

Life Stories and the Search for Educational Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

The stories that people tell about their lives in the context of educational relationships draw attention to the possible experiences through which their lives could grow in meaning. In this collaborative reconstruction of one person's life history, I present an interpretive retelling of several life stories that this person—Gurraacha Sabaa, an Oromo activist—told me as part of my work at the Dream Desk, a community-based education project designed to strengthen and support learning networks in the communities around a public library in Minneapolis.

My interpretive retelling of Gurraacha's life stories is based on the search for educational possibilities that organizes my work at the Dream Desk. This work requires a broad understanding of education. Thus, I define education as the process by which meaning grows in human lives. This broad definition of education is directly inspired by the work of philosopher John Dewey (1916). It is a way of translating a technical definition of education given by Dewey into the more practical terms required for my work at the Dream Desk. According to Dewey, education is a "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 82). In Dewey's definition, the process by which meaning is added to experience is a process of growth. Further inspiration for this broad definition of education is drawn from the work of historian Lawrence Cremin (1976) and anthropologist Hervé Varenne (2007), both of whom recognize education as a fundamental human experience that is not limited to what takes place in schools.

By attending to the life stories of one person, I explore the educational possibilities in his life as well as the particular conditions that restrict the realization of those possibilities. Our search for educational possibilities focuses on potential educational experiences related to Gurraacha's interest in human rights advocacy. And our collaborative reconstruction of his life history focuses on the ways in which the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in his life. While interpreting the trajectories of meaning revealed by his life stories, I also interpret the educational possibilities created by the ways in which his life history is collaboratively reconstructed in our educational relationship. These interpretations include attention to the practical guidance his life stories provide for our work together as well as the way in which they address me at a symbolic level, marking the differences between my experiences as a white American man and his experiences as an Oromo man.

As Jackson (2002) describes, storytelling is both a strategy for "transforming private into public meanings" and a strategy for "sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (p. 15). That is, life stories do much more than provide life with coherence and order (Linde, 1993; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Life stories have democratic and existential imperatives. These democratic and existential imperatives shape the intersubjective space created in the dialogue between my perspective and Gurraacha's perspective, which is the basis for our educational relationship and our search for educational possibilities. In conclusion, I propose collaboratively reconstructed life histories as the foundation for an ethnography of educational possibilities, a form of

social inquiry that not only supports educational action but also is shaped by its exigencies.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On November 12th, 2015, Oromo protesters began demonstrating in a small town near Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. They were protesting a government plan that would displace Oromo people from lands near the city. Had I not met Gurraacha Sabaa¹, an Oromo activist, in October, I likely would have known little about these protests. Gurraacha and I live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, thousands of miles from Addis Ababa. We met at the East Lake Branch of Hennepin County Library in October 2015. East Lake Library is located in south Minneapolis near neighborhoods that are home to many Oromo refugees. I was working at the Dream Desk, a community-based education project that was started three years prior by an organization called Learning Dreams in partnership with Hennepin County Library. I have worked for Learning Dreams for the past ten years on similar projects supporting and strengthening networks of learning in communities. That evening, Gurraacha was the first person to sit down at the Dream Desk and talk with me.

Conversations at the Dream Desk begin with a question: “What do you want to learn?” The question is written in large letters on a sign that stands to one side of the Dream Desk. The sign on the other side summarizes the search for educational possibilities that begins with these conversations: “We connect you to resources in the community to support your learning.” Several colorful cards printed with the phrase “I

¹ This name is a pseudonym. For a discussion of how Gurraacha and I arrived at the decision to use a pseudonym, see pages 75-76.

want to learn...” sit on top of the Dream Desk. They display a variety of interests and aspirations, each handwritten by someone who had previously talked with me.

We refer to these interests and aspirations as “learning dreams” to suggest that learning includes much more than what takes place in schools. It is not limited to the academic subjects and skills commonly associated with the word “learning.” Learning also includes those experiences that are associated with the word “dreams,” the desires and aspirations that excite the imagination. Hinting at this broader understanding of learning, we invite people of all ages to share their learning dreams and then together we search for possibilities to support the realization of those dreams.

When the learning dreams displayed at the Dream Desk are viewed together, they suggest the wide range of possible answers to the question, “What do you want to learn?” I often clarify the question by adding: “Any answer is welcome as long as it’s meaningful to you.” That day when Gurraacha and I met, the learning dreams displayed included: basic computer skills, meditation, English, origami, Spanish, drawing, and engineering. Some learning dreams, such as basic computer skills, English, and Spanish, are very common at East Lake Library. Others, such as drawing, engineering and meditation, are less common. And, still others, like origami, are unique. All learning dreams, however, are made meaningful in the context of individual lives and the particular experiences from which they emerged.

Before I finished my introduction, Gurraacha took a blank card and wrote “advocacy” on it. He explained that he was specifically interested in human rights

advocacy. When I invited him to share additional dreams, he said he wanted to learn about “nonprofit management” and “journalism” too.

At the Dream Desk, people often share several learning dreams. Sometimes the way in which they are related is obvious, but not always. I suspected that nonprofit management and journalism were a part of Gurraacha’s interest in human rights advocacy; however, I was not sure. “I have a feeling there’s a story that connects these dreams,” I said, inviting Gurraacha to explain.

“Yes,” he said, “it’s the story of my life.”

In my work at the Dream Desk, stories about lives are important. They guide searches for educational possibilities. Following Charlotte Linde (1993), I refer to these stories as “life stories.” This term encompasses many story types. It includes the type of story Gurraacha told that first evening, a narration of several events that took place over many years, beginning when he was young and continuing to the present, thereby constituting the story of his life. It also includes the more focused stories about specific events in his life that he has told during our subsequent meetings. Life stories have become particularly important in my work with Gurraacha. He tells them more frequently and in more detail than anyone else who I have met at the Dream Desk.

My dissertation is an interpretive retelling of the many life stories Gurraacha has told me. It is a collaborative reconstruction of his life history that aims to answer the following question: In what ways is the meaning of human rights advocacy presently growing in Gurraacha’s life? This is a question about education, which, like learning, I define broadly. From the perspective developed through my work for Learning Dreams,

education is the process by which meaning grows in human lives. This broad definition of education is directly inspired by the work of philosopher John Dewey (1916). It is a way of translating a technical definition of education given by Dewey into the more practical terms required for my work at the Dream Desk. According to Dewey, education is a “reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (p. 82). In Dewey’s definition, the process by which meaning is added to experience is a process of growth. As Gurraacha told me the story of his life that first evening, I was listening to it with these ideas about education in mind.

“Am I taking up too much of your time?” Gurraacha asked as he looked around the library, indicating he was aware that others might want to talk with me.

“No, not at all” I said. “I want to hear more.” In the fifteen minutes since we had met, Gurraacha had already described several major events in his life. I was willing to listen as long as he wanted to continue. The story was already suggesting answers to my questions about the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. And, moreover, the meaning of human rights advocacy was growing through the reconstruction of experience involved in telling me the story.

A more specific definition of meaning helps to clarify. “Meaning,” according to Mark Johnson (2007), “is relational. It is about how one thing connects or relates to other things.” Or in other words, “the meaning of a specific aspect or dimension of some ongoing experience is that aspect’s connections to other parts of past, present, or future (possible) experiences” (p. 10). Meaning grows when connections of this kind increase.

The story Gurraacha told me connected his interest in human rights advocacy with the persecution he had experienced as result of human rights violations by the Ethiopian government. More specifically, he told me about the three years he was imprisoned for his role leading protests in Addis Ababa when he was a university student. His story also connected his interest in human rights advocacy with his continued activist work in the Oromo diaspora community in the United States, namely his work with nonprofit organizations that serve the Oromo diaspora. Additionally, our conversation about his story connected human rights advocacy with possibilities for the future. We identified human rights organizations that he wanted to establish stronger relationships with and discussed nonprofit development and management resources that I knew about.

It is connections such as these that make life stories important in my work at the Dream Desk. Life stories draw attention to trajectories of meaning. Our reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history involves identifying trajectories that connect past experiences with potential experiences in the future, thus indicating the direction and movement of meaning in his life. Once identified, these trajectories of meaning guide the search for educational possibilities that organizes my work. Educational possibilities are the potential experiences through which human lives could grow in meaning. For example, the story Gurraacha told when we met traced his interest in human rights advocacy back through his activist work and experiences of persecution. Identifying this trajectory explicitly allowed us to search for educational possibilities that would contribute to the growth he had already experienced. These searches assume that all experience has the potential to be educational. Indeed, as Dewey writes, "the very process of living together

educates. It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriches imagination” (p. 10). When Gurraacha and I find resources that support new experiences related to human rights advocacy, the search is successful; however, it is not finished. As Dewey explains “the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end” (p. 55). In addition to guiding our search, the telling and retelling of life stories in the context of these realized possibilities provides a way of assessing how meaning is growing and supporting its continued growth. The reconstruction of Gurraacha’s life history is one form that the retelling of life stories takes in our work. It contributes to an increased ability to find and create experiences that will continue the growth of meaning in Gurraacha’s life.

As the search for educational possibilities proceeds, we meet with many obstacles and frustrations. In other words, despite the abundance of educational possibilities created by the process of living together, the search for educational possibilities is not always successful. The reason why a project such as the Dream Desk is necessary is because the realization of educational possibilities is more restricted for some people than others. That is, the process of living together may educate, but such education is not always equitable. Many restrictions derive from deep and persistent social inequalities of the kind that affect the large Oromo, Somali, and Latino populations near East Lake Library. Systematic discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, and class effectively limits access to many institutions and resources that offer educational possibilities. Discrimination on the basis of age and gender limit educational possibilities as well.

While a great deal of energy has been devoted to understanding educational inequality, much of this work has focused on how these social inequalities affect students in schools. According to historian Lawrence Cremin (1976), the dualism between school and society that Dewey challenged with his broad definition of education has persisted. While educators have long understood that schools must be understood in their social and political context, there is still little recognition of their broader educational context. Understanding the educational context of schools requires an analysis of “the relation of various educative interactions and institutions to one another and to society at large” (p. 83). Due to a lack of attention to this educational context, attempts to address educational inequality focus primarily, if not exclusively, on schools. The effect is that inequalities in the realization of educational possibilities outside of schools are given very little attention despite the fact that these educational inequalities are more significant.

Indeed, from the perspective of my work at the Dream Desk, these inequalities are far more concerning than the achievement gap in school success. Inequalities in the fundamental process by which human lives grow in meaning directly undermine the educational purpose of democratic societies. This purpose, as Dewey (1920) writes, is “to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class, or economic status” (p. 186). My work at the Dream Desk addresses this fundamental form of educational inequality by organizing searches for educational possibilities in collaboration with the people I meet at East Lake Library.

By orienting toward the learning dreams of specific individuals, the search for educational possibilities explores the particular conditions that restrict the realization of

educational possibilities for those individuals. A general understanding of systemic forms of educational inequality supports this search; however, it is only a starting point.

Identifying obstacles confronted by specific individuals and experimenting with ways in which those obstacles might be overcome is the focus. For example, constraints that affect many refugees, such as altered social status in a new society and increased distance from familiar social networks (Sorenson, 1996), limit the educational possibilities available to Gurraacha. Our search for educational possibilities investigates the particular forms this educational inequality takes in Gurraacha's life; however, it focuses not on the causes of this inequality, but the specific possibilities for confronting it.

Accordingly, life stories are an important part of our search for educational possibilities. The connections they establish between past experiences and present concerns suggest new possibilities. And so, as I listened to Gurraacha's story, I thought about the many resources, settings, and relationships that could create more educational experiences related to his interest in human rights advocacy. I considered introducing him to activists I knew, finding nonprofit management workshops, and getting in touch with editors and reporters at newspapers.

The ecological theory of education developed by Cremin (1976) is helpful in considering the full range of educational possibilities. This theory further develops the broad perspective on education suggested by Dewey. It recognizes the wide variety of individuals and institutions that educate and provides a framework to enable the examination of their interactions and relationships. In this framework, the educational influences present at particular times and places relate to one another in what Cremin

calls “configurations of education” (p. 30). This theory encourages the examination of these relationships in their particularity as they manifest in local contexts. Cremin applied this theory to historical case studies, showing, for example, that the influence of the nineteenth century common school was not a result of the common school acting alone, but rather a result of a configuration of education made up of mutually supportive educational influences, namely: the white Protestant family, the white Protestant church, the white Protestant Sunday school, and the common school. Cremin presents additional examples of configurations of education in his three-volume history of American education (1970, 1980, 1988). Based on this research, Cremin (1976) defines education as “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any outcomes of that effort” (p. 27). The de-centering of schooling in this definition and the historical research on which it was based has informed recent anthropological studies of education.

Drawing on Cremin’s ecological theory of education, anthropologist Hervé Varenne (2007) offers an anthropological theory of education. From his anthropological perspective, education is “a fundamental human endeavor” and “schooling, where it has become culturally dominant, is but one of the many means that people with and without authority attempt to transform each other, their conditions, and themselves” (p. 1540). In following, Varenne (2008) proposes “education” as a theoretical term to account for what people do when confronted with the need to find out what is going on in their lives. It is conceived of as “the broad process that includes teaching and learning but also includes all the other activities that may lead to or follow teaching and learning—including paying

attention, investigating, deliberating, setting up, and so on” (p. 361). This definition recognizes the full anthropological scope of the phenomenon of education.

Founder and Director of Learning Dreams Jerome Stein (1992) describes how Dewey’s work, which emphasized how the reconstruction of experience was a fundamental part of human meaning making, also contributes to a broad perspective on education. The focus on two concepts—“meaning” and “community” (p. 8)—throughout Dewey’s work emphasizes the central role of education in democratic societies. As Stein explains, the reconstruction of experience is consummated in meaning for individuals, and democracy is a community of individuals “doing what they can to create the solutions and consummations required by their lives” (p. 144). Drawing on these ideas, Dewey and Goodwin Watson (1937) articulate a utopian vision for a society in which all life is educational. They envision a society in which the “educative function” of democracy is made dominant. For democracy is effective, they explain, “only as all institutions and relations contribute to development of personality” (p. 540).

These historical, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives inform my understanding of education. And these perspectives inform my work at the Dream Desk by encouraging attention to a wide range of educational possibilities. Investigating this wide range of possibilities is usually the focus of my work. The people I meet at the Dream Desk tell me their learning dreams, and we search for educational possibilities together. With Gurraacha, however, my work was different. As our search for educational possibilities developed, I had difficulty finding new possibilities that were meaningful for

him. Unlike many people with whom I work at the Dream Desk, he was already well connected to networks of individuals and institutions that supported his learning dreams.

Yet, despite this difficulty there was something that Gurraacha found valuable in our work together. He told me many stories about experiences in which the meaning of human rights advocacy was growing in his life. These life stories described recent experiences as well as experiences from before we met, including stories about experiences that took place many years in the past. Because of the time we spent discussing his life stories, this became more important than the other contributions I could make to our search for educational possibilities. I eventually recognized that what Gurraacha found valuable in our work was the way in which we discussed his life stories. The opportunity to reconstruct his experience with the educational focus provided by our relationship at the Dream Desk was a way of supporting the continued growth in meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. It was for this reason, that I suggested we undertake a collaborative reconstruction of his life history.

The guiding question of this life history—in what ways is the meaning of human rights advocacy presently growing in Gurraacha’s life?—has two answers, which constitute the central arguments of my dissertation. The first answer identifies two trajectories of meaning related to human rights advocacy in Gurraacha’s life, and thus makes a direct contribution to our search for educational possibilities. The second answer makes an indirect contribution. It is about the educational quality of our relationship and the significance of life stories in our work:

1) I argue that the meaning of human rights advocacy is presently growing in Gurraacha's life through the ways in which he organizes the Oromo diaspora to support protests against the Ethiopian government. This takes the form of two trajectories of meaning. The first is the long-term support that could lead to eventual political restructuring in Ethiopia. The second is the direct and immediate support demanded by the protests that were taking place during the first six months of our work together. Both trajectories of meaning build Gurraacha's identity as a "human rights defender" (United Nations, 1998).

2) I argue that the meaning of human rights advocacy is presently growing in Gurraacha's life through our collaborative reconstruction of the experiences he narrates in his life stories. That is, in order to understand Gurraacha's life history, it is important to recognize the role I have played in reconstructing it. As Gurraacha's interlocutor, the different perspective I provide as a white American man and the specific purposes I bring as part of my work at the Dream Desk are important. And, moreover, through our work together, my understanding of education has changed. I have come to a new understanding of the importance of life stories during the search for educational possibilities.

My dissertation is organized to support these two arguments. In Chapter 2, I review several anthropological life histories and argue that such works, while not explicitly concerned with education, provide an important foundation for anthropological studies of education. I have found that these works attend closely to the process by which meaning grows in human lives, further extending the anthropological perspective on

education proposed by Varenne. More specifically, they interpret the trajectories of meaning in human lives by retelling life stories. In addition, anthropologists give close attention to the ways in which life histories are affected by their ethnographic relationships.

In Chapter 3, I detail the methods I have used to invite, retell, and interpret Gurraacha's life stories. These methods are drawn from and respond to the discussion in Chapter 2. The collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history is an anthropological life history, and as such, relies on an ethnographic foundation. These methods are necessary for identifying the trajectories along which the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in Gurraacha's life while also attending to how our relationship and our collaborative reconstruction of his life history contributes to that process.

Then, with this theoretical and methodological foundation in place, I return to the story of Gurraacha's life. Chapter 4 is an interpretive retelling of stories about the most recent part of his life. It focuses on stories he has told me about experiences that have occurred during our search for educational possibilities over the first six months of our work together. These stories provide the context needed to understand the stories in the following chapter. Chapter 5 is a retelling of stories about experiences that preceded our meeting, focusing on those that Gurraacha narrated during our search for educational possibilities and their meaning in the context of this work.

Finally, I conclude with a summary of how the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in Gurraacha's life through our collaborative reconstruction of his

life history. On this basis, I recommend extending the focus on life stories that developed in my work with Gurraacha to my work with others at the Dream Desk. The collaborative reconstruction of life histories, I suggest, is an important part of the search for educational possibilities. Moreover, it provides the foundation for an ethnographic inquiry into educational possibilities in a local community.

CHAPTER 2
LIFE STORIES, LIFE HISTORIES,
AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF EDUCATION

The study of schooling has been the focus in research by educational anthropologists since the interdisciplinary subfield of Anthropology & Education formed in 1954 (Spindler, 1955). This focus is a result of a narrow definition of education informed primarily by the concerns of the students, teachers, and administrators of schools in the United States. While this focus has produced new anthropological perspectives on schooling, drawing attention to the social and cultural contexts in which schooling takes place through ethnographic studies and cross-cultural comparisons, it has limited the possibilities for reciprocal exchange with anthropological theory.

This lack of reciprocal exchange is problematic. At best, the subfield has not fully explored the theoretical significance of the phenomenon of education despite its relationship—through the phenomenon of learning—to the discipline’s core concept: culture. As Greg Urban (2001) explains, “culture is whatever is socially learned, socially transmitted” (p. 2). At worst, the subfield has reinforced a narrow definition of education by not exploring the full range of its cross-cultural variation. Consider, for example, that anthropology of religion, another subfield, is not limited to the study of Christian churches. These institutions, like schools, are an institution that originated in Western societies and were spread around the world as part of a process of colonial expansion. To limit the anthropology of religion to the study of Christian churches would ignore the many other institutions and practices associated with religion. In the same way, the

anthropology of education, when limited to the study of schooling, ignores the many other ways in which education takes place in human lives. Because educational anthropologists have, for the most part, not extended their study of education beyond schooling, their contributions to anthropological theory have been limited. However, the contributions that have been made are important to recognize. Educational anthropologists have developed sophisticated analyzes of the social and cultural context of schooling based on rich ethnographic evidence, emphasizing the necessity of inquiring into educational inequality beyond the school while at the same time providing cultural critiques of the institution of schooling.

The focus on this important work has made research on schooling dominant in the subfield; however, anthropological interest in processes of socialization that preceded its formation (e.g. Mead, 1928; Whiting, 1941) has continued to develop through research on topics such as cultural transmission (e.g. Gearing & Tindall, 1976) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Varenne's (2007, 2008) recent critiques of the focus on schooling in the anthropology of education suggest an expanded perspective that would make education central to anthropological theory.

While drawing on insights developed through this history of learning-oriented research in anthropology, the anthropological theory of education developed by Varenne (2008) critiques the focus on reproduction found in much of it. Culture is not just what is learned or acquired, he writes, it also involves how people work to develop new understandings of their lives and then use those to transform the conditions in which they live. His definition of education as "the broad process that includes teaching and learning

but also includes all the other activities that may lead to or follow teaching and learning—including paying attention, investigating, deliberating, setting up, and so on” (p. 361) recognizes the full anthropological scope of the phenomenon of education.

My definition of education as the process by which meaning grows in human lives is similarly anthropological. It rejects definitions of education that focus on schooling and proposes a specific way to investigate education as a fundamental aspect of human experience. Like Varenne, I see ways in which such an investigation can contribute to anthropological theory. Indeed, among anthropologists, there is a long-standing interest in meaning and an increasing interest in human lives. While anthropology, by definition, is the study of humans, the lives of specific humans have been of less interest, a secondary phenomenon in relation to culture, the discipline’s central concept. Nevertheless, interest in human lives can be traced back early in the discipline, indeed, to the emergence of ethnographic fieldwork, which brought anthropologists into direct contact with other people through participation in their lives. In one of the first detailed descriptions of ethnographic fieldwork, Malinowski (1922) offers the following goal for anthropology, which he refers to with the phrase “the study of man”:

We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him. In each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses, yearn after a different form of happiness. In each culture, we find different institutions in which man pursues his life-interest, different customs by which he satisfies his aspirations, different codes of law and morality which reward his virtues or punish his defections. To study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behaviour and mentality without the subjective desire of feeling by what these people live, or realizing the substance of their happiness—is, in my opinion, to

miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.” (p. 25)

This vision of anthropology has remained mostly unrealized. In the ethnographic texts written throughout most of the twentieth century, it was often difficult to identify even a single person, much less “the hold which life has” on that person. Perhaps this statement should be read as referring only to collective values, aspirations, impulses, and forms of happiness, for that is what has interested anthropologists most. Unfortunately, this interest has had the effect of excluding, or at least marginalizing, attention to specific human lives. As Ingold (2011) explains

generations of theorists, throughout the history of the discipline have been at pains to expunge life from their accounts, or to treat it as merely consequential, the derivative and fragmentary output of patterns, codes, structures, or systems variously defined as genetic or cultural, natural or social. (p. 3)

The cultural descriptions and interpretations produced by anthropologists, while based on encounters during fieldwork with people living their lives, mostly disregarded the details of those specific lives and instead emphasized the collective. As conventions for writing cultural description and interpretation changed in the late twentieth century, the human lives on which ethnographic writing was based were given more attention in ethnographic texts.

More recently, some anthropologists have called for even more attention. Biehl (2011) suggests that ethnographies can “give form to people’s own painstaking arts of living and the unexpected potentials they create” (p. 22). And Ingold (2011) resists the expunging of life from anthropology by recognizing “life’s capacity continually to overtake the destinations that are thrown up in its course. It is the essence of life,” he

continues, “that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather that it keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents” (p. 4). The ethnographic fieldwork in which anthropologists engage, Biehl and Ingold recognize, provides this sort of perspective on human lives. It is a perspective capable of recognizing and investigating education in its various forms.

In this chapter, I consider the various ways anthropologists have emphasized stories about lives in their ethnographic research, focusing specifically on anthropological life histories. Life histories, I argue, offer a foundation for an anthropology of education that attends to the process by which meaning grows in human lives. They challenge the disciplinary expectation of cultural description by not only including stories about lives, but focusing on the meaning of those stories in individual lives.

Life Histories in Anthropological Research

While many ethnographic texts contain stories about individual lives, there is a certain genre of ethnographic text that gives them a prominent place. I will refer to these works collectively as “anthropological life histories” or “life histories,” as is conventional when discussing them as a genre. Yet, it is important to note that many authors of life histories find this name to be inadequate. They mark new theoretical orientations and methodological approaches with other names, such as “ethnographic biography” (e.g. Herzfeld 1997), “cultural biography” (e.g. Frank 2000), and “person-centered ethnography” (e.g. Desjarlais, 2003). The distinctions made by these names are ways of addressing a fundamental tension associated with life histories in anthropological

research: the tension between life stories and cultural description. The relationship between these foundational aspects of anthropological research changes in life histories, and the change has important implications for the purposes that guide interpretation. I have organized my review to consider how this tension has led to theoretical and methodological innovations in the way anthropologists understand how meaning grows in human lives.

