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Introduction

Mitra Shavarini

We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.

— Ben Sweetland

Each year, six Brandeis University Sorensen Fellows set off into the world for a summer internship that they hope will make an impact in the communities in which they immerse themselves. This year, our Sorensen Fellows traveled to Rwanda, Swaziland, Northern Ireland, Palestinian Territories and Tanzania with precisely that charge: Go into the world to make a difference. Ostensibly, they venture to the communities they want to serve with passion and dedication, to make an impact. Yet they come back to find that it is they who have been impacted. Indeed, Sweetland’s quote resonates fully with their experience: “We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.”

This anthology you hold in your hand speaks to the brightening of those “paths” — a compilation that reveals the duality that is nurtured through the Sorensen Fellowship.

The Sorensen Fellowship is multi-pronged academic and experiential experience. The Fellows are first vetted through a competitive application process. Once selected, the Fellows are required to take a spring semester course that intellectually prepares them for their summer field project. In addition to this course, the Fellows participate in a spring semester workshop that introduces them to the social science research method of “Portraiture.” In this training, they learn about gathering data (including observations, interviews and journal writing), as well as data analysis (by way of finding themes).

They come to understand the nuances of Portraiture and how it differs from other research methodologies, the importance of context in our understanding of social phenomena, and how a context’s texture — sound, smell, sight and even taste — is an essential part of human behavior and of understanding. They also learn that Portraiture broadens the audience of social science beyond academic walls by making it accessible and engaging.

Then comes summer and they depart to the far corners of the globe to make a difference. They stay in close communication with the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life and with each other, sharing stories, probing questions, engaging in one another’s experiences: back and forths that forge a community.

Once back on campus in the fall, the students participate in my writing seminar, which uses Portraiture to digest and report on their experiences. The data analysis and writing they are required to do is rigorous and demanding. Not only do they have to grapple with shaping their own thoughts, they also have to help shape and edit the writing of their peers. Each of us, including myself, is invested in the success of the other. We work on each others’ papers as if they were our own. It is a communal effort fostered by encouragement and accountability, support and harsh criticism, intimacy and frankness.

Now that I have told you all of this, let me introduce to you this year’s dynamic group of Sorensen Fellows:

Rachael Koehler ’13, from Pennsauken, New Jersey, is double majoring in Psychology and Religious Coexistence. She is a community advisor for first year residents, an undergraduate department representative for Religious Studies, and chair for Relay for Life, raising funds for the American Cancer Society. She did her Sorensen Fellowship internship with Beyond Skin in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which works to promote racial and religious coexistence through multicultural arts and
media. She planned her own coexistence festival and brought people of different religions together in dialogue by producing a religious understanding radio show.

Mangaliso Mohammed ’13, from Mbabane, Swaziland, is majoring in Environmental Studies and Economics with a minor in Legal Studies. Having lived in a developing country for a significant part of his life, Mangaliso is particularly interested in the sustainable development of informal communities such as slums in the urban areas of his home country. In summer 2011 he worked as an intern for the Municipal Council of Mbabane, focusing on waste management and pollution control in the urban areas surrounding the country’s capital. For his Sorensen Fellowship internship, also with the Municipal Council of Mbabane, Mangaliso worked on finding suitable renewable energy sources for low-income households to alleviate poverty as well as reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS in urban areas.

Karia Sekumbo ’14, is majoring in Economics and International and Global Studies with a minor in Legal Studies. Although he is originally from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, he has lived in several different countries including Botswana, Swaziland, Uganda and now the United States. He is the current president of the Brandeis International Journal, a campus publication dedicated to discussing international relations and global affairs. He was an intern with Opportunity International, a microfinance organization in Tanzania, where he gained a more concrete understanding of the workings of microfinance and its important role in global poverty alleviation and the reduction of gender inequality in communities.

Robyn Spector ’13 is majoring in Business and American Studies, with a minor in Journalism. Elected photography editor for the student newspaper The Justice in her first year at Brandeis, Robyn now serves as an associate editor on the newspaper’s executive board. In addition, she is an undergraduate department representative for Journalism, and has photographed campus events for the Office of Admissions, the Office of the Arts, and the Ethics Center. Born and raised in New York City, she has studied at the International Center for Photography and the Maine Media Workshops, and has been featured in National Geographic and the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan’s exhibition “ImagiNation: Young Photographers Engage the World.” For her Sorensen internship, Robyn photographed and reported at The New Times, the central English-language newspaper in Kigali, Rwanda. Through the lens of a photojournalist, she examined journalism ethics in a developing country and learned about the roots and intricacies of Rwanda’s history that are ingrained in its society today.

Andrea Verdeja ’14 was born in Japan to Cuban and Spanish parents, and raised in the Dominican Republic. She is majoring in Politics and International Relations, with a minor in Peace, Conflict and Coexistence Studies. She is currently the president of the International Club at Brandeis and assistant captain of the sailing team. In summer 2011 she interned at the Jesuit Service for Refugees and Immigrants, working in both the Dominican Republic and in Haiti. She was an advocate for the legal rights of Haitian immigrants and their children, many of whom are arbitrarily being deprived of their legitimate nationality by Dominican government officials. For her Sorensen Fellowship she interned at the Al-Feniq (Phoenix) Center in Bethlehem, a community center in Deheisha refugee camp led by Palestinian refugees working to serve their residents and advocate for their social and political rights.

Our Fellows are supported by the wonderful Ethics Center staff: Barbara Strauss, senior department coordinator; David Weinstein, communications specialist; Marci McPhee, associate director; and Dan Terris, director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. I thank each of them for all they do to make the Fellowship an enriching experience for the students. Without their support this publication would not have been possible.

Finally, a word of thanks to this year’s Fellows. Not only do they light the paths of others, but they’ve lit mine, too.

Mitra K. Shavarini teaches in Peace, Conflict and Coexistence Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at Brandeis.
If you ever get into a conversation with someone while out in Northern Ireland there are certain things you cannot talk about: religion, football and nationality,” Liam, my Irish Catholic colleague says with a serious face. “You don’t live here. You don’t have an opinion. Try not to make eye contact. If someone looks at you or comes toward you, quickly get away.”

Liam’s eyes burn with intensity. His warning hits me like a gust of cool wind. I defensively zip up my jacket. My expectations of peaceful Irish culture are drowned in the rain puddles surrounding me.

More importantly, he adds, don’t talk about The Troubles.

I zip up my jacket a little tighter.

Northern Ireland is considered to be a post-war society. Beginning in 1969 and peaking in the mid-1970s, an ethno-political conflict dubbed as “The Troubles” caused an estimated 3,529 deaths in Northern Ireland. This conflict dates back to the 17th century, when land was confiscated from the native Irishmen by the British. In 1921, during the Irish War of Independence, Northern and Southern Ireland gained their territorial freedom. Declaring themselves as the Republic of Ireland, southern Ireland became dominated by those who identified as Irish and Catholic. These Irish Catholics were opposed to the Irish Catholics in Northern Ireland who called themselves Unionists. Unionists wanted to keep Ireland as one independent nation. However British Protestants held the political power. This group wanted to remain loyal to the Crown and decided to remain a part of the United Kingdom.

It was a dispute that by the late 1960s led to “The Troubles” – a war of nationality, religion, and political beliefs. Remnants of this hostility are visible even today: divided neighborhoods, widespread presence of paramilitaries, and youth violence are a constant reminder of Northern Ireland’s divided past. It is in this context that Liam bids me his warning; he speaks of the tenuous nature of The Troubles’ continuing impact on Northern Ireland.

This past summer I interned at Beyond Skin in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland. Working with students in segregated communities, Beyond Skin aims to foster understanding of and develop appreciation for outside cultures. Through various workshops, this community-building organization brings together not only Protestants and Catholics, but also other cultures, such as Nepal’s. Their workshops are essential to healing. If the next generation continues to be hostile toward the other side, there is fear that another war could break out.

As I helped Beyond Skin conduct its workshops, I grappled with one overarching question: Given the socio-political and religious division that lingers in Northern Ireland, how can one define a national identity? Will these lines of segregation ever allow a cohesive local culture? I am curious and driven to understand how I can define Northern Irish identity.

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To help answer my questions, I explore three general identities present in Belfast, Northern Ireland. There is my housemate, Patrick, whose Irish Catholic identity contrasts with my own Protestant affiliation. Through our exchanges I become curious about how Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland can separate themselves so much, when they are so similar. I then present an example of a mixed marriage: my Protestant boss, James, and his Catholic wife, Sinead. Their marriage reveals hope for a united Northern Ireland through the normalization of mixed marriages and mixed communities. Finally, Gita, a Nepalese immigrant, represents the impact outside cultures have on the people
of Belfast. Collectively, these three stories enable me to explore the possibility of establishing a cohesive national identity in Northern Ireland.

Tension in Northern Ireland

Endless green hills and peaceful farmlands shield visitors from Northern Ireland's bloody past. With roots in the civil rights marches in the late sixties – an attempt to give equality regardless of religion and political affiliation – The Troubles have been a source of bloodshed and shame in Northern Ireland. Residents experienced fighting and hate crimes for three decades. Neighbors turned on each other, killing those who were different, using methods that included bombings, military involvement and street fighting. Citizens, driven by passion, fought to their death to protect their family and their national roots. Both the British and the Irish felt the land was rightfully theirs. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement laid the groundwork for stronger relations between the Irish and British government. This was meant to calm tensions between residents who identified with the “other” side.

I arrived in Northern Ireland expecting to find a country amidst conflict transformation. I wanted to engage in communication and negotiation, both proven and successful approaches in the conflict resolution process. After all, I had learned that by acknowledging cultural differences and engaging in discussions warring factions can arrive to a new place, a shared understanding. What I discovered, however, was that Belfast has not been able to integrate its different cultures. “Certainly, religious difference is bound into divided Belfast, but the religious labels really signify more broadly ramifying ethnic difference, an ethnic difference that has increasingly been sharpened by the addition of opposed nationalisms.” Belfast has been divided based on community demographics since The Troubles, and remains segregated today. Ethnic difference – whether someone identifies as British, Irish, or other – continues to keep Northern Ireland conflicted.

Communities in Belfast are segregated on loosely defined religious labels. North and East Belfast are mainly Protestant communities, poor socioeconomic areas, with 41 percent of residents unemployed. In fact, it is not uncommon for large communities of Protestants to be unemployed, as it is fairly easy for this community to receive welfare benefits. The local government in Belfast is run by a majority of Protestants and falls under British rule. Many Catholics choose not to apply for unemployment stipends out of pride, or are denied based on their religious identity. Therefore, Protestants have less competition, and easier access to government financial services, and don’t feel much pressure to be employed. Opposing the North and East, West Belfast is known for being home to most of the city’s Irish community. Pubs are on every corner, and Republic of Ireland flags hang from shop windows. South Belfast is a mixture of identities from the most segregated communities. Queen’s University is in the South, attracting a young and diverse population. Many refugees and immigrants make their homes in South Belfast.

These separations are apparent through physical walls throughout the city of Belfast, known as “peace walls.” There are Irish or British flags on either side of the walls. Murals supporting soldiers and martyrs for the Ulster Volunteer Force or Irish Republican Army cover every side street. These paramilitary groups were those leading the bloody fighting in The Troubles and represent the extremists for the Loyalists and Nationalists, respectively. These extreme differences in opinions also lead to segregated schooling. Catholics go to private schools while Protestants go to public schools. This separation is due to a desire by the parents for their children to learn a certain history. Public schools, funded by the British government, teach a biased view of the troubles favoring Loyalists, and vice versa.

Each group adheres to its own traditions, music, food, religion, language, sports and national anthems. For example, British would play a version of football that is equivalent to American soccer. The Irish have their own version – Gaelic football. This sport is a mixture of American basketball and soccer. At an Irish pub, there would be not only Gaelic football on television, but a live, traditional folk music group playing all night. A Protestant pub would instead rely on bar conversation to provide the background noise and atmosphere. Differences such as these make each culture unique, but rich.

Through all of the differences, I was still able to find some similarities between these two identities in tension. Differences between Protestants and Catholics are often believed to be truth, based on surface level analysis. However, a closer look may reveal that these two groups are more similar to one another than they may believe.

Religion as Identity

It is my first time in a Catholic mass. Patrick quietly grabs my arm and guides me up to my seat. The eyes of the saints, whose images adorn the walls, seem to fixate on me. Down the pew, two middle-aged women also stare while I self-consciously return to my seat. In a Catholic mass, there are certain prayers that require the congregation to kneel on the bar at their feet. Genuflection is a sign of respect and adoration to God. Apparently, I missed the cue that we were done with the prayer, and am the last to return to sitting upright.
Until I met Patrick, I had planned to stay out of Catholic churches during my stay. Patrick is my 24-year-old housemate in West Belfast. His strong commitment to his Catholic faith led him to his current position as Youth Ministry Coordinator at Clonard Monastery. Clonard Youth Outreach holds sports activities, cleanups, social dances, and field trips in the community to offer a safe place for the youth to connect with each other and learn about having a relationship with God. His Catholic identity is as central to him as my Protestant identity is to me.

Catholic mass procession is unfamiliar to me. I sit, stand, kneel, recite. I go through the motions but there is no meaning or understanding behind them. Patrick does his best to keep me informed of what is going on. Many of the songs and recitations reference the Virgin Mary or other Saints, blasphemy according to my Protestant background. I try to look at the mass through Patrick's perspective. Being Catholic is the identity he was raised with. It is part of what being Irish means to him. Catholics believe that their church is the original church of Christianity. Patrick would see no reason to question the legitimacy of his mass in the same way that I would as an outsider. He is a part of the in-group, in this case Catholics. He is, therefore, defensive of his tradition to any member of the out-group, Protestants. Likewise, Protestants who are observing a Catholic mass are instinctually more defensive of his tradition to any member of the out-group, Protestants. This need for defensive behavior was a constant tension between the two communities I noticed in Belfast.

In the Catholic church I feel as though I don’t belong. Is this how the Irish in British-ruled Northern Ireland feel? When the North and South were split, many Irish communities were forced to be under British rule because of their location. Patrick is from one of these communities. His family maintains that they are Irish and that they live in Ireland. In these areas where pockets of Catholic communities remained, surrounded by Protestants, violence and discrimination prevailed. “It is generally argued not only that Catholics were denied political rights and their ‘fair share’ of government goods and services, but that they suffered from economic discrimination.” Catholics and Protestants in Belfast did not get along or feel they belonged together. They created and maintain segregated schools, shops, pubs, political parties, and even neighborhoods. Walls – as physical barriers – mark this segregation: showing citizens where they can and cannot go safely. Catholics under Protestant rule were at an unfair disadvantage and found it easier to create their own communities than to venture out of their comfort zones. This is why the following week, when Patrick accompanies me to a Protestant service at Fisherwick, he tells the driver to take us to “The Bot,” a club around the corner from the church.

“It may not be safe to have a Catholic taxi service drop us off in front of a Protestant church. And these guys drive me around a lot. If they knew I was going there they may not take me anymore,” Patrick tells me when we arrive to the church. I take note of his emphasis on what his community thinks.

Catholics are very focused on the idea of community. The high population of Catholics in West Belfast and Patrick’s fear of offending the local cab drivers encompass a common group mentality that social relations are extremely important and should be held over individual values. Patrick offered to come to a Protestant service with me, yet his allegiance to his community prevailed over any level of comfort he felt about attending.

Contrary to Patrick’s uncertainty about attending the service, Fisherwick feels like home for me. Familiar songs and prayers frame Protestant services, so even 3,000 miles away I am able to find comfort in a bread and grape juice communion. Glancing at Patrick, I notice his silence and stiff discomfort. We leave the church, and I ask what he thought of the service.

“I was pretty uncomfortable. I tried not to talk too much so that they couldn’t tell from my accent that I was Catholic. They would have picked up that I’m from the country and not Protestant, and I didn’t want them to know I was from County Armagh.” Patrick says in an almost joking matter as a cheek-to-cheek smile spreads across his face. This sticks with me. He was as uncomfortable in the Protestant service as I was in the Catholic service, yet we get along with each other fine.

Religion is arguably one of the most important factors in terms of creating a social identity, however there can be unification even without the common thread of religion.

Some integrative values are necessary in every society, irrespective of its relative stability. No matter how pluralistic a society and how numerous the value systems to which its groups adhere, some core values must exist that demarcate the boundaries of that society and distinguish it from others...Values are by definition nonempirical [sic] statements, but that does not necessarily make them religious.
In Patrick’s case, his Catholic identity makes him the minority, and therefore brings him to conclude that he has nothing in common with the dominant Protestants. However, through our interactions, we notice how our worship services are different, but also learn that the values behind the sermons are in fact complementary. As is the case with many religions, faith is meant to provide followers with a positive moral compass which they can follow. At both Clonard and Fisherwick churches, messages were shared about the importance of kindness to one another and the place of love in the Christian heart. I am able to find more similarities between the faiths than differences. Values such as kindness and love are essential teachings of Christianity. Yet outside the frame of Sunday services, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland seem to have forgotten them in light of The Troubles.

Although contrasts do exist, through the commonalities of the religions there can still be a strong bond and close relationships, as with Patrick and me. Spiritual differences in our identity remained, but did not hinder our ability to share a house or a friendship. Both Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland associate the other side with being the reason for the deaths of The Troubles, and further dissociate from them. However, if they were able to see shared values behind their religion, and discover their similarities in being Christians despite their separate denominations, they may find they have more in common.

Instead, what one finds in Northern Ireland is that religion hinders one’s ability to form friendships, to develop broader bonds and to eventually create a local culture. Due to their associations with the past, religious titles carry negative connotations. However, it is not the religions that make these groups different, it is only their assumed hatred of each other stemming from the past. Through my interactions with Patrick I questioned why these groups are not able to acknowledge how similar they are. In order for commonalities to be discovered between the two, they need to set aside their differences, and focus on the core beliefs that the Northern Irish share. If they continue on as if they have nothing in common and further discriminate against each other, it is uncertain whether there can ever be peace.

**Mixed marriages in a segregated land**

Monday morning in the Beyond Skin office, James, my Protestant boss, is telling me about his weekend with his Catholic wife, Sinead. James is British and Sinead is Irish, but they were both born in Northern Ireland. “She hated it,” James said. “Hid in the back the whole time. And at one point a reporter came over to interview us and she ran off!”

