

IMMIGRATION SNAPSHOT: PHOTO STORIES BY OREGON
REFUGEES AND ASYLEES

by
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A THESIS

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Table of Contents

An Abstract of the Thesis of	2
Acknowledgements	3
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	5
Literature Review	6
Defining Immigrant, Refugee, and Asylee	6
Immigrants, Refugees, and Asylees in the Media	7
Storytelling as a Tool of Change	9
Inquiry Design	11
Context	11
Phenomena of Interest	11
Participants	12
Methods for Data Collection	13
Frameworks for Interpretation	13
Author's Positionality	16
Insights	16
Oregon	17
Home Countries	18
Multiculturalism	20
Hardships and Challenges	21
Resilience	25
Helping Others	26
Nature	28
Recommendations	30
Adapt to Similarity and Difference	30
Lead with Curiosity not Judgment	32
Center Immigrants, Refugees and Asylees	33
Perspectives	33
Reflections on Methodology	33
Final Perspectives	35
Bibliography	37

Introduction

This project was conceptualized during my internship at the Multnomah Idea Lab (MIL), a policy incubator in Multnomah County. It was designed to be the convergence of my passion for art and storytelling, my personal desire to learn more about my identity as a second-generation American, and the historical and ongoing work done by the MIL and others to shift the narrative around immigration. The current dominant narratives around immigrants, refugees, and asylees which revolve around legality, struggle, or sacrifice are neither particularly correct nor inspiring toward community and policy action. However, as the dominant narrative, these reductive understandings of immigrants, refugees, and asylees inform public opinion, which informs policymaking. Thus, the goal of the narrative shift is to catalyze the personal and political changes needed to create a more inclusive immigration system and society. The culmination of six photo stories from Oregon refugee and asylee storytellers, this project is not a traditional research paper; rather, it is a photo storytelling project designed to provide immigrants, refugees, and asylees a platform to define their stories on their own terms and advocate for the changes they want to see. This project takes the form of a report and an audio-visual storyboard. While this report provides context, analysis, and recommendations from storytellers, the complete photo stories can only be viewed on the [storyboard](#). The combination of the report and storyboard is designed to create accessible and interactive ways for those from all different backgrounds to learn from the refugee and asylee storytellers. The hope is that individuals and institutions use the knowledge and insights they gained from these stories to implement changes in their organizations and daily lives. Please note that no part of this thesis project should be interpreted as generalizable research.

Literature Review

Defining Immigrant, Refugee, and Asylee

This inquiry defines “immigrant” as synonymous to the UN International Organization for Migration’s (IOM’s) definition of a migrant: “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from [their] habitual place of residence, regardless of:

- The person’s legal status
- Whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary
- What the causes for the movement are
- What the length of the stay is (United Nations [UN]).”

Under this definition, “immigrant” is an umbrella term for anyone with immigrant status (UN). Refugee and asylum are two such statuses. These statuses are similar, but not the same. According to the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), both refugees and asylum seekers are people forced to flee their home countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution, war, or violence (UNHCR). However, there is a procedural difference between the two: refugees usually apply for and are granted status before they reach their country of final destination, while asylum seekers usually apply for and receive status in their country of final destination. An asylum seeker becomes an asylee after they have been granted asylum status.

While the experiences of refugees and asylees are distinct both from each other and immigrants as a broader category, they are not often demarcated in studies or in media coverage. For this reason, this inquiry includes references to studies about immigrants as a broader category. These studies are used as a proxy for experiences specific to refugees and asylees, with the acknowledgment that it may not be completely representative of their experiences.

Immigrants, Refugees, and Asylees in the Media

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of immigrants, refugees, and asylees by choosing which stories are covered and how to frame them (Appadurai, 2019; Estrada et al., 2016; Famulari & Major, 2023; Farris & Mohamed, 2018; Parrott et al., 2019). This influence becomes problematic when the media's portrayal of immigrants diverges from reality. Meta-analyses of immigration media coverage have documented this skew and its nature. Famulari & Major (2023), a meta-analyses of twelve news sites, Farris & Mohamed (2018), a meta-analysis of three newspapers across ten years, and Parrott et al. (2019), a meta-analysis of fifty regional news outlets' Twitter posts, found that U.S. based newspapers across the political spectrum disproportionately highlight the experiences of Latine communities, low-wage workers, and undocumented immigrants. Estrada et al. (2016), an analysis of the media coverage of six exclusionary immigration bills, and Famulari & Major (2023) also noted that immigration stories tend to center around the Southern Border and legality. This framing often explicitly or implicitly connects immigrants to crime (Estrada et al., 2016; Famulari & Major 2023). The implicit connection between immigration and crime is exacerbated by the fact that the media also commonly depicts immigrants, refugees, and asylees as some form of threat (Estrada et al., 2016; Famulari & Major, 2023). For example, articles may raise concerns about how these communities may harm public safety, American values, or the economy (Estrada et al., 2016; Famulari & Major, 2023). Scholars and community members have debunked these portrayals, but because they continue to inform public opinion, they must be acknowledged (Appadurai, 2019; Chattopadhyay et al., 2019; Farris & Mohamed, 2018).

Even well-intentioned media coverage can harm perceptions of immigrant, refugee, and asylee communities by decentralizing their experiences. For example, when covering immigration

issues, media coverage often defaults to centering the perspectives of non-immigrant actors discussing immigrant issues (Estrada et al., 2016; Partain, 2019; Seo & Kavakli, 2022). Such articles may justify immigration by centering its economic benefits or how non-immigrant policy actors feel about the issue. These stories decentralize the interests of immigrant, refugee, and asylee communities in favor of centering the aspects of immigration policy that most resonate with nonimmigrant actors that favor more restrictive immigration policies (Chattopadhyay et al., 2019; Estrada et al., 2016; Seo & Kavakli, 2022). On the other hand, human interest frames, which focus on immigrants as individuals, may lean into stereotypes that anonymize and sentimentalize immigrant, refugee, asylee experiences (Chattopadhyay et al., 2019). These frames often give immigrants, refugees and asylees “a plot (a narrative or a story) but no character, identity, or name” (Appadurai, 2019, p. 558). Said plot deemphasizes the unique aspects of each person's story and instead emphasizes victimhood, struggle, and sacrifice.