In order to understand the tension between life stories and cultural description, it is necessary to distinguish between “life stories” and “life histories.” A “life story,” according to Charlotte Linde (1993), is a kind of story that is common in everyday life. Anthropologists frequently hear life stories during their ethnographic fieldwork, but such stories are not specific to the ethnographic encounter. They are heard frequently because life stories include all stories that “have as their primary evaluation a point about the speaker, not a general point about the way the world is” (p. 21). All people tell such stories about their lives.

Life stories, defined in this way, contrast with life histories, which are a highly specific genre of written text produced through an uncommon social interaction involving one person telling another the story of his or life in detail, often over the course of many hours. Most people never tell such stories. As Geyla Frank (2000) explains, “life story research focuses on how people tell stories about themselves under specific circumstances and for particular purposes” (p. 20). Thus, it requires that the life stories considered are not limited to those told within the uncommon social interaction in which a comprehensive story of a person’s life is elicited. In the life histories of the early

twentieth century, very little attention was given to the circumstances in which life stories were told and the purposes for doing so. Many of the theoretical and methodological developments in how anthropologists invite the telling of life stories and then retell them in life histories have been based on giving greater attention to these important contextual details.

With the contextual details of life stories, new kinds of interpretation are possible. “A life story” Frank (2000) continues, is integrally related “to a reconstruction of events or life history, regardless of whether the life history is created by the subject or by another person” (p. 21). I have been drawn to anthropologists’ writing about individual lives because of the prominent place given to the process by which life stories are reconstructed in anthropological life histories. This process is a fundamental part of education. John Dewey (1916) defines education as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (p. 82). The interpretation of life stories in anthropological life histories provides a way of understanding how reconstruction adds to the meaning of experience in a person’s life. In other words, it provides a way of understand the process by which meaning grows in human lives.

Tension Between Life Stories and Cultural Description

In the Foreword to Walter Dyk’s life history of a Navaho man, *Son of Old Man Hat*, Edward Sapir (1938) issues a harsh criticism of other anthropological life histories. He accuses these works of being “dramatizations of cultural patterns” and associates them with historical novels and primitive romances. In Sapir’s assessment, these works all aim

“to give us the glamor of exotic custom as a background for more or less interesting events affecting people in other times and other places than our own.” The mere association of anthropological life histories with these other works was a harsh criticism. A common purpose of these life histories was to challenge the sentimental and romantic images of other peoples created by these popular works. Sapir, however, goes further in his criticism. “The individuals who are requisitioned for this somewhat technical process,” he writes, “have a disappointing way of dying in the meshes of the tapestry which they are commanded to enliven” (p. vii). In the early twentieth century, life histories were one expression of what Kluckhohn (1945) describes as “the nascent fashion encouraging anthropologists to take more account of the ‘human’ side of their materials” (p. 86). In Sapir’s estimation, the common ways of doing so did not always succeed.

The one anthropological life history that Sapir names in his criticism is Paul Radin’s *Crashing Thunder*, which was published in 1926. This work is often praised for its groundbreaking qualities. Indeed, many consider it to mark the beginning of serious attempts to make use of life histories in ethnographic research. As a result, it has been widely discussed, and this discussion reveals a tension present in all anthropological life histories.

The tension arises when the focus on one person’s life that is required to write a life history pulls against the disciplinary expectation to write cultural descriptions of groups of people. John Dollard (1935) echoes Sapir’s criticism of Radin, making the tension explicit: “This autobiography,” he writes, referring to Radin’s *Crashing Thunder*,

“should be taken as an inside view of the Winnebago culture rather than as a careful analysis of a human life” (p. 260). Radin would not dispute this framing of his work. In “The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian,” Radin (1920) states that his aim was “not to obtain the autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he had grown up” (p. 88). Radin’s stated purpose is different from the purpose implied in Sapir’s criticism. L. L. Langness (1965) explains these different purposes: “Radin, unlike Sapir, was interested only in *culture* and not in the individual per se, the ‘individual-in-culture,’ or in personality” (p. 8). Important to note, however, is that this assessment is relative to Sapir’s interest. Radin’s work was groundbreaking because it challenged the exclusive focus on culture that was present at the time. Reflecting on the use of autobiographical materials in anthropology, Franz Boas (1943) simply dismisses them with questions of their reliability: “They are not facts,” Boas asserts, “but memories and memories distorted by the wishes and thoughts of the moment” (p. 334). Radin’s challenge to Boas made it possible to raise questions about what purpose the interpretation of life stories might serve in anthropological research.

The Growth of Meaning in Human Lives

The most important question for my purposes is one implicit in Sapir’s criticism. How do anthropologists prevent the individuals whose life stories they retell from becoming so entangled in cultural description that those individuals die? Or, in a positive formulation: How do anthropologists continue the growth of meaning in human lives through their

retelling and interpretation of life stories? Sapir (1938) offers a hint in assessing the significance of the life stories told by Son of Old Man Hat and retold by Dyk (1938).

And so the Son of Old Man Hat, not by hinting at human likeness or difference but through the sheer clarity of his daily experiences, resolves all cultural and personal conflicts and reminds us that human life is priceless, not because of the glories of the past nor the hopes of the future, but because of the irrevocable trivialities of a present that is always slipping away from us. (p. ix)

This assessment resonates with the definition of education given by Dewey (1916). In defining education as the “reconstruction of experience” Dewey rejects other definitions, specifically those that conceive of education as either “preparation for a remote future” or “recapitulation of the past” (p. 86). Attending to the reconstruction of experience locates human life—and, specifically those parts that are most meaningful, or priceless—in the present, emerging amidst the trivialities. Thus, it is when this process of reconstruction is explicit in life histories that the growth of meaning might be continued.

With this hint from Sapir as a starting point, and the questions derived from his criticism as a guide, I consider several well-known life histories, specifically *Worker in the Cane* by Sidney Mintz (1960), *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* by Vincent Crapanzano (1980), *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* by Karen Brown (1991), *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* by Ruth Behar (1993), and *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* by João Biehl (2005). The authors of these life histories all retell the life stories of the individuals with whom they worked using innovative approaches to narration and interpretation.

Mintz retells the life stories of Eustaquio Zayas Alvarado, or “Taso.” Crapanzano retells the life stories of Tuhami. Brown retells the life stories of Marie Thérèse Alourdes

Macena Champagne Lovinski, or “Alourdes.” Behar retells the life stories of Esperanza Hernández. And Biehl retells the life stories of Catarina Gomez Moraes. The life histories they have produced offer answers to the question I have posed: How do anthropologists continue the growth of meaning in human lives through their retelling and interpretation of life stories? One strategy common to all is that they attend to the meaning of life stories in the present, that is, in relation to the context in which the stories are told to them. They attend to the collaborative interpretation that they participate in while listening to life stories and retelling them. They attend to specific qualities of the relationship between themselves and the people with whom they work. And they attend to the interaction of different purposes present in these relationships, which affect how life stories are told and interpreted.

While these works span several decades, my purpose is not to trace the historical development of anthropological life histories. That is beyond the scope of this review. The time period covered is simply an indication that life histories capable of continuing the growth of meaning in human lives have been consistently produced even as the concerns of anthropologists have shifted radically over the past several decades.

Interpretation

The life histories produced at the beginning of the twentieth century were often referred to as “autobiographies” because the main text of these works was written almost entirely in the voice of the person whose life stories were retold. The life histories published by Radin (1926) and Dyk (1938) both included only brief introductions, thus offering minimal interpretation. Of course, the translation and significant editing required to

produce a life history is a form of interpretation too, but this was not frequently discussed. In fact, Radin (1926) stated that he had made “no changes of any kind” to the manuscript written by Sam Blowsnake, the subject of *Crashing Thunder*. He insisted, moreover, that he “in no way influenced [Sam] either directly or indirectly” (p. xxiii), despite the fact that he had described a process of translation and editing.

Mintz (1960), like Radin, edited in such a way that the order of the life stories in his text was changed from the order in which they were originally told to him by Taso. And beyond reordering, many stories were simply removed. While Mintz does not label this a form of interpretation explicitly, his explanation makes it clear that he understood the significance of these changes. “The exact sequence of Taso’s narration,” he writes, “would reveal some clues to his character, but the sequence could not be entirely preserved if the final manuscript were to be read as an autobiography” (p. 8). As Niedermuller (1988) explains, “the reconstructive character of life history means in practice that the speaker selects from the stories of his life and he does not relate all the stories of his life” (p. 464). In this way, two forms of editing are taking place. Mintz reconstructs the life stories Taso selected by selecting those he will retell based on his understanding of autobiography as a genre.

In doing so, he raises a question about the genre itself. Rosaldo (1976) describes how “most anthropologists have assumed that the life history is a natural and universal narrative form” (p. 145). Behar (1993) develops this criticism of life histories further. “One problem with the genre,” she writes, “has always been its use of the Western form of autobiography to encase the self-narrative of a person marginalized by the West” (p.

272). With this political dimension in mind, Behar “refrained from the temptation to reorder the account” (p. 14). Considering this political dimension of reordering life stories in their retelling does not, however, mean that stories should never be reordered. Editing has potential to be a positive contribution to the reconstruction of life stories, a way of adding meaning. Indeed, while Behar did not reorder the stories, she did select which ones to include in the retelling. What is important is attending to the effects of this form of interpretation. Doing so makes it possible to consider “conceptions of what it means to be a person, live a life, and tell a life story,” which as Behar (1993) explains, “are social constructs with profound cultural and class implications” (p. 273). To understand how meaning grows in a person’s life, it is necessary to understand that a life is a social construct, affected in fundamental ways by social differences such as culture and class.

Referring to an anthropological life history as “autobiography” has more serious consequences than suggesting interpretation is not necessary. It hides the relationship through which the text was produced. As Crapanzano (1980) explains “the life history, like the autobiography, presents the subject from his own perspective. It differs from autobiography in that it is an immediate response to a demand posed by an Other and carries within it the expectations of that Other” (p. 8). In addition to editing, the life histories considered in this review also include another subtle form of interpretation. The anthropologists not only retell the stories of the people with whom they worked, they reconstruct the telling. Or in other words, they narrate the encounter in which the life

stories they retell were originally told to them, including themselves as active interlocutors.

Mintz (1960) structures large sections of his text as a dialogue between himself and Taso. These dialogues are direct transcriptions of their interviews. In the dialogue, Mintz asks questions that invite Taso to tell stories, and thus their voices alternate. Taso's voice, however, dominates. His stories extend across multiple pages, and when Mintz does interject, it is almost always a brief clarifying or redirecting question. At times, however, the rhythm of the dialogue shifts. Taso's answers are shorter, and Mintz's questions are more frequent and influential. For example, when discussing Taso's conversion to Pentecostal Christianity, the following exchange is narrated:

...when a brother speaks and speaks, the pastor or someone else takes him and helps him kneel, leaves him kneeling there, and lets him speak what he will; and then the service continues.

So we can suppose that a brother has no control of the words he speaks?

Eh—in the beginning when a brother receives the blessing, no—he usually doesn't have that control. Afterward he begins controlling himself... (p. 222)

This exchange highlights the extent of Mintz's interpretive influence during the original telling, an influence that he could have chosen to edit out. The decision to leave this and similar exchanges in the text is yet another form of interpretation. It draws attention to the collaborative quality of the reconstruction.

Crapanzano (1980) also structures large sections of his text as a dialogue. Like the dialogue between Mintz and Taso, these sections are based on the recordings of his interviews with Tuhami. However, one important difference must be noted. Whereas Mintz reserves his more developed interpretations for the conclusion to each chapter, and the introduction and conclusion to the book, Crapanzano intersperses extended

interpretation into the dialogue, thus interrupting the dialogue as it originally took place with a third voice, the voice of the narrator. This voice is endowed with “the privilege of (re)encounter” (p. 23). That is, Crapanzano—and only Crapanzano, not Tuhami—re-encounters the dialogue with a self-reflective stance, rereading the words he and Tuhami spoke to one another and adding additional meaning through his interpretive commentary. For example, when discussing Tuhami’s association with religious brotherhoods, the following dialogue is narrated and then interrupted with interpretation:

- That comes from dreams. When I see a saint in a dream, I go to him.
- Did you dream about Sidi ‘Ali?
- I dreamed first of all about Sidi ‘Ali. I dreamed that a woman came to me and told me to visit Sidi ‘Ali.
- Who was the woman?
- Lalla ‘A’isha.

Tuhami’s immediate association of the Hamadsha saint with ‘A’isha Quandisha was not unusual for him or for the Hamadsha themselves. (His calling her by name *was* unusual.) The association is implicit within both ritual and legend. Sidi ‘Ali is said to have ordered Sidi Ahmed to fetch the she-demon from the Sudan. (p. 95)

Mintz too alternates between his voices of encounter and re-encounter, although not as frequently. In addition to the interpretation interspersed in the dialogue, Crapanzano, like Mintz, offers extended interpretations in other sections of the text, sections in which his voice does not directly encounter Tuhami’s. Crapanzano places these extended interpretations in between the chapters containing dialogue, not just in the introduction and conclusion, in order “to stress the extent to which ethnological theory is embedded within the specific ethnographic encounter” (p. xii). The commingling of voices, including voices of encounter and re-encounter, further stress this embeddedness.

The way in which Behar retells Esperanza's life stories also involves a commingling of voices through dialogue; however, much of the dialogue, at least in the early chapters of the book, is almost exclusively in Esperanza's voice. That is, in the original telling, Behar contributed infrequently, and she has remained faithful to this rhythm in her retelling. When her voice does enter into the dialogue, the novelistic style is made visible. For example, after several pages of Esperanza telling a story involving her son, Behar's voice enters with a question:

“Have you tried to talk to your son?” I ask, guessing what her answer will be.

“No! Hum! I'm here for him to come talk to me, not for me to go talk to him. I say that as a mother I'm not about to go begging to my son, licking up my son. I raised him. He's big and strong. I'm her for him to look out for me, not for me to go begging to him. And then with those wicked ways of his, wanting to force himself on my girl.”

“And don't you feel sad about what happened?” I feel compelled to ask.

“Yes, of course. For my money, I feel sad. That's what I feel. Just that. I don't feel anything for my son.”

“You don't feel bad about your son?” I persist.

“No. I suffered so much because of him, and then look at how he repaid me. No, comadre, why should I go beg my son to talk to me? After all he's done? After he took up with that woman and her father? No, we don't talk. They're in on it together.

“It's just that maybe they don't want to do me in, or they can't pull me down. But they could do it. Yet, they could. You don't think so? You saw what happened to Mama. They haven't killed me yet because God hasn't let them. And because a lot of people here know that I have Chenchu, so they treat us as witches. If anyone tried to do me harm, they know it's going to be a battle.” (p. 177-178).

The effect is that even when Behar's voice is not present on the page, her presence in the dialogue is felt. By keeping Esperanza's voice at the center of the text in this way, Behar (1993) shows her efforts “to hear and understand her” (p. 14). She also shows how these efforts lead to her more active interpretation later in the book. Retelling Esperanza's life stories in this novelistic style shows Behar's increasing ability to contribute her

interpretations and thus take an active role in the reconstruction of Esperanza's life stories. Her voice of re-encounter begins primarily as a narrating voice and eventually grows into and merges with a more actively interpreting voice. This voice is less intrusive than Crapanzano's voice of re-encounter as it is more continuous with the relationship between Behar and Esperanza. The shifts to sections of the text entirely in Behar's voice, including full chapters at the end, are, as a result, less abrupt. Altogether, this way of developing her voice and gradually integrating it into the retelling allows for a reconstruction that feels balanced, with Behar and Esperanza both making significant contributions.

Brown (1991) and Biehl (1993) both have an even stronger presence as narrators than Behar. Their retellings are more detailed, which is partly due to the fact that the setting of the original tellings varied. When Taso, Tuhami, and Esperanza are telling their stories to Mintz, Crapanzano, and Behar, respectively, it is clear that the setting is like that of an interview, the two sitting together with an audio recorder between them. Mintz provides few details about where Taso's stories were told. Behar tells readers that she and Esperanza often sat in Esperanza's kitchen. After the initial description the setting fades into the background. Readers are reminded of it occasionally when one of Esperanza's children interrupts her stories. They were sometimes sitting with Behar and Esperanza listening to the stories too. Crapanzano, similarly describes the setting only briefly. Tuhami told Crapanzano his stories in the home of Crapanzano's field assistant, Lhacen, who, in serving as an interpreter, was also part of the context of the original telling.

Crapanzano discusses at length how Lhacen's presence, like the setting in which the stories were told, also fades into the background.

In contrast, Brown (1991) describes the changing contexts in which she heard Alourdes's stories. Some stories are retold in Alourdes's voice. Others are retold in Brown's voice. And they are often contextualized by a narration that details the setting and circumstances in which the story was told. Brown's voice dominates, yet this does not decenter Alourdes. Rather, it draws more attention to the collaborative reconstruction of life stories in which she and Brown are engaged. Brown's interpretations are embedded in her narration. Biehl (2005) structures his interpretation similarly, embedding it within narrations of the changing contexts of telling. Unlike Brown, however, his narration follows a clear trajectory of events, sometimes even propelling it forward. For example, in the following exchange, Biehl asks a question about Catarina's separation from her husband, which leads them both to offer interpretations about the meaning of her divorce.

Did he find another woman because you left home? Or why did it happen?
"No."

After a silence, Catarina answered a question I had not asked: "He didn't leave me because of my illness either... That didn't bother him." Yet it struck me that her statement affirmed the very thing she sought to deny: the key role played by her physiology within the household, of which she was both conscious and unconscious. She then added that jealousy was her husband's basic state of consciousness.

"He was jealous of me. He used to say how ugly I was. He wanted me to stay in the wheelchair...so that he could do everything as he wished. He found another woman because he wanted to be a true macho. One day, he came back and said, 'I don't want you anymore.' I said, 'Better for me. I want a divorce.' We separated from bed, bath, table, home, and city. I wanted a divorce. Divorce is mine, I asked for it first."

This story and the interpretations embedded in it are part of the overarching story that Biehl tells about Catarina's separation from her family and the reestablishing of contact that he helped to facilitate through his work with Catarina. Like Brown, Biehl gives interpretive focus to the present more than past, which emphasizes the present significance of the reconstruction of experience that takes place in the production of a life history. This interpretive focus provides one answer to the question raised by Sapir's criticism. How do anthropologists continue the growth of meaning in human lives through their retelling and interpretation of life stories? They do so by connecting stories of past experiences to their meaning in the context of present experiences.

The various strategies of interpretation all show that the meaning anthropologists add through interpretation is drawn from their own experiences, including their own interests, personal background, and scholarly knowledge. Indeed, interpretation has no other source. As C. Wright Mills (1959) explains, life experience is an important part of intellectual work. To disassociate one from the other prevents their mutual enrichment. For example, Mintz (1960) draws on an interest in the history and politics of Puerto Rico, interpreting Taso's life story in relation. His interpretation, while focused on an individual's life, "pretends to no profound psychological interpretation" (p. 7). Crapanzano, in contrast, emphasizes the psychological focus of his interpretation, and draws on his background in psychoanalytic theory to support it. Behar, Brown, and Biehl, too, draw on their own experiences and interests. Behar draws on feminist theory. Brown draws on studies of religion. And Biehl draws on bioethics. This is notable because of how the influence of these interests differs from other ethnographic research. In life

histories, the meaning contributed through anthropologists' interpretations is not alone. It interacts with the meaning contributed by the people with whom they work. Crapanzano (1980) explains.

I do not try, in this book, to give a view of Moroccan culture from within. The attempt to discover what a culture looks like from personal-historical documents has always struck me as an act of great naïveté. Rather, I look at the way in which Tuhami makes use of the particular idiom at his disposal to articulate his own experience, including his personal history within *our* negotiations of reality. With less perspective perhaps, certainly with greater resistance, I look at the use I make of my own idiom within our negotiations. (p. xi)

Indeed, when writing life histories, anthropologists orient toward enhancing the collaborative reconstruction of experience that takes place through these negotiations. The interpretive demands of the people with whom they work reveal the tension between life stories and cultural description, demanding that anthropologists, regardless of other interests, also orient toward the lives of the people with whom they work. It is in their relationships, and the ways that these relationships influence their interpretations, that the effect of anthropologists' personal backgrounds is most present.

Relationships

The significance of relationships between anthropologists and the people with whom they work is especially important in life histories. Relationships are an important aspect of the specific circumstances in which life stories are told. Rosaldo (1976) emphasizes the importance of considering the relationship between the person who originally told the story and the anthropologist who listened and then retold it. "Anthropological life histories," he writes, "are stories told to a particular person which inevitably reflect this personal relation. To assess and interpret properly the content of a life history one must

know something of both the speaker and the listener” (p. 122). It is important because this relationship undoubtedly affects the telling, including the selection of life stories to tell and the ways in which they are told. The relationship, moreover, mediates the telling and present exigencies of that person’s life, which, as described above, are an important way in which anthropologists continue the growth of meaning through their interpretations.

It is significant that the relationships between anthropologists and the people whose life stories they retell often begin without a plan to write a life history. To plan an ethnographic research project focused on an individual life is rare in the discipline. Anthropological life histories are often conceived after strong relationships are formed in the course of ethnographic research with other purposes. Biehl (2005) states this explicitly when describing how his work with Catarina began during a research project focused on how poor people in Brazil were dealing with AIDS. “I had not planned to work specifically with Catarina, nor had I intended to focus on the anthropology of a single person. But by our second meeting in 1999, I was already drawn in, emotionally and intellectually. And so was Catarina” (p. 6). The other life histories began similarly. Mintz met Taso while studying the sugar cane industry in Puerto Rico. Crapanzano met Tuhami while studying the Hamadsha brotherhood in Morocco. Brown met Alourdes while studying Haitian Vodou in Brooklyn. And Behar met Esperanza while studying colonial Mexican women’s confessions to the Inquisition in Mexico. Unplanned beginnings like these are significant because they reflect the tension between life stories and cultural description.

The decision to write a life history can be influenced by how attention to one person's life might inform the anthropologist's ethnographic research more generally. Crapanzano (1980) describes how he was directed to Tuhami by others who knew he was interested in 'A'isha Qandisha, a she-demon associated with the Hamadsha. He was told that "Tuhami knew a lot about 'A'isha's ways and the ways of the Hamadsha. He was not, however, a Hamdushi, a member of the brotherhood" (p. 6). Tuhami's status as an outsider intrigued Crapanzano because he could provide a different perspective on the Hamadsha. Crapanzano, like Biehl, had not planned to write a life history about Tuhami. "Initially," he writes, "I set out to question Tuhami about his involvement with the Hamadsha and other religious brotherhoods" (p. 13). In the same way that the stories Tuhami told Crapanzano about his life informed this research, the ethnographic knowledge Crapanzano gained from doing this research informed his life history about Tuhami. This shift from life stories informing cultural description to cultural description contextualizing life stories is another point of tension, which is reflected when anthropologists integrate generic descriptions of the life cycle and life events into their life histories. Crapanzano (1980) does this when he constructs a story of Tuhami's circumcision based on subjective accounts of the circumcision ritual provided by others and his own observations of it in addition to Tuhami's stories. This reflects the tension in the discipline that keeps anthropologists, at least initially, oriented toward these more widely accepted ethnographic purposes rather than their relationships.

The effect of this tension on the relationship diminishes as anthropologists and the people with whom they work come to know each other better. Indeed, many

anthropologists choose to continue their work with specific individuals because of personal qualities, not only their ability to provide information on topics relevant to their ethnographic research. In some cases, the personal qualities that an anthropologist recognizes are directly related to their ethnographic purposes. For example, Mintz (1960) characterizes Taso as “a superb informant in the anthropological or ethnographic sense. He is very perceptive and possesses a great capacity for examining the things about him and reflecting on them” (p. 9). In other cases, anthropologists are drawn to specific individuals because of qualities that distinguish them from other people. Catarina left a strong impression on Biehl after his first visit to Vita.