James is describing his weekend during Northern Ireland’s holiday weekend: July 12th. On this day, there is a parade in Belfast, a day commemorated by Protestants since the 18th century. Celebrating the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II in 1690, men of the Orange Order among other Protestant political figures and bands march through the streets in a continuous three-hour parade. Happily drunk, and dressed in the red and blues of the United Kingdom, the British line up in the streets surrounding Belfast’s city hall, cheering their fellow religious comrades – i.e., Protestants – parading before them.

This year, James decided to bring Sinead to see the bands. Identifying as Catholic, she was nervous to be seen. He told me that if Sinead had been recognized on the news at a July 12th parade, many of her friends and family members in West Belfast would shun her for betraying her Catholic roots.

James and Sinead exemplify a mixed marriage in Belfast. Statistics show that by 2009, one in 10 Northern Irish marriages were in fact considered “mixed.” This is a relatively new phenomenon in Northern Ireland, one that only started to occur after the Good Friday Agreement, and one that has been rising ever since. Still, many families do not approve of mixed marriages, or rather one who is considered as the “other.”

**Othering is the social, linguistic, and psychological mechanism that distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them,’ the normal from the deviant. Othering marks and names the others, providing a definition of their otherness, which in turn creates social distance, and marginalises [sic], dis-empowers and excludes.**

Due to the segregation of communities, shops, and jobs, this notion of “othering” is exacerbated in Northern Ireland. In these divided communities, it becomes hard for Protestants and Catholics to meet in a friendly, social setting. James and Sinead met in a conference outside of work and were able to make their relationship work. They have been lucky that their families have accepted their decision to marry. Other couples are forced to keep their relationships secret from their loved ones, and attend support groups such as those of the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association.

This idea of “othering” is the most disheartening to me. Back home at Brandeis University, I am in relationship with someone who is Catholic while I identify as Protestant. To me, Catholic and Protestant are the same religion, just two alternative ways by which to comprehend the same ideologies. During my various conversations with locals in Belfast about my relationship, I found I received many mixed responses. Many told me that it
would not last between us because we were not of the same religion, and that we should try to find someone within our own community. In Northern Ireland, however, religion isn’t the issue — it is used as the cover for two opposing political views. Because of this manipulation of religious identity, a woman from a Protestant community and man from a Catholic community would never have the same opportunity to be together that I have in the United States.

James and Sinead make their relationship work, but it is difficult. They differ on almost every political and social issue. For the holidays they alternate churches, respecting that religion is still a large part of both of their families’ lives. An unresolved issue for them is children; it’s an issue that they’ve deferred for the time being.

Interestingly, mixed marriages are considered to be “mixed” only if they fall along the Protestant and Catholic divide. Marriages between different denominations of Protestants, for example, are not forbidden or taboo. This marriage segregation is considered by some to be the most prominent reason Northern Ireland is still so divided. Couples are from the same community and thus of the same religion. In the case that there is a mixed marriage, it often does not help desegregation, because the husband is forced to cut ties with most of his former relationships. Dissociation from old friends and communities is due to not only the religious statement your faith makes, but also the ethno-political. By converting from Catholicism to Protestantism, one is converting from an Irish Unionist to a British Loyalist.

These fundamental differences which separate Catholics and Protestants make it hard to imagine a unified culture. Sinead and James struggle with making their relationship accepted in their communities.

Sinead’s willingness to see the bands on July 12th, and James’ to spend Christmas at a Catholic mass are incremental steps toward creating peace between their respective religio-political sides. The sacrifices and compromises they make allow for a peaceful household and relationship, even when the two sides do not see eye-to-eye. But it is in the next generation that will ultimately bring true — and perhaps, lasting — change.

Many cultures, one land

James addresses a group of bright-eyed children sitting before him on the floor. “Alright then, would you all like to share a song from your culture with us?”

We are in West Belfast visiting an Irish-speaking summer school. Beyond Skin is holding a Nepalese culture workshop.

At first, the fourth graders are silent, shy it seems. Quick looks are exchanged and elbows nudge each other's sides. One brave boy slowly inches a reticent but proud hand into the air and suggests they sing the national anthem. His teacher shoots him a stern look while uttering something in Irish. Then I notice the dark-haired, freckle-faced teacher and James lock eyes. Her mouth curves into an apologetic smile. From these tacit glances I gather there is tension, something is amiss between their teacher and this boy’s idea of singing the national anthem.

The goal of this workshop is to bring a variety of world cultures to students in Northern Ireland who may never experience them otherwise. On this day their instructor is a Nepalese woman, Gita, who has immigrated to Belfast after marrying a Northern Irish native. So far, she has taught students some Hindi, demonstrated how to make beaded bracelets, and even sang the children a popular Nepali folk song called “Resham Firiri.” She has also set up tents around the room to represent Nepalese huts. She has covered them with hanging tapestries; some to act as walls, others as blankets on the floor for sitting. Vivid and bright colors abound. There is a mock fireplace in the middle of one tent; a picture of Lakshmi, a Hindu goddess of fortune, with burning incense (considered Hindu worship) rests in the tent’s far corner. Hanging outside the tent is a Nepalese flag. I am in awe of how well Gita seems able to simplify and share her Nepalese culture.

After learning about Gita’s culture, I did not see harm in the class expressing their own culture by singing the national anthem. As an American student based just outside the nation’s first capital, Philadelphia, patriotism was instilled in me. Grade school class trips to Philadelphia included constant praising of Benjamin Franklin and the Liberty Bell, and tours of Independence Hall and the Betsy Ross house. Each day, before school, we’d stand erect reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by the playing of “The Star Spangled Banner,” the United States’ national anthem. We were encouraged to be proud Americans.

“Why are they not allowed to sing their national anthem?” I ask James.
“That’s not the anthem they’re talking about. These students are raised in Irish communities and taught to speak Irish. All they know is that they are Irish, and that their national anthem is “The Soldier’s Song.” These families don’t see themselves as part of the U.K., even though they live in Northern Ireland. They’d never accept “God Save the Queen” as their own.”

In her work on national anthems, Karen Cerulo offers analysis on the creation of a single national symbol, such as a national anthem. For areas being colonized, such as the United States of America or Ireland in the 17th century, the structures from the parent country are not always kept. She explains that national symbols are meant to establish the individuality of the region they are representing. They are meant to be created as their own. In the context of Northern Ireland, it is not about choosing one national anthem over the other. In fact, the legal national anthem is “God Save the Queen.” Both anthems separately represent distinct cultures that make up Northern Ireland. The way to unify the people is through a new symbol. Cerulo offers flags, crests, or mottos as alternatives. By teaching these as representatives of the land and culture of the land in Northern Ireland, they will gain power and effectiveness as symbols, and can be a complement to one’s identity, past one’s ancestry.

This continued segregation and clinging to an identity associated with another country has led to Northern Ireland having no culture, tradition, or pride to call its own. In his research on identity, S.P. Huntington claims dual national identities can sometimes force individuals to choose. If they feel they have been displaced from the source of one identity, such as the Irish living in a British-ruled land, they will choose to defend the threatened identity. In post-Troubles Northern Ireland, Irish and British defend their heritage from being lost or attacked. Living through The Troubles has made both sides defensive of their identity. Some fought, even killed, to defend their communities, so until they feel that their identity is no longer under scrutiny, there is no chance of a single identity for everyone in Belfast to emerge.

In these segregated communities, children are taught to fear and dislike the “other” from an early age. It is a fear that leads to continuing violence and little hope for reconciliation. Without intervention from outside programs, many students may never understand the benefits of peace in Northern Ireland.

What is disturbing about segregation in Northern Ireland is not that there are tradeoffs; it’s that the people entrench themselves in segregated communities, and many of their leaders help them do it ... A 2009 study by the Belfast-based Institute for Conflict Research found that kids still identify themselves along sectarian lines. It’s a question not of religious doctrine but of belonging – your people versus mine.

Belfast continues to find comfort in using titles of religion to self-segregate. Children growing up in these communities do not know any better.

Ironically, in the setting of workshops such as this, it is okay to learn another culture. Nepalese customs have no place in The Troubles, therefore engaging in these practices is not a threat to the existence of the Irish or British culture. Through interactions with immigrant culture, Northern Irish will have to defend the authenticity of their own culture, as well as make it distinct. Both sides have been fighting for so long, focused on their differences. By exposing both Protestants and Catholics to outside cultures, they may see how similar they truly are. And unless they learn to focus on the similarities over the differences, the next generation of children may fall into the same biases of their parents, suggesting a potential for future wars.

James takes control and asks the children to quiet down. He directs Gita to begin another Nepalese song on her hand drum, and passes tambourines to the children to create their own music. Swept up in laughter, the children drop their persistence on singing the national anthem and play along with their instruments, rejoining Gita’s culture. For the moment, Irish culture has once again been swept under the rug.

In conclusion, Liam’s warning lingered with me through the summer like the relentless Irish rain. It made me wary to ask questions, to engage in conversation. Fear of asking the wrong thing initially restricted my tendency to be inquisitive. Two weeks into my internship, I conducted my first interview and realized that Liam’s caution did not apply to me. People were willing to share their story with me. My role as an outsider to Northern...
Ireland, regardless of my nationality, religion, or political affiliation, granted me access to neutral ground. I was able to talk about religion, football, The Troubles and nationality.

Belfast is a city with a bloody past. Some residents are making strides to put The Troubles in the past and integrate neighborhoods. Others prefer remaining segregated and maintaining the culture and tradition that is familiar to them. My experiences as an American intern in Belfast – an outsider – have led me to believe that there may not be an opportunity for adults who have lived through The Troubles to reconcile their differences. They have seen the other side at their worst and may not have the capacity or desire to forgive.

Hope for a peaceful Northern Ireland lies in future generations. Catholics and Protestants need to be able to come together and coexist. Patrick’s story shows that religious identity is important, but that there is more to a person beyond this. Sometimes one must set aside surface differences to get to their core values. Once this happens, there is room for mixed marriages, such as that of James and Sinead. Mixed marriages allow partners to fully express their identity. These can work through compromise, and focusing on similarities instead of differences. Immigrants such as Gita in Belfast can help to highlight these similarities. She contrasts with Northern Ireland’s Christians. Her culture can serve as a lens for Protestants and Catholics to better see their similarities.

These workshops and conversations seem to be helpful while they are taking place, but we are unable to know the lasting effects once the students leave the classroom. Future research should look into following up with students as they age. Keeping them involved with groups like Beyond Skin can help organizations know which models of conflict transformation are most effective.

These can then be implemented in schools for future generations.

By exposing children to cultures besides their own both within and outside Northern Ireland, they can further see their similarities to each other. If they are not taught how to get along with their neighbors, another generation will experience the legacy of The Troubles’ hatred and violence. I am confident that once these opposing sides can set aside their differences there can be peace in Northern Ireland, and a national identity will have room to emerge.

Notes

1. Of these deaths, 1,114 were British Security, 10 Irish Security, 168 Loyalist Paramilitary, 395 Nationalist Paramilitary, and 1,842 Civilian. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/tables/Status_Summary.html
3. Conflict transformation assesses historical roots and inter-group dynamics in establishing a successful course of action in healing after a conflict. http://www.springerlink.com/content/978-1-4020-6956-7/#section=142708&page=1&locus=0
5. Belfast is divided based on religious labels of its residents. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/belfast_religion.gif
7. Field notes on June 20, 2012.
14. Field Notes: The Orange Order is a fraternity that originated in Northern Ireland. It is named after William of Orange. Members are only Protestant and anyone who is Catholic or has Catholic familial roots cannot become a member.
15. This statistic shows a rise in mixed marriages post-Troubles. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/8344480.stm
17. NIMMA exists for the mutual help and support of people involved in or embarking on mixed marriage in Northern Ireland. They offer support and information through activities, publications, and direct contact. For more information, visit http://www.nimma.org.uk/.

19. Also known as Irish Gaelic, Irish is the national language of Ireland.


Changing the Culture of the Young Generation in Msunduza, Swaziland: The Role of Women

The Location

It is 5:30 PM, just before sunset, and I am driving in my aunt’s car up the steep hill to Msunduza. My aunt is slowly swerving in all directions trying to avoid the gaping potholes scarring the narrow road which can barely squeeze two cars side-by-side. I roll down the front passenger seat window to catch conversations of those we pass by, the people on the sidewalk. Many of them are hauling their tired bodies up the merciless hill with plastic bags hanging from their hands, the women with baskets mounted on their heads. A familiar odor of sewerage starts to seep in. Looking ahead, I see traces of grey water oozing down the road and stashes of plastics and diapers trapped in the storm drains. A large overflowing dumpster slowly comes into view positioned in the middle of the roundabout. My aunt parks the car next to the putrid waste container with a liquor and grocery store in front of us.

There it is on my first day back home, the main reason I was eager to get out of Msunduza Township. Teenage boys ready to swindle anyone who walked past them for a few bucks to buy more alcohol. I quiver thinking to myself, this could have easily been you, a teenage boy waiting for his next high. That was not so long ago. I give a weary smile to the boys and move on. I am happy to be back in Msunduza for the summer. After all, it is only temporary. In three months I will soon reminisce about it and its troubled youth over my in-flight meal on South African Airways, flying back to the American college I attend.

Still, Msunduza, a township located in the African nation of Swaziland, is my home. A landlocked country within South Africa, Swaziland shares a border with Mozambique on its northeastern side. Four parallel climatic zones divide Swaziland into four distinctive regions. Mbabane is part of the Highveld which is the outermost region to the west of the country, and sits in a river valley enveloped by a belt of igneous rock mountains in an amphitheatre-like structure. Msunduza overlooks the Central Business District of the city of Mbabane. Banks, shops and government headquarters are located in the city, making it an economic engine that lures people from rural areas.

What is home to me – Msunduza – is also the largest and oldest slum in Mbabane, holding a population of 16,000. Locals know it as eKasie or eSkom, both of which mean “the location where presumably anything goes.” It is a place where unpleasant stereotypes prevail. One report describes us, the youth of Msunduza, as “being without any commitment to responsible activity, and as a result, engage[d] in risky behaviours such as sexual intercourse, drug abuse and criminal offenses like house breaking and theft.” Another study reports poverty (95 percent), unemployment (79 percent) and unsanitary living environment (42 percent) as the major challenges faced by the youth in the township. These dire descriptions of Msunduza suggest that a better way of life has receded from our youth’s reach, that we are forever a doomed township. Yet, for some us who were born in Msunduza, we have not given up. We believe that there is a way to break away from Msunduza’s traps.

I arrived in Msunduza this summer to intern with Municipal Council of Mbabane (MCM) in their Environmental Health Services Department. I had originally assumed that tackling the environmental hazards that exist across Msunduza – such as the waste dumps and dilapidated stick and mud houses – would fix our fundamental problems. Creating clean and healthy living spaces within the township would, I thought, bring back dignity to Msunduza’s living environment, enabling its dwellers to
start seeing themselves in a different light. The residents would see themselves as worthy human beings deserving of a life different from the usual hopeless life of a slum-dweller demonstrated by their current living situation.

However, as much as it is important to implement effective environmental programs in Msunduza, the force that I discover has helped me rise above these traps is the role women can play in turning this society around. It is this realization that leads me to my research questions: What role do single-parent women play in changing the culture of the youth? How can single-parent women in Msunduza transform the lives of the youth out of their constant struggle with poverty?

Here, I offer portraits of two women and through their lives explore the role of women in changing the culture of the youth in Swaziland’s Msunduza Township. First, my grandmother, whom I’ve determined was the catalyst that enabled me to escape the typical trappings that stagnate the lives of Msunduza’s youth. Grandmothers are increasingly becoming primary caregivers to their grandchildren in Swaziland, mainly due to HIV/AIDS. Then I portray Futhi, a single parent from Msunduza, whom I met through my internship with MCM. She represents a new generation of young women juggling family gender roles trying to create a better future for her five boys and herself. Together, these two women exemplify one of the largest forces of hope that I believe exists for Msunduza’s next generation.

A tight regiment: my grandmother’s broom

I grew up in Msunduza Township under my grandmother’s care. She was the boss and I was the young employee. Contrary to the doting grandmother stories I’ve heard from my college friends from the USA, my grandmother was a strict and serious woman. Chores and obedience were the main ingredients of my days. Get up: get the broom, sweep my room, eat, sweep the living area, go to school. Come back and do more chores, sweep some more, do some homework and finally go to bed. This was my life on auto-pilot for 11 years under my grandmother’s strict regiment in Msunduza.

I recall her orders and the broom, the latter like my grandmother herself.

The broom was simple, made from a bundle of dried straw. When I was ten years old, it was half my height. Though the broom could reach even the most hidden surfaces of the room with its flexible strands, it was quite a backbreaking tool and using it definitely exercised my spine each morning. The broom, just like my grandmother, quickly became the object of discipline in my life. A stern, unyielding and forever threatening stick in my childhood that made me behave.

Grandmothers in Msunduza have become the flexible brooms that try to sweep away the dirt in the township. More and more, they are becoming primary caregivers in Swaziland, particularly among low income families. The growing social, economic and environmental problems faced by poor families are forcing grandparents to become more responsible for their grandchildren when parents are unwilling or unable to care for them. Some of the leading causes that ultimately assign grandparents this role include HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, imprisonment, child neglect, divorce, work, illness or death.

Without a social service department to take care of a child’s welfare in cases of parental loss, most children find themselves under next of kin guardianship. Relatives within the structure of the extended family are expected to take care of the child according to traditional Swazi family culture. Grandparents are an important component of Swaziland’s traditional family culture, ensuring family continuity. Most importantly, literature reviewed by the World Bank on Indigenous Knowledge in development programs depicts grandmothers as intrinsic players in the well-being of women and their children in non-western societies like Swaziland. Grandmothers often have an even larger and influential role to play in their extended families in childrearing, particularly in cases where the mother or father is not present because of work, sickness or death due to HIV/AIDS.

Similarly, my paternal grandmother stepped up to play the role of a primary caregiver when my father passed away when I was ten. She offered to share the burden of childrearing with my mother: my grandmother raising me in Msunduza and my mother raising my younger brother in the Lowveld.

