

## Learning to Listen

Contextual Meaning, Preliminary Applied Methods, Refugee-centered Research in Cairo

By Matt Hanson

### Introduction: Origins of Self Searching for An Other

“There are only three *kinds* of people in this world”

We speak out loud sitting on a third floor downtown Cairo balcony. Drinking a warm glass of black tea, or Egyptian whiskey as it is known in a local joke, and overlooking the crazed, commercialized Islamic world that in every instant is compelled beyond the old money-tongued religion, we realize we have the balcony all to ourselves. From above, the streets sustain a culture meant for safekeeping the look, feel and being of ethnic identity. We think, “Forsaken tribalism smiles through the innocence of a woman brewing tea.”

“There are three kinds of people in this world.”

“People like me, people like you, and people I don’t know, have never known and will not ever know...”

The truth is we don’t really want to get to *know* any of them.

“And there is another truth”

“There is a fourth person who has the traits of me, you and the unknown. That is us, and we are a single person.”

Is it I who creates my self? Are my experiences of *culture* a reflection of my self?

I would be the first to say, “I don’t know.” Despite *culture*, I remain an unfathomable mystery, especially to myself. To embrace being a *complete* unknown has been a healthier identification than being a-part to prescribed formalities. In the process of experiencing *culture* or any social function in which I am bound, I indelibly become a-part to another whole. The question remains, do I identify with the part or the whole, neither or both? I return to the Groucho Marx joke, “I wouldn’t want to be a part of any club that would have me as a member.” The essence of self-definition balances uniquely over a precipice of individuality and collectivism. When intervening in *cultures* or

collectives of any kind through a prescribed selfhood, especially those within which you are not a member, any sense for understanding the collective is swallowed by a complete unknowing. There is another myth that through selflessness, collectives are strengthened, known and related to through intuiting expansive and specific self-identities. Can *culture* be seen as a knowledge re-source from which selfhood and selflessness are engaged simultaneously through collective re-identification with experiential living processes, forms and ideas? Is *culture* an ideal imagination, a comfortable and necessary survival-illusion, or a fundamental and basic social form through which many express at once that *I am*, reaching out to you (*as in all of you, any one else...outside me...*) while almost magically, at the same time, *I reach in to my self*?

In the mentally cohesive leap of projecting my self onto the page, I must say that in actuality, I must re-create myself. As a child, wonderment strikes you in every direction, filling the earth's soil with the undying vibration of a wildly sound hallucination, fearful and alive with a kind of spiritual theatre behind every door, curtain, wall, ground, sky, ocean, face and of course, mirror. From a child's perspective, is *culture* a thought which reveals lies and chronological motivations to live, know and liberate that which you can not understand into a logical arrangement, into a calming peace of relational truth? I beg the case that, no, this is not true, if we can once again imagine childhood outside of the intellectual yearnings of the modern psychological mind, to be a child, is to experience momentous rhythmic merging with the truth of non-existence and existence being one tragicomic painful laughter of awe in the human form. Am I mythologizing the stepping-stones to learning? Is this not also a fundamental mystery in Western psychology? It is my deepest conviction that self *is* culture.

When I was a child I remember reading a translated tale from India wherein the Self was created, and lonely as it was, created another self, so that it may share its experience of creation. While the tale represents in simple emotional themes what is, in effect, a learning tool for recognizing the basic duality of existence within the culture forms of the cosmologies of India, the idea that we find meaning through a basic relation to others, simply knowing them as another, is the core mystery of our knowledge of who we are. That we is *self*. I feel that as pertains to culture, we are born attuned to a biological curiosity which recognizes the immediate exhilaration of being, and that as we go along in life, we see that our inspiration for being is at least to some extent, our own creation. If only we closed our eyes and plugged our ears like children once again and left our selves out, would the exhilarated inspiration be there, if only for us?

The experience of consciousness is a metaphor for learning, wherein there is unknowing, an empty cup. The cup is filled with knowledge. If we speak of water as a metaphor for knowledge the cycle of learning necessitates that the contents of the cup be poured into a mouth wherein a body of teaching occurs through the transmission of knowledge, sustaining the life of the knowledge and teaching. Thinking of knowledge as sustenance helps to see knowledge as a living entity as necessary as the food we eat and water we drink, in effect, it *is* the water we drink and food we eat. The cyclical path to the consciousness of knowledge as life, experienced as a mutual learning process, is synonymous with one's cultural identity.

The sense of culture that I have known since childhood enjoys filling our cup to the brim, and holding it to the light for all to see with the overwhelming sensual joy of personal richness. I see culture, however, as a turning point, a facet to a great mystery, a

precarious symbol wherein we reach into a recognizant mythic image of our mirrored selves and enter through into newfound self-mystery. Being alive in a world where we are a renewed child is to be filled with wonderment and knowing. Equipped with the consciousness of learning is to continually re-pour our cup of water onto a barren earth and allow gardens and jungles to emerge. That conscious pouring celebrates our knowing full-well that Earth's climactic vegetation is resonant with our feminine aspect, and as animals, we are the masculine aspect in our nourishing, human world of animal and vegetable interdependency. Ever deeper as we explore and learn from ourselves, we may see that culture is in fact a living entity of varying multi-faceted ancestral perspectives living in the moment created out of a single minutia of space and extending now to the absolute corners of our precise scientific imaginings. As we continue to peer into the viscera of our cultural lives, we know that behind it all, a Love breathes with sweetness over our doings and pervades our discoveries, and we smile back, continuing ever further from children, into the forms of culture which make sense of our transition from adolescence into adulthood. Finally, we re-live our entire lives through the webs of experience which the earth's air feeds into our mysterious biology of spiritual perceptivity. We become sensitive to an unending journey that wheels us through the pores of the universe.

After childhood, I can explain my experience with the next stage of sense-making through personal logic and family belief-system orientation as a collective identity of self through particular experiences with the people who were the closest to me in my early life. At such an age, I was very much a repository for the motivations that they felt, and so they impressed on me their universe with all the vitality of the original self reaching

out to another. I was “brought up” in a suburb. One question that I have today is, if I was “brought up” by other people, where was I? How could I “bring up” my self, if I am down and I need someone else to get me up there? When did I begin to have a say about how or where I was brought to? Do I now? Am I there? I don’t really feel like I went anywhere. The importance of bringing up my personal background is a necessary feature of re-learning and finding new spaces to listen within myself to the distant experiences of others who have lived their lives in very different ways. This practice is one that over the years can be refined into deeper contextualization within specific settings in order to see the place that is deeply and uniquely human, personal and honest where cultures can be shared with creativity and respect.

Within the Boston, Massachusetts, New York, N.Y. and Washington D.C. megalopolis, as it is known, is Mattapoisett, a relatively small town by the sea that is about as much a part of the New England experience as you can possibly idealize. Historically a settlement of idealists, my first memories there were fantastic scents of the salt-aired sea which was virtually at the end of my driveway. Imagine! A universalizing dimension of Earth-location, in a place eponymous with Europe’s sea-conquering Empire. To a child, all it was...a gateway to the ever-expanding, sparkling vibrancy of an absolutely unreal entity; ocean. What continues to live with me until this day, is the memories I have of my stepfather, which as a male reside in my mind’s self story as my first male role-model. He once crashed through the wall of a house we were renting. He put a whole new spin on the term “home-wrecker,” and if I would enjoy anyone to wreck my home, it would be him.

I remember my stepfather’s family as a curious people because while outside of

my normally conceived biological heritage, they received me kindly in their home in a way that was different from friends and babysitters of my family. As much as they were not really my family, they really were. They were descended of Portuguese immigrants, which is the city of New Bedford's dominant heritage. New Bedford, Massachusetts continues to play a prominent role in my life as my mother's parents reside there.

We moved from that home, which, while having mostly a subconscious effect, was extremely groundbreaking in my self-place orientation. After all, we were a well-off nuclear family of four, who were able to do such luxurious and self-defining, place-cementing things as have our *own* place. We had a garden and two cats. We also had neighbours who I remember distinctly as a dysfunctional single woman, a physically unhealthy couple, and a friend of my brother and I who was 5 years older and taught me how to skate, play basketball and read Playboy magazine; American culture in a nutshell. One night my stepfather unintentionally threw a beer can into my brother's special drinking glass. Looking at the cracked image-seal of the famed baseball player, I remember having a strange twinkling effect of a question. "Is this really what I want, or more, what *we* want?"

When it came to going to the school mandatory for all members belonging to my family's religious history, there was no question of *wanting*. I was going to be made to go, even if my mother had to rip me out of the car seat. Today, I reflect on that unique school for us minority religionists outside of the bleakness of being there as a child who only wanted to play outdoors after school. Having to go to a second school after regular school which had little to do with daily life was not appealing. Today, however, I almost admire my mother for bringing me there because it is a culture from our blood relations. I

see my childhood cultural orientation as a gift from those dead and alive. It reflects more than my own personal daily life. How difficult must it be for a child who does not see or even hear much from the living about his ancestors, the *dead*, yet is brought into a place and way of life regularly in their name? I recall my experience at religious school as being that which defined my way of thought as an institution more than any other because of its unique effect. It was a place where you could ask questions, many times more so than “regular” school. We were given a breadth of ancient texts that have carved their place in human history to a greater extent than maybe any other literary tradition, and there we were, small children, allowed to question its content as much as we desired. Moreover, we were there to learn that history in our *own* language. It was a chance to be unique and to answer questions about community identification and belonging in the process.