Why did I choose to work with Catarina and not someone else? She stood out in that context of annihilation; she refused to be reduced to her physical condition and fate. She wanted to engage, and I had a gut feeling that something important for life and knowledge was going on that I did not want to miss. Her words pointed to a routine abandonment and silencing, and yet, in spite of all the disregard she experienced, Catarina conveyed an astonishing agency. (p. 11)

That Catarina wanted to engage is important. Anthropologists are often drawn to specific individuals because of the interest those individuals express in working with them. Indeed, Behar (1993) did not seek out Esperanza. As she explains, Esperanza sought her out. “Her manner of persuasion was to feed more words into my tape recorder than the other women, to plunge into levels of complexity and contradiction, and to refuse, simply, to tell her story too quickly. She chose me to hear her story” (p. 6). This interest is often what draws anthropologists into a project of writing a life history. Considering it directly reveals the human source of the tension between life stories and cultural description. Ethnographic fieldwork requires working with individuals, who in sharing

their life stories make appeals to anthropologists that sometimes become more important than the disciplinary expectation of cultural description.

In many cases, the mutual interest in working together that establishes the relationship develops into a caring relationship. Crapanzano characterizes his relationship with Tuhami as a friendship. It was based, as he explains, on a desire to maintain “mutual self-recognition” (p. 14). In some cases, these have culturally defined forms. Behar (1993) and Esperanza formed a “compadrazgo” relationship, which involved her and her husband becoming spiritual coparents to Esperanza’s daughter and participating in “intimate but respectful friendship and patronage” (p. 5). The compadrazgo relationship, as Behar explains

is typically forged between persons of high and low economic standing, so that as the better-off person in my relation with Esperanza I would be expected to offer financial assistance if she requested it. She would be expected, in turn, to offer me small gifts from time to time, say, of produce from her field, and to act with extreme courtesy whenever we encountered one another. (p. 5)

In other cases, caring relationships develop without clearly defined roles but rather through caring acts. Mintz (1960) helped Taso’s nephew get a job in the United States. Biehl (2005) helped Catarina reconnect with her family and access medical care. And Brown (1991) accompanied Alourdes to court after her son was arrested and on a trip back to Haiti. These caring relationships and caring acts strengthen the relationship between anthropologists and the people whose stories they retell. However, it is important to recognize that these relationships, while characterized as friendships and including acts of care, are likely quite different than other relationships that anthropologists and the people with whom they work would describe as friendships. The

primary purpose of the relationships, in most cases, is a research purpose, which is shaped mostly by the anthropologists.

In addition to these particular qualities of the relationship, a symbolic dimension is always present as well. As Crapanzano (1977) explains “the Other includes not simply the concrete individual who stands before one, but all that he stands for symbolically” (p. 4). Dwyer (1982) makes a similar point, suggesting that “Self and Other must be understood in an extended sense” because “all individuals carry and express their own society’s concerns” (p. 255). Reflecting on her initial encounter with Esperanza, Behar recalls how she saw Esperanza as “an alluring image of Mexican womanhood” (p. 4). While this symbolic image of Esperanza was eventually contextualized by how Behar came to know Esperanza through their relationship, the symbolic dimension of the relationship remained significant. This is true of all human relationships, but it is especially important to recognize in the relationships between anthropologists and the people with whom they work. Indeed, it is another source of tension between life stories and cultural description. While ethnographic research attempts to complicate stereotypes of others, it nevertheless encourages anthropologists to move toward cultural description and the generalizations on which it is based. The interpretation that follows, even when based on the particularities of actual lives, tends to ignore how meaning grows in the lives of specific individuals.

The symbolic dimension of the relationship affects perceptions of anthropologist too. It affects how they are understood by the people with whom they work. “I symbolized the European man who held [Tuhami] back” (p. 93), Crapanzano explains.

And later he adds, “It was as though he wanted to entrap me, to enslave me though the power of the word—to reverse the colonial relationship. What he wanted was rather the imaginary fulfillment of an emptiness” (p. 140). Mintz also notes his symbolic value for Taso. “I was representative of something foreign and not just anything foreign but the United States” (p. 2). Considering the symbolic level is one way that power relations between anthropologists and the people with whom they work are revealed. In reflecting on her relationship with Esperanza, Behar (1993) notes that she “felt uncomfortable when an ‘informant’—particularly another, less-privileged, woman [Esperanza]—was assertive and aggressive, rather than complicitous and cooperative as informants ‘should’ be” (p. 6). It is important to consider how these power relations—which grow increasingly fraught as intimacy increases (Stacey, 1988)—affect the life stories that people share with anthropologists. For example, Mintz had shared a mild contempt for revivalist churches with Taso, which he thinks made Taso reticent about admitting his conversion. The ethical dilemmas that accompany the relationships in which life stories are told are another source of tension between life stories and cultural description.

Attention to these various aspects of the relationships in which life stories are told varies widely, however there has been a general trend toward including more information. The life histories that were written early in the twentieth century include very little information about the relationship. Life histories written later often include more information. This is especially the case for those written after the late 1970s and early 1980s, when criticisms of the discipline led to increased reflexivity (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Those that include more information do so by both describing qualities of

the relationship and narrating interactions so that readers can witness the relationship for themselves. For these reasons, the relationships between anthropologists and the people with whom they work are among the most important circumstances to consider in the telling of life stories. When relationships are not considered, anthropologists effectively eliminate themselves from the account. In this way, they “can deny the essential dynamics of the encounter and end up producing a static picture” of the person whose life stories they retell (Crapanzano, 1980, p. ix). Such a static picture is one way in which the growth of meaning can be obstructed in the life histories that anthropologists write.

Purposes

An important aspect of life histories is that they provide some space to understand not just the anthropologist’s purposes but the purposes of his or her interlocutors as well. Most ethnographic works are based on working with many people, observing how they live, participating in their lives, and talking with them about what it all means. The synthesis of this kind of fieldwork leads to an ethnographic text that is centered on no particular person, except perhaps the anthropologist. In the narrative forms of ethnographic writing that have developed over the past several decades, ethnographic description is written from a situated perspective, that of the anthropologist. In this sense, all ethnographic texts are person-centered, and most are centered on the anthropologist. Even earlier ethnographic texts that completely erased an ethnographer’s presence are implicitly centered on the ethnographer. Langness (1965) goes further, arguing that “virtually all anthropology is biography” (p. 4) because anthropologists can comprehend only through their own experience and the people they work with understand only

through theirs. This idea, in some form, is now widely accepted. Accordingly, many ethnographers include parts of their own life stories in their ethnographic texts.

While this is important for methodological reasons, it more strongly asserts the centrality of the anthropologist's purpose. To make the life stories of another person central to an ethnographic text means engaging with the purposes that person brings to the work. When many people are minimally involved, as is the case in most ethnographic research, there are fewer questions about why they cooperated with the anthropologist. But when one person invests heavily in the project, then the question is raised: What purpose does he or she have for doing so?

Thus, different purposes interact in anthropological life histories, including the new collaboratively established purposes that emerge from the relationship. Anthropologists' purposes are the ones that most often frame the text. They explain to readers why they are retelling one person's life stories, often addressing the tension between life stories and cultural description directly, yet defensively. The focus on an individual life must be justified in anthropological research. The purposes of the people whose life stories anthropologist retell are often given in life histories too, although usually less prominently.

In describing the use of interviews in life history research with a New Guinean person, Langness (1965) writes that "the aim of the New Guinean is often, perhaps, to get it over with as quickly as possible so as to get back to more meaningful pursuits such as gardening or pig tending" (p. 38). The purposes of anthropologists often shift in response to the purposes of the people whose life stories they retell. Their purposes shift away

from cultural description and towards the pursuits the people with whom they work find most meaningful. This shift is often accompanied by a justification of life history, which is an additional purpose I will consider.

Behar's purpose was shaped by the contributions Esperanza's story could make to feminist anthropology. As she states "I will attempt a reading of Esperanza's story in terms of the question of where to locate the transgressive woman in patriarchy and in feminism" (p. 276). While Behar's background as a feminist anthropologist shaped her research, she arrived at this specific purpose only after coming to know Esperanza better. Many of Esperanza's life stories focus on her suffering as a woman. Behar brings a feminist perspective to her work with Esperanza, which attempts to alleviate Esperanza's suffering by challenging patriarchy.

Esperanza recognizes how their work is like a confession with a priest. Behar is now carrying her sins because she listened to the story. "She pauses and with laughter in her voice says, 'I've made a confession. Now you carry my sins, because it is as if I have been confessing with my comadre instead of with the priest! You will carry my sins now, because you carry them in your head'" (p. 164). The more immediate purpose, however, is how the story affects her daughter's future. "She doesn't want her daughters to go through what she has—and that is why she relentlessly pounds into their hearts and minds the story of her life" (p. 292). Telling the story to Behar is another way of making sure her daughters learn from her story.

When Brown met Alourdes, her purpose was to contribute to a survey of the Haitian immigrant community in Brooklyn, continuing the study of Vodou she had

conducted in Haiti. Toward this end, she photographed the altars in the homes of many Vodou priests and priestesses, including those in Alourdes' home. Her purposes shifted as her relationship with Alourdes became more intimate. She realized that she could gain more insight into Vodou through this relationship, which allowed her the opportunity to participate directly in ceremonies that she had not experienced before.

People bring the burdens and pains of their lives to this religious system in the hope of being healed. I realized that if I brought less to this Vodou world, I would come away with less. If I persisted in studying Vodou objectively, the heart of the system, its ability to heal, would remain closed to me. The only way I could hope to understand the psychodrama of Vodou was to open my own life to the ministrations of Alourdes. (p. 10)

The relationship that developed with Alourdes when she opened her life in this way shifted her purposes even further from her initial plans to write cultural description. As Brown explains

my aim is to create an intimate portrait of three-dimensional people who are not stand-ins for an abstraction such as "the Haitian people" but rather are deeply religious individuals with particular histories and rich interior lives, individuals who do not live out their religion in unreflective, formulaic ways but instead struggle with it, become confused, and sometimes even contradict themselves. In other words, my aim is to create a portrait of Vodou embedded in the vicissitudes of particular lives. (p. 15)

Brown makes Alourdes purposes explicit with a brief story about how her work with Brown was a way to distinguish herself. "When she introduced me to her father," Brown writes, "she mentioned right away that I was writing a book about her" (p. 176). Their work together was also aligned with the purposes Alourdes normally brings to practicing Vodou. Their work together invited Alourdes to share her knowledge.

Mintz (1960) went to Puerto Rico as part of a team conducting community studies. His initial purpose was to understand the community he had selected and its

relationship to the sugar cane industry. When he met Taso, he told him his “aim was to find out how people lived” (p. 3). As his relationship with Taso developed and the life history project took shape, his purpose became more focused. “My main objective,” Mintz explains to readers, “was to make available a rural proletarian's account of the experience of ‘westernization’” (p. 11). Mintz cautions readers against inferring other purposes, specifically finding a moral in the story.

Taso's story has no moral. Perhaps it is enough that his life should seem so much better to him now. Or perhaps the reader will see the waste I think I see: the waste of a mind that stands above the others as the violet sprays of the flor de cana tower above the cane. But the story should evoke no pity, for that is a sentiment which degrades the meaning of Taso's life to himself and to those who know and love him.” (p. 277)

This possibility of evoking pity is especially important to consider. Anthropologists often write about people who are oppressed and suffering (Trouillot, 1991; Robbins, 2013).

One value of life stories is that they show that suffering is never the totality of someone's experience. Meaning still grows in their lives. And at the same time, anthropological life histories, in retelling life stories, do not ignore the suffering caused by oppression.

Taso's purposes were oriented to his relationship with Mintz. “Taso's unusual matter-of-factness about my work was basic to our common task; his restless and inquiring mind gets him interested in almost anything another person may be doing” (p. 7). The purpose may be as straightforward as this, affirming the relationship and developing it into a friendship by working together. Mintz adds that his “friendship with Taso, which ripened during and after the 1948 political campaign, may have gained strength partly because he felt rejected by the party leaders” (p. 209). The shift in Mintz's purposes, urging readers to see the waste, is also a way of affirming their friendship. He

shows this primarily by retelling Taso's life stories in cultural and historical context. In this way, he is influenced most by the general purpose of showing the individual in culture rather than attending to his personality.

Crapanzano's purpose shifted most from cultural description to life stories. The book, he explains is an experiment. It is an experiment in theorizing an ethnographic encounter. "My aim," Crapanzano writes, "is to emphasize the degree to which theory itself is a response to the encounter and to the burden that encounter imposes on the psyche of the investigator" (p. xiii). This purpose developed from his deepening relationship with Tuhami, and it included another purpose, to know Tuhami completely, which he recognizes as illusory because it requires "the reduction of the Other to that which is completely graspable" (p. 134).

Tuhami's purposes corresponded to Crapanzano's and likely influenced them. Tuhami wanted personal recognition and, moreover, wanted to be "recognized as exceptional" (p. 10). It is likely that the personal recognition integral to the production of a life history is a purpose shared by all those who tell their life stories to anthropologists. This personal recognition is a part of friendship.

Biehl (2005) describes the alignment between his purposes and Catarina's purposes explicitly.

These early conversations with Catarina crystallized three problems to address in our work together: how inner worlds are remade under the impress of economic pressures; the domestic role of pharmaceuticals as moral technologies; and the common sense that creates a category of unsound and unproductive individuals who are allowed to die." (p. 8)

These problems, despite the academic idiom in which Biehl states them, are connected to Catarina's purposes. A question Biehl asked many of the people he worked with reveals this more clearly: "I asked her the question I posed to everyone: why do families leave people here?" (p. 118). That is the question that Catarina wanted to answer. In doing so, she hoped to improve her condition, see her daughter, reorganize her life, and understand her condition through writing. Most practically, she wanted treatment for the disease that had affected her, and that required she be recognized as a person. Continuing the growth of meaning through a life history is one way of recognizing someone as a person. And recognizing someone as a person often involves orienting toward his or her purposes.

Participation

In all of the life histories considered, the anthropologists also narrate the ways in which they participated in the lives of the people whose life stories they retell. As their relationships grew closer, the task of reconstructing life stories was taken on in earnest. This led to shifts in the anthropologists' purposes, shifts that oriented them toward the purposes of the people with whom they were working. With closer relationships and reoriented purposes, opportunities for increased participation are created.

This form of participation is different than the participant observation that is expected in ethnographic research. It is different because participating in an individual's life often means intervening. As discussed above, interpretation is one way of participating in the growth of meaning in a person's life. While this is significant, anthropologists writing life histories are often drawn into more consequential participation, participation that could be described as intervention. Such participation

often involves deliberate attempts to affect the course of someone's life, which is an important way of coming to know that person better. Most importantly, participation is a direct way to continue the growth of meaning.

Crapanzano (1980) initially resisted participating in Tuhami's life beyond their interviews. As he describes, "to have extended our relationship from the privileged domain of the interview to that of everyday life would have been too disrupting for Tuhami, and perhaps for me" (p. 13). Even within the domain of the interview, however, his participation in Tuhami's life was significant.

As Tuhami's interlocutor, I became an active participant in his life history, even though I rarely appear directly in his recitations. Not only did my presence, and my questions, prepare him for the text he was to produce, but they produced what I read as a change of consciousness in him. They produced a change of consciousness in me too. (p. 11)

Crapanzano's participation in Tuhami's life history, along with his purposes and their relationship, changed significantly after one interview in which Tuhami expressed his desire to get married while conveying a belief that this desire would never be fulfilled.

Reflecting on this, Crapanzano (1980) writes

There had been something desperate in Tuhami's last words: "Even my neighbors ask the same thing: Why I don't get married. It irritates me. It is up to Allah. There is nothing I can do about it." I knew I could no longer maintain ethnographic distance. Tuhami's appeal was too great, and I myself too much of an activist, to accept what I understood then to be his passivity before forces externalized in 'A'isha Qandisha, the saints, and ultimately Allah...His beliefs, I was convinced at the moment, held him back...There was, I realized, a limit to my relativism. I became a curer." (p. 133)

Crapanzano narrates his decreasing resistance to participation in Tuhami's life. All of this was more urgent because Crapanzano was leaving Morocco soon. In their next interview, Crapanzano talked with Tuhami about marriage, addressing the obstacles he saw and

encouraging him to try if that is what he desired. In their last interview, they did not discuss the topic of marriage directly, but interpreted Tuhami's dreams, and it was in this way that Tuhami's change in consciousness was produced. With Crapanzano's encouragement, Tuhami recognized that he had a choice in the matters affecting his life, including marriage.

This change in how Crapanzano participated in Tuhami's life helps in recognizing less dramatic changes in participation in life histories written by other anthropologists. Mintz's discussion of Taso's conversion shows signs of a similar shift. That is, for the first time in their interviews, Mintz and Taso discuss something with much meaning in the present, rather than looking back on the past. Behar similarly moves from stories about past events in Esperanza's life to stories about present concerns. She accompanies Esperanza as she sells her goods in the marketplace and to a ritual held at friend's home. Brown participates actively in Alourdes' work, assisting her in preparing for rituals and following her suggestion to go through a ritual marriage ceremony.

Biehl (2005), most of all, demonstrates how these ways of participating can organize an entire life history. As he reflects on his work with Catarina, he explains how such participation came to feel necessary.

Having spoken to Catarina at length and examined her medical records, I could have stopped the work at this point and said, "I have a story to tell." But such an approach would have been too similar to the long history of actions that had time after time discontinued Catarina's possibilities. In participating in the recollection of her life, I had gained a clearer understanding of the ordinariness and representativeness of Catarina's abandonment. But her desire was to reenter the world. As the work moved on, I was becoming more than Catarina's listener and interpreter; our interaction had grown into a means for her to access medicine and the family. The ethnographic work helped both to historicize the apparent intractability of her condition and to propel new events. (p. 209).

Through his work gathering Catarina's medical records, finding and talking with the doctors who had treated her, getting in touch with her family, and seeking further treatment, Biehl ultimately got Catarina's condition diagnosed. She had a rare genetic disease known as Machado-Joseph, which causes the deterioration of the central nervous system. While the diagnosis came too late for Catarina—she passed away while Biehl was trying to arrange treatment—it has allowed her brothers to get treatment. They also had the disease, as did other family members going back multiple generations. It is likely that it would have remained unidentified if not for Biehl's intervention.

The Reconstruction of Life Histories

“What an ethnographer studies,” Brown (1991) writes, “is how people create meaning or significance in their lives” (p. 14). The retelling of life stories in anthropological life histories is a way of participating in that creative process. The interpretations that anthropologists contribute to life histories develop in the context of their relationships with the people whose life stories they retell. Such relationships make it possible to understand the purposes motivating people to tell their life stories, inviting anthropologists to orient towards those purposes while still recognizing the value of the anthropological purposes they bring to the collaborative work of reconstruction. And thus, meaning grows. It grows when interpretation is guided by participation.

When anthropologists participate—when they intervene in the course of someone's life—they become part of the story. The value of their interpretations is reflected in the role they play. Some remain minor figures, providing personal recognition to the people with whom they work and a unique perspective on their lives.

Others, however, move closer to the parts of life at which meaning is presently growing. When anthropologists participate in this way, their interpretations have the potential to contribute even more. By narrating stories of past growth in relation to stories of directly experienced present growth, the reconstruction of life stories has the potential to support additional growth. It has the potential to continue the growth of meaning.

CHAPTER 3

RECONSTRUCTING A LIFE HISTORY AT THE DREAM DESK

The people with whom I work at the Dream Desk often tell life stories during our search for educational possibilities. The research methodology I have developed for reconstructing Gurraacha's life history is an extension of the ways in which I normally listen to these stories and participate in discussions of their meaning. Our collaborative reconstruction is based on my interpretive retelling of the life stories that Gurraacha shared with me, specifically those that have been most meaningful in our work together. In this retelling, I narrate Gurraacha's original telling in the context of our conversation and then contextualize it with additional interpretation.

This research methodology is directly informed by the anthropological life histories and the ethnographic relationships on which they are based that I described in the previous chapter. While my role at the Dream Desk is primarily educational, it also has ethnographic qualities. It involves coming to know other people and recognizing our similarities and differences, especially those pertaining to the social conditions that affect the realization of educational possibilities. Indeed, the success of my work at the Dream Desk depends on developing this sort of ethnographic knowledge about education. Accordingly, I begin by describing ethnography as a form of human relationship. Then I consider the way these ethnographic qualities are part of educational relationships at the Dream Desk and how these relationships develop through the search for educational possibilities conceptualized as fieldwork. Next, I describe the specific ways in which I have used life stories told during those searches as data. And finally, I detail the

approaches to interpretive retelling I have used to produce this collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history.

Ethnography as a Form of Human Relationship

In a description of her research methodology, Brown (1991) writes that "ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship" (p. 12). This description of ethnography emphasizes the first of three distinct activity phases, or "moments," that John Van Maanen (1995) identifies in his description of ethnographic research.

The first moment concerns the collection of information or data on a specified (or proposed) culture. The second refers to the construction of an ethnographic report or account and, in particular, to the specific compositional practices used by the ethnographer to fashion a cultural portrait. The third moment of ethnography occurs with the reading and reception of an ethnographic text across various audience segments. (p. 5)

It is in this first phase, referred to as "fieldwork," that anthropologists first encounter the people with whom they work. Their "collection of information or data" happens through human relationships. It happens through their interactions and conversations with the people they meet and come to know during fieldwork. Attending to these human relationships, rather than the data or information collected, not only emphasizes the first phase of ethnography, but also draws attention to the important ethical considerations that emerge in this first phase. For example, anthropologists must consider how to form relationships that satisfy their research purposes while mitigating the possibility of coercing or exploiting the people with whom they work. And while such ethical considerations may be most prominent in this first phase, they are not limited to it. Indeed, it was by attending to the way she wrote about her relationship with Alourdes that led Brown to describe ethnographic research as a form of human relationship. Ethical

considerations related to those that arise in the first phase of ethnography are present in the second and third phases as well. Specifically, anthropologists must decide how to represent the people they have come to know in writing as well as the effects those representations may have when read by others.

A brief history of ethnographic research in anthropology helps to explain. In the ethnographic writing of the nineteenth century, these ethical considerations were given little, if any, attention. One reason is that the first phase of ethnography did not take place through the direct encounter and resulting relationships established during fieldwork. During this time, anthropologists based their ethnographic writing, not on their own experiences of direct encounters with other people, but on accounts written by other people who had experienced such direct encounters. These accounts were written in the context of colonial intervention. For example, missionaries and colonial administrators, who provided many of these accounts, were seeking ethnographic understanding in order to further their purposes of proselytization and governing. Anthropologists' indirect encounters through these accounts allowed them to disregard the ethical considerations of coming to know other people, despite the fact that the relationships on which the accounts were based were fraught with ethical problems. Missionaries and colonial administrators came to know other people through relationships based on manipulation, coercion, and subjugation, to which anthropologists contributed directly and indirectly by publishing racist ethnographic analyses of other peoples that justified ongoing intervention in their lives.

The emergence of ethnographic fieldwork was a response to this problematic situation. The problem, however, was considered to be primarily epistemological rather than ethical. Simply put, the assumption was that the knowledge gained by direct relationships and first-hand experiences would produce better cultural descriptions. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), whose descriptions of fieldwork mark this shift, explains that the goal was to “grasp the native’s point of view” (p. 25), which can only be achieved by residing among a group of people, participating in their lives, and making systematic observations of the experience. The hallmark technique of ethnographic fieldwork, “participant observation,” is derived from this way of conceptualizing fieldwork and the epistemological motivation to support ethnographic writing with first-hand experiences rather than second-hand accounts.

While ethnographic fieldwork was initially motivated by such epistemological considerations, it did address some of the major ethical problems created by early ethnographies. Anthropologists writing at the beginning of the twentieth century rejected the ways of writing about other people that upheld and contributed to the widely accepted racist idea of cultural evolutionism. Works such as *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* by Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) conceptualized “culture” as a scale of progress leading towards civilization. Western peoples, from this perspective, were the culmination and other peoples occupied lower stages, moving towards civilization but not yet attaining it. The human relationships that were a part of fieldwork were the basis for rejecting this concept of culture and its racist classification. Franz Boas and his students based their work on a

plural concept of culture in which all “cultures” were considered to be equal.

Ethnographic fieldwork, in the Boasian tradition, was a way of studying cultures on their own terms (Stocking, 1974).

