

**LIVING IN A CULTURE OF CHANGE: AN INQUIRY INTO THE LEARNING  
EXPERIENCES OF NEW SUDANESE STUDENTS IN CALGARY SCHOOLS**

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
of the University of Lethbridge  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

**MASTER OF EDUCATION**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA**

July, 2010

Dedication

To my family:

Fiona, for your unconditional love and support

Shayne, Matiala, Reyna: my children, you give me reason to carry on

*Kuliswe* (Mum): Thank you for a solid foundation and for your sacrifice

*Ba Taata* (Dad): Your teaching, example and spirit live on

And to all participants in this living story

*Ndalumba kapati*: Thank you

## Abstract

Low achievement, low attendance, and high dropout levels characterize immigrant student populations in cosmopolitan Canadian schools. This thesis identifies the lack of understanding in the community in urban multicultural Alberta as the prime cause of the struggle encountered by new immigrant students in school. The thesis incorporates the experiences of six new immigrant students to promote an authentic curriculum of learning and teaching to meet the needs of these learners. It posits that an authentic curriculum is unlikely without input from learners. The method used Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics and phenomenology, with the researcher asking the six African participants to share their stories in the African storytelling fashion in which no one dominates the discussion. The conversations were analyzed and interpreted to provide insight into the life-worlds of the participants. Ted Aoki's multilayered curriculum of curriculum-as-planned, curriculum-as-lived experience and the "zone of between" are seen as a beneficial practice inclusive of all students.

## Acknowledgements

As I conclude this thesis, I am eternally thankful to the Lord Almighty for abundant blessings, salvation and for guiding me through this journey. In addition, I am deeply indebted to the contributions of all the people who have touched my academic, professional and personal life up to the point of this thesis. I thank my parents Miles and Mary Simoongwe for instilling the love of learning in me, for strong family values and for a firm foundation in how to live with others in society. I also thank my beloved wife Fiona, and my three children Shayne, Matiala and Reyna, for understanding, love and support. I acknowledge the support of my extended families in Zambia and Canada for their continued questions and care throughout this thesis.

I heartily thank my supervisor, Dr. Erika Hasebe-Ludt, whose encouragement, guidance and support from the initial to the final level enabled me to persevere with my research, despite a myriad of setbacks including a car accident in the preliminary stages of the thesis study. My sincere thanks go to the members of my committee, Dr. Brian Titley and Dr. Cynthia Chambers, for their mentorship, patience and suggestions. Finally, I would like to thank all the participants and readers of this thesis.

*Catakamana cakayoosya: All things that have a beginning have an ending*

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## Chapter 1: Beginning From Home

*Home is a blueprint of memory. Something known like breath. Skin is a kind of home.*  
—Georgia Heard

### Introduction

Two summers ago I returned to the homestead where I was born and grew up in the village of Sipatunyana in the Kalomo district in southern Zambia. With me on this trip were my Canadian-born wife and our two children. The journey began by plane from Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to Lusaka, Zambia, via London, England. From Lusaka we travelled by road to Kalomo, where most of my family lives now, about 40 kilometres north of the original family homestead (*ku Munzi* in Tonga). It had been three years since my last visit to Zambia and over 20 years since I had been to *ku Munzi* itself. My wife had not been back since our wedding six years before, and this was the children's first trip to Zambia. My son was almost three years old, while my daughter's first birthday was coming up in about three months' time. I was eager to take my family to *ku Munzi*, to find our family roots together.

Aware of the length and difficulty of the trip, which consists of about 30 hours of travelling, we had planned the final leg of the journey to *ku Munzi* to take place two weeks after our arrival in Zambia. By this time, I had projected, we should have recovered from jetlag and we would have re-integrated sufficiently into the extended family and the culture. Luckily, our journey was uneventful and when the two weeks had elapsed, we packed a picnic lunch and headed south for our visit to *ku Munzi*. On this last segment of the trip we were joined by two of my brothers who, like me, had not been back to the old place for a long time. In all there were six of us who boarded the eight-seater minibus that we had purchased especially for this purpose.

Reality set in the moment I closed the doors of the vehicle and started the engine to head for our old home. “This is it,” I thought. The long-awaited trip was underway. I was immediately struck by a strange feeling. My heart was beating really fast. With interludes of heart-to-heart conversation with everyone in the vehicle, baby talk and cries, silence, and the music of the Zimbabwean artist Oliver Mtukudzi playing in the background, we drove along the empty gravel road to *ku Munzi*. My older brother and I shared stories and memories of *ku Munzi* as we went. We also answered questions from the rest of the group. Since *ku Munzi* is where my father was buried, much of our discussion and questions revolved around our memories of him.

As we approached home, these memories of Dad in *ku Munzi* also invoked other memories and stories of this place and other places we have lived since we moved in 1981. Talking about Dad’s life led me into a place of the imagination about how different this trip would have been had the structure of *ku Munzi* been intact and had Dad been alive. Then I would have been taking my new family to my parents’ place for the first time. I imagined how very different the occasion would have been. During the glory days of *ku Munzi*, family reunions were celebrated in style and with enthusiasm. Even though events like this were rare in my family due to its small size, when they occurred they were greatly cherished and triggered some of the most defining details of our heritage. My father, who believed in celebrating success and life in general, would grace such events with elaborate ceremonies, a practice he must have inherited from generations past. At these ceremonies, members of the extended family would often be invited to *ku Munzi*. The gathering would begin with general introductions and then the family

participated in cultural acts of endearment to enhance the bonds that drew them together as a larger clan.

Traditionally, family members would greet one another with our special right-handshake of unity and peace, universal across the Zambian cultural spectrum. Greetings by hugging and kissing were less common among members of my nuclear family. It was not uncommon though to see members of my extended family affectionately hugging and kissing. Cousins would hug cousins, grandchildren and grandparents would hug, and nieces and nephews would also hug their (distant) aunts and uncles. Siblings rarely hugged each other or, if grown up, their parents. In-laws commonly exchanged greetings (from a distance, sometimes via a middleman, usually a child) but rarely shook hands. Young children and babies were the stars of such occasions, as they would make the rounds of being lifted up, kissed and hugged lovingly by everyone, especially by their grandparents. Special prayers were said to welcome the new children into the family. The introduction involved giving small gifts of sentimental value to the new family members and to young children. Among the gifts common at family reunions were such items as beads, hand-made crafts, clothing, money, or a designated keepsake from a departed relative that changed hands within the prescribed order of family inheritance, or small animals like chickens, pigeons, or puppies. Following this formal process of integration would be feasting, conversing and any further gift exchange. This is when the well-known jubilation of African celebrations would happen, including spontaneous ululation, singing, reciting stories and poems, clapping and dancing, which would mark the rest of the gathering. Prayers of dedication, thanksgiving, supplication, faith statements, and other spiritual acts would interweave the occasion until the end. Dad would usually select

the best steer from the herd for slaughter to signal the reunion and to celebrate the first visit of new family members. Sometimes Dad would slaughter a cow for a less significant reunion as well. For instance, when the older siblings in my nuclear family returned from boarding school after being away from home for a three-month term, a cow or a pig would often be slaughtered.

This visit to *ku Munzi* was going to be different. *Ku Munzi* was a different place now. Nobody lives there anymore and of course Dad is no more. There were no handshakes, hugging, kissing or gifts. No one said prayers. No steers were killed for a feast. No one sang or danced. There were no voices. This trip was instead “a walk in the shadows of life” (Ritz, 2004); we were exploring memories. *Ku Munzi* now greeted its visitors in a different way—in silence. It was a place lacking in beauty but still rich in memories.

As we drove along, I noticed great changes in the places that I used to know very well. These changes were a constant reminder of the length of time that had elapsed since I had been here. The road itself had changed greatly; it appeared less travelled, narrower and gullied, maybe due to less maintenance than it used to get during my time in *ku Munzi*. In the mid- to late-1970s this road seemed much busier than it is now. I remember how those big lorries with loads of precious minerals from the mines to the south pounded past these places daily from sunrise to sunset. It used to be so busy that we had to watch out for these monstrous trucks when, as kids, we would go onto the road to collect the colourful stones that fell off their cargo. At the same time, the Independence War was going on in neighbouring Zimbabwe (*Mutala* in Tonga, which means “across the river,” the Zambezi River). The Zambian Army, which was acting as a peacekeeping

and security force during the Zimbabwean war, relied on this road as a major conduit to the Zimbabwean border in the Zambezi Valley. Perhaps these factors had prompted the United National Independence Party (UNIP) government of President Kaunda to keep this road in better shape. I wondered: Do we need a war to turn the wheels of bureaucracy in the present Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) government to have roads like this one maintained? I wondered whether the much older and much more remote road to *ku Munzi* that would soon branch off would even be recognizable or drivable, judging by the change that I could see on either side of the larger road we were on. Would I be able to tell where to turn and would I recognize our old place once we had arrived? Overgrown vegetation, denudation and re-settlement by newcomers on each side of the road had transformed the landscape.

As we approached *ku Munzi*, memories of life in this place became more striking and more specific. I reminisced about the many important events that had taken place here. First, this place is where I had been born and spent much of my childhood. I started school in *ku Munzi*. In essence, this place is *where my life and hence my whole story begins*. In terms of family, this is the only place where I lived in a complete family context, if a family is defined as a social unit of father, mother and children. We left this place soon after Dad's passing when I was only nine years old. Without question, whenever I think of this place, the intense thoughts of Dad's life and death always take precedence, and now we were getting near. For this reason and out of respect to Dad, as soon as we arrived at *ku Munzi*, our first stop was at his grave (or *ng'anda* in Tonga, which also means *house*, therefore his new house).

It took us a few minutes of searching through the tangled elephant grass and wild berry bushes (*zitewo* in Tonga) to find the grave, the only standing *ng'anda* of *ku Munzi*. These few minutes felt like a century of torture to me. It did not sit well with my conscience and with the tenets of my heritage that we would not be certain of my father's resting place even for a moment. I felt a sense of relief when my older brother announced, "It's over here." It was still devastating to think that we had to search for a while before we could locate this place of great significance. Once we had all gathered around the site respectfully, we focused more closely on his life story. "Here lies a great man," I declared to everyone with deep emotion. Dad's legacy and example has been historic in our family and in the community of which *ku Munzi* was a part. At the time of his death, Dad was the treasurer of the local school's Parent Teachers' Association (PTA). He was also the branch treasurer of the United National Independence Party (UNIP), which was a grassroots organization of the then governing national party—all this on top of numerous other community committees and volunteer groups that he was informally a part of. We chatted about some of these things as we inspected the grave and its surroundings. Besides the slab of cement that formed the actual tomb, remnants of the home-baked brown bricks used to build the tomb still lay scattered around the site to tell the story of this place.

While we were at the gravesite I began to question my understanding of the appropriate code of conduct for us. This thought brought back to mind lessons of *ku Munzi* on the subject of death. It was interesting that my natural response was not to tap into the lessons from years of schooling in Western-prescribed curricula or their enshrined religious teaching. I was not going to be satisfied unless I conducted myself in

accordance with my family's teachings and the Tonga ways of knowing and doing. Then as I searched my memory on matters of death, I remembered that in this tradition, paying attention to words such as the following would be an important and acceptable mode of thinking and acting at the gravesite of a loved one. Respect. Love. Honour. Connection. Worship. Spirits (with a small "s" is *luuwo* in Tonga; this translates in English as "wind"). Ghost. Fear. Power. Silence. Listen. Sincerity. Death. Resurrection. Life. Prayer. Gods (with a small "g"). God. I also recalled how in my family children were taught that the dead do not vanish but remain active members of their families and of the larger society. As a consequence, those who were alive were urged to accord them due reverence, honour and respect. Being at the gravesite was a rare chance for us to reciprocate Dad's many acts of love and care, and make contact with a departed member of the family. Before we left the gravesite we cleared out some of the debris that had covered part of the inscription stamped onto the concrete slab. The inscription states Dad's full names, his date of birth, and the date he passed away. Then we took some photos to conclude our visit with Dad.

We proceeded to visit the rest of *ku Munzi*. We had parked the vehicle behind the anthill near the grave and could not drive any further because this was the end of the drivable part of what remained of the old road. So we had to walk for the rest of the way (about half a kilometre), through tall grass and thick bushes on a path that existed only in my older brother's memory and mine. The sandy spots and gullies along the way assured us that we were on the right track to the site of the vanished buildings of *ku Munzi*. *Ku Munzi* had completely changed. We could hardly recognize the entrance to the yard, but as soon as we were inside, the feeling of familiarity amazed me. I recognized the feeling

of being home again; I had arrived. This surprised me because the place itself was bare. There were no houses, chickens or people to welcome us. Yet, the familiar feelings of peace and tranquillity replenished my body, mind and soul. When I looked up, I could see the familiar horizon. I could still reconstruct the same animals in the clouds that I used to see twenty years ago. The birds sang tunes I remembered. I recognized the feel of the July wind as I watched it waving the elephant grass. Despite the absence of yelling cousins, hungry calves racing in the vicinity, smells of domestic animals, the familiar buildings, pots calling out that winter lunch was ready, and women singing, I felt at home as we walked around our old homestead.

Mindful of time, I quickly led everyone to some of the special locations where I had spent treasured moments as a young lad. We wandered throughout the grounds and talked over the tall grass and bushes as we stumbled on these spots of interest. This is where the family house stood. Grandma's house faced this way. The main *butala*, the barn where grain and groundnuts were stored, was located somewhere there. "Look at that tree—it is still there." I spent countless hours playing with my cousins in that tree. That was our playground. Let me show you the house in which I was born; it is about one hundred metres from this spot. This house has a special meaning to all of us children. Dad had painted a blackboard on the west side of the living room wall, right in this location. He had purchased learning supplies and taught each one of us early literacy and numeracy skills before we were enrolled in formal school. He used the board to help us with homework in the later years of our education as well. Both Mom and Dad valued education a great deal. Mom did not have the opportunity to attend school, but she is one of the most talented, witty and wise people that I have ever known. Dad, the child of a

chief, was fortunate enough to have received formal education in the colonial system. “You will go nowhere without education,” Dad often said. So he taught us the importance of school early and made sure that each of us had adequate preparation before being registered in school. That is why I regard my father as my first teacher. He taught me how to print my name and how to count. He taught me handwriting and drawing. By the time I went to grade one, at age eight, I knew how to read in English; I was just beginning to read in Tonga. Also, he taught me general school etiquette such as: *wait your turn, ask questions, listen, raise your hand to ask or answer questions, respect your teachers and thank them for their work, and strive to be the best you can be.*

It may come as a surprise that I started school when I was eight years old. In those days in this region and in most other regions of rural Zambia, starting school at eight was not unusual. Of course coming from a family that valued education and school a great deal, enrolment at eight was taken as a huge disadvantage for the future of a child. In fact, I had made three unsuccessful attempts to register for school before my eighth birthday. Oxfam senior researcher and author Kevin Watkins (2000) has documented some of the conditions that cause children in developing countries such as Zambia to begin school as late as I did.

Each day millions of children in the developing world embark on long journeys to their schools. The journeys . . . result in children being away from home for long hours. They also create security fears for parents, especially concerning young girls. Excessive distance frequently results in parents enrolling children late . . . . Parental fears about security are closely correlated with the distance that children have to travel to school. For rural communities in Zambia, school journeys often

imply distances far in excess of 2 km . . . In many cases, the journey to school will mean traversing swollen rivers during the rainy seasons, or negotiating other hazards. Villagers in one area of Zambia's Eastern Province, which borders on a game reserve, reported to Oxfam staff that their fear of wild animals attacking the children was a major reason for keeping them at home. (pp. 193-194)

In addition to the issue of distance is the lack of space and human resources in rural schools. In my case, space was the main impediment to early school enrolment. Each time I was turned down, I was given a reason that I took with a grain of salt: "He is too short this year. Bring him back again next year." The reality of the situation was that the school was too small to accommodate every school-aged child in its large catchment area. Because my Dad was on the school's PTA executive board, he appreciated the situation much more than the average parent, which was probably what led him to make the decision to home school us.

All these thoughts were occupying my mind as we walked around the village. After we had explored the yard, confronting history this way, it was time to say goodbye to our silent but generous host. We took final glances at the place and some last-minute pictures, and then it was time to head back to the vehicle past Dad's *ng'anda*. This was a highly emotional moment for me. Thinking of the impending return trip to my other home overseas, I was uncertain whether I would ever come back to my original home. I was also somewhat sad because I was not able to see some of the places on the property due to the limited time. A day's trip was obviously too short to revisit a place that embodied so much of my experience—at least a third of my life-story. On the other hand, I counted it as a blessing that I had the opportunity to bring my family back to our roots,

thereby blending my family's past with its present. The definition of who I am would be incomplete without examining my roots, which are firmly anchored in *Ku Munzi*. Indeed, *Ku Munzi* is one place to which I return often in my thinking, in my dreams and in my whole being. *Ku Munzi* is my first home and it will always be my real home.

### **The Thesis Story**

“Knowing what is true, what is valid and reliable, and what to predict should come from listening to as many stories as you can and deciding how to act responsibly” (Pelias, 2004, p. 9).

I have begun this thesis with a story to draw attention to the nature of the text that comprises the study. The introduction is intended to define this thesis as a *story* arising from a conglomeration of stories or lived experiences of its participants (of which I am one) and stories that will arise as a result of telling these stories. As well, telling this personal story early in the conversation reveals the human face behind the typed text (Iffrig, 2007). I wish to introduce myself to the reader more deeply than spelling out my dual role as the author of the study and as one of the participants in the study. Through the story, I intend to depict my voice thereby displaying a sense of who I am, where I come from, and where I am going in this conversation. I believe it is from such a deep interface of explication, through the introduction that comes in our narratives, that true knowing and understanding of each other arises. As Mathews and Wacker (2008) stated, “Stories are how people tell each other who they are, where they came from, how they are unique, what they believe” (book summary). In so doing, I hope this story will provide preliminary information about me that might be useful in understanding the

message of the thesis. In the later chapters, the thesis evolves into a story of stories as the narratives of the Sudanese students (the rest of the participants) are projected.

In addition, by starting with a personal story I would like to reveal my fundamental belief in the benefit that, as individuals and a society, we can learn from personal narratives and the experiences of others. British author Karen Armstrong explained this notion well in her book *The Spiral Staircase* (2004): “[W]e should probably all pause to confront our past from time to time, because it changes its meaning as our circumstances alter. Reviewing my own story has made me marvel at the way it all turned out” (p. xix). I believe strongly in the power of story as a learning tool. Growing up in a traditional African society in which the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) occurs primarily through oral stories, I understand how useful stories can be in any society. Personally, I am highly indebted to the narratives of my family and members of the communities in which I have lived for the larger proportion of what I know, beginning with the natives of *ku Munzi*.

On a different front, I have used the story of a *journey* (my trip back to *ku Munzi*) in the opening stages of this conversation for metaphorical as well as etymological reasons. *Metaphorical*, because I tend to visualize life-events as though they were short episodes in the continuum of the journey of existence. As such, my whole life-story, your career, this thesis and stories, are all examples of the episodes of existence: the journeys. When it was time to start writing the thesis I asked myself: What is better as a beginning to this segment of my journey than a narrative of a literal journey? The *etymological* connection is related to this metaphorical image and the particular situation (discussed in detail in Chapter 2) I was in when I entered into the conversation of this thesis. I was in a

curriculum studies class, in which the meaning of the term *curriculum* was traced to its Latin roots from the word *currere*, which means journey (Pinar, 1975). According to Pinar, an understanding of curriculum in a personal sense begins a trip (*currere*) that extends our understanding not only of ourselves but of others. Pinar urged educators to “bracket” (1975, p. 406) the educational aspects of the world, curriculum as it is widely known, the status quo. It is a call for those of us in education and research to rid ourselves of cultural conditioning and get beyond the self. By tracing past experiences, Pinar suggested, educators can relate lived experiences more fluently and accurately so as to face the present and the future more confidently. From this connection, the authentic curriculum that any academic study must contribute to reverts back to experiences of life or journeys. Thus I see the stories of the participants in the study as vignettes of their life journeys, which collectively constitute an authentic curriculum, and this story as part of my curriculum vitae—a life-journey—beginning from home.

### **The Research Question**

To keep the conversation of the thesis in focus, I asked the question: What are the experiences of new immigrant and refugee Sudanese students in Calgary schools? Emerging from this principal question is an unlimited number of important but subordinate questions that emerge from listening to the participants’ stories first-hand or through reading them in the text of the thesis. For example, when the participants recounted some the horrific life-experiences of war at young ages, as their teacher, I could not help but ask how these experiences affected them now in their day-to-day lives at school. Did they think about these low episodes of their life-worlds often? How often?

I suspect other readers will ask these and many more questions as a result of reading this thesis, hence participating in the conversation with the students' narratives.

### **The Significance of the Study**

Educational discourse aimed at meeting the needs of all learners in the twenty-first century could fall short of its purpose without an effort to include all its stakeholders; that is, educators at all levels from pre-school to post-secondary, students, parents, governments, and affected institutions and communities. This study identifies new students (who are often at risk of being left out) as an important factor in this discourse. In particular, this research is aimed at revealing the voices of the new immigrant and refugee students. The relevance of these students' narrative in a community like Calgary is reflective of the dynamic changes that are a feature of Canadian society. For the new Sudanese students (and others in similar circumstances) this study is especially critical because it is a platform on which their voices could be projected and heard. As bona fide members of their society, the new students' contributions to educational discourse pertaining to their future is as important as those of the veteran members of society. Exclusion of any sector of society in pertinent matters such as teaching and learning would lead a community to stagnate, a sure step towards extinction in the twenty-first century (Fullan, 2001). Thus, including students' voices on matters of learning is crucial for educational development in Alberta and related communities.