When I had my “rite of passage,” there was not much said, except that I was supposed to be a “man.” On this day that I write this, I take that definition to mean that suddenly we have our *own* connection to the “up on high.” Now we know how to pray. Becoming a man is the experience that he and his personal deity(s) meet at a point, and so, become one. Other rites of passage which American identity establishes is that of driving at sixteen years old and legal independence at eighteen years old including buying tobacco and alcohol at twenty-one. If your deity is America, “growing up” or having your “rite of passage” means that suddenly you and America are now, essentially the same. Voting in America is taken to mean that decision-making can be afforded proportionately and equitably between individuals and collectives as mediated by government. For most of the world which does not have the illusions of full democracy

so simplistically cast in their mentality, national identity is far less deified. On the night of my “rite of passage” I was fourteen. I smoked and drank alcohol for the first time in my life. I had consumed so many intoxicants in the company of my family that I think I had my fill for the next four years. That night was enough to tell myself, whatever America offers as a fact of “growing up,” we already covered all the good stuff.

In my final year of High School, after all of my “primary” schooling, a final English project had us ask, “Who are you? What is your place in the universe?” I remember being furious at the teacher for asking us this belittling, deleterious, idiotic question. Were all the formalities of schooling meant for one ridiculous, unfunny joke? After all, it was our “culture” that we were learning about, a little hodgepodge of Western civilization and American history here and a little British literature and one dead Latin language there, mathematical logic, computers and socialization all for a self-exhausting mystery question. I began to ask myself, if I didn’t understand at all who I am, or what my place is in the universe, then what do *I* understand? If *I* don’t understand *me*, how can *I* understand anything else?

University courses in five countries brought me to a renewed understanding of my own cultural history. For one, it has been made clear to me that there are three kinds of people in this world; settlers, immigrants and Indigenous peoples. In my cultural history, I am of settler and immigrant histories and their consequent mentalities. On my Father’s side, my Grandmother, or Grammy as I call her, owns a musket from the revolutionary war, which she is proud to proclaim as that once used by one of our ancestors who was a true settler. She also refers to being a fifth-generation immigrant from Germany in the history of a great-grandfather of mine who I admire for living in Alberta, Canada with the

Blackfoot Nation. His life is a path, that in many ways I have also followed. And as yet unspoken of her own volition, my Father understands that from her we maintain a heritage from France, England and possibly Ireland. If only I had some Spanish, the three largest colonizing Western Empires of the world would be under my belt (yet maybe that is why I have become so familiar with the Mexican and Peruvian cultures?) The Grandfather on my Dad's side who I call Grampy recently turned 82. He is of Norwegian descent, his Grandfather being born in Norway. His father's generation was the last to speak Norwegian, which I consider to be a deafening blow to our cultural identities. On my Mother's side, our immigrant ancestry is even closer to home. My Grandmother who I call Nana, was born in Poland (now Ukraine). My Grandfather, who recently turned 95, who I call Papu (Greek for Grandfather) is a first generation American, born in Brooklyn, NY, however of a family from Greece.

This split of immigrant and settler is not as apparent to me as the counter-acting belief systems which either of my Father's and Mother's side expresses in their daily life. For my Father's side, a certain sect within the nation's more popular and dominant religious is the practice as I understand. All listen to Grampy read sacred passages on that special winter's day which I have spent with that family since I can remember. Despite the differences between families, both find their way inside a consecrated building for marriages and funerals. I grew up on my Mother's side except for every other weekend and two weeks out of the year for winter holidays and summer vacation with my Father and his side of my family. My Mother's side are religious minorities through and through. At once I am tempted to say that religion is rarely practiced, however, my presence at "rites of passage," hearing of special prayer recitations for my late great-

grandmother, the constant studious piety of my Grandmother, the critical life commentary of my Grandfather, and our beautiful and pride-filled heritage of relational continuity would go to shame if I simply admitted that there is no religion outside of eating together for holidays. The atmosphere is just never so solemn as that with my family who practices a more nationally dominant religion, so much so that it doesn't really feel like *religion* so much of the time, more like saying hello to good friends and family. Family on my Mother's side seems more independent in practice, probably due to our economic stability, yet we are together in spirit. I have noticed my Father's side cherishes physical contact despite my being relatively separate from them due to my being a child of a divorce. In my Father's side of the family, I play my part in the White, dominant, American culture. Going to their home in upstate New York is very much like stepping inside a Norman Rockwell painting.

In my Mother's side of the family, I keep sacred the fact that sixty years ago, we were not even considered White or allowed into Universities. I cherish the memory of my late Uncle, who was one of the original 200 within our religious minority to be let into University in America. He graduated from Harvard. Regardless, being recognized as belonging to this particular religious minority group is not much a part of my identity within my Mother's family, because although having gone through the "rite of passage," I am, from what I can tell, considered a bit of a half-breed. Instead, we emphasize scholarship, music, social tolerance and family history. We can trace our family history back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Religious leaders kiss my Nana's hand and fundamentalists have been known to bow down to my late Uncle at sacred sites because we are descended from a famed religious scholar in our history. The long list of names that climb out of the faces

in the plethora of old family photographs places any popular culture stereotypes of our historically unique tribulations as members of our religious minority into highly personal momentums of genuine family solidarity. My Papu and Nana are people who I have known more thoroughly than anyone in my life because they provide a certain richness through relating to our grandparent-grandchild connection as cultural individuals. The Greek in my Papu is expressed in his neighbourhood community mentality, he enjoys sitting and talking and reading, and his opinions and idioms about the world and humans are fantastically original and piercingly critical, for example he says, "Planet Earth is the insane asylum of the Universe!" Although he is reaching centenarian age, the only pill he takes is Vitamin D. His strength is a forecast of the worth of human happiness beyond all personal physical obstacles. My Nana's Polish background reveals itself as an elegant lady whose obscure, minority language conversation skills are confidently boasted along with her association with high society circles and a talented affinity to sight-read classics of the great composers of Europe on piano. Her tremendous character enables her to continue to share her music knowledge with all of the young aspiring pianists of the New Bedford, Massachusetts area to this day. Out of any one, the grandparents I have on my Mother's side are the two people who continue to provide me with a reference through which I may identify as a cultural being within the melting pot, and now the world.

Cairo, the place where I am situated today, is a place which has special significance. It is a place where I first found myself outside of the norms of American life. Here we surely live *another way of life*. Because of the tourism industry and the globalization of American culture it is indeed difficult to convince members of my biological family, all who are Americans, that identifying a specific place is synonymous

with locating *another way of life*. The curious fact is that Cairo is a place of the Arabic language, which in reference to my “upbringing,” is similar in phonology and vocabulary to that which I had learned after “regular” school about *my* history.

I described the concept of *another way of life* to my Mother recently in reference to learning other languages as an adult, which is different than being bilingual, wherein a child learns two languages in the same place. When you learn a language at any time, however, you can see how there are words and expressions that can not be said in any other language. It is similar with place, however, no one can be bi-local. You are only in one place at one time. Each place is like a language, wherein there is a *way of life* in one place that can not be lived in another. When I asked my mother in Mattapoisett, “What are you doing *here*? What is it about this *place* that has meaning for *you*?” She responded with an answer to the effect of “I like the smallness and the ocean...” Her answer is not only representative of the mentality that you can do many things in one place that you can also do in another. Additionally, it is, in her own simple way (to no personally negative consequence), a symptom of an imperialistic mentality which desires generalized sentiments towards a universalized sense of place. In ethnographic terms, this is called ethno-centrism and it has an immediate reality, especially when you refer or think of one place as another place, hence *New England*.

## Chapter 2: Cairo Research Project History

The current research project aspires to uncover the gaps in ecological translation in finding the inexpressible aspects of one place which continue to be lived in regardless of local incongruity. These are conflicted, creative and marginal zones of group

experimentation that confound cultural norms in a proliferation of new experience. Cairo continues to provide this prolifically.

The refugee community in Cairo are a people who have had to negotiate across state boundaries to the point where they are denied the basic human ability and right of movement based on policies of cultural generalization, and social ignorance. It has been invaluable for me as a human being to attempt to continue to actively understand their perspectives. My pursuit of communicating my own perspective on my experience as a part of Cairo's refugee community has been supported through personal relationships currently active within the refugee community. This process connects me with direct relevance and experience to the fact that the continuity of such relationships can broaden to include greater efficacy in creative social action within the refugee community itself.

While living and studying in Calgary, Canada for the past two years, the issues of Indigenous peoples, refugees and state boundaries have been sources of contemplation for me as I experience my own place in this world with political relevance to the importance of *place* in culturally-defined land practices, movement narratives and shifting human identities. Through my current research, I aspire to address the issues inherent in multiple-community belonging through individual and collective experiences with political vulnerability relative to globalization.

The research project in Cairo is one avenue with which to build upon work relations and invaluable friendships. The issues that are articulated and pertinent in the relationships that I have made with the Sudanese and other African migrant communities in Cairo are issues that I will continue to pursue as lifelong pursuits, especially while I continue to be in personal contact with the people I have worked with. My two years of

study in the International Indigenous Studies program at the University of Calgary are inspired by my work as an English teacher, organizer and supporter for Refugee Culture Centres in Cairo. I plan to engender future sustainability for the project using the learning I have been given over the past two years.

Through the creation of a research praxis embedded in the existent educational curricula of Refugee Culture Centres in Cairo, refugee students will be able to establish themselves as capable researchers unto themselves. The research agenda intends to impart the education skills involved in enacting a research process as applicable in the refugee education community. This opportunity is part of a compensatory process of continuity in recognizing the value of the relationships gained through working with the refugee community in Cairo. In the theoretical context, my research experiences in Mexico and Peru as an undergraduate student has exposed me to the pertinent issues in international development, minority rights and social justice work through research and education-based community activism. This research is a dialogue on contextual knowledge and multi-cultural awareness in non-western social settings, especially dealing with the conflict and human rights paradigms in the Middle Eastern context.