Despite this important shift, many ethical problems remained. The human relationships that provided anthropologists with the opportunity to observe and participate were given little attention except in brief methodological descriptions. Moreover, certain conventions of writing persisted or developed that distanced the ethnographic texts from the human relationships on which they were based. These conventions, which were common in early and mid-twentieth century ethnographies, were criticized thoroughly in the 1980s (Marcus and Cushman, 1982; Fabian, 1983; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). Van Maanen (1995) summarizes these critiques in his description of the genre of “ethnographic realism.”

The genre itself is marked by a number of compositional conventions including, for example, the swallowing up and disappearance of an author in the text, the suppression of the individual cultural member’s perspective in favor of a typified or common denominator “native’s point of view,” the placement of culture within a rather timeless ethnographic present, and a claim (often implicit) for descriptive or interpretive validity based almost exclusively on the author’s own “being there” experience (fieldwork). (p. 7)

While the focus of these criticisms is the second phase of ethnography—the writing of an ethnographic text—they reveal a disregard for the human relationships formed during the fieldwork of the first phase. The author and the people he or she came to know during fieldwork disappear in realist ethnographies. And a “culture” is written about as though it was unchanging, which is only possible when the specific human lives and the relationships through which they are understood are not represented in ethnographic

texts. These conventions reveal a disregard for relationships formed during the first phase of ethnography, in part, by forgoing the opportunity to extend those relationships into the second phase. In an ethnographic text, as Crapanzano (1980) explains, there is an opportunity for re-encounter.

The third phase of ethnography—the reading of an ethnographic text—has been given much less attention than the first or second phases, yet the ethical problems are no less significant. They result from the fact that this third phase is also a form of human relationship, although perhaps in less obvious ways. Representations of other peoples in published texts are part of the human relationships on which ethnography is based. The harmful effects of negative representations published with the authority of science are part of that relationship too. Such representations have continued to circulate despite more attention from anthropologists. This is most clearly the case in the negative representations of Native Americans circulated by anthropologists. Despite the anti-racist project of Boas and his students, who made ethnographic writing about Native Americans central to American anthropology, anthropological writing about Native Americans did not avoid these harmful effects. The tendency to represent Native Americans as an “other” within America is also part of that tradition and has been criticized heavily by Native American scholars (most notably Deloria, 1969) and through dialogue between Native American scholars and anthropologists (Biolsi, 1997).

The third phase of ethnography has been engaged primarily through considerations such as these. However, as Caroline Brettell (1993) notes, these questions about readership and audience do not consider one specific and important group of

readers, “those about whom the ethnography is written” (p. 2). It is also important to consider how ethnographic texts, before publication and after, are part of the relationships on which they are based. This perspective on the third phase of ethnography has been given the most attention by developments in collaborative, feminist, and activist ethnography, which attend closely to ethical considerations across all three phases.

In an important contribution, Judith Stacey (1988) observes the risk of “exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment” in the “egalitarian, reciprocal relationships” (p. 21) that develop when feminist ethnographers attend closely to the ethical considerations of relationships formed during ethnographic fieldwork. Despite the fact that feminist ethnography is based on a “collaborative, reciprocal quest for understanding,” the ethnographic text that results from fieldwork is structured primarily by a researcher’s purposes, offering a researcher’s interpretations, registered in a researcher’s voice” (p. 23). The researcher’s control over an ethnographic text can produce situations in which the interpretations offered in published texts can exploit and betray the people whose lives are interpreted. In other words, an ethnographic text, when read by the people about whom it is written, is part of the human relationship on which ethnography is based. While these risks are serious and require constant attention, it is important to consider that, as Stacey notes, collaborative, reciprocal relationships provide a foundation for offering interpretations that can be “constructive and deeply appreciated” (p. 26). Yet, even when interpretations make this positive contribution to a relationship, thereby reaffirming the intimacy that has developed, they still can have

negative effects. As Stacey describes, intimacy increases the risk that the people with whom anthropologists work will feel abandoned when the relationship ends.

Feminist and activist anthropologists who prioritize collaboration in the writing process address this risk by inviting the people represented in the text to read and respond to it. This sort of reading identifies more clearly the way in which this third phase of ethnography is a form of human relationship. The reading of ethnographic texts provides an occasion for the people represented in it to consider the interpretations already formed, critique and contribute to them, and ultimately suggest or insist on revision.

Considering how ethnography is a form of human relationship through these three phases—fieldwork, writing, and reading—suggests the potential for educational relationships in each. An educational relationship is a certain kind of ethical relationship. It is a relationship that supports the growth of meaning. In developing my research methodology, I have considered the educational quality of my ethnographic relationship with Gurraacha during our search for educational possibilities, while retelling his life stories in writing, and when discussing these interpretive retellings with Gurraacha.

Educational Relationships at the Dream Desk

The relationships I establish through my work at the Dream Desk have a clearly defined educational purpose that guides our search for educational possibilities. As stated on a sign displayed at the Dream Desk, the purpose is to connect the people with whom I work to resources in the community to support their learning. This educational purpose provides a unique perspective when considered in relation to the very different purposes that often guide anthropological research. Common anthropological purposes, as

described in the previous chapter, usually follow from the disciplinary expectation of cultural description. The educational purpose of relationships at the Dream Desk prioritizes the purposes of the people with whom I work. Their learning dreams define specific searches for educational possibilities, which guide my educational organizing work. These learning dreams also guide the way I listen to the life stories they tell during our search for educational possibilities. Thus, the educational purpose encourages a prioritization of life stories over cultural description.

When I asked Gurraacha what he wanted to learn, his answers—his learning dreams—directed me to those parts of his life in which meaning was presently growing: human rights advocacy, nonprofit management, and journalism. Our search for educational possibilities was guided by these learning dreams, each of which is meaningful to Gurraacha. Indeed, he selected each learning dream. He stated each when I asked him what he wanted to learn, but more importantly, these dreams were already growing in meaning through his experiences prior to when we met. In retelling and interpreting the life stories Gurraacha shared with me, my primary purpose is to continue this growth of meaning.

The unique perspective provided is the result of this way of participating. I participate through my educational organizing work, and thus the educational purpose central to this work is also central to my research methodology. This reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history is a form of educational research, by which I mean that the research itself, and the human relationship on which it is based, supports the growth of meaning. To designate research as “educational” does not necessarily mean the research

is educational in this way. Indeed, Martin Hammersley (2003) reviews the many ways in which the question “can and should educational research be educative?” has been raised. His use of the term “educational” refers to research about education, and his use of the term “educative” refers to practices with educational, or “educative,” effects. After reviewing several arguments for why educational research should be educative, he concludes that “research cannot be educative, only informative” (p. 3). As Hammersley explains

To be informative it to provide knowledge that one believes will be of interest or use to an audience. The central concerns are the validity and the relevance of the knowledge produced and communicated. By contrast, to be educative is to act towards someone in a way that is designed to help him or her learn something—to facilitate a change in understanding, attitudes, and/or behaviour. Such action will often involve supplying information, but this is by no means the only kind of educative act, and will often be accompanied by others; such as providing a model, asking questions, praising, admonishing, presenting stimulus materials, etc. (p. 18)

In making this distinction, Hammersley argues that much of the research that claims to be educative is, in fact, only concerned with informing educational practice, and research that is truly educative violates a valuable restriction on the role of the researcher. “The two goals,” he continues, “being informative and being educative, pull in different directions” (p. 18). This tension between educating and informing is similar to the tension between life stories and cultural description in anthropological research. In the life histories considered in the previous chapter, the focus on life stories and the decision to write a life history about a person often led to forms of participation that intervened in that person’s life and attempted to affect its course. The relationships, in this way, could be considered educational, or “educative” in Hammersley’s words. However, the life

histories produced still prioritized informing. The life history text itself, the product of the research, had little educational effect in the lives of the people whose life stories the anthropologists retold. The texts were written primarily for other audiences, and in some cases it is even unclear if the people about whom the text was written had a chance to read the text, either during the writing process or after publication.

In developing this methodology for reconstructing life histories at the Dream Desk, I have attempted to continue the growth of meaning in Gurraacha's life by integrating the life history text into our work. In this way, the educational purpose of reconstructing life histories at the Dream Desk is extended further. Reconstructing life histories at the Dream Desk is a way of reflecting on the meaning of Gurraacha's life stories so as to support our search for educational possibilities and continue the growth of meaning in his life.

For this reason, I think of Gurraacha as an important audience for my interpretations of his life stories. I retell his life stories in such a way that they continue the collaborative reconstruction that happens in our conversations, and I share them with him as part of our work. Our conversations about them lead to new interpretations that are then incorporated into our search for educational possibilities. My interpretations are organized around the question: in what ways is the meaning of human rights advocacy presently growing in Gurraacha's life? Gurraacha will judge the ultimate value of these interpretations based on the support they provide to our ongoing work together. In this way, my purposes are aligned with Gurraacha's purposes. Yet, they are not the same. Gurraacha's purpose is to realize the learning dreams he shared with me. My purpose is

to support him in doing so, and, in the process, better understand the possibilities for education in a democratic society and the educational inequalities that limit their realization for some people.

Our educational relationship is based on Gurraacha's recognition of how I can support the growth of meaning in his life. My contributions to this process come in several forms. The foundational contribution is a relationship that focuses exclusively on the learning dreams that he defines. One very practical part of this contribution is my time and energy. The significance of this cannot be underestimated, especially when considering that there are many educational possibilities Gurraacha recognizes but simply does not have time to explore. For example, I have spent time finding information about law schools and searching for funding opportunities. In addition to my time and energy, I also contribute the privileges associated with my identity and social position. As a white American man, I encounter fewer restrictions than Gurraacha when navigating access to many institutions. While Gurraacha does not often report trouble navigating access himself, my social position is available in this way if necessary. Such a contribution to the search for educational possibilities occurs frequently in my work at the Dream Desk. With Gurraacha, this contribution often takes the form of providing advice on American communication conventions. For example, when writing an email to inquire about a U.S. Senate hearing, Gurraacha asked me to help him revise in order to have the effect he wanted. Other contributions I make are based on my professional role. Working for Learning Dreams and being affiliated with Hennepin County Library are additional resources when navigating access to educational possibilities. The educational purpose of

the Dream Desk project and the trust associated with public libraries often makes it easier for me to request information and meetings with people whom neither Gurraacha nor I know. My work for Learning Dreams also involves ongoing training and practice in methods of navigating access to educational possibilities, developing and maintaining relationships that can create access to educational possibilities in the communities around East Lake Library, and continually developing and revising my understanding of educational inequality based on what I learn during many searches for educational possibilities with others.

I offer these contributions to the process by which meaning grows in Gurraacha's life knowing that they are often accompanied by drawbacks too. The exclusive focus of our relationship on Gurraacha's learning dreams creates an intimacy that increases the risks of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment described by Stacey (1988). This intimacy, as is the case in similar ethnographic relationships, is based on asymmetrical knowledge. While I occasionally tell Gurraacha stories about my life, I know many more about his. Moreover, while the relationship is voluntary for Gurraacha, the increase in intimacy and trust leads to situations in which unwanted influence might be tolerated or even unrecognized. The possibility for such unwanted influence derives from our different social positions, our different understandings of the desirability of certain educational possibilities, our different understandings of educational inequality, and, ultimately, our different understandings of the meaning of human rights advocacy in general and in Gurraacha's life specifically. Of most concern is the way in which the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life is related to his experiences of

persecution and torture. I have been cautious in my interpretations of the meaning of these experiences because of the sensitivity of these topics and their more recent introduction into our relationship.

This asymmetry in our ethnographic relationship is based on an asymmetry in our educational relationship. Our relationship was established for the purpose of supporting the growth of meaning in Gurraacha's life. While he is supporting the growth of meaning in my life too, the form this support takes is different. Through our search for educational possibilities, my understanding of educational possibilities and the educational inequalities that restrict their realization grows. This improves my ability to provide educational support to others with whom I work at the Dream Desk.

The Search for Educational Possibilities as Ethnographic Fieldwork

The search for educational possibilities that takes place through my work at the Dream Desk is form of collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2005) guided by educational purposes and based on educational relationships. The reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history is a mode of multi-sited ethnography that Marcus (1995) labels "follow the life." As Marcus explains "life histories reveal juxtapositions of social contexts through a succession of narrated individual experiences" (p. 110). The site of such research is correspondingly complex.

While Gurraacha and I met at the Dream Desk at East Lake Library, our work is not limited to this physical location. We do occasionally meet at the Dream Desk, but more often we meet outside the library. The Dream Desk is better understood as symbol of our educational relationship and a metaphorical site of our research. It defines our

relationship even when I meet with Gurraacha at other physical locations or when we communicate in other ways, such as by phone, email, or text messages. Thus, I use the phrase “at the Dream Desk” to refer to this educational purpose and metaphorical site, not necessarily the literal Dream Desk.

Our work at the Dream Desk leads us to many other sites, many of which Gurraacha describes when telling life stories. These sites include any social context that we explore together through discussion. They range from his elementary school in a small town in Ethiopia when he was a child to a meeting he was anticipating with a member of a U.S. congressman’s staff. These various sites are connected by our search for educational possibilities, which also explores other sites at which the growth of meaning in Gurraacha’s life might be supported. For example, we explored other sites when I suggested that Gurraacha connect with an organization that offers resources for managing nonprofits or when I offered to arrange a meeting with a staff member at a human rights organization.

In addition, our search for educational possibilities has the potential to extend into other sites that hold educational potential. Most immediately, these include sites in Minneapolis, the city in which Gurraacha and I live. For this reason, it is important to consider the urban context in which our search for educational possibilities begins. As Edmund Gordon (2003) explains “the concentration of people, resources, sources of stimulation, and conflicts found in urban society leads to interactions that have great potential for influencing the developmental process in human beings” (p. 191). At the same time, access to this potential is restricted based on structural inequalities. Gordon

addresses this in general terms by noting how “different social and political groups may become more isolated from one another in urban areas” (p. 192); however, this leaves the sources of inequality unspecified. Our search for educational possibilities confronts specific forms of restricted access to educational potential that affect Gurraacha, namely ethnic discrimination, racist oppression, class disparities, and capitalist exploitation. Each of these restrictions takes specific forms in Gurraacha’s life, some of which are specific to the urban context of our search for educational possibilities, some of which are more general. They include the ethnic discrimination in Ethiopia that led him to flee the country, his constrained opportunities for work as a black man in the United States, the limited economic resources that result from these constrained opportunities, and the destabilizing effects of international investment in development projects in Ethiopia.

Life Stories During the Search for Educational Possibilities

During our search for educational possibilities, there are many opportunities for Gurraacha to tell life stories. Sometimes I ask him to tell a story but more often a story is simply suggested by the topic of our conversation. When I do ask him to tell a story, it is never an unexplained request. Rather, it is because I notice the possibility for a story that could help me understand his learning dreams better.

For example, shortly after Gurraacha and I met, he heard that staff members of Congressman Keith Ellison, who represents Minnesota’s Fifth District, were looking for someone with a background in Ethiopian law to review a draft bill. I advised him on ways he could contact those staff members and offer to review the draft legislation. I also assisted him as he prepared his comments on the draft bill. Much of our work since has

focused on finding other possibilities for influencing U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. During this part of search for educational possibilities, Gurraacha has told me stories about his experiences with the politics and laws of Ethiopia.

As described in the previous chapter, many anthropological life histories begin with anthropologists asking someone to tell the story of his or her life. The request is often not fully explained, partly because it is often assumed that it needs no explanation, and partly because anthropologists remain unsure as to the purpose of life stories in their ethnographic research. Even when I asked Gurraacha to tell me the story of his life when we first met, this request was contextualized as a way for me to understand the learning dreams he had just shared. Moreover, he had offered the story, and as I was to learn, it was one among many life stories that he would tell me.

The life stories Gurraacha tells recount a wide range of experiences. They include stories about experiences from long before we met when he was living in Ethiopia. They also include more recent stories about experiences that took place since he came to the United States, including very recent stories about experiences that took place after we met. In addition to these stories of past experiences, Gurraacha also tells stories about possible experiences, experiences that he anticipates for the future.

For example, Gurraacha has told me stories about his childhood and his time as a university student. He has also told me stories about the major events in his life since coming to the United States, most of which have to do with his activist work in the Oromo diaspora. The protests that began in Ethiopia shortly after we met as well as Gurraacha's legislative advocacy have been the topic of many stories about very recent

events. These recent experiences usually take place only a few days before he tells me about them. Such stories differ from those of experiences that took place further in the past. They are less synthesized. Sometimes they are more detailed, but sometimes they are less, told briefly in passing. The stories about possible experiences include those in the near future, such as the story Gurraacha told me about a meeting later on the same day with one of Congressman Ellison's staff members. They also include those in the distant future, such as the story Gurraacha told me about someday returning to Ethiopia, focusing specifically on the kind of work he imagines doing when political unity is achieved.

The stories about recent experiences and possible experiences anticipated in the future are a direct result of the way in which the stories are told during our search for educational possibilities. This search focuses our relationship on those parts of Gurraacha's life in which the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing. Accordingly, stories about the recent past and future are told in addition to stories about the more distant past, and all are told in such a way that supports our search for educational possibilities. Each contributes to the growth of meaning in Gurraacha's life. The specific contributions made by each focus my interpretations.

Life Stories as Data

A few months after we met, I asked Gurraacha if I could write about our work together. At that point, with Gurraacha's permission, I began recording our conversations. The recordings make it possible to recount the stories in Gurraacha's voice in the rich detail of his original telling. The recordings also make it possible to reconstruct a more detailed

description of the context in which the stories were told. However, I also retell stories from our first few months working together based only on my memory. Thus, the recordings are not absolutely necessary.

My notes about our conversations and the stories Gurraacha told during those conversations, whether aided by recordings or not, constitute the primary form of data that I draw on in reconstructing Gurraacha's life history. However, these written versions of oral stories are not the only form of data. I also draw on several written stories that Gurraacha has produced. In addition to brief stories Gurraacha told in text messages he sent me, I draw on two documents that contain extended life stories. The first document is a biographical statement that Gurraacha wrote shortly after we met, which I helped him revise. I draw on both his initial draft and the subsequent revisions. The second document is an affidavit Gurraacha wrote in 2014 to include with his application for asylum in the United States. He shared this with me when the urgency of his asylum application increased. In addition to specific life stories, these documents have helped me understand the sequence of major events in Gurraacha's life, which was not always clear because of the way his telling of life stories was part of our search for educational possibilities rather than for the purpose of creating a comprehensive account of his life.

Whether I am drawing on life stories told orally or written life stories, an important aspect of the data is the context in which the stories were shared with me. Thus, an additional kind of data is the stories I tell about these contexts in my notes about Gurraacha's life stories. These stories are part of my interpretive retelling of Gurraacha's life stories and the foundation of our collaborative reconstruction of his life history.

Interpretive Retelling

My retelling of Gurraacha's life stories is a form of interpretation. As explained in the brief history of ethnography provided above, interpretation is not straightforward or neutral. The choices I have made in how to retell Gurraacha's life story create a representation of his life that is influenced by my specific perspective and partial understanding. Moreover, interpretation is based on the relationship that Gurraacha and I formed during our search for educational possibilities, during the first phase of ethnography. The interpretation that takes place in the second phase extends our relationship into the process of writing. Through my interpretive retelling, which is a re-encounter with Gurraacha and his life stories, and our discussions of this retelling, we reconstruct his life history.

This reconstruction is based on stories told in the context of our search for educational possibilities over the first six months of our work together. Unlike many anthropological life histories, it is not based on one long telling, in which Gurraacha attempted to provide a comprehensive account of his life. Rather, I have selected and organized life stories he told me during our search for educational possibilities. I narrate these stories in the context of that search, thus establishing connections between the experiences he narrates and present experiences. My interpretation focuses on those connections, the ways in which his life stories and my retelling of them support the growth of meaning in his life. I also reflect on the meaning of education in democratic societies, further supporting the growth of meaning in his life by narrating how meaning is growing in my life and through our work together.

Selection of Life Stories

Gurraacha has told many stories during our search for educational possibilities, many more than I retell in this reconstruction of his life history. My selection of stories is based on how they contribute to my understanding of the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. I have selected those stories that mark established connections with Gurraacha's experiences related to human rights advocacy or those that offer the potential for creating new connections. Indeed, the most meaningful parts of life are dense with such connections, and meaning grows when new connections are created. Stories are one way of creating those connections, and life stories, specifically, contribute to the growth of meaning in human lives.

The first criterion I have used in selecting which stories to include in the reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history is whether or not they are about Gurraacha, whether or not their primary evaluation is a point about him and his life (Linde, 1993). As Linde notes, this point about the speaker can be made either directly or indirectly. I have thus included stories in which Gurraacha narrates common experiences in general terms or events that he did not directly experience. For example, when Gurraacha told me stories about intimidation strategies used by the Ethiopian government and Ethiopian criminal procedure in general terms, I interpreted these as stories about him, and thus, life stories. I interpreted them in this way because, in the specific context of their telling, these stories make an indirect point about Gurraacha and the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life.

In summarizing several approaches to interpretive biography, Norman Denzin (1989) emphasizes the importance of “turning points” or “epiphanies” (p. 22), suggesting that they provide the main structure for biographical texts, at least those in the Western tradition. He explains that “epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives...They alter the fundamental meaning structure in a person’s life” (p. 70). The life stories I have selected include turning points, but the description of a turning point is not a selection criterion. Rather, I focus on the meaning of the stories in the context of our search for educational possibilities. Accordingly, some turning points that would be important in another reconstruction of Gurraacha’s life history are left out. I have selected life stories that contribute to the ongoing alteration of fundamental meaning structures in Gurraacha’s life, specifically those related to human rights advocacy. My focus is not on turning points but rather those experiences that have the most meaning, those that are still growing in meaning in the present.

Another criterion I have considered when selecting life stories is their reportability or tellability. Stories with “extended reportability,” according to Linde (1993), “are tellable and are told and retold over the course of a long period of time” (p. 21). For an event to be reportable, she continues, it “must either be unusual in some way or run counter to expectations or norms” (p. 22). Ochs and Capps (2001) emphasize that “tellability is related not only to the sensational nature of events but also to the significance of events for particular interlocutors” (p. 34). That is, while some aspects of tellability are based on the content of the story itself, tellability is also based on the relationship between teller and listener. In my work with Gurraacha, the most tellable

stories are those that are relevant to our search for educational possibilities. And it is stories that are tellable for this reason that contribute the most to my understanding of the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life. Linde (1993) also recognizes the importance of the relationship between teller and listener when assessing tellability. In addition, she suggests another factor to be considered, "the amount of time that has passed between the event and the telling of the story" (p. 22). Certain stories are tellable only shortly after the experiences narrated occurred. They are tellable, in part, because they provide reports on recent events. When Gurraacha tells stories about experiences that took place many years prior, they are tellable for different reasons. They are tellable because of their contribution to the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. All of these specific aspects of tellability are ways of describing what makes stories meaningful. Tellability is ultimately about connections with past experiences, the present telling, and future possibilities.

A related criterion I have used in selecting stories is the frequency of retelling. In our search for educational possibilities, Gurraacha tells some stories several times. His retelling suggests what is meaningful, and the repetition is part of the process by which meaning grows. When life stories are retold in new contexts, new connections with past, present, and future experiences are formed. My retelling is an extension of this repetition with a goal of creating a similar effect: continuing the growth of meaning in Gurraacha's life.

The selection of life stories has a major effect on the representation of Gurraacha's life created by this life history. For this reason, attending to ethical

considerations is important. When Gurraacha reads my retelling of his life stories, I ask him which stories he would like to include and which he would like removed. For example, the stories Gurraacha has told me about his name have important connections with the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. Our discussion of these stories has deepened my understanding of this meaning, and, perhaps, has deepened Gurraacha's understanding too. However, potential problems arise when we consider other readers.

I expressed concern to Gurraacha about the consequences of this life history being read by members of the Ethiopian government, which in my understanding is a real possibility because of evidence that the government has monitored his actions in the past. Could the reading of this life history by this audience lead to further persecution? To address this potential problem, we have decided to change his name, modify identifying details in some stories, and remove other stories when circulating the life history text to audiences beyond the two of us.