This fixed plot, the “quintessential” immigrant journey, in addition to running the risk of retraumatizing the storyteller, conflates worthiness of citizenship with suffering and ties the obligation to aid immigrant, refugee, and asylee communities to the degree of their suffering rather than to international legal mandates or moral obligations (Duarte, 2022; Tuck & Yang, 2014). These critiques of dominant immigration narrative cannot be fixed by replacing this narrative with any single other one. Confining immigration stories within any single plot or stereotype turns immigrants, refugees, and asylees into one-dimensional characters (Appadurai, 2019; Chattopadhyay et al., 2019). When they are defined only by how they came to the US, only a fraction of their experiences will ever be represented (Appadurai, 2019; Chattopadhyay et al., 2019).

The invisibility of the complexity of immigrant, refugee and asylee experiences is further exacerbated by the episodic and event-driven nature of immigration coverage (Estrada et al., 2016; Chattopadhyay et al., 2019; Famulari & Major, 2023). By sensationalizing immigration issues, this type of coverage hinders the ability for immigrant, refugee, and asylee communities to garner support from key governmental institutions. By framing issues as isolated incidents rather than the results of larger, outdated systems and cultural issues, sensational coverage fails to sustain public interest beyond the duration of a significant event (Estrada et al., 2016). As a result, political support for immigration reform is generally sporadic and limited to helping communities that receive a sudden surge of media attention. For instance, in response to increased public pressure, the federal government created humanitarian parole programs for Ukrainians and Afghans but has not demonstrated similar commitments in aiding immigrants, refugees, and asylees from other regions.

However, a patchwork of country-specific programs is not the ideal solution; systemic reforms that provide steady, long-term resource allocation to serve all immigrants, refugees, and asylees regardless of country of origin or how they arrived in the U.S. However, there have been no significant systemic reforms to that end for almost forty years. The last major reform was the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) (Tichenor, 2021). This policy stagnation demonstrates that without understanding the richness and diversity of immigrant, refugee, and asylee experience, implementing and sustaining systemic reforms can be prohibitively challenging.

Storytelling as a Tool of Change

Underpinning these problematic and limited media narratives is the voices of immigrants, refugees, and asylees themselves (Estrada et al, 2016; Seo & Kavakli, 2022). But not only does

the lack of self-representation allow for negative immigration narratives to persist, it also enables ostensibly positive immigration coverage to overlook “daily and systemic inequalities” that communities face (Partain, 2019, p. 571). These incomplete narratives shape public opinion and, by extension, inform what policies elected officials create and pass (Appadurai, 2019; Estrada et al., 2016; Famulari & Major, 2023, Farris & Mohamed, 2018; Parrott et al., 2019). Therefore, to counteract the media’s tendency to stigmatize and decentralize immigrants, refugees, and asylees, narratives that emphasize their voices and agency must be elevated (Chattopadhyay et al., 2019).

The process of storytelling can be used to elevate these under-represented narratives. Storytelling projects that provide a platform without the constraints of media framing allow community members to share stories they would like to tell. These stories resist prevailing narratives and stigmas imposed on immigrant, refugees, and asylees and redirect public attention towards narratives they want to elevate (Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2017). Additionally, storytelling empowers communities by facilitating connection. As stories function as both “storehouses of memory” and “aspirational maps,” they humanize storytellers by offering a deeper understanding of their experiences and build solidarity between communities as they reveal common ground (Appadurai, 2019, p. 564; Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2017). This convergence of narrative resistance, identification of shared experiences, and community empowerment can make storytelling a catalyst for sustainable policy change (Appadurai, 2019; Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2017). Unlike other forms of social change, its efficacy is not from its direct impact on policy actors, but rather from its ability to influence public perceptions—our perceptions—of what it means to be an immigrant, a refugee, or an asylee.

Inquiry Design

Context

Founded as a “bastion for white conquest and control,” Oregon’s statehood is inextricable from the dispossession, forced removal, and genocide of indigenous people (Tichenor, 2021, p. 63). Furthermore, the state’s early immigration policies favored Northern and Western Europeans which together created a disproportionately white population that treated those from all other backgrounds as second-class citizens (Tichenor, 2021). However, due to community and political advocacy, political stances and demographics began to shift. In 1987, Oregon became the nation’s first sanctuary state and since 1990, Oregon’s percentage of foreign-born community members has more than doubled from 4.9 to 10.2 percent in 2020 (Tichenor, 2021). The largest immigrant populations in Oregon are from Mexico, China, India, the Philippines, and Vietnam (Tichenor, 2021). Notably, the storytellers in this project represented none of these communities, but they did represent communities from different places in Oregon. Three were from Multnomah County, one was from Washington County, one was from Lane County, and one was from Marion County. The foreign-born populations in these counties varied greatly. According to Data USA, as of 2021, 13.5 percent of Multnomah County’s population is foreign-born, 17.9 percent of Washington County’s is, 5.56 percent of Lane County’s is, and 12.7 percent of Marion County’s is. These factors among many inform the experience of storytellers and the design of this project.

Phenomena of Interest

1. What can photo stories from Oregon refugees and asylees tell us about their experiences?
2. How do photo stories from Oregon refugees and asylees complicate the dominant narrative around immigration?