### **Conceptualizing Change**

Living in this culture of rapid change (Fullan, 2001) in which our circumstances are continually evolving, it is necessary to stop sometimes and re-examine our lives. One

only needs to consider a single dimension of our lives, such as technology, to get a sense of the magnitude of change in our time. It is estimated that the average lifespan of technological equipment, for instance, is only three years (Kyrnin, 2007). For computer software, this period is reduced to a matter of months. With this rate of change, it is no wonder that we appear to be chasing the intangible. Western society has produced a generation that is consumed by the game of catch-up, commonly known as the rat race. In this hypothetical race, participants must run continuously since there seems to be no starting or finishing line. Each participant must compete in every field since there is always someone ahead of him or her. Everyone wants to get ahead and be successful, but in the meantime, everyone must catch up to those ahead. The result is a society that is in constant metamorphosis. Armstrong (2004) reminded that this is the point when a society needs to apply its brakes lest it forgets the important aspects of life. Zambian scholar Dambisa Moyo, in her new book *Dead Aid* (2009), spelled out a similar message when she talked about revising the global aid policy, especially as it pertains to the lives of the underprivileged. For those of us in teaching and learning, David Smith (2009) reminded us, “As educators, we cannot understand the troubles [or needs] of our students without understanding the deep politico-economic grammar that is underwriting their lives, and our own as teachers” (p. 116). Thus as educators, we need to pause and confront our past and learn from it. We need to revisit our paths and repeat our stories to one another.

Opening up the conversation in this thesis by narrating a personal story of journeying to *ku Munzi* reinforces my commitment to look back into the past (a society’s) life journey with the view of learning from it. My commitment to this notion is evident from the title of the current study: *Living in a Culture of Change: An Inquiry Into the*

*Learning Experiences of New Sudanese Students in Calgary Schools.* With these life accounts, like my narrative of *ku Munzi*, it is my intention to create a living text from participants' voices and vignettes of confrontations with our past. Hopefully, as a society, albeit a busy one, we can stop long enough to listen and learn from stories such as these. These experiences may be of use especially to those who identify themselves as educators, policy makers, parents, social workers, mentors, medical officials, clergy, and related stakeholders. Living in this culture of change and multiculturalism, it is more important than ever to confront our past regularly and intentionally so that the story and hence the voice of every member of our society is heard. This thesis story is my attempt to contribute to this effort by projecting the participants' voices as well as my own.

## Chapter 2: The Research Story—Methodology

*Things announce themselves, bear witness to their presence: “Look, here we are.” They regard us beyond how we may regard them, our perspectives, what we intend with them, and how we dispose of them. —James Hillman*

### Being Found by the Topic

What does authentic curriculum look like in our classes today? I am referring to the changing face of twenty-first century classrooms. In the past few years, schools in Calgary have been swamped by new students from all over Canada and all corners of the world (Statistics Canada, 2006). Some of the students have come from war-ravaged countries and might have been out of school for a long time. While some students may have some form of school experience, others have none. I have in mind a case that my school board is struggling to deal with right now: the large numbers of new Sudanese students, most of whom have come to Canada as refugees directly from the Sudan and some who have come from Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia or Kenya after spending time in refugee camps.

So this situation caught my attention, which has culminated in the present conversation. The sentiments above were echoed in a class contribution by one of my colleagues who was a teacher in Calgary at the time and a fellow student in the Master of Education program at the University of Lethbridge. Like this participant, the students in that class were interested in grounding the theoretical claims garnered from a graduate curriculum studies course in their teaching practice and experience. The rest of the discussion that went on for an hour or so concerned the topic of new, transient, migrant, immigrant, and refugee students. The teachers cited examples of the many challenges they faced with the constant flow of newcomers to their classrooms. The issues of

English as a Second Language (ESL) programming, and the effect of politics and a booming provincial economy on teaching and learning dominated the discussion. The example of the new immigrant and refugee students from the Sudan was at the centre of the conversation. Being the only African in the room, I was in the spotlight whenever this topic arose. Before I realized it, I was faced with an issue that has become part of my story. It was time to respond.

David Jardine reminded me that the encounter with my research topic was not atypical after all. He wrote:

[A topic could arise out of a] commonplace experience that any teacher knows about full well. Before we adopt any methodological stance, before we “do” any research, before we know it, we enter a classroom and something that a student says, some work that they have produced, something they have written, some question they ask, the look in one child’s eyes, some sketch posted on a bulletin board—these simple things sometimes strike us, catch our fancy, address us, speak to us, call for a response, elicit or provoke something in us, ask something of us, hit us, bowl us over, stop us in our tracks, make us catch our breath.

(Jardine, 2006, p. 2)

This was a case in point. The topic struck me squarely; it *addressed* me directly as the sole African immigrant in the course, living and teaching in Calgary. It spoke to me loudly and clearly. How could I not hear, how could I not listen? I was there, participating in the conversation. It caught my attention as an immigrant learner and educator and called me to respond to the many questions that were directed at me then and those that have followed me since. It elicited from within me some of the subtle

linkages that exist between immigrant (particularly the Sudanese) students and me. It asked me **to go and ask the students** the questions that would go unanswered otherwise. It hit me head-on, being the only African present at the time, and it left me feeling discomfited since I did not have all the answers when it was expected of me. It stopped me from doing my thesis on the initial topic of authentic assessment and it has made me catch my breath several times over the last two years.

My encounter with this topic of study could be compared to an experience of how a person at home might react upon hearing a knock at the door. The topic's persistent "knocking" eventually made me open the door. That is how the topic of the Sudanese immigrant students found me.

### **Resisting the Call**

Opening the door for a guest is generally a simple matter of protocol but looking the guest in the eye and engaging him or her in conversation takes more courage. Once I had opened the door, I was ready to take up the subject but not without trepidation. Was I prepared for such a project?

At the time I was teaching in Morley, Alberta, where all my students were Native Canadians from the Stoney Nakoda First Nation. This meant that my teaching experience included little of the changing face of the classrooms that most of the participants had described in our discussions. There were no Sudanese students in my classes on the Reserve. Prior to my job at Morley, my only long-term Canadian teaching experience had been an instructional position at a satellite campus of Red Deer College in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. The students at Rocky were mostly young adults of European descent from mainstream Canadian society who were returning to school to upgrade their

high school credentials. Again, there was not much visible diversity, no transient students and certainly no Sudanese students. In terms of teaching experience with transient or immigrant students, I was probably the least exposed of all participants in the course. Obviously this did not help to boost my confidence in taking on the topic.

My personal and educational experience before immigrating to Canada about six years ago was less than helpful. My knowledge of Sudanese peoples and cultures was sketchy, to say the least. In Zambia, I had learned about the physical geography, politics and religions of North Africa but not in depth. I knew merely that the Sudan was the largest country in Africa and wars had ravaged that country for at least two decades. Recently, I had come to know a little more about the Sudan through friends that live in my current hometown of Cochrane, Alberta. These friends spent some time living and working in Southern Sudan as part of an international humanitarian effort to combat the effects of the civil war in the 1990s. More recently, I learned that one of my cousins in Zambia, a senior police officer, had been posted to the Sudan as part of the African Union (AU) peacekeeping force in the volatile Darfur region of Western Sudan. This personal connection had aroused my interest in the historical and current affairs of the Sudanese and the matter of world peace in general. Beyond this, I knew little about the affairs of Sudanese students either in Calgary or Africa.

The fact that I had never been to the Sudan exacerbated the feeling of inadequacy and alienation from the topic. Despite these feelings, I made up my mind to face the challenge. I decided to focus on the commonalities such as *place* and *being*, the attributes that link me with the Sudanese students. Since the students in question originated from the same continent (Africa) as I, and immigrated to the same place (Alberta) as I did, I

reasoned that their daily experiences would be similar to mine. Moreover, as Black minorities navigating the Alberta educational system at the same time, I began to perceive the issues of these students as mine; after all, most mainstream Canadians viewed all Black people to be the same (Fine-Meyer, 2003). With more information available due to transnational movements of people and to the Internet, it is reasonable to argue that perhaps the number of people who regard Black people or any race of people with such homogeneity has dwindled in post-modern Canada. Regardless of whether people's perception has changed or not, the reality as a teacher and a new Black immigrant, settling at the same time as the students into a new educational system (that perhaps would benefit from changing such perceptions), I became convinced that this was the right decision and carrying out the study would be meaningful to me.

However, I still had doubts, wondering whether it was any business of mine to carry out the study for which all I had were questions but no answers. I had questions about the students' special circumstances as people born in a country at war and how this situation affected their interaction with other people. While both the Sudan and Zambia were British colonies, the postcolonial directions of the two countries are radically different. Born in Zambia, a country that has had no war since its independence from Britain, I could not fathom what it meant to be born in a war-torn nation. In Zambia I grew up on a peasant farm where we reared cattle, pigs, chickens and ducks in addition to growing cash crops such as maize, sunflower, groundnuts and brown beans. I remember how momentous it was every year if the government delayed in making available the farming implements and farming inputs in the spring or if the rains did not come on time (normally in mid-spring, at the end of October). I remember how we complained about a

slow bureaucratic system of government, poor roads, corrupt government officials, diseases, lack of schools and school spaces, and so on. The difficulties that I experienced in my early years of growing up in Zambia pale in comparison to these students' conditions of war. They had to live in fear of their lives for decades, unable to grow food or earn money to feed themselves. They were malnourished, diseased and displaced. Sudanese-born writer Stephanie Beswick (2004) chronicled the Sudanese conflict as the longest civil war in Africa. She stated, "The first conflict dated from 1955 to 1972; the second from 1983 to the present" (p. xiii). These Sudanese students had now been removed (physically) from the dangers of war and were starting new lives in a different environment just as I had done a few years earlier.

Following my decision to conduct this study, I had to confront my pre-understandings of the process of researching. Gadamer (2004) called these pre-understandings *prejudices*. These were deeply held personal philosophical and professional prejudices, stemming from a solid background in science and mathematics education. As a result of these prejudices, I questioned the authenticity of studies that were outside the realm of science up to that point in my professional and academic journey. During my training and practice as a science educator it had become engrained in me that research was only authentic if it were quantifiable, objective, and reproducible. According to that school of thought, research meant only the quantitative and experimental forms of research. Through this lens, clearly, this topic lay outside the characteristic cyclone (create-test-use) of authentic research because it was not "scientific." I was now faced with a topic that would push me out of my comfort zone. I knew little about qualitative research beyond the spelling of the word. Indeed, something

had happened that was beyond me: “over and above [my] wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxvi). It was time to venture into understanding the meaning of research as it pertained to my topic.

### **Insight From “Truth and Method”**

Beginning with research textbooks such as the *Introduction to Educational Research* (Mertler & Charles, 2005) and *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (2007) by the internationally renowned researcher Max van Manen, I embarked on a journey that would lead to a remarkable encounter with a weighty, rich and extremely difficult work entitled *Truth and Method* by the contemporary German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004). Like many others working in the human sciences, I was impressed by this book—Gadamer’s *magnum opus*. The original text of *Truth and Method* was written in Gadamer’s native language, German. It has since been translated into English and several other languages (Grondin, 2003). In this book, I read about the contributions to qualitative research by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Natorp. Later in my literature review I would add to this list the contemporary voices of narrative inquiry researchers such as Ted Aoki, Richard Palmer, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Antoinette Oberg, Carl Leggo, William F. Pinar, Cynthia Chambers, David Smith, David Jardine, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Max van Manen and many others. In the natural sciences, I had been influenced by Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Karl Popper, Galileo, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein.

From these excursions into the literature, I discovered that research was more of a transcending process than I had ever seen from my scientific viewpoint. I realized that

researching was sometimes a nonlinear adventure that did not always establish detectable facts or unravel clear outcomes. Thus researching, *chercher* from Latin *circare*, to go around, or *searching again*, going around, is a continual process.

Therefore I believe that in searching researchers look for what is not in their possession in the here and now, either because it has gone missing or because they have begun the pursuit of possibility. Something happens that alerts the researcher to hunt for something that could be—a possible existence. In any case, in searching and searching again, “researching” must lead to the revelation of the pieces of the universe. That is, authentic researching aims at reaching towards and presenting these pieces of the universe intact and in their natural form. These pieces may be revealed as simple or complex, tangible or intangible, measurable or immeasurable, pleasant or discomforting, desirable or undesirable, complete or incomplete, and comprehensible or incomprehensible because that is their authentic state of being. That is, in researching we are primarily interested in penetrating to the origin (truth) of existence or being. Like pieces in a jigsaw that when put together expose a picture, the addition of one more piece to the puzzle is a step closer to the re/making of the picture. As in the process of completing a jigsaw, researching is not confined to a single straightforward procedure. It involves reflection, trying out, measuring and re-measuring, focusing, re-visioning, revisiting, editing, and doing these repeatedly.

Following my exploration into the concept of research, I turned to the specificities of the research topic at hand: *Living in a Culture of Change: An Investigation Into the Learning Experiences of New Sudanese Students in Calgary Schools*. What form of

research would the study entail? By extension, what method(s) would be appropriate to employ? And what would be my role as the researcher?

### **A Theoretical View**

I turned to the works of Antoinette Oberg, a respected Canadian scholar of educational research. Oberg provides an important basis for budding researchers in the human sciences to consider at the beginning of their research projects. Her ideas are especially helpful to those in the field of educational research. She presented her theory of educational research by using a creative, poetic braid topic entitled, *A Theory of Research* (in Chambers & Hasebe-Ludt, 2008). In finding a research topic, Oberg (2008) suggested, “[I]t is more reasonable that a research topic would emerge from the place (topic: Gk. *topos* / place) where we are positioned in life, from the pro-positions with which we prop up our lives and compose the narratives that tell how we live” (pp. 5-6). She is speaking the same language as Jardine (2006), mentioned earlier in this chapter, when he suggests that a research subject often emerges from common places such as classrooms, notice boards, facial expressions, public announcement (PA) systems, from wherever we pop up in our lives, where we are positioned, any place, any time. Further, Oberg pointed out that when a topic emerges, it presents itself fully endowed with its theoretical character. The term “view,” according to Oberg, is related to what is called a theory because both concepts describe a way of seeing the world. That is, when a topic announces itself or has been seen, a theory about it simultaneously springs up. She says when a researcher is selecting a subject of research, he or she is effectively theorizing. Considering the topic is like extending a hand to the handle of a theory—to grasp it.

The theoretical premises of the present topic about lived experience are thus located in the territories of hermeneutics and the phenomenology of human science research (Dilthey, 1985; Dostal, 2002; Gadamer, 2004; Merleau-Ponty, 1968; van Manen, 2007). It is a phenomenology topic because of its propensity for *being*, or lived experience. The description and interpretation (understanding) of this phenomenon is a preoccupation of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004; Grondin, 2003; Husserl, 1982; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 2007). Epistemologically, an individual's experiences can be viewed as units of the whole experience of being. "Each one of [these] experiences (Erlebnisse) existing by itself is a separate picture of the universe" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 64). These units of experience, according to Gadamer, "are themselves units of meaning" (p. 65). Understanding the universe, therefore, calls for the assemblage of these experiences so that a picture of the universal jigsaw is revealed. Each experience should be understood in terms of itself as well as in relation to the whole assemblage. Equally, an assemblage of experiences or simply "experience" should be understood in terms of itself and as a function of the constituent experiences. The picture developed here is that of connectedness; each of the experiences is intertwined with other experiences. Thus, researching (or pointing to) a phenomenon is essentially an act of pointing to all things and this gives phenomenological research its thrust. Max van Manen summed this up well: "Lived experience is the starting point and the end point of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 2007, p. 36). He added, "Lived experience gathers hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather [these individual experiences] by giving memory to them" (p. 37). These conclusions validate Oberg's assertion that within a topic that may have emerged out of ordinary experience are coded messages about the theories by

which the topic could be understood, conceptualized or treated, including methodological data.

### **Research Methodology**

On the methodology of a topic of study, Oberg (2008) stated:

Graduate student researchers are generally advised to find a research topic and then find a methodology match. I tell them that methodology is a way of seeing knowledge, knowers, and knowing, and that this theory is already there, implicit in their writings-toward-topic: in narratives about their interests, researchers construct and display their theories. (pp. 19-20)

Just as there are many ways of completing a jigsaw puzzle, Oberg suggested that there are many *ways of seeing* knowledge, knowers, and knowing. I would not be doing this topic justice (or any other research topic for that matter) by advocating a single methodology. Oberg declared the theory, *the way of seeing*, is already there because a researcher's *ways of sense-making* are present within the individual.

As Oberg had suggested, I came into this research with a methodological stance: the scientific method. Although I might have used Oberg's theory in the preliminary stages of the study, I did not immediately appreciate its implications for my topic. By the time I returned to it, I had already spent many months reviewing literature on the question of methodology, trying to locate or craft a methodology to match my topic. In fact, I stumbled on *Truth and Method* while in pursuit of the methodology. From the title, I thought I had finally found an easy-to-read textbook that I had long been searching for. This was not the case, because it is not Gadamer's purpose in *Truth and Method* to present *a single way of seeing* things. Gadamer was forthright about his purpose in *Truth*

*and Method*. He stated, “My concern was and is . . . not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (2004, pp. xxv - xxvi). He is expounding on Edmund Husserl’s “back to the things themselves” (Grondin, 2003, p. 13) pronouncement. In fact, this is in line with what Oberg (2008) is telling her students: “[M]ethodology is a way of seeing knowledge, knowers, and knowing, and that this theory is already there” (p. 20). While we examine the topic, the “thing” or phenomenon *that happens to us* tells of the methodology that is embroidered in the theory that is *already there*. Now I realized that I needed to look no further than within myself for the methodology of my topic. As soon as I became interested in the topic of transient, migrant and immigrant students, and began talking about the topic of new Sudanese students, I was writing, reading, listening to stories and to the news related to Sudanese affairs and questioning what I was reading and hearing. Oberg says I was already acting out *my ways of seeing* the topic. Hence, I had already found the *methodology match*, so that “in narratives about their interests, researchers construct and display their theories” (p. 20).

Drawing on Gadamer’s thinking in *Truth and Method*, Jardine (2006) concluded that, in relation to the conversation about the methodology of a topic in human science:

A method has no face, no body, no memories, no stories, no blood, no image, no ancestors, no ghosts and spirits, no monsters, no familiars. It does not help us get our bearings and learn our way around, because there is no “place” to it. (p. 271)

This came as a shock to my scientific mind! Jardine is telling us to re-consider what constitutes a method before advocating one over another.

“Method” (Greek: *methodos* pursuit of knowledge, from *meta*, expressing development, + *hodos* way) is an intellectual concept that must bring about order. The Oxford Dictionary of English defines the word “method” as “a particular procedure for accomplishing or approaching something, especially a systematic or established one” (Soanes & Stevenson, 2005, p. 1105). The dictionary definition traces the term’s origin to late Middle English when it started as a medical word used in the sense “prescribed medical treatment for a disease” (p. 1105). In medicine, if one did not follow the standard, plainly scribed stepwise process set down by an authoritative knower, the consequences could be dire. The person might not be cured and could perish. This might explain why once a method is known, in most instances, it is adopted and applied without question to this day.

The concept of methodology is derived from the word method—it is “a system of methods used in a particular area of study or activity” (p. 1105). The scientific method owes its dominance in history in part to this way of thinking. Jardine and others in the human sciences are questioning this perception and, in my opinion, rightly so. As a “thing,” a method was simply a prescription and to some degree it has remained so. It begs the question: How can anyone prescribe what he or she does not know or have? Do we not say in prescribing that this is how you should do it because a different way would not work? I agree with Grondin, who concluded, “We always come too late when we try to completely conceptualize and methodize what we actually understand” (2003, p. 284).

As a science teacher and researcher, applying a select method is the right thing to do because the goal is to teach the new concept. The students must copy the method down, learn it and be able to regurgitate it in an examination or research project or

laboratory investigation. Jardine stated that researching must venture *beyond* the parameters of regurgitation. Moreover, no one knows what is being researched because when we research, we want to find out more about something we do *not* know.

### **The Data of the Study**

In *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, van Manen noted, “The ‘data’ of human science research are human experiences” (2007, p. 62). In this study, the human experiences are the participants’ lives or lived experiences. These lived experiences, I propose, are important building blocks (or pieces of the puzzle from my jigsaw analogy or pieces of the universe from Gadamer’s metaphor) in developing an understanding of a people’s life-world. From understanding lived experiences, we may be able to expose deeply held beliefs and traditions that define the individuals concerned. By and large, an understanding of an individual’s life-world spills into an understanding of the society of which he or she is a part, which may ultimately result in an understanding of each one of us.

In the stem portion of the title of the thesis, “*Living in a Culture of Change*,” I am indicating aspects of experience that the students are undergoing. At the same time, by “*An Investigation in the Learning Experiences*,” I am revealing the present as well as the past. In both, the future of the students is implied. While we can try to show that the research investigates the past in the same way as the present (and the future), it would be more accurate to see this study as an excursion into the historical life-world of the participants. Gadamer alluded to this point in his discussion of the “temporality of human finitude” (Gadamer, as cited in Grondin, 2003, p. 284). As we experience something in even the tick of a clock, what is experienced slips into the archives of our life history, so

lived or learned experiences are a thing of the past. Reflecting on learned experience requires going back, confronting our past, giving the experiences back to memory and telling our story. In practice, “[a] person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through it” (van Manen, 2007). This is the reason I returned to my historical roots to begin this research.

Stories such as my tale of returning to *ku Munzi* are some of the ways we can explore these events of history, which according to Gadamer (1985) are “the initial conditions of the possibility of reaching agreement and understanding” (p. xv). Gadamer draws on Plato’s idea of ethics to shed light on what he means by *understanding*: “[E]thics is not a matter of imposing otherworldly doctrine upon life but rather a matter of submitting privileged doctrine to the testing ground of lively discourse” (p. xv). According to Gadamer, understanding is arrived at when people engaged in a lively discourse come to an agreement. They see each other’s perspective with a nod. This study aims to display the experiences of its participants in order to add to these lively discourses in society.