It is important to state, however, that our discussions so far do not settle the ethical questions about the selection of life stories to include in future versions of Gurraacha's life history. Rather, this is an ongoing discussion that will be considered with each specific opportunity for wider circulation. There is the possibility that Gurraacha could decide he does not want any of these stories published. While this seems unlikely based on our conversations so far, it is important that the option is available. It is one of the balancing factors in the power relations that affect our relationship. As Stacey (1988) explains, it is often easier for researchers to leave their field sites, thus ending relationships, than it is for those with whom they work. Because of the structure of our

work together, Gurraacha and I have equal ability to end our relationship or specify restrictions on it. Because our relationship is based primarily on our work together at the Dream Desk, a decision to limit the circulation of selected life stories only to our relationship would not mean ending our relationship.

Organization of Life Stories

I have organized Gurraacha's life stories in a loose chronological order based on the events narrated. The chronological order is "loose" in the sense that a story may extend into events that occurred earlier or later than the events in stories that precede or follow it. For example, one section of Gurraacha's life history, titled "Son of a Pastor," includes events from Gurraacha's childhood as well as when he was a university student. The following section, titled "Gurraacha Becomes Daniel" also includes events from Gurraacha's childhood, thus breaking the chronological order. This is a loose chronological order. Each story is anchored at a point on the timeline of Gurraacha's life but not all stay focused on a single event.

A chronological order is common in anthropological life histories. The circumstances of the telling are often deemphasized if not edited out entirely, thus obscuring the relationship formed during the first phase of ethnography. In many anthropological life histories, these circumstances are not important because they had little effect on the telling, or at least the anthropologists considered the effect to be inconsequential. That is, while it is expected that anthropologists describe the general effects their relationships may have on the telling of stories, this general description is often considered adequate for making visible the effect of the circumstances. Each story

is told in similar circumstances. The relationship develops as the anthropologists come to know the people they work with better, but the circumstances do not fundamentally change.

I have ordered Gurraacha's life stories chronologically based on the order in which the narrated experiences occurred, yet I still contextualize all in the present concerns that motivated their telling. Indeed, the loose chronological order reflects the fact that Gurraacha did not tell these stories as part of one comprehensive life story. Each was told at different points in our search for educational possibilities. In organizing these stories chronologically based on the events narrated, I have made significant changes to the order in which they were told. However, I have retained relevant aspects of these circumstances by narrating the original telling of each story, including my participation as Gurraacha's interlocutor. As a result, the already complex temporality increases in complexity with the temporal shifts of the original telling. This temporal complexity creates opportunities for interpretation. It draws attention to my relationship with Gurraacha and the role I played in the growth of meaning in his life.

I have determined that this loose chronological order best serves the purposes of reconstruction. Part of the interpretive work of reconstruction is making connections across events. Gurraacha already makes such connections in his original telling. For example, the story anchored in how his father became a pastor stretches back before his father was born and forward into the time when Gurraacha was studying at Addis Ababa University. In these temporal shifts, Gurraacha is tracing the trajectories along which meaning is growing in his life. The loose chronological order draws attention to these

temporal shifts and trajectories of meaning, thereby suggesting additional opportunities for interpretation. I follow the guide Gurraacha has provided and interpret the connections across events that are produced based on the ordering of stories in my retelling. The most important connections across events in this reconstruction are the connections created between the narrated events and the circumstances of telling in the present. The main benefit of this kind of chronological order is that it emphasizes how the life stories I retell were meaningful when Gurraacha told them to me.

The chronological order creates an additional interpretive opportunity. It shows clearly the parts of the life history that Gurraacha gives the most emphasis. Certain parts of his life are more frequently narrated in the stories he tells me. This provides one way of determining which are most meaningful in the context of our search for educational possibilities. For example, Gurraacha has told and retold many stories about the protests he participated in as a university student. He has told me very little about the time just before he went to university, except for marking that his activist efforts began in high school. The greater number of stories told about his time as a university student and the greater number of connections established with other parts of his life through these stories and my interpretations suggest that this time was more meaningful in relation to Gurraacha's interest in human rights advocacy.

Finally, the most important factor considered in choosing this chronological ordering is the opportunity it creates for expanding our relationship in the second and third phases of ethnography. As described above, when re-encountering these stories during the writing process, the chronological order invites new kinds of interpretation.

The order provides an interpretive perspective that is different from the original context of telling. I re-encounter Gurraacha and his life stories with a better understanding of the sequence in which his experiences occurred, and when Gurraacha reads my retelling of these life stories, he re-encounters himself and his stories from this perspective too.

Narration of Life Stories

The style of narration I use when retelling Gurraacha's life stories was selected for the ways in which it supports the interpretation required for reconstructing a life history. At the center of this style of narration are extended stories that Gurraacha told and my responses to them as well as the conversational exchanges that lead to and follow from the stories. I narrate this interaction of our voices, which is based on my notes and recordings of our conversations. My voice as a narrator is thus also present. This is the voice of "(re)encounter" that Crapanzano (1980, p. 23) describes. I narrate Gurraacha's speech and my own as well as my thoughts at the time of encounter and our reflections and interpretations at the time of re-encounter.

My interpretations focus on the process by which meaning is growing in Gurraacha's life, specifically the meaning of human rights advocacy. I refer to parts of our search for educational possibilities that came before and after as well as stories that precede and follow it in his life history. In developing these interpretations, I also reflect on my educational relationship with Gurraacha and my work at the Dream Desk, thus continuing the growth of meaning in my life too.

My interpretations are integrated into the interactions of these voices. This style of narration is similar to the forms of "narrative ethnography" described by Barbara

Tedlock (1992). “The world, in a narrative ethnography,” Tedlock writes, “is re-presented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his or her personality. This enables a reader to identify the consciousness that has selected and shaped the experiences within the text” (p. xiii). The textual form of this style of narration resembles styles common in novelistic writing. In each section of Gurraacha’s life history, I establish the context in which he told me the story. Then, I weave my interpretations into Gurraacha’s telling of the story, thus constituting my retelling.

In narrating Gurraacha’s voice and my own at the time of encounter, I have edited for clarity. That is, while much of what Gurraacha and I said is reproduced verbatim, I have not followed this method of transcription as a strict rule. In other words, I have used an audio recorder as an aid to memory, but have not become beholden to its precision. For example, in a conversation in which I compared what Gurraacha wrote down as his learning dream with what others write down as their learning dreams, I modified the abbreviated phrase that I used. I changed the phrase “what they wrote down” to “what they write down as their learning dreams.” I made this change because, when reproduced in writing, this meaning may not have been clear to readers. Moreover, these are the kinds of changes I would make in notes based on memory alone. I have made similar clarifying edits throughout the text. In addition, I have, at times, removed repetitive, incomplete, indecipherable, and irrelevant utterances as well as inconsequential overlaps in our speech. These features of conversation are significant in some approaches to interpretation. In the mode of interpretive retelling that I employ, they can be distracting

and, at times even dehumanizing. The operating principle is to produce a representation of the life stories Gurraacha has told in such a way that they can continue the growth of meaning in his life. More specifically, my goal has been to produce a text that Gurraacha and I can read and revise together as part of our search for educational possibilities, rather than a text that treats our conversations as data and extracts them for analysis that is distant from Gurraacha's concerns. In these ways, I have attended to the underlying theory and politics of transcription (Ochs, 1979; Bucholtz, 2000), recognizing that my interpretive work begins with transcription, specifically when deciding which parts of what we have said are relevant and consequential. I have thus selected a form of "naturalized transcription" that privileges written over oral discourse features" (Bucholtz, 2000, p. 1461) for the way in which it supports the narration of a complex temporality that marks relationships between the time of events experienced in the stories Gurraacha tells, the time of our encounter, and the time of my retelling.

Extending our Educational Relationship with a Life History

This methodology for reconstructing life histories is organized around the growth of meaning in the lives of the people with whom I work at the Dream Desk. It is based on the development of our educational relationship through our search for educational possibilities. As such, it narrates this relationship and how it formed, thus drawing attention to the first phase of ethnography. It then extends our relationship into the second phase by creating an ethnographic life history text through which I re-encounter Gurraacha. In this more contemplative space, with some distance from the demands of educational action, I contribute additional interpretations. In this way, the asymmetry in

our relationship is decreased. In my interpretations, I share more of myself. I share more of the ideas that have helped me in understanding the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life. I also share aspects of my personal background that shape my understanding of human rights advocacy and educational possibilities. When I share these interpretations with Gurraacha by inviting him to read my retellings of his life stories, I extend our educational relationship into the third phase of ethnography.

The life history text is written in such a way that it can be revised and expanded as our search for educational possibilities continues. I do not simply ask Gurraacha to read the text once, checking my interpretations. Rather, it is a text that Gurraacha and I will read and reread together in order to guide our search for educational possibilities. In addition to revising the interpretations already in the text, this reading and rereading will contribute new interpretations of Gurraacha's life stories. It will also contribute new interpretations of our work together. By growing as the search proceeds, the life history text remains oriented toward the purpose of continuing the growth of meaning in Gurraacha's life. The reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history in the next two chapters is, thus, a version that will change over time. Indeed, since I have written this version, Gurraacha has already told me additional stories that I plan to integrate in the future.

CHAPTER 4
HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY AND
THE SEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

After our first meeting at the Dream Desk, two weeks passed before I saw Gurraacha again. During this time, I was searching for educational possibilities based on our initial conversation. We had planned to meet at East Lake Library to discuss the possibilities I had found, but a few minutes before our meeting, Gurraacha called and told me he had discovered his car had a flat tire and it was important that he get it repaired right away. He was eager to talk though. In fact, he was outside the library in the parking lot, so he asked if I would be able to come with him and talk on the way to the tire repair shop. I agreed, recognizing that this would give us more time to talk than meeting somewhere near where he was going, which I had planned to suggest when he told me the problem.

As we drove to the tire repair shop, Gurraacha explained that he suspected the nail in his tire was an act of vandalism, targeted at him because he was an Oromo activist. A few weeks prior someone had broken one of his car's windows. He briefly explained the tension between Oromo people and other Ethiopian ethnic groups, which, at the time, I knew little about. Like many others living in Minnesota, I was aware of the large Oromo refugee population in the state, but did not know much about the circumstances that forced them to leave Ethiopia. Through my work with Gurraacha, I was to learn much more. The meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life is directly related to his experiences of persecution as an Oromo person and his activist work defending the

human rights of Oromo people against violations perpetrated by the Ethiopian government.

Life Stories and Our Search for Educational Possibilities

This chapter is an interpretive retelling of life stories that Gurraacha told me about several recent experiences, specifically experiences he has had since we met. When Gurraacha originally told these stories, he was narrating experiences in the context of our search for educational possibilities, often describing experiences directly related to it. I retell these stories as the first part of our collaborative reconstruction of his life history, which supports this search as it continues. Gurraacha's interest in human rights advocacy guides this search, and, for this reason, it also serves as an interpretive guide that I follow in our reconstruction of his life history. In what ways is the meaning of human rights advocacy presently growing in Gurraacha's life? I ask. My interpretations seek answers to this question.

In my interpretations, I identify two major trajectories of meaning in Gurraacha's life. That is, by establishing connections between narrated experiences in the past and potential experiences in the future, I identify ways in which the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in Gurraacha's life. Both trajectories build his identity as a human rights defender, an identity that includes his activist identity but enlarges its scope. The United Nations (1998) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders explains that human rights defenders contribute to "the effective elimination of all violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms of peoples and individuals" (p. 39). The first trajectory of meaning involves his efforts to influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. The second

involves his efforts to organize the Oromo diaspora to support protests in Ethiopia, which is the most recent form of many years of activist work. My interpretations are oriented towards ways of supporting the continued growth of meaning along these trajectories through our search for educational possibilities.

Beginning Gurraacha's life history with retellings of life stories about recent experiences provides a foundation for interpreting life stories about experiences further in the past, which I retell in the next chapter. Through my interpretations, I describe how Gurraacha's life stories support the realization of educational possibilities through our work together. Life stories reveal trajectories of meaning, and, in doing so, they strengthen educational relationships, including the relationship between Gurraacha and me. This relationship is primarily an educational relationship.

Gurraacha and I met at the beginning of October 2015. The stories in this chapter are about experiences that took place in the six months that followed. Gurraacha told me stories about these experiences in the context of our developing educational relationship in which I provided support as the meaning of human rights advocacy continued to grow in Gurraacha's life. This support often took the form discussing recent experiences and making plans for pursuing new possibilities.

Soon after we met, Gurraacha heard about a bill that was being drafted by Congressman Keith Ellison, who represents Minnesota's Fifth District. Gurraacha and I are both constituents. When Gurraacha contacted Keith Ellison's staff to inquire about the bill and offer to provide feedback, he was asked to send a brief biographical

statement. At the beginning of our work together, we focused on this possibility.

Gurraacha and I met several times to discuss his drafts and make revisions.

While we were working on his biographical statement, protests began in Ethiopia. This added urgency to our work. Soon after sending his biographical statement, Gurraacha met with Omar, a member of Congressman Ellison's staff. Omar sent him a copy of the draft bill to comment on. Before his meeting with Omar, Gurraacha and I met to discuss what he hoped to accomplish at the meeting. After the meeting, we met and discussed the new possibilities it had created. In addition, I met with Gurraacha several times to discuss the comments he was planning to send and the possibilities that might come from this opportunity to be involved in the legislative process.

A few weeks later, Gurraacha was invited by a group of Oromo community members to a meeting they had arranged with Congressman Ellison. He provided an update on the protests to Congressman Ellison, which were still continuing. These protests continued throughout our work and have shaped much of it. Gurraacha and I discussed what he hoped to accomplish before this meeting as well.

While beginning this legislative advocacy, Gurraacha continued his other activist work. One part of this work was a plan to make a documentary explaining the protests. Gurraacha and I met with filmmakers who he thought might be interested in working on the project, and I arranged access to filmmaking equipment. Although Gurraacha's plans to make a documentary were not realized, the support I offered was an important part of how our educational relationship initially developed. In addition to providing a space for

reflective conversations, I was also willing to become directly involved in Gurraacha's work and contribute other forms of support.

The stories that follow focus on activities related to Gurraacha's legislative advocacy and his efforts to organize support for the protests in Ethiopia that began in November 2015. In my retelling, I contextualize the stories in our search for educational possibilities. As described in the previous chapter, these stories are organized chronologically based on the events narrated rather than the order in which the stories were told. This organization creates interpretive opportunities for understanding the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life by juxtaposing different contexts of telling during our search for educational possibilities.

Ethiopia Human Rights Act of 2016

In November 2015, Gurraacha heard that Congressman Ellison was drafting a bill about human rights in Ethiopia and was seeking feedback from someone with a background in Ethiopian law. Gurraacha had studied law as an undergraduate at Addis Ababa University and was excited about drawing on this expertise to provide feedback. We discussed how he could become involved in the U.S. legislative process and influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia.

This was the beginning of Gurraacha's legislative advocacy, which is one important way that the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in his life. While reflecting on this beginning four months later, after Gurraacha had sent his feedback on the draft bill, I realized that I did not know how he had originally heard about it. "How

did you hear they were drafting legislation?” I asked, wondering if the details might suggest other possibilities.

In response to my question, Gurraacha provided more than these details. He told a story that explained not just how he had heard about the draft bill, but how he came to know the person who told him about it. This story did suggest other possibilities, but not the kind I had been expecting. “There is a friend of mine called Odaa,” Gurraacha said. “After I came, he tried to introduce me to many of his friends. He's someone like me, who really suffered a lot in his childhood, maybe in his early age.”

Many of the people Gurraacha knows in the Oromo diaspora share experiences of suffering, a result of repressive practices by the Ethiopian government, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and murder (Advocates for Human Rights, 2009). When Gurraacha told this story, we had been working together for almost five months. I knew that Gurraacha was well connected in the Oromo diaspora community, and I had heard him attribute some of those connections to the bonds created by shared suffering. As Gurraacha suggested, his relationship with Odaa formed because they recognized that they had both suffered in similar ways.

By beginning the story in this way, Gurraacha was drawing attention to the “interpersonal grounds of suffering” (Kleinman et al, 1997, p. ix). Indeed, by telling this story rather than simply providing the details I requested, he conveyed, as he often does, that the suffering he has experienced is not his alone. It is shared, a collective experience. Of course, I had not suggested that Gurraacha should only provide the details. The ways that stories like this one had informed our search for educational possibilities over the

preceding months had made it clear that my questions were invitations to tell stories. Reference to social suffering in Gurraacha's stories, nevertheless remains challenging for me to negotiate in our conversations. Doing so requires recognizing the educational value of such experiences, while not forgetting the pain associated with them.

"I think one of his uncles disappeared," Gurraacha continued, "and he didn't know whether he was alive or not. When new people come from home, Odaa usually asks. That's how he approached me, whether his uncle is in prison or not, whether we see him or not. And the last time he was seen."

Gurraacha then connected this story about Odaa's suffering to his own, specifically the three years he had been imprisoned in Ethiopia. "Actually he got better information from us. One of the people in the prison with me, I heard him talk about Odaa's uncle. He said the guy spent the night with him in his house. And he left to go somewhere, and he was taken in between. I didn't know after that where he was taken. He was not in prisons. Nobody can know whether he was killed, whether he is alive or not. And Odaa usually tries to find out that."

Because of his experience of suffering, Gurraacha was able to help Odaa get information about his uncle. The specific ways in which he and Odaa shared this suffering led to a new relationship, which provided Gurraacha with educational support. Such connections are necessary for understanding the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life. The suffering he has experienced contributes to its meaning.

And, moreover, these connections lead to the continued growth of meaning, which Gurraacha explained next. “Then we keep on talking. He told me about World Without Genocide. Ellen, she's the director. This motivated me to work with Americans.”

World Without Genocide is a human rights organization based at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota. Going to law school is another educational possibility that Gurraacha and I have discussed. Continuing his legal studies is one way he could build his identity as a human rights defender. When I read about World Without Genocide later, I recognized that Mitchell Hamline School of Law might be a law school that Gurraacha would like to attend because of the attention to human rights issues indicated by this affiliation.

“So Odaa was a big part of you trying to have some effect on U.S. policy?” I asked, recognizing that Odaa had done more than just give Gurraacha information about the draft bill. He had suggested the possibility of working with Americans through his relationship with Ellen.

“Yes,” Gurraacha said, “and he is the one who told me about this draft bill. He told me they want somebody with a legal background to check it. So he gave me Omar's phone number.” Omar is one of Congressman Ellison’s staff members, the person who Gurraacha initially contacted about the draft bill.

When Gurraacha tells me life stories, I listen for connections to past experiences and future possibilities and interpret the specific ways in which the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in his life and could grow more. My ability to identify these connections is shaped by the similarities and differences with my own experiences. More

specifically, I have not experienced suffering in the way Gurraacha and other Oromo refugees have. Because of this difference, I am cautious when suggesting how experiences of suffering contribute to the growth of meaning in Gurraacha's life. I am cautious because of the position from which I interpret Gurraacha's experiences. As Jackson (2002) writes, "academic and bureaucratic representations of the refugee" have a "habit of constructing the refugee as victim and seeing oneself as rescuer or saviour" (p. 82). The refugee is constructed in this way, he suggests, by likening them to martyrs, sanctifying their suffering and finding meaning in their traumatic experiences. Thus, while I recognize the conditions that affect Gurraacha and other refugees, I am cautious not to let these conditions overshadow Gurraacha's specific experiences. Meaning grows through specific experiences, such as Gurraacha's relationship with Odaa. It also grows through our relationship, through the way in which his life stories guide our search for educational possibilities.

Accordingly, I cautiously follow Gurraacha's lead in identifying connections between past experiences of suffering and future possibilities related to his interest in human rights advocacy. To not do so would allow the pain of these experiences to overshadow their educational value for Gurraacha, specifically the way in which shared experiences of suffering have helped him become part of Oromo diaspora social networks in Minnesota. The possibilities offered by these social networks are likely more promising than the kind of possibilities I more often identify, such as those created by connections to Mitchell Hamline School of Law and other Americans with whom Gurraacha could work. It was through his relationship with Odaa that Gurraacha saw new

possibilities for continuing his activist work in the diaspora, specifically working with Americans who are interested in human rights issues, including those Americans who shape U.S. policy towards Ethiopia.

Protests Begin in Ethiopia

When Gurraacha contacted Omar and offered to provide feedback, Omar asked him to send a biographical statement. After writing a draft, Gurraacha asked me to help him revise it. Helping him revise provided support for the realization of this possibility as well as an opportunity to get to know Gurraacha better. Like the story he had told me when we first met, his biographical statement was the story of his life. However, this story was told for a different purpose. While it did explain his interest in human rights advocacy, its purpose was to establish his qualifications for providing feedback on the draft bill. We recognized that this biographical statement—this specific life story—could open up new educational possibilities for Gurraacha as he pursued his interest in human rights advocacy. It was in the context of our work on his biographical statement and the hope related to the possibilities it offered for influencing U.S. policy towards Ethiopia that I first learned about the protests that had begun outside of Addis Ababa.

On November 30th, 2015, I texted Gurraacha asking if he wanted more help with his biographical statement. “How’s your bio coming along?” I wrote. “Do you want to schedule another time to work on it together?”

He replied three days later with an apology and a request for support. “I am so sorry for failing to get back to you as soon as I saw your text. I have been pretty busy with my own job schedules and the unrest going on back home. There is a protest going

on and 3 students killed so far many hundreds arrested. You may follow on social media #OromoProtests. So I didn't complete that bio so please let's do it together. This is the time I need your help badly and I want to consult with you on how to go about what's going and how to really get international media attention.”

The protests Gurraacha referred to had begun on November 12th. They were peaceful protests in response to the government transferring ownership of land in a town outside of Addis Ababa to private investors (Amnesty International, 2016). This kind of land grab had been anticipated for over a year. A copy of the Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan, which would involve forced evictions of Oromo farmers from lands near the city, was leaked in 2014. Protesters were concerned that the government was moving forward with the Master Plan. The protests escalated on December 1st when government security forces killed three student protesters. The violent response by the government was not surprising. Similar protests in May 2014, Gurraacha later told me, had resulted in 75 deaths.

I was at East Lake Library working at the Dream Desk when I received Gurraacha’s reply. I had been planning to leave soon, but I told him I could stay if he would like to meet. I had been unsure of how to respond to the message because of the reference to suffering—to the killing of three protesters and the grief it implied. Was Gurraacha feeling grief? The message did not indicate it. He seemed focused on action, on responding to these killings as human rights violations.

In my reply, I conveyed my understanding of the seriousness of the event by offering to meet immediately. “No need to apologize,” I wrote. “I understand. Let's meet

soon. I'm at the library now. I was planning to leave soon but I could stay if you can meet before 7. If not, let me know when you can meet.” When I sent this message, I felt it was inadequate. While I wrote that I understood, this understanding was limited. I understood enough to know that Gurraacha owed me no apology, but beyond that I did not understand what feelings were motivating Gurraacha’s desire to respond urgently. As a white American man, I have no comparable experience of suffering. I do not know the experience of such government-sanctioned violence personally as Gurraacha does. When Gurraacha and I discussed this story, he explained how these difficult experiences had become part of him. Many of his friends have been arrested, and some have been killed. When he was in prison, he saw many people killed. These experiences, he said, have changed how he feels grief. He feels sad, he said, but he has become accustomed to it.

These differences in our experiences made the reference to suffering in Gurraacha’s text message difficult to negotiate. It was even more difficult to negotiate than the reference to suffering in the story he told me about Odaa. This suffering—the killing of these three students—was not only more immediate, it was also more directly a part of Gurraacha’s educational experience. It was providing the motivation to continue his human rights advocacy work, and it was the basis for his request for support from me. As I continued to reflect on what felt inadequate in my text message, I recognized that it was not only my limited ability to understand Gurraacha’s suffering but also my limited ability to acknowledge it. As Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997) explain “to be ignorant or incapable of imagining another person’s pain does not signal blindness in moral sensibility in the same way in which the incapacity to *acknowledge* that pain does” (p.

xiii). The challenge of negotiating references to suffering involves acknowledging this suffering adequately.

In addition to the uncertainty caused by my limited understanding and the anxieties about my inadequate response, I was concerned that Gurraacha might be expecting more support than I could provide. While I could search for people who knew more about how to get international media attention, I might not be able to find someone quickly enough, and I could offer no advice on this myself. Offering to meet immediately, while a form of acknowledgment, would be inconsequential if I was unable to provide the support Gurraacha was hoping for.