Participants

With the help of the Multnomah County Idea Lab and United for Immigrant Justice, six storytellers responded to an invitation to participate in this project. Storytellers had to meet the following criteria: they were at least 18 years old, self-identified as a refugee or asylee, were excited to share stories both orally and through photography (though no prior photography experience was required), had access to a device that could take photos, and were able to converse with the interviewer in English. Due to the English language requirement, all storytellers had been in the U.S. for several years. Four out of the six storytellers were from African countries, including Cameroon, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Cote D'ivoire (Ivory Coast). The other two storytellers were from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Four identified as men and two as women. The backgrounds of the storytellers were intentionally diverse in order to encompass a broad range of experiences.

Table 1

Storyteller Pseudonyms and Key Themes

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Key Themes
Storyteller A	Afghanistan	Relocation, Belonging, Nature
Storyteller B	Myanmar	Identity, Community, Nature
Storyteller C	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Hard work, Resilience, Helping Others
Storyteller D	Ethiopia	Humanity, Unity, Helping Others
Storyteller E	Cote D'ivoire	Food, Culture, Country of Origin
Storyteller F	Cameroon	Community, Belonging, Nature

Note. Henceforth storytellers will be referred to by their pseudonyms.

Methods for Data Collection

This inquiry adapted the photovoice methodology created by Wang & Burris (1997) incorporating improvements made by Prins (2010), Bell (2015), Vinyeta (2013), and García (2022). Each storyteller participated in two one-hour sessions, either in person or virtually. Sessions were one-on-one due to the logistical challenges of coordinating group meetings, transcribing group discussions. In the first session, storytellers were briefed on project details and trained in photography basics. Although it was not required, every storyteller shared a little about their background as it related to the project. This meeting was not recorded, but notes and reflections were documented after the meeting. A second session took place two to five weeks after the first. Between sessions, storytellers took or compiled up to eleven photos to create a photo story on a topic of their choosing. In one case, a storyteller's computer broke and their photos were lost. That storyteller took replacement photos after the second session to match his story. The second session was a sense-making activity where storytellers told the stories behind the photos and answered follow-up questions. These stories were recorded and transcribed. Printed copies of their photos and up to \$50 in gift cards were made available as compensation.

Frameworks for Interpretation

Analysis included both notes from the first meeting and story transcripts. Originally documents were going to be coded based on codes from the literature review, but there was little to no overlap between the codes used in studies on immigration media coverage and storyteller's narratives. Instead, Connelly & Clandinin's (2006) narrative analysis framework was used as a starting point for coding. This framework views stories through the lens of three commonplaces: temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Temporality refers to

understanding that persons and events are not fixed, but rather in a constant state of temporal transition (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Sociality explains the social context of stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). These can be micro-level personal contexts: feelings, dreams, hopes, values, and macro-level social contexts: institutions, cultural norms, and political structures (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Place ties stories to concrete locations to account for how physical spaces influence stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

With the narrative analysis framework in mind, documents were coded in two steps. First, documents were open coded for commonplaces that emerged in ideally all but at least a majority of stories. Twenty codes emerged, the majority of which were related to sociality. Next all codes and quotes were reviewed holistically and focused into the seven most universal themes: Oregon, home countries, multiculturalism, hardships and challenges, resilience, and helping others. Documents were then focused coded for those themes.

Table 2

Code Definitions and Commonplaces

Codes	Commonplace	Definitions
		Open Code
Barriers	Sociality	Obstacles storytellers face.
Belonging	Sociality	Positive connections to a place or people.
Comparison	Sociality	Comparing aspects of the U.S. to those of another country, generally their country of origin.
Culture	Sociality	Expression of national and ethnic identities.
Food	Sociality	Culturally specific items for eating or drinking.
Future	Temporality	Things that are ongoing, might happen, or will occur after the interview.
Location	Place	Place where some event occurred.

Multiculturalism	Sociality	Any experience involving two or more cultures including cultural fusion.
Nature	Place	All the animals, plants, and organisms, geological features that are not made by people.
Negative Emotions	Sociality	Feelings with negative denotations.
Past	Temporality	Things that occurred before the time of the interview.
Positive Emotions	Sociality	Feelings with positive connotations.
Present	Temporality	Things that are ongoing or occurred during the interview.
Recreation	Sociality	How people spend free time.
Relationships	Sociality	Interactions and connections between storytellers and other humans or animals.
Relocation	Place	Significant semi-permanent movement from one place to another.
Resilience	Sociality	Ways of overcoming or managing adversity.
Support	Sociality	Expressions of altruism or receiving help from others.
Work	Sociality	Labor done for money or education.
Focused Code		
Hardships and Challenges	Sociality	Ongoing or repeated obstacles storytellers faced.
Helping Others	Sociality	Acts of altruism or supporting others.
Home Country	Place	Any mention of places, geographic features, or institutions in their countries of origin.
Multiculturalism	Sociality	Any experience involving two or more cultures including cultural fusion.
Nature	Place	All the animals, plants, and organisms, geological features that are not made by people.
Oregon	Place	Naming a place, geographic feature, or institution in Oregon.
Resilience	Sociality	Ways of overcoming or managing adversity.

Author's Positionality

I acknowledge my positionality, as an AFAB (assigned female at birth), queer, gender-queer second generation American. One of my parents is a 1.5 generation American from the Republic of Korea and the other is a 6th generation American from France. I did not grow up in primarily immigrant communities and am still learning how my lived experiences as a second generation American intersect with these communities. Having started working with immigrants, refugees, and asylees only a year ago, I am still in the early stages of understanding of both immigration systems and the lived experiences these communities. All these positionalities shaped my inquiry process and insights and so I present these results as just one of many possible interpretations.