A primary objective for the proposed study is to explore the cultural continuity of each refugee student relevant to their country of origin and how that has transformed as a factor of their current status within the host country. The study aims to gauge indigenous cultural continuity and discontinuity as a variable in the improvements or disadvantages towards higher educational attainment or opportunity in employment directed for use in the country of origin, in the host country, or abroad. A successful curriculum within Refugee Culture Centers has to integrate the negative trauma expressed within the

particularities of each student's experience as a refugee. In order that the learning and tradition of the Refugee Culture Center continues to effectively service its student population, the capability of such centers to address the social problems of the community will be a fundamental qualification of their success in educating the refugee student population. Outside of a context of reading into refugee communities as a network of pathology, the activity in focus is creative and seeks to incorporate the healing arts of music and storytelling in any and all forms.

The significance of the study rests on the shared development and application of a research praxis. Refugee students undertake voluntary research projects within their communities. Complementary to testimonial experiences that directly or indirectly inform the pedagogical successes and social impacts of Refugee Culture Centers, refugee students engage in an education practice which involves their culturally embedded perspectives and insights into their own unique education.

The project recognizes the traditions of knowledge attainment as research practices in the region whereby indigenous social structures are prioritized over university research structures. Without assuming that it is refugees who necessitate education on the matter of their own socio-political conditioning within Egypt as a host country, the study seeks to provide a place where refugee students can vocalize issues from their perspective. Presenting contemporary stories about personal, physical and mental conditions in a safe and confidential environment is a primary concern.

The refugee community has the characteristic of being shaped by its contextual social environment to a great degree. The experience of the refugee community can be said to inform the overall limitations in improving refugee education and opportunity in

Cairo and/or abroad. Involving the experience of cultural integration into the curricula of Refugee Education Centers addresses the experienced actualities of integration within a space dedicated towards conscious change as opposed to other stringent realities in refugee policies and mandates imposed by either Egyptian government officialdoms and/or the top-down hierarchies of many international organizations.

My personal interest in Refugee Culture Centers originates at a center where I volunteered teaching English for ten months in 2007-8. From the beginning of my time I looked up to the director of the center from the moment he first invited me to “take tea” until the final moment when I left Cairo. Sitting at a metro stop café, he asked me to stay on to volunteer longer. I knew I had to return. He became a mentor and father figure of astounding proportions. To this day I hold his name with great esteem and realize that our relationship is indeed the backbone of my continued interest in the issues which are much more directly confronted in his life as a refugee in Cairo for seven years from Darfur, Sudan. Also having lived in Syria and Libya, he refers to his years in Cairo as the most enduring, living as a refugee. Through developing a close working partnership with the director of the Refugee Culture Center, he has inevitably become co-researcher to this project. It is *our* project, co-authored by the director of the center, the participating individuals in Cairo’s refugee community, and myself.

Having such great personal communications with the director the Refugee Culture Center in reference, I witnessed how NGO and University student activism failed to address relevant issues by applying its extra-local agenda and foreign interest-based action. By taking authoritative standpoints over the local knowledge of the director of the center, the entire basis for the non-religious and non-tribal educational application in the

East African refugee community in Cairo was undermined. My work with the center through personal fund-raising, independent activism and English teaching provided a solid foundation after all outside University and NGO partnership disbanded. The process inspired me to understand with greater depth how a relatively impoverished and politically weak community could continue with their educational and humanistic mandates. My continued partnership with this particular Refugee Culture Center until the present is a testament to the abilities of this community as representative of minority and humanitarian activism around the world.

I have traveled within myself through a twisting and gyrating, filthy and lightless tunnel, yet have emerged with a cultural familiarity with the language and customs of a minority community in urban Egypt having lived and studied in close contact with local refugee communities. A major counterpart to that is my continued friendship and personal connection to the work of refugee and minority education. My research background in Latin America is based on my involvement in Cairo and my continued relationships with people from Maya and Amazonian communities. These experiences have given me a greater global awareness in applying my experiences in international humanitarian activism to co-create an accommodating research praxis relative to context(s) in focus.

Research as knowledge-creation ideologies and practices seek to encourage sustained activism for the refugee community in Cairo and for the future of the Refugee Culture Center institution as a social mechanism to alleviate the suffering experienced by refugees within a humanitarian crisis. We recognize and support refugees as being able social participants with equal opportunity in their country of residence. The hardships

which East African migrants face in Cairo's social and political environment include aggressive acts of violence, racial stereotyping and a range of other debilitating social conditions. The testimonial aspect of the study exists to provide first-hand insight into the process of inter-community societal change as a people's indigenous social structure is radically transformed through trans-national government policy.

The perspectives of a student's experience can arise as a distinct space through which to learn the transformative customs within their own community as well as recognize where feasible opportunity lies outside of their community. Improvisational dramatic art is of particular interest to the program because of its history within the indigenous cultures of Sudan. The creative capacity of culturally designed education strategies in refugee communities in Cairo with high content of Sudanese migrants can continue to provide youth and future community leaders with a viable platform with which to voice concerns and raise issues relevant to the social conditioning of African migrants in Egypt.

Through cultivating knowledge-creation in the social structures of Sudanese and other African refugees in Cairo, the issues of socio-cultural adaptation and traditional continuity can be addressed with relevance to current events in education and employment around the globe. The ownership of inter-community statistics and leadership authorities within the communities in the proposed study also work within specific models of confidentiality and sharing. In such contexts, knowledge signifies formal relation. This process undergoes intensified protocols of protection in communities especially sensitive to outsider and introduced change as minority groups affected by migration and isolation. It is the expressed sentiment and concern of refugee

students, foreign teachers, and past and future researchers in Cairo that proven data on the effectiveness of Refugee Culture Centers to improve the conditions and plight of East African migrants in Egypt motivates and enriches the lives and cultures of the region in context and thus the global community.

Being in contact with the refugee community in Cairo regardless of attaining funding for formal research projects has allowed me to see the very point of associating myself with people whose worldview supports a continuity of real physical human presence as opposed to status awards that many times misdirect human action into the delusions of vacuous socio-cultural norms of expression and behaviour. My studies on the diversity of Indigenous heritages and the variegated mass movements of asylum seekers in this world have augmented my understanding of my own cultural perspective as part of an ancient Diaspora culture. In addition, conflicted political and military fallouts within contemporary Middle Eastern cultures are highly politicized within American culture. I am bound within such local contemporary social issues. This knowing, grounded in personal experience, has led me to learn from the places of peoples affected by migration and cultural isolation who continue to be negatively affected across state boundaries. Speaking simply, my sense of home has become a more practical reality. I feel enlightened by a new sense of appreciation for my individual and communal spaces where I find life. On a broader level, I have found increasing motivation and expanded awareness for the work which goes into creating healthy spaces for people on a human level in our common home, the Earth.

Working with refugee communities in Cairo has been a source of ecological anticipation into a realm of ever-broadening experience defined by transcending cultural

models for specified thought and action. The story of how I became so closely associated with refugee culture centers in Cairo is the seed of my departure from the conventional knowledge forms which I have been taught within institutional learning. In this present time and place, refugee culture centers are my inspiration for re-searching my self and place within a movement narrative of human voices spread thickly within each beat of my heart. It is a journey that calls forth my ancestors into the unborn beauty of my yet-to-be experienced connections to the people and places that enrich my life to no end.

### Chapter 3: An Ontology of Personal and Experiential Learning

To allow your sense of being and presence to breathe is to express your ontological worldview. An ontology or *way of being* is an essential aspect for constructing a map with which to delve into the meaning of our self in relation to others. Perceiving the immediacy of presence in the context of what is meant when re-viewing the act of simply being may seem like a passive, objective task. Its utility is, nonetheless, a mutual activity which amounts to *renewing* your basic relativity to all aspects of life including the physical, mental, and any other categorical definitions to which you normally refer as aspects of your self. In effect, aspects of self may find definition within group identification where for example, “The cornerstone of community psychology is the science of action...not just creation of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but also to the creation of knowledge for the sake of its utility...” (Foster-Fishman, 1).

The ideological markers of creating knowledge re-makes community. Group identity and experience becomes based in collective stories and interpreting them in a way where all present may find their own sense of meaning. The freedoms found in knowledge-creation reflect the scientific process through finding repeatability within

certain community spaces continually and wholly re-formed through story-telling. Stories are to be regarded as ontological expressions or processes to a knowledge of being, however, "...engaging in scientific inquiry is not, by its nature, necessarily a benevolent process." (Foster-Fishman, 1). In the context of refugee communities, the morality of refugee politics is often speculative, wherein the absolute negativities of extreme poverty and displacement, which have often created the knowledge of refugee communities, are not to be neglected.

Necessarily, we must also evaluate the importance of place. Ecology, *eco-* referring to place and *-logy* referring to logic, identifies ontological perspectives of place. The importance of place is of great significance if we base our thoughts on the idea that knowing where we are is a symptom of knowing where we are not, in the same way that knowing who we are individually is defined by who we are not. The placement of borders in self and place definition is an issue which continues to breed both conflict and belonging, for such borders are re-presentations of a relationship in flux. If we understand that the "...ecological emphasis includes a focus on the transactional nature of relationships..." (Foster-Fishman, 2) we can refer to our basic biology, wherein we are basically a product of the air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink. Similarly, when engaged in community development, the ideologies of relational borders, and their contextual application is a constant source of creative action and thought. Thus, "...based on Freire's (1970) demonstration...helping individuals to gain access to information and to develop an increased understanding of the societal issues that impact their lives are fundamental tools for community change" (Foster-Fishman, 2). As spoken by an elderly Tibetan refugee in India, "...*home* is a meaningless word apart from

*journey and foreign country...*” (Diehl, 12).