Gurraacha and I met the next day, but only for a short time. Gurraacha could not make it at the time we had originally planned because his work schedule had changed unexpectedly. Gurraacha works as a driver. He drives three families' children from their home to school in the morning and back in the afternoon. Between those times, he is usually free, but his schedule can sometimes change. While this work allows him a lot of time to continue his activism, it can sometimes interrupt it. This is one form of educational inequality that affects Gurraacha. The time he is able to dedicate to human rights advocacy is limited by the time he must spend earning a living through work that is unrelated. In this case, his work took him away from a meeting that felt urgent because of these protests.

Because of this sense of urgency, we talked very little about his biographical statement when we met and instead focused on the protests. Gurraacha drew a map of Ethiopia and explained the political tensions that resulted from a system of decentralized

regional governments that had been intended to give ethnic groups control over their own regions, while the federal government was effectively controlled by only one ethnic group, the Tigrayans, represented by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This tension is especially strong in Addis Ababa, he continued, because it is both the national capital of Ethiopia and the regional capital of Oromia.

My concern that Gurraacha was expecting more support than I could provide was unfounded. The educational support I could provide was valuable to him. This educational support was, as Varenne (2008), explains a process of “discovery, explanation, and reconstitution,” a process of figuring out what to do next by investigating the conditions that Gurraacha was facing. The story Gurraacha told was a way of figuring out what to do next. It led us to identify several next steps, including finishing his biographical statement.

Gurraacha and I scheduled another meeting for the next day to work on his biographical statement together. I could feel a new sense of urgency in what previously had been only a promising possibility. Gurraacha's story about the protests, which connected directly with his own experiences as a protester, compelled me to participate more actively. I had talked with Gurraacha about finding additional writing support, but now I knew that would not be able to happen soon enough for this specific writing project. When we met the next day, we finished revising his biographical statement. He then emailed it to Omar and expressed his interest again in reviewing Congressman Ellison's draft bill.

The brief story that Gurraacha told me in his text message and the more detailed version he told me the next day introduced the second trajectory of meaning, specifically his efforts to organize the Oromo diaspora to support protests in Ethiopia. While these efforts certainly did not begin at this time, it was these stories that introduced this trajectory into our work directly and with urgency. It also introduced how these two trajectories affect each other. Our plans to work on his biographical statement were set aside while he told me plans for response to the protests. The immediate action demanded by supporting the protests in Ethiopia added urgency to his efforts to influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia while also taking time and energy away from them.

Meeting with Omar

Shortly after Gurraacha sent his biographical statement, Omar, a member of Congressman Ellison's staff, replied and suggested they meet to discuss their work on Ethiopia. Gurraacha texted me after he received this message and asked if I could talk on the phone. The meeting was the next day. I was unable to talk when he texted, so I suggested we meet in the morning.

After Gurraacha updated me on the protests, I focused the conversation on our immediate task. "What do you hope to accomplish at the meeting?" I asked. We did not have much time to talk about this important meeting, so I wanted to make sure that we used most of our time to focus on the possibilities it offered.

Gurraacha had clear objectives. "To inform them about the current situation in Ethiopia," he said, "and ask that Ellison not support aid to Ethiopia unless it include accountability." This is the basis of Gurraacha's interest in U.S. policy towards Ethiopia.

It is part of his human rights advocacy work because the U.S. provides aid that directly supports the TPLF staying in power and indirectly supports the suppression of Oromo dissent.

While I have come to think of the two trajectories of meaning that guide our search for educational possibilities separately, this is only a practical distinction to organize our work. As this story shows, they are not isolated from one another and attending to their relationship is important. Gurraacha had hoped to influence this bill before the protests began. Now, he was able to use the urgency of the current situation to compel action. Indeed, I felt how the new urgency of our work together had compelled me. Additionally, attending to the relationship between these two trajectories of meaning helped me recognize how I am not only involved through the educational support I provide Gurraacha but how I am implicated as a citizen of the United States.

While my role is indirect and remote, I wondered if this symbolic level of our relationship was significant. The intervention of the United States could affect the situation in Ethiopia dramatically, but U.S. policy calls for only minimal intervention in human rights violations and, thus, does not acknowledge the suffering of the Oromo people as a result of U.S. aid. In addition, I recognized that I am likely among those Americans that Gurraacha knows best. For these reasons, I felt compelled to provide as much support to Gurraacha as I was able to, but I recognized that this feeling could lead to reproducing a victim/rescuer relationship. When Gurraacha and I discussed this story, he explained that all he wants from American citizens is that they know their tax money

is used against innocent people in Ethiopia. He hopes that with this knowledge Americans will push the U.S. government to change its policy towards Ethiopia.

As we discussed Gurraacha's plan for the meeting further, we identified two additional goals, first for him to find out what was in the bill and then to offer to be involved if it was something that interested him. Our meeting was brief, focused entirely on identifying and clarifying these goals. We made a list, and Gurraacha left with a clear agenda for the meeting. It seemed to me that Gurraacha would have had no problem preparing for the meeting on his own if I had not been able to meet. Certainly there are other people that could provide Gurraacha with better advice on this sort of meeting. Indeed, later I found that Advocates for Human Rights had published a guide for activists working in diaspora communities (Advocates for Human Rights, 2014) that included specific advice on meeting with legislators and their staff members. At some point, it will be important to create connections with people who are more familiar with the process of legislative advocacy, but at the time it was enough for me to imagine a successful meeting with him. In fact, discussing the meeting, rather than referring him to information about such meetings was more important at this point. It provided Gurraacha with an opportunity to tell more life stories.

This kind of life story is an important part of our work together, and it is an important part of how our collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history supports our search for educational possibilities. This story was about events in the near future, about possible experiences. By including it in this reconstruction, it has the effect of "sideshadowing." Sideshadowing, according to Morson (1994) is a narrative feature

that shows alternatives to the events that actually happened. “Two or more alternative presents, the actual and the possible, are made simultaneously visible,” thus emphasizing a sense of possibility in the remembered present moments of the past (p. 118). For example, Gurraacha and I had previously been assuming that the draft bill was directly related to Gurraacha’s interests. In this conversation, we considered it might not be. Also, in this story, we were both positioning Gurraacha as consultant, someone offering expertise, not simply the concerns of a constituent. We imagined this identity for Gurraacha in this story anticipating his meeting with Omar and in Gurraacha’s biographical statement. It is an identity of a human rights defender. Retelling this story reminds us how we had hoped the meeting would go, and how that is related to what actually happened.

The next day, I texted Gurraacha and asked him about the meeting. I was hoping that Gurraacha could become very involved in the bill drafting process and, in this way further build his identity as a human rights defender. I had been thinking about how Gurraacha might be able to align the work he does to support himself financially with his activist work. While this particular meeting did not offer specific possibilities, it seemed to move Gurraacha in that direction.

“My yesterday's meeting was great,” he wrote. “I just started by welcoming him. He told me that he had been to Ethiopia. Then I briefed him about what's going on about the protest. Then we get to the draft bill issue. He told me the bill was initiated by Oakland Institute. It is more of environmental justice. I think he didn't read the attachment of my background so he listened to me. He said he'll send the draft so that

they can revise it, just a voluntary thing. But he mentioned to me people who I should talk to and who I should contact. In general I am successful.”

Gurraacha called before I could reply. We talked about the meeting. I was a little disappointed that Omar hadn't read his biographical statement. I thought the story was a compelling one, and that the story itself could open up more possibilities. Gurraacha did not seem disappointed. The meeting had achieved what we had hoped. Omar had agreed to send him a copy of the draft bill, although it sounded like the bill might be different than Gurraacha expected. Omar had also told Gurraacha about other people he could connect with, other people Gurraacha could contact to extend his legislative advocacy work.

However, I still felt disappointed about Gurraacha's biographical statement going unread, and I have wondered why I felt this if Gurraacha was unconcerned. Reading the biographical statement would be form of recognition, recognition by this representative of the U.S. government, a government that Gurraacha was trying to influence through his human rights advocacy work. My vision for a more educational society that guides my work at the Dream Desk is the source of this disappointment. It is based on the vision articulated by Dewey and Watson (1937) in which all of life is educational. I had hoped that Gurraacha's biographical statement could contribute to the growth in meaning of human rights advocacy in his life by providing this recognition, a recognition of Gurraacha as a human rights defender, which holds possibilities for Gurraacha to develop his legislative advocacy efforts. While this vision for a more educational society is not always aligned with Gurraacha's expectations, it is an important part of our relationship

and my educational role. It suggests that experiences such as this one could be more educational.

While recounting what he had told Omar about the current situation in Ethiopia, Gurraacha told me how the protests were developing. The protests, he said, have been successful. They are growing larger and getting more attention. And, while that is a sign of success, it also means the suffering is increasing. Stories about the Ethiopian government's violent response and the suffering it has caused connect with many of Gurraacha's experiences. They motivate his action, and they motivate mine too.

A few months later, Gurraacha told a brief story about this meeting when I asked him for more details on this success. Reflecting on successes and frustrations helps guide our search for educational possibilities. "Do you remember what felt successful about meeting with Omar?"

"We discussed about the situation in Ethiopia in general," Gurraacha said, "and he seems to understand and said they were working towards that. And why successful was the first thing. The main important thing we wanted from him was the bill, right? The draft bill."

"Right," I confirmed, recognizing that this was Gurraacha's main goal.

"So he sent me that. So it's on the right track to go forward," Gurraacha said, emphasizing how the achievement of this goal opened up new possibilities.

Looking back after a few months, the brief story focuses on this outcome. At the time, we were revising the draft bill that Omar had sent, so it was also the focus of our present work. We did not yet know how it would move forward and what would come

next. However, new possibilities were discernable. In addition to getting a copy of the draft bill, Gurraacha had received important information about the bill, specifically that it was initiated by the Oakland Institute, a human rights organization that he was familiar with.

When Gurraacha told these stories, he and I were negotiating our identities in relation to each other. We were trying to position Gurraacha as a human rights defender with expertise on the topic of the draft bill. I was recognizing the symbolic level of our relationship, the effect that my identity as an American may have on our work together. In my retelling, these negotiations continue.

Making a Documentary

When Gurraacha first told me about the protests, he said he would like to make a documentary to get more attention. The goal of the documentary, he explained, was to document the protests and draw attention to the violent response from the Ethiopian government. After his meeting with Omar, he told me more about these plans.

“The situation in Ethiopia is getting worse,” Gurraacha said. “Now twenty-five people have been killed. The most important thing right now is to make a documentary to get more attention.” Gurraacha had access to many videos and pictures, which protesters had posted to social media and sent to him. His plan was to edit these into a brief documentary along with interviews explaining the protests.

I had seen some of these videos and pictures. Several had been posted with the #oromoprotests hashtag that Gurraacha had suggested I follow. They included graphic images of some of the protesters who had been injured and killed. As Katherine Verdery

(1999) explains, dead bodies are often used as political symbols. One aspect of their symbolic efficacy is the way in which they engage the emotions through identification with life stories. The specific images that I saw were images of students who had been killed. Their youth was emphasized, and several comments lamented that these students were too young to die.

With these images in mind, I asked Gurraacha if he knew any Oromo filmmakers. “I can help find a filmmaker if necessary,” I said, “but someone who already knows about the situation and is invested in making a film about it would be best.” I was concerned about the ways in which an American filmmaker might appropriate these images. As Kleinman and Kleinman (1997) describe, images of suffering are regularly appropriated for professional and commercial gain. While they argue that appropriation is sometimes valid, I was not confident in my ability to quickly find a filmmaker who would be sensitive to these ethical issues. “To develop valid appropriations,” Kleinman and Kleinman explain, it is important to “first make sure that the biases of commercial emphasis on profit-making, the partisan agendas of political ideologies, and the narrow technical interests that serve primarily professional groups are understood and their influence controlled” (p. 18). It was ultimately Gurraacha’s decision whether he wanted to work with an Oromo filmmaker or an American filmmaker, but I felt it was my responsibility to at least consider these ethical issues because of the negative effect an appropriation of these images could have on Gurraacha’s educational experience, which included how the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life was growing through making a documentary.

Gurraacha said he had a filmmaker in mind and would find out if he was interested. We then talked briefly about the other kinds of support that I could provide. I told him that Learning Dreams has a partnership with a media arts organization that supports independent filmmakers, so I could arrange access to equipment and consultations with other filmmakers if needed. Gurraacha is well connected to the Oromo diaspora community and the human rights advocacy community, so it is by offering connections outside of those communities that I can be most helpful in our work together. Such connections, by extending Gurraacha's social network, open up new educational possibilities.

Gurraacha thanked me for my support. "It's very helpful to have someone to share what I'm thinking about with," he said. This expression of gratitude reassured me that even without these connections, the educational support I was providing was helpful. The urgency of the situation and the complex ethical considerations were making it difficult for me to find new possibilities. I was, however, available to listen to Gurraacha's stories and discuss his plans. Our discussion of these stories, I recognized, offered a way of exploring educational possibilities that was no less valuable than other contributions I could make to our search.

Over the next few weeks, Gurraacha searched for a filmmaker to work on the project, and I arranged access to filmmaking equipment. Gurraacha and I met with two filmmakers who were considering being a part of the project, but neither was able to invest the time and energy needed. Gurraacha continued searching for a filmmaker, but

most of his energy was required for more direct forms of response to the protests, which were continuing to grow wider and stronger.

One of the consequences of the increasing strength of the protests was the increasing violence of the Ethiopian government's response. On December 17th, 2015, Gurraacha texted me another update about the protests. Similar to the previous text message update, it was part of an apology. We had planned to meet and discuss next steps for producing the documentary, but Gurraacha was unable to come to the meeting.

"I am very sorry for not responding or showing up to the library," he wrote. "I have been a little bit busy with the protest that is happening and also somehow mobilizing people. They tell me they have 72 confirmed killed so far. It's really sad. Let me know when you will be coming to library. I will meet you tomorrow or the day after tomorrow no problem."

Unlike with previous messages, I was unable to respond immediately. I was working at the Dream Desk and meeting with other people. I could have responded the next day, but I was again unsure about what to write, and I was unable to meet when Gurraacha suggested. Moreover, Gurraacha's expression of sadness was new. While the message was still focused on the action needed, this was the first time Gurraacha had shared his feelings about the protests with me directly, and I was uncertain about how to respond in a text message.

As a result of this uncertainty, I decided not to address these feelings until we could talk in person. "It wasn't a problem," I wrote, letting him know again that he owed

me no apology. “The end of the week was a little busy but let's meet soon. Are you free on Tuesday?”

When we met, I asked Gurraacha how he was feeling. I had come to know Gurraacha well over the preceding two months and was concerned. This concern was complicated by our search for educational possibilities. The meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha’s life was growing through these protests. Because they coincided with the beginning of his legislative advocacy, stories about them were incorporated into this work. They were also prompting an exploration of new forms of activism, such as making a documentary. Yet, at the same time, they were a source of sadness and continued suffering.

In response to my question, Gurraacha showed me pictures of some of the people who had been arrested. They were only a small group of many more who had been arrested, he explained. He identified with these prisoners of conscience. Like them, he had been arrested for his participation in the protests. While he was sad about the situation and feared for how these prisoners would be treated, the fact that it was so similar to what he had experienced more than fifteen years before compelled him to act. Gurraacha was planning to disseminate the pictures through social media. His plan for the documentary was the same. A large part of his activist work in the diaspora takes place on social media. It is one way he can influence the situation in Ethiopia. These stories compelled me to act too. While still uncertain, I was beginning to recognize how the educational support I was providing Gurraacha might be the most important way I could take action.

Meeting with Congressman Ellison

On December 21st, 2015, Gurraacha and a small group of Oromo community members met with Congressman Ellison. They told him about the protests and explained the demands of the Oromo community. Earlier that morning, Gurraacha had texted me to let me know.

“I think I'm going to meet Congressman Keith Ellison this afternoon,” Gurraacha wrote, “I am one of the 15 people selected to meet him at his office by Oromo community of Minnesota. Maybe they give me 10 minutes. I wish I can have some time to discuss with you. The meeting is at 2 PM do you have some time before that? I was told yesterday. It was very short notice.”

I was not able to meet with Gurraacha because I had other meetings already scheduled, but I was able to talk with him on the phone while he was on his way to the meeting. He said he was planning to begin with his personal experiences leading protests like the kind taking place in Ethiopia and then conclude with what Congressman Ellison could do to address these problems, specifically to issue a bill.

I suggested that he emphasize how the two parts are connected, how his personal experiences led to his current recommendations. Through our work together, I had come to understand the significance of this connection. I thought it would add credibility to his account of the protests and, in doing so, open up more possibilities for the meaning of human rights advocacy to grow in his life. I was imagining specifically the way such a story could develop his identity as a human rights defender. I also assured him that, no matter how he organized his presentation, it would be effective. Indeed, I found the brief

summary he had given me to be very compelling. He was drawing on his personal experiences as an activist and a victim of persecution to establish a connection with the people in Ethiopia who were protesting and meeting with violent responses from the government.

My suggestion was based on an understanding of the way in which Gurraacha's life stories had affected me and on the way in which the meaning of human rights advocacy was growing in his life through the telling of such stories. I hoped that his meeting with Congressman Ellison, like his meeting with Omar, would be an educational experience in which his stories of persecution and suffering could be transformed into the political effects he desired. The suggestion was another expression of my vision for a more educational society, a way of emphasizing the significance of this meeting in relation to Gurraacha's human rights defender identity.

Gurraacha told me more about the meeting a couple months later when we were reflecting on his efforts to influence U.S. policy. "That meeting was requested by Oromo community," he said. "It was at Ellison's office. So the Oromo community met, called up about fifteen people. I was one of them so actually they tasked me to present about the situation. That task was given to me. I have to just prepare that presentation. And I made that."

"Yeah, I remember we talked on the phone about that one, just before. So you were the one that gave the presentation? Did the others talk also?" I was curious what kind of leadership role Gurraacha had been in at this meeting and, more specifically, if he

was able to present himself not only as a leader in the Oromo diaspora but a human rights defender as well.

“After awhile, yes,” he said.

“But you gave an initial presentation,” I said, confirming Gurraacha’s prominent position at the meeting.

“Yes,” Gurraacha said. “I just started from the background, how displacement was happening in Oromia, especially around capital, Addis Ababa. About the 2014 protest and the master plan and its effect. And then about the protest going on right now. And all the casualties and the killings and the arrests. Then what we need, what Oromos demand.”

“Did you tell him any more of your personal story?” I asked and then reminded Gurraacha of our conversation before the meeting. “I remember we talked about that, about how much of that you should include or not.” I was curious if his story had the effect that I had hoped. Certainly, Gurraacha had learned a lot about legislative advocacy through this process so far, but did he feel that this representative of the U.S. government had acknowledged his suffering? His presentation, it seemed, could be an opportunity to reconstruct the meaning of these experiences from a position in which he was recognized as a human rights defender and to understand the meaning of these experiences in the context of U.S. policy towards Ethiopia.

“Just very brief, I didn't get to details,” Gurraacha said.

“Yeah, the more important thing was what the Oromo people need right now,” I said, recognizing that my educational focus and vision for a more educational society

might not be aligned with the more important practical goals of the meeting. “Do you remember what you asked for?”

“Actually he already gave us the letter he drafted to Secretary John Kerry and he also gave us a hard copy of the draft bill,” Gurraacha said. “We demanded the release of political prisoners and this to be included in the letters or in the draft bill too.”

“Did that meeting feel successful like the meeting with Omar?” I asked.

“Yes, I think so. Maybe I didn't narrate my personal experience,” Gurraacha said.

While I appreciated that Gurraacha was considering my suggestion that his personal story was important to tell in this situation, I did not think the meeting was any less successful because he had not told this story. “Well, you don't necessarily need to. Maybe you had already established the fact that you had that kind of personal experience,” I said.

“Yeah, so actually the program was tight,” Gurraacha explained.” like ten minutes or fifteen minutes, so I had to address what's going on. Update him on that. So I didn't.”

While I understood, I nevertheless felt disappointed. I felt disappointed in the same way I had when Gurraacha reported that Omar had not read his biographical statement. It is important to emphasize that I was not disappointed in Gurraacha. I was disappointed in the way that this part of the political system did not provide enough space for the kind of educational experience I saw as a possibility. The disappointment was not simply because of a lack of acknowledgment of Gurraacha's suffering. It was because of a lack of acknowledgment of how those experiences have led him to an interest in human rights advocacy. Additionally, I was concerned that a meeting in which the meaning of

these experiences was not recognized could position Gurraacha as a victim rather than a defender of human rights.

Protests Continue

On December 24th, 2015, members of the Oromo community in Minnesota protested in front of the State Capitol Building in St. Paul. Gurraacha had told me about this protest when it was being planned. Organizers had hoped to bring people together earlier to coordinate with other protests taking place in the Oromo diaspora in other cities and countries. Several articles from the local media covered this event and explained why the Oromo community was protesting at the State Capitol specifically. As Mukhtar Ibrahim (2016) reported for Minnesota Public Radio, protesters were urging “the U.S. government to stop providing assistance to the Ethiopian government, which largely relies on development aid from foreign donors.” This was the same day that Congressman Ellison issued a press release containing the letter that he and his fellow representatives, Betty McCollum and Tom Emmer, had sent to Secretary of State John Kerry.

The urgency to Gurraacha’s work was clear. Most of our meetings since the beginning of the protests were focused on related urgent tasks. In mid-January, I asked Gurraacha to tell me more. He began by elaborating on the statistics that he had been telling me in brief updates.

“The protest began, I think, on November 12th. Yesterday is two months. So after that people are protesting. Students are protesting all over, every university, every high school. So how has the government responded? Violently, killed 200 so far, some say. Actually 140 is reported by every media, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty. Even

yesterday, there is a report, 160, I think that's reliable, 160 people. And some go til 200. So people killed is this much. Number of people arrested, some take it to 30,000.”

“30,000?” I asked, unsure if I had heard Gurraacha correctly.

“Yeah.”

“30,000?” I asked again in disbelief.

“Yeah, and more than 4,000 OFC members are arrested.” The Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) is an opposition party in Ethiopia. Gurraacha, like an increasing number of people in the Oromo diaspora, is a supporter of this party.

“I didn't realize it was that many,” I said, explaining my disbelief. Gurraacha had mentioned arbitrary arrests but he had never reported any numbers.

“Always they arrest everybody when they can't stop the protest,” Gurraacha said. “They don't even arrest in prison. They arrest in everything, in every warehouse and whatever.”

“So the prisons can't even hold the number of people they've arrested,” I said. While I had been seeing Gurraacha regularly since the protests began and had been receiving frequent updates from him, I had simply not realized the scale.

“Almost they arrest everybody,” Gurraacha continued. “So the number of people wounded is more than 2,000.” And then he described how the Ethiopian government has responded to the demands of the protesters. “The protest has continued. Yesterday they came up and said that they have not cancelled the Master Plan. They will be considering the Urban Proclamation.”

“Considering what?” I asked. I did not know anything about the Urban Proclamation.

“Urban Proclamation is a proclamation which they made on Oromia cities. It allowed the federal government to intervene in all Oromia cities,” Gurraacha explained. “The constitution under Article 49, Sub 5, it says Oromia shall have a special interest over the capital Addis Ababa because Addis Ababa is within Oromia. It's on Oromo land in the heart of Oromia. They also said the details will be determined by law. So it's not yet determined. They didn't make any proclamation on that, on how Oromo benefits from Addis Ababa and what kind of relationship Oromia Regional State will have with Addis Ababa city administration.

“So they said they will be working on these three issues, the master plan cancelled, revising the Urban Proclamation, and they will be working on this special interest over Addis Ababa. However, still the OPDO or the Oromia regional government don't have power to do this. Maybe TPLF told them to declare this.” The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) ostensibly represents the Oromo people, but is known to be controlled by the TPLF (Tuso, 2006).

Gurraacha explained the relationship between these parties as he continued. “If the OPDO had power they would have made their own president. They want Abadula. He now is the speaker of the federal parliament. They want him, but TPLF don't allow him because he is strong. The people love him, but the TPLF don't want him. Even among the OPDO, there are strong OPDOs who could rule, but they don't allow that. And so the regional state doesn't rule itself. Simply it's fake. So even though they declare that now to

cool down the protest, I don't think that would mean that much. It would not help that much.”