Insights

Storytellers shared photo stories that spanned a breadth of topics. Three storytellers told the story of their journeys. Storyteller A's story, *My Life Through the Language of Photos*, starts in his home village in the mountains of Afghanistan, moves to Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, and ends in Oregon where he lives now. Storyteller B's story, *Pink Bubble Gum Lush Adventure* follows a refugee (she/they) from the Zoomi ethnic group in Myanmar. Their story starts with a metaphor comparing immigrants to bees, moves to Seattle, then highlights meaningful moments and landmarks in Oregon before ending in Ecuador where they were inspired to reclaim their heritage. The final story of a journey is from Storyteller C. Titled *My Journey to Unknown*, his story starts with his flights from Nairobi, Kenya to Dublin, Ireland, Los Angeles, and Portland. He then shares about taking English and Economics classes and landing his first job at a bank and ends with him quitting and starting his own organization. The photo stories that did not center the storyteller's journey range in topics including celebrations, food, and thank you cards. In *Mosaic*

of Africa, the story told by Storyteller D depicts his nonprofit's African heritage and Black History Month event. In *West African Food and Ingredients*, Storyteller E shares about culturally significant food from Cote D'ivoire (Ivory Coast). In *My Love for Oregon*, Storyteller F tells a different story with each photo including anecdotes about her love for papayas, why she calls carrots "American Cola," and multicultural friendships. The variety of these photo stories is a testament to the diversity of experiences across refugee and asylee communities, yet commonalities emerged. While storytellers did mention hardships and challenges, stories overwhelmingly focused on positive and day-to-day experiences implying that storytellers wanted to share more about the positives of their lives than the negatives. Additionally, seven common themes arose related to the phenomena of interest: Oregon, home countries, nature, hardships and challenges, resilience, multiculturalism, helping others, and nature. These themes, present in all or a majority of the stories, provide insight into the shared experiences of the diverse refugee and asylee storytellers.

Oregon

All stories were intertwined with elements of their local Oregon community. For some storytellers, that manifested as aspects of their Oregon life that they appreciated. For instance, they valued having access to local libraries and all the resources they made available, as well as being able to ride public transportation without being late to work. For all storytellers however, Oregon was embedded in their stories through the specific cities, landmarks, or institutions that they felt personal and positive connections to. Places storytellers mentioned included: Beaverton, Bend, Eugene, Portland, Salem, Oregon City, Lincoln City, Milwaukie, Clackamas, Gresham, Mt. Tabor, the Oregon Coast, Multnomah Falls, Crown Point, Mount Hood, Bonneville Dam, the Portland Airport, Portland Community College, Portland State University, and the University of

Oregon. Some of these locations were named because of the memories storytellers made there. For example, Storyteller A describe places in his photos as, “wonderful reminders... of the past.” Other locations were significant because they were places storytellers found a sense of belonging. Storyteller F referred to the PDX airport carpet as a “reminder that I'm home.” Other places still were where storytellers experienced personal development or where they made positive impact. Storyteller C referred to bank he worked at saying, “I grew there,” and, “There used to be some French speakers who came ... Some of them they just, used to come because of me.” Some places represented all the above. Storyteller B shared, “At Mt. Tabor I did so much work and I like we built fences. I made a trail there...so whenever I go, I can like, “That's the trail I made,”... to see the work that I did made me feel belong...[and] fulfills that space in my heart.” The way this storyteller connected to Mt. Tabor is representative of not only to how Oregon shaped their experiences, but also how they, and all the storytellers have shaped and continue to shape Oregon through their own actions and experiences.

Home Countries

In four out of the six stories, storytellers highlighted the positive elements of their home countries and cultures. Topics under this theme encompassed aspects of everyday life, foods, celebrations, and landmarks. For example, Storyteller E shared about the ocean, street food, and the church that is the world's largest located in Cote d'ivoire (Ivory Coast) and Storyteller A shared about the mundane joys of his home village including chasing animals around with his family. These stories highlighted the meaningful connections and memories storytellers associated with their countries of origin.

Storytellers elaborated on how these and other elements of their home countries shaped their lives today. Storyteller E explained:

Cause I was born close, you know, near the ocean my whole life, so I used to seafood. Anything in the sea, I love it. I eat it a lot. That's why one, we used to go... and eat the buffet, some kind of big buffet but it's all seafood. When I go in there, I just oh I feel like, I'm in heaven because I eat to the fullest.

Similarly, Storyteller F shared about how growing up “cultivating” her own food shaped her love of “seeing what earth can produce,” and “taking care of nature as well.” Storyteller A shared that because he grew in the mountains his “favorite places are mountains.” These quotes demonstrate the significant influence of storytellers' countries of origin on their past and present lives.

Storytellers also highlighted differences between their countries of origin and the US. For example, Storyteller F explained how life in her village was “more inclusive of the whole community.” She provided the example of how in her village “there [was] no invitation-only stuff.” Likewise, Storyteller A noted geographic differences. He explained that when he first came to the U.S. he “live[d] on a small island called Martha’s Vineyard surrounded by oceans... at the beginning I was a big fan of water. And then at some point you get kinda... bored you want it to be in the mountains... where I grew up.” These quotes invoke a sense of nostalgia for meaningful elements of their home countries. Storytellers navigated this sentiment by finding similar elements in Oregon. For instance, Storyteller B talked about how she connects with her home country through nature. She stated:

I was born in a house in the mountains and so I think that is like one of something I'm really, really like passionate about being a part of nature and going back to my roots, despite it being thousands and thousands of miles where I'm from. I can still connect into what this soil, right? Because at the end of the day, it's all connected.

These quotes show how storytellers find ways to connect back to their home countries by finding pieces of the U.S. that remind them of where they were born or how they grew up. Through these connections storytellers transcend place and intertwine pieces of their home cultures within the geography and culture of Oregon.