Basing our thought and work on the great names and lives whose experiences forged areas of human development as yet remaining to be fully articulated in global community, we can also learn much from the most specific of applied methods. Contemplating the accessibility of human resourcefulness within one’s self has the immediate potential to recognize the re-source of humanness within others. Whether or not through an able body and stable mind, simply using directed speech and intentional behaviour is a cultural configuration. Psychological and sociological analyses of one’s actions harken back to the communal history of peoples and places lived throughout one’s life. When reaching further into the technological innovations of mechanistic, artificial culture, we can outreach our cultural configurations into economic, political and social engines of change. For example, from one formalized ontological perspective and contemporary research practice, “Photovoice (Wang an Burris, 1994) is an innovative participatory research method that incorporates the process of documentary photography with the practice of empowerment education (Freire, 1970).” (Foster-Fishman, 3). Deriving holistic notions from ontological participation as a formal practice can be problematic within the fixed technological variables found in utilizing resources from Western consumer societies. In the non-western social context, Photovoice continues to render positive decision-making and leadership opportunities possible in human communities throughout the world (Foster-Fishman).

The tensions of transactional mutuality within the power-balances emergent within a technologically rich ontology are twofold. For one, the essential ethical arrangements within storytelling through any medium engender community dialogue

which is remarkably receptive to personal and communal growth where in one example, "...sharing their stories...reflecting with others about the broader meanings...displaying these photos and stories for the broader public and policy makers to view...participants are provided with a unique opportunity to document and communicate important aspects of their lives" (Foster-Fishman, 3). The downsides, however, entail a cultural/physical lens and human eye's replacement with that articulated in the consumer culture mentality as inspired by industrious productivity. This kind of activity may neglect the often painfully yet necessary and inevitable mutual process known through re-cognizing and seeing one's self directly and seeing another humbly by over-formalizing inter-cultural and inter-personal communication. Through an in-depth critical evaluation of the research practice in focus, "Photovoice has proven itself to be a highly flexible tool for carrying out needs assessments, asset mapping, and participatory program evaluations...we know little about the impact that Photovoice has on the participants themselves" (Foster-Fishman, 3).

What is the purpose or meaning of telling a story? Does the story change if told through different mediums? There are some who follow the idea that the story *is* what medium it is told through. Within the context of the applied Photovoice method "...stories are viewed as important cognitive mechanisms in that they "organize experience, give coherence and meaning to life events, and provide a sense of continuity, history, and of the future..." (Foster-Fishman, 3). What, if you could imagine, would be the value of having a sense of continuity to a people who have survived, maintained and adapted their lifestyles in many ways and suddenly became involved in a contemporary participatory research project. The reflexive motivations of contemporary applied

research seeks to portray participatory research projects as encapsulated cultural schemas all the more visible against a backdrop of as yet unfound “difference” relative to the community within which such a participatory program is applied. When attempting to explore the perspectives of a refugee community who experience the participatory research paradigm as a foreign culture, we can then examine how for Photovoice participants, “...community awareness...understanding of neighbourhood conditions and indigenous mechanisms for change was viewed as an essential component to supporting resident empowerment...” (Foster-Fishman, 4). The application of participatory research necessitates that a mutuality is projected onto others wherein experimentation is expressed from within all involved perspectives, enriching multiple communities at once, and in effect, creating community.

At first, one has to understand where certain social boundaries lie predicated on self-place relative to communal identity. For example, Western research historically has what I believe to be a pathological mindset in representing the furthest and most exotic cultural orientations from the language or society which is dominant within the research process. Imperialistic and oppressive social momentums that define and *represent* other perspectives are one of many self-reflective obstacles within contradicting and fragmented identities in communities and individuals who are beset by separation ideologies wherein “... power, privilege, and culture influence and often shape the lens by which we acquire knowledge and view the world...” (Offet-Gartner). It continues to be problematic and virtually impossible to negotiate generalized intra-community dynamics pertaining to research with extra-local agendas be it in knowledge-creation, compensation, relational values, etc. With that in mind, we can conceive of ourselves as

an amalgamation of multi-communal identities wherein there are degrees to which, within each, we identify as being both within the community and without. Regardless, intra-community dynamics within research parameters accomplishes specific ways to knowledge-creation by and for both the people doing the research and who or what the research is being done on. Contemporary participatory dialogue seeks, instead, to erase the divide which is created through researcher/researched dichotomies. When voices are silenced, intra-community networks are broken, and instead, we are representing a manifestation of inconsistent research.

Within communities which initialize the process of inner growth as a priority to knowledge-creation, many of the existing participatory methods in research can become useful, however, only within the scope of very specific application. Seemingly consistent with the basic intentions, “Photovoice engendered what Keiffer (1984) refers to as participatory competence: ‘the combination of attitudes, understandings and abilities required to play a conscious and assertive role in the ongoing social construction of one’s political environment’...” (Foster-Fishman, 7). There are three fundamental structural modes which contributed to the success of Photovoice as a competent participatory method. These community-centered values include,

...an expanded awareness of circumstances and conditions within their own communities...becoming more knowledgeable about their community...understanding of what they shared in common with other residents in their community... feeling an increased sense of ownership of their community and a sense of responsibility for making their community better... (Foster-Fishman, 8-9)

In the act of defining community spaces and members, there must be a recognized ontological necessity towards human behavioural protocol. In simple terms, there must be a regularity in practicing recognized, communal expressions of basic respect. As we conduct research in community spaces and places we have to realize that these are not

necessarily places of research, an in effect, we are displacing social norms with an extra-local informational resource. The existence of time and space wherein people can recognize one another outside of research agendas is, in this regard, a priority over the research process. Within participatory and community-based research, “The configuration of commonality (same neighbourhoods) paired with diversity (different ages and ethnicities) seemed to foster an environment where it was safe to explore similarities and differences...” (Foster-Fishman, 12). The act of relating through mutual respect and inherent regard for one another within a space that is not necessarily *your* space or *my* space in any absolute way, but is *our* space must be also recognized within levels of awareness for individually found relativisms of self and place in specific communal settings. By its very definition, we must respect that communal is not synonymous with public and instead is a more conscious process of one hand reaching out to another.

Furthermore, as research is enabled through mutual human respect, ideological community may be expressed and then acted upon through the creation of a particular research community. The experience of a “research community” is formed from existing communal spaces into a community resonant with newly-formed relationships between individuals practicing transparent formalities of knowledge-sharing. The essence of a pathway into healthy extrinsic community dialogue has been documented in Photovoice where, “Individuals who participated in Photovoice described themselves as having increased skills and efficacy, an expanded critical consciousness about their surroundings, and increased resources for becoming change agents...” (Foster-Fishman, 12). The bridged gaps in existing communal spaces into a space facilitating the creation

of renewed communication between peoples and places is reflected in the practice of a physical method to learning.

Photography is an especially useful entity for free-associating with communal norms and socially-recognized significance. For the community wherein the Photovoice method was applied, "...the photographs they took stimulated a *dialogic* process that went beyond the content of photographs, resulting in a rich exchange of ideas, concerns, hopes, experiences and understandings..." (Foster-Fishman, 12-13). The multitudinous verity found in dialogic processes is that which often dreams through social norms to the better interests of people, as they suddenly have the freedom to choose within a repertoire of cultural mentalities of which they are aware, and decide which is appropriate for their lives as individuals within certain community spaces. Community support through research initiatives entices new relationships into social sustainability based on relational experience as opposed to a sole researcher's perspective. For example, "...new roles as photographers often provided participants with opportunities to speak to others whom they did not have previous relationships" (Foster-Fishman, 9). The ability to consciously choose the type of community spaces relative to individual involvement through the development of "research communities" is both mutually beneficial and serviceable to both individual and communal identity.

Despite misgivings about the irreparability of local culture-forms as they confront the "all-seeing eye of Western technology," a mindset many Western people also attribute to themselves, the Photovoice method reported that "...insights did not replace the participants' own perspective, but instead broadened them..." (Foster-Fishman, 13). It can be said that global utility of newly created "research communities" as a source of

knowledge also provokes local interpretations of the meaning “global community.” The redefinition of research through the engagement of the entire spectrum of experiential knowledge capacities within different cultural models and social priorities around the world is a practice expressed in one way or another through social integration of global media exposure, yet also exists as a lesson which participatory research encourages.

The tension between homogenization and heterogenization, blur and spatter... suggests that the local-global binary may in fact be unproductive and reductive... ‘...as fast as forces from metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one way or another...’ (Diehl, 11)

The role of outsider perspectives in community-based research designs is also extremely relevant as it is “insider” mentalities that conceive the “outsider.” The “outsider” within participatory research, however, is recognized as an engine of creative space within a holistic worldview of human growth. The place of the “outsider” is usually at its healthiest expression as a vehicle through which the “insider” mentality is recognized as unique, independent and respected as maintaining its own relational truths. In other words, “...in order for participants to have the capacity to share their expertise, they must recognize that their indigenous knowledge and experience is legitimate, valued, and valuable...” (Foster-Fishman, 10). Regardless, the inclusion of any extra-local motivations for conducting a research project has its challenges. Added that a research project is most often intended to create a formal product as a result of communal knowledge-creation, participation by definition can be applied inconsistently within contextualized social circumstances of imbalanced power relations. For example, if the setting and function of knowledge-creation through the Photovoice method has been brought into a social space where at one point the method of knowledge-sharing was not articulated within that space, “...several factors such as interest in community, desire to

learn photography, and/or a certain level of time availability may have influenced participant's decisions to participate..." (Foster-Fishman, 14). Self-reflexive contemporary research practices recognize a constant flux of human activity and inter-relational devices which attract individuals through thematic negotiations as functional role-players in social and environmental technologies. With respect to the history of research, "...conventional approaches to evaluation (i.e., focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys) sometimes augment a distressed community's sense of powerlessness..." (Foster-Fishman, 4). The contemporary expressions of a "research" ontology is looking more and more like a visible human presence in both the vast diversity of human societies throughout the world and contemporary participatory research designs. Mutual respect and recognition forms close relationships of healing and trust as foundations towards physical collectives and communal growth.