This story is about the scale and significance of the protests. While it is not about Gurraacha’s experience directly, it is a life story and thus informs our search for educational possibilities. It is one way that Gurraacha stays connected to the politics of Ethiopia. As Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) write “the political role immigrants and refugees play in both countries of origin and countries of residence” is part of a process of transnationalism that has “important implications for their sense of self” (p. 169). And it is through this changing sense of self that the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in Gurraacha’s life.

As Gurraacha had told me before, his heart is in Oromia. I reminded him of this. “At one point when you started telling me about the current protests, you said that your heart is there. You're living here in Minneapolis but your heart is in Oromia. Tell me more about what that feels like. I imagine that it feels difficult to be so far away. But I don't know for sure. Maybe you're in a better position to organize from here.” While considering how difficult the experience must be for Gurraacha, I was also thinking about the possibilities it created for him to become a human rights defender. In addition to his activist work supporting the protests, he was able to begin his efforts to influence U.S. policy. We had also begun talking about the possibility of law school, which would be yet another way to move out of a direct activist role and into an advocacy role. It is through this shift specifically that Gurraacha is recreating a sense of self in the United States.

“Yeah, the thing is because of social media I receive hundreds of inboxes every day. People send me pictures. Actually only one person has more access. That is the owner of Oromia Media Network. He got every video. They sent him videos and pictures. Actually but I have friends, hundreds of friends who were with me in prison. They communicate me. So there are my colleagues in the university, students. We studied together. They also communicate me.

“I can't say I can support it being here better, but still there is a lot to do being here. And maybe voice for the people here. And there are different ways to support them being here even though I'm not physically there. I don't think they allow me anymore. I know there is a risk to be arrested, even being killed, if I go back. The time I came, for example, I came here to study without talking on medias. Even if I go back then, even though there is that risk, that risk has doubled now.”

“Because of your activism in the diaspora community?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“Have you considered going back? I know that you ultimately would like to. When we were at the library last time you said that once the Oromo people are free and everything has been achieved that you've been working towards then you would invite me to Addis Ababa. I appreciated that. And yes I would certainly come, but there was something that surprised me about that. I didn't know that you had that very specific goal of going back. I think I was very focused on the present situation, which seems very dangerous, and not thinking about the future, about when your vision for the future is

achieved. You're probably often thinking about that vision for the future.” Recognizing this long-term goal was important for me. As Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) write

It is by no means certain that the situation [in Ethiopia] will ever be resolved; so in the same way that many other diaspora groups maintain myths of return that remain unrealized, the repatriation of the Oromos from North America may remain only a fantasy, regardless of events in Ethiopia, especially as individuals begin to establish themselves with homes and families in their new countries of residence. (p. 171)

Many of the other refugees I work with at the Dream Desk are established in this way, with homes and families, and so I often assume they do not have plans to return to their home countries. I had assumed that this was the case for Gurraacha, or rather I had not understood the contingency implied when he said he could not return because of the risk of persecution he faced. For this reason, it surprised me when he spoke with certainty about returning. My surprise was based on an assumption that the political situation would not change despite the fact that his interest in human rights advocacy and his activist efforts were oriented to this goal specifically.

“The regime will not stay in power forever,” Gurraacha explained. “It may crash in five years. It may crash in ten years.” Gurraacha understood the current regime in Ethiopia to be temporary.

“Right, you've even seen that in your lifetime,” I said. “What happened in 1991 was a complete change.” In 1991, the communist government, known as the Derg, was overthrown by a coalition of freedom fighters from several ethnic groups. The Derg had been in power since 1974, when it overthrew emperor Haile Selassie, who had ruled since 1930. As Tusso (2006) explains

there has been a fundamental psychological transformation among the Oromos with respect to their basic demands for self-determination since 1991. In many respects, the fall of the Derg during the last week of May 1991 was the most significant event in the modern political history of the Ethiopian Empire. With the demise of the Derg, the fall of the century-old Amhara power was consummated. It seems that at a subconscious level, the Oromo populace had believed for years that the Amhara power was invincible. The earth shaking political developments of May 1991 proved otherwise” (p. 166).

Gurraacha conveyed this belief in self-determination through political revolution.

“Still the way they are there would be a complete change. They are not allowing any dissent,” Gurraacha said. “If you don't give any way for air to come out, the more it fills and it will burst.”

“And there's also pressure from the outside,” I added. “Because the more they suppress dissent, the more the international community just can't stand by and allow that to happen. And that's already what's starting to happen with the possibility of the U.S. government stipulating they have to meet these conditions, not suppressing, not discriminating, to receive aid. I think that's important for me to remember that there's this vision for the future, which could be fairly soon, of a complete change in political power and maybe even this vision for unification that you've described before.” Unlike some Oromo people in the diaspora, Gurraacha's vision of political change is for unification and peace among the ethnic groups of Ethiopia rather than freedom achieved by creating an independent Oromia through secession.

“Whatever the case, the current scenario will change,” Gurraacha said, emphasizing that political revolution was inevitable, not a myth in his understanding.

Through this story imagining the end of the current regime in Ethiopia, I recognized that my own experience of the stability of government in the United States

had led me to assume the same was true in Ethiopia, despite historical evidence to the contrary. I realized that Gurraacha had been expressing this in many ways that I had not fully understood.

“When would you be able to go back?” I asked. “What would need to change for you to be able to go back?” Now I was participating more actively in imagining this future and searching for a connection with the trajectories of meaning in Gurraacha’s life.

Gurraacha paused for several seconds to think before he replied. “There should be some change. The regime should change the way it considers all opposition as enemy. They consider if you're opposition, you're enemy. That's how they consider. They just don't consider you somebody with different idea. No, they think their idea is absolute. It's the only way, the only correct way. Whatever program they have is the perfect one. Even sometimes people can elect the opposition with a mistake. The people are wrong or stupid, so if people elect some other people, the population is mistaken. Because they are perfect in their way and it is the only way, like the way of Jesus Christ. That's how they think. If they change that mentality and allow people to exercise their rights, that's okay. I can get back home anytime. And I want to do my thing there. I want to participate.”

While our search for educational possibilities had been focusing on ways for Gurraacha to participate in the United States and in the international community as a human rights defender, his ultimate goal, as he explained was to someday participate directly in Ethiopian society again. His direct activism supporting the protests thus remains important for this reason. It is one way that he can continue participating in Ethiopian politics while living in the United States.

“You'd continue organizing?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“And if it changed where there wasn't this active discrimination, how would your activist work change?” I asked, imagining a more specific possible future. “What would you like to be doing?”

“Then I can just engage in development issues,” Gurraacha said, adding detail to the possible future I had proposed. “I just engage in teaching people maybe. Maybe I'll be a professor.”

“I'm realizing how big your dream is,” I said. “All of the things we've talked about are a dream for a political restructuring in Ethiopia. And it seems that will happen. Like you said, the way things are there cannot continue forever. And the pressure that's building will probably cause a change soon.”

This was an important moment in my work with Gurraacha. The stories Gurraacha told connected the meaning of these protests with the meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. I realized then that Gurraacha's interest in human rights advocacy was a way of staying connected to his home, and it was the means to achieving a revolutionary vision. Building his identity as a human rights defender was important not only as a way of recreating a sense of self in the diaspora but also for what it could help him accomplish if he returns to Ethiopia. When Gurraacha and I discussed this story, he emphasized that while he could not know whether he would decide to return, the significance of his work as a human rights defender is valid because it is part of a quest for justice, a quest for humanity.

Comments on the Draft Bill

The protests had kept Gurraacha so busy that he had not had time to read and comment on the draft bill that Omar had sent him. He began preparing his comments two months after receiving the draft bill because he was attending a human rights conference and he expected the director of the Oakland Institute, which was the organization that had drafted the bill, to be there.

“There is this human rights event, just coming this Thursday. Speakers are Amy from Advocates for Human Rights, Congressman Keith Ellison, and director of Oakland Institute.” Gurraacha and I agreed that reading the draft bill before the conference was important in case he had a chance to talk with the authors. As Wedel, Shore, Feldman, and Lathrop (2000) explain, “public policies connect disparate actors in complex power and resource relations and play a pervasive, though often indirect, role in shaping society.” This conference offered possibilities for Gurraacha to extend his legislative advocacy further into the social networks organized around U.S. policy towards Ethiopia.

“Is it an event here in Minneapolis?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah, it's in U of M, Humphrey School.”

“Are you there to watch and listen or are you going to participate more?” I thought maybe Gurraacha was speaking at the event. I knew he had been invited to speak at similar events in the past. Gurraacha, too, is part of the social networks organized around U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. His legislative advocacy work is part of an effort to find a new position in these networks.

“Just I am invited,” he said.

“But you may be able to meet people,” I said, emphasizing these possibilities. “So what day is that?”

“Thursday the 25th.”

“Okay, let's meet sometime before Thursday. You read the draft bill, then we can discuss your notes when we meet,” I suggested.

Gurraacha and I met on Wednesday to discuss the draft bill. He had not had a chance to start reading, so we talked about possible comments as he read. We were not able to finish reading, but it seemed like a good start and would give Gurraacha something to talk about if he did meet the authors at the conference. We met again to talk about his comments on the draft bill the following week.

“How did the conference go?” I asked. “You said you couldn't stay for the whole thing.” Gurraacha had texted me a brief update mentioning he had not been able to stay for the conference, but he had not explained why. I was curious to know what happened because he had been excited about the conference.

“I have to go for work,” Gurraacha said. “I have to leave before 2. So they make a break between 1:30 or 1. Then they have to start again and it will go up to 5. So I had the first part. The second part I didn't. The first part was good, especially Anuradha, the director of Oakland Institute. Her presentation was so good.”

“Did you get to meet any of the people from Oakland Institute?” I asked.

“Yeah, I met her. I just talked to her but there were medias that wanted to interview her. I didn't have enough time during the break.”

“Yeah, that’s tough, but you got to introduce yourself,” I said. I was a little disappointed that the possibilities offered by this conference had been restricted because of Gurraacha’s work schedule. My vision for a more educational society was again the source of this disappointment. As Dewey and Watson (1937) describe “there is perhaps no deeper defect in present society than the fact that for most persons their life work is not secure, not very enjoyable, and not desirably educative” (p. 539). Many of the others at the conference were there as part of the work they do to earn a living. The fact that Gurraacha had to leave the conference—a gathering that could move him closer to finding paid work more closely aligned with his identity as a human rights defender—for unrelated work made this form of educational inequality particularly clear.

“Actually, I didn't know it was her but I had some email communication with her in 2014. When I visited World Without Genocide, someone gave me her email address. And I communicated with her on email. She said she's visiting California. And she said she'll be going to D.C. The chairman of OFC, Dr. Merera, was in D.C. by then. He had some fellowship, National Endowment for Democracy. So I also suggested she meet him directly because he's the one who can write from there, but we couldn't meet in D.C. She was busy and he was busy too. After that communication stopped. I used to see her report. Usually she tweets sometime. Also she joins our Twitter campaign.”

“You just got to talk briefly, right?”

“Very briefly. I just thanked her for the reports. And I usually see her tweets. It's wonderful. Her report is very good, deep, has a good knowledge of the issue. And I raised to her ‘I had email communication with you and we even had a meeting arrangement in

D.C. and we failed to see each other.’ And she said she remembers. And I told her that I will be keeping in touch. Because she's the one behind the draft bill.”

“So you could probably ask her who the author of that legislation is,” I said, already starting to strategize about how he could be in touch soon.

“And there is one more human rights organization. I couldn't remember the name. They were mentioning there. He wanted to meet me. Maybe I can arrange a meeting with him because he got the Senate draft resolution too. And that's what he wanted to discuss with me.”

“This draft bill?”

“Not this one, the other one, the Senate resolution, the draft resolution,” Gurraacha said. Shortly before the conference, Gurraacha had heard about this Senate resolution. By attempting to influence it, he was extending his legislative advocacy work, becoming connected to more actors involved in shaping U.S. policy towards Ethiopia.

“So you told him about that and he wanted to talk with you about it?” I asked.

“Yes, he got that draft,” Gurraacha said as he started strategizing too. “That's good to arrange a meeting with him. Maybe communicating this too is very important. Writing an email to Omar and Anuradha.”

While the possibilities were not as promising as I had hoped, it seemed that Gurraacha felt the conference was successful enough. More importantly, with this conference as the catalyst, Gurraacha and I continued discussing his comments on the draft bill. He finished his comments in late March and then sent them to Omar. We talked about the whole process a few days after.

“You had hoped to get comments back to Omar sooner but that took awhile to do. What do you think it was that made it difficult to do right away?” I asked. I knew Gurraacha had been focused on the protests in Ethiopia, but I thought it would be helpful for us to discuss in case there was any additional support I could have provided. “That seemed really important,” I continued. “You had that opportunity to have some direct influence but then a lot of time passed before you actually got it back to Omar. What slowed that down?” An important part of the search for educational possibilities is identifying the obstacles that are restricting realization.

“Usually two things had influence on me. First one I lost my bag, so my laptop too. I used to get a lot of information on social media and from back home. I have to update that on social media. People can use it for whatever, maybe people write articles and other things. At least people should know. Mostly people back home do not post things. They usually send to us. Send to us videos, so that has consumed most of my attention and my time.”

“So you started getting more of that because of the protests.”

“Yeah.”

“Right, that seems like another one of these ways that there's a balance between the urgent action needed to participate in those protests and support them and this more long-term thing of having some influence on U.S. policy,” I said. After working with Gurraacha for more than six months, I had a better understanding of how these two trajectories of meaning that had guided our search for educational possibilities related to each other. “And in the end,” I continued, “it's unclear to me how much influence you

can have. Because we don't even know what will happen. It seems unlikely that that bill will even get passed, certainly not taken up in the amount of time that would matter right now for these protests. So there's something more long-term about it. But was it still helpful to work on that together? To keep space for doing that together? Or did that feel like a distraction to you?"

"Yeah, that's good," Gurraacha said. "It's good that we did that."

"That's one thing I can definitely do is decide that this thing that's a more long-term project needs space right now," I said, and then offered a specific form of support. "And I can help create the time for us to do it."

"Yeah, that's the right decision. I'm glad we do that," Gurraacha said, agreeing to my proposal to make more time for these long-term efforts in our work together. "At least it will pave a way for me to have a better relationship."

"Right, even if that bill doesn't go anywhere, you'll know Keith Ellison's staff," I said. "You'll know him. He's seen you a couple of times now." I recognized that the possibility of a better relationship that Gurraacha had identified was the most clear and immediate possibility. My hope had been larger, a hope that Gurraacha would receive not only acknowledgment of his suffering from this representative of the U.S. government, but also action in response, action that could have some effect on the current political situation in Ethiopia. In this way, my hope had extended beyond what may have been useful for Gurraacha. I had hoped that Congressman Ellison, as my representative, could take action in support of Gurraacha in a way that I could not myself.

In summarizing my understanding of these trajectories of meaning and their relationship to each other, I was narrating the way in which I had noticed them interacting. When Gurraacha and I discussed this story, he described this time of urgent action as a time when he was “consumed” by the protests. My question about whether my support was helpful or not was an attempt to coordinate my efforts with his. I worried that my focus on the educational possibilities that could follow from his developing relationship with Congressman Ellison and his staff were a distraction to Gurraacha. And I worried that I was simply putting too much hope in the possibility of acknowledgment from a representative of the U.S. government when Gurraacha had more urgent concerns.

In response, Gurraacha affirmed that these efforts are important. Through Gurraacha’s legislative advocacy, as one specific form of his human rights advocacy, he is creating connections to the social networks that influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. This is an important way that the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in his life. As Jackson (2002) writes, recognizing refugees for who they are, which is more than victims, requires giving them “the right to participate in the decision-making processes of the polis, to be drawn from the margins of the State toward its centre, integrated as equals rather than subjects” (p. 84). Gurraacha’s legislative advocacy is connecting him with American society in a way that recognizes him as human rights defender and not just a victim of human rights violations.

Conclusion

The experiences narrated in the preceding life stories draw attention to two trajectories of meaning in Gurraacha’s life. My retelling of these stories narrates the way in which I

came to understand the relationship between these two trajectories. The identification of two separate trajectories is partly the result of my practical efforts to guide our search for educational possibilities and partly the result of the different perspective I brought to our work. I noticed that Gurraacha's legislative advocacy efforts, which offered long-term possibilities for political restructuring in Ethiopia, competed with his more immediate efforts to organize support for the protests taking place in Ethiopia and, at the same time, provided additional motivation for it. Our reconstruction of this part of Gurraacha's life history, focusing on recent events, is thus organized around interpretations of these trajectories of meaning.

The relationship between the two trajectories is part of a process of transnationalism. Through Gurraacha's legislative advocacy efforts, he is recreating a sense of self in the United States. He is finding a way to participate in American society by connecting with the social networks organized around U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. At the same time, he is very connected to the politics of Ethiopia. His efforts to organize support for the protests that were taking place kept him in touch with many people in Ethiopia on a daily basis. His heart, as he had told me, was in Oromia, and his work here in the United States was a way of maintaining that connection to his home, a connection that included a hope of someday returning. Both of these trajectories of meaning contributed to building Gurraacha's identity as a human rights defender.

My understanding of these two trajectories of meaning was fundamentally shaped by differences between Gurraacha's experiences and mine. These differences limited my ability to understand the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life. I do not

have the same experiences of suffering as Gurraacha. Thus, when we discuss the violence experienced by Oromo people as a result of the Ethiopian governments human rights violations, I can acknowledge these experiences and attempt to imagine them, yet I remain cautious because of the limitations of what I can imagine. Our different understanding of the stability of the Ethiopian government was another major difference that has affected my interpretations. I had not understood the full scope of Gurraacha's learning dream as a result. All of these differences originate in the different social position that I occupy as a white American man. The many privileges I have experienced contrast with the lifelong discrimination that Gurraacha has experienced, both in Ethiopia as an Oromo person and now in the United States as a black man and a refugee. Because of these differences, an ethnographic inquiry is necessary to guide our search for educational possibilities. It requires attention to the ways in which we interpret the meaning of certain experiences differently.

During our search for educational possibilities, several possibilities that I suggested to Gurraacha went unrealized. I suggested additional writing support when Gurraacha was revising his biographical statement. I offered access to filmmaking equipment and filmmakers. And I found legislative advocacy resources provided by the Advocates for Human Rights. The possibilities we focused on were those that Gurraacha had found himself, specifically commenting on the draft bill, meeting with Congressman Ellison and his staff about the bill, and extending his legislative advocacy work. My suggestions were not aligned well enough with what was then meaningful to Gurraacha. I was still coming to understand how much of Gurraacha's energy was required by his

efforts to organize support for the protests in Ethiopia. And we were still coming to know each other. Indeed, while the focus of our work was positioning Gurraacha as a human rights defender, we were also negotiating our identities in relation to each other. I was recognizing the ways in which I was implicated in Gurraacha's interest in U.S. policy towards Ethiopia as an American citizen, and we were finding ways to address this at both a practical and symbolic level.

The life stories that Gurraacha told me played a major role in this process of negotiating our identities. Our collaborative reconstruction of his life history continued this process and provided support for our search for educational possibilities when specific suggestions I offered were not yet meaningful enough to pursue. It supported our search by helping me understand the ways in which the meaning of human rights advocacy was growing in Gurraacha's life. And, most importantly, it offered Gurraacha many opportunities to reconstruct the meaning of his recent experiences in the context of our educational relationship.

CHAPTER 5

THE MEANING OF HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY IN GURRAACHA'S LIFE

In this chapter, I continue our collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history by retelling several life stories that Gurraacha told me about experiences that took place before we met. Like the previous chapter, Gurraacha's primary learning dream—human rights advocacy—guides my interpretations. The central question—in what ways is the meaning of human rights advocacy presently growing in Gurraacha's life?—however, is asked from a different perspective because these stories are not about recent events. My interpretations focus on how the experiences narrated in these life stories establish connections between our search for educational possibilities and experiences further in Gurraacha's past.

During the search for educational possibilities described in the previous chapter, Gurraacha also told life stories about major events in his life that were related to our search. I learned that he came to the United States in February 2014, when he was 34 years old, and prior to that, he had lived in Ethiopia. He was born in a small town called Fantalle, which is located in the largely rural Oromia Regional State. His father was a pastor. He preached at a Pentecostal church, and previously at a Lutheran church. Through these stories, I learned that as a child Gurraacha questioned the Christian beliefs his father taught. Nevertheless, Christianity remains important to him, at least those beliefs that he has accepted after careful consideration. These and other details about Gurraacha's life informed our search for educational possibilities.

When Gurraacha was 6 years old, he began attending elementary school, which was uncommon at the time. Many Oromo people considered schooling to be an assimilationist tool of the government. Gurraacha's father, however, believed strongly that everyone should go to school. Because Gurraacha was one of the few Oromo students at his school, he was ridiculed and made to feel ashamed of his identity. At school, he directly experienced the denigration of Oromo language and culture that was prevalent in Ethiopia. As a result of this ridicule and his father's conversion from Lutheran to Pentecostal Christianity, Gurraacha changed his name to Daniel when he was 11 years old. In 1991, when Gurraacha was 12 years old, the Ethiopian government was overthrown by a coalition of freedom fighters. Seeing the Oromo activists who were part of this coalition inspired Gurraacha. He decided then that he would someday become a freedom fighter too. When he was 20 years old, Gurraacha moved to Addis Ababa, the capital of the Oromia Regional State and the national capital of Ethiopia. He had moved there to study law at Addis Ababa University; however, his studies were soon interrupted. He was arrested after participating in protests, which led to a one-year suspension from the university. The suspension did not discourage him. When he returned, he not only participated in protests but also helped organize them. As a result, he was arrested again. The punishment this time was more severe. He was imprisoned for three years.

After Gurraacha was released from prison in 2007, he returned to Addis Ababa University, focused on his studies, and completed his bachelor's degree in law in 2009. After graduation, he was arrested again for his support of a protest near Fantalle and then received regular threats from government security forces for the next several years.

After one particularly serious threat in February 2014, Gurraacha fled from Ethiopia to the United States. In Minneapolis, Gurraacha has continued his activist work in the Oromo diaspora community. In June 2014, he gave testimony about his experience of persecution in Ethiopia to Congressman Keith Ellison at an event at the Oromo Community Center in St. Paul. And, in coordination with activists in Ethiopia, he organizes social media campaigns designed to influence the Ethiopian government.

These details about Gurraacha's life have all been part of stories told during our search for educational possibilities. The retellings of life stories that follow are an inquiry into the meaning of these experiences in our work together. In offering interpretations of these life stories, my goal is to better understand the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life and support its continued growth in meaning.

Human Rights Advocacy in Gurraacha's Life

While the following stories took place before Gurraacha and I met, I retell them in the context of our search for educational possibilities. They contribute to my understanding of how the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in Gurraacha's life. When Gurraacha tells these stories he adds meaning to the two trajectories that have guided our search. Some stories are told in the context of Gurraacha's efforts to influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. And some stories are told in the context of his efforts to organize support in the Oromo diaspora for the protests that were taking place in Ethiopia. All of the stories establish connections between his past experiences and our present search for educational possibilities that further develop his identity as a human rights defender.

Son of a Pastor

When discussing the first few months of our work together, I mentioned to Gurraacha that the story he told when we first met conveyed a clear sense of how his interest in human rights advocacy had developed over the course of his life. He responded by telling me a story about his Christian background and his understanding of faith.

“You have a pretty developed philosophy of your own personal growth,” I said, wondering if it was clear enough to be articulated explicitly.

“Yeah, exactly. Do you want to hear that?” Gurraacha offered.

“Oh I’d love to!” I replied, and then explained my curiosity. “Not everyone knows how they became interested in what they write down as their learning dreams. And sometimes there’s not a big story.” That Gurraacha did have this knowledge and more stories to illustrate did not surprise me. The stories he had told since we met suggested there were many more.

Gurraacha then told a story that revealed the influence of his religious background, which he had shared very little about prior to this. “There’s another aspect of my life which I didn’t tell you,” Gurraacha began. “I can tell you that part. The other part that influenced me to be what I am was that my dad was a pastor. He used to preach in a kind of Lutheran, a Norwegian church.”

While we had not talked at length about this part of Gurraacha’s life, I did, in fact, know that his father was a pastor. Gurraacha had included this detail in the first draft of his biographical statement. I had commented that the information about his parents was not necessary given the purpose of the biographical statement, so he decided not to

include it in the final version. I remember, however, being curious about the place of religion in Gurraacha's life.