Multiculturalism

All storytellers expressed positive sentiments regarding multicultural environments. For instance, Storyteller D titled his photo story “Mosaic of Africa,” and Storyteller F dedicated a photo to highlighting the happiness she associates with building multicultural communities. She explained, “I find joy in connecting with different people and building a community where my normal community doesn't exist.” She continued, “And so I love when my kids are building their community that is inclusive of people that look different from them.” These sentiments are a testament to the value and positivity she and other storytellers saw in multiculturalism.

However, while storytellers believed multiculturalism was important; they also shared that it often takes work. Storyteller C explained that because of his English classes, “I met a friend from all over the world, we have our own, it was a class of over 25 people. We had like 20 nationalities which was quite strange.” The use of the word strange implies that Storyteller C had to adapt to the multicultural environment, but his mention of friendship demonstrates he did so successfully. This storyteller also shared how his non-English language skills helped him build cross-cultural connections. He shared, “there used to be some French speakers who came to the bank. So, I built the relationship with them... so from Belgium, from Canada.” These quotes demonstrate how storytellers were able to leverage their unique skills to bridge cultural differences. Likewise, Storyteller D shared that there are many tensions between different African communities he had to learn to navigate. He shared how he inspires cross-cultural collaboration,

stating, “it's Africa you know, unity, mostly we like to play, Bob Marley you know “Africa Unite,” you know, and “One Love” and those kind of things... telling a message, of collaboration, partnership, unity coming together as one... we can achieve great things. These quotes represent how these storytellers believe that bridging cultural differences may not be easy, but it is worth it.

Living in multicultural environments also enabled storytellers to create new experiences and expressions of their identities at the intersection of their culture and American culture. For example, Storyteller F started calling carrots “American cola” due to the similar sounds they make when they are being chewed and Storyteller B explained how being a part of many different cultures influenced their pronouns, they shared:

I use they/them pronouns. I use she, but I want to use they pronouns because it's like, I don't know, I feel like she is not enough. I feel like she's just one singular person. I was like, I'm so many like, you know, it's just so many different sides of me that I think could be really, they is more of a better representation of that.

This quote represents how this storyteller sees themselves as not only the sum of two cultures, but a unique individual created by the intersection of many different cultural identities. This experience applies to other storytellers as well. As multicultural individuals, their stories and lives unify people and culture in their own unique and generative ways.

Hardships and Challenges

While storytellers shared many positive experiences, they also shared hardships present in their daily lives. For example, multiple storytellers mentioned financial hardships. Storyteller E explained that refugees are not allowed to work in the U.S. until they are granted legal worker authorization; a process which can take months. Once granted authorization, they are expected to not only pay for their everyday expenses, but also pay back all the money the government spent

on them prior including their plane ticket to the US. Compounding financial hardship, two storytellers also noted how expensive cultural foods are in the US. Storyteller F shared, “I can afford it [papaya] once a month, but not more than that because it's too expensive. So I just took a picture of it. I can have in my home and think about the papaya.” Because their foods have to be imported, they cost more, but storytellers buy them anyway because culture, including food, is not optional. Still these stories illustrate how their identities as refugees and asylees create additional financial hurdles.

In addition to the financial obstacles, all storytellers also expressed some difficulty acclimating to U.S. culture in general. As Storyteller A explained, “I had to start from nothing. Well, I could speak English, but there was a lot needed to be done in order to...thrive or integrate into the community. I didn't know much of it. I don't know much about the culture, traditions and everything else.” Through this quote, he emphasized the challenges of adapting to a new country, especially with little background or preparation. While refugees do receive orientations to U.S. culture, multiple storytellers also expressed that these trainings did not fully prepare them to navigate life in the U.S.—especially in regard to navigating acts of discrimination which four out of six storytellers mentioned experiencing. Examples storytellers named included being called slurs or being stopped by airport security when dressed in cultural attire. For the storytellers, these struggles with manifestations of xenophobia and racism continued to persist even after they adapted to other aspects of U.S. culture.

The most common ongoing hardships rooted in xenophobia and racism revolved around perceptions of language—this hardship was mentioned in all but one story. Every storyteller spoke multiple languages—one storyteller spoke five. However, several storytellers expressed frustrations that many didn't accommodate the difficulty of operating in their non-native language

and that their intelligence was often judged on their ability to speak English. Storyteller C explained:

Language is a tool of communication. If somebody cannot speak English, doesn't mean is idiot. I made some doctors from China, they get treated like illiterate. I get a good doctors.... even the other day I receive a college professor who has the PhD from one respected university. But...they get treated like illiterate. So don't measure... language as the measurement of intelligence... No, it is totally wrong, because if you go to another country who doesn't speak English, you will look like an idiot too.

His quote highlights why the equivocation of language skill and intelligence is not only false, but harmful because it negates the very real skills and expertise storytellers bring.

In addition to judgments associated with language ability, storytellers recounted other forms of hurtful judgements about differences rooted in racism and xenophobia. The most prevalent of which were around food. Storyteller E explained:

“[We] eat chicken feet, chicken heart, some of the things that people think is taboo, but it's one of the best food that we eat a lot. Like a lot of people will be surprised if they saw chicken feet “How do you eat it?” “That look nasty” “That look gross.” But those are the healthy food we eat.

His use of the word “taboo” highlights this storyteller's observation that their food is not accepted by the dominant culture. But his explanation of the food’s nutritional benefits emphasizes that lack of acceptance does not equate to inferior quality. Storyteller F echoed a similar sentiment stating:

It could be not normal for a U.S. child that is not from African background, but just because it doesn't look common to someone, it doesn't also mean it is not the right thing for this person. So discouraging making fun of other children food, it's not good.