#### Chapter 4: Applying a Reflexive Methodology for Participatory Community

The adage, *research is a living thing*, suggests that it needs to contribute to the greater society... To truly do this, we need to think *beyond* the confines of the study... This includes building in sustainable programming as part of the actual project... Teach research skills at the grassroots level, perhaps laying the foundation for more research, especially that of an in-group nature... Focus on the strengths of the culture, as opposed to negative or pathological components, especially if it dispels previously held myths and stereotypes... (Offet-Gartner)

How can we relate a history of "objective" research with being a child "raised" in Western social values and norms? Is the child a blank-slate? If you subscribe to the sociological referencing of feral children, you will of course think so. Can we relate the reference to feral children to studies on exotic cultures in objective research? If you are aware of the early history of anthropology there is a chance you will.

... researchers were taught to be *blank slates*... value-free, cultural-less psychology held fast through the first fifteen years... working with various groups of children—autistic, Aboriginal, immigrant, rural—children whose experience did not necessarily fit this approach. I began

to question...(Offet-Gartner)

When we understand methodology as a specific *way to know* we can realize that knowledge is formed through social bonds. Within ourselves, we understand more about self-knowledge through our experience with that which is not us. Thus, methodology is founded on the potency of relating to that which is yet to be known. The systemic application of single methodologies over multiple research subjects sheds its tough skin of ethnocentric priority by treating every individual self-experience from the perspective of newfound, multi-faceted methodologies of immediate experience. The challenge of knowledge-creation is not in creating a knowledge “product,” it is instead in specifically applying a way of knowing to experience self *as* community.

There are many ways which researchers have cleansed themselves of generalizing research subject matter under the umbrella of stultified methodologies. In this respect, a methodology is applied as a fundamental outgrowth within a variegated unique expression which arises out of a fresh ontology capable of learning from that which is to be re-presented as research.

“New ways of contemplating research are now needed that reveal the *intersections* of multiple, shifting subjectivities and historical contexts for each [participant]” (Tanaka, 2002, p. 288). Tanaka also says “research methods can no longer afford to be “timeless” or overlook the onrush of multiple cultural histories (p. 269)...trying to modify the *old* methodologies will only water- down or subjugate the centrality of culture in the research process” (Offet-Gartner)

In the context of self-critique, participatory research is often confronted with a conflict beset within the tribulations of individualistic academic research over community-based research. Dysfunctional priorities on access to sources of knowledge are prevented in one example of a community-based research design where, “Consistent with an inductive approach, the research team refrained from conducting a formal review of the literature prior to data analysis as doing so may ‘bias the researcher’s thinking and reduce openness

to whatever emerges in the field...” (Foster-Fishman, 6). The pre-formulated biases of a research project as imposed in the field require a full examination of each individuals’ cultural momentums through which they have become present in the community in which the research is formalized. As identified from an individual perspective, “...culturally-infused research insists that researchers locate themselves—identifying their cultural influences as well as their reasons for embarking on the project in question...” (Offet-Gartner). In effect, it is truly pertinent to have a transparency of individual motivations within research communities as a way to re-form the relative self as it is experienced, known and defined within communal spaces.

In the journey of a self searching for another within research language, there is a vast range of terminology which is used to describe “other” people. When an individual engages in research with focused cultural content, the research language to define others quickly undergoes various transformations. Students of participatory research ideologies are breaking the conventions of non-interventionist research. Contemporary research is re-defining a historical relationship between peoples, where for example, one ground-breaking researcher wrote, “I sought ways to incorporate what I had learned from *the field*...the emergence of qualitative research...I realized I had to discover a lot about my own self, my cultural influences, beliefs, and biases before I initiated research” (Offet-Gartner). The findings of today’s research is as much about re-discovering our self-place as a process as it is about discovering other peoples’. We are re-learning our identity constantly through the experience of shifting human communities and deep traditions which exist independent of social norms in western European ideologies of legitimate knowledge.

I encourage each of you to find the strength, courage, and desire to examine the cultural context

and implications—defining your own culturally relevant question and answers—*before* attempting a research project...*all* research is a cultural endeavour; ethically sound research is culturally-infused research” (Offet-Gartner)

When revising the conventions of research language, the specificities within our experience of different terminologies must exist in a way which enables us to actively utilize a potency of contextualized meaning. In the act of breaking down the walls of antiquated meaning for certain words, we must become enthralled in a lively scholarship effective at the community level. Such research activism reaches into the halls of our most deep-seated ignorance and transforms that ignorance through a reflexive, critical eye. With this eye we can notice wholesale social dogmas within our history and modern society, “According to Pederson (2001), “culture is perhaps the most important and most misunderstood construct that has emerged from the social sciences in this century”” (Offet-Gartner). One of the foundational points of reference for understanding a methodology which includes such a vibrancy of experimental and experiential language use, is manifesting an awareness that *ways to know* or methodologies are in fact, everywhere, and inform every second of our entire lives.

...biases are not conscious or intentional; rather, “our worldviews are so deeply ingrained that we rarely question our standards, and may not be consciously aware of the impact of our values on research.” (Offet-Gartner)

How we know our self, others, and our place and processes of relation between those are all expressions of specific methodological consequence, which while we are not always aware, are behind every movement of our existence. Regarding this specific methodological consequence within the conscious designation of research within a community is an aspect of **cultural awareness** wherein we find that within competent research frameworks “...*training and “good intentions” were not enough, that competent practice required more specific knowledge...*” (Offet-Gartner). The critical reduction of

knowledge and terminological meaning is the cultural awareness process through which the enrichment of diversity in communal knowledge occurs.

How has it been that as “researchers of culture” we continue to overlook the expression of our own culture as that which informs research agendas? Is *our* culture a research agenda? Where do *we* depart from *our* research? The amalgamations of self-definition tempered by our experience with others is a crucial area of interest for self-critical and self-explorative research. The history of Western social knowledge derives from the process of *knowledge-legitimization as research* wherein, “It became clear that change was needed or psychological research was going to fail to be of benefit for a rising portion of the population...lack of awareness by Whites that they are cultural beings is a major contributor to the problems associated with research across cultures” (Offet-Gartner). If ethnocentrism is a pathology within the history of research what are its causes, and what are its symptoms? The objectification of place is symptomatic of our entitlement issues as a society.

Objectification of peoples and lands are fundamentally caused by self-objectification wherein there is an identification and experience of belonging in a country where social conflict provides logical reasoning for the separation of ancestral, place-based extended family structures (i.e.. post-WWII North American value systems around work, family and social identity). Beliefs based in self-objectification are masked in optimistic idealism, yet are founded in a lack of trust in ourselves and other people as human beings. Within this we use technological multimedia to manifest ignorant motivations to utilize what is most basic to the survival of human beings on the Earth, namely our sources of sustenance. The symptom of our ignorance can be summed up in

the word **privilege**. Actively assuming privilege extends beyond what we conceive knowledge to be, into conceiving a uniform and fixed *knowledge*. Privilege gives the right to possess absolute knowledge resonant only within a specific methodology or way to that knowledge.

Modern academic movements rarely require, with great enthusiasm, a full inclusion of other sources and ways to knowledge. This process, however, even if academicism offered it prolifically only amounts to unanswered questions because "... researchers must develop their ethical reasoning *before* research begins... rules and codes will not give us *the answer*" (Offet-Gartner). There is no answer to any social research problem that is to be had *only* within academic circles. What use is a formalized *answer* if it bespeaks an experience of relating to peoples through a cross-cultural knowledge which exceeds any single definition, extending beyond *re*-presentation? Nothing can be *gained* in research defined simply by an experience of what it is to be an individual human being who attempts to understand how "...each of us has the responsibility to work together to actively transform our institutions and social groups..." (Offet-Gartner). In all sincerity, we must rescind our need to attain other peoples knowledge to approach mutual trust through knowledge-sharing.

All creative *re*-presentation is simply an emphasis of the essence of an unanswered question, a mystery as deep as the self. As a new generation of authors recommend, "...only members within a cultural group should conduct research pertaining to that group...only those close to the community can truly represent it without distortion..." (Offet-Gartner). In effect, we must see where there are silenced voices, and recognize them, not as necessitating a voice, which simply imposes, "...an awareness of

the oppression that has been perpetuated by research,” (Offet-Gartner) but also that “...some marginalized people will not respond to research requests because they have been pathologized in the past or saw research as confirming existing stereotypes” (Offet-Gartner). Knowing where the boundaries of research are is, instead, the professed necessity of **cultural awareness** to the extent that we must then begin a process whereby *we* are silent before others, and really listen to ourselves and others with emotion, intelligence and purpose in order to locate our place with others.