Normally, in Swazi traditional families, the father’s side of the family is responsible for the children. Children inherit their father’s family name as well as the family traditions – even more so if the child is a boy, since he is expected to pass on the family name to another generation. Likewise, I was the first male born to my father. My grandmother took me in with some expectation that I would continue my father’s legacy. The only problem was Msunduza and the temptations that drowned its youth. She would make sure that I would not become another drug addicted school dropout. Just as she was happy to have me sweep my room every day, she was ready to sweep me away from the streets of Msunduza and have me do endless chores and homework at home. Each morning when I refused to get out of bed at 5:30 am before school, she would wave the broom in my face screaming, “You want to waste your life sniffing glue and begging for 20 cents like the rest of the boys on the streets of Msunduza?”
In low-income townships like Msunduza, grandmothers are at the frontline of cleaning the streets from the youth. The major contributing factor in the rise of orphans in the country is HIV/AIDS, with the highest HIV prevalence rate in the world: 39.2 percent. A significant portion of Swaziland’s children has lost one or both of their parents. In 2010, Swaziland was projected to have 198,000 orphaned and other vulnerable children, 70,000 mainly due to AIDS related deaths. Essentially, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has left many of these children without primary caregivers. The children lack parent figures who can provide for their needs until they become independent adults.

Though relatives in the extended family are expected to take care of the orphans, usually the grandmother is the only who is closest and willing to take responsibility for the child. The younger generation of parents (29 – 49 year olds) is dying of AIDS across the country. A report in The New York Times reveals that many of the younger folk who still have the energy to take care of children have left their extended families in search for jobs in Swaziland’s major cities and the neighboring South Africa. Consequently, a lot of old women and children are left behind to survive on their own. In 2004, the percentage of children living with grandparents was estimated at 21.4 and was expected to go up with an increase in the HIV prevalence. Throughout Swaziland, 40 percent of households host orphans and other vulnerable children. Most of these houses are headed by grandparents and in some cases, children share the role.

The rampant poverty on the streets of Msunduza was the reason my grandmother led her household in a “tight regiment.” People migrate to Msunduza from rural areas in search for jobs and a better life. Yet, most people in Msunduza are unemployed. More often, for slum-dweller families, the relatives are unable to take care of the children because they are likely to be experiencing poverty themselves. Besides their lack of skills to perform in the formal job market in the city of Mbabane, they also face high unemployment rates within the urban area. The Times of Swaziland reported urban unemployment to be 23.6 percent in 2010 among the formally trained labor force. Youth unemployment (ages 15-24) was estimated to be three times higher than all other age groups. For the rural-urban migrant, these conditions make it even harder to find decent employment in the city. A survey of residents from Msunduza in 2005 revealed that in some cases, the income of one working person has to support a large family of nine to 12 people.

My grandmother’s household consisted of 11 people, five of whom were grandchildren. Despite her job as a primary school teacher, the large family size was a major source of financial and emotional hardship. Having lost her firstborn, my dad, she could not get time to grieve. She had to pick up the pieces of our broken family and take care of us. She had to work hard to provide food, shelter and school for me. If not, I would end up in the street of Msunduza begging for a way to meet my basic needs. Of the rural-urban migrants in Msunduza who cannot find a job, a large number of them end up on the streets with no money for food.

The constant chores she imposed on me were her solution to shelter me from Msunduza and enforce discipline in my life. In her household, for example, taking a nap during the day was a serious offense, devised out of tough love. When I was unfortunate enough to be caught in the act she would shake me awake, guilt tripping me with her legendary quote, “There is no man in my house that can sleep in the middle of the day when the lord has blessed us with work and a beautiful day. Are you sick? You want to blame me in the peace of my grave for not teaching you right?”

My grandmother was no stranger to tough love. She was raised under the fierce hand of her aunt, and had to fight adversities to earn her education. Just like me, she grew up in Msunduza, but at a time when it was much less developed. The streets were all gravel roads and much of Msunduza was covered in forests that were used for firewood. Her family lived in a stick and mud house with a thatched roof. Without electricity, she woke up at the crack of dawn to make fire to boil water and cook breakfast. She expended so much energy each morning, gathering wood, making a fire, preparing breakfast for the whole family only to share a plate of sugarless soft sorghum porridge with four her other cousins.

Her male cousins were her constant source of distress. Scooping large amounts of the porridge, they would wipe out the plate in a few seconds. She would be lucky if she managed to get three or four spoonfuls out of the meal. Most of all,
Each traditional Swazi home has a house allocated as a “grandma’s house” where all family problems are discussed and resolved. The grandmother is considered to be someone who bears profound knowledge on the well-being of her family, knowledge passed on to her by her grandmothers. She often acts as the mediator in family disputes, and children run to her to seek refuge when their parents discipline them. Her age is a symbol of wisdom and her gender as an older woman in the society stands for her infinite ability to nurture her family and community in all situations. In Swaziland, the elderly are respected individuals who pass on the wise traditions of the past. Swaziland Positive Living, a non-governmental organization for people living with HIV, depicts grandmothers as “heroes” in their briefing on a summit in 2010 that focused on the impact of HIV/AIDS on grandmother’s lives. The organization holds grandmothers as an invaluable component of the society because they “always play an important role in solving disputes and as a source of knowledge ... they are holding together the social fabric of communities across the continent.”

Given that my grandmother was literate, I had an added advantage as a teenager growing up in Msunduza. The literacy rate for female adults 15 and older is 85.6, percent compared to 87.4 percent in adult males 15 and older. She was able to be a more effective role model or catalyst in changing my path as youth of Msunduza by emphasizing education as my only key to success. According to Jonasi’s study on grandmothers as role models in Malawi, illiterate grandmothers are limited in their effectiveness as role models for their grandchildren because they are not as conversant with the structures of the modern world. When they have no education, the degree to which they can emphasize the need for education for their grandchildren is limited. Literate or not, grandmothers play a significant role as caregivers. They have at their disposal useful cultural values and practices to pass on to younger generations. These values can shed light on how to break the cycle of poverty between generations, especially among the youth.

A young mother and the youth at her disposal

Futhi is short for Ntombifuthi, which means “another girl." This is a name common among Swazi girls. In a traditional Swazi home, boys are valued more highly than girls. Sons carry and pass on the family name, whereas daughters marry into another family. For Futhi being “another girl” systematically limited the opportunities she could have to improve her life. As a young girl, she was excluded from receiving a full education, which ultimately drove her into a life of childrearing. Futhi, who has just turned 30, is already a mother to five children, whom she has to raise as slum-dwellers in Msunduza.

The hierarchical family system that gives rise to egregious biases against women is a phenomenon common in African countries as well as in other developing nations around the globe. Kevane, in his book “Women and Development in Africa: How Gender Works,” describes boys as ranking higher than girls in the family hierarchy regardless of age. Men and women lead gendered lives and make different choices because they are presented with different opportunities. There are cultural expectations that limit the choices that women like Futhi can make to develop and enjoy their lives. The role of the woman as a mother and wife in the African traditional family is a gendered controlling “the space of feasible action” that the African woman can take. It shapes her choices and obligations within the family and the rest of society. In
a way, her gender and her sexuality are not hers to own and to enjoy. The women’s sexual acts are bundled in most cases with rights and obligations to care for children.31 Young mothers like Futhi have to build the courage to sieve through their gendered roles to make decision on the changes they need to make to balance their lives for the better.

Futhi is my newly acquired friend and co-worker at MCM. I see her three or four times each week either at tea-break or in departmental meetings. Like many young mothers, she is trying to secure a better future for her five children in the face of poverty. Whilst juggling family roles, Futhi has to ensure that she puts her five boys through school so they can have a brighter future. In the past three years, Futhi has decided to earn her living by collecting waste on the streets of Mbabane, including Msunduza. Waste collection is a career that is looked down upon. People in Mbabane do not see value in waste because many of them want to be hired into an office job in one of the emerging skyscrapers in the city, a reality only possible for a handful. In order to provide food for her household, Futhi has put pride aside and actively searches the streets of Mbabane for any waste that she recover to generate income. Waste collection is Futhi’s first step in climbing the ladder out of poverty. Her decision to join MCM’s Waste Recycling and Reuse Project is one way she can take responsibility for her kids and not give them up to perish on the streets of Msunduza.

On a cold Monday morning in May, during the Southern Hemisphere’s autumn, Futhi and I are in the office enjoying a quick coffee break. I sit behind my desk staring up at her thick lips moving in slight tremor complaining about chilling temperatures outside she has just escaped. Below her chin, her hands are tightly gripped on the warm coffee mug, with traces of steam spirals slowly warming her face. Futhi wears a white scarf neatly tied in a bun on the back of her head. I sip my cup of tea transfixed on her round face noticing the sharp contrast of the white cloth against her dark African skin tone. Her darkened and dry, flaky skin is a testament to the hard work she endures in the bitter morning cold, rummaging the streets of Mbabane for any waste that can be recycled.

It is customary for women, particularly older women, to cover their heads as a sign of respect to their children and community. By wearing a headscarf, women assume their role in society as mothers. As a woman with five children depending on her on a daily basis, the mother role is probably one that Futhi can’t easily separate between work and home. Without a headscarf, she would probably have to pay for an expensive hairstyle to make herself presentable at work. For a woman like Futhi, struggling to meet her children’s needs, the headscarf is the cheapest and most sensible solution to dress in public.

African rural women are the poorest of the poor and experience poverty and inequality differently to men.32 The lack of access to resources coupled with unequal rights in family structures make women not only poorer in their families but also in the broader society.33 For women this translates to limited access to education and training skills, which further exacerbates life below the poverty line.34 Futhi, like many women in Msunduza, lives with limited access to clean water and electricity. Poor sanitation becomes a health and safety hazard. Add five children to the already loaded equation of multiple responsibilities women have to juggle and the situation becomes dire.

As Futhi leans forward to pour herself another cup of coffee I find myself transfixed by her welcoming round face and soft brown eyes. With her rough and cracked hand, Futhi pours herself the cup. She smiles back at me noticing my apparent my fascination. Her smile gives me courage to ask what I’ve bottled up ever since I started learning about her life. My curiosity pours out of me:

“Five children is a lot to manage, especially in Msunduza. What will you do when MCM cuts all funding to the recycling and reuse project? How will you and your boys survive?” My intrusive questions do not faze her. She smiles back at me and in an assuring motherly voice says,

“Only God can help us. God takes care of His children. He will fight our battles. In the meantime, I have to make sure that I can sell enough waste to make money to feed my kids. I have to be on the streets for my kids.”35

The burden of the grinding poverty of low-income communities falls substantially on women and their children. Without an education, Futhi is restricted in her capacity to provide a better standard of living for her family. Her lack of proper skills means she cannot get a well-paying job. With no source of income, she is stuck with her children in the vicious poverty

“Five children is a lot to manage, especially in Msunduza. What will you do when MCM cuts all funding to the recycling and reuse project? How will you and your boys survive?” My intrusive questions do not faze her.
cycle of a slum-dweller. By breaking away from the gendered roles that suppress rather than empower, women can open up opportunities that can bump life a level higher from hopeless poverty.

Conclusion

For the youth living in poor developing countries like Swaziland, life is hard and challenging. Growing up in a slum like Msunduza, where the fate of the youth is sealed before birth, is even more testing. It sometimes takes the eye of an old experienced woman to break the vicious cycle of poverty that traps the youth of Msunduza in risky behaviors. A mother of two generations like my grandmother who has witnessed her own struggle and her children’s struggles is crucial in preventing the same suffering among her grandchildren. The youth of Msunduza need grandmothers who can identify the roots of the generational problems that exist within their families. In doing so they can put the new generation on a new path free from drugs, unwanted teenage pregnancies and dropping out of school. My grandmother was able to tap into her experience and see that I would need tough love and strong discipline to rise above the stereotypes of the youth from Msunduza. She brought structure in my life and saw the different roles in every teenager from Msunduza they see their own child. Together, they have given me the ability to see that one way to improve the lives of the youth is to improve the living conditions of women in society, particularly those raising children on their own. Be it in or outside of the home they interact with the youth on many fundamental levels, making sure that the basic needs of the youth are met. By improving the social, economic and environmental spaces in which women live, a larger share of the youth generation is likely to reap the same benefits. They share their living spaces with their children in poverty and in wealth. Women often do not hesitate to assume these challenging tasks because in every teenager from Msunduza they see their own child. When they assume these difficult roles in childrearing, women like my grandmother and Futhi make an invaluable contribution to the village it takes to raise a child.

Further research should analyze the role of the community in producing an environment that is conducive for youth to thrive. More research should explore if there are any significant differences in benefits that the youth get from older and younger female primary caregivers, and how the conditions for each category of caregiver can be improved to benefit the younger generation.

What is the correlation between improving women’s welfare and environmental issues with the well-being of the youth? What is the community’s role in ensuring that a mother’s cry for help to secure a better future for her teenagers is heard? What tools need to be in place to enable women to become leaders in their communities in reducing poverty reduction for themselves and the youth?

Addressing these fundamental problems, focused on creating healthy and safe living spaces for youth and their primary caregivers, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, is critical to overcoming the vicious cycle of poverty.

Notes

1. Used by residents to dump their household waste before it is transported to the landfill.
5. MCM is the local authority in Mbabane established by the Swaziland Urban Government Act of 1969. It is one of the 12 Urban Councils in Swaziland responsible for urban management. Responsible for the administrative capital of the country, MCM oversees planning and development of the Municipality, controls local environmental health matters, and provides local infrastructure and services such as roads, storm drainage, and solid waste management (World Bank, 2002).


10. Swaziland Demographic and Health Survey of 2007: leading HIV prevalence rate in the world with 39.2 percent of pregnant women attending antenatal clinics and 26 percent of the working age group 15 to 49 years.


19. Mhlongo 41.


29. Kevane 29.


35. Interview Notes, June 4th 2012.

36. Interview Notes, June 4th 2012.
“Without the services of Opportunity Tanzania, I would not have been able to improve my current business and pay for my children’s school fees. I hope to purchase a house.” With a stammer after every sentence, George Nzali, a client at Opportunity Tanzania, responded to the questions I posed to him during the interview. Loan Officer Jones Kato and I sit on a rusty wooden bench near George’s small business. George sells secondhand baby clothes for a living.

Through the services of Opportunity Tanzania (OTL), a microfinance organization, George has been able to increase his stock of clothes, diversify his business, and improve his income. We are at one of the garages of the Ilala Market District in Dar-es-Salaam, the commercial capital of Tanzania. Surrounding Loan Officer Kato and me are a heap of goods from other merchants. The air is filled with a putrid smell of fresh produce and meat products that have been covered for a long period of time. There is frantic shouting heard across every corner as the merchants try to gather their bearings. Walking through the narrow footpaths of this informal market requires steady, cautious steps in order to avoid the newly formed deep, muddy potholes. The rainfall has been replaced by a waft of humid air that makes sweating inevitable. Despite a recent rainfall having caused an interruption, I return to my interview with George. I am eager to know how microfinance has changed George’s life.

Microfinance is the provision of small-scale loans to low income communities as a working solution to poverty alleviation. In this paper, I explore the impact of microfinance on urban informal and semi-rural lives in Tanzania. Through the provision of loans and basic financial services microfinance allows low-income merchants to improve their earnings and better the livelihoods of their families and communities. In the context of Tanzania, this translates to increased access to education, water, sanitation, basic nutrition, clothing, and shelter. OTL, where I interned this past summer, is part of a global chain of microfinance organizations under the parent company Opportunity International. Developed by Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, microfinance has impacted millions of impoverished communities around the world. With its record of success in other countries, I wondered whether this innovative style of banking – small loan provisions – can help erase poverty in Tanzania. The following paper attempts to answer this question.

My inquiry relies on portraits of three people who have played an enormous role in my understanding of microfinance. My first portrait is of William Solezi, the chief operations officer at Opportunity Tanzania. William enables me to understand the history of OTL and microfinance in Tanzania. His experiences with OTL elucidate how microfinance stands apart from other forms of development and poverty alleviation. William also sheds light on the importance of good management and effective client targeting as a main component of OTL’s success.

My second portrait, Officer Issa Sama, a loan officer at OTL, elucidates the impact of microfinance in the semi-rural parts of Tanzania. I journey with him one day during one of his field visits. Seeing his clients allows me to compare and contrast the difference between microfinance in the semi-rural and urban informal market places in Tanzania.
My final portrait is of George Nzali, one of OTL’s clients in the urban informal marketplace in Dar-es-Salaam. My interview with George provides insights into the strengths of microfinance and the shortcomings of the Tanzanian government. Ultimately, I aim to uncover the strengths and shortcomings of microfinance in poverty reduction in Tanzania, an understanding that I hope will reveal a much broader picture of poverty in Tanzania and the role government can play in its alleviation.

**Hii Ni Tanzania Yangu: This is my Tanzania**

My higher education experiences and temporarily living in the USA have taught me a great deal about the stereotypical view of a person from an African country. There is a tendency to think of Africa in terms of its poverty, an element of human suffering. The image would be further exacerbated if the person hails from Tanzania, one of the world’s poorest countries. In the article “Our Image of Africa is Hopelessly Obsolete,” Ian Birrell comments on the disparity in perceptions about Africa. He notes that there is a disconnect between the Western portrayal of Africa and the reality on the ground, specifically pertaining to the recent advances made across the continent: “Too many people remain locked into stale narratives of Africa as a land of suffering in need of our salvation…. The continent is on the edge of economic takeoff similar to those seen so dramatically in China and India. For all the problems that still exist, a recent survey found investors in Africa are overwhelmingly positive.”

*My Tanzanian reality is a reflection of the optimism in Africa’s future. Growing up in Tanzania, I have enjoyed the rare privilege of attending relatively expensive private schools, living in a comfortably furnished house, and even travelling during family holidays. This does not necessarily mean that some of the stereotypes do not hold. According to the World Bank, 35 percent of the 45 million people in Tanzania live at or below the poverty line. Much of this poverty is concentrated in the rural parts of Tanzania where only about 14 percent of the population have access to electricity. Only 54 percent of this population enjoys improved access to water. This promotes the risk of malnutrition and disease. Access to water translates to access to life, in the form of nutrition, sanitation, irrigation and production. All of this means that a large percentage of the population in Tanzania is mired in life-threatening poverty.*

Reconciling my economic situation with the circumstances that many Tanzanians face has been challenging at times. I have thus decided to shape some of my life goals towards improving the livelihoods of other Tanzanians, who may not have grown up with the same privileges that I have.