### **The Research Interviews**

Although I now had a better understanding of what researching entailed, as a methodical individual, I still had to rely on some form of structure in order to gather the students’ experiences. My plan was to have up to seven student participants with whom I would meet on the school premises (preferably in a classroom or library space) for two one-hour sessions. The plan was to work around the students’ schedules so that their participation in the study would not interfere with their school program. However due to insufficient numbers of Sudanese students at the school I was teaching at, I was able to

involve only three students. In any case, the ideal interview sessions in my mind were to go as follows: I would arrive in the research space (a classroom or library) to organize the physical space for the meeting and to set up the recording equipment. Then the students would arrive in the room (from their class before lunch break or from their last class of the day). We would then sit down in a circular formation (as our forefathers would do in the evenings of storytelling) and let the stories flow in a non-constricted fashion, with no one taking a position of power. I would prime the discussion by repeating the purpose of the gathering, by asking a question from a pre-planned list of ideas and questions, or by telling a story. Once the discussion was underway, anyone could tell his or her stories. These stories would generally be unstructured. The stories could be about the individual's life before and after immigrating to Canada or it could be a story of someone else in the participant's life journey. My goal in these interview sessions was to create an atmosphere similar to the African storytelling cultural settings. I believed that in this kind of setting the participants would share freely and openly in these sessions and whenever we met afterwards. For the most part, the in-school research interviews went as per my plan.

In addition to oral stories, I had included other instruments of researching such as the questionnaire (see Appendix A). A list of pre-planned open-ended questions (see Appendix B) were to be handed to the group when it was least disruptive to the conversation because I thought it might detract from the cohesive natural setting that I envisioned for the sessions.

As planned, all the session proceedings were recorded using an audio-video recorder for the initial focus group of the Sudanese students (Notela, Syana, and Joe,

whom I will introduce in further detail in Chapter 3). The sessions were filled with spontaneity, jubilation, and stories. The students and I made an instant connection, so much so that each one of us was visibly saddened when we had to adjourn at the end of the lunch hour. We ended up meeting for three sessions partly because I wanted to meet my target time of two to three hours of interviews and partly because we all wanted to come back together and just talk. I met with each of the students many times after the classroom sessions but the three meetings were the sessions that were recorded. Before starting the sessions, I had been concerned that the presence of the recording equipment might be a source of discomfort that would prevent them from sharing openly. I was also worried that my position of power as a teacher in the school board might have a negative effect on the natural flow of conversation. It turned out that these were non-factors for the participants. I wanted the sessions to be casual and casual they were. The participants were articulate and appeared truthful in sharing their experiences. As natural conversations often go, sometimes participants were competing to speak so listening became a strenuous activity that made the job of transcribing the audio extremely difficult.

Chapter 1 displays some of my lived experiences of a relatively distant past. This chapter has addressed some of the more recent experiences I have gone through as a result of entering into the present conversation. In the next two chapters, I will confront the student participants' past by revisiting parts of the fabric of history that have had an effect on the lived experiences of the participants before and after immigrating to Canada.

### **Chapter 3: The Participants—The Lost Boys and Girls of the Sudan**

#### **A Long Journey Home**

To begin the discussion on the participants of this study, I have the privilege of introducing you to James Nguen, one of the six primary participants in the study. I feel fortunate to have met James and I am pleased that he was willing to work with me on this project. You have probably heard the moving story of the Lost Boys of the Sudan (Bernstein, 2005; Hecht, 2005; Williams, 2005). James is one of the lost boys and we are fortunate to hear his story in this text.

The story of the Lost Boys of the Sudan is a snapshot into the gruesome events of war that led to the displacement of millions of Sudanese citizens from their homes (Beswick, 2004). According to Beswick, the phrase “Lost Boys of the Sudan” originally referred to the 26,000 boys and a few girls of the South Sudan region mainly from the Dinka ethnic group who were displaced and/or orphaned during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005, about 2 million killed). Today the phrase is applied more generally to describe not-for-profit organizations set up to help any groups of young Sudanese boys and girls that have been transplanted from their homeland in circumstances similar to the Lost Boys of the south, including the emigrants and refugees from the western region of Darfur.

James was born in the Sudan among the Nuer people, a group in the semi-independent region of South Sudan (Nguen, 2007). He lived in his home country until he was seven years old when his village came under attack, at which point he and several other boys from the area ran into hiding in the bush until the sound of gunshots and artillery had subsided. Upon returning to their homes, the boys were met with the

traumatic reality of war: clouds of smoke and fumes from razed houses, corpses of family members and animals. “The place was shocking, totally empty and uninhabitable, because of what happened because of bombing—war is a terrible thing (Interview, May 2008),” James narrated. James had to leave for the bush again where he joined a host of other boys fleeing from the war. For their own survival and safety, the boys began the journey of their life to unknown places, starting with a daunting walk east towards Ethiopia. This was the beginning of the group that is now famous the world over as the Lost Boys of the Sudan. To the family members who also survived the war, the boys were lost because they were nowhere to be found. In spite of the many dire possibilities, however, the families held on to the hope that maybe their sons would return home one day. They held on to this hope because no one could prove they were dead. Their movements could not be traced and their remains had not been found. At the early age of seven, James went on the long journey that would eventually lead him to Calgary, where I would meet him.

In addition to telling me his story personally, James generously allowed me to access a website that hosts part of his story online ([www.cielopictures.com](http://www.cielopictures.com)), and his award-winning documentary DVD entitled *The Long Journey Home of James Nguen*. From this website and from the DVD, I garnered additional information for the study about the story of the boys and girls of the Sudan, from the time they left their homeland to the present. The video disclosed that by the time the boys and girls arrived at a camp run by the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army in Ethiopia, there were no tents, huts, latrines or food left. The camp was being threatened with siege by some disgruntled Ethiopians who wanted the refugees to stay out of their country. In light of the hostility in Ethiopia,

the lost boys set out again, walking towards Kenya. The journey would last about four years. According to Rick Castiglione (2007), president and executive producer of Cielo Pictures Inc., the host of James's story online, "By the time the children arrived at the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya, four years later, only 16,000 were still alive. James Nguen was one of them" ([www.cielopictures.com](http://www.cielopictures.com)). Some of those who did not make it were "attacked by animals or perished from the equatorial heat, disease and starvation ([www.cielopictures.com](http://www.cielopictures.com))," Castiglione added.

James told me the story about his experience of the trauma of death and other hardships on his journey in the desert to Ethiopia, and from Ethiopia to Northern Kenya:

Life was extremely difficult. Lots of people did not make it. We would walk during night-time and we would try to sleep in the thickets during the day for fear of being seen by government soldiers or the militia. It's hot in the Sudan, and we had no food and no water lots of the time. In a lot of places, we would live on drinking our urine. It was hard. I watched guys get sick, fail to carry on and others died while we watched; we could not help. Wild animals ate others. Others were captured and given guns to fight with the army. We walked for many months; I don't know how long exactly, but many months. Ethiopia was no good either, and then we headed to Kenya. We experienced similar hardships on this journey too. We lost many more guys on our way to Kenya too. When we arrived in Kenya, it was bare, no houses, no nothing, but it was a safe haven for us. We built our houses and began our new lives. I was there for ten years. I have lots of memories of Kakuma; I started school in Kakuma and in 2001 I was selected to go to Canada. (Interview, May 2008)

Although I had read about the story of the lost boys before, hearing this story firsthand from James had a different effect on me. I was moved by the amount of suffering and grief that the person in front of me had gone through and is still grappling with. At the same time, I was challenged by James's resilience, strength and steadfastness. To me he was the epitome of hope, the emblem of the "power within" of a person's being. James's current activities illustrate this point.

In 2007, two years after the Government of Sudan had signed a peace agreement with the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army to end the war, and following the news that his mother, two siblings and some other family members had survived the war, James set out to continue his journey of courage and hope . "On June 10th of this year [2007], James Nguen boarded an airplane and began a long journey home, to a village in South Sudan, to be reunited with a family he lost 19 years earlier ([www.cielopictures.com](http://www.cielopictures.com))," reads an excerpt from the website of Cielo Pictures Inc. Despite the difficulties that his return trip presented, from the preparation required by the accompanying documentary crew, to transportation and security issues, James remained hopeful that he would eventually be able to return to his new Canadian family. The final leg of this journey was especially difficult as the road became increasingly impassable. Eventually the truck got stuck in the mud and was left behind. The rest of the way, James and his team had to walk for about two-and-a-half hours to get to his mother's home. The reunion scene in the video is extraordinary.

On his arrival at home, as customary, James assumed the role of the head of the family, since he was now the oldest surviving male of the family. In Nuer tradition,

James was now carrying a heavy responsibility that required a great deal of knowledge and life experience, much of which he had missed, having been away from his people for so long. When asked by the interviewer of the documentary about what he was going to do, he responded:

I need a lot of time, lots of time to think; at the moment I don't know what to do. I need time to make any decisions. You can see there are health issues to attend to. Lots of things to think about. (Nguen, 2007, n.p.)

After about six weeks of living with his family, James returned to Canada to continue with his education in college.

I met James at his college library about a year after he had returned from the Sudan while I was beginning to compile the literature review for this research. I thought I had finished data collection for the study but once we sat down to talk, I realized that this research is an ongoing conversation that I will carry with me wherever I go for a long time. James' story found its way into the thesis conversation. After telling him what I was doing, I formally invited him into the study and he graciously agreed. The next day we met again, and this time he brought with him a friend that I will call "Dan" in this report. Dan was also one of the lost boys. I will relay the rest of Dan's story in later segments of the thesis. Unlike the other participants, James's and Dan's involvement in the study occurred outside the context and did not follow my original plan, which focused on students at secondary schools.

### **The "Seven" Participants**

In the original plan, I had laid out a scheme of how participants in the research would be selected. Using this plan, each participant was supposed to be asked to be part

of the study after I had determined that the participant was a new Sudanese student in a Calgary (or surrounding area) school or post-secondary learning institution. The target group included any student in grades 5 to 12 or in first or second year of college or university, provided the student had been in Canada for less than ten years. I had also predetermined the maximum number of participants I wanted to involve in the project as seven.

“I am curious,” began a member of the audience in my colloquium presentation of the proposal of the thesis. “How did you arrive at the magical number of participants to be seven?” I explained that I had picked a number of participants that I thought would form an accessible, representative and manageable sample. “Further,” I elaborated, “so far I have not come across any reports or texts that have strict sample sizes for studies of this nature—ethnographical, auto/biographical, narrative inquiry type studies.” In fact, Mertler and Charles (2005) noted that the number of participants for a narrative inquiry study could range from one to 20 or more. I chose seven. In retrospect, though, I think I have an explanation for this choice. In my secondary school years at Namwianga Christian Secondary School in Kalomo, Zambia I learnt the significance of this number in the Bible. Even before high school, I remember hearing stories such as the story of Creation, the Wall of Jericho, and others in which the number seven is emphasized. As a result, it has become customary in biblical thought to regard seven as a special number, symbolic of completeness. Maybe I was guided by this latent knowledge garnered from years of biblical studies when it came to choosing this number for any purpose. Or maybe it is because I was born seventh (and last) to a *complete* family. Before I met James, I had

had three participants to work with. The next time when he came with Dan, the number came closer to the magical seven.

Fortunately, James and Dan were over age of 18 years of age, which meant that I did not have to get consent beyond their voluntary acceptance to participate in the research. For the other three participants, I had to go through many levels of permission before I could include them in the study. Finally, I had five rather than seven participants.

Once I had recruited the participants, the plan was to meet with each participant or group of participants for at least two sessions. This process took about four months to complete. Finally, I could conduct in-school interview sessions with the students.

### **A Brief Account of Each Participant**

- **James** (see The Long Journey Home story above)
- **Dan** was born in South Sudan and lived there until the age of 13 when he was forcibly drafted into a militia organization as a child soldier. After fighting for a while, his face permanently deformed to tell a lasting story of war, Dan ran away from the army to return home, only to find that his home no longer existed. It had been attacked and his people brutally killed. He then went into hiding in the bush where he joined thousands of other Sudanese boys and girls on their way to unknown places in pursuit of freedom. At that moment he, like James, became a bona fide member of the Lost Boys of the Sudan group. At the time of this research, Dan was enrolled in an upgrading program at a college in Calgary.
- **Syana** was born in the volatile Darfur region of western Sudan. She and her family left the Sudan for Egypt due to the war between the government of the Sudan and rebel groups. She spent two years in Egypt before she and her family

came to Canada as refugees in 2006. At the time of the research, Syana was in grade 10 at a large high school in Calgary.

- **Notela** was born in Darfur, Sudan. She immigrated to Canada with her family as the war intensified in her home country. Notela, like Syana, went through Egypt before attaining refugee status and being allowed to come to Canada. She also arrived in Canada in 2006. Notela left the Sudan after completing grade 9 but when she arrived in Canada she was placed in grade 11 based on her age. At the time of this study she was in grade 12 at a high school in Calgary, Alberta.
- **Joe** was born in Darfur, Sudan. He and his family arrived in Canada as refugees in 2007. Joe has had tremendous struggles in adjusting to the Canadian way of life and to the Canadian style of schooling. At the time of this study, Joe was in grade 10 at the same school as Syana and Notela.

These are the participants whose lived experiences form the basis of the thesis.

Other stories relating to those of the primary participants were of equal importance in propelling the conversations. Some of the stories in the thesis go back several generations before the time of these participants or their parents or their grandparents and great-grandparents. Such stories have been invoked to act as a historical background from which the situation of new Sudanese students can be visualized.

I will end this chapter with a poem from one of the Lost Boys of the Sudan now living in Alberta. The message in the poem points to some of the author's experiences of war and immigration appropriate to this conversation.

Here is Athiaan Makuach Garang's (2008) poem:

### **The Phone Call**

In the middle of the night  
 With the clock's persistent ticking  
 I turn from one side of my bed to the other  
 Pondering my life  
 My eyes growing heavy  
 Waiting for the sleep that never comes.  
 I let my imagination wander afar  
 Back to my homeland—Sudan  
 That night I left  
 The night was as silent as the grave  
 Stood still and cold like steel  
 Perhaps sad that it is losing me  
 I remember clearly, just a toddler  
 Playing on green grass  
 And enjoying the life in the countryside  
 That simple peaceful life.  
 Then all of sudden  
 The phone rings  
 Cutting through the silence  
 Loud, startling, it frightens me  
 "Hello," I say, trembling like jelly  
 "Hello," said a voice,  
 "I am Athiaan's mother; can I please speak to him?"  
 My heart pumps fast, and faster.  
 "Yes, Athiaan is speaking," I say nervously.  
 "How are you, my son?"  
 I have no words to say.  
 She is a stranger to me  
 Yet closer than my own skin.  
 The eighteen years apart instantly fade away.  
 They are shadows across my heart  
 I could feel her now more than ever  
 I could see her clearly, vivid as crimson  
 In my mind's eye.  
 "I am fine, thanks, Mother," I said.  
 As tears roll down my face  
 The distance between us quickly closes.  
 My mother has found me.

## Chapter 4: Immigration and Cultural Experiences

*Long before children have any acquaintance with the idea of nation, or even of one specific religion, they know hunger and loneliness. Long before they have encountered patriotism, they have probably encountered death. Long before ideology interferes, they know something of humanity. —Martha Nussbaum*

### Background

In Chapter 3 I briefly introduced the student participants of the study and told James's story in detail. In this chapter I will delve deeper into more of the participants' life-worlds in relation to the central purpose of the thesis. That is, I will project the students' voices through their lived experiences as narratives in the interview sessions and by using their historical life-worlds. I will briefly discuss the circumstances that have caused many Sudanese people to leave their country for other countries such as Canada. Respected Sudanese scholar Catherine Jendia (2002) shed light on this subject. She wrote, "The story of [the] Sudan is largely one of conflict, civil war, displacement, communal violence, repression, and famine" (p. 1). Unfortunately, this dark picture of Africa's largest country has influenced its socio-political landscape for a very long time. Iyob and Khadiagala (2006) traced the multiple Sudanese conflicts to the distant pre-colonial past and to the eccentric colonial heritage of Anglo-Egyptian overrule. According to Iyob and Khadiagala, the Sudan's ancient pre-colonial past includes a link to the renowned pedigree of the pharaonic civilizations of the Nile, and to the Christian kingdoms of the Nubia, and to the Islamic Nilotic sultanates. Contemporary Sudanese society has preserved this multicultural background but, sadly, it has also maintained the traits of its ancient sub-cultures. Owing to the longevity of the Sudanese conflict and to the complexities of its origin, historical path, and persistence, it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand the current wars in the Sudan. Consequently, many reports in the

media often use conventional binary terms such as African Arab, Muslim Christian, north-south, modern-traditional, military-rebel, and legitimate-illegitimate, to describe the perpetual Sudanese impasse. In spite of the correct term(s) that best describe(s) the situation in the Sudan, the fact of the matter is that millions of Sudanese citizens' lives are disrupted and many have been utterly destroyed as a result of this deadly conflict. This has left many Sudanese yearning for peace, freedom and prosperity with little choice but to look elsewhere for these fundamentals of life. As Iyob and Khadiagala (2006) observed, hope for a stable and peaceful Sudanese society is just a dream. They wrote, "The Sudan is a land where peace always seems to hover over the horizon while numerous destructive wars scar its inhabitants" (p. 13).

Since the Sudan's political independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, the country has suffered civil war save only for 11 years (1972-1983). This period was an interlude of relative peace demarcating the periods dubbed the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972) and the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-the present) (Beswick, 2004; Jendia, 2002). The first war began in 1955 a few months prior to the country's full independence, which raises questions about the foundation upon which the new government was established. Did the colonial powers relinquish their power because the country became unmanageable as a consequence of the war? Were the reins of power handed over fairly to a nation stratified regionally, religiously, racially and linguistically? Interestingly, the colonial government operated the Sudan as two fully separate territories, the commercially favoured Arab North and the under-developed oil-rich Black African South. At independence, however, the two regions were handed over as one bundle to the northern-based government—in spite of a raging war.

The war that would continue for nearly two decades was intensified following the new national government's failure to fulfil its obligations to the citizens of the provinces in South Sudan. The government failed to honour the promise of treating the South as an independent region within a federal Sudan. Instead, the newly formed "national" government based in Khartoum was quick to increase its hold on the affairs of the South, without the Southerners' input or representation. The Khartoum government became widely resented by non-Arab Sudanese for two reasons: it was inequitably filled with Northern representatives and it used a unilateral (dictatorial) decision-making process. Naturally, the Southerners swiftly objected to such actions by the government. They had not only lost trust in a dishonest institution but they had seen increased government presence as foreign intrusion aimed at stripping them of their rights and dignity while exploiting their region's rich natural and human resources. This led to increased efforts by the South to achieve self-governance with minimal contact with the North in a federal government system. To this end, the South started crafting its own regional executive and judicial institutions as well as a full-fledged police and military force. Obviously this move to independence did not sit well with the government in Khartoum, since by now the resources in the South had become a major source of revenue. This led to increased tension between the North (the government) and its hapless Southern citizens, hence the two decades of conflict, named the First Sudanese Civil War. The government military forces clashed with the regional forces that were now considered by the government to be illegal militias. The result was millions of Sudanese casualties, mostly civilians from the largest ethnic groups of Dinkas and Nuers in the South (Beswick, 2004). Also due to this war, tens of thousands of Sudanese were driven out of their homes and left the country to

go to refugee camps in neighbouring countries, creating the initial period of a “lost generation” from which the Lost Boys movement stemmed.

The Second Sudanese Civil War, which started in 1983, is related to the first. The national government legitimized its role in the South by signing a ceasefire in 1972 then further antagonised the South by turning the entire country into an Islamic state. This meant that even though the South was predominantly Christian or of African traditional religions and spiritualities, its non-Islamic citizens had to adhere to the laws of the Islamic religion, including the distinctive Sharia Law. The introduction of Sharia Law, a law that purports death by stoning of anyone in contravention of Islamic Law, was not acceptable to the Christian or African faithful in the South Sudan region. This resulted in yet another civil war, which continues to this day. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese lives were disrupted again owing to this war. The majority of the lost boys and girls of the Sudan are refugees of this war.

The Darfur War of the remote region of western Sudan, which intensified in 2003, coincided with the Second Sudanese Civil War as a separate war. It is regionally removed from the battlefield of the Second War in the South, and its causes appeared to differ from those of the South Wars at its onset. I will elaborate on the second point because the first requires no further treatment.

Early in the research stages of this study, I visited a Sudanese Baptist church in Calgary. On this visit I asked a man about the situation in Darfur. He told me he was a Southerner and as such he was reluctant to speak on behalf of Darfurians, to which I prompted, “Why not?” in amazement. “Isn’t the Darfur region part of the Sudan? You are Sudanese, you surely know more about the war that has destroyed lives of your fellow

citizens than I do, don't you? I am sure you care, please tell me about it." He responded hastily:

You as a fellow African will understand: Darfur is fighting the same war that we have been fighting in the South. The Sudan is in Africa, but Darfurians were not alive to this fact for many years. Now they are coming to their senses—the war in the Sudan has always been caused by foreigners, same as any war anywhere in Africa. You know what I mean. (Interview, March 2007)

In simple terms, the man viewed the civil wars in the Sudan as racially motivated: Arab Africans versus Black Africans. This is the position of most Africans in the Sub-Saharan. To some extent he was right and I understood his explanation quite clearly. Even when reading about the Darfur War since, I have yet to come across a more convincing cause of this war.

The Darfur war unlocked the underlying racial tensions in Sudanese society. While the previous two wars could be explained in politically correct terms as political or religious wars, these theories fail when it comes to Darfur. The Darfur region does not exhibit the same separatist traits as South Sudan, so it is not a war about government. Darfurians are already Muslim by faith so it not about the introduction of Sharia Law or any Islamic caste. Although the Darfur region is an agricultural base and its mountains are rich in gold, its riches do not warrant the brutal action by a government (or government-aided militias) on its citizens. When I asked Darfurian Sudanese immigrants, they were quite blunt: "Arabs consider us Blacks as dogs." The Darfurians had no kind words to describe their relationship with the Sudanese government in Khartoum, which they described as an oppressive (terrorist) regime. "Arabs care less about the Black

people of Africa; they mine gold in the mountains and neglect my people's health, education, survival, everything. Darfur has no proper hospitals or roads," one Darfurian immigrant recounted. It is the utter negligence of Darfur by the Arab-dominated government that prompted the citizens of the Sudan in Darfur to speak out. The voice of the Darfurians was obviously a source of discomfort in Khartoum judging by the government's response that has left hundreds of thousands dead in what is widely considered the first genocide of the twenty-first century. I have come to the conclusion that this war is indeed a racial conflict between the powerful Arab-dominated government and its hapless black-skinned citizens.