If we can adjust our sensibilities to renewing fundamental notions of a social research methodology, we must, by necessity, reconfigure our definitions of fundamental terms. Culture is a term used often with liberal meaning. In regaining a sense of liberality through more varied yet more precise usage for a term like “culture,” we must not so much analyze the morphology as the syntax. A return to an original experience of first usage within a particular context shapes the meaning respectively. In that sense we can use such terms as “culture,” which have significant breadth of context in academic and socio-historical literature, to gain a greater depth of specificity while maintaining an expansive meaning for future contextual usage. One author identifies **culture** as a term that “...assumes a multiplistic rather than an ethnocentric cultural identity where individuals are free to hold membership in a number of cultural groups that change and vary in importance and inclusion throughout one’s life...” (Offet-Gartner). From a transformative stance on interpretive meaning within specific contexts, the tension between expansive and particular usage can be addressed relative to the idiomatic patterns in the specific culture in reference.

Based on a methodology within the research community which seeks to re-define

broad social-definers, we can derive a consensus on a network of further definition and growth of meaning centered on a functional central meaning in a word as broad as “culture.” In other words, we are creating a metaphoric language tree which has its roots in specific cultural norms and a trunk sharply defined through a unique expression of such a broad term as “culture,” yet spreads out to include various shared definition with its larger communal sensibilities. For example, **culture-infused research** and **cultural self-exploration** determines that “Each of us is a cultural being who has *learned* our culture, often insidiously. This becomes problematic if the ensuing attitudes, beliefs, biases, and so on are not consciously re-examined throughout our lifetime to ensure current validity and utility” (Offet-Gartner). A return to seeing our fundamental notions of who we are down to our everyday behaviour is curiously similar to that professed by psychological studies on adolescence. The experience of questioning and re-forming our identity, social place, and behaviour runs parallel to transitional life-stages, as for example, mid-life crisis or other forms of returning and *reformulating* our cultural orientation within social norms and privileges.

Within cross-cultural social research, the methodologies which are sensitive to and respect human diversity are not applied through a shedding of the personal-cultural affinities of the researcher within their newly formed research community in order to replace them with new ones. Instead, we must see that “...There is no way to completely strip culture from any research, since even the language used to report the findings is culturally bound...” (Offet-Gartner). In the same way, this idea can be illustrated through race relations where, for example, through denying white privilege, oppressive conditioning is only perpetuated if not addressed clearly and directly (Sue). With this, we

can study and apply research as a natural mode through which human beings relate and function as unique expressions of their own society and culture in the creation of knowledge which can be articulated and shared cross-culturally. The natural affinities towards understanding and becoming another grow out of a desire to be more than that which our original social place has set for us. In effect, cross-cultural research is an experience of intra-cultural knowledge-creation whereby national, cultural, familial and other identity markers are re-formulated through a positive process of active engagement within modes of identity formation or **cultural identity development**. The ability to refer to social norms as entry-points towards a conscious social and individual growth outside of “given” preoccupations of what we are “raised” to think, believe and act can enable appropriate social research that respects the research process as a whole. Holistic perspectives on research do not see conventions and norms as negative. Instead, conventions and norms continue to provide the ground from which outreach efforts at cross-cultural knowledge-sharing can begin.

A framework for establishing connections between people with different cultural orientations enacts simultaneous instances of interpersonal conflict and union. On the experimental stage wherein every culture involved has ample footing to express their own unique cultural identities, a space is provided for *other*, *new* or *misunderstood* cultural expressions to emerge. Experiencing culture loss is, to a degree, symptomatic of transcending cultural affinities which are essential to cross-cultural understanding. Almost in concert with early ethnographic approaches to the role of the wounded healer in small-scale societies, the initial step towards extinguishing socio-cultural norms and entering into a space of newfound psychological depth and complexity can be a source of

conflict. Retuning to one's socio-cultural norms through newfound sense-relations, cultural experience and personal roles and inviting foreign precepts for new ways to act towards others and lead peoples unconventionally. The conflict stage, however, is one step in a complete process of cultural renewal, empowerment and identity-formation within respective originating cultural orientations whereby individuals' cultures are strengthened as a whole. The idea that "*Conflict* begins when the person begins to recognize the plight of other cultures and races, especially in contrast to their own" (Offet-Gartner) is part of the contemporary cross-cultural researcher's practice of mutual sensitivity to a multitudinous range of socio-historic forces at work in multicultural exchanges.

Without referring to a range of power imbalances at work in the history of forced acculturation, the personal sacrifices made through valid research to engage precise practices that address ethnocentric biases involve processes including the ideas that "...*Redefinition and Integration* marks the point when the person has successfully achieved a balance between her/his cultural identity and that of others" (Offet-Gartner). Also termed as **identity integration**, this is an experience which must be tempered and consciously understood independent and in concert with **acculturation** in order to effectively service the needs of a particular research project aimed at stabilizing self-cultural orientation within specific cross-cultural spaces.

Researchers who have reached the final stage of identity integration, and who are aware of themselves as cultural beings, have the greatest chance of compiling ethical and culturally sensitive research...Eurocentricism is not like a prejudice...it requires conscious thought and action to overcome... (Offet-Gartner)

The ability to perceive spaces of cross-cultural tolerance and verity is through a competent resignation from the idea that **identity integration** and **acculturation** are

synonymous and translate into equal social and individual processes of knowledge-sharing in community-based research. As most cultures which participate in Western research have been exposed to various forms of acculturation, "...ascertaining the impact of acculturation directly from each participant is the most appropriate choice to make..." (Offet-Gartner). **Identity integration** can, in a sense, be understood as a way to recognize **acculturation** as an initial step towards a methodology for self-knowledge within a research community inspired by intercultural tolerance and confidential application of specific knowledge(s) shared, gained and created.

A systematic methodology, or way to know, encourages appropriate self-cultural identities within community spaces, ultimately helping to inform research initiatives. A space, even if simply a mental space, wherein a basis for mutual sharing of identity formation as a living process is important. We can approach a value-centered practice of integrating ourselves as cultural beings through prioritizing subjectivity in the impacts of a specific self-awareness rendered throughout community-based research. A stepping stone mentality from an original sense of self-identity as an individual researcher into communal research can be mutually attained in, for example, the following order:

- [1]...researchers are encouraged to frame their projects in a holistic manner...Approaching the community as a student, as much as a researcher, will go a long way toward demonstrating respect...
- [2]...Inviting family and community members to take part in the research process is a wise plan... Try to ensure that you are equally available to each participant and their families...
- [3].....inquire about the participant's experience of role models with reference to what is being studied...Stories are used to offer information in a way that is neither competitive nor seen as a sign of interference...
- [4]...Seeking advice from inside the cultural group cannot be understated...go to the participant...
- [5]...be open to and appreciate cultural diversity within *all* groups...
- [6]...find renditions closer to the *lived experience* of those you are seeking to understand... (Offet-Gartner)

Garnering mutual respect in the work of cross-cultural evaluations of participatory research processes begins with self-respect. An important aspect of self-respect is in

recognizing the challenges that one faces within themselves to see beyond their cultural lens/biases in order to effectively create the possibility within oneself to engage in cross-cultural knowledge-sharing. If we understand knowledge as a light that shines on our preoccupations, biases and boundaries, we can then depart from implausible goals within research designs, which are merely a reflection of self-ignorance. Such application of knowledge as a reflecting lamp over social ills is much of the time a product of the misunderstood power imbalances that have defined histories of oppression for cultural groups within participatory research communities.

Enabling a methodology embedded in a pragmatic ethical fluidity resonant with the multi-cultural ecology of communal participation means that we are "...being guided by the values and beliefs of the individual community. Short of examining one's own worldview, this may be the next most important step toward providing ethical and meaningful research... (Offet-Gartner)." As a commentary to the literature in reference, critically analyzing value-centered language challenges the idea that outsider perspectives are to be prioritized over subjectivity within multi-cultural research communities as a whole. Reviewing ambiguous generalities within the expansive potential of "community research" as a wholesale term without specific cultural and experiential reference perpetuates dogmatic knowledge schemas which research literature is historically built to accommodate. For every action, meeting and representation formalized in research projects, the question must be asked, "For whom is this intended?" As language can be perceived as formalized intentionality, so our research must be communicated within applied methodologies, and thus ethical referencing, specific to knowledge-capacities experienced through building a multi-cultural community.

The sustenance as knowledge metaphor must become linked to the relational perspectives which are created through the making and re-making of research communities. Lifelong human connections with which to grow and learn as an internalized growth process is not simply a conjecture in experiential cross-cultural knowledge-sharing. Research projects, in this sense, do not end nor do they begin as understood within the chronological frameworks constructed outside of knowledge-based forums specific to the community-focus. Asking the question, “When does the research project begin and end?” is like asking when does learning begin and end. As a fundamental outgrowth from our most basic human experience, so cross-cultural research, by definition, must become exposed to methodological reflections on community sustainability wherein, “...this process requires the investigator to build relationships with potential participants *prior* to requesting their participation in a study...better relationships equal better research!” (Offet-Gartner). How can sustainability be tempered between creative human movement, resource-based impermanence and mechanical or old-fashioned research methodologies? The community priorities that shape the research, must become central to defining where research begins and ends where for example, “...easy access to the information gathered...consistent with how the community derives its knowledge...researchers have to assist communities, after the research is over, to obtain the supports they might need to ensure sustainability...” (Offet-Gartner). Becoming an informational resource within culturally-embedded circumstance occurs through offering personal knowledge and experience in building compensatory networks.

...it is the beliefs that you, the researcher, hold and the ways in which you *apply* the methodology that makes the difference...it is clear that more definition, description, participation in the process, ability to clarify, receive final drafts, and benefit from the process is wanted by the communities...