In addition to reinforcing the need to unlearn the association of “different” or “unfamiliar” with “bad,” this quote also alludes to another challenge: teaching children how to navigate the same hardships associated with their own refugee or asylee identities.

Three storytellers addressed the challenges of raising kids or being raised as a kid in a country where the culture differs from that of the parents. They struggled with teaching children to navigate cultural differences and judgments from those outside their ethnic communities. For example, Storyteller F shared how her children’s lunches were made fun of at school. However, children struggled not only with judgments from those outside their community but also with judgments from their ethnic community. Storyteller B explains:

Throughout my high school and grade school like I just didn't fit in and I didn't fit in my community. I was just like an oddball, like I love dyeing my hair. I love putting so much makeup on. And at that time they're like my community was so very conservative...and, lot of the girls in that community called me whitewashed and I was like, “Wow, like this really, really hurts.”

These examples emphasize the unique challenges refugee and asylee children face. Not only do they encounter judgements from outside their ethnic community, but they also face judgments from within their own ethnic communities for deviating from cultural norms as they grow up in a different culture. The term “whitewashed” epitomizes how Storyteller B’s ethnic community perceived these differences as negative and her reaction showed how these judgements were harmful. Overall, storytellers’ narratives highlighted how their hardships and challenges stemmed not only from systemic shortcomings, but also individual interactions from people both within and outside their ethnic communities. Therefore, ameliorating these challenges requires not only changing the system but also the ways we interact with each other in our daily lives.

Resilience

While many of the aforementioned hardships persist, all storytellers had their own methods of managing or overcoming them. Common sources of strength and support included community, culture, and nature. For example, Storyteller D shared how the Black friends he made in Massachusetts taught him how to navigate life in the U.S. Black man. Similarly, Storyteller B explained how they received the validation they needed from their partner, stating, “He is the only one that in my whole life that has truly seen me for who I am and have accepted me.” Storyteller E emphasized “culture and faith” as his sources of strength and Storyteller F identified friends as a vital source of support. She also shared how nature helps her through times of difficulty:

One of the things I loved was the hummingbirds. Like sometimes I'll be sad and missing my family and I just want to go stay outside in the garden... And I'm working and then I'll hear this very gentle sound. And I look and it's the hummingbird. I enjoyed it so much. It was like my reminder of love... beyond what I'm facing.

Storyteller F was not alone in finding peace in nature; this theme appeared in three stories. Storyteller A described the ocean's calming effect, saying, “the song... the sound of the ocean the water, the waves, the calmness there portray a whole story of a different feeling: a relief.” Storyteller B echoed these feelings, explaining how being in nature supported their mental health. These sentiments demonstrate how connection was major source of strength for storytellers. Connections could be with nature, community, culture, or many other things, but it was these connections helped many storytellers maintain resilience in the face of adversity.

Storyteller C exemplified another resilience strategy: his perspective on challenges. He didn't view them as a negative. When discussing a difficult supervisor, he shared, “My father used to coach me and say, ‘If you avoid challenge, you avoiding growth.’ So, don't avoid challenge.

Embrace them and love them. So, the guy [my supervisor]—I thank him because the way he put me pressure, the more I wanted to learn.” By viewing hardship as an opportunity for growth, he reframed challenges to be positive. He further explains that other immigrants and refugees can adopt the same mindset, stating:

I want... the immigrant and refugees to not take negative experience to hold them against anybody or any company. Turn it around, use it for your own benefit. Use that moment to learn, because if you hold that, you are the one who is being hurt.... Embrace every moment. Use it to learn. You will grow more and you will be proud of yourself.

His quote serves to empower immigrant and refugee communities to cultivate resilience especially as they face unjust challenges. He demonstrated a desire to create an even more resilient community. A vision which all storytellers supported by sharing their own resilience-building strategies.

Helping Others

Every storyteller expressed a desire to “liv[e] in a way that leaves a positive impact,” as Storyteller F articulated. Multiple storytellers cited wanting to help others as a reason for participating in this project. However, each storytellers actualized their dedication in different ways including serving, celebrating, or grieving with others, often in ways that were rooted in culture. For example, Storyteller E:

We have somebody who bereaved, in our community. And what we do is tradition with our community, we come together and cook. Make care that food for that person who bereaved family. And then we collect money. Whatever you can give, but we set a certain number... and give it to that family that bereaved. So we have, we call it the feast time.

Thirty days is set... and all of that to complete that thirty days we still go there and so, you know... sit with the family and speak to them.

For this storyteller, this form of support is embedded in his culture. However, like many other storytellers, many of the ways he helped others were less directly linked to cultural practices. For instance, he also serves as a mentor and a grant writer for a youth camp. A quote that epitomizes the selflessness of all the storytellers came from Storyteller C. He shared:

I want to be a person who can help someone. That's it. I get satisfied. I get a joy when somebody can be, I can put smile on somebody's face, when somebody came to my office and I helped them to get something to eat to, I help them to register the kid to school. I wanna be more helpful. Not only just limited resources, but I want to see many people get helped through my experience or my hands... I don't wanna be a millionaire, be a big business and just me, my wife and my kids. I want to be a person with interest who will other people will benefit whether financially or socially or emotionally.

This quote reflects how these storytellers want to help others in any way that they can. In pursuit of this goal, several have dedicated their careers to being the support they needed when they first arrived, while others see their contributions manifest in other ways. Storyteller B used the metaphor of a bee to explain how they saw themselves helping others. They shared:

Bees going everywhere... I'm like that's my story... I had to go somewhere else I had to leave and, and I really like the idea of the pollination the enrichment of anywhere because bees do! Bees don't have a destination where they pollinate, right? This is not exactly, "This is my area, this is my trip." No, they go everywhere, and they pollinate and they make flowers bloom. They make any type of plant that they're supposed to bloom bloom and give us all the nutrients that we need, and I really really like that analogy into humans.