The narratives of the students in this chapter depict some of these "war scars," the predicament that many Sudanese emigrants have been born into and that has driven millions of them from their country.

### **Leaving the Sudan**

In an interview session with the three new Sudanese students, I asked the students to describe the situation that led them to leave the Sudan. I wanted them to narrate what they remembered about what had happened to initiate the process of moving and where they had gone after they left their home in the Sudan. I wanted them to lead me through all the places they went to and the experiences they encountered until they arrived at their destination in Canada. For the most part, their stories were similar. So I will present Notela's narrative here:

We left the Sudan in a hurry. My parents said, "We have no place here." The soldiers were closing in, our lives were in danger; everything "stopped" in our town. I was afraid for my life and for the lives of all the people I knew who lived

in our town. In a very short time, life had completely changed. There was no more hope there. This is the place where I was born. It is the only place I had known.

(Interview, February 2008)

It was difficult for me to listen to Notela's moving experience. I could not imagine the fear, confusion, pain and suffering that she went through at such a young age. As she told her story, the other participants looked on intently and expressed sadness in their face while nodding their heads in agreement. It was obvious that this story was familiar to everyone in the room but me. Suddenly, the usually vibrant meeting was engulfed in sombreness, with each one of us scraping for inner strength to support Notela as she spoke. Afterwards, each of the students told similar touching experiences to Notela's.

James and Dan (see Chapter 3), who lived in the remote regions of Southern Sudan, described much more urgent and desperate experiences of displacement than the Darfur experience of Western Sudan described by Notela. As described earlier, James, Dan and many of the lost boys and girls of the Sudan did not have any warning about the outbreak of war. According to James, "The soldiers invaded when everyone was going about their business." Most of the lost boys and girls were either not at home when their homes were invaded or escaped into the bush as the soldiers entered their village. This is what led to the separation of families and initiated the long journey of the lost boys and girls, first to Ethiopia and then Kenya before immigrating to Canada as refugees.

Growing up in Zambia, which has never been involved in armed conflict, I could not fathom these students' experiences. I fought back tears as I listened to the students

tell their stories. It made me appreciate the peace that characterizes Zambia and I wished it could be spread to the Sudan and other hurting nations across Africa.

As a teacher I wondered what impact the traumatic experiences I heard from the students had on these young people's lives and learning. How long could that impact last in a person's life? How often do such experiences resurface in a person's mind? Would it be helpful information if service providers such as social workers and teachers were aware of these experiences in their interaction with the students? For example, if all of Notela's teachers were aware of this experience, would it affect them in their interaction with her? Would it influence their lessons? I could see in Notela's eyes that she was profoundly shaken as she re-lived her memories, remembering some of the lowest points of her young life and voicing these to the group. I drew great encouragement, however, from looking Notela in the eye and seeing her courage and positive attitude. I saw the same kind of positive attitude and determination in the other students as well. For instance, after I could no longer contain myself while watching James's documentary DVD in the library with James, it was James who consoled me. "It is okay, brother," he said, "I have learned to cope. Things will be better for me, for my family and for my country. Thank you for taking your time to learn my story."

From her home in rural Western Sudan, Notela and her family fled to a nearby town where they sought refuge before leaving for Egypt. She said, "We were in Egypt for two years but it's not like here. We could not go to school. Foreigners cannot afford school because it is expensive and rent is also expensive, and you need correct papers." Notela's experience in Egypt is not atypical of most refugees in African countries. James and Dan had similar experiences in Ethiopia. In fact the Ethiopian experience was worse

because as the lost boys and girls arrived, Ethiopia was at the climax of internal chaos that culminated in the civil war of the 1990s (Jendia, 2002). This put the Sudanese immigrants in yet another precarious state, shattering their hopes for peace and freedom in that country. Understandably, in that context the thought of school was a luxury. The refugee camps were barely providing basics such as food and sanitation. This situation caused most of the boys and girls to leave Ethiopia for Kenya. Notela and her family were in a better state by comparison, since they were working refugees. They resided in a place as a family and they could work to support themselves.

### **Arriving in Canada**

Notela narrated how happy she and her family were when they received the news that they had been selected to come to Canada: “In Canada you will go to school and I will get a better job,” her dad said. Notela’s hope for a better life in Canada is a dream that many Sudanese immigrants hold. It is a long-standing dream for many African-Canadian immigrants as we see in Chapter 5. However, as we have seen in many of these stories, not all of the immigrant’s hopes become reality when they arrive in Canada and not in the time frame hoped for. As *The Study of Sudanese Settlement in Ontario* (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2004) revealed, sometimes the dreams that some Sudanese immigrants have about Canada are nowhere to be found when they arrive. On arrival, the reality of being newcomer sets in and some dreams begin to fade as the difficulty of making a living in a strange land takes over. According to the Ontario report, the Sudanese immigrants’ experience of traumatic displacement and mistreatment in transitional refugee camps contributes to their struggle to resettle in their new country. They arrive in the country with deep scars of abandonment, rejection and mistrust,

doomed to be foreigners for the rest of their lives. One participant in the Ontario study put it this way:

First of all, you have your homeland and there is a loss. This loss will continue until when you come they tell you, “You are no longer a refugee.” This is home, but it is *another* home, and it still does not feel that it is a home. You are still temporary.

You are still a refugee. It is hard for us to get beyond that for a long time. “You are safe, don’t fear.” That can prove to someone that, yes, I’m okay. Then they try to unpack all that. Okay, I can actually live here, probably live a much better life than at home. The opportunities are all here. Then maybe this person can begin to loosen up. But to do that requires role models or some of their own people in their community to tell them, to meet them in the beginning [to say] yes, you are here, I have been here, it is true.

These experiences show the fragile nature of immigrants from war-torn countries such as the Sudanese at the time of their arrival. Thus it is important that this information is made available to immigrant receiving and resettlement organs of society so that they can alleviate the struggles that immigrants face at arrival time. It is evident from these narratives that at times lack of information about the newcomers exacerbates the difficulty. It is in such information gaps that studies such as this thesis find their place.

I will close this chapter with the words of an Alberta poet, Athiaan Makuach Garang (2008), himself a Sudanese refugee immigrant living in Edmonton. He described his immigration experience in a poem entitled “Promise:”

**Promise**

Stranded in this wheelchair  
Immobilized, helpless  
And your promises are fading like the autumn leaves  
You dropped me when I was wounded  
With no one else to care for me  
I am left to despair  
In this malicious world  
Here is a man, once mighty  
With freedom to give, to share  
To serve my country faithfully  
Unlike the serpent, that by its own fault is rejected  
I had honour and dignity  
But now I am forever confined  
Like a monument to unrealized dreams  
And in everlasting watch  
In motionless woe  
I see my days ticking past  
And like an ancient headstone  
I will crumble to dust soon enough.  
Where are my rights and my dignity?  
Where is the promise?

## Chapter 5: The Early African Canadian Story

*I'm on my way to Canada  
That cold and distant land  
The dire effects of slavery  
I can no longer stand—  
Farewell, old master,  
Don't come after me.  
I'm on my way to Canada  
Where coloured men are free.*

—George W. Clarke, American Abolitionist

### Before the Lost Boys and Girls

The issue of African Canadians is often obscured by the United States' dramatic history of slavery. It included slave revolts, lynching, the Underground Railroad to northern U.S. states and to Canada, the Civil War, the Great Negro Plot, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Clara Brown helped African Americans escape slavery. The mid twentieth century saw race riots and Rosa Parks started a fresh impetus to equality. Martin Luther King Jr. is seen as a hero of equality. Mary Ann Shadd, Affirmative Action, Oprah Winfrey, Jackie Robinson, Jesse Jackson, urban schools, and Black Power have all contributed to changing attitudes. *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Alexander & Glaze, 1996) was a case that would dismantle racial segregation in schools and other public facilities in the U.S. To these stories can be added the more recent stories of African-Americans, which both helped and hindered racial equality. They include the popular Michael Jackson but also police discrimination. Rap music has travelled worldwide. O. J. Simpson's case was a *cause célèbre*. Magic Johnson became a household name as a result of his success in sports. Topflight politicians have included Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and the first Black president, Barack Obama. In fact, people of African descent have been part of Canada from its inception (The Canadian

Encyclopedia, 1985) but their story remains mainly untold and their contributions under-represented.

Many African Canadians of great distinction have made remarkable contributions to the story of Canada. They include Mathieu da Costa who came to Canada aboard *Jonas* together with Samuel de Champlain and Pierre de Monts in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Da Costa helped to establish Port Royal, dubbed the first permanent settlement in North America (Knowles, 2007). Olivier Le Jeune was the first African Canadian to have come directly from Africa and the first known Black slave in Canada (Nader, 1992). Marie Joseph Angelique, a Quebec slave woman, set ablaze her owner's house upon receiving the news that she was going to be auctioned. Angelique was punished and brutally murdered in full view of her townspeople to serve as a deterrent to other slaves (Alexander & Glaze, 1996). The Jamaican Maroons, a militia of about 400 people, were brought from Jamaica to Canada by the British colonial government. They were strategically settled around the city of Halifax to protect the city from French invasion. Champions against racial discrimination included the French Army and Navy Black servicemen, Thomas Peters, Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, Harriet Tubman, Mary Ann Shadd, John Ware, the Niagara Movement, Nova Scotia No. 2 Construction Battalion, George Dixon, Sleeping Car Porters, Africvillians, Rosemary Brown, Kay Livingstone, Lincoln Alexander, the 93<sup>rd</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup>, and 97<sup>th</sup> Black construction regiments, George Dixon, the Victoria Rifle Corps, Elijah McCoy, Black Oklahomans, the Underground Railroad, Sheldon Taylor, and the Black Pioneer Rifle Corps (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Hill, 1981). The life experiences of these Canadians, and others in later times, tell an incredible story about life as an African-Canadian in the larger story of

Canada. In this chapter I will describe some of these historical stories to extend the field against which the experiences of the new Sudanese students in the thesis can be viewed.

The term *African Canadians*, as used here, refers to the Black people of Canada whose ancestry can be traced back to the continent of Africa. Although many African Canadians can trace their ancestry to specific regions of Africa, many are tied to their motherland only by the colour of their skin. Over the course of history, mainly due to the events of the infamous slave trade, Black people have been scattered all over the world with the largest numbers concentrated in the Caribbean nations, South America and the United States. Canada is also home to a considerable number (about 700,000, at par with the current population of Canada's First Nations) of Black people mostly resident in Eastern Canada where some have lived for many generations (Statistics Canada, 2006). In recent times, many of the new African Canadians have come to Canada directly from Africa, while others have come from other parts of the world. Together they form the group that I have called the African Canadians, a group that is not necessarily homogenous. The African Canadians add their language, nationality, religion, culture, and lifestyle to the Canadian social tapestry (Maki, 2003). In using the umbrella term "African Canadians," it is not my intention to ignore the group's intra-diversity, but to emphasize the bonds intrinsic to the Canadian Blacks as a group. In doing so, I hope that following their historical path in this chapter will illuminate the common story of the experience of Black people in Canada: their history, longevity, and prominence.

I must state from the outset that the task of learning the story of African Canadians was rather dreary and most discouraging. Not long after I had begun reviewing the literature, I discovered that despite the enduring presence of people of African

descent, historical records represented their stories mainly in footnotes, endnotes, brief commentaries and appendices. In the few cases in which African Canadians' affairs have been dealt with directly, it has been in the form of either a crisis management exercise or scientific analyses of statistical census data, and not much else (Walker, 2008). As the story of the first (recorded) Black immigrant will illustrate here, the tradition of treating African Canadians as an *other* has a long history.

### **The First Black Immigrant**

Mathieu da Costa was the first-named person of African descent in Canada. He was reported in 1605 in the company of the French explorers Pierre de Monts and Samuel de Champlain (Bothwell, 2006; Brown, 2002). As a skilled interpreter and navigator, Mathieu da Costa was hired to work as the explorers' interpreter in their dealings with aboriginal people. Da Costa was a fluent speaker of pidgin Basque, in addition to French, Dutch, and Portuguese. Pidgin Basque was a language spoken by the Mi'kmaq natives that Champlain had encountered on the eastern coast of Canada (Heritage Canada, 2008; da Costa 400, 2007). His knowledge of this native North American trade language suggests that da Costa must have been in North America even before Champlain and de Monts's voyages, and certainly before 1605 (Knowles, 2007). The date of da Costa's maiden landing on Canadian soil has yet to be established. The da Costa story and especially his ability to speak pidgin Basque raise many other questions about the first contact between Africans and North Americans. Were there other Blacks in other parts of the New World prior to 1605? If there were, how long had they been in the New World? Could it be that Africans and North Americans had transatlantic dealings well before A.D. 1,000 when the first European visitors, the Vikings or Norse people, are said to have

arrived in Canada (Knowles, 2007)? Maybe Mathieu da Costa was a seventh-generation North American. The puzzle may never be solved. However, it is not contestable, though rarely acknowledged, that Mathieu da Costa helped to establish the habitation at Port Royal, the French settlement that is widely known as the first successful European settlement on mainland Canada (Bothwell, 2006; Brown, 2002; Knowles, 2007). For his contribution to the establishment of Port Royal in Nova Scotia, however, and later the establishment of Quebec City, Samuel de Champlain assumes the title of the Father of New France or Canada (Bothwell, 2006; Winks, 1997).

Although the historical records depict Mathieu da Costa as a transient visitor, the fact that a person of African ancestry was present in 1605 dispels the “widespread perception of African-Canadians as ‘recent arrivals’” (Alexander & Glaze, 1996, p. 19) in Canada. The list of accomplished African-Canadians noted earlier and the current demographics, which put African-Canadians in third place (by population size) among minority groups in Canada, call for the revision of the Canadian story (Statistics Canada, 2006).

### **Early African Canadian Immigrants**

Some of the earliest Black immigrants to Canada came as slaves. Slavery in what would become Canada is believed to have been practised by the native peoples of the Northwest Coast prior to and during European contact (Brown, 2002). In his bestseller entitled *Canada Firsts* American activist and “perpetual” American presidential candidate, Ralph Nader, lists Gaspar Corte-Real as the first European to practise slavery in Canada. He stated, “In 1501, [he] enslaved fifty native men and women in Newfoundland” (Nader, 1992, p. 8). According to Nader, Black slavery in Canada

appears to have been initiated by the French as early as 1608, though the first Black person to be recorded as a slave in Canada was a seven-year-old boy from Madagascar in 1628. The nameless boy is said to have arrived in the property of Captain David Kirk, an English privateer who was conducting raids on the French colony in the St. Lawrence basin (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Da Costa 400, 2007; Nader, 1992; The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1985). Later, Captain Kirk sold the boy to Father Olivier Le Tardif, who re-sold him to a Quebec (New France) resident when he left for France. Upon his baptism by Father Le Jeune, the boy was named Olivier Le Jeune, combining the names of his master priest and his baptising priest (Africanaonline, n.d.; Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Nader, 1992). Olivier Le Jeune is believed to have been the first African to become a permanent resident of Canada. He lived in Canada until his death in 1654 (Alexander & Glaze, 1996).

From this point on, Black slavery in Canada grew into a significant social and economic institution. Between 1628 and the British Conquest in 1759, New France had about 3,604 registered slaves out of which about 1,132 were Blacks. By 1783, almost all African-Canadians were enslaved (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Nader, 1992). The French defeat that ushered in British criminal and civil law did nothing but reinforce slavery and exacerbate the misery of slaves in Quebec. Although the British had the reputation of being harsher to slaves than the French, the tenets of the French *Code Noir* tell a different story. The following excerpt from the *Code Noir* describes the “proper” treatment of slaves in New France before the British Conquest.

If a Black tries to escape, we cut off his ears and we brand a *fleur-de-lis* on his shoulder with a hot iron; if he tries to escape a second time, we cut the hamstrings

on the back of his legs. If he is so bold as to try again, it's death. (Fine-Meyer, 2003, p. 83)

The reality is that enslaved African-Canadians, under the French or the British, experienced extremely harsh conditions. Slaves in early Canada were non-persons under the law:

They were property and had no rights. Slaves were listed in wills and passed on to White sons and daughters . . . slave auctions were common, especially in Nova Scotia . . . published notices of escaped slaves, offering sizable rewards for their return [were also common]. (Alexander & Glaze, 1996, p. 40)

For at least two decades after the conquest, the majority of the population of African-Canadians remained under the yoke of slavery.

The first group of free Black immigrants arrived from the United States at the end of the American Revolution War (1775-1783). This group consisted of Americans who fought for the British Crown and were promised land, freedom, and equality for their service (Brown, 2002; Hill, 1981). Faced with charges of treason and persecution, approximately 80,000 to 100,000 Loyalists fled the newly created United States after the war, about half of them going to Canada. Many settled in Nova Scotia and in the unsettled lands above the St. Lawrence rapids and north of Lake Ontario (Bothwell, 2006; Brown, 2002; Nader, 1992; Walker, 2008). In total, about 3,500 free Black Loyalists were taken to Nova Scotia, while an estimated 2,000 went enslaved.

As the Canadian author James G. Walker (2008) observed, when the Loyalists arrived in Canada, they entered a chaotic and inefficient land-granting system rife with British colour prejudice and colonial perceptions:

If many Whites suffered delays, were assigned poor land, or had no land at all, it is obvious that the Black Loyalists experienced an even less favourable fate. Their disappointment, and the discrimination with which they were met, indicated that they were not to be treated as equal citizens after all, and encouraged many of them to believe that they would have to look beyond the governor and his surveyors to complete their escape from slavery and to achieve the independence they sought. (Walker, 2008, p. 59)

The Black Loyalists suffered open racism and discrimination from the larger White colonial society, which always viewed them as migrants whose stay in Canada was only temporary. Without a country of origin, many of these African–Canadians became so desperate that they re-sold themselves into slavery while others considered returning to the United States. When a chance was presented to them to repatriate to the British colony of Sierra Leone in 1792, about 1,000 Black men, women and children boarded the ships bound for Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa. Those who remained behind endured the “segregation [that] soon appeared throughout the Canadian colonies. . . . In most workplaces [the] blacks held the lowest paying jobs; and being relegated to jobs without responsibility accentuated their [perceived] slave status” (Alexander & Glaze, 1996, p. 42).

### **Early Refugee Immigrants**

In 1796, the Maroons of Jamaica became the second group of free Black immigrants to Canada after the Loyalists (Our History, 2008). The Maroons were descendants of Black slaves who had escaped from the Spanish colonizers before the British conquest of Jamaica in 1655 (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Winks, 1997). For over a

century after the conquest, the Maroons waged war against the British colonizers of the Island of Jamaica until 1796, when the government succeeded in overcoming them. To establish its control over the island and disempower the dissenting citizens, the colonial government removed an elite group of approximately 600 Maroons, called the Trelawney, from Jamaica and transported them to Canada.

[The Maroons arrived in Canada at] the time period when the military authorities were afraid that the French might try to recapture Nova Scotia by an invasion.

[The] British Government believed that the Maroons would *be useful and faithful corps* [italics added] to oppose an invading enemy. (Our History, 2008)

Therefore, the government looked for a strategic location where the Maroons could be utilized. The government then secured some land close to the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the Maroons built the community of Preston. Although the Nova Scotia Maroons lived in relative peace for about four years and helped build the Citadel in Halifax, disputes between the Jamaican and English authorities with regard to the financial support of the Maroons interrupted their stay. These disputes, coupled with social discrimination from members of the Canadian community and unexpected effects such as the cold weather, left the Maroons with no option but to resort to their militant ways. Consequently, in 1799 the colonial government decided to remove the Maroons and send them back to Africa. By 1800, most of the Maroons had been transported to Freetown, Sierra Leone, Africa (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Our History, 2008; The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1985).

The next group of free Black immigrants arrived in Canada following the War of 1812. Once again, the promise of freedom, equality and land in Canada had prompted

thousands of African–Americans to fight alongside the British in the war (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Walker, 2008). Free African American volunteers and escaped slaves distinguished themselves in many crucial battles. The Company of Coloured Men, for instance, made a great impact during the crucial battles at places like Fort George, Niagara Town, Stoney Creek and Lundy’s Lane, and played a decisive role in the Battle of Queenston Heights (Alexander & Glaze, 1996; Winks, 1997).

At the end of the Canadian–American War of 1812, at least 2,000 so-called *Black refugees* were taken to Halifax in 1813. Other Black refugees of the War of 1812 settled in Ontario and other regions in the Maritimes. This group constituted Canada’s first wave of refugees. Over the next 30 years, between 1,000 and 2,000 African–Americans continued to leave the U.S. for Canada each year due to legal discrimination in the United States and in pursuit of the promise of Canada as a safe haven for Blacks (Hill, 1981; The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1985). As with previous bands of Black immigrants, the Canadian public resented the refugee immigrants of the War of 1812. They were largely treated as temporary residents whose sole reason for immigrating was to escape slavery (Fine-Meyer, 2003).

The largest number of Black American immigrants to Canada arrived as passengers on the historical Underground Railroad (Brown, 2002; Hill, 1981; The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1985). The Underground Railroad was a secret network of houses at which slaves could stay during their escape to free states in the United States or to Canada. The facilitators in the Railroad developed an efficient system of communication using symbols and coded language that was highly secretive and exclusive. In code, the escaped slaves were known as *passengers*, the guides were called

*conductors*, and the homes that they would hide in were called *stations* (Hill, 1981; The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1985). It is estimated that between 1815 and 1860, the Underground Railroad transported 80,000 slaves to freedom; about 50,000 of them came to Canada. Relentless efforts by conductors like Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), herself a runaway slave, and abolitionists on both sides of the border propelled the success of the Underground Railroad. For over 10 years, and at great personal risk, travelling by night and in extreme secrecy, Harriet Tubman led hundreds of slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad. Tubman became known as “the Moses of her people who never lost a passenger” (America’s Story, n.d.).