Organizations such as OTL have stepped in and directed their efforts at reducing these difficult conditions. Their work is primarily concentrated in the urban informal and semi-rural businesses of Tanzania. “Informal” in this context means the Tanzanian population which does not have access to traditional banking and financial resources as their main source of survival. It is often the case that many of these small businesses and merchants have migrated from the rural parts of Tanzania in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Setting up a small business such as a duka, (the Kiswahili term for “shop”), a secondhand clothes shop, or a small cafe in a shack provides them with income, which they in turn use to take care of their families. This is where OTL steps in: their clients are those urban and semi-rural merchants who do not have established credit to secure bank loans.

**Faith-Based Banking, Businesses and Poverty Alleviation**

“When I first came, things were not so good. There was no sense of organization and structure to how things are done here,” said William Solezi, the chief operations officer at Opportunity Tanzania. He grimaced as I asked him my questions. A medium height, middle-aged Tanzanian man, William had worked at Barclays Bank in Tanzania as a project manager before joining OTL.

This was my third day as an intern at OTL. I began the day by interviewing William Solezi, to get an informed insight into the background of the company. We sat in his office, isolated from the rest of the workers at OTL. Honking car horns and running engines could be heard outside the office.
gates during the morning hustle and bustle of Dar-es-Salaam. The air conditioned room was filled with a strong aroma of coffee as we both had a cup at his desk to get the day underway.

One of the main reasons for their ineffectiveness was that there was a sense of hierarchy about how they treated their work. They knew more. Tanzanians knew less. “We’ll provide for you, you’re not capable of providing for yourself,” is what these organizations seemed to imply. “A rich person from across the world is helping you.”

OTL has only been functional in Tanzania for three years. In this short period the company has undergone a major transformation, which has ultimately benefited OTL’s clients. William explained to me that OTL had taken over from a previously defunct microfinance organization. The previous company, Faulu, had been mismanaged on several fronts. According to William, the products that they offered their clients as well as their accounting systems were the two main factors that had contributed to their poor performance.

“We had a high portfolio at risk (PAR) when I first came in. It was about 21 percent. Many of the clients were at risk of defaulting on their loans. We did not have a proper way of managing the loans and monitoring how a client was performing. It was really hard and difficult during the first few months.”

William continues explaining the background to OTL with some frustration. A high portfolio at risk translates to a higher percentage of clients who cannot repay their loans. It would then mean that OTL could disburse fewer loans to fewer clients. The difficulties endured during the first few months can be seen in the displeasure etched across William’s face. As an intern, I had not given much thought to the importance of good management of microfinance organizations.

My courses at Brandeis University had only exposed me to the fruits of microfinance in developing countries. From the onset, I did not consider this dimension to financially empowering vulnerable communities. During my first days as an intern, I am taken aback by how much the culture of the workplace resembles that of an established commercial bank. Loan recipients are listed as “clients.” Potential defaulters are classified as “portfolios at risk.” Loan officers are assessed according to how many loans they disburse. The interest rates that they offer are competitive with other microfinance organizations operating in Tanzania. Although OTL actively receives grants and donations from different donors, their target is to become self-reliant. They aim to achieve this mission by reaping a profit from disbursing more loans to different clients.

William continues to explain the history of OTL while steadily sipping on his cup of coffee. As he lifts his cup to take another sip, he pauses to elaborate on how OTL had to undergo a complete transformation in order to change its fortunes. “We had to completely change the management at OTL in order for things to work out better. Most of the senior management right now has had vast experience in commercial banking before switching to microfinance. We redesigned the types of loans available to clients so that we would not continue losing them to other microfinance organizations.” As he puts his cup down after another sip, William continues to explain, but with more enthusiasm.

The description of the working culture at OTL intrigues me. I had become accustomed to seeing different non-governmental organizations embody different strategies to poverty eradication. Yet, one after the next had failed to address the root causes of poverty. One of the main reasons for their ineffectiveness was that there was a sense of hierarchy about how they treated their work. They knew more. Tanzanians knew less. “We’ll provide for you, you’re not capable of providing for yourself,” is what these organizations seemed to imply. “A rich person from across the world is helping you.” These were the overriding sentiments that I could pick up when I came across various non-governmental organizations and development institutions operating in Tanzania. To me, this seemed to be a very wrong approach to development. Poor Tanzanians are depicted as helpless people. So, it follows that they are in need of saving. These approaches did not match my pragmatic personality. They did not empower people to take their future into their own hands. Instead, the relationships between the organizations and the recipients created financial dependence.

In “Snakes in Paradise: NGOs and the Aid Industry in Africa,” Hans Holmen comments on this phenomenon as he notes the impact that various non-governmental organizations have played in the development process: “NGOs tend to be strong on participatory rhetoric but weak on its practice. For all their virtues,
NGOs may undermine local initiatives as well as facilitate them. The reason seems self-evident. Sub-Saharan Africa seems not to have developed since independence.\textsuperscript{25}

I have witnessed an increase in the number of non-governmental organizations working in Tanzania, only to be faced with the same disappointing development indicators at the end of every year. The increase in top-down NGOs has also created a subculture of dependency, which in my view has also distorted the goals of development in the first place. To a certain extent, this had also left me disillusioned with the role that I can play in improving the living conditions that many Tanzanians face.

I sat upright as William’s description of OTL’s transformation re-energized me. He spoke of the loan recipients as clients, not poor, helpless people. It seemed as though his personality and mine were alike. His previous work experience showed that there is room for entrepreneurship and business when it comes to social justice. There was no disparity between both of these fields that greatly appealed to me. In essence, microfinance serves as a form of social entrepreneurship.

Noticing my resurgent enthusiasm, William continues: “One of our unspoken tactics is to target women. That was one of our main targets when we reshuffled things here and the way we did business.”

The effects were there to be seen. In three years, OTL had gone from having a 21 percent portfolio at risk (PAR) to a 2.1 percent PAR. More than 70 percent of the loan recipients have been women. In development, women are often noted as key agents to unlocking potential and improving the livelihoods of the communities in which they live.

In “Women and Sustainable Development in Africa,” Valentine Udoh James comments on the role of women in traditional African societies and the role that they can play in improving the social conditions of their households: “African women have only a very limited say in their personal day to day lives, or their immediate societies and communities although it is they who feed the family, are responsible for its social well-being and the management of household resources.”\textsuperscript{26}

By directly targeting female clients, I observed that OTL has picked up on the pertinent role that women play in Tanzanian households. William affirms this supposition in the office: “Directly targeting them allows for wider social effects.”

“If women in the developing countries are to continue to assist in the current efforts of development, adjustment programs and resource management issues that will affect their lives must be clearly articulated and have the best interests of women in mind,”\textsuperscript{27} writes Valentine Udoh James. Granting women preferential access to financial services further empowers them to take care of their families and communities. Observing a ratio that held women in the majority translates to widespread effects in their families and communities. Fewer children and elders are at risk of dying from prevalent diseases such as malaria and typhoid. There are lower rates of malnutrition in densely populated households. More children attend school. Some clients can now afford cleaner water and electricity for their households.

OTL previously had just two branches in Dar-es-Salaam. Now there are plans to increase the number of branches to ten, in three cities across the entire country (adding Moshi and Arusha). The management had developed two sets of loan products that were in great demand by customers. The Pamoja loan, (which means “together” in Kiswahili) allows entrepreneurs to form collective groups of up to 30 people (15 in urban settings, 30 in rural areas) and take out individual loans of up to 1.5 million Tanzanian shillings ($944 US). The Vuka (“crossing over” in Kiswahili) enables clients in groups of 10, to individually take out loans of up to 7.5 million Tanzanian shillings ($4721 US). The loans are designed to empower clients to expand their businesses and steadily climb up a ladder and further develop their entrepreneurial acumen. The clients that have managed to climb up the loans ladder could now perhaps afford to build or purchase their own house. All of these societal impacts were implied in the numbers that demonstrated OTLs’ tremendous growth.

Not all of OTL’s clients are mired in poverty, however. In my travels, some of the clients that I saw had already attained a comfortable lifestyle (by Tanzanian standards). Some had houses with running water, electricity, beds, furniture, and some entertainment. I however chose to interpret this as a means of indirect poverty alleviation by promoting job growth among unskilled workers. The more affluent loan recipients would in turn expand their businesses and employ more people, whose circumstances are in need of attention.

I had touched on all the historical and mechanical aspects to OTL that I had wanted to know. One final aspect that I did not yet inquire about was the faith-based approach. What was the relevance of this? Sitting across from William, intrigued by the interview, I inquire about this aspect to OTL’s work as a concluding question. Peering at his watch and then back at me, William explains: “Every week we have devotion and across all the branches we regularly engage in praise and worship. We are not just a microfinance
As we weave in and out of the narrow roads of the villages, Officer Issa drives the motorcycle slowly. The familiar sound of a motorbike signals that someone from a nearby city has just arrived or is about to leave. Out of every corner, as different villagers hear the motorbike, they pop out of their small houses and shops and try to stop him for a few minutes to ask him a few questions.

When I entered the OTL offices that morning, the day had commenced with prayers and devotion, a ritual regularly performed by the management at OTL. OTL’s parent company Opportunity International is a faith-based organization. The founders of Opportunity International envisioned microfinance as a means of “serving God through serving the poor.” This umbrella goal has enabled them to apply an ethical approach to banking across the 21 countries in which they operate across the world. The faith-based approach gave Opportunity International an institutional conscience, which permeated through all of the branches across the world. This conscience I could see was enshrined across the banner in the main lobby with OTL’s vision, mission, core values and code of conduct. OTL’s vision read: “Our vision is to see the people in poverty have the opportunity to work themselves out of poverty, to provide for their families and to build a fulfilling life.”

I end the interview with William on a lighthearted note. “Do I like my job?” he asks, seemingly caught off guard. “Yes, I like it,” he says after a brief pause. “It gives me something to look forward to every morning when I come into work.” He has a smile this time. I can also feel his sense of satisfaction at OTL’s progress. It seems as though the management still has a vision for OTL’s growth in Tanzania. They are not resting on their laurels. An innovative type of banking was being used to empower people to improve their livelihoods.

**Bringing Opportunity to Semi-Rural Communities, Encouraging Rural Development**

“Are you tired? You’ve been quiet for some time.... Since you’re on the back of a motorcycle I have to make sure that you do not fall asleep on me. It might be a little dangerous.”Loan Officer Issa Sama slightly tilts his head to peer behind him and see whether I am awake.

My eyes are droopy with fatigue after a long day’s outing in Himo, a semi-rural community in Tanzania. The wind brushing against my face is the only thing keeping me awake. The scorching Tanzanian sun has changed color into an afternoon orange and a slight chill is accompanying the onset of nighttime. There are a few buses on the road that are winding up the long, ten hour journey from Dar-es-Salaam to Moshi, and are thus on the same route through Himo. On either side of the road I see female farmers with babies strapped to their backs steadily packing up and retreating to their small semi-cemented houses after a long day’s work.

I accompanied Loan Officer Issa on one of his field visits because I wanted to gain an insight into microfinance as it applies to the semi-rural parts of Tanzania. I chose Officer Issa from among the other loan officers at the Himo sub-branch of OTL because I needed to understand how he had managed to retain his position as the best loan officer at OTL.

On paper, his records were indeed impressive. In a period of two years at OTL he had managed to amass a total of 400 clients while retaining a one percent default rate. Of the 400 people that benefited from OTL’s financial services, only five people risked not being able to repay their loans. On this journey, I discovered that the majority of his clients were located in the semi-rural parts of Tanzania.

Officer Issa and I strike up a good rapport from the beginning of the day. I find that he is a very slender, soft-spoken young man. It is this same personality that many clients warmly respond to when we embark on our site visits. Noticing that I am very tired on the back of the motorcycle, he begins to engage me in conversation to prevent me from falling asleep. I notice his eyes darting between the rearview mirror and the road ahead as he juggles the road and his passenger. “Most of the people in these more remote villages do not have access to any sort of financial services. They can’t take loans from major banks. Just as you saw and heard for yourself, most of the clients we just visited are fishermen.”

Leaving the villages after extensive client visits during the day is extremely difficult. It is about two hours away from the OTL Himo branch. The inhabitants live in semi-cemented, mud-plated, one-bedroom houses. The small houses are clumped together. A large portion of the villagers have families of six or more living inside the houses.
As we weave in and out of the narrow roads of the villages, Officer Issa drives the motorcycle slowly. The familiar sound of a motorbike signals that someone from a nearby city has just arrived or is about to leave. Out of every corner, as different villagers hear the motorbike, they pop out of their small houses and shops and try to stop him for a few minutes to ask him a few questions. Some villagers ask when his next visit will be. Others ask for an appointment, when they can begin processing a Pamoja loan request for their own group. A group of women thank Officer Issa for the work that he had done as a loan officer to the village. “Take this, my child. God bless you. Continue coming back here in the near future.” A stout elderly woman hands Officer Issa a handful of dried fish wrapped in newspapers. The deep sense of gratitude by the woman demonstrates the human impact of enabling someone to earn a livable income. I feel a great amount of appreciation for Officer Issa as we depart from the village that afternoon.

In “Microfinance and Public Policy,” Bern Balkenhol highlights the ‘wider’ implications of microfinance to poor communities: “The poverty impact of microfinance schemes cannot be reduced to an analysis of the direct impact on households given that there is a range of indirect impact on local economies that should also be taken into account.”13 Explained here is the notion that rural microfinance has greater implications for the entire community. Directly targeting semi-rural populations through microfinance reduces the need to migrate to cities such as Moshi because more financial resources allow them to continuously reinvest in their own communities.

As I witness this afternoon and as Officer Issa explains, many of the villagers have channeled their earnings towards improving their own individual communities. This was done through refining their small houses by purchasing cement, and establishing small shops and little entertainment centers. If it were not for these services, many of the male residents would continue making a living in Moshi solely as car washers, bicycle repairmen, or through any sort of income generation that they can put their labor towards.

Many of the villagers relied on Lake Nyumba Ya Mungu (“God’s House” in Kiswahili) as their main source of fish. The fish is sold in the village, nearby towns, and when possible in Moshi. Granting these fishermen basic microloans allows them to expand their small businesses by increasing their supply of fish and diversifying the goods that they sell in their small businesses. For some, it also affords the opportunity to sell their fish products to nearby towns and cities they were previously unable to. Under different circumstances gaining access to any sort of basic loans and financial services may have been near impossible because of their location in the semi-rural parts of Tanzania.

“You will notice also that more of these villagers seem more accountable than some of the clients you have encountered in Dar-es-Salaam or Moshi.” Officer Issa continues talking as he steers the motorbike past a car. “Yes, why is that?” I reply. I had become more alert as Officer Issa recounted the day’s work.

“Most of the clients in Dar-es-Salaam, Moshi or Arusha come from rural areas, like this one. So, they enter the city looking for some sort of opportunity. If they started a small business, they would rent a room in a slum and live there. Here, the houses in this village are the property of the villagers. So they are a lot more fearful of having any of their houses repossessed because they are unable to pay their loans. Also, they have not had proper exposure to city life, or to any sort of financial services so they try their best to repay these loans because they do not want to lose this opportunity.”13

As Officer Issa explains the intuition behind his success as a loan officer, he has also put into context many of the things that I witnessed during my stay as an intern with OTL. When I interviewed customers in Dar-es-Salaam about where they were from, many informed me that they had migrated to Dar-es-Salaam from their village a while ago. The loan officers in Dar-es-Salaam who had a higher portfolio at risk found that some of their most difficult clients were migrants from the interior parts of Tanzania. Providing these villagers with access to financial services grants them opportunities that they did not previously have. At the same time, because they are not migrants they have more to lose if they are unable to repay their loans while being in their home village. Officer Issa’s position as an officer in Himo manages to take advantage of this. These clients tended to be more accountable than clients from the city.

The broader picture, however, pointed to a lack of emphasis on rural investment on behalf of the government. In “Rural Development: Putting the Last First,” Robert Chambers comments on the lack of attention directed towards rural populations in developing nations. He begins by noting the disproportionate labor flows: “Rural parents educate their children hoping they will gain urban employment; officials in districts seek postings to regional headquarters, those in regional headquarter, try to get capital cities, and those in capital cities try to join the brain drain in richer countries.”14 The main emphasis points to a need to reverse this trend of migration in developing countries.
Officer Issa’s role as a loan officer works towards disrupting these movements. Chambers’ research also points to a need for national government to direct its approach in this manner in order to effectively prevent these movements on a greater level. He focuses on the national government, and not individual companies: “Decentralization is one key to these spatial reversals…. With strong leadership or strong local demands, it is possible, though difficult to force funds outwards, to give more local discretion, to decentralize agricultural processing and small-scale non-agricultural production, to disperse in short parts of the core towards the periphery.” Microfinance through OTL in Nyambinda (the village we visited) was, in my view, only doing half of the work. The Tanzanian government needs to adopt this approach to the 74 percent of the Tanzanian population residing in the rural areas. This would entail relocating government buildings, factories, schools, hospitals and housing facilities from the main cities such as Dar-es-Salaam, Moshi, Arusha and Mwanza to the densely populated rural areas. The premise behind this is the creation of greater opportunity.

The motorbike begins to slow down as we turn a corner to temporarily park. I need to board a bus to Moshi, whereas Officer Issa is headed in a different direction. Nighttime has all but descended upon us. “I used to work on Saturdays and Sundays travelling to different villages to look for clients and locate different villages. It’s not easy but I enjoy what I am doing,” he says, and looks at me, noticing that the day’s activities had left me tired. It has reached a point where I need to say goodbye to Officer Issa. At the T-Junction of the road, we each go in opposite directions. Officer Issa rides his motorcycle, with one less passenger, to Himo Branch as the top loan officer for OTL in the country. I return to Moshi with a more concrete understanding of the social dynamics behind rural urban migration, poverty alleviation, and the strengths to microfinance.