This metaphor articulates not only the inherent value the storyteller sees herself bringing to her community, but also how individuals from all backgrounds existing and working together can make their community a better place. Storyteller D reinforced this sentiment when he explained,

I'm Ethiopian, he's Somali... he's from there, but you see all of us we sit together. You know, a Somali can come in. I may not know his culture, he's East African, we are neighbors, but he is there, so any problems I can solve, he can ask me, I will solve. If I can't, he will (gestures to coworker), if he can't he will (gestures to other coworker). Supporting one another.

Both quotes are a testament to how when people come together from many different places to support one another any problem can be solved. Storyteller D also explains, "One hand cannot wash itself, two hands wash each other and the face." Storytellers alone can do many things, but because they work to support one another, they can do so much more.

Nature

Nature was a recurring theme in all but one of the stories. Storytellers expressed their connection to nature by associating it with positive emotions such as "peace," "relief," and "calmness." But nature's prevalence wasn't just because it evoked positive emotions, it was as inextricable from stories as it was intertwined with storytellers' culture, recreation, feelings of belongingness, medicine, and food. For example, when describing an important food in Storyteller E described not only the food itself but its role in nature. He explained:

Cassava is a very essential, traditional food in the continent of Africa. It is used for hundreds of millions of years and today it does that. So that one tree, not just, the root, but the leaves also provide, animals, eat the leaves. Humans eat the leaves and the roots. Animals eat the leaves and the roots itself.

By illustrating the important role cassava plays not only for them, as a part of their diet and traditions, but also casavas' importance in the broader ecosystem, the storyteller represents the interconnectedness of food, place, culture, and nature.

Nature was even a common thread in how participants talked about other themes. Nature was described as a representation of and way for storytellers to reconnect with their home country. For example, Storyteller A took a photos on a hike in Bend because the nature resembled his home village. Additionally, nature was used as a metaphor to understand their own experience and a way for them to support others and create a better world. Examples of this include the previously mentioned bee metaphor and Storyteller F's story from when they went back to visit Cameroon:

I was a tree planter... before I came to the US. I led youth programs in summer to plant trees.... A few months ago, I was in Cameroon, some of the youth in the village came and said, "Hey, we have to show you something." And so, I went with them and they're like, "Look at the trees. These are trees that you helped us plant." And I was speechless. I had goosebumps because I'm like, the trees are three times bigger than me. But they're providing shade. They're providing beauty. They are enjoyed by the community. That is what life is about. Is not just, "What do I gain from the moment? What am I gaining?" No, it's like, "What am I sewing that will last?" And so to me, the youth, when they insisted, "Please, we wanted to talk to you," and I followed them and they're like, "This is you in our community. You're still here." I couldn't talk. And I felt, "Wow, this is what life is." Living in a way that leaves a positive impact. Not for me, but for the betterment of others around you. And, yeah, so that's what my connection to nature is.

For this storyteller, nature holds her memory and is an extension of her and her impact on the world. Nature showed her that the good she sews continues to grow and evolve even in her absence.

Nature was similar for all storytellers who reference it. It was so much more than a plant, a river, or a mountain. It was a source of comfort, wisdom, and grounding that transcends place and time.

Recommendations

Many of the hardships community members mentioned were rooted in their day-to-day interaction with others, rather than broader systems. That does not mean that broader systems do not inform these interactions, nor does it mean that our immigration system does not need to be reformed—they do, and it does. But many of the challenges storytellers named cannot be addressed at the systemic level alone. Rather, both individuals and systems need to change. For these reasons, the first two recommendations can be applied to broader institutions but are designed to be actionable at the individual level. These recommendations, adapt to similarity and difference and lead with curiosity rather than judgment, originate from the storytellers themselves and are focused on recognizing and interrupting subconscious associations created by racism and xenophobia. The last recommendation: center immigrants, refugees and asylees, was rooted in my own insights within this project. This recommendation was designed to help institutions reflect on their own processes and adapt them to incorporate the insights of current and future storytellers.

Adapt to Similarity and Difference

Four out of the six storytellers spoke on the importance of recognizing that humanity transcends borders. Storyteller D shared, “We all have the same wants. The same needs. The same thing, it doesn't matter, color, [or] religion.” This quote points to the importance of acknowledging shared experiences. He then suggests ways to lean into these similarities to create a better community, continuing:

We may disagree. But let's work together on what we agree on. Respecting one another is my principle. So humanity supersedes all duty. I mean, I may disagree with you, that's fine. You know, we don't have to fight about it. There are more things we can do. To make a quality of life better for all mankind.

Through these quotes, he empowers us to lean into our similarities and work together to create a better community.

But it's not enough to see our similarities, we must also honor our differences. To this point, Storyteller F shared:

We need to make room for others that are different, that look different from us. Our differences is what makes the society beautiful. And embracing those differences, living, embracing your identity with authenticity and the living in ways that you embrace others—you welcome the human that's next to you—is what causes and creates a more welcoming and healthy society.

Her quote illustrates how she believes that accommodating and celebrating difference is essential to a healthy society. Instead of judging differences, finding ways to make space for and celebrate them, will allow us to create a more inclusive, multicultural society. Creating this type of society requires not only recognizing that there is more than one right way to do something, but also accommodating those multiple approaches. Storyteller F provides an example of how this might work in practice.

Allow those from a different background [to] express their gratitude to you in ways that matter to them as well. It could be them bringing a flower to your door. It could be them celebrating you in public, talking about you saying special things about what you do. That is their way of saying thank you. Our ways of showing gratitude may not always be the

same. Make room to acknowledge the gratitude that different people express and... bring beauty in our society to know, that's all different ways to express gratitude.

