johnson, 2012).

This pivotal shift from traumatic historical events propelling diaspora movements to community building is important for those interested in similar asset-based processes.

The Somali refugee movement is an exemplar of these phenomena. No significant numbers of Somalis settled in the U.S. prior to the years leading up to the fall of the Barre regime and subsequent start of civil war in 1991. Early arrivals settled in New York City, Washington D.C., Boston, Los Angeles, San Diego, Atlanta and Detroit (Fangen, 2007). While federal funding provided much needed services to official resettlement cities, high cost of living and safety issues drove many to seek affordable housing, job opportunities, better education and social services, and an established Somali community elsewhere. As a result, Somalis have migrated to smaller cities such as Columbus, Ohio and towns in proximity to original destination cities.

Columbus is home to roughly 35,000 Somalis, one of the largest Somali communities in the U.S. (CRP, 2009; Moore & Joseph, 2011; Roble & Rutledge, 2008; SCAO, 2005; Waters, 2012). Like other new gateways, central Ohio has grappled with accommodating the unique challenges brought by the large influx of Somali refugees and secondary migrants including disparities in education, language, religious affiliations, and varying migration experiences. Many nonprofit organizations have formed to address these concerns by offering vital services like ESL education, job training, and case management (CRP, 2005; Roble & Rutledge, 2008). Yet, anti-Somali sentiments and misperceptions regarding religious and cultural practices persist (Waters, 2012) leading to tensions between cultural groups and a general lack of understanding among the general population.

So how can community artists, practitioners, and researchers respond to these new voices, whose experiences may not fit neatly within current immigration policies, dominant cultural narratives, or the capacities of cities to address challenges ranging from language barriers to the provision of adequate social services? What does a diasporan approach to community arts offer and value? One example is *Dumarka Soomaaliyeed*¹ *Voices Unveiled* (DSVU), a narrative participatory photography (NPP) initiative developed by the author and a group of young Somali women that created spaces of dialogue exploring diasporic identity and a public exhibition. Through this example, this chapter demonstrates how community arts' attention to collaboration, education and facilitating dialogue across cultures offers an advantage in addressing issues relevant to diaspora communities. This chapter also presents the project's method, NPP, as rooted in participatory action research (PAR) and culturally relevant arts-based methods, fostering reciprocal exchange between participants and researcher, and facilitating intercultural civic engagement with diaspora communities.

ART AS A TOOL FOR WORKING WITH DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

Art educators and community arts practitioners recognize the importance of artmaking with immigrant and refugee populations (Brunick, 1999; Bye, 2004; Chappell & Faltis, 2013; Wellman & Bey, 2015). Some utilize art as therapy, attending to those who have recently experienced trauma through preven-

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