Reverend Josiah Henson was another conductor whose contribution to Canada and especially to the development of education should not go without mention. Reverend Henson was based at Dresden, Ontario in the Black community of Dawn during his conductor years (Nader, 1992). Besides his spirited service as a conductor, Reverend Henson is credited for establishing the settlement and community of Dawn. He is also credited for starting the first vocational school for Blacks called the British–American Institute for African-Canadians. He did this almost single-handedly and with meagre resources. According to Nader, Reverend Henson met Queen Victoria at least three times to solicit funds for the purchase of a two-hundred-acre site for the institute at which ex-slaves could be taught useful skills and craft a hopeful life (AmericanCivilWar.com, n.d). Reverend Henson’s Institute paved the way for the education of minorities and the under-privileged in Canada.

With the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865, thousands of Black people who had sought refuge in Canada returned to the U.S. At the same time, faced

with repression and American legal inequalities, small groups of African-Americans continued to move northward to Canada. The northward movement was later intensified by the constant recruitment of American farmers by the Canadian government to populate the prairies (Fine-Meyer, 2003). Thousands of White American farmers responded to the advertisement of cheap arable land in Western Canada. They began trekking north to become the homesteaders and pioneers in the prairies. Among these pioneers was a trickle of successful Black farmers from Oklahoma. Between 1909 and 1911, about 1,000 African-American farmers from Oklahoma moved to Alberta, forming what would become known as “The Black Oklahomans” (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1985; Fine-Meyer, 2003; Maki, 2003).

Shortly after the arrival of the Black Oklahomans, however, public campaigns to “Keep the Prairies White” started. This public pressure eventually caused the government to modify the immigration policy against further immigration of African-American farmers (Fine-Meyer, 2003). Anti-Black racism reverberated all across the country: “The press joined White groups, associations, and chambers of commerce in sending one single unified message to Ottawa: ‘Keep Our Land White’” (Alexander & Glaze, 1996, p. 106). These chilling campaigns were not uncommon from high-profile organizations such as the Edmonton Board of Trade, which sent the following message in its petition to Ottawa in 1911:

We cannot admit as any factor the argument that these people may be good farmers or good citizens. It is a matter of common knowledge that negroes and whites cannot live in proximity without the occurrence of revolting lawlessness, and the development of bitter race hatred. We are anxious that such a problem

should not be introduced into this fair land at present enjoying a reputation for freedom from such lawlessness as has developed in all sections of the United States where there is any considerable negro element. There is no reason to believe that we have here a higher order of civilization, or that the introduction of a negro population here would have different results. (Alexander & Glaze, 1996, p. 112)

The result was the formulation of a government Order-in-Chief by the reigning Liberal prime minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, that reads:

For a period of one year from and after the date hereof the landing in Canada shall be and the same is prohibited of any immigrant belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada.

(Government of Canada, 1911, as cited in Fine-Meyer, 2003, p. 10)

In a later chapter, I have re-told a story from *Pourin' Down Rain*, by Calgary author Cheryl Foggo (1990), who is a descendant of the Black Oklahomans. I strongly recommend this book for those interested in learning more about the experiences of African Canadians of that era. It is fascinating to travel with Foggo in the familiar places that she talks about and then fast-forward the clock to the present and see how the situation has developed.

Besides the Black Oklahomans, a few other African Americans who had moved to Canada prior to the restrictions of 1911 settled in Alberta. The story of one of those African-American settlers merits a mention here, because much of his life story occurred in Calgary and the surrounding areas that this study investigates. It is the story of John

Ware, a cowboy and farmer who homesteaded in a number of sites in southern Alberta, particularly around the Calgary area.

The story of John Ware is one of heroism, excellence, hard work, self-determination, and comradeship. John Ware was born into slavery in 1845 in South Carolina but died a respected freeman in Alberta, Canada in 1905, the year that the Province of Alberta joined Canadian confederation (Hundey, 2006). After the American Civil War, John Ware left South Carolina and went to Texas where he learnt the skills of cowboys. In 1882, he was offered an opportunity to be part of a cattle drive to Canada. (In 2000, I witnessed a recreation of Canadian cattle drives in the Calgary and Cochrane area of Southern Alberta and heard the story of John Ware from some of the cowboys.) When Ware arrived in southern Alberta, he decided to stay and make it his home (Alberta Centennial, 2005; Alberta Settlement, 2005; Hundey, 2006). As part of the Province of Alberta's centennial celebration, the story of John Ware was presented as one of the stories of men and women who had made a great contribution to the province. "John Ware died in September 1905, the month and year of Alberta's emergence as a province thanks in part to his hard work, initiative and vision" (Alberta Centennial, 2005). He is buried in Union Cemetery, Calgary.

Restrictive immigration policies were still in place in Canadian politics well after the departure of Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier from Ottawa. These measures did not only limit the number of Black immigrants entering Canada but also drove out Blacks who had lived in the country for many years (Fine-Meyer, 2003). This caused the "back-to-Africa" movement, which led hundreds of Blacks to repatriate to West Africa (Alexander & Glaze, 1996). Between 1914 and 1918 about 2,000 Black Canadians left

Canada for the United States and Africa, leaving the population of African-Canadians at its lowest ebb (Milan & Tran, 2004).

It was not until the immigration reforms of the 1960s that the Black immigration numbers began to rise again. The 1960s' reforms ushered in a points-based system, which was aimed at luring economic immigrants into the country and removed the legal preference for immigrants of European origin (Milan & Tran, 2004). Since the introduction of the point system, more immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean countries have been admitted to Canada. The Sudanese immigrants that are the focus of this study are some of the beneficiaries of the point system of the 1960s. Recent statistical data indicate:

The number of those identifying themselves as Black [in Canada], the third largest visible minority group [has risen by about] 18.4% from 662,200 individuals in 2001 to 783,800. They account for 15.5% of the visible minority population and 2.5% of the total population. (Statistics Canada, 2006)

Canada has followed a persistent drive towards a socio-political, ecological, and legal system of equality and justice for all citizens in a multicultural society. Studies that cause Canadians to think about their society, such as this thesis, will continue to find their place in the story of Canada. Canadians need to continue telling the *whole* story of their past, so that they can give new hope to everyone, including the marginalized and the voiceless. The ideals of freedom and equality under the law that the Loyalists, the refugees of the War of 1812, and the passengers of the Underground Railroad envisaged in Canada must continue to drive all Canadians forward. As Canadians, we need to listen to persistent voices like the voice of the former Canadian Ambassador to the United

Nations and human rights activist Stephen Lewis. In a *1992 Report on Race Relations in Ontario*, Stephen Lewis described the challenges still before Canadians, especially in education; it seems the wars of early Canadians are not a theme of the past yet. The ghosts of the Laurier and Sifton era are still alive in twenty-first century Canada. Lewis wrote:

First, what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of “multiculturalism” cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target. . . . As one member of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations said, “The Blacks are out front, and we’re all lined up behind.” (Lewis, as cited in Alexander & Glaze, 1996, pp. 115-116)

## Chapter 6: Experiences of Resettlement

### Transculturation

In this chapter I will explore the resettlement process as it relates to immigrant students' conception of home and belonging. Using the excerpts from my conversations with the participants, I will attempt to display some of the key adjustments that students from the Sudan must undergo in the Alberta educational system and in Canadian society generally.

To describe the series of resettlement events in an immigrant's life, I will turn to the work of a Cuban essayist, Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz coined the term "transculturation" to describe the process of resettlement that he saw as inescapable for anyone who must migrate to a new community, school, or country (Ortiz, 1940). According to Ortiz, when im/migrants move to a new place, they begin a process of change that not only affects them but the host community as well. In the end, through a series of interpersonal adjustments or acclimatization of cultures (transculturation) the newcomer develops a sense of belonging to his or her new home. Ortiz postulated that the degree of cultural diversity between the sending and receiving society is directly related to the severity of transculturation.

Ortiz envisaged transculturation as a serially occurring process of three sub-processes that he termed deculturation, acculturation, and neoculturation (Cowan, 2005), which must occur before a newcomer can attain the *feeling of belonging* in a new culture. He arrived at his conclusions while researching the resettlement and cultural integration of new (Afro-Cuban) im/migrants in his native country of Cuba. He noted that every im/migrant begins resettlement by undergoing a "deculturation" period that he explained

as “the process by which voluntary and involuntary newcomers were torn away from their old cultural roots” (as cited in Street, 2005, p. 152). This is when the newcomers begin to notice discrepancies between the old and new ways of knowing, doing and living, in the adopted culture. These cultural indicators are encountered through ordinary social interactions or through reading, listening and asking questions, or through organized socio-cultural orientation and integration programs. Through these ordinary experiences, the newcomer learns *the way things are done* in the local community. In the early days of moving when the reasons for moving are still vivid and everything about the new society is preferred, the individuals tend to be quick to self-orient with the norms and folkways of the dominant culture. The im/migrant embraces the new cultural rules as a way of securing and cementing the move to a new society. Shifting to doing things *this way* is effectively the deculturing, or adopting of a new culture, Ortiz suggested. Deculturation starts at arrival, therefore, which may begin with the newcomers’ formal orientation process, and lasts throughout the “honeymoon” period of immigration.

The students in this study described their deculturation period as an overwhelming experience of great change. Apart from the expected climatic change, it appears that the students were not prepared for the myriad of changes that occur when one leaves his or her social setting for a new one. At the core of their immigration was plainly a pursuit of freedom and opportunity. A chance to go to Canada was seen as a gateway to this dream. Deculturation for these students was necessarily an automatic process that they had to undergo in order to actualize their purpose of moving from the Sudan to Canada. In their minds, it seems, deculturating was a necessary psychological move to freedom and success because *not* doing so was associated with the previous life

of insecurity, pain and suffering due to the raging war in their homeland of the Sudan. They saw the (mental) move away from the *old ways* of a war-torn society and quickly learned how to live and function in Canadian society as an important first step toward resettlement. My conversation with Joe one cold winter day illustrates the process of deculturation undergone by his family shortly after they arrived in Canada.

It was a brisk cold Tuesday morning in Calgary and I was rushing to school for my first chemistry class at 8:30 a.m. I left home about half-an-hour earlier than usual because the radio announced an overnight snowfall of about thirty centimetres and continuous snow for much of the day and the roads were in a poor state. Clad in snow boots, a pair of corduroy trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, a toque, and mittens, I arrived at the school. As I descended the steps that led to the science labs for my first class, I met Joe who was also dressed for the weather, but still wanted to preserve a certain style of dressing. He wore somewhat oversized shoes and a pair of black jeans-trousers that were tied to his waist with a big belt that sparkled with silver metal pieces as decoration. On top of these he wore a colourful overcoat that was unbuttoned in front, revealing a loose T-shirt that had a picture of the American rapper Tupac Amaru Shakur (2 Pac). Under the T-shirt a blue turtleneck undershirt protruded, which he pointed out to me jokingly as he said, “Good morning Mr. Simoongwe. Can you imagine seeing a Zambian dressed like me on a February morning in Lusaka?! My dad bought this shirt when he got his first Canadian paycheque and said we needed to dress Canadian now.” He was pointing at his turtleneck, to indicate it was not part of his style (or culture) to wear a turtleneck shirt. I just smiled and responded that it would be quite funny to see anybody dressed that way in February in Lusaka for certain, but it may not be so funny on a July morning in Kalomo

(Southern Zambia). I knew exactly what Joe meant by pointing out the turtleneck shirt because turtlenecks are not popular in most parts of Africa, obviously due to the warmer weather.

My brief conversation with Joe reveals two points about immigrants' transculturation to a new society. First, it is quite clear that among the priorities of resettlement in Joe's family was the need to integrate in Canadian society. Joe's dad wanted his children to "dress Canadian now," as soon as he could afford it. This demonstrates how important it was for him to adopt the Canadian way of life, in the process abandoning or obscuring his Sudanese identity. Ortiz pointed out that this is typical of immigrants in their early stages of resettlement since the reasons for moving tend to obscure any other factor of resettlement. Challenges encountered due to the differences between the receiving culture (or society) and the immigrant's ancestral heritage are viewed as obstacles that must be overcome in order to get "civilized" into the new culture. Joe's dad was at this stage of transculturation when he bought Joe's turtleneck undershirt. Second, Joe's reference to African dressing code and his 2 Pac shirt show that at the time of this conversation he had moved beyond deculturation in his transculturation process. It was clear to me that Joe was more inclined to act out his identity as an African (North American) youth rather than just as a mainstream Canadian teenager. While it is not unusual to see Canadian youth under-dressed for the cold weather, Joe's attire, which I thought was improper for the prevailing climatic conditions, communicated another dimension of his life stage. He was a young man aware of the world around him. He was an African youth in an environment that did not define him fully. Joe set himself apart from his father's propensity to adopt the new culture

unreservedly. It seems he was sorting through the elements of society, choosing some, foregoing some and enduring others—signifying that he was undergoing a stage of transculturation beyond the initial deculturation phase.

Following deculturation, im/migrants enter a more cognizant period. The newcomer has now become aware that not everything about his or her old culture is to be cast away and not everything in the new culture is to be embraced. Ortiz saw this stage as an excruciating one. It is a time filled with surprises and questions. Joe must have been in this phase of transculturation that cold Tuesday morning. Perhaps the Edmontonian Athiaan Garang was also experiencing this when he asked, “Where is the promise?” in his poem *The Promise* (see Chapter 4). It is a time of evaluation and value judgment, which is often daunting. Ortiz called the social adjustments that follow from this stage of resettlement “acculturation.” During acculturation, the host culture is affected as well, because some of the cultural tendencies preserved in the newcomers make their way into the social fabric of the mainstream society.

The final stage, “neoculturation,” sets in when individuals begin to concretize their adopted forms of a culture. Ortiz saw neoculturation as “an ongoing project” (Street, 2005, p. 152) whose offerings have culminated in the dynamism that has become the hallmark of transient, multicultural and diverse societies.

In education, especially in highly diverse school communities with a high incidence of resettlement of students in their care, it is important that stakeholders are aware of these stages of resettlement. As Ortiz revealed, in transculturation, much of what an individual experiences during resettlement happens so subtly that it could go unnoticed. Unless members of the host community pay special attention, the resettlement

of some students is bound to be unsupervised, which might have heartbreaking repercussions for individual immigrants or refugees. The changes in the life of a person as he or she makes the transition to a new place are rarely obvious, but can be tumultuous. My conversation with Syana, one of the participants of this study, will illuminate this process from an experiential vantage point.

### **Syana's First Day of School**

Syana and her parents moved from the war-ravaged Darfur region of Western Sudan. When her family left the Sudan, Syana was in grade 6. They lived in Egypt for about two years before coming to Canada. During their time in Egypt, Syana did not attend school and her dad, who is well educated as an accountant, had no time to tutor her because "he had to work in order to have us fed," she said. Syana and her siblings could not go to school because they did not have the necessary student visas to register in the Egyptian school system. "Even if I had the visa, it is lots of money. My dad could not afford sending me to school and providing for us," she added. Syana is now in grade 10 at a large high school in Calgary where I met her two years after she arrived in Canada.

During the interview sessions, I asked Syana to tell me about her first day of school in Canada. She began by laughing and the other participants in the room burst into laughter as well, including me.

Oh my god! It was quite a day. Lost, lost, lost, everywhere. I didn't know where to go, I didn't know what to do, whom to talk to. I felt like I was in a forest alone. I was lost. I did not know how to open my locker. Everyone is busy and they won't help you. Oh my god . . . I was scared. But I was happy. Some of my classes that day were a nightmare.

“I can understand being scared, but what do you mean when you say that you were *happy*?” I asked.

This [day] meant a lot to me. I was back to school after being denied the chance in my own country. Finally hope was coming back in my future. School is everything for me. I was happy because I was a student again. I want to become a geologist in the future. I need school to realize my dream.

“I see, so why were you scared?” I probed.

Everything was different. People were all over the place and they were moving fast in all directions. Open hallways [though filled with people]. Lots of places to go; to see this teacher, that counsellor, the office and signing forms, timetables, looking for rooms, and I could not speak much English. I felt so embarrassed. I forgot to eat my lunch that day—I will never forget that—I only remembered when I got home.

“Did you speak English when you came here?” she asked me. I told her I did, because in Zambia we spoke English at school. English is the official language of Zambia. Then she continued:

You can't compare school in the Sudan with school here in Canada. It is so different . . . oh my god! This school is even more different than my first school in Canada when I just arrived. This was in Regina, Saskatchewan. It was a smaller school compared to this school but it is like comparing an elephant with a rabbit to my school back home. I miss my school in Regina. It was nice and small. The teachers are nice, they are mostly immigrants too: from the Philippines, Africa, and South America.

When I asked Syana to share with me her significant educational, social or cultural experiences of moving to Canada, she smiled and pondered the question for a moment.

Then she said:

Firstly, I had this “school jump.” I left school in the Sudan as a grade 6 and I landed here in Canada as a grade 8. The principal said my grade level was determined by my age. So there I was, skipping a whole year of school. It is kind of special though [with a smile on her face] that I will never attend grade 7 in my life. Isn’t it cool? I agreed to be placed in grade 8 although I was really a grade 7-level pupil. And I could not speak English. In Saskatchewan, my teacher told me that I could learn better if I look the teacher in the eye. That is not what we did in Africa. If you respected the person (in Africa) you gave them your ears, not your eyes. You listened and spoke less. You could look at him but you must make sure to listen. Here it is the opposite. If you don’t look at them, they take it you need to see a counsellor or psychologist. I was also shocked with how cold it gets in the wintertime.

From this conversation I have drawn a number of lessons about resettlement, some of which I already knew from personal experience. First, and taken at face value for anyone who has spent at least one year teaching in any large urban school, Syana’s story is a familiar one. However, there are experiences in the story that clearly set Syana’s experience apart from an ordinary first day of school as well as the initial cultural shock of moving into a drastically different society. Notable in this overwhelming ordeal is Syana’s inability to ask for help. She stresses that she was lost, but instead of asking for help, she expects other people to come to her aid: “Everyone is busy and they won’t help

you.” This way of dealing with things came up quite often in my conversations with the other participants too. For instance, Notela stated, “You know, culturally we Africans tend to wait for things to come to us. If a teacher wants me to say something in class, the teacher calls my name.” When I asked Notela whether she did not speak voluntarily in class because of being shy, she said, “No.” She said it was just a way of showing respect. But I wondered, in Syana’s case, whether the question of language skills that came up later in our conversation had something to do with her inability to speak out. When I asked her about this she said language had nothing to do with it. As a matter of fact, Syana believes that she had learned enough English by then.

Another theme that emerges from this story is that of diversity among newcomers, not only in terms of race and culture but individual preparedness. Syana’s failure to open her locker illustrates this point. Unlocking a single-dial combination lock is a basic skill that most new students (from Canada and many other countries) would have mastered by her age. These are some of the experiences that get left out of regular orientation programs in most schools, especially at the high-school level. Unfortunately, Syana’s lack of such operational skills is not unique. Nearly all the participants of this study reported alarming life-skills difficulties similar to Syana’s. The skills varied from learning to use the train and bus systems, to the computer, parking meters, finding books in the library, and to using the school bus. So as a diverse Calgary society that is becoming more diverse, we need to be more attuned to the circumstances of immigrants’ knowledge of life-skills needed in their new life. One way we can achieve this is by including the newcomers’ input, such as Syana’s story, in program design and delivery.

In light of this, immigrant-receiving institutions such as schools ought to operate more flexibly by creating and implementing programs that fit the particular newcomers' resettlement needs. To do this, it is important that these institutions find ways of getting to *know* the newcomers. One way that schools have attempted to do this is through orientation programs at the beginning of each academic year. Even though these programs are an important step in the right direction, more needs to be done. In their current format, these orientation efforts clearly do not meet the needs of immigrants and refugee students in Syana's situation. One reason the current orientation programs fail to meet newcomers' resettlement needs is that since the programs tend to be conducted only at the beginning of the year, students who arrive later in the year miss out. In any case, the typical orientation programs usually just introduce the new student to the classrooms for the current semester. Moreover, their structure and organization appear to serve the needs of a generic new student rather than a wide range of students who really need orientation and resettlement services.

Often during these orientations, a group of student leaders and a few members of staff stand in strategic points around the school to direct new students to a central gathering place or other points of interest in the school. The host students may be handing out the day's or week's program brochures and maps of the school, and some free handouts: the most popular is ice-cream. A senior member of staff officially gives a welcome speech (or orientation message) to the new students or the whole student body. This may be followed by group tours led by host students and staff. To mark the end of the orientation session, the new students may be led to a central location (again) where they are collectively addressed before being dismissed. In most cases, the whole program

lasts about eight hours, barely sufficient even for students who are transferring from within the country. Thus the current orientation efforts in most receiving institutions, including schools, lead the newcomers into their new settings only up to Ortiz's first stage of transculturation, deculturation, and abandons them thereafter.

New students like Syana require much more than a school assembly orientation, in which teachers and schools staff are presented to the student body, to undergo the resettlement process of transculturation less painfully and relatively quickly. They certainly require much more than half-a-day's school tour by another student. Even the common International Student Centres that some schools use as follow-up orientation facilities do not meet the needs of most new immigrant and refugee students in their current format. From my observation, these International Student Centres are created to supplement the services offered in learning resource centres. The resource centres tend to deal with behavioural and developmental learning needs rather than meeting the needs of new international students. The International Student Centres do little more than reproduce the role of resource centres. Based on this point and in light of Ortiz's description of resettlement, I will propose the establishment of an additional section or department in our schools, especially in large cosmopolitan schools such as most high schools in Calgary, Alberta. For the sake of this discussion, I will call these new learning spaces *Resettlement Centres* or *New Students' Centres*.