Individuals and institutions should acknowledge and adapt to similarity and difference by honoring and supporting multiple ways of doing things. This will not only support storytellers but create new opportunities for individuals and the broader community.

Lead with Curiosity not Judgment

The recommendation to lead with curiosity not judgment comes from Storyteller F. She stated, "My takeaway for people is to encourage curiosity and to not be quick to judging what you perceive as not normal." She highlights that judgmental comments around difference come from mental shortcuts that rely on false equivalencies such as the equivalence of "different" and "bad." Multiple storytellers encourage people to notice and interrupt this pattern of thinking. For example, Storyteller C stated, "Do not think because someone didn't speak good English like you is an idiot or stupid. Don't measure intelligence with the language." Through this quote the storyteller asked us to question the connection of language ability and intelligence. Another example named by both Storytellers E and F were people referring to unknown foods as "gross," or "bad." These comments come from a perspective that equates unfamiliarity or difference with negativity, but this way of thinking can be changed. Storyteller E provides an alternative: "I want when folks see the pictures. They should say "Wow, what kind of food is that?" Curiosity, not judgment, turns difference and unfamiliarity from something negative into an opportunity to learn and grow as a person, community, and society. It allows everyone to better understand our similarities and differences. Institutions and individuals should therefore use this framework foster relationships across difference and cultivate a multicultural community.

Center Immigrants, Refugees and Asylees

Centering this project around stories storytellers wanted to share highlighted the large discrepancies between and storytellers' narratives and media coverage. The most common themes of media coverage: the border, victimhood, struggle, and sacrifice, were not central themes of these storytellers' stories—if mentioned at all. While that does not necessary mean that media coverage is inaccurate, it does mean it is incomplete; there are many important nuances and experiences beyond those in the media. These discrepancies included elements that these storytellers wanted to highlight: their joy, resilience, and connection to nature. Therefore, any decision, personal or political, informed solely by the dominant narrative around immigration would lack critical nuances and perspectives. Thus, effective decision-making around immigration requires centering immigrants, refugees, and asylees in the decision-making process.

While centering immigrants, refugees, and asylees requires that policy actors better listen to their voices, listening is not enough. To truly center these communities, policy actors must also trust the storytellers' experience and expertise by acting on the insights they provide and incorporating them into policy change. Additionally, because immigrant, refugee, and asylee experiences are diverse and ever-evolving, storytelling efforts cannot be one-and-done; they must be continuous in order to adapt to these ever-changing communities.

Concluding Perspectives

Reflections on Methodology

This project revealed many pros and cons of the photovoice methodology. The pros mainly stemmed from the visual elements it added to the narratives, which allowed for stories to not just be heard, but also seen. The methodology, being relatively novel, also encouraged both storytellers

and viewers to see their communities in a new light. Photography gave storytellers, even those who had previously participated in storytelling projects, a new way to share their experiences. They had to figure out how to represent elements of their past, present, and future through photos of their physical surroundings. Additionally, it is the hope, that photo stories will enable viewers to gain new perspectives as they view familiar objects and places through the eyes of the storytellers. Another benefit of this methodology was its relative accessibility. The photographic elements offered a means of engagement with the project for those whom language, including jargon, may be a barrier. Overall, the photovoice methodology increased the depth of understanding of stories.

The cons of the methodology however, generally stemmed from the logistical challenges associated with it. One significant challenge was protecting storyteller confidentiality, as it limited which photos could be shown and therefore what stories are told. In this project, four photos had to be removed because they were too identifying. Additionally, Storyteller E changed his story because, while he was comfortable sharing his original story with the public, he was not comfortable sharing the associated photos. Photography also introduced additional opportunities for technical issues. Specifically, during this project, Storyteller C lost all his original photos because his computer broke. Finally, this methodology also required a greater time commitment from both the researcher and the participants compared to an interview project, as tasking participants with taking photos, requires an additional initial training meeting and a window for participants to take said photos. Overall, the photovoice methodology opened different avenues for understanding immigrant, refugee, and asylee stories, but it also presented additional logistical challenges. In the context of this project, the visual and interactive aspects made it uniquely

valuable, but the trade-offs may differ for a project on a different topic with a different purpose. There is no one right way to elevate a story, just as there is no one right way to tell one.

Final Perspectives

Telling stories are one way we learn how we know who we are. They enable us to explore and bridge differences and deepen our understanding of each other and the world. This project invited six Oregon refugees and asylee storytellers to highlight their own experiences through photo stories. These stories revealed significant disparities between them and mainstream media coverage. Storyteller narratives did not revolve around sensational events; instead, they were selected based on their potential to connect different cultural backgrounds, support other immigrants, refugees, and asylees, or because of their personal significance. Topics ranged from journeys and cultural differences to food and celebrations with common themes including significant places in Oregon, aspects of their home countries and cultures, connections to nature, and multiculturalism. These stories highlighted their successes, joys, and communities of mutual support rather than borders, suffering, or sacrifices. While they shared the hardships and challenges, they also emphasized resilience. Overall, storytellers not only introduced many nuances and complexities, but also localized global experiences within our Oregon community.

However, the stories from this project reflect only the perspectives of six storytellers at one moment in time, stories which were further limited by the project medium of photography. Given there is no universal immigrant, refugee, or asylee experience, and each individual's story is ever evolving, there are countless immigrant, refugee, and asylees stories to be told. But, by continuing to center their voices and acting upon their recommendations—to honor similarity and difference and lead with curiosity and not judgment—we as individuals and institutions, can move towards a

more inclusive multicultural society. Storytellers will bring the world to us, but it's our collective responsibility to weave these narratives into the fabric of our community and into our daily lives.

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