**Secondhand Dealings, Temporary Relief, Permanent Perpetuations**

There has just been a downpour at one of the informal marketplaces in Dar-es-Salaam. When I was younger, I did not enjoy visiting these informal marketplaces. The chaotic scenes that follow the downpour rekindle this familiar feeling. Sweat is dripping down my face. Small merchants and businessmen are scrambling to and fro to reassemble their belongings after the rain has disrupted their activities. The densely congested marketplace and the muddy potholes make moving around uncomfortable. I try my best to breathe through my mouth to avoid the rancid smell that has just filled the air. George Nzali, a client at OTL, Officer Jones Kato, a loan officer, and I are seated inside a nearby garage. I had asked Officer Kato to visit one of his more successful clients in the informal marketplace because I wanted to have a better idea of the types of businesses that many of OTL’s clients in the informal marketplace owned. Officer Kato points to George Nzali as one of his customers that has made the most progress.

As the rain temporarily subsides, we move to a wooden stall that has been covered by plastic bags. Similar stands and kiosks surround this makeshift wooden stall. Underneath the plastic bags are a heap of baby clothes. This is George’s business. Like George, many of the stalls surrounding him also have secondhand clothes. Other nearby merchants sell produce such as vegetables, fresh fruit, poultry and other types of meat products. The roofed shops sell finer goods such as flour, soda, cooking oil and kerosene.

I hold one of the secondhand baby garments in my hand and pause for a moment, trying to reconcile what I’ve learned in books with that which I now hold in my hands.

“So where do you buy these from?” I finally gather the strength to ask George this question.

“I buy them from some Indians who import them and sell them by the kilogram.” It seems as though George has also noticed my momentary fixation on his clothes. He informs me that the unit price for one of these small baby garments does not exceed 500 shillings, less than one dollar.

Officer Kato prods me, to find out whether something is wrong. I have remained fixated on this one item of clothing for too long.

With the baby clothes still clutched in my hands, my mind raced to a development economics course that I had taken before travelling to Tanzania. I learned about the development theory of Import Substitute Industrialization (ISI), a theory which espouses that any economy should direct its efforts away from importing goods that can be locally produced. Instead, ISI proposes that on a national level the country should divert its efforts towards producing goods that can be locally manufactured. This way, more employment opportunities are created within the boundaries of a country, more cities spring up in the interior parts of the country. Tribalism decreases as more connections between diverse ethnic groups take place. There are fewer pressures placed on highly populated urban centers. Development and material progress would take place on a national level and less in only a select few cities.
If only more emphasis were placed on producing clothes and cotton derivatives such as textiles within Tanzania, using Tanzanian cotton, could this work towards curbing the level of poverty and promote job creation in the interior parts of Tanzania, I wondered? There would be less rural urban migration as more job opportunities were created in the rural parts of the country. As a result, fewer informal settlements would spring up in the city. The cheaper imports of secondhand clothes harm the efforts of local manufacturers and hurt local producers.

The theory of ISI was developed by an Argentinian economist, Raul Prebisch, who analyzed the economies of developing countries. The theory asserts that many developing countries are stationed as exporters of primary products while they import secondhand manufactured goods. One of Tanzania’s major exports is cotton, used to manufacture textiles that are used to make clothes. Exports amounted to 26 percent of the gross domestic product of Tanzania in 2011. ISI supports the belief that any government should direct its efforts towards enforcing strict protectionist measures on the economy. A country like Tanzania ought to direct its efforts towards manufacturing these exports so that they can be locally produced and consumed.

I recalled going grocery shopping with my father just before a regular school week would begin. As we would walk around the supermarket, I used to always reach for the more fashionable imported goods in the confectioneries stand. My father, however, would always encourage me to buy goods that were made in Tanzania. Back then, I did not think of it as particularly “fashionable” to show up to school with a crummy bag of locally-made confectioneries. I did not understand the lesson that my dad was teaching me. Firmly planted directly in front of the stall, I shake slightly as I feel the tremor of what he was really trying to encourage me to do: support Tanzanians by purchasing Tanzanian goods. The theory of ISI could be applied to food, clothes and other basic items that could be made across the country.

A 2003 fact-finding report indicated that 34 percent of the 45 million households in Tanzania are engaged in some informal trading at any given point during the year. Secondhand clothes traders like George have increased in the informal sector over the years. This has developed to the extent that mitumba (“secondhand clothes” in Kiswahili) cooperative trading unions have grown. The unions work together as a collective to price, distribute and market the secondhand clothes that are imported and resold across the country. While this creates opportunities for merchants, on a national level it prolongs the problems pertaining to rural job creation, urban rural migration, increased informal settlements, and more importantly poverty within the nation. A factory set up in the rural areas translates to a large amount of resources being directed towards maintaining this investment. Such resources include electricity, water, training centers, schools, hospitals, and an improved supply of food to cater to the new demands of the working employees. These are just the potential benefits of investing in Tanzanian clothes. Applying this to other goods can have similar effects.

Officer Kato has grown frustrated with my continued silence and tugs at my shoulder. I take one final look at the pieces of clothing that are in my hand and look around. Am I delighted at George’s success story? I guess I should be. But I have to ask: What about the impact of secondhand clothes dealings on local manufacturers, and its continued effect on the lives of people in search of work? Are these merchants helping or ailing the

Is it really my place to make a judgment on how the Tanzanian economy should work over one summer as an intern? After all, who am I to judge? I might be Tanzanian, but I have not lived the struggles of the ordinary Tanzanian. I am here as a student from the USA. Cloaked in American clothes and enjoying the privilege of higher education in a prestigious American university.

Tanzanian economy? Theoretically, it’s the latter. Is it really my place to make a judgment on how the Tanzanian economy should work over one summer as an intern? After all, who am I to judge? I might be Tanzanian, but I have not lived the struggles of the ordinary Tanzanian. I am here as a student from the USA. Cloaked in American clothes and enjoying the privilege of higher education in a prestigious American university.

After holding on to the secondhand baby garments for a long time, I fold and place them back on top of the heap of clothes at George’s makeshift stall. I thank George for his time and cooperation in answering my questions. The difference between theory and practice linger with my steps as Officer Kato and I begin negotiating our way out of the muddy walkways of one of the informal market places in the Ilala Market District of Dar-es-Salaam.
Final Remarks

This paper has explored the dynamics and impact of microfinance when applied to the urban informal and semi-rural communities in Tanzania. The interviews with Opportunity Tanzania’s clients from informal marketplaces in the cities of Dar-es-Salaam, Moshi and Arusha have enabled me to develop a greater understanding of the informal economy. This comprehension has also solidified my knowledge of the Tanzanian economy and the government’s current role in development. The interview with loan officer Issa, from the Himo rural branch has broadened my interpretation of microfinance when applied in semi-rural settings.

However, my analysis of microfinance in Tanzania has also revealed its shortcomings in poverty alleviation. While microfinance and banking holds one of the keys to unleashing entrepreneurial potential, more has to be done by the government to improve the welfare of Tanzanian citizens. The government has to a certain extent misdirected its priorities. Goods that are consumed by Tanzanians, such as clothes, should also be made and manufactured in Tanzania. This will work towards improving the strength of the Tanzanian currency and hence the economy. Rural job creation and investment will curb the level of rural urban migration and reduce the number of informal settlements that arise from these movements. Such an approach will work towards ensuring that Tanzania becomes a fully autonomous self-driven economy. The new generation of Tanzanians such as George will be entrepreneurs of Tanzanian goods. Microfinance will evolve into proper mainstream commercial banking. Informal settlements such as the Ilala marketplace will become future shopping destinations for a Tanzanian middle class. In order for this to happen, the Tanzanian government must lay the necessary foundation through focusing its attention away from being an export-driven economy.

I believe such an approach to development can work towards improving the livelihoods of many Tanzanians. If applied by governments in other developing countries, these basic essentials can redirect a country’s priorities in the right way. This will eventually lead to decreased dependency on aid and assistance while the livelihoods of citizens continue to improve. As I discovered during my internship this summer, addressing problems such as poverty requires more efforts at targeting the root causes and redressing them before looking for external assistance.

Notes


7. IBID


11. IBID


13. IBID


15. IBID p18.


18. IBID


20. IBID
Building on the Past: Media Ethics in Rwanda’s Evolving Post-Genocide Society

Robyn Spector ’13

July 1st, 2012. Perched on an elevated media platform, ten feet or so above ground, 50 local and foreign journalists, including myself, marvel at the buzz of the National Amahoro Stadium. A celebration of Rwanda’s 50 years of freedom from colonial rule, over 30,000 people fill the stands. Crowds of people dance, raise their palms to the sky, and turn their wrists to the rhythms of the African drums. Laughter, cheers, and biblical hymns fill the atmosphere. At 103 degrees Fahrenheit, my black camera body is starting to heat up and the weight of the day is setting in.

For Rwanda, July 1st is not simply joyous. Rather, it serves as a reminder of the challenges and lives lost during the past 50 years. The date itself falls within the period of 100 days, during which the country’s 1994 genocide against the Tutsis saw the mass slaughtering of over 800,000 people.

On a personal level, July 1st is rather somber as well; it is the day I lost my dad two years ago. The day I received that phone call that he had a heart attack, and that our disagreement the night before would forever go unsettled. As I returned to university that fall, I wondered how to best learn from my tumultuous relationship with my dad in the persistent unrelenting continuation of time. I clung to friendships, often restrictive and unhealthy, that led me to neglect myself and to struggle to keep up with the world around me. When I applied to intern in Rwanda for the summer to examine media ethics in a post-genocide nation, I was myself trying to discover the road to recovery. For the past 18 years, Rwanda has faced this exact challenge.

The sea of yellow, blue and green flags, present through my camera’s viewfinder, emphasizes the progress of Rwanda’s reunified populace. Bright white smiles on the dark African faces seem to reflect an overall optimism in the country. But the slice of time, captured in each zoomedin photograph, allows me to notice the concealed gashes and mutilated limbs of people throughout the crowd. The camouflaged soldiers, guns erect, positioned at every seating section, spur doubt about the country’s stability in my mind. I press my thigh against the metal railing of the media platform, and the seemingly secure structure, wrapped in fabrics and curled ribbons, starts to rattle.

As an American journalism student, my perception of the media in general lies in its ability to hold society accountable for its past and to provide context for its present. Entering my internship at The New Times, Rwanda’s first English and largest daily newspaper, I hoped to gain a deep understanding of the country’s accomplishments and challenges since 1994. The Independence Day festivities, which filled the pages of the newspaper the next day, added to the growing stack of experiences I compiled on my desk at The New Times.

What I learned is that in order to grasp the reality of Rwanda, I needed to look at the media through which I was seeing it. How do the remnants of the genocide impact print journalism ethics today? To that end, I first analyze the historical context of the country’s media censorship. Through the lens of the media, I then examine the current state of affairs in Rwanda, and how its past informs its present. Lastly, I use my experiences in the local press and as an American student to examine the possible implications of Rwanda’s
silenced opposition. The implications of censorship on Rwanda’s future are yet to be determined but the impact of the past on Rwanda today is arguably hard to deny.

Out of Focus: the Media and the Genocide

June 6th, 2012. In Rwanda, the night sky is blinding. With few streetlights and minimal skyscrapers even in the country’s capital of Kigali, it is hard to make out the “land of a thousand hills.” The view from my oval plane window gives little insight into the journey ahead in my eight-week summer internship. The only image I can muster of Rwanda is its past.

I look at the people around me.
Who is Hutu? Who is Tutsi?
Would I even be able to tell?

Up until this point, my perception of Rwanda was colored by documentaries and photographs of the pervasive destruction that existed during the time of the genocide. Bodies covered in blood, mutilated limbs, women raped and children crying. People running for their lives from the violence.

Walking across the tarmac, at the rather basic East African airport, I look at the people around me. Who is Hutu? Who is Tutsi? Would I even be able to tell?

“Presumably not,” a Rwandan student explained to me when I got back from the summer. He cited increased intermarriage between Hutus and Tutsis, and between Rwandans and foreigners, that makes it difficult to categorize people according to old ethnic classifications.

Next to me, rolling a rickety black suitcase, an elegant dark-skinned lady in her 60s clings to the hand of a white man walking on her other side. The man, her husband, is the same elderly Norwegian gentleman who sat next to me on the plane. In our conversation, he told me they got married five years ago and that this is her first time back to her home country in 18 years. I presume her time away had something to do with the genocide. In fact, he disclosed to me, 25 members of her immediate family were killed. She was gang-raped and beaten repeatedly.

I watch her hands shake uncontrollably. We are approaching the customs checkpoint in the main airport terminal. In Rwanda’s colonial era, everyone was mandated to carry identification cards signifying their race. Today, as demonstrated by the documents tightly grasped in the woman’s hand, I notice everyone is Rwandan. Bringing up ethnicity with locals is precarious, according to the book, “Customs and Culture of Rwanda.”

“What are you doing here?” the woman asks me, trying to take her mind off of her nerves. I hesitate to tell her I’m working for a newspaper. I don’t know yet what people in Rwanda think about local journalists and newspapers in Rwanda depicted Hutus as short and stout with wider noses and darker skin tones, while Tutsis were quite the opposite. Their taller physiques, willingness to convert to Roman Catholicism, lighter skin tones, and ethnic origins in the Horn of Africa were considered to be “more European” than the Hutus.

Walking across the tarmac, at the rather basic East African airport, I look at the people around me. Who is Hutu? Who is Tutsi? Would I even be able to tell?

Throughout modern history, media has played a significant role in perpetuating genocides. When Hitler rose to power in
1933, his head of communication Joseph Goebbels capitalized on the Nazi control over the media and used it as a means for disseminating hate.9

A descendant of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants who fled their homes in the 1920s to escape persecution, I have never fully understood the idea of ethnic cleansing, and how the human conscience has allowed it to happen. Amos Elon, author of “The Pity of It All,” explains that people in Germany were susceptible to Nazi propaganda because of the economic and political devastation the country experienced in World War I. Hitler brought new unified hope to the country, and Jews, who were often prominent business owners, sources of envy and an isolated ethnic minority, gave Germany a population to rally against.10

Similarly, in Rwanda many Tutsis held high positions that made them accessible targets. Movements of decolonization throughout Africa in the 1950s and ’60s intensified Hutu resentment of Tutsi authority and power struggles led to a Hutu uprising in 1959 that killed hundreds of Tutsis and exiled over 300,000 more. Hutus declared the country a republic, and Rwanda gained independence from colonialism in a formal 1962 U.N. referendum. Ethnically motivated violence, however, continued up into the 1970s when Hutu militia appointed Major General Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu himself, as head of the republic.11 Under his reign, the 1962 constitution changed multiple times, with specific attention to the country’s media laws.12

Founded in 1987, Kangura (meaning “Wake up!”) was a newspaper published by a Tutsi and edited by a Hutu, openly critical of the country’s president. The publication presented a strong objective threat to the government because it was seen as balanced from both ethnic sides. In 1990, President Habyarimana’s wife Agathe and other extremist Hutu military officials realized that they needed to weaken the influence of Kangura. They bribed the Hutu editor of the publication to quit and help them start an opposing paper called Kanguka (meaning “Wake them up!”). That year, Kangura published “The Ten Commandments for the Hutu,” telling Hutus that by marrying, hiring, or befriending a Tutsi they would be “traitors” to their own ethnicity.

“I’m working for The New Times,” I respond as we line up to be seen by the customs officers. The atmosphere is quiet. It’s as if the airport has been waiting for our plane for hours.

“Oh.” She pauses, turning around in the line to look at me. She adjusts the silk scarf in the collar of her beige blazer. “That’s a very nice newspaper,” she adds. I wonder what she means by “nice.”

My motivation to intern at The New Times was twofold: to gain the most access and largest reach from a newspaper widely disseminated and highly influential within the country, and to examine how successful the newspaper is in implementing its mission. Founded in 1995, in a climate of despair and great vulnerability, the newspaper, as stated on its website, aims to bring “fair and balanced reporting without any confrontational tones, political or otherwise” to the people of Rwanda.13 The urgent need for objectivity post-genocide was dire, but the damage of the country’s slanted media and the extent that it needed repair was vast.

Newspapers in the early 1990s, regardless of political and ethnic backings, dehumanized the “other.” In 1990, government officials, concerned about the unwieldy media, made an appeal to the press on Radio Rwanda to be “responsible” with the content that they published.14 Throughout the early 1990s, the U.S. and Belgian embassies offered ethical training seminars for Rwandan journalists to dissuade them from using the media to propagate hate. Journalists at the time did not typically have college degrees or professional training; as a result, many newspaper editors were military officials with a vested interest in promoting their political beliefs. After warnings to the Rwandan press went unheeded, the government’s information office, Service Central de Renseignments, called a meeting with journalists to introduce new media laws, which placed numerous restrictions. These censors prevented newspapers from writing about religion, regionalism, and the president and his family. In essence, they stifled any anti-government view.

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While a director for Rwanda’s Bureau of Information and Broadcasting established an association of journalists to allegedly “protect the interests of the press,” opposition journalists knew that the reality of the association was that it gave government officials an avenue through which to silence them and influence their content. President Habyarimana eventually liberalized the media again before 1994, but the continued political backing Kangura received amplified the voices of the Hutu over the Tutsi, giving them an easier ability to propagate their messages of ethnic cleansing.

In February 1994, just before President Habyarimana was assassinated in a plane crash, the Hutu publication printed an article warning, “We know where the cockroaches are. If they look for us, they had better watch out.” With the loss of the president, and the fiery hate speech across the media, ethnic violence erupted and the 100-day genocide ensued. Eight hundred thousand people were killed. Radio stations and newspapers encouraged Hutus to identify and slaughter their Tutsi neighbors. Machetes, the main tools of violence, brought the country into turmoil. While the mass annihilations were taking place, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi-dominated militia group exiled in Uganda, increased in strength and waged a war inside Rwanda against the Hutus in power. Paul Kagame, at the helm of the RPF, won control he has held ever since.

Double Exposure: Rwanda Today
June 11th, 2012. A light-skinned African woman in heels and a black business dress suit stands at the back of the church. Her left hand wraps around her dress suit stands at the back of the church. Her left hand wraps around her dress. The church is in Nyamata, a town approximately 30 minutes out of Kigali, and one of the areas hit hardest in the genocide.