These resettlement centres should be created with the most fragile new student in mind. Unlike orientation programs that last anywhere from a few hours to one week, the new resettlement programs should be more flexible in terms of their length of operation. New students should be able to return to the resettlement centres when they need

assistance throughout the time that they need it. Unlike International Student Centres, which appear to have been turned into language tutorial spaces, resettlement centres should be places for *all* new students. While learning the official language is an important factor in resettlement, it is clearly not the only issue that newcomers grapple with in transculturation. What new students need most at the start of school are the day-to-day life-skills revealed in Syana's first day of school, such as opening a locker. These are the skills they need to get *into* the community. Thus these resettlement centres should be designed to serve as avenues through which the schools would meet such needs. The centres should serve as spaces through which the host society gets to know the new students and learns more about the students' needs. At the same time, the students would learn more about their new institution, new learning system, and new culture. This would ensure a smoother transition for the students by reducing the negative effects of resettlement. An orientation program organized in this way goes well beyond the surface orientation of a quick round of introductions of teachers names' and their extra-curricular roles, mastering the fixtures on a school map, identifying emergency exits, locating the rugby field or knowing which bus to take. It penetrates to the deeply held underpinnings of a community. It introduces the new student to what he or she really needs to know to function properly in the new environment and culture. It is a mode of preparing the newcomer to become a contributing member of society, which should be the central goal of an authentic education system. Thus the creation of the resettlement centres would add value to a school's general programming. This is the form of orientation I envision and one that would cater for the needs of all students in schools filled with transient, migrant, immigrant and refugee students. The resettlement centres would meet this purpose

providing they remain true to the fundamental principles of inclusiveness and sensitivity to the new students' resettlement needs.

Sensitivity to the needs of new students is in fact a curriculum matter. Syana's story exemplifies this point: "I miss my school in Regina. It was nice and small. The teachers are nice. They are mostly immigrants too: from the Philippines, Africa, and South America," she stated. It follows from this statement that Syana's view of schooling is closely tied to her perception of her teacher. In one of the interviews, another participant explained how her performance was affected in a particular subject because she believed her teacher disliked her. This reveals that the way teachers respond to and deal with new students affects the students' academic and social performance (Campano, 2007). Apart from the personal relation with teachers, Syana's statement portrays another connection with her teachers in Saskatchewan that is crucial to this discussion. She said teachers were "mostly immigrants too," suggesting this as a reason for the positive experience she had at her previous school. Syana's perception of the teachers and how that translates to her learning brings the notions of belonging and identity to the fore. It seems that because Syana identified herself as an immigrant student, she felt comfortable in the company of other immigrants. She felt that she *belonged* to the classes of her immigrant teachers.

Syana's learning experience stresses the teacher's function as a role model. Unfortunately for Syana and others in her situation, immigrant teachers who could fill this learning need are still sparse in learning institutions in Alberta. I base this point on my extensive personal experience of the educational systems in the province as a student at four and as an instructor at two post-secondary colleges across the province, as a long-

term teacher at four high schools, and as a substitute teacher at more than 15 schools from elementary to high schools in Calgary and Rocky Mountain House. In many of these learning institutions in the last ten years I have observed an overwhelming increase in the cultural demographics of students while the cultural dynamics of staff that serve them have remained static. For instance, at one school of approximately 2,500 students in Calgary, over half of the student population is Asian and about two-thirds of the total student population is from a visible “minority” but the school has only three Asian teachers out of about one hundred teachers. In this school, it is easy to see Syana’s story as it plays out in the lives of new students from China. With such a large population of immigrant students in this school it is safe to conclude that a good number of these students feel out-of-place because of a lack of teachers with whom they can culturally or racially identify. In general, then, while it is important to adjust pedagogical programs and processes in the light of a growing multicultural student populace, it is also necessary to grow a culturally diverse faculty. This process includes hiring qualified visible minorities at all levels of the education system, not just in cleaning jobs. From this experience, it goes without saying that there is a need for minority teachers in many Calgary schools.

Beyond the factor of the image of the teacher in the classroom, teachers in classrooms with diverse populations are required to be sensitive to the content of the curriculum in order to accommodate students in their care. A short personal experience might help to illustrate this. In an economics class shortly after I had arrived in Canada, I was deeply disturbed by my professor’s worldview. According to him, the world consisted of a few countries on three continents. Whenever he listed examples of places

in the world, you could be sure they included North America, Europe, Japan, China, South Korea, Australia and India. I never heard him once talk about Africa or any place on the African continent. Neither did he talk about South America or the Asian countries not listed above. I know he was probably unaware of this, but had he even mentioned any place (even by a slip of the tongue such as Swaziland in place of Switzerland) on the continent of Africa, it would have meant a lot to me. I would have had a different reason to remember him and my experience at that institution would have been enriched. The message to teachers is about going back to the basics of communication studies—you must know your audience (Leggo, 1999). So as teachers, we need to know our students if we are to meet their learning needs.

I will close this chapter by quoting a poem that summarizes this ideal of offering authentic curriculum in diverse classes. The writer, Belizean-born Canadian educator and poet, Nzingha Austin, came to Canada as a child and has lived here ever since. Her comments show the multiple layers of belonging and of strangeness, and indicate the length of time it takes to adjust. New students need to be fast-tracked to ease their transition.

Nzingha Austin recently told me, “I feel more Canadian when I am travelling outside Canada than when I am back home here because of the values, I think, and people’s attitudes towards me when I am travelling” (Austin, personal communication, 2009). The following poem is Nzingha Austin’s (2002) expression of her experience of the Alberta social studies curriculum.

I sat in my Social Studies Class, clinging to the words of my teacher. I was excited because this was the year I was going to learn about myself.

In Grade Seven we studied China. I learned of the Ming Dynasty and of the rise and fall of feudalism.

We learned of Japan, a country at its crossroads, torn between tradition and change.

We studied Brazil, a country so rich in culture, wildlife and history.

We learned of World War I. Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated by Gavrilo Princip of Serbia. And so it commenced.

We learned of World War II. Two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the first time that nuclear power had been used. Millions of Jews were tortured and killed by the Nazis while the world watched.

I had listened to all these things attentively, but never quite identifying. But now it was my turn.. We were going to learn about me.

One morning I walked into class and I took my usual place at my desk. It was bleak outside. It was cold, snowy, and windy but I was cheerful because today was the day. I sat on the edge of my seat impatiently.

He began. Blacks were brought over as slaves on ships crossing the Atlantic. They were brought over to the Caribbean and the United States and used as a source of labour in the fields. Slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807, and it was not until 1865 that it was abolished in America.

There it was in a nutshell. My history, and the beginnings of my culture summarized in a paragraph.

In that moment, whatever light had shone, was snuffed out by some invisible wind. And suddenly, I felt as bleak as it looked outside.

## Chapter 7: Linguistic and Cultural Experiences

*Everything presupposed in hermeneutics is but language.* —Friedrich Schleiermacher

### Communication

Communication of any kind relies heavily on the medium of language and on cultural understanding between the people involved. This is because communication impinges on a set of actions or gestures that transmit meaning to both parties. This set of actions constitutes the cultural component of the communication, and the medium of transmission constitutes the language. In a hermeneutics conversation such as this one concerned with “understanding text” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 387), the matter of language is critical. In order for a conversation to be sustained between two people, they must speak a common language, whether directly or through a translator. Note, however, that if the need for a translator exists, it signifies a lack of understanding between the people in communication. Usually, this is because one or both of the participants is attempting to communicate using a foreign language. The good news is that a language can be learned; although, being able to speak the language fluently without requiring a translator does not necessarily amount to real understanding. This is a matter of interest in hermeneutics and certainly in this text.

Hermeneutics calls for a proper understanding of the subject matter that takes place in the medium of language. True understanding begins to take shape when the newcomer internalizes the new culture expressed in that language. This is an ideal situation of course, whereas the reality of understanding lies in a successful process of transculturation discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless it is important to keep in

mind the hermeneutical position on the role of language and cultural experience to bring about proper understanding of any conversation.

### **Learning a Language Upon Immigrating**

It is impossible to talk about experiences of immigrants in Canada without touching on the issue of language and literacy. Since Canada is officially a bilingual nation, these discussions are essentially about a newcomer's capacity to function in the country's official languages, English and French. The ability to converse in these languages has a bearing on one's integration into the dominant Canadian culture. Therefore, language acquisition or enhancement is part of the process of transculturation. As a consequence, for most immigrants, the matter of language is the first of many changes that confront them upon arrival in Canada and it is the first step they must take in their resettlement: "Your first months in Canada will be full of change. You will face many challenges, especially if you have to learn English or French, or improve your language skills," reads a statement from the Citizen and Immigration Canada (CIC) website ("Adjusting to Life in Canada," CIC website, 2009). Later in resettlement, if an immigrant aspires to become a Canadian citizen, the matter of language resurfaces again, this time in a more formal way. That is, for an individual to become a citizen, he or she must demonstrate a sufficient level of fluency in one or both of the official languages (CIC, 2009). In this sense, the definition of a Canadian citizen is closely tied to the factor of language; that is, you can become a Canadian citizen if and only if you are fluent in the French or English language. In keeping with the language requirement, 98% of all Canadian residents reported being able to communicate in an official language in the last census (Statistics Canada, 2009).

The issue of language was clearly an important factor in the transculturation process of the participants in this study. It arose at some point in my conversations with each of the participants. It is a factor that has travelled with them throughout their translocation journey. For James and Dan who had to live in Ethiopia and Kenya, functioning in the respective local languages of the refugee camps in both countries was one among the numerous challenges they faced on their way to Canada. Syana, Notela and Joe, whose immigration trail led them through Egypt, reported less difficulty in the matter of language since they were all fluent in the Arabic language that is widely spoken in Egypt. Nonetheless, according to Joe, the fact that they spoke the Sudanese (Darfurian) dialect of Arabic meant they still had to wrestle with the factor of language. When asked why Notela and her family preferred to stay indoors much of the time when they lived in Egypt, she stated: “Arabs treated us badly, like dogs. Dad always went to the store because he spoke the Queen’s old English because he was educated in Britain you know.” Notela’s comment illustrates the racism between Arab and Black Africans and reveals the discrimination faced by new immigrants due to language difference. Unfortunately, this form of racism faced by these students on their way to Canada is widespread in many parts of the world today, including the students’ new home of Canada.

Notela’s language experience in Egypt brings to mind a similar event that happened to me here in Alberta. I was in the third year of my undergraduate studies at the University of Alberta when for one semester I applied to live in a central residence on campus. That semester, approximately one hundred students occupied the residence hall. From this population, the majority of students were local Caucasian graduate students

and with only a handful of international students. In terms of racial diversity, there was one Chinese Canadian, one Thai, one East Indian Caribbean, and one African (myself). One day as I ate my supper at the kitchen table, one Caucasian female student who rarely talked to anybody in the building sat across from me and began to chat with me. She asked whether I had a part-time job and whether I planned to stay long term in Canada once I had completed my studies at the university. When I said I did not have a job at the time but “yes” I planned to live and work in Canada long term, I was surprised by her response. She looked troubled by my answer, which startled me because I did not expect such a response. Then she explained that her reaction had little to do with what I had just said but the conversation just reminded her of an incident she wanted to alert me about. She then went on to narrate experiences she has had with prospective employers in Alberta as an international student whose first language was neither French nor English. She said she had been to a number of job interviews where she felt she did not get the job because she spoke English with an accent. According to her, I had an advantage with this form of indifference because as soon as I entered an office, the employers could see what they were getting and treated me accordingly. In her case, she felt disheartened to see their respect evaporate the moment she uttered her first word.

This student’s experience, like the Sudanese students’ experiences en route to and in Canada reveals the importance of language in resettlement and transculturation. Due to this kind of treatment, which she referred to as “prejudice,” this student disliked Canada to such an extent that as soon as she completed her graduate degree, she left for her home country, Greece, even though her study visa entitled her to one year of employment in

Canada after graduation. She totally altered her plan of applying for a work visa after graduating and any plans of immigrating.

Unfortunately, experiences of racism related to language are problems that affect sections of the education system in Alberta. It does not affect only immigrant students, as the following account shows. This happened during group discussions in one of my graduate studies class. As my group was discussing a topic on ESL class sizes, I was baffled by a side-contribution made by one of my colleagues, a teacher in Alberta. He said one day he went into a French immersion class and he could not believe his eyes: “Here was a Native student sitting in a French immersion class!” He went on to say that he questioned the student to establish that the student was actually taking French. “Can you believe it, a Native student in French immersion classes?” I was moved by his perception. The discussion group was momentarily silenced by the disturbing sentiments shown by this teacher. After about a minute of staring at him and at each other, I broke the silence by asking him what was so surprising about a Native student in the French immersion class. Before he could respond to my question, his cell phone rang. He went outside the classroom to answer it and never returned to the group. As a group, we pondered on the shocking perception our colleague had exhibited, while acknowledging that unfortunately his point of view was not necessarily an isolated one. The group condemned the scourge of stereotyping, discrimination and racism implicit in the contribution by my colleague. This story shows the critical role played by language in education. Language can draw people together but unfortunately it can alienate others, as shown here. It also reveals racial tensions in Canadian society that need to be worked out especially in school systems. Having taught at a school on a Native reserve for three

years, and having taught in the public school for as long, I am well informed about the tension that exists between Native Canadians and mainstream Canadians. My colleague's attitude toward his Native student was but the "tip of the iceberg" so to say.

Concerning the participants, at the time of the research, all the primary participants were still taking English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes, albeit at various levels. By this time in their resettlement and at their education level, all participants had acquired sufficient English skills to communicate clearly, with the younger ones being more fluent than the older ones.

Like the participants, I too had to make adjustments to my English language skills, although I was exempted from taking any ESL classes because of my standing in the mechanics of the English language acquired from many years of learning and teaching in English in Zambia. My issue was about the variation of English of a Zambian English speaker compared with the Canadian English version, in the same way as the Sudanese students' experience of the Arabic language in Egypt. When I immigrated, I realized that although I could generally understand most Canadians speaking English, sometimes it took me a while to decipher the meaning of what was said. I became aware of this understanding (of language) problem when, in many instances, a joke was cracked and everyone laughed but I would be left wondering what was funny. This experience made me realize that being able to function in a language entails much more than mastering the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of a language. I was undoubtedly well schooled in these areas, but it was the cultural dimension of language that I was wrestling with and was deficient in, when I moved from one (English-speaking) culture to another. With this realization, it came as a natural step for me to take a second look at the current

ESL curriculum and programming in Alberta, since this is an official avenue through which speakers of other languages can learn English.

### **English-as-a-Second or Additional Language**

The conversations I had with any of the primary participants (and with other immigrant students and teachers who worked with them) identified language as being vitally important in the life of an immigrant student. One of the four teachers with whom I often discussed my research called the ability to function in English or French *the gateway* to success for an immigrant student. The teacher made this comment at the end of my in-school interview sessions with the students. I had just asked a team of teachers who worked with the participant students to discuss their experiences of teaching immigrant students, particularly ESL and the Sudanese students. The conversation surprised me. The teachers pinpointed the interface between a person's cultural background and the new language as being the key to the educational success of the individual. From this standpoint, they explained that a successful ESL program needed to address the question of culture concurrently with its linguistic emphasis (in much the same way as the resettlement student centres proposed in Chapter 6). Although all the teachers had stated that they were trying to teach ESL with this in mind, the wide spectrum of cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms presented great challenges. The teachers named the large size of the ESL classes as another impediment to this effort.

On the subject of the Sudanese (ESL) immigrant students, the teachers thought that, for the most part, the programs had been very helpful to this population. They compared the Sudanese students' language needs with those of the students from Siberia

with whom I had worked in a learning-strategies class that I was teaching at the time. The teacher made reference to Siberian students' ESL struggles, because we had just received a new student from Siberia who had had no previous experience with English before immigrating to Alberta. The student had been assigned to me because, according to the authorities, "He [was] not comfortable with female teachers." This was quite a challenge for me because I had no formal training or experience in teaching ESL classes. I collaborated with the other teachers in the department to devise a personalized curriculum for this student. We had to begin from scratch, labelling common objects in the room and working with children's picture books, once we had discovered the student's interests. He liked sports so we looked for sports-related children's books. The teachers had noticed that many African immigrant boys experienced similar language issues, which unfortunately, meant that many fell through the cracks, left school and associated with gangs on the street.

Further, the teachers talked about other problems outside of school that they presumed to be unique to the Sudanese students' success in ESL or school in general such as the role of parents in the learning process of the new students.

### **Immigrant Parents' School Involvement**

The teachers were concerned about the placement of immigrant students in grade levels that were not reflective of the students' academic achievement. They pointed to experiences similar to those revealed by Syana, Joe, and Notela concerning placements. Along with this, the teachers cited the lack of parental involvement as another adverse factor in the education of immigrant students. They aired their frustration about families sending children to school and leaving the school to fulfil the function of educating the

children single-handedly while expecting a splendid performance from the students and from the school. According to these teachers, the parents' inadequate involvement and high expectations created tremendous stress for the students, the teacher, and the system.

It became clear to me from the discussions with the teachers that the issue of language was necessarily a cultural issue. I saw the lack of support by the parents as evidence of this. How can parents who are trying to grasp the basics of a culture and a language be in a position to help their children in the same process? They may try to help, but it would be expecting too much of these immigrant parents to think that they would act like parents who have lived in the community longer. Notela and Sandhi's stories illustrate this point. Their parents were in language classes at the time of this study. Notela's mother was not able to converse in English even two years after immigrating. This is a reason that may keep some parents from being involved in the school system to support their children.

### **Students' Experiences of ESL**

Both James and Dan described language as a barrier to many immigrants' full resettlement in Canadian society. Both recounted their long journey of immigration and resettlement with constant reference to English-language training, mostly in the form of ESL classes. They were thankful for the professional and considerate work of language trainers at vocational centres such as Bow Valley College who had helped them learn English from beginning levels to the level they were at when I met them. James, who had done much of his high-school education at Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, said:

It was so hard at ESL but with focus, one can pass. It is so important to have ESL certification because this allows you to go to college and get into more English

classes. In Africa I passed, no problem; courses like Social did not involve essay writing. (Interview, May 2008)

Dan identified ESL training as one of the greatest challenges in his education:

Besides the horrific experiences I went through and the fact that I cannot change what my family is still going through, even if I know what needs doing, ESL and the way I talk are the next problems these days. Most guys give up and find a job or get into trouble. Life is hard. (Interview, May 2008)

Both Dan and James gave the example of the Sudanese immigrants working in the meat plant at Brooks, Alberta, and the groups of young African men who loiter on the streets of Calgary as possible casualties of the immigrant language training programs. They agreed that it takes a great deal of focus and support to succeed in ESL or in any educational program in the early days of immigration.

The younger students treated their ESL experiences in much the same way as they did the rest of their classes. All three of them stressed that ESL classes were helpful for them and other immigrant students who come from non-English-speaking countries. Notela listed her top performance in ESL as one of the highlights of her school experience since immigrating to Canada. She said this achievement has instilled confidence in her that has helped her to excel in other subjects as well. On one of the interview days when she came late, she proudly reported that she had been late because her teacher had just posted mathematics test marks online for which she got 93%, the top mark in her class! Syana was also positive about her ESL experience except that she thought, "Sometimes ESL is too easy and boring." Further, she said, "I like it because it makes us feel special. We get to leave the school to visit places in the city. And we get

extra time on tests and exams.” That ESL programming in some schools in Calgary was too easy and hence did not meet the needs of some students was indicated in Deepa Rajkumar’s (n.d.) paper *Sudanese Experiences of ESL in Canada: A Multiplicity of Voices*. According to Rajkumar, the ESL curriculum is designed to “produce and reproduce the Sudanese as refugees and the Canadians as citizens” (Rajkumar, n.d., p. 1). Rajkumar’s findings should serve as a reminder to those who plan, teach or facilitate ESL programs to place the learner’s needs at the centre of their duties. That is, each class needs to be culturally sensitive so that its content is stimulating and appealing to the learners. For instance, decorating an inclusive classroom could involve wall pictures and text that is representative of the cultures in the room. Lessons, projects, discussions and examples in a stimulating and inclusive ESL class should always be designed to cultivate a sense of recognition, acceptance and inclusion of all the members of the class. In this way, learning (not only of a new language) becomes a meaningful experience in which students feel valued and respected.

### **My TOEFL Experience**

The issue of language in the resettlement process has affected me as well. Although I come from an English-speaking country where I did my schooling in English, when I came to Canada I too had to deal with the issue of language like the rest of the participants in the study. Apart from the sudden realization that I spoke with an accent, I learned to my surprise that because English was not my first language, I was classified as a special-needs learner. I have always regarded English as one of the four languages that I function in, Tonga being my mother tongue, but I never saw this as a disability until I came to Canada. I was shocked that this was the general mentality in some sectors of

Canadian society, especially in schools and among teachers. Instead, I have always seen this as a talent and an added skill in my life. In fact, I had to write the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in spite of my transcript that showed that I had done all my schooling in English and passed the government O-Level English examination. My teachers' college and university transcripts showed that I had passed all my courses. I had taught secondary school science in English for over three years. Zambia is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, follows the British system and uses English (the country's official language) as the medium of instruction. But I still had to write the TOEFL examination.

The following poem captures my language experience and how I imagine other immigrants envisaging their experience. This is my wish:

**ESL**

I wish we were all the same  
I wish we all spoke the same language  
I wish we were all ESL

I wish we were all the same  
I wish every student were ESL  
I wish all teachers were ESL  
I wish all schools were ESL

I wish we were all the same  
I wish all workers were ESL  
I wish all managers were ESL  
I wish all companies were ESL

I wish we were all the same  
I wish every parent were ESL  
I wish all the children were ESL  
I wish all families were ESL

I wish we were all the same, ESL.  
I wish we lived in an ESL country

I wish my wish never came true.