(Offet-Gartner)

Compensation can be understood metaphorically to assist and complement its practical application, especially in educational contexts. If a person undergoes individual transformation whereby they are selflessly given to community-defined knowledge, this process then also reflects a selflessness resonant within community structures. In accordance with the principle of community selflessness, self-identification with research communities through experiential mutuality is also, to a great extent, an ever-expanding role-playing methodology in tune with the group experience as it is articulated within and without the research praxis. Authoring community experience has its parallels within wider perspectives from our living natural environment as “Kenny (2000) likens this process to that of a raven, soaring high above the earth to get a broader understanding of the environment; coming in close to examine smaller details, and then back up again to watch, wait, and plan” (Offet-Gartner).

When discussing the *voice* issue, we must complexly examine what our *voice* is, where the local forums for speaking are located and their protocols. Speaking from an authoring perspective, there is rarely the fortunate opportunity to commonly share the entire spectrum understood by self-experience within the contextualized meanings found inside research communities, and instead, as researchers, we often revert to *othering*. Time-worn conventions found in western research norms have authorized a perspective on knowledge where, “...research can be used to “desilence the oppressed” (p. 802)...Tanaka goes on to say that “having voice means having culture” (p. 289)” (Offet-Gartner), however without the gaining a mutual understanding on where community perspective lies and has voice, “Lincoln and Cannella concur and warn that “impulses to represent the voices of others and to liberate the less fortunate are deeply embedded” (p.

276)...do research differently...” (Offet-Gartner). The renewed availability to enact such a process would redeem a cognizance in the communication conventions that accompany contemporary research and informational authorship. Individualistic perspectives on writing, knowledge and research can lead to an understanding that, “... if the participants and their communities are kept in the centre of the research, many of the potential dilemmas will not occur” (Offet-Gartner). In effect, we must engage in community dialogue as the foremost methodology in authorizing the legitimate knowledge found within community spaces. Our technological constructs for knowledge-sharing and thought-provocation must be fundamentally transformed into that which is immediately accessible to wider, communal participation. In the process, we must forego the chance to speak on behalf of knowledge and the community, to let the community speak for itself.

Where research often has the potential to expand beyond its original frames of reference formulated during initial research design processes, the pragmatism behind being **self-reflexive** is not to be underestimated in maintaining a continuity of focus on the self-potentialities of research agencies to experience and interpret the particular realities within which the research takes its scope. In this way, we can formulate methodologies for expanded research perspectives through introspective evaluation. The identification with the dichotomous relationship between expanding the field and highlighting particular concerns within pre-determined research projects are predicated on exclusion and inclusion where transcending such dual fixations means “...moving beyond the initial wave of calling for increased multicultural research to one that requests the inclusion and examination of all cultures, including Whites...that exclusion of any form, is neither useful, nor ethical and may in fact *do harm*...” (Offet-Gartner). Forced

intervention and/or forced participation which research can assume in community spaces of relative and absolute inclusion is necessarily prevented by “...Involving your participants, using as many of their own words, and culturally locating the research as much as possible, are ways to arrive at the closest interpretation possible; while realizing that you will never be able to fully capture the essence of an experience, simply a representation of it...” (Offet-Gartner). Any and all peoples involved in a community through their enactment of a research methodology must necessarily express a self-revealed **cultural location** as a fundamental aspect to open and transparent self-communication to all influenced by the research project.

...all research data, including field notes, transcriptions, recordings, and photos be returned to the community studied... This would ensure that whatever cultural language, history, stories, or traditions were recorded remains available to that particular group... academia’s refusal to comply with these requests, and the emphasis on publishing completed work in educational journals and papers, is a continued form of acculturation and appropriation” (Offet-Gartner)

Experimenting with the research process is not a solo act nor a monologue on paper. Participation methodologies necessarily must consider categorically re-defining research and its associated socio-cultural norms because “...*codes*, simply deduced, reflect the culture of those who were empowered to write them...” (Offet-Gartner). In order to surpass industrial methodologies of knowledge-production into creative community models of knowledge-creation the fact must be adamantly adhered to that “research does not start and stop with the actual study (Lincoln & Canella, 2009). It lives on, in experience, documentation, and knowledge—like all stories—it affects lives...” (Offet-Gartner). The implementation of **member checks** insists that *research* is by the definition of the word a recurring and cyclical process. Completing compensatory methods initializes a process wherein “the benefits of going back to your participants to ensure that you *get it right*, to open up dialogue, and display that you *care if you got it*

*right*, rather than just assuming you did, far outweigh the negatives” (Offet-Gartner). By engaging a self-reflexive participatory process where research is an avenue through which to build upon existing relationships formed communally within a design process, the compensatory actions become natural and self-motivated as a way to keep in touch and justify the shared creation of informational and multimedia resources.

An experience of compensatory and sustainable frameworks can be carried into the formalities of ethics as they are understood in research processes where “Ethics in research, as in every aspect of life, is about the way you *live* your life; ethics are a way of being, not just a way of reacting...” (Offet-Gartner). In describing the effects of research on a community, one author wrote in natural metaphors where for example, “a study can be likened to a pebble that gets tossed into a lake. Its impact can create innumerable ripples that cannot be controlled, contained, nor completely predicted—the result of which extends far beyond the point of entry” (Offet-Gartner). The self-reflexivity in participatory research must extend also to active involvement by all those who fund and inspire the study at hand. This process may include previously unrecognized stakeholders across national and cultural boundaries extending between great geographical distance or varied life experience. The research, in this regard, should not be seen as an individual motivation, “Researchers must remember that they are ambassadors for their cultural group, their profession, and for research as a whole. Whether bridges are built or burned will impact both current and future studies...” (Offet-Gartner). Research is seated in a historical and cultural momentum which seeks, as the self does, an other.

Contemporary research is about completing cycles of communication from home-community spaces into areas of relative ignorance in the name of clarity to seek active,

living visions. The relationships and communities formed through participatory research are meant to provide for the future creation of extended families and new communities based on knowledge and experience grounded in shared dialogues.

In order for a culture-infused research paradigm to become a member of the research family, it will require acceptance and recognition from other members of the family (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). Directly or distantly, you are a member of this family” (Offet-Gartner).

The resultant social effects of globalization and informational technology has emptied the physical palms from where relationships were once formed and offered plasticity and electricity in their place. Speaking in the name of contemporary research, our work seeks once more to place another physically present palm in those hands which extend voluntarily, and in the process extend another.

### Conclusion: Self-Introspection on Personal Limitations and Cultural Power Struggles

Fundamental to using a culture-infused research paradigm is, first and foremost, the understanding of one’s own culture, including any power and privilege that inclusion in the particular culture affords us...we often benefit from remaining ignorant to the realities of these constructs. Resistance to their recognition is often deeply ingrained, subversive, and couched in good intentions... (Offet-Gartner)

If I don’t have a sense of my self it is because I don’t have a sense of who I am with, who I am a part of, and what defines me. If I don’t know me, it is because I don’t know us, and merely defining *us* as a united entity, before getting to know us, is never a simple process. When asking *who* defines me, in relation to *what* defines me, is to undergo a process whereby *what* surrounds me becomes personalized into *who* surrounds me. To experience seeing and being in an environment to the point where it expresses personality reflective of culture is an enactment of a “what” to “who” transformation found between peoples as well as in relations between humans with environments, seasons, ecologies, mountains, seas, animals, plants, etc. and even buildings, streets,

clothes, money, etc. The essential act played through self-redefinition as a cultural expression in constant relativity to others is fundamentally an entry into a personalized worldview.

The necessity to express power imbalances requires multiple voices in a forum where, previously unequal, all are allowed to speak within a legitimate collective recognizing, accommodating and compensating for shifts in power relative to the means through which people communicate, act, and think. Each mentality which expresses power relations, for example being invited into personal or family space and, and/or expecting those from less powerful nations and cultures to recognize and meet with you, are fundamental ideological responses brought from within Western culture. These are also spaces wherein the “less powerful” see the “more powerful” as less powerful, if only within their own circles of knowledge. Engaging with people in culturally-rich settings is to re-define power imbalances. The narrowness found within imposing generalized perspectives over silenced or vulnerable minorities does not allow for alternative and relative power associations to exist.

As much as it is necessary to include perspectives of the “less powerful” in order to see where the “powerful” culture is drawn and defined in relation, there has to be a certain degree of self-reflection within any system of culture forms because human functionality as a whole can be seen as a regression and imposition of power struggles within each individual, extending as between two or more people, two or more families, villages, cities, countries, and regions. It is important to ask the question, “Why do I feel as if in this situation I may be more powerful to decide how a relation is formed?”

Intending to connect to people through relation-building processes is often

projected as a positive endeavour. Without redressing power imbalances, many perspectives within multi-cultural relations experience an unceasing subjection to imposed relations as externally destructive and often violently opposed to independent cultural self-sufficiency. Having ulterior motives outside immediate, transparent, and mutually shared identity-knowledge, is more internally destructive to any and all involved than any other communal formality.

It is commonly a source of fear for myself speaking as a member of a Western state to embark into self-caused imposed power struggles. It is an activity, however, which is necessary and enacted subconsciously and obviously in many ways as a traveler from America into the Middle East, despite working as a researcher. A few of the most visible encounters which emphasize such a conflict are experienced immediately through language. Power imbalances are apparent wherein I have traveled such distance yet am able to fit comfortably inside urban spaces physically and mentally directed towards a culture resembling that of the country where I originate, whereas locals who are from villages only an hour outside of the city experience great difficulty in many contexts relative to their way of life . The global prevalence of my mother-tongue language, English, surely creates a wall every time I am present with locals. It is not so much that I arrive speaking English as the dominant means to communicate that creates a wall as many enjoy practicing a foreign language, it is in the basic communication needs that force them to speak English and different cultural styles that speaking my language entails which becomes frustrating. In the Middle East in particular, language is one of the first barriers to mutual inter-cultural communication found in sharing and respecting social norms, behaviours, and taboos of difference and sameness.