There is nothing redeeming about this church. In 1994 it is estimated that over 10,000 people were burned alive in it. Grenade holes mark the outside walls and concrete mass graves line the church’s courtyard. Inside the relatively small redbrick building, a plaster plaque of the Virgin Mary is illuminated by a single streak of sunlight. Her expression is wrought with disappointment. Religious leaders told people they would be safe here, that the church would be a place of refuge for them during the genocide. But 40 long wooden pews are piled high with clothes and broken promises. Crumpled and fading in color, the garments once draped the bodies of people killed in the area, and represent the lingering sentiments of shock and betrayal.

The woman walks slowly to the altar, examining the pews as she passes them. Each step she takes echoes on the concrete floor. I try to be discreet as I photograph her, so as not to disturb her moments of reflection. Yet the scene is new for me too. It is my first day on the job as a photography intern for The New Times, and the chill of the church’s past provides a stark contrast to the promise of the country’s future. After all, watching the World Health Organization (WHO) officials examine Rwanda’s improving healthcare system earlier in the day was rather inspiring.

Unlike the church, frozen in a moment of time, healthcare in Rwanda is continually progressing. Life expectancy at birth has gone up in the past 10 years, from 48 to 58. An estimated 94 percent of HIV/AIDS patients are able to receive the anti-retroviral drugs they need to survive. Unlike America, Rwanda has universal health insurance. The system covers 92 percent of the population, and premiums are an average of $2 per visit.

Touring the hospitals and healthcare clinics with the WHO officials, I witnessed the positive outcomes because of it. Women, pre-registered in maternity health programs, cradled babies against their exposed bosoms for warmth; infant mortality rates in the country have dropped significantly between 2000 and 2010. Local physicians work collaboratively with American, French, and Belgian doctors to care for patients, who are wrapped in colorful African fabrics, each with their own metal hospital bed. According to a New York Times interview with Peter Drobac, Rwanda country director for Partners in Health, “[The country’s] health gains in the last decade are among the most dramatic the world has seen in the last 50 years.”

While the fluorescent bulbs in the church are dim and the streaks of summer sun coming through the windows do little to assuage the church’s chilling past, I find optimism in my pictures of Rwanda today. In a 2009 broadcast CNN reporter Fareed Zakaria called Rwanda “Africa’s biggest success story”— but he wasn’t just referring to its health care. Gross domestic product has increased significantly over the past 10 years; private investment is growing, and Starbucks and Costco now buy about a quarter of Rwanda’s yearly coffee crop. With regard to gender and opportunity, 56 percent of members of Parliament are female and the average attendance rate in public schools is 97 percent for both boys and girls. What’s more, in a 2011 Gallup poll 92 percent of Rwandans said they feel safe walking alone on the streets at night. Though many may attribute this to the police state and authoritarian leadership style of the country’s current president, Paul Kagame, the government certainly deserves credit for the positive impact it has had on Rwanda’s ability to rebuild and progress.
A Close Up: New President, New Times
July 19th, 2012. I am pushed from all directions. To my right and left, fellow photojournalists, working for Rwandan and other African newspapers capture the scene. Inside a semicircle of bubbling nursing students in their mid-20s from the Rwamagana Nursing School, President Paul Kagame and former U.S. President Bill Clinton wrap their arms around each other and smile. Everything about the scene is posed. The 50-something-year-old woman photographing for The Clinton Health Access Initiative, a former photo editor for USA Today and a close acquaintance of the Clintons, flags her hands to position the students. My experiences photographing and editing for several American newspapers have trained me to think that photojournalism at its best is candid, that an image unaltered by the presence of the photographer has an ability to better reflect reality. I hesitate to capture the head-on shot of the diplomats, but I know it is the kind of front-page photo The New Times is looking for.

The New Times was founded to serve the Rwandan refugees, over a million in number, who returned to the country post-genocide speaking English. Whether explicitly or implicitly stated, however, there were seemingly additional advantages to introducing an English press. Most returnees still knew the local language of Kinyarwanda. Even still, the English media, starting with The New Times offered the country a more neutral language on which to build its recovery.

At the time of the genocide, the predominant language, in addition to Kinyarwanda, was French (a remnant of Belgian colonialism). France, hoping to preserve its language foothold in Africa, offered military support to countries that institutionalized French, and thus aided the extremist Hutu government in the country’s 1994 genocide. What’s more, as this happened America did nothing.

Eighteen years later, I watch awe-struck Rwandan students crowd around to shake hands with the remarkably thin and rather wrinkled former U.S. president. I had encountered Bill Clinton before in my life; my father worked in politics for the large majority of my childhood. At this moment, however, watching him face students directly traumatized by the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which took place at the time of his presidency, I can’t help but think he looks a lot older. Clinton’s apology to the people of Rwanda on March 25th, 1998, felt to me like empty words. But as one photographer for a larger East African newspaper explains to me, “It was more than other countries offered.”

Though French was taught in Rwandan schools up until 2008, that year the government made a decision to replace it with English. The reason, explained the country’s trade and industry minister, Vincent Karega, was that “English has emerged as a backbone for growth and development not only in the region but around the globe.” While this shift in the institution of language came several years after the establishment of The New Times, post-genocide aid from the U.S. and the U.K. in the country came almost immediately. The New Times decision to print in English set a foundation on which Rwanda could further develop relationships with these global powers.

Following the genocide, the Rwandan government strictly controlled the media. In order to start a newspaper it had to be approved by the government, and the messages needed to be filtered. According to an interview with a former journalist in the country, this censorship was greatly welcomed by the people right after the genocide. “The country was in such a vulnerable place. We didn’t want to go back to the days of hate speech and a biased media.” A Rwandan student at the university I attend in America agreed that, “Restricting the media after the genocide had meaning.” He stressed, however, that, “Keeping media as it was back then right after 1994 means nothing today.”

The stakes of journalism are incredibly high in Rwanda at present. In 2002 the Media High Council was established by the government to preserve the country’s freedom of press, though today its mission, according to the Council’s website, includes “Promoting freedom, responsibility and professionalism of the media.”

While these changes in its goal seem minimal, a media bill passed in 2009 mandates that journalists must now show educational credentials and a clean criminal record in order to work in the profession, both which they receive from the government. In addition, media outlets must pay high licensing fees in order to operate and print. Strict penalties exist for publications that endorse or deny the country’s 1994 genocide, “incite discrimination,” or “show contempt for the president.” Several journalists have been arrested on such grounds.

The Committee to Protect Journalists confirms two arrests of journalists in 2011 for violations of free speech, though many more are believed to fit the category. That same year two independent newspapers, Umuseso and Umuvugizi, were disbanded for “posing a risk to national security,” and the editor of Umuvugizi fled Rwanda for fear of being assassinated. He was shot dead outside of his home later that year.

The opposition today does not seem ethnically driven. A former Rwandan journalist now living in Canada confirms that editors and reporters for both publications were Tutsi and Hutu, some were even ethnically mixed. This is also
confirmed by the book “Media and The Rwandan Genocide,” which goes so far as to identify Umuseso reporters as former soldiers for Kagame’s RPF party.36

The image of Kagame is highly crafted. His face hangs in every storefront and public space throughout Rwanda. I zoom in to watch his casual interactions with the Clintons.

I learned this summer that not even a publication like The New Times, with its strong allegiance to the president’s office, can escape the government’s watchful eye. When I contacted the newspaper last September about a summer internship, a man named Joseph Bideri was the managing director and editor-in-chief of The New Times. Arrested on November 14th, 2011, he was interrogated for the newspaper’s coverage of alleged government malpractices. Though he was ultimately released from prison, he was banned from returning to the newspaper, and by the time I arrived for my internship a new editor had filled the position.37

In a recent journalism class my professor reminded me that “No civilized society functions with a media void of regulation.” A few years after the Founding Fathers secured the First Amendment rights in the American Bill of Rights they passed the Sedition Act of 1789, which placed significant restrictions on the practices of free speech and free press. Even in the United States, leaders seemed to hesitate to trust the populous with such a right.

In Rwanda, redefining the media after the vituperative effect it had on the genocide is a large challenge. The added media restraints, nevertheless, make it seemingly impossible for journalists to hold the government, and the populace, accountable for its past.

A reporter associated with The New Times admitted to me “There are some things we say, and some things we don’t.” I wondered what he meant by this and who decided the distinction.

Privately owned with “strong government support,” The New Times is frequently criticized for its close-knit relationship with Kagame. When I once made a comment about the poor photo quality in the newspaper, I learned that the newspaper doesn’t actually own a printing press. Rather, it uses a government service, nestled in the bottom of the parliament building.

Government funding of the news does not necessarily indicate a pro-government bias. Other governments around the world directly fund national news outlets: England has the BBC, Canada has the CBC, America has PBS and NPR. In fact, many people feel these are the most objective news sources in their countries.38 What makes the Rwandan media situation different is that the government does not just help to fund The New Times; it seems to control it.

I watch the New York Times photographer, a Canadian man about my age, stray from the rest of the press. He experiments with light, shadow, depth of field. So long as the security guards surrounding the presidents don’t push him aside for getting too close, he has free reign to tell the story he sees fit.

While my situation as intern for The New Times allows me to capture whatever images I want as well, my experiences photographing President Kagame before have taught me that regardless of what photos I take the government will get the final say on what goes to print. At the country’s 50th Independence Day celebration, I was required to send my photographs of Kagame to his office directly afterwards for approval. Kitty Llewellyn, a U.S. citizen and former editor for The New Times Sunday section, confirmed in a 2008 correspondence with the U.S. Embassy “…[t]hat the Office of the President sends and approves images of President Kagame used on the front page of the paper.”39

I flinch at the thought of government control. In the United States, I’ve grown accustomed to a media that controls the government. Many even argued that the recent 2012 presidential race was influenced by liberal-leaning political press coverage.40 Regardless of partisanship, I would never think to show the president of my American university an article about him before it was published in the campus newspaper. I would never trust an article in The New York Times that needed to be approved first by President Obama. I would worry for the sake of censorship. In Rwanda, despite the fact that Article 34 of the Constitution, revised several times since 1995, secures “freedom of press and freedom of information,” many subsequent clauses loosely define circumstances in which the government can control the media.41 One clause in particular, from my standpoint, seems to be in image-making.

The image of Kagame is highly crafted. His face hangs in every storefront and public space throughout Rwanda. I zoom in to watch his casual interactions with the Clintons. His arms are loosely crossed.

At the Independence Day celebration Kagame seemed a bit sterner. He stood before the stadium, fists tightly clenched by his sides. His message, consistent with his portrait throughout Rwanda, is of
power. Internationally, however, Kagame has very little. The picture the foreign press paints of him, positive or negative, is out of his control. Many people are proud of the self-reliance embedded in his innovative models for foreign aid, and credit him for the progress he has brought within Rwanda. Others, including New York Times columnist Marc Sommers, feel that “he does not merit his reputation as a visionary modernizer” because his regime is “all about force.” In essence, what Sommers touches on is the virtue of free speech.

I have continually subscribed to the idea that free speech is an indication of a stable society; after all, the motto of the liberal arts university I attend near Boston is “Truth, even unto its innermost parts.” Nonetheless, in a November 2011 interview with International Reporting Project journalists Kagame challenged this very notion. “If you have politics that concentrate on making people understand that they are different and they should be at each other because of their differences instead of getting together in spite of their differences,” the president said, “that’s exactly where the problem starts.”

The government sends strong messages that the people must make amends and find ways to reunify. It does not matter who is Hutu or who is Tutsi, though a few years back it meant life or death. Peace is more important to the government. What is inconsistent in this argument, however, is that peace connotes the importance of peace over truth. He wrote, “I acknowledge that to molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine, or practicing worship merely religious or spiritual, it is to persecute him, and such a person (whatever his doctrine or practice be, true or false) suffereth persecution for conscience.”

If Kagame’s ultimate goal is peace, why does he silence the dissent of others? The message he sends instead is that there’s only one truth, and he decides it.

I center Kagame in my viewfinder. His dark mustard buries the movement of his upper lip as he wraps up his conversation with Bill Clinton. His soft-spoken nature stands in contrast to his militant policies. His reserve, however, is quite similar to that of the people he governs. Throughout Rwanda, tall gates block the homes of residents. Mistrust permeates the country, as it did from the rift between neighbors in the genocide. Eighteen years following, I question if the rift is the reason Kagame is so unwavering in his politics. Is his tough backbone a response to the fear of his people? To understand the underlying fear of free speech is to begin to assess what a society needs to implement it. How can people in Rwanda speak openly when the past has understandably led to a closed and protective society? The answer does not seem simple. It might take more than a free press to solve.

Caught in the Image: Rwanda Moving Forward

November 28th, 2012. “In Rwanda, we wait for violence.” He strokes the ends of his wispy mustache and glances around the empty student lounge. It is the intimate thought of a Rwandan abroad, momentarily freed and quietly desperate to escape the persecution of his homeland’s government. At an American university near Boston, Massachusetts, I feel safe. My eight-week summer experience in the East African country feels distant and compact. Yet free speech for him is still high risk and he hints at the notion that trouble is brewing.

Today the NPR show “On Point,” hosted by Tom Ashbrook, was dedicated to discussing the recent developments of fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). “In the last week, rebel soldiers have been on the move again. It can all seem murky and far away. But little neighboring Rwanda — a darling of many Americans — is playing a big, controversial role,” Ashbrook says. He refers to reports that link the current Rwandan government to rebel groups causing violence in the DRC. A political reporter who’d worked in the Great Lakes region of Africa for several years adds, “It looks like the glow around Kagame is starting to fade.”

With growing internal and external media criticism of Rwanda’s current president (and government at large), the question is what will happen to the country’s political climate within the next few years? After all, the country’s elections are approaching in 2015. More importantly, at least from my perspective, is what will happen to the media (specifically The New Times).
The Rwandan student beside me clasps his hands and admits to the vulnerability of his country post-genocide.

“We needed some sort of censorship, or regulation of speech, to let the people heal.” His tone, feeble and raw, reminds me of how I felt in the aftermath of my own time of loss.

I wonder if the Rwandan people feel the same looking at Kagame. The stringent regime of the current president could arguably be seen as a scaffold. For the past 18 years, it has offered a protection and forceful embrace to Rwanda, similar to what I too needed in order to recover from the instability of loss. With the passage of time, and the abuses of unhealthy relationships too strong to bear, I realize I am stronger without them. Maybe Rwanda, as seen in the growing number of people – the students and the journalists – willing to speak out against the government, is coming to that same conclusion.

Notes


3. The Belgians gained control over Rwanda from the Germans following World War I. Waller, David. *Rwanda, Which Way Now?*


7. He showed me over ten people he was “friends” with on Facebook who fit the new racial hybrids but because of today’s strict government regulations against classifying ethnic groups, official statistics on intermarriage rates are unavailable.


10. The Bosnian genocide also relied on media, when Serbian forces seized control over television networks and broadcasted anti-Croat and anti-Muslim messages on them. According to a British journalist, Ed Vulliamy, who was reporting on it at the time, ‘It was a message of urgency, a threat to your people, to your nation, a call to arms, and yes, a sort of instruction to go to war for your people.... It pushed and pushed. It was rather like a sort of hammer bashing on peoples’ heads, I suppose.”

Almost five months ago I stood in the sweltering sun documenting the 50th anniversary of Rwanda’s independence. Yet, it seems a new push for independence might be needed. The Rwandan student beside me clasps his hands and admits to the vulnerability of his country post-genocide. “We needed some sort of censorship, or regulation of speech, to let the people heal.” His tone, feeble and raw, reminds me of how I felt in the aftermath of my own time of loss. Two years since my dad died, I question why I immersed myself in the abuses of friendships that did not work. Looking back, however, I try to be sympathetic to the true extremities of my own pain. The idea of support was overwhelmingly attractive.


30. For the past two days, Bill and Chelsea Clinton have toured the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Rwanda, largely focusing on the work of the Clinton Health Access Initiative. The first day, the Clintons, together with Dr. Paul Farmer, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Partners in Health and the Jeff Gordon Children’s Foundation, opened the first cancer treatment center in the country. Though the international press flocked to the story of cancer treatment in Rwanda, the Boston Globe publishing the news on its front page, Kagame was unable to accompany the Clintons. The second day, the Rwandan president is able to make it and together the diplomats meet with nursing students in the school in Rwamagana.


32. Interview on Monday, November 17th, 2012


Two rockets have just flown over us,” says Mahmoud with a battered voice over the phone. “Things are about to get really ugly, Andrea.” His joyful and energetic personality was no longer there; not today. I had never heard him that way.

It is Friday November 16th, 2012 – the third day of the latest hostilities between Hamas and Israel. Two rockets launched from Gaza have just landed near Gush Etzion, one of the biggest illegal Israeli settlements within the West Bank. An unprecedented event in history, as Hamas rockets have never achieved such a range. Flying over 80km, it presents an alarming reality for Israel: half of the country is now within missile reach.

Less than four months ago, I would have been there with Mahmoud in Deheisha refugee camp, watching the rockets fly over our heads and waiting for the sound of the explosion as they landed. Located in the outskirts of Bethlehem – and just a few minutes away from Gush Etzion – Deheisha became my home over the summer. I volunteered in one of its refugee-run community centers, called Al-Feniq, which advocates for Palestinian refugees’ human, civil and political rights.1 There, I worked on translations, webpage development, and grant proposals, but most importantly conducted a series of interviews for a future film compilation with members of the camp in their early 20s regarding what their lives are like. It is in Al-Feniq that I met Mahmoud, also a volunteer and a refugee himself who took me under his wing all summer. But today, as I talk to him over the phone, I am sitting outside of my residence dorm in a sunny but cold winter morning on the other side of the world, in Waltham, Massachusetts.

“Clashes have already started throughout all of the West Bank, and Bethlehem is being cracked down as we speak,” says Mahmoud. I cringe….

He points out that even if the West Bank is momentarily contained, it will just be a matter of time until the uprising starts again. But as Mahmoud and the rest of my Palestinian friends take to the streets to face rubber bullets and tear gas from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), my close Israeli friends at the predominantly Jewish American college I attend are being drafted back into the army. Their friends and siblings are already on the field, and sirens are going off in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the first time in over two decades. Their families will remain near bomb shelters, and the possibility of having to evacuate their cities to take refuge in the north of Israel is not far-fetched.