## Chapter 8: School Experiences Outside the Classroom

### Manyana-Manyana: Stereotyping and Racism

As we saw in the previous chapter, it does not always take language or accent to alienate members of a community such as a classroom, residence hall, school, a place of work or any other setting. Sometimes it is just a matter of the words one uses. For instance, I attended a multicultural after-school evening event that was organized to showcase Asian culture. The evening was well organized with performances ranging from drama and speech to music and dance, followed by a variety of Asian food. It was well attended by parents, community members, and school staff, but not so much by non-Asian students. The next day I asked Joe why he had not attended the event dubbed *ShowcAsian*. Joe said he did not attend because he was not Asian. Then I asked my homeroom class the same question and, like Joe, about 80% of the students felt *ShowcAsian* was a poor title for the event if it were intended to be inclusive. One student said outright that she thought it was a “racist” function and she would not attend even though she was Asian. While the title succeeded at defining the event showcasing the school’s Asian population, it fell short of marking the event as a multiculturally inclusive one.

Birch (1985), who described racism as a set of attitudes about one ethnic group, usually viewing another as worse or less than one’s own, saw the very act of choosing words as perpetuating racism. According to Birch (1985), “Racism is often revealed in the language people use: explicit, extreme or offensive. Racism may appear in a choice of words” (p. 10). For Joe and the students in my homeroom class, *ShowcAsian* was an Asian-only event, thereby sidelining them from intermingling with their Asian peers even

though the teacher who organized it had said it was a multicultural event and everyone was welcome to attend.

The story of *ShowcAsian* has important implications for those in multicultural settings. For educators in multicultural schools, Joe's interpretation of *ShowcAsian* as a racist function reminds us to be cautious not only about the day-to-day language used in the classroom but about all the modes of communication and modelling used in the school. Racism can hide in the teacher's choice of visual images, books, movies, examples, curricula and extra-curricula activities. The fact that racism can be expressed in these ways shows that it is learned, since these sources are the primary avenues through which schools transmit other forms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Thus it is incumbent upon educators and policy makers to take centre stage in recognizing and calling out racism in multicultural settings. While most students who felt discriminated against by a perceived racist title chose not to attend as the best option, I do not think it is. I think members of multicultural contexts ought to tackle racism head on when they recognize it rather than "shovelling it under the carpet," so to speak. A week after this function I talked with the teacher who had helped organize it about these students' comments and feelings. She assured me that she would consider changing the title to a more accommodating one the following year.

Since beginning this study I have been attentive to the words used by teachers, staff, administrators and students in the schools I have worked in Alberta. Some of these words and phrases follow. *White-washed*, Canadian Asian students who were either born in Canada or first-generation immigrants who speak and act like Canadian (Caucasian) European students. I have heard students call Japanese Canadian peers *Japs*. On Native

reserve schools I heard some students refer others as *apples*. These students were called apples because they were perceived to have adopted the Whiteman's culture—they were red outside but white inside. Another term is *bananas*, referring to Asians (yellow outside and white inside). The teachers also use terms that could segregate students. These terms include: coded kids; my 24s; the Paki students; Asian fail; our regular students; normal kids; the Asian parents; the immigrant parents; ESL students/standards. Student conversations include: you're so Asian; she's so black; terrorists; the brown students; the Mecca breed; the sprinters; the T-boys, and many others.

One morning not long after the *ShowcAsian* function, a new teacher who had been hired midway into the semester greeted me and ended his English words with the phrase "*Manyana-Manyana*." I responded to the relevant part of the greeting in English, "Good morning." Then I immediately asked about the *Manyana-Manyana* suffix. He explained that he thought he would bring an African ingredient into the day. I told him that *Manyana-Manyana* was as foreign to me as Greek or Cantonese. I reminded him that Africa was a vast continent with many different cultures and I had no concept of or association with this phrase.

A few weeks later he apologized to me "for pre-judging." He said he did not know what to say to start a relationship with me because I was the first African he had worked closely with. "It is a line from an old movie," he said. "I am sorry for my ignorance." Of course I had no issues with accepting the apology and I did not expect it because I was certain that our previous discussion had solved the misunderstanding. I only repeated my comments about the vastness of the African continent and its corresponding diversity of languages and cultures. So it is not likely that one descriptor

true for one population would be true for the next and even less likely from one person to the next. In the stories that follow, you will see more experiences of the participants that portray forms of racism persisting in the education system and in schools in Alberta today.

### **A Black Student's Picture-Day Experience**

At the end of the day as I was wrapping up, Notela entered my room to ask me a question about when the photographer was coming back to the school for photo retakes. The moment she entered, the public announcement (PA) system went on. She listened and waited until the PA turned off. Then she asked, "Was that announcement about re-takes?" "No, it was about bus 'tickets' not 're-takes,'" I responded. Notela then went on to tell me the purpose of her visit. She wanted to know which day the photographers were coming back for retakes because she wanted to have her photo taken again. When I asked her what was wrong with the picture she had, she began to tell me her school photo experiences:

I hate picture day. It is a waste of time for me. I don't know why they do that. The lighting is not set for us. Last year I asked the guy to adjust the equipment but he said it would work fine, but see what I had to live with all year. This happens every time. It is so frustrating. (Interview, March 2008)

Notela's experience reminded me of my own photo experiences outside of school. At one time I had taken a roll of film to a store to be developed, before the era of digital cameras. When the pictures had been developed, I pointed out to the photo-lab technicians that the quality of the photos was poor and I was not happy with the outcome. Then the technician told me she had done her best to make the photos appear the way I

looked. The pictures were so dark you could not see my face had it not been for my white teeth (in some photos) and sparkly eyes. I felt so insulted that I told her my intention was not to look like Michael Jackson; I just wanted better service. As for professional photos at school, like Notela, I have also given up—I do not even go for re-takes anymore. I just put the photos in the filing cabinet hoping no one ever asks to see them. Notela went on:

But why, why don't they just set up a different booth for people of colour? They know they will return for re-takes, and I bet you if you go to the gym on re-take day you will find all the Black kids there, and they will be the majority. It is so insane. This needs to change. The most annoying thing is that people still say "Wow you look great in this picture," when I am hardly visible. It is so condescending. (Interview, March 2008)

Notela's experience demonstrates the need for schools and school systems to revise their policies to meet all students' needs (Simoongwe, 2008). Failing to do this causes problems such as the systemic racism that seems to be occurring in Notela's photo experience. If Notela was right that retakes were mostly for Black students, then something is terribly wrong in the planning of picture day at Notela's school. I know that the setup of the equipment (cameras and lighting) can be adjusted to produce a good quality picture of a Black person. The poor quality photos show that the setup on picture day is, as Notela puts it, "not for us." Perhaps it is not only the picture equipment that is not set up for students like Notela; it may be that school policies were set up in a like manner. With increasing diversity in cosmopolitan classrooms comes the need to restructure some of the setups that may under-serve students like Notela. Thus if old systems that were designed to meet the needs of a homogeneous population group, such

as students of European descent, are not revised, more and more students like Notela will be excluded in school systems in the twenty-first century. Through the stories of its participants, this thesis brings out some experiences unique to the Sudanese students whose inclusion in the school systems in Calgary warrants important changes in the status quo. To illuminate this point further I will present Joe and Syana's stories about their hair.

### **“Hairday”**

In the research interview, Joe said:

I like to keep my hair like this because it is easier to manage and to keep people out. When I have long hair, people like to run their fingers through my head. It is so annoying; even people I barely know want to do this. I dislike it; but what I hate the most is being treated the way they treat a pet—you know, petting a dog or cat or some other furry animal. It's so rude. I tell them all the time. I even told off a teacher once. That is why at times I wear a veil on my head whenever I have long hair—it has nothing to do with my religion at all. (Interview, February 2008)

Syana in the research interview declared:

I am proud of my religion. I wear my veil all the time; my mom wears one too. In my religion, good Muslim women wear them. I am not a bad girl like these guys. People ask me questions about my veil and I just tell them I am a proud Muslim woman who must wear a veil as per custom in Islam. (Interview, February 2008)

Like Joe, I have also had people attempting to run their fingers through my hair but I had not realized it was because of the length of hair. I have always kept my hair short anyway. However after my interview with Joe, I am now more aware of this, indeed so

much so that I try to keep vigil over my son's hair as well. I make sure to cut it before it is long enough to keep those "hungry" fingers from invading his head. I am concerned that since he is so young, older students (or teachers) could take advantage of him in their quest to get the apparent "petting fix." Joe is right, the practice of running fingers through one's hair is rude but more than that it is a violation of one's dignity and self-worth. If the person doing it obtains the same pleasure as that obtained from petting an animal such as a dog, a cat or a horse, what does the act say about the person who is being petted? More than that, what about the relationship between the "petter" and the "petted?" Whatever the rationale may be, it is a practice that I would not like done to my child, to me, or to any other person. It is inhuman.

As for my daughters, "hairday" as Cheryl Foggo (as cited in Maki, 2003, p. 44) calls it, is a different story. Their hair is kept long (for some reason, it seems girls do not tempt "petters") and must look fancy every day. Sometimes it is plaited; sometimes it is put in a ponytail. Sometimes it is just combed and styled for the occasion. But in all cases, it is always an ordeal. It takes a long time to do and most of the time it seems the girls have to endure some painful episodes. After watching what my girls have to go through to look after their hair, it makes my fear of the wandering fingers pale in comparison. Neither of these experiences comes close to Cheryl Foggo's (1990) description of her kind of hairday in her years of growing up in Calgary in the 1960s.

Cheryl Foggo is a descendant of the Black Oklahoma farmers mentioned in Chapter 5. She was born and grew up in Calgary (Maki, 2003). Her great-grandparents came to Canada in 1910, which makes Cheryl a fourth-generation Canadian. In the

following story, she described her mother's efforts to fit into a society that was predominantly white, as follows:

Hairday, as my sister and I referred to it, was a torment, a day of relentless brushing, pulling, plunging into the yellow tub of water and then, at the end, the dreaded "hot comb." After a vigorous towel drying at the hands of our mother, there was an hour's grace for air-drying, then we endured another hour, longer for me because of the thicker (bad) hair, beside the gas stove. Our mother divided our hair into tiny strands, coated each strand with Vaseline, then applied the teeth of the comb from our scalps to the ends of our hair. We felt the heat, heard the sizzle, smelled the burning protein and saw the smoke rise into the air around us. (Foggo, 1990, as cited in Maki, 2003, pp. 45-46)

According to Wilma Maki (2003), at age 14, Cheryl decided that there would be no more hairdays. She had decided to lay claim to her African heritage. She let her hair grow and curl naturally in an Afro hairstyle. When she went to school like that, showing that she was proud to be Black, some classmates snickered as she walked into the classroom. One of the students in the classroom shouted, "Cheryl, did you stick your finger into an electric outlet?" (p. 46), which made fellow students burst into laughter, but Cheryl would not back down. She had found her identity and she wanted to live as a proud African-Canadian. (At the end of this chapter is a poem by a former student of mine, whose theme is identity.) Syana's wearing of a veil despite the "stares" she experienced was her expression of being a proud Muslim. I believe this sense of identity is important for a person to function coherently as body, mind and soul.

In addition to the African students' voices represented in this chapter so far, I had a conversation with one of my students whom I will call Sandhi. From Sandhi's story I hope to be able to draw some parallels with the experience of Canadian immigrants of diverse backgrounds. I met Sandhi at the same school that Syana, Joe and Notela attended, which gives his experience particular relevance to the present conversation. He was in grade 11. Sandhi and his family had immigrated to Canada from Bangladesh about three months before I met him. His family consisted of his dad, mom, a younger brother and himself. His dad is an architect by profession but his credentials (like many immigrants') are not recognized in Canada. "My dad works in a warehouse of a grocery store at present and Mom is just a housewife," Sandhi said.

**Dressing Experience: Sandhi**

Sandhi tells his story of adjustment:

Sir, I am depressed. No one to talk to; no friend here. I go to work after school till 2.30 a.m., sometimes 3.00 a.m. I work full-time. School is different here. Exams are about method. In Bangladesh exams are from book. You learn book you pass. Here you learn method; it's hard for me. I am always tired. Mom said teacher should talk to Dad. He said he worked and went to school; he passed and he's now an architect. (Interview, March 2008)

As a team of teachers who had contact with Sandhi, we talked to his father, after which his workload was reduced to three days per week instead of the 40-hour week that he worked right on arrival to Canada, on top of a full load of high-school classes (grade 11 physics, mathematics, social studies and computers). When he went to talk to the school

guidance counsellor, the counsellor advised him to drop physics and to replace it with a less intensive course in the resource room.

I took time to listen to Sandhi's relationship struggles. He repeatedly blamed himself for not making friends with anyone in the school or at home. I pointed out to him that friendships usually evolve naturally and as soon as he had time to spend outside of work and schoolwork, his chances of making friends might increase.

He told me how he changed his style of dressing because some students whom he said originated from India, Afghanistan, Pakistan or Bangladesh made fun of his clothes. He pointed to my dressy long-sleeved shirt tucked nicely into a dressy pair of trousers with neatly laced shoes, as how he used to dress.

They laughed at me, sir, and said I was looking like new and old. Now I wear ragged jeans, T-shirt or sweat shirt and cap. I don't enjoy . . . I like one girl but I don't know how to talk to her. (Interview, March 2008)

Sandhi and I spent many sessions discussing the issues of *difference* and how real and important they are. He pointed out that I was the first African Black teacher he had ever seen in Canada. I shared my experiences of difference with him and encouraged him to see the brighter side of being different. We pursued the issue of the difference in learning systems between his old country and Alberta. We examined the pros and cons of each system and established that the systems are very different and he was now in transition from one to the other. I assured him that it was important to me that he told me about this systemic difference and I would share this information with other educators.

We talked about the importance of keeping one's identity wherever one may be and in spite of what friends may say. I encouraged him to dress in a way that he felt

comfortable. I informed Sandhi that I would be his friend. I am glad I listened.

Enala Mumba's (2009) poem follows.

### **Celebrating Me!**

I'm celebrating me!

The me that when the Lord created said it was good!

The me that is uniquely me, unique in purpose and design!

The me that is, and not the gal in the neighbourhood or the gal in the movie!

Celebrating the me that was born for such a time as this!

Celebrating the me that was made complete & all I need to become is already contained within! Celebrating me and all I'm blest with!

I'm celebrating the me that is human and not an angel!

Celebrating the me that falls yet rises!

Celebrating me with my strengths and weaknesses!

Celebrating me and the family I was born into!

Celebrating me and the friends that grace my life!

Celebrating me and the friends and people who left!

Celebrating me and my destiny!

Celebrating me, where I've come from, and where I'm going!

Celebrating me and where am at, knowing the Sovereign Lord designed it so!

Celebrating the me that was, that is and is still developing!

Celebrating the me that is still a work in progress!

Celebrating me and the life I've known!

Celebrating me and my talents, gifts, skills and personality!

Celebrating the me I've discovered and I am thru God's word!

Celebrating the me that still has worlds to conquer!

Celebrating the me I've come to appreciate, love and become friends with!

Celebrating the me that only grace, love, favour and mercy has brought thus.

Thank you Lord for giving me a chance to celebrate me!

## Chapter 9: Interpretation—Seeking Understanding

### Interpretation

The notion of interpretation is a hallmark of hermeneutics and interpretive inquiry. This is true especially in the school of thought influenced by the tradition of hermeneutics set forth by Schleiermacher in biblical studies, Dilthey in historical studies, and by Heidegger in ontological studies—the foundation of present-day philosophical thinking (Silverman, 1991; Virkler, 1981). To the students of hermeneutics today, this way of thinking would rightly be attributable to the great philosophical contribution of Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer draws on Schleiermacher's viewpoint, seeing the process of interpretation as closely interwoven with understanding. Gadamer's thinking appears to be influenced by Martin Heidegger's description of hermeneutics as the interpretation of Dasein (experience) in *Time and Being* (as cited in Silverman, 1991, p. 1). For Gadamer, the problem of interpretation is a problem of understanding.

In this chapter, I will discuss the notion of interpretation of this text in the “Gadamerian hermeneutics” as it has unfolded to me in the course of this study. In Gadamer's terms, the moment I entered into this conversation to learn from the students' stories, I started interpreting: “Understanding occurs through interpreting” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 389). As a matter of fact, for a study of this nature, interpreting begins as soon as a topic is identified, continues throughout the researching, writing and reading stages, and as long as the topic is pursued. So when I began to learn more about new Sudanese students in Calgary, I had essentially started to interpret this part of the world around me. Then I had to do more interpretation when I started choosing the sources to read during

the literature review. The data generation and collection stages relied on careful interpretation since I chose the kind of questions to ask, some that I wrote down and others that I asked as the conversations unfolded.

According to Gadamer, the discussions I had with fellow teachers, administrators, professors, and others after hearing the students' stories were *acts of interpretation*. These discussions were aimed at penetrating to the truth of the students' experiences. I continued interpreting as I sorted through the transcribed data and deciding the points to include and exclude; in this way, the writing process was also interpretation. Necessarily, my interpretation continues as long as I remain a participant in this conversation. Just as it required several sessions to hear the students' stories and to write them down, "nothing that needs interpretation can be understood at once," Gadamer stated (2004, p. 190). The picture of interpretation described here is much stricter than the understanding garnered from an aggregate of observations. Listening to or reading the stories in this study without the desire to understand the embodied message and learn from them falls short of real interpretation that leads to understanding. In effect, the process of interpretation is inextricably intertwined in the text itself, but as Gadamer wrote:

Interpretation does not try to replace the interpreted work. It does not, for example, try to draw attention to itself by the poetic power of its own utterance.

Rather it remains fundamentally accidental. (2004, p. 401)

Interpretation is not situated just in the care of the author, therefore, but with all participants of a conversation, including the reader. As bona fide interpreters, participants in a conversation must reveal their perspectives, prejudices and opinions openly in a dialogue for true understanding to occur. This is the reason hermeneutical interpretation

is a complicated and difficult undertaking. To take on this kind of work one has to be sincere and prepared for vulnerability.

The act of interpretation, if authorship, saps all the perceived authority and power from the author and places him or her into the same rank as readers, the other participants. So, as the author reflects on his work, he becomes but a reader of the text. The meaning he attaches to his text is impermanent because it has a different effect on him each time he reads it. The position of the author does not render him unimportant in the reading and understanding of the text but the meaning in hermeneutics texts casts well beyond its author. Crucial to hermeneutics thought is the author's life-world and the frame of mind that caused him to write the way he did. In Gadamer's terms, "We try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views" (2004, p. 292). This is important because hermeneutics thinking recognizes the close link between the subject matter and its author as a prime factor in the author's taking on the subject. Therefore a holistic interpretation of the text about a subject must involve an understanding of this dimension of the author's perspective. Being an author, therefore, entails subjecting oneself to public readership, questioning, scrutiny, critique and criticism. At the same, it is an opportunity to be passionately involved in a subject. In this study I have told my story partly to give the reader a glimpse of my perspective in forming an interpretation of the thesis text.

Now I will proceed with further interpretation of the text by illuminating features of the research that I perceive as important in understanding the participants' life-worlds shared here. In fact, shedding light on certain aspects of interest in a text is purely

interpretation in hermeneutics and according to Gadamer, “All interpretation is highlighting” (2004, p. 401).

### **Conversation**

This thesis was written in conversation form, preserving the format of the stories that were remembered and shared. Although the stories of the participants are at the centre of this conversation, I have included many other stories that were prompted by paying attention to the students’ stories. For instance, I have included the stories of earlier Black African immigrants to Canada; the Lost Boys of the Sudan; and stories of other student immigrants like Sandhi for this purpose because each story has a connection with the Sudanese students’ life experiences as African immigrant and refugee students settling in Alberta. In this way, their story is in conversation with the other stories included in the thesis. When these stories are examined in respect to each other, true conversation occurs, which in turn may lead to a proper understanding of the text. Gadamer espoused conversation as a platform for understanding, where two people bring their ideas forward irrespective of differences or similarities, and walk away transformed by the experience. He wrote:

[I]n a successful conversation they [participants] both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.

(Gadamer, 2004, p. 371)

In the conversation, the two people undergo a form of metamorphosis, another dimension of vulnerability. It is important to note that this transformative experience occurs in an atmosphere of truthfulness and openness, which is not a passive process by any means (Simoongwe, 2006). It is an energy-consuming process that participants *take part in*. This reiterates the definition of hermeneutics as an art rather than a mechanical process. In a conversation, therefore, understanding must occur in the way that a work of art comes into being. The bonding of the two companions begets understanding, as a product of this artistic procreation. Without true openness to one another there would be no genuine human bond, no *communion*, no *fusion of horizons*, and hence no understanding in the hermeneutic sense.

Understanding a hermeneutical phenomenon comes from mutual interest and concern with a subject that is placed before the two people or in a text (Virkler, 1981). The subject matter becomes the confluence of each of the two people's opinions and prejudices at which point they experience the transformative impact of a conversation.

I implore the readers seeking to understand this text to become *active* readers and hence participants in the ongoing conversation in order to penetrate to the message embedded in the narrated life-worlds of the new students. I agree with Gadamer that as a

conversation takes place, a dialogue is created between the participants. In a successful conversation, that is, in a *space* in which participants meet with openness of heart, willing to explore and relate ideas, new understandings form (Gallagher, 1992).

### **Context**

Working in hermeneutics, pointing to the historical “context” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 196) of a subject is a first step towards understanding. Using Wilhelm Dilthey’s logical analysis of the concept of context and coherence, Gadamer reiterates the hermeneutic principle that a detail is understood in terms of the whole, and the whole is understood in terms of the detail. Thus if the narratives of a study are to be understood, it is imperative to delve into the historical details of the participants’ life-worlds chronicled in the earlier chapters of the thesis. It is important to read each story in the context of the historical background provided in the conversation. For example, to understand how much change has occurred in terms of race relations in Calgary schools in the past fifty years, one could read Syana and Joe’s hair experiences in 2007 in conjunction with Cheryl Foggo’s hairday experiences in her Calgary school in the 1960s.

An attempt to understand and hence to interpret the narratives of the new Sudanese students requires an understanding of the general premise of their story both as Sudanese people and as African immigrants to North America.