Basing thoughts and actions as a counterpart to American and Western cultural norms, there is an assumption that my intentions are globally-centered and thus already understood. “White” identities follow closely behind globalizing agencies as a means through which to validate being able to intervene and fit into every social circumstance. Imposing a simplistic, globally recognized identity as “American” is simply a forceful and disrespectful means to gaining community acceptance, further enunciating that there cultural identities are not as globally legitimate, recognized or understood. There is a mentality that says, “I am who I am because I accept change, and because I accept change I have the moral high ground.” This mentality is mostly misconstrued when placed in a modern inter-cultural communication settings that occur daily. Such settings are pronounced when visiting multi-faced and diversely unique cultural domains.

The balance between traditional and modern are often expressed through privileges based on access to resources which instil values based on change and modernity as principles leading to economic superiority. “Traditional” as a term, is an umbrella concept applied to the East and its cultures which are founded on non-compliant values incongruous to Western norms. This wholesale categorization is often times brutally dishonest to a people who, instead of having decision over access to resources in order to bring desired economic and socio-cultural change, the resources are brought and imposed with a rapidity meant to disregard local decision-making based on state policies which continue to apply top-down forms of governance. It is also assumed that because “I” do not understand how “their” societies are formed and inter-related, that they incontrovertibly do not know themselves. This simplistic way of projecting difference onto people in the Middle East reflects my own relation to myself as “other.” In addition,

I only engage with peoples, whether locals or not, who likewise fit the definition of difference that I prescribe despite being invited into varying local spaces. Traditionalizing peoples based on Western-founded knowledge and ignorance neglects the ways local people identify or relate within themselves through independent global expressions and economic self-sufficiency. This is also a reflection of my incapability to relate to myself and members of my “own” culture.

The deeply layered histories which the East has endured and continues to express in its daily life are well under-appreciated in the West. There is a mentality still living from the Berlin Wall history where the East is a non-inclusive and sheltered womb of human tradition while the West is a changing and dynamic multi-cultural economic power-house. In Africa, as I experience and learn, this East/West history is not a closed chapter. The experience that I have had personally is simply that East/West mentalities are fundamentally backwards to the point where “our” enemies, as perceived in the West, become “our” friends as Westerners in the East. “Our” ideas of tradition, as perceived in the West, are essentially modern lived realities when visiting the East. When beginning to attempt seeing Eastern perspectives, “our” ideas of Western modernity, are instead longstanding traditional heritages. Methods to explain “traditional” and “modern” dichotomies within certain historically chronological time constraints have vastly different scopes within cultures and histories extending back thousands of years in a continued ecological-cultural memory.

In the West, particularly in America, we are highly mono-cultured and assimilative in our regard to difference and self-recognition. Life in the East, in Egypt in particular, is vastly interwoven with difference and tolerance within its own historical and

cultural forms of difference and sameness, while of course there is racism and social inequality. To assume that there are strict dichotomies based on maintaining a unique perspective and to apply that perspective as a stronghold to universal truth and scientifically-observed fact is a symptom of Western insecurity for cultural difference and the need to dominate and spread our sense of placeless incongruity on Earth. “Our” environmental mismanagement is a trademark of “our” civilization and of “industrial civilization” as a whole as it is strengthened and encouraged by imposing its sensibilities into every society and individual that remains “traditional.” In the age of globalization, we are claiming every cultural form as our own creation because we feel that we have now infiltrated everywhere and that the independence of nation-states in the modern world operate in full-force according to a social agenda which was forged in Western Europe and continues to be policed by global American interests. These are dramatic conclusions meant to inspire individual realization that we subtly impose this on ourselves and our relations with others regardless of any apparent cultural differences in our lives. By basically disregarding *cultural* difference, socially-destructive mentalities are sustained.

We are casting our ignorance over human diversity, biological diversity and a diversity of thought, imaginative action, creativity and truth. It needs to be understood that within the scope of this conclusion I am portraying a need to interchange the use of subjectivity and objectivity in language through a balanced perspective which recognizes the “I” as dependent on the “us.” My quotations around “our” are founded on a need to re-think the adoption of self-claimed cultural norms and personality features which each of us from the West carries and identifies with. If we look back into our history we can

see that most of our identity markers which define us as a community, an international Western social construct, are absolutely stolen, borrowed, claimed, “discovered,” realized, understood, learned or created elsewhere with inspiration from elsewhere.

The relative truth that I am attempting to relay is that of the omnipotent mythic muse. Looking to the insignificant corners of our self-creations and revealing them to others is required for satiating the appetite of the creative mind. We must ask ourselves then, are these “corners” of our minds and worlds so insignificant? In the process of creating “our” own world and personal worldview, whose are we destroying? Why am I part of a culture which is dominant and overwhelming in its grandiose world-objectification? How can I look more closely beneath my skin and into the eyes of others and re-view *my* self as *our* selves to return to a common self that is an authentic, representative, living expression of who I am and who we are? And in that process, again respect and recognize others in the ways that they define themselves, and not the ways that we have become so comfortable to define them.

One of the foundational assumptions which allows the Western mind to flourish with oblivious ignorance irrespective of the great and dire need to respect cultural difference is an idea that is especially pronounced as a Westerner visiting less-powerful nations. Despite tolerant and open-minded Westerners traveling to the East in search of another, we involuntarily and intentionally hold true to a sense of safety which we are afforded as part of a powerful nation. This sense of safety extends beyond physical safety in relatively unstable economic and social circumstances to an informational safety where we represent the ideological and militant forces of security that we have become identified with on an international level. Even more destructive than any physical

security, we bring a sense of informational safety, which is an entitlement to knowledge enabled to the point where what happens to “me“ happens also happens to “you.” In effect, we feel that we can say anything and do anything that our culture affords. Such interpretation of culture-spaces originates from living in a place where it is not problematic to speak for others because of the institutionalized silencing of others’ voices. In fact, in many circles, speaking for others is honourable and promoted. Our sense of safety, is thus derived from imagining assumed communities that we define based on our experience of “others” and “our” place in “their” social-spaces. How is it that we create communities based on cultural difference? The West upholds self-security, yet is a fear-based culture whose dominance and power is always threatened. To perceive community based on cultural similarity in diverse settings enacts mutual communication, action and knowledge.

Within White and Western cultural ownership of scientific research, generalizing peoples and places through using terms as “locals” and “regions” is problematic. As I have used the term “locals” to refer to the people in Cairo and Egyptians. There is great unfounded depth of expression within even those two identities which does not easily fit into a single, broad social-definer as “local,” because, again, it has a tendency to neglect global identities found in outsider definitions of who “locals” are despite Western ideological intervention. The cultural location of my research in focus, while founded by a renowned Iraqi academic and humanitarian, is decidedly that of a Canadian University constituent whose global focus also centers on First Nations societies in Canada, however, prioritizes minority social development and conflict resolution as an area of primary concern for academic, NGO and popular social reform. Through able culturally-

aware and self-reflexive individuals, there exists a stability of mutuality in our relations with peoples who the Academy has received so much of its history and knowledge. Today, and with my current project, I am enacting a process where we, as a society, can give back the knowledge that continues to be re-shaped and possessed by Western knowledge-holders. With sustained effort and presence among communities and individuals in non-Western settings, there can be a mutual capacity to learn how to effectively enable Western research processes in order to provide for such communities a way towards answering and including such communities into Western research on their own terms, if they so desire, and in turn, create a way through which Western society can receive informational experiences founded on a mutual self-respect for newly created community, society and self.

As we approach new ways to self-identify and realize communities based on knowledge-creation, new challenges arise in pursuing and engaging with ontologically-consistent methodologies in research expressed through discursive language. There is great contemporary movement towards transcending discursive norms through the use of audio-visual art to gather research predicated on inter-cultural dialogue. Participatory frameworks which live outside of a specified methodological research framework possibly can include participatory engagements on all levels of self and society. Discursive language is limited by centralized access to informational resources and individualistic creativity. Using a research ontology to create inter-cultural community is strengthened through at first relating through artistic expression in the fields of music and visual arts, for example, which human societies find as a means through which to communicate social norms, privileges, and knowledge. Creative improvisations can be

used to reconfigure how cultural practices function in larger schemes. Creative arts are a platform from which greater multi-cultural communal awareness is achieved. There continues to be contention in communities created by governmental and academic definitions over the ability to achieve cultural modes of expression common to global inter-cultural arts in the name of vulnerable and minority group expressions. Refugee identities, for example, founded on politicized forced migration and personal suffering exists relative to their respective transitional social fabrics. Nonetheless, the social context wherein people are defined shapes their cultural affinities and creative life. When peoples relate in spaces where they are simply human beings, there is respect, when people relate within cultural spaces, there is respect for difference, when people relate within spaces of suffering, there is respect for sameness. Creating inter-cultural spaces to accommodate human identities, cultural expression, and physical and social traumas requires that as individuals, we look into our common self-expressions, and search for communal identities formed and lived through searching. Through a constant re-searching for specific social contexts within which *to learn how to listen*. We are constantly re-formed, re-created and re-presented in mutual processes re-cognizing individual and community identities over sustained personal and collective histories .

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