Between rockets falling in Tel Aviv and bloody clashes in the streets of Bethlehem, I am caught in between. Not being Jewish, Muslim, Israeli or Palestinian, but rather a 21-year-old young woman from the Dominican Republic, I am the epitome of the outsider. But precisely because of it I am granted the privilege of having access and strong ties to both sides – a privilege that now has me unexpectedly being torn apart by two worlds, trapped in parallel and seemingly opposite realities whose future is actually intrinsically and inseparably bound.2

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been one of the most prolonged, unstable and impactful conflicts of modern times. Having great regional and international repercussions, it has been under the spotlight of world politics for numerous decades and continues to be today. While both Israeli and Palestinian narratives of
the conflict have received wide attention from the international media, the lives, circumstances and claims of Palestinian refugees have received considerably less. With 7 million out of the 9.3 million total Palestinian population being refugees living throughout Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt), they are an indispensable third actor to take into account. Without their participation, all possibilities of a viable political solution to the conflict remain impossible. Achieving sustainable peace in the region will depend to a large extent on the manner in which the issue of Palestinian refugees is addressed.

Though utterly important in order to fully grasp the profound complexities of the conflict and thus attain a thorough understanding of it, taking into account all existing narratives of the conflict is a significant feat that lies beyond the limited scope of this paper. Nevertheless, doing so is undeniably a crucial and imperative task that has been and must continue to be undertaken elsewhere in great depth.

This essay will explicitly try to shed light on only one of the multiple versions of the lived truth as subjectively experienced and interpreted by one of its many actors, those whom I lived with and learned from this summer: Palestinian refugees living within the West Bank. Who are they and what are some of the components that shape their identity? In an attempt to answer these questions, I will present the story of three Palestinian refugees as recounted through their perspectives, each illustrating how the effects of their past, present and prospective future merge as one in forging their identity. I will argue that refugees within the West Bank derive their sense of self from a simultaneously three-dimensional time in which the longing for the return to their past, the efforts to cope with the hardships of the present and their attempts to establish the groundwork for the betterment of their future circumstances comprise some of the most important elements of their identity.

Tamer, a teenage falafel vender from Balata refugee camp, will show us how refugee identity is specifically constructed around the “right of return” and the fundamental role that memory and oral history play within it. Intisar, mother of six in Arroub refugee camp, will tell us the numerous ways in which their present circumstances of being positioned against both the Israeli military occupation and non-refugee Palestinian society shape refugee subject formation. Lastly, Mahmoud, from Deheisha refugee camp, will show us that for refugees, advocating for a better future is in itself a form of resistance.

**Historical Framework of Palestinian Refugees**

The following account of historical events, as well as those that will be presented throughout the rest of this paper, will only comprise the ones that are specifically concerned with and ultimately constitute the Palestinian refugee narrative – as it was recounted to me and as I was exposed to throughout my stay with refugees over the summer.

May 14th, 1948. For Israel its date of birth, the fulfillment of a dream as a Jewish state. For Palestinians the Nakba – the Catastrophe – the start of a life in exile. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War had “consequences and impacts [that] go beyond the geographical limit of the area and the historical time in which it occurred.” Throughout the war and immediately after the establishment of the state of Israel, 750,000 Palestinians were either forced to leave or fled from their homes at the sight of neighboring villages being attacked. In its aftermath, around 418 Palestinian villages from the total 600 that fell under Israeli control had been destroyed. While most of these villages no longer exist, some others remained standing and were resettled with Jewish immigrants arriving in the newborn Israeli state in the wake of the Holocaust.

The 1948 Palestinian mass exodus resulted in the creation of 58 refugee camps spread across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank. These enclaves of land, rented by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), were originally conceived to offer a temporary shelter of fabric tents for these fleeing refugees. Sixty-four years later, all 58 camps still exist – sheltering more than 1.4 million Palestinian refugees who still await their return to their land.

Despite being in exile for decades, refugees have largely not been assimilated into the populations of their host countries. Up to this day, some of these governments only grant Palestinian refugees a temporary status within their territory with no civil or political rights, that confines them to the boundaries of the camp. This has contributed to the formation of Palestinian refugee identity as a distinct, unified group that exists outside of the societies they live in.

Refugees living in camps do not fall under the authority of their host countries, but rather under the jurisdiction of UNRWA, which supplies them with basic needs. Today, these camps have become jungles of concrete buildings characterized by critical overpopulation and by severe conditions of impoverishment despite UNRWA’s efforts. They are subject to conditions of “low employment, poverty, fragile health systems and high infant mortality,” characteristics that are not unique to Palestinian refugees but are rather shared by numerous other refugee situations across the world.
Though being a highly debated and contested subject, one of the many academic arguments suggests that five unique elements of the Palestinian case set them apart from other refugee cases around the world: (1) Its significant longevity. Created in 1948, the Palestinian refugee situation is a multigenerational one that constitutes the “longest running refugee case in the world.” (2) Its demography. With a total of 7 million Palestinian refugees — constituting three quarters of the total Palestinian population — they are the “largest refugee and displaced persons population in the world.” (3) Complexity of legal status. Palestinian refugees are registered under UNRWA, the only ad hoc organization that specifically exists to provide services to a single population, instead of falling under the umbrella of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) like all other cases. Because only 5 million of all refugees are registered under UNRWA, the proper definition of a Palestinian refugee is greatly disputed. (4) Nature of displacement. Unlike the majority of cases where safety or political settlements are the central issues standing between refugees’ ability to return to their original homes, Palestinians refugees are denied return by Israel based “upon religion and ethnicity.” (5) Lack of sovereignty. “Repatriation” of refugees becomes an unfitting term, as Palestinians no longer have jurisdiction over the territory they claim — it is now a state that belongs to others.

In the particular case of the segment of Palestinian refugees this essay is concerned with – those living inside the West Bank — it must be kept in mind that apart from their condition as refugees they are also subject to, next to the non-refugee populations in both West Bank and Gaza, a life under Israeli military occupation ever since Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War. It is with the above stated framework in mind that this essay will analyze Palestinian refugee identity within the West Bank by specifically looking at the influences exerted by conceptions of their past, present and future.

### Tamer, Balata Refugee Camp

**“The Role of the Living Past”**

**Holding On to the Right of Return**

“This is not our home, you know?” says a young boy in front of me. His wide dark eyes look at me with a strong assertiveness uncharacteristic of his age. Bony bodied, with thick hair and ragged clothes, he does not seem to be more than 13 years old. Yet he speaks to me with the self-confidence of an adult.

“We will return,” he affirms, matter-of-factly. Following the establishment of Israel and the 1948 War, the UN General Assembly approved Resolution 194 which stated that all refugees that wished to “return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors were permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date” or would otherwise receive compensation for their property if they chose not to return. The claim to the right of return is further based on the recognition that a state cannot “legally expel a population under its control, and that those who are expelled have a right to reverse this illegal act and return to their homeland.”

**“Inta min we’en? Where are you from?”** I ask, with the little Arabic that I have learned so far.

“I am from Lydda, near Jaffa,” answers the boy as he prepares a falafel for me. “Pickles?”

“Lah, no thank you,” I reply.

In a matter of a few months, 600,000 Jews succeeded in overpowering an Arab population twice its size and taking possession of their land. Despite pressure from the UN, Israel’s commitment to this new demographic status of Jewish majority that resulted from the mass exodus of Palestinians “took the form of firm opposition to the return of the refugees.” For Israel, allowing three quarters of a million refugees to return to their homes presented an existential impasse: the end of Israel explicitly conceived as a Jewish state.

Sixty-four years later, the Right of Return remains denied. Generations of Palestinian refugees and their descendants continue to claim it year after year. Instead of fading away as new generations branch out, refugees’ “refusal to be marginalized and absorbed into the region reflects a nationalism that has deepened and consolidated despite fragmentation and exile.” Their resolute determination to hold on to the Right of Return has become the very cornerstone of Palestinian refugee identity.

“How much do I owe you?” I ask Tamer as he hands me a sizable falafel dripping with tahini sauce while he oversees his family’s falafel stand in the main street of Balata refugee camp.
“Two shekels,” he answers. 50 cents of a dollar. A stark contrast to the 16 shekel falafel I ate in Tel Aviv last week. Handing him the small silver coin, I sit on one of the two chairs available. Tamer proceeds to sit next to me; I smile.

Located outside the Palestinian city of Nablus, Balata was created in 1950 to shelter 6,000 Palestinians from 60 different villages in now proper-Israel. It is one of the 19 refugee camps that are located within the West Bank, significantly outranking all of them in population, but also in human density. UNRWA reports having 24,000 registered refugees living in a space of 0.25 square kilometers, one of the highest population densities in the world. According to local residents, however, the real population of the camp is around 30,000 refugees.

“But you were born here, right?” I ask.

“Yes, and so were my parents. I’ve never really been outside of the camp. Come, I’ll show you around,” he says enthusiastically, appointing himself my personal tour guide.

Tamer’s conception of the world is confined to the parameters of the camp. What used to be an ensemble of UNRWA tents in the early 1950’s is now a chaotic ocean of run-down concrete buildings tightly built and gloomed onto one another – characteristics resembling an overcrowded urban slum. Tamer takes me through the narrow winding alleys of Balata that measure less than half a meter wide, sometimes even as narrow as shoulder width. There is no ventilation, no light, almost no air to breathe. High walls of three-floor buildings built centimeters from each other only let you see thin strips of the sky above. As the population of Balata increased, refugees have had to build upward as they are not allowed to construct outside of the originally allocated 0.25 square kilometers.

I wonder what it must have been like for Tamer to grow up in this constricted and overpopulated environment. While children back home in the Dominican Republic grow up playing bitilla – a simplified version of baseball – in parks or parking lots, children inside Balata have no open place to play in. The dirty and suffocating alleys of the camp are the only place they have to be.

Decades of living solely within the camp and new generations like Tamer never having lived anywhere other than inside its boundaries, stand in direct contradiction to the conception of a refugee camp as a transitory place of residence. Nevertheless, authors argue that the internalization of the Right of Return within refugee identity and the consequent perception of their situation as being fundamentally temporary serve a crucial function: the promise of one day going back to a life of farming and physical freedom make the camp’s harsh living conditions more possible to endure.

“It’s Tuesday. Aren’t you supposed to be at school, Tamer?” I ask.

Forty percent of Balata’s total population is under 14 years of age, and 61 percent is under 24. Only four UNRWA schools – two for boys, two for girls – supply the entire camp with limited education up to 8th grade. Despite UNRWA’s efforts, educational conditions in the camp are still precarious. Schools are forced to run in two shifts, with classrooms hosting over 50 children at a time.

“My dad needed me to work today,” he says. The small falafel stand is the only means of subsistence for Tamer’s household of eight. But owning a falafel stand already is an advantaged position within Balata refugee camp, where a quarter of the population is officially unemployed – not including women and children.

The rate of household poverty stands at 49.7 percent and those living under extreme poverty is at 30.8 percent, considered a conservative statistic by locals. Most families have to resort to living meagerly from vegetable and fruit mini-markets that they open in their own living rooms.

Refugee camps are markedly the poorest communities within the West Bank. But despite this reality, refugees remain living in the camps instead of assimilating into the non-refugee Palestinian society which – albeit living under Israeli military occupation – generally enjoys a higher standard of living. This possibility of assimilation does not exist for many of their counterparts in neighboring Arab countries. This is greatly due, on the one hand, to the inability to afford a life outside the camp. On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, many refugees choose to live within the camp out of ideological principle and conviction: the camp is an essential component of what defines them as refugees.

“Tamer, how come you consider yourself a refugee if you live inside Palestine, in the West Bank?” I ask.

“Palestine is all of historical Palestine. Abbas is trying to kill Palestine with his UN bid for statehood.” he replies.

“So you are against the two-state solution? I probe.

Before coming to the West Bank this summer, it had seemed to me that the idea of achieving two states – an Israeli one living side by side with a Palestinian one – was the universally accepted solution to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My encounter with refugees proved otherwise.

“Of course! Having two states would mean giving up on our homes and all the land that the Jews took away from us.” he says.
Refugees are by principle opposed to the idea of an independent Palestinian state consisting of the West Bank and Gaza as delimited by the 1967 borders, if the price to pay for it entails renouncing to their Right of Return. For them, Palestine should be a single unified territory, what it once used to be during the British mandate before the UN partition plan of 1947 and the founding of the state of Israel. They see the initial displacement of the Nakba as a mass humanitarian injustice that resulted in the establishment of a foreign state upon their land. But even if Israel was originally ‘artificially’ created, the reality in place today determines that its existence as a sovereign state cannot be contested. The only possible resolution for an Israel conceived as a Jewish state that is existentially unwilling to absorb the Palestinians in exile seems to be the creation of two states. But for the 7 million refugees living in the oPt and neighboring Arab countries that adamantly hold on to their right of return, this is also a stark impossibility. Taking into account that refugees make up 70 percent of the entire Palestinian population, can a two-state solution even be viably implemented?

The Claiming Force of Memory

“Tamer, so it was your grandparents who first came to Balata?” I ask, intrigued.

“Yes, I’m a third generation refugee,” he says. “The only one alive who has seen our home in Lydda is my grandmother, who just turned 80. She still has the keys to our house.”

Having the key to her childhood house in Lydda is not an unusual story. It is common among Palestinian refugees who had to abandon their homes at the outbreak of the 1948 war: a symbol that they will one day return. But Lydda as Tamer’s grandmother remembers it no longer exists. It was one of the Palestinian villages that was taken over during the Nakba, and is now an Israeli city renamed “Lod” located to the southeast of Tel Aviv.

“My grandmother always tells us the stories of how she grew up playing at the beach. I wonder if the sea is really like she says it is.”

The fact that Tamer considers Lydda to be his home – despite never having lived there or even seen it – is the product of the strong connections he has developed towards that land grounded on the stories told by his grandmother; stories with the power to create binding emotional ties that allow Tamer to nevertheless draw fish swimming in the sea. The sum of these narratives constitutes Palestinian refugees’ symbolically constructed shared identity. Collective memory as considered by academics “needs not reflect truth; instead, it portrays a truth that is functional for a group’s ongoing existence.” These authors argue that “the social reality of the present explains the past,” and that collective memory is therefore self-fulfilling, biased, selective and appropriately distorted. In this sense, scholars state that memories reminiscent of a better past life actually serve as a coping mechanism for Palestinian refugees to bear the privations of life in exile within the austere conditions of the camp.

Through their recurrent telling and the added impact of their collectivization, these memories have become “fossilized” over time to become a central component of refugee consciousness that functions through continued affirmation. Tamer’s identity as a refugee is built on a firmly established culture of oral shared history that is passed down from generation to generation. It stems from the constant recreation of a wholesome life that once belonged to them, and a determination to never give up the right to return to it.

But the transmission of identity through memory and oral history is not only proper to Palestinian refugees. It fits into a broader scheme perpetuated by populations subject to exile or forced migration all throughout history, where retrospection is the central axis around which identity is forged, seeking to “anchor the present in the past.”

“My grandmother always tells us the stories of how she grew up playing at the beach. I wonder if the sea is really like she says it is.”

This common feature of life in exile is one that I happen to be familiar with: I, myself, was also born into one of these families. My grandparents, initially supporters of the Cuban Revolution like most Cubans at the time, later had to flee their country with my father and uncles into political exile after Fidel Castro installed a regime of terror. None of them has been able to go back to Cuba since. They were forced to leave their entire lives behind, never again to see their friends and family.

Just like Tamer’s grandmother.

“But after living in Balata for more than six decades, wouldn’t you and your family consider that this is now your home?” I ask, confused, remembering my own family’s past as they ended up taking refuge in the Dominican Republic – the country that we now consider our home.

“No. We might have lived here all our lives, but this will never be our true home... We cannot be wronged forever. The injustice committed against us will eventually
be redressed; we will return,” he says emphatically.

For my grandmother, even after more than four decades living in exile and raising her kids and grandchildren in the Dominican Republic, home will always be Cuba. The nostalgic pain in my grandmother’s eyes reminiscing about a life that could have been but never was, is the same that I now see in the eyes of the older generation of refugees that I met this summer. The dreams of being able to return one day are the timeless curse that will always haunt the minds and hearts of those who were forced to leave.41

Though Tamer and I both share a family story of exile, there is a crucial difference between us: my generation, unlike his, did not grow up holding on to Cuban identity and the dream of one day going back. We were able to assimilate into Dominican society, and today call it our country. For Tamer, however, this has not been possible. Refugees are discriminated against within non-refugee Palestinian society in the West Bank, a subject that I will be discussing later, and their shared identity of inherited memories and an oral history unites them as an indivisible family distinct from and in opposition to other non-refugee Palestinians who did not endure the specific consequences of the exodus.

“Stan’na, wait for me here,” Tamer says at one point, while disappearing through the narrow alleys.

In front of me, graffiti on the wall reads “No peace without return to our homes.” But the long-lost homes of these refugees no longer exist. Their villages effaced from the map, Hebrew-named cities and synagogues stand now in their place. Hundreds of Jewish families have lived in them for over half a century, birthing three generations that now also call it ‘home.’

“We will never give up our right of return,” say the walls. But a return to where? I ask myself.

**Intisar, Arroub Refugee Camp**

**“The Present as a Chisel”**

**Subject Formation vis-à-vis Israeli Occupation**

“Weh bid’di shai? Would you like some tea?” asks Intisar.42 Not waiting for an answer, she pours mint tea into two small glass cups.

In her late 50s, Intisar is wearing a beautiful long black thob adorned with handmade, vivid-red traditional Palestinian embroidery designs, and a perfectly matching hijab. I wonder how she manages to resist the overwhelming summer heat while still looking impeccably elegant.

I look at Intisar and notice her deep wrinkles as they map themselves out over her face. I catch her eyes in a brief glimpse, their darkness and lost look revealing without words that she has not had an easy life. We are sitting in a very small room in Intisar’s house, maybe big enough for three. The walls are filled with banners and posters of three political prisoners; it reminds me of a mausoleum. But these are not just any prisoners – they are Intisar’s children. She points at a set of abstract paintings hanging from the front wall.