Contextual interpretation need not be exclusively historical. While an issue like the hair experiences can be read in relation to the historical experience of Foggo’s *Hairday* (see Chapter 8), it can also be read in the context of recent events in Calgary or elsewhere in Canada. For instance, it can be compared to Quebec’s Bill 94 debate.

According to Clifford Orwin’s (2010) article *No room at the inn for veiled women? Get*

*real, Canada* in the *Globe and Mail*, Quebec's Bill 94, if passed, would refuse government services, public employment, educational opportunities and even most medical care to Muslim women wearing the *niqab*. This follows from two cases in which government officials in Quebec ejected two Muslim women immigrant students from government-sponsored French-language classes because they wore religious veils (*niqabs*), one woman in November 2009 and the other in April 2010. As a result of this research, I have become more attentive to matters of new immigrants in Canada and elsewhere, such as the *niqab* debate Quebec, and related religious debates in France. With respect to the Sudanese story, my contextual interpretation has expanded my knowledge of the Sudan and its people. I see the story of the Sudan in more sources than I used to. The news feeds are all over the Internet and I suspect they have been for many years but I was just not attentive enough. The conversation is the contextual backdrop for my interest in the Sudanese situation. For example, for the first time, I followed the political election that took place this spring. Now I am watching keenly for the developments on the proposed referendum that will decide on the full independence of South Sudan. Indeed, I have experienced the hermeneutic transformative character of a genuine conversation.

Cases of racism revealed in the thesis could be interpreted in conjunction (context) with current affairs in Calgary or elsewhere in Canada. Ironically, as I write, a related story is unfolding in Quebec in which a woman wearing a black-and-white checkered scarf, and mistaken for another woman suspected of criminal activity, is reportedly being charged for putting a plastic bag on the bench that she was seated on. According to the television news on CBC, the police invoked a bylaw in the local municipality that prohibits placing a bag on the bench as she did. She was charged with a

\$600 offence that perplexed the residents of that municipality and made news all over the country. One reporter's comment caught my attention: "The woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The police invoked a charge similar to those often slapped on males of colour suspected as criminals," he stated on CBC news, The National.

While the experiences of the new Sudanese students apply directly to Calgary schools, they can be extended to what is happening elsewhere in Canada and perhaps across its borders. In this sense, while this conversation is about the Sudanese students, it is also a conversation about the education of immigrant and refugee students from any country. In fact, it is a conversation about anybody living in a culturally dynamic and pluralist society. If more questions arise because of this conversation, then the purpose of the thesis has been achieved.

### **Questioning**

The skill of questioning is important in ensuring an interplay of opinions and prejudices in a conversation. In hermeneutics, a question serves to open up possibilities and to keep them open (Gadamer, 2004). This is unlike the "scientific" sector where questions are selected because of their capacity to confine a topic so that it can be measured. Here the question revives the subject so that the underlying message is appreciated.

In the ancient Tonga tradition of my ancestors, the art of questioning was a life-saving one, literally. Young Tongas learned this vital skill inherent in the saying *Syaabbuzya takolwi bowa* (One who *asks* will not be poisoned by eating mushrooms). It was a teaching statement issued in the form of a stern warning by elders to alert the young people to the value of *questions* and *questioning* in life. It was not uncommon in

traditional Tonga society to use fear as a way of instilling knowledge and limiting risk-taking. Before the advent of modern medicine, eating poisonous mushrooms meant death. Since death by poisoning was common, it was advisable to ascertain the kind of mushroom (or any foodstuff for that matter) being served before eating it. So everyone in the community acquired the life-preserving skill of questioning. In reality, this skill was applicable in any situation in which new *knowledge* and *truth* were sought, which has direct implications in research. In research, are we not also concerned about valuable knowledge and the truth? Anybody wanting to learn more about a subject of interest or necessity, or in pursuit of understanding, knowledge or truth, should benefit immensely from this ancient skill of questioning. The research question of the thesis and any other questions that follow it in this conversation continue to breathe life into the conversation.

### **Listening**

A key attribute of a conversation is the ability of the two people in conversation to listen to each other and offer their own ideas. Even if the message is transmitted audibly and in clear language, without a genuine listener its essence is lost. True conversation would not occur because in a true conversation the two people engage in a relationship. They are interdependent and both of them benefit. That is why it is imperative to enter into conversation with an open heart. Although everyone enters a conversation with his or her own preconceptions, opinions, prejudices, and historical and experiences, it is important to consider these as preconditions for a true conversation that brings about understanding. The core of hermeneutic interpretation is subjecting each of these ways of seeing or knowing theories to a dialogue so that they flesh each other out. This is the

*space* of the transformation that Gadamer espoused (Grondin, 2003) and it requires a higher order of attentiveness, listening.

Listening as interpretation is especially crucial for those in education. Educators often become so consumed with the demands of the system, the program of studies or syllabi, and the all-powerful examinations that they neglect their capacity to be attentive to pedagogical sources outside of these factors. They may do a fantastic job of executing the prescribed curriculum but according to the legendary Canadian curriculum champion and educator, Ted Aoki, doing so addresses one dimension of a curriculum referred to as *curriculum-as-plan* (Aoki, 2005). Aoki described the *curriculum-as-lived* experience as the aspect of curriculum theorizing and practising that is neglected when the educator's role becomes technicized. When the teacher becomes merely a technical implementer, good teaching is reduced to technical effectiveness. Curriculum-as-plan can routinely be rehearsed and mastered because it assumes uniformity within its jurisdiction. On the other hand, the curriculum-as-lived experience is not so predictable and cannot be repeated. It moves the teacher into the lives of his students, teaching them in the context of their life-worlds. This is why interpretation for understanding (listening) becomes critical. Aoki promoted the curricula praxis of dwelling in the Zone of Between as the *curriculum-as-plan* and *curriculum-as-lived experience* (Aoki, 2005).

As a student of Aoki's Zone of Between, I realize this is not always a place of comfort but a space of tensionality. It is a testing ground in which the life of the teacher is often pushed (and pulled) to the limit. On one hand, the teacher must implement the so-called formal curriculum with its deadlines and its power to keep him employed. On the other, the teacher must pay attention to the realities of the classroom and the lives of the

people he is teaching. The students struggle to learn because of physical, medical, cultural, linguistic, economic, social, religious and political influences. In view of the students' experiences, the teacher must direct learning so that it is relevant to his or her students, which is what attentiveness to both curricula worlds will yield. That is, listening equips the educator to understand and facilitate an authentic curriculum that includes a blending of *curriculum-as-plan* and *curriculum-as-lived*.

Listening to the voices of the students adds to this form of curriculum. It takes attentiveness and a courageous will to recognize, confront and stamp out ills such as ignorance, prejudice, racism, negligence, silence, harassment, favouritism, unfairness, and discrimination that the participants in this study reveal are still rampant in school systems. These ills may appear on classroom walls, in textbooks, teacher lessons, curriculum documents and policies, grouping and group discussions, parent-teacher conferences, sports activities, and related school events like Notela's picture day. In this study I have attempted to model and promote a real conversation in which subjects that are rarely (if ever) talked about, such as racism, could be freely discussed. Ted Aoki's curriculum includes these difficult issues, which he described as "unsayables" (Aoki, 2003, in Hasebe-Ludt & Hurren, 2003, pp. 2-3). The unsayables need to be incorporated in conversations and every aspect of the school experience. Interpretation of this text includes this level of attentiveness.

Interpreting this text would be incomplete without realizing that the text itself is not without flaws or limitations. In what follows I will discuss the limitations important in understanding the message of the present thesis.

## Limitations

Up to now I have only described some of the techniques that can be employed so that the message of the thesis is actualized and understood. Since the message is the phenomenon at the focal point of the conversation, I would like to emphasize the importance of keeping this fundamental purpose throughout the text. To avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to return to the title of the study: *Living in a Culture of Change: An Inquiry Into the Learning Experiences of the New Sudanese Students in Calgary Schools*. All the events in this research need be read with this premise in mind. The important outcome is to learn from the participants' narratives. I recognize this as a limitation that can sway the reader's quest to grasp the message communicated in the text. It was not my intention to simply compile stories of immigrant students for the sake of it, but I carefully selected those that would bring into view the sought-after learning experiences of new immigrant and refugee students from the war-torn nation of the Sudan. This is another limitation, because by so doing I was bracketing a much more transcendent topic for my own limited purpose, enshrined in the title of the study. Further limitations may arise from the constant presence of my perspective in the conversation. While I recognize this as a limitation, I also realize that working in hermeneutics makes it inescapable. The author is always implied in his work (Gadamer, 2004). Nonetheless, it is a limitation because a chance exists that the presentation and interpretation of the work seems overly narrow and self-centred because of my voice and my personal narrative in the text. As a hermeneutics-interpretive inquiry, the focus of this study is not my story or the story of the students but the phenomenon of lived or learning experience (van Manen, 2007).

The collection of data poses a possible limitation as well. Because I conducted the research session with high school students in the school in which I was teaching, my position of power may have influenced this process. Although the students appeared unaffected by my position, it would be naïve of me to assume that their stories would be told in the same way had I not been their teacher. By extension, the fact that this study concerned Black African immigrants and was conducted by another Black African immigrant may also be viewed by some as a limitation. From my perspective this is not a limitation; in fact, more studies by researchers familiar with the topic should be encouraged. I believe that if researchers with a genuine interest and a stake in the topic conduct the study, the cloud of misunderstanding over interpretation would dissipate.

Finally, I recognize that the experiences related herein do not portray *all* the dimensions of the phenomenon required in addressing the needs of these fragile new immigrant students in Calgary schools. This is another limitation. It is clearly not the purpose of this thesis to start and end this conversation but to open it up for further exploration. From this vantage point, it is abundantly clear that this is not a closed conversation and it does not end with the last letter of this text. My hope is that this episode of the conversation (my stories, the stories of the Sudanese students and others in this text) will resonate with teachers, students, researchers, and other citizens. I hope that this conversation will serve to inspire others to remember, examine, tell and re-tell their own stories.

## Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusion

*Ring the bells that still can ring,  
Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack, a crack in everything,  
That's how the light gets in.*  
—Leonard Cohen, The Anthem

It is something of an oxymoron to insert the word “conclusion” in a hermeneutics conversation. The fact that this conversation does not end here has been adequately discussed in previous chapters. The heading “conclusion” is used merely to signal the end of the typed and bound text. As I finish writing this thesis, exhausted from the physical and mental demands of the task of researching and writing, and as I look back into the narratives of the study, it is somewhat disconcerting not being able to present concrete results that I can plainly display for the reader. I think I can trace these feelings back to my scientific training, mentioned earlier. From the technical aspects of carrying out this study, I have come to an understanding that working in hermeneutics, unlike natural science, will not produce a concrete result. In view of this, I will close this thesis with great satisfaction and comfort in the hermeneutics conclusions, which are devoid of closure. They are totally different from the conclusion of a science experiment in which the researcher can definitively state the results or prove a hypothesis.

### Dialogue

In participating in the conversation of this thesis, I have been engaged in related conversations on various fronts. These discourses have transformed my reality. The dialogues and the research texts led to further dialogues with the students, teachers and others concerned with matters of new immigrants in Alberta. These constituted the data of the study. With the continued dialogue and writing of this thesis I have continued to

learn more about this topic. I know that my involvement in these dialogues will not end. My role in the conversation will alter slightly because the purpose of the new dialogue will be different. I will no longer be noting down the themes that arise for the purpose of publishing an academic work and gain a passing mark in the defence. The dialogue will return to the original reason that drew me into the conversation: genuine concern as a teacher in Calgary and as a fellow African immigrant living in Alberta, negotiating the same educational system as the other participants.

### **Implications for Teaching**

As a teacher at multicultural high school in Calgary, the conversations of this thesis immediately affected me. Even though my current school has only a handful of Sudanese students, these narratives have equipped me to relate to these students. For instance, my teacher-student relationship has been strengthened by my interest in the current situations in their homeland: the military conflicts in Darfur or South Sudan, and the central government in Khartoum. It is quite fulfilling to see the passion of these students as they tell their life stories. It is amazing how much information students offer when they realize that another person is genuinely interested. Apart from the direct application of the thesis conversation to my school's Sudanese immigrant students, the information from this research has been useful in my interaction with all my students.

The narratives in the study have provided constant cues that alert me to celebrate difference in whatever form it appears. I have learned the value of doing so from the students' narratives and my own. I think it is empowering to talk about differences openly in a safe and positive environment rather than holding on to old prejudices in silence. Not talking about these differences is more likely to provoke racism, bullying,

discrimination, and disengagement in a school setting and in society. As a teacher, I am now more aware about the importance of drawing the students' life-worlds into my teaching and their learning. Doing so, I believe, adds to the curriculum and empowers the students. Once the students know that their story matters, it is gratifying to watch them blossom. Their participation improves and so do punctuality, attendance, and achievement levels. Relations among students and between the teacher and the students also improve. The school becomes an attractive place to go to, thereby reducing the number of dropouts. I have no doubt that I am now a better teacher because of my improved cultural awareness resulting from being a participant in this study.

It is important to point out that being aware of differences and confronting them has not had a positive effect in every context and on every student. Initially, most students are sceptical about sharing their stories, especially in a mathematics class. However, once they see that I also share my own life-story and that I mean well, they begin to participate, but some never open up the entire semester. In any case, the key point is to respect every person's circumstances and make them part of the learning and teaching experience. This is the meaning of an authentic curriculum, which I endeavour to facilitate. The thesis has presented one more step in the approximation of such a curriculum: one that is multilayered, combining the curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived experience with all the zones of in-between and beyond. So this conversation has been a learning experience for me.

### **Impact on Personal and Professional Life**

Earlier in this text, I pointed out that I entered the conversation of this thesis in pursuit of answers on the topic of new immigrant students in Calgary schools. I set out to

respond to educators' pedagogical questions about how best to meet the rising needs of this population to keep them in school and off the street (Dowding & Farinaz, 2004). As these questions got closer to home, particularly when the question about the new Sudanese students arose, the signal to take action was unequivocal. As I mentioned in previous chapters, I hearkened to the call to embark on this study only to discover that my knowledge was meagre. I had to learn new ways of thinking: qualitative research, phenomenological-hermeneutics and interpretive story, narrative and autobiographical inquiry, and ethnographic study. As a teacher, my experience was exclusively in the experimental research field, so when I started researching, I was certain that I would carry out a study that would display the needed answers. The picture I had in mind was that of my science laboratory experiments. Put on your lab-coat, safety goggles, grab a notepad (or the new iPad!), stopwatch, and get to work. Whip up a lab report. Done! Well, not so. But was I going to get any answers? What kind of answers, when, and how?

### **Awareness and Sensitization**

This study was not going to be an experiment that could be neatly completed. In fact it is not an experiment at all and it is not something to be ignited and then extinguished. It merely caught up with me; it has a *life* of its own. Pinar (1975) compared autobiographical researching such as this to a life journey. He used the Latin term *currere*, which translates as "to run" in English, to depict this phenomenon. The prominent pedagogical concept of curriculum derives etymologically from this term. In this study I have rediscovered the meaning of school curricula through Pinar's (2004) conception and theorizing of *currere*. I am now fully aware of the prominence of life in my curriculum planning, theorizing and practice. The life-worlds and words of this thesis

are now part of the curriculum in my classes and I hope they will find space in the classes or lives of those who encounter them through this text. Indeed, *Living in a Culture of Change* is an enduring journey, *currere*.

In this journey, I envision my role to be like that of an Olympics torchbearer whose function is to raise the torch high for an assigned stint. The torchbearer runs passionately and proudly. As in the case of the Olympics torch relay, this conversation is about awareness and sensitization. No medals are to be had. Its efficacy is less about tangible on-demand results than about a campaign for exciting possibilities. It is concerned with forging a team of athletes and a strong fan base for the big tournament. The Olympics tournament thesis is what will transpire in my classroom, in the school, playground, sports team, textbooks, administration office, research office, lecture theatre, Ministry of Education office, teachers' association, media, lesson plans, educational conventions and discourse.

I cannot itemize the results but are these answers for a thesis? Are they achievable? How and when? The answers are embroidered in the arteries and veins of its participants and in memories of fear and happiness. They are found in the students' ability (and inability) to speak a language in their ESL and FSL classes. The answers are in their songs, music and dance, in their eyes and hair, in their sports and in mathematics. The answers are in their responses, questions and answers and in their journals. Answers appear in their past and future, in news headlines, in their blogs and online, in their lanyards and identity cards. The answers are in their stories.

Just look in-between the pews  
Just read another book.  
Just look on the map  
Just listen to their stories.  
Just watch them dance.  
Just call their names.  
Just look them up.  
Just Google them  
Just look them in the eye.  
Just read again.  
Just call them  
Just choose them  
Just ask them  
Just listen  
They belong.

### **Further Conversations**

In this thesis, I intended to pave the way for further conversations on this topic, particularly on those issues that are least talked about in schools and in society but that confront students, staff and administrators daily. It is not common in schools to discuss issues such as Joe's hair, Notela's photos, Syana's first day of school experiences and Sandhi's resettlement ordeal. The stories are often left untold, unwritten and unresolved. More research, writing, and critical discourse is needed to keep these conversations aflame especially when educators must scratch for answers, everything seems dark and gloomy and the feeling of inadequacy reigns. In those times the wisdom in the saying, "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars," should be considered.

Perhaps some of the stories in the text were dull and gloomy or dark. If they were, this is not the time to close your eyes for it is in the dark that the beauty of the stars is revealed. Indeed, stories that spread darkness in our minds and hearts may be needed to see the things that matter. When the stars appear in the night sky, it is a reminder that there is light other than the sun. The voices of the immigrant students in this thesis could

be compared to stars and the voice of the members of the dominant society to the sun, which everyone normally looks to for energy and life. Listening to the voices of the students is like opening our eyes in the dark to take in the energy of the stars. Through the filtering of darkness, *another* source of power is actualized, another *truth*. The stories presented here are meant to reveal this kind of truth. Cohen's (1993) poem the "The Anthem" is encouragement to keep asking, talking and writing about these important issues: "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in" (p. 373), so "ring the bells that still can ring." Thus every member of society, especially those of us in minority settings, need not stop telling our stories. I agree with Baldwin's statement:

As long as we share our stories, as long as our stories reveal our strengths and vulnerabilities to each other, we reinvigorate our understanding and tolerance for the little quirks of personality that in other circumstances would drive us apart. *When we live in a family, a community, a country where we know each other's true stories, we remember our capacity to lean in and love each other into wholeness.* (2005, p. 18; emphasis is mine)

In light of this, I urge further conversations, research and writing in matters of new immigrant students and African Canadian immigrants. So long as the issues that decentre these members of society exist, and policies and practices that render new immigrant students as an *other* still exist, and while any of the unsayables remain unsaid and unresolved, research of this nature, which gives a voice to the voiceless will find its place in educational discourse.

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## Appendix A

## Questionnaire

**Background:**

1. State the date and city/town of your landing in Canada. Date \_\_\_\_\_  
City/Town: \_\_\_\_\_
2. State the date of your arrival in Calgary. \_\_\_\_\_
3. State the date and city/town of your departure from the Sudan. Date \_\_\_\_\_  
City/Town \_\_\_\_\_
4. List the names and locations of places you lived at from the time of your departure from the Sudan to the time of your arrival in Calgary:
  - a) Name \_\_\_\_\_ Location/Region \_\_\_\_\_ Duration \_\_\_years/months
  - b) Name \_\_\_\_\_ Location/Region \_\_\_\_\_ Duration \_\_\_years/months
  - c) Name \_\_\_\_\_ Location/Region \_\_\_\_\_ Duration \_\_\_years/months
  - d) Name \_\_\_\_\_ Location/Region \_\_\_\_\_ Duration \_\_\_years/months
  - e) Name \_\_\_\_\_ Location/Region \_\_\_\_\_ Duration \_\_\_years/months

**School:**

5. What grade level were you in before registering at a Canadian school? Grade \_\_\_\_.
6. What grade level did you register in at your Canadian school? Grade \_\_\_\_.
7. List language(s) of instruction at your school (s) :
  - a) Before coming to Calgary: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.
  - b) In your Calgary school(s): \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.
8. How would you rate your English/French language skills currently?  
Very low to Very high: 1    2    3    4    5
9. How does your selection of classes relate to your career ambitions?
10. What extra-curricular activities are you involved in? If none, could you explain why you are not involved in any?
11. Briefly describe a typical day in your life at school. Highlight some fulfilling, exciting and/or frustrating moments. You may write a short essay or paragraph or a poem, or you may make a drawing. If you require more space you may use the blank papers provided.

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix B

## Open-ended Question Sheet

1. What classes are you taking currently? How did you choose these classes?
2. What is your career ambition? Do you think you are on course toward your career goal? Explain. How are you utilizing school programs, services and processes to meet your intended goals? Would you say your current school has a supportive environment for you to reach your goal? Why/Why not?
3. Describe your relationship with your peers? Your teachers? Counsellors? Coaches? Administrators?
4. Do you have any friends at this school? Do you have friends who are immigrants? Non-immigrants? How do you choose who becomes your friend?
5. What language do you use at home? Are you fluent at speaking English or French?
6. Have you ever attended ESL classes? If yes, was (is) it helpful to you? How do/did you feel about being an ESL student? I once read a report of a study in which one student who was talking about her ESL experience said “I think they think that we are stupid.” Do you or did you ever feel that way about ESL classes? In your case who are the “they” of the previous quotation: teachers? Students? Who? Explain.
7. How do you rate your level of acceptance of people of different religions, races, nationalities? Do you feel everyone is treated equally with respect and dignity at this school? Explain.

8. How does your experience of school in the Sudan compare with your experience of school here in Calgary? Was it worth leaving the warmer climate for the cooler one?
9. What are some of your memorable experiences of coming to Canada? Do you plan to return to Africa someday? Why/Why not?
10. (i) Could you describe your first day of school in Calgary?  
(ii) Could tell me about some of your best/worst in-school experiences at this school?