“It is the artwork that they have sent me from prison,” she says melancholically, a weak half-smile trying to appear on her face. “Beautiful, aren’t they?”

Mother of six, Intisar lives in a refugee camp called Arroub, right on the highway that connects Jerusalem with Hebron.

Ever since 1967, refugees within the West Bank, like non-refugee Palestinians, are subject to a life under Israeli military occupation characterized by movement restrictions, checkpoints, confiscation of land, and military raids.

“They arrested the three of them, all within the same day. Fatima was recently released, but my two eldest sons, Yusuf and Malik, are still in jail,” she explains.

They were arrested under administrative detention, the common Israeli military practice of preemptively detaining Palestinians – particularly young males – without any charges and without a trial for an indefinite period of time. Yusuf and Malik are among the 4,600 Palestinian political prisoners currently incarcerated in Israeli jails; Intisar, merely one of thousands of grieving mothers.43

Refugee camps across the West Bank are specifically targeted by regular IDF military raids; during my stay in one over the summer, they averaged from two to four times a week. Nightly arrests and incursions of soldiers into the camps are a routine part of refugee life. Interestingly, it is precisely in this interaction with, as well as in opposition to, Israeli authority that refugee identity is to a large extent formed. All development and maintenance of identity “requires the existence of another, different and competing alter ego.”44 The concept of binarism – the idea of two extreme opposites – inherently plays a central role in every process of subject formation. That is, identity construction revolves around the image of the “Other,” in contrast to which the subject is able to define itself according to what it is not.

In the case of camp-dwellers within the West Bank, the encounter with Israel is an integral part of who they consider themselves to be. If Israeli soldiers who break into the camp are perceived as
perpetrators of injustice, oppression and humiliation, then Palestinian refugees in turn conceive themselves as morally superior, heroic and selfless in their willingness to sacrifice their lives by confronting the soldiers during the night raids in the name of justice, seeing it as an honorable act of protecting their community.

“Both of my sons are part of the hunger strike,” says Intisar, this time suggesting a sense of pride in what she is saying.

What Intisar is referring to is a movement that has recently taken place across Israeli prisons, where Palestinian political prisoners are undertaking a mass hunger strike demanding better treatment and living conditions within the jails. In the formation of refugee identity, the process of self-definition through binaries creates an inversion of values. The endurance of suffering and abuse now becomes an act of heroism, a source of pride through which to acquire a “sense of moral righteousness from self-sacrifice,” not only for the individual, but also for his/her entire family. It is an elevation of social status within the camp.

This logic, however, is not only relevant to political prisoners. It is applied to the endurance of any kind of abuse perpetrated by the “Other,” in this case the occupying Israeli, and in particular to the act of contesting it. Those who seem to have internalized this the most have been the shebab, the male youth of the camp.

“Neighbors on the highway call us to let us know the soldiers are on their way, and the entire camp then expects them prepared,” explains Intisar while sipping from her cup of tea.

“How so?” I ask, intrigued.

“Every time the soldiers come in, the shebab, the youth, fill up the alleys of the camp in order to throw stones at them and often end up facing tear gas in response,” she explains.

The shebab in Palestinian refugee camps have taken upon their shoulders the responsibility to defend their camp. By throwing stones at the soldiers and at times even making homemade Molotov cocktails to retaliate against soldiers’ bullets, they take on the task to slow down the soldiers as much as they can in order to give those they came to arrest enough time to either hide or escape.

“I prohibited my children from being in these clashes, but I knew they still did it behind my back,” says Intisar.

Unlike what many interpretations might suggest, throwing rocks and fabricating homemade Molotov cocktails within the camp are not acts of gratuitous violence. From my interactions with young refugees over the summer, I gathered that for them these acts were not only a form of contestation and self-defense, but also a source from which to derive dignity in the midst of repression. Moreover, failure to act is perceived within camp culture as a “betrayal of one’s ideals, loved ones, and country” — an automatic stripping away of one’s manhood.

But most importantly, through these acts refugees are able to actively reassert a crucial aspect of their identity. The enduring of violence as a group and especially the act of contesting it unites the camp with indivisible bonds, becoming a fortified family where everyone defends and protects one another.

Though contestation to military raids is an assertion of collective heroism and shared experience, it also encapsulates a competitive individual element. The more “bravely” young boys contest Israeli authority, the higher status and respectability they achieve within the shebab. As one scholar describes it, beyond “the beatings, arrests, and injuries with a bullet (...) emerge[s] a cool, hip experience among the group. (...) Engaging in these activities and narrating the engagements [is] a source of prestige. The Israeli army [becomes] the game in town. (...) Tackling them is the way to define oneself within the group.”

Intisar grabs the kettle and pours more tea. “The younger kids who can’t go out to the streets in the confrontations set out early the next morning to find as many rubber bullets as they can, and to bet with one another what kind of machine guns the soldiers were using according to the sound of the gunshots,” she says, almost with a laugh.

How different my childhood was…. But the youth of the camp are not the only ones shaped by the recurrent encounters with Israeli authority. The role of women has also been considerably impacted.

“We mothers have to live perpetually on the edge of our nerves, not knowing if our boys will be the ones arrested next. Every time I heard the soldiers were coming, I would wake up my children and have them be properly dressed and with shoes in case the soldiers came for them, because they won’t let them take anything with them. And a year and a half ago, they finally came for my boys.”

Intisar’s husband died several years ago, and Yusuf and Malik became the breadwinners of the family. Since their incarceration, however, Intisar has had to open up a small grocery store in her living room, and sews traditional Palestinian clothing to sell to tourists in Hebron in order to keep her household afloat.
Military raids within the camps have significantly altered the traditional family structure of its inhabitants, and, women’s construction of identity inside it as well. With husbands and sons in jail, many Palestinian women in refugee camps have had to step up into becoming the economic heads of their families, an unknown or sometimes uncomfortable position, coming from the normally accustomed domestic role they used to fulfill.\textsuperscript{53}

Moreover, to a large extent women have had to also assume the role of communal caregivers and protectors by taking care of the injured.

“If somebody in the camp is wounded, we cannot take him to the nearest hospital. That would entail revealing his identity to the authorities. They would immediately arrest him for being subversive,” she explains.

Women, as the designated go-to nurses in the camp, have had to learn basic medical techniques like suturing, bandaging, and preventing wounds from getting infected.

“But why would it be unsafe, if they’re sent to Palestinian hospitals?” I ask, her statement seeming counterintuitive.

“You can never know who might turn them in…” she replies, her eyes locking with mine.

Non-Refugees as the other “Other”

Intisar is hinting at the social and political division that exists between Palestinian refugee and non-refugee populations within the West Bank. Some academics argue that the origins of this division lie in refugees’ landlessness. That is, the uprooting refugees underwent during the Nakba deprived them of “their social status, both in their own eyes and in those of neighboring populations, including non-refugee Palestinians.”\textsuperscript{54} Though my natural assumption had been that all Palestinians living in the West Bank shared the same “Palestinianness,” the inferior status attributed to refugees sets them apart from the larger society as a distinct marginalized group. This social status is not only assigned to individuals, but to entire families, who cannot be “divorced from their refugee heritage.”\textsuperscript{55} The fact that they also happen to be the poorest segment of the population further reinforces this notion by adding a socio-economic dimension to this hierarchy.

“They are not like us,” reaffirms Intisar.

Systematic discrimination based on alleged inferiority has led refugees to contest it by also defining themselves as a group apart.\textsuperscript{56} In their eyes, they constitute a much stronger and more dignified group whose history of struggle entitles them to embody the real meaning of “Palestinianhood,” unlike non-refugees who have not experienced the adversities refugees have. Refugee identity is once again, as it happens vis-a-vis Israeli authority, constituted not only in contrast to non-refugee Palestinian society, but also through an inversion of the table of values. Enduring suffering in their condition of poverty, but most importantly through the experience of mass exodus not lived by non-refugees, becomes for them the repository of collective dignity and the source of a superior national consciousness.

“Abbas and his people are puppets of the Israeli government, always doing as they are told and betraying their country. Who are they to give off our land?” asks Intisar.

Refugees are the first ones to contest the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and mobilize against their pursuit of a two state solution, whether it is done through negotiations with Israel or through a UN bid for statehood: refugees understand that the PA destroys their right of return by confining “refugee rights to what Israel [is] willing to concede.”\textsuperscript{57} Because refugees are the ones who have the most at stake in any settlement, they are known to be the most politically active segment of the population within the West Bank.\textsuperscript{58} This has led the PA to also carry out police raids throughout refugee camps in an attempt to mute any inner dissidence or disruption that might jeopardize the fragile negotiations it manages to have with Israel. These factors have at times produced an element of mutual resentment between both refugee and non-refugee populations.

But despite being excluded by non-refugee society and confronted by the PA, refugees’ widespread and organized political involvement has led them, in times of crisis, to spearhead the Palestinian resistance movement as a whole. To a large extent, both the First and Second Intifadas were initially fueled by and made possible due to the uprising and revolts that emerged from refugee camps. Because of their respected leadership in these times of crisis, refugees have been able to exert great political pressure on the PA.\textsuperscript{59} As outspoken and crucial political players, they have gained the entitlement to “representation in national institutions, settlement negotiations and in future Palestinian polity,”\textsuperscript{60} thus becoming subject to an intricate mixture of simultaneous marginalization and indispensability.
“Life under occupation, especially inside the camp, is really hard, Andrea,” says Mahmoud, looking me straight in the eyes. “And in the face of continuous repression, one can react in three ways: you can either become psychologically traumatized for life, you can join an armed struggle or an extremist group, or you can choose to devote your life to improving those of your people.”

PA or life in the camp – have succeeded in markedly chiseling their identity in many told and untold ways.

Mahmoud, Deheisha Refugee Camp
“Agency on the Road to a Better Future”

Counterbalancing Uncertainty
“Life under occupation, especially inside the camp, is really hard, Andrea,” says Mahmoud, looking me straight in the eyes. “And in the face of continuous repression, one can react in three ways: you can either become psychologically traumatized for life, you can join an armed struggle or an extremist group, or you can choose to devote your life to improving those of your people.”

He pauses and smiles. I let his words sink in.

“He chose the third option,” he says, referring to both his personal life and to Al-Feniq, the community advocacy center where I volunteered this summer. Short and fit, with a neatly groomed beard and black rectangular glasses that give him an intellectual aura, Mahmoud is a 24-year-old Palestinian refugee living in Deheisha camp. We are sitting on a bench overlooking Al-Feniq’s playground, the only recreational space available for its 13,000 inhabitants who live in a restrained allocated area of 0.3 square kilometers.

“It is the reason why Al-Feniq was created,” he continues. “My parents’ generation wanted to keep us away from the streets – away from the rubber bullets and tear gas. They wanted to spare their children from living the same life they did, of being either jailed or killed.”

“Has it worked?” I ask.

“Look around. What do you see?”

A group of a dozen 10-year-olds is playing in the swings and slides in front of us. The walls of the playground are covered in colorful murals, all painted by the children in Al-Feniq’s summer camp. Next to the playground is a big conference room, where a mosaic workshop for teenagers is taking place. A small but well-kept garden on its side offers a refreshing green area in contrast to the clogged greyness of the whole camp. Al-Feniq has also created an ongoing project of small-scale greenhouses placed on rooftops across Deheisha that currently grow fruits and vegetables.

Founded in 2000, Al-Feniq is a refugee-run organization that provides the residents of the camp with a wide range of opportunities that they would otherwise not have access to. It has its own theater group and performance stage, the only women’s gymnasium in the area, offers language courses, film and photography workshops, meditation classes, monthly political debates, and an extensive library freely accessible to all residents, to mention only a few of its numerous programs.

“The only time that I have been outside of Palestine was through Al-Feniq,” he says. “And seeing the world from the outside completely changed my life and the way I perceive things now.”

Mahmoud is referring to the cultural exchange programs that Al-Feniq organizes with partner organizations abroad. Next week, their theater group will be going to France to perform a play written by one of its members that raises awareness about Palestinian refugees. They perform regularly within the camp, using popular theater as a vehicle to transmit educational messages, like anti-drug campaigns and children’s rights.

Al-Feniq is one of the multiple examples of the extensive self-organization that takes place inside the refugee community. The implementation of these grassroots projects within the camps by their own inhabitants is an active reclaiming of agency and authorship over their future – otherwise essentially uncertain. But these projects also serve as a response to the patronizing or savior-like discourse of international NGOs that often try to dictate the parameters of what refugees “need” or how they should live their lives.

“Who knows our reality and our needs better than us?” Mahmud asks rhetorically.

Addressing their needs by themselves offers refugees a sense of self-assertion that weighs against the image and conception of a refugee living in perpetual
I gathered from numerous conversations and interviews throughout my stay in Deheisha that regardless of the practical and political feasibility of their dream, continuing to label themselves as refugees after 64 years in exile is a way of asserting that no matter the levels of repression or the adversities they are subject to, they will not cease to exist.

Helplessness and dispossession. It is a way of counteracting the status of inferiority that is attributed to them by non-refugee Palestinian society, a powerful mechanism of empowerment. But though these efforts build refugee identity in one way, they also contradict it. Refugees have to grapple with the challenge of trying to improve the living conditions of the camp without altering its “exceptionality.” These grassroots organizations are sometimes accused of contributing to the “normalization” of the camps’ circumstances, a feat that would eventually work against their own interests. Their community work undermines the level of urgency that is constitutive of refugee camps, precisely one of the key pieces of political leverage in demanding refugees’ right of return. Why implement durable solutions or invest in large-scale infrastructure when a camp is supposed to be a temporary place of residence? If the camp becomes a place with good living conditions, what would differentiate it from a normal city? Can it be called a camp at all? This would mean the assimilation of refugees into their host societies – the very relinquishment of who they define themselves to be.

The Pursuit of Wholeness

In the views of refugees, “the camp is the national symbol of the Palestinian struggle and is a source of pride.” Al-Feniq stands as an example of how Palestinian refugees embody the concept of sumud – steadfastness – the determination to persevere no matter the severity of the hardships that must be endured. The self-organization that takes place within the camps is a form of micro-resistance that lives the “national” in ways that the political leadership that claims to represent them does not – a way of constructing an alternative conception of the nation.

“We will never give up,” says Mahmoud with the same certainty that I find written on walls across the camps.

I gathered from numerous conversations and interviews throughout my stay in Deheisha that regardless of the practical and political feasibility of their dream, continuing to label themselves as refugees after 64 years in exile is a way of asserting that no matter the levels of repression or the adversities they are subject to, they will not cease to exist.

“Mahmoud, if you were given the right of return today, would you go back to your grandparents’ village?” I ask.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I would do. Maybe. Maybe not. But I want to be able to have the option to choose. That the world recognizes that we were wronged; that justice cannot forever be postponed.”

Taking into account the drastic rate of population increase of Palestinian refugees, it seems that their unresolved situation – and particularly the region’s ability to handle it – cannot be sustained indefinitely. While it is true that for Israel the right of return is beyond any possible discussion, Mahmoud’s assertion is also true: the refugee problem will not disappear.

On this highly contested subject, some academics argue that refugees’ demand for redress is a matter of acknowledging the right to return – regardless of whether the intention to exercise that right exists or not. They suggest that the idea of “fair peace” in the eyes of the wronged “can only be based on the healing of past wounds.”

As stated by Michael Dumper, “the status of being a refugee, of being displaced and of being in exile is experienced as a transitional phase, a place in waiting, of being incomplete, (…) reaffirmed by every checkpoint and every encounter with officialdom” so that it is only by finding a way of righting what was wronged that they can “achieve wholeness as individuals and as a people. (…) What comes across as intransigence is in fact a very personal need for completeness.”

Sitting on the elevated hill of Al-Feniq’s playground, I contemplate Deheisha spread before my eyes.

“Our revenge will be the smiles of our children,” says Mahmoud.

But I see the children already smiling every day.
Conclusion

It is Wednesday November 21, 2012 – the eighth day of the latest deadly hostilities between Hamas and Israel. A bomb has just exploded on a bus in central Tel Aviv for the first time since 2006. Hamas rockets and hostilities have killed six Israelis, and around-the-clock Israeli airstrikes in Gaza have claimed the lives of 170 Palestinians. The conflict remains as alive as ever.

After working all summer with Palestinian refugees within the West Bank and living in a camp, the lives of Tamer, Intisar and Mahmoud are for me the most indicative of the different ways in which components of their past, present and future merge as one to influence the formation of their collective identity. Their past remains alive through their firm determination to hold on to the right of return and through the molding force of memories as retold throughout generations. Grappling with the circumstances of the present influences their subject formation by the encounter with, and the opposition to, both Israeli authority and non-refugee Palestinian society, creating a distinct identity that separates refugees as a unified subgroup with a due political relevance of their own. In addition, self-organization and active agency to improve the camp is one of the many ways in which refugees reclaim a say over their uncertain future.

This essay has only taken into account one of the many lived versions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has impacted world politics for decades, that of a crucial third party: Palestinian refugees. The lived experiences of all other players within the conflict must categorically be further analyzed and understood before any prospects for sustainable peace can arise.

Notes
1. For more information, visit Al-Feniq Association's Webpage: http://www.phoenixbethlehem.org/
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid, p. 73.
15. The identities and recognizable characteristics of the Palestinian refugees in this essay have been altered for the sake of their safety.
25. Rotberg, 3. Also, Dumper, 4
27. Unemployment rate is officially 25% by ILO definition, but locals say that this does not include women and children; cf. Ibid.

28. Ibid.


30. Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority, January 2005 – Present.


32. Benvenisti et all, 151.


35. Rotberg, 4.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid, 150.


40. Bowker, 12.


47. Ibid, 56.


49. Hafez, 34.

50. Ibid, 48.

51. Ibid, 56.

52. Ibid, 59.


54. Bowker, 68.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid, 69.

57. Ibid, 77.

58. Journal entry – Personal Interview June 28th, 2012


60. Ibid


63. Hanafi, 88.

64. Bowker, 68.

65. Hanafi, 58.

66. Dumper (2007), 77

67. Author’s emphasis. Bowker, 98.

68. Benvenisti et all, 132-133

69. Dumper (2007), 5