“A church in Oromia that was established by Norwegians?” I asked.

“Yeah, in Ethiopia they call it Mekane Yesus. It's very close to Lutheran. The missionaries who usually come to the region are Norwegians. Mostly they are Europeans anyway.

“The story is that there was war between the Oromos and Amharas. When they win or capture people, they sell like slaves. So they sold an Oromo boy as a slave and he was taken to Massawa and sent to Arabia. From Arabia, a French guy bought him and found him to be good. They called him Onesimus. The guy is brilliant so they taught him the Bible. After he completed high school, he studied the Bible for six years. Then he said, ‘I want to go back to my country.’ That was in 1850 to 1880.”

These dates set this part of the story over a hundred years before Gurraacha was born. I have, nevertheless, included it as part of Gurraacha's life history because it explains how Christianity came to have an effect on his life. That my reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history includes stories about events before his birth is significant. For many of the people I work with at the Dream Desk, my knowledge of their lives often begins long after their births. Gurraacha weaves together historical time and biographical time to create meaning as he tells life stories. Accordingly, in my interpretations of Gurraacha's life stories, I attend to historical time as well.

“Onesimus took some missionaries with him,” Gurraacha continued. “He translated the Bible into Oromo, some other books too, religious books. That was a time

that King Menelik who formed the modern Ethiopian state was invading, so he couldn't get to Ethiopia. After he finished the invasion process, he asked permission and got to Ethiopia. Menelik told him not to preach that version of the religion to other society, only to Oromo society. And he preached that to the western part of Oromia.

“The Ethiopian rulers, because they are orthodox Christian, don't want the other version because there was also power conflict between Orthodox Christian and the Catholic in northern Ethiopia in which many people died and the Orthodox Christian won. They don't want any other version of Christianity so they sent it to the Oromo region.”

In this story, Gurraacha introduces two historical figures Onesimus and King Menelik. While the story focuses on his religious background, the story is not only about religion. It is also about the conflicts and tensions that shaped the modern Ethiopian state. Onesimus, a religious figure, was sent to Oromia by King Menelik, a political figure, and this interaction of religion and politics shaped the world into which Gurraacha's father was born several decades later.

“So my dad, when he went to school, he was supported by these Norwegian churches. They gave him a scholarship and he lived there. He lived there and he worked there too. So he grew up there under them. And actually he didn't complete his high school.”

“This was his entire schooling from when he was young?” I asked, wondering just how much these Norwegian churches had shaped his father's childhood.

“Actually he joined the school at the young age. He studied for 7 years and after junior school, he married my mom. So he left the schooling but while he left he had training, something like a nurse. So he worked in a clinic in a remote countryside because he grew up there and preached.”

The Norwegian churches, by converting Gurraacha’s father to Christianity at a young age, shaped the family into which Gurraacha was born. He experienced the influence of Christianity directly through his father’s work as a pastor.

“So I grew up in the church,” Gurraacha said. “Every Sunday we go. Mostly the disagreement between me and my dad is about that.”

“About the church? I asked. I was curious to know what forms this disagreement had taken. Did it come from a simple frustration with going to church every week, or did it have a deeper source? Was it a disagreement based on beliefs?

“Yeah, I don't want to go most of the time. The only reason I don't want to go is I find contradictions in the Bible when I study. Here God says don't lie. There somebody lies but God is not angry at him.”

“So you asked questions like this?”

“Yes, people killing each other, God is okay with that. So why these contradictions? Here it says something. Another place it says some other thing.”

“Did you talk with your dad about those contradictions, ask him those questions?”

“Yeah, I don't ask all, but sometimes, because he get angry. So I only believe some part of it, not all.”

These questions that Gurraacha asked when he was growing up—questions that confronted the contradictions in Christian teachings and challenged his father’s beliefs—did not lead to a rejection of Christianity. As Gurraacha explained, they helped him recognize what in Christianity was meaningful to him then. In a similar way, telling this story to me and giving voice to those questions again was a way to explain what remains meaningful to him now.

“However, from the way I grew up, “Gurraacha continued, “there is something in me. There is a question of justice in me, which I totally accept. What is it? *Yetebedele*,” Gurraacha said in Amharic, searching for the English word, “somebody who is in a state of injustice, who is disadvantaged?” When I asked Gurraacha about this word later, he explained that he used the Amharic word because the Oromo language does not have an equivalent.

“Oppressed?” I offered.

“Yeah, you stand for him. There is this spirit which is there in me. I think that's from the Bible, always to be on the side of the oppressed or the disadvantaged. And maybe also not worry much about material things. In that regard I'm different from people. Even though I don't have something I'm okay. What I give value is spiritual things, like moral things, what I achieve instead of what material money I achieve. All these things came from religion.”

This question of justice, a question that has guided Gurraacha’s activism and developed into an interest in human rights advocacy, has a religious source. Gurraacha traces this religious source back to a childhood shaped by his father and his father’s

church and, even further beyond that, to the historical events that brought Christianity to Oromia. The ambivalence Gurraacha conveys about his Christian background is one way that the meaning of Christianity is still growing in his life. While he does not accept all Christian beliefs, he totally accepts the question of justice that comes from Christian teachings. Reflecting this ambivalence, he differentiates himself from those who value the material over the spiritual, and, at the same time, though not explicitly, he differentiates himself from those who have accepted these and other Christian values without question.

“However, let me tell you,” Gurraacha continued.

“However.” I repeated, intrigued. “That sounds interesting.”

“Yes,” Gurraacha said, smiling. Then he continued. “However, after I joined the university, especially after I studied philosophy, those questions about the Bible got bigger and bigger. I had a different perspective. After I studied law, after I studied about interpretation, how to interpret the law, I go back to Bible and tried to interpret the Bible and now it became perfect for me. It works.”

“So when you accept it as a text to be interpreted not a text to be followed literally then you can reconcile the contradictions?” I asked.

“Yes, this time I'm okay. I can preach. The only problem is people who preach it didn't know how to interpret it. My dad didn't know how to interpret it. And it is good book and perfect. After a long time I understood what faith is and how it works. And I found it is perfect and it works if you now how to use it. A lot of things I found to be good there.”

With the new perspective and ideas gained through the study of philosophy and law as a university student, Gurraacha was able to reconcile the contradictions he had noticed and questioned in his father's beliefs. This new perspective allowed him to reconcile contradictions that he had felt since he was young. Perhaps, it also allowed him to recognize those Christian beliefs that he had accepted fully despite his resistance to accepting them all.

The new understanding of faith that came with this reconciliation and recognition intrigued me. "Tell me more about what you understood about faith and how to use it," I said, encouraging Gurraacha to directly address my comment about his philosophy of personal growth, which had invited these stories. It seemed that faith might be at the core of this philosophy. This faith was initially integrated during his childhood, as the son of a pastor. However, it was only later, when he returned to Christianity with the tools of interpretation, that he recognized this faith and how it works. "It sounds like your understanding of faith might be broader than religious faith," I added. "Is that true?"

"Yeah, the thing is, for example, the Bible it says if you have a small faith you can move this mountain here to there. It means if you have faith in that, you can achieve. So there is a thing that I want to achieve and to be. There are ways to manifest that. Thinking about it is one thing. If I believe, I work towards it. And then feeling that I have achieved it, feeling that I have that thing by itself will add a lot of power, a lot of motivation to achieve. But if I worry about how I can achieve. If I say 'I don't think I can achieve on all those stuffs.' It's very hard for me to achieve. But the fact that I have believed, will give me much power, and there is a high possibility that I achieve it."

This faith is an important part of how Gurraacha continues the growth of meaning in his life. It is a faith drawn from Christian teachings. Indeed, in explaining it to me, he quotes from the Gospel of Matthew: faith can move a mountain “from here to there.” Yet, this faith is, as I suggested to him, broader than religious faith. It is not used to defend Christian beliefs. Rather, it is a faith in his ability to achieve what he strives for. As such, it suggests a question to be asked while interpreting his life stories: in what ways does Gurraacha use faith to achieve what he desires? Such faith contributes directly to the ongoing process by which meaning grows in his life.

I explained to Gurraacha that this kind of faith is similar to the faith I bring to my work at the Dream Desk. When the people with whom I work tell me what they want to learn, I have faith in their ability to achieve those learning dreams. I recognize that there will be obstacles, as Gurraacha certainly does, and I express faith that those obstacles, whatever they may be, are surmountable. The source of my faith, however, is different than Gurraacha’s. It is drawn not from Christian teaching but from democratic theory.

According to Dewey (1939), a “democratic faith” is “belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness.” This “faith in democracy,” Dewey continues, “is all one with faith in experience and education” (p. 343). It is important to recognize that such faith, regardless of its source, is not equally distributed. For some of the people with whom I work, their sense of the possibilities available to them is limited by many experiences in which hoped for possibilities remained unrealized despite their efforts. Gurraacha’s faith,

despite constrained life circumstances, stands in contrast. And not only that, it is a faith that he articulates as part of a philosophy of his own personal growth.

Gurraacha Becomes Daniel

While discussing law school possibilities, Gurraacha told me a story about his name. He had mentioned that he wanted to talk about law school more seriously, so I had researched specific programs in advance. Law school offered a new way to build his identity as a human rights defender. The story about his name interrupted the beginning of this first focused conversation about law school.

When Gurraacha was eleven years old, he changed his name to Daniel. The meaning of his name was emphasized by the circumstances that led him to change it. It is part of his past that he draws on when building his identity as a human rights defender, which is an identity that can be further developed by going to law school.

“Gurraacha is an Oromo name,” Gurraacha explained, “And there is this thing that most Oromos changed their names. There is influence to change your name. Like if you have an Oromo name, people think this is just stupid and silly.”

“Because of the general denigration of the Oromo language and culture?” I asked. We had talked about the many different forms this could take, but Gurraacha had not said anything about pressure to change his name.

“Yeah, most people. When you go to school. The teacher may say, 'Oh! No, no, no! Come up with other name! This name, no!' So you change your name.”

Gurraacha experienced the denigration of Oromo language and culture, including the pressure to change his name, more directly than many other Oromo children his age.

As he explained in the draft of his biographical statement, many people in the region where he grew up “believe schooling as assimilation policy of government and do not send their kids to school.” During the time when Gurraacha was in school, “a program of de-Oromoization” was carried out through schools. The Amhara rulers systematically denigrated Oromo language and culture to weaken Oromo nationalism, which was developing at the time (Hassen, 1996, p. 71).

As with religion, Gurraacha expressed ambivalence about his schooling. He recognized it as a privilege that differentiated him from others, even though he did not feel fully aligned with the experience then. School, much more than church, created tension in his life. In the draft of his biographical statement, he expresses a value for schooling, while also noting that it was a source of ridicule and shame. Gurraacha’s experience of schooling, while specific to the relationship between Amharas and Oromos, is similar to the ways in which schooling been used around the world as a tool of assimilation. What he described was similar to the ways in which “educational systems intent on ‘de-Indianizing’ Native children” were developed in the United States (Grande, 2004, p. 11). These assimilationist practices have a long history, and while they are no longer as overt as they once were, many people in the United States experience school as a form of alienation.

It was this feeling of alienation, produced through ridicule and shame in school, as well as a religious conversion, that led Gurraacha to change his name. “I changed my name when I converted while I was ten,” Gurraacha continued. “And while I was ten my dad was converted from the Lutheran Norwegian church to a Pentecostal church based in

the United States, the United Pentecostal Church. So there is a need to baptize. Again they much focus on baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. So I go again to baptism. They put you in the water and that time people change their name. Mostly they change to biblical names. I went through that and I changed my name to Daniel. I became Daniel for some time.”

Freedom Fighter

In 1991, when Gurraacha was twelve years old, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the ruling communist regime. The EPRDF comprised a coalition of revolutionary groups, including the Tigrayan People's Liberation and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The new federal system of government created Oromia as an officially recognized region in Ethiopia (Lata, 1998). Gurraacha described this political revolution when we were discussing his biographical statement. Indeed, it was part of his biographical statement. It was part of the story of his life, a way to develop his identity as a human rights defender. As he explained, this political revolution brought good and bad changes for the Oromo.

“Prior to 1991,” he wrote in his biographical statement, “the Oromo nation was not officially recognized by the Ethiopian government. The Oromo language, culture, and identity were undermined and totally neglected. After 1991, Oromo became a school and working language. I was happy to see that my language, culture and identity were recognized and valued.”

The bad changes were due to a falling out between the OLF and the EPRDF. “The EPRDF began killing, persecuting and arresting Oromos who it deemed to be supporters

of OLF,” Gurraacha explained. “I witnessed when parents were arrested because their son joined OLF. Hundreds were arrested in school because their kinsmen were OLF.

Classrooms were turned into military camps of EPRDF soldiers. Any time OLF soldiers were seen in some village, the villagers were arrested, tortured and some were killed.” As Asafa Jalata (1998a) describes, “the TPLF/EPRDF wanted to subordinate Oromia to Tigray” so it attempted to “suppress the emergence of Oromo national power” (p. 15).

Witnessing these events moved Gurraacha to become involved. In his biographical statement, Gurraacha summarized these experiences, emphasizing his growing sense of injustice. “The Oromo political party, which was a stakeholder in the transitional government was pushed out and soon was outlawed. Since most Oromos were supporters, they were interrogated and discriminated against.” And these experiences led him towards a life of activism. “It was then, at this early age,” he wrote, “seeing how Oromos are subjected to discrimination and other injustices, that I knew I wanted to become a freedom fighter.”

It is significant that Gurraacha wrote “freedom fighter” in his biographical statement. While making peace may be an ultimate goal, it is peace that must be achieved through struggle, through a fight. Peace, in the form of nonviolent resistance, may be the form of that fight, but it is a fight nevertheless.

Gurraacha has long since realized his aspiration to be a freedom fighter. It is an important part of his identity, a part of his life that has been growing in meaning since he was eleven years old and that continues to grow in meaning. The biographical statement he wrote is one way in which this growth is continuing, specifically through his interest

in human rights advocacy. It is growing along that trajectory of meaning that includes his legislative advocacy efforts. As we revised the statement together, we considered how this brief story about his life could put him in a position to influence the bill Congressman Ellison was drafting about human rights in Ethiopia. Having such influence, even if only minor, would constitute a new achievement as a freedom fighter.

First Student Protest

Gurraacha joined Addis Ababa University in September 1999 to pursue a bachelor's degree in law. According to his asylum affidavit, he was one among the thousands of students who protested the dissolution of the Student Association by the government in April 2001. The government responded harshly.

As Gurraacha wrote, "federal police invaded the university compound, beat and injured many of the students, including me. Hundreds of us were imprisoned in the police training camp called Senkelle. I was beaten on my right leg with a short thick police stick and I could not walk for many weeks. I still carry the scar."

The image of this scar is a reminder that the meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life has grown through many forms of suffering, including traumatic experiences of violence. It was not until Gurraacha sent me his asylum affidavit that I learned of this story. That is, Gurraacha told this story in order to prove his risk of future persecution. It became part of our work together when Gurraacha wanted to find ways to expedite his asylum request. The story is significant because it marks the first time Gurraacha was the target of physical violence authorized by the Ethiopian government in order to suppress. The scar of this first experience certainly remains meaningful to

Gurraacha. While the specific physical scar may not always be invoked, Gurraacha often connects the emotional scar of the violence he experienced directly to his activist work. He tells stories about the persecution he experienced in order to draw attention to ongoing human rights violations in Ethiopia.

When Gurraacha sent me his asylum affidavit, he told me that the stories it contained were more detailed versions of stories he had told me. These variations in detail are important to consider because Gurraacha frequently tells stories about the kinds of violence that created this scar. In what ways do the details of such stories continue the growth of meaning in his life? I ask this question cautiously, recognizing the sensitivity of this experience and the reasons why Gurraacha may not frequently tell detailed stories about the traumatic violence he has experienced. At the same time, following Das and Kleinman (2001), I feel it is important to consider how the telling of such stories, whether about his own experiences or the similar experiences of others, may be a form of healing. Thus, I add another question to consider while interpreting Gurraacha's life stories: how does the growth of meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life constitute a form of healing? When Gurraacha and I discussed this story, he offered further interpretive guidance. He explained that what feels most healing is when other people recognize his experiences and take action in response.

This guidance helps focus the question, but the risks of asking it are nevertheless important to address directly. The representation of violence in my retelling could hinder rather than support the healing process. Representing a violent experience in a text and attempting to interpret its significance can have a harmful distancing effect. Yet, this

problem of representation is part of the democratic process by which meaning grows in human lives. As Das and Kleinman (2001) write, “if one were not willing to experiment with how much one’s own voice finds recognition in other voices—and, conversely, with when it is that speaking for oneself one is also legitimately speaking for another—it would be hard to conceive of any democratic processes at all” (p. 5). The recognition conveyed by such interpretations raises questions about how avoiding such interpretations would create an absence of recognition and acknowledgment. When Gurraacha tells stories of traumatic violence he is seeking recognition that leads to action, and specifically action that can contribute to ending similar violence still taking place.

Second Student Protest

Most of the stories that Gurraacha has told me about his student activism have focused on the protests that took place in January 2004. It was then that he took on a leadership role as an organizer. He told me about the first of these protests while recounting the testimony he had given in June 2014 at the Oromo Community Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. This event was organized to present testimony to Congressman Ellison. Gurraacha had recently finished commenting on the draft bill and we were imagining what could come next in his legislative advocacy efforts. The story Gurraacha told me was an extended version of the story he told that day.

“The first protest,” Gurraacha explained, “was about Addis Ababa, the capital of the Oromia Regional State. The TPLF pushed the puppet Oromo organization that is within EPRDF to move out of Addis Ababa and to move to a different city.”

“I read about that,” I said. “So they moved the capital of the Oromia Regional State. It had always been Addis Ababa but they forced it to move because they wanted to separate it from the capital of Ethiopia.” The agreement by the OPDO to move the capital of the Oromia Regional State from Addis Ababa to Adama undermined the special interest that Oromia has in Addis Ababa. As Gurraacha had told me before, this special interest is recognized in the Ethiopian Constitution.

“Yeah. So when they moved it there we make demonstration,” Gurraacha continued. “On that demonstration they identified me as an organizer. The police came and arrested me. They put me into a pickup car. They arrested me with three or four others, but they just wanted to arrest me. While I sit on the car, the police used the edge of his shoe and hit me over my eye. My eye was risked. If he hit me over here, it's done. I bleed a lot, but it didn't really hurt my eye.”

“That was while he was arresting you?” I asked, affirming that the police officer’s actions were unnecessarily violent.

“Yeah someone informed them that I'm organizing it. I was not officially organizing, but someone told them it was me, so they send a federal police to arrest me. They just came and arrested us, took me to police station.” As Gurraacha later explained, he had actually witnessed another student, a student known to be working with the government, point him out to a police officer.

Gurraacha was likely pointed out as an organizer because he was part of the Oromo Students Union. While he did not play any role in organizing this protest, this

affiliation made it plausible that he had been involved. In this way, the form of participation he chose developed into perceived leadership, which he had not chosen.

“So they arrested you but then released you soon after?” I asked.

“Yeah, they released me the second morning. I was shouting too much. I was saying ‘The guy who hit me should be responsible. He should be brought to justice.’ They don’t care.”

“It sounds like all of this is about justice, about challenging injustice, and at all levels,” I said, offering a way to organize what Gurraacha had narrated. “You were challenging the decision to move the capital as well as the police officer who felt it was part of his job to violently attack protestors.”

Gurraacha was raising the question of justice. In this story, it was addressed not only to the Ethiopian government, but also to a fellow citizen, acting as an agent of the government. This police officer had singled out Gurraacha and attacked him. Demanding that this man personally accept responsibility for the injustice he perpetrated recognized him as a citizen with moral obligations to his fellow citizens. Demanding that he be brought to justice, perhaps raised the question of justice in the police officers who heard Gurraacha shouting. He was demanding that they recognize their complicity.

In telling the story to Congressman Ellison, Gurraacha raised the question of justice again. He was demanding that Ellison recognize the complicity of the United States government in supporting such violence. And, in telling the story to me, he was raising the question of justice yet again, demanding that I, as a United States citizen, recognize the ways in which I was implicated too. The way in which these stories address

me at this symbolic level is an important part of the broader context of our conversation, which was oriented toward possibilities for Gurraacha to continue his legislative advocacy. In telling me these stories, Gurraacha is rehearsing ways in which he might compel other Americans to intervene through his efforts to influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. When Gurraacha and I discussed this story, he emphasized his need to make his stories shorter. He said he would like to practice so that he can explain within a short period of time. As I was coming to recognize, this kind of rehearsal is one way in which the telling of life stories itself offers educational possibilities.

Third Student Protest

The third student protest Gurraacha participated in took place shortly after the second. He also told this story while telling me about his testimony to Congressman Ellison.

“When the federal police surrounded Addis Ababa University and entered the university compound, we were in a sit-in in front of the university, in front of the president's office because some eight students had been arrested in the first protest. We were demanding the university to pressure the police to release them. And we were asking the university to allow us a cultural night once a week, in Oromo Culture and Language Center. Because the Amharic, they have once a week. For Oromo, we were asking once a week too.”

“And they don't allow that?” I asked.

“Yeah, they don't want that.”

“That's such a direct act of discrimination.” I said, still surprised by how overt the Ethiopian government could be in its discrimination despite the fact that Gurraacha had previously told me about many similar acts of direct and overt discrimination.

“Since they don't want to say no, they said go through Mr. X and Mr. Y, maybe people who are spy for government. They say ‘Go through them.’ ‘No, just allow. We will elect a committee to lead that. Why do we go to these people? Who are they?’ They don't want to give us permission. That's why they come up with this pretext. And they wanted to take action against us. They wanted to clean us from the university. They say ‘They are evil-minded people.’

“Evil-minded?” I asked.

“Yeah, they say we are corrupt,” Gurraacha said, offering an explanation for why the university administrators would characterize him and his fellow students in this way.

“They saw you as corrupt because you were not just submitting to them,” I surmised.

“Yes,” Gurraacha agreed, “and they say we are promoting narrow nationalism.” This phrase, “narrow nationalism,” is one that is often used by representatives of the Ethiopian government to characterize the Oromo nationalist movement as backward, reactionary, and dangerous to the Ethiopian state (Hassen, 1996).

In this story, it is important to note that my reaction of surprise to the discrimination Gurraacha described is related to Gurraacha's interest in human rights advocacy. Restricting a group of Oromo students from gathering and discussing Oromo culture is not surprising in the context of everything Gurraacha has described, yet it still

strikes me as an egregious violation of their rights in a society that claims to be democratic. My sense of these rights, as an American, is what Gurraacha is appealing to when he invokes human rights. As Mark Goodale (2009) explains, the normative assumptions on which the idea of human rights is based derive from a Western perspective. Thus, the symbolic level of our relationship includes not only our relationship as American citizen and refugee, but also our relationship as Western observer and member of an oppressed ethnic group in Ethiopia. At this symbolic level, the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in Gurraacha's life. It is growing through the reactions that his stories provoke in me, which is a way of exploring the educational possibilities offered by his human rights defender identity. As Talal Asad (1996) explains the idea of human rights is unstable, and "neither the attempt by Euro-Americans to impose their standards by force on others nor the willing invocations of these standards by weaker peoples in the third world makes them stable or universal" (p. 1104). Through these stories, Gurraacha and I are negotiating particular meanings of human rights in our work together.

While I listened to these stories about the persecution Gurraacha experienced and confronted, I thought about him giving testimony. I thought about how he has continued his activist work in the in the United States by telling stories about human rights violations to people like Congressman Ellison who are in in a position to intervene, even if only indirectly through policy. Yet as Gurraacha explained, he was able to tell only brief versions of these stories, really just summaries, when giving testimony. These were not the stories that Ellison had heard.

As with his more recent meetings with Congressman Ellison and his staff, I felt as though Gurraacha's experiences of suffering and persecution were not recognized adequately. However, I also understood that Gurraacha needed to balance the details of the traumatic violence he had experienced with his efforts to influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia. The personal healing that might take place through sharing his story, through reconstructing this experience in the context of his work as a human rights defender, was subordinated to creating change that could contribute to ending similar forms of violence towards others in the future.

Prisoner of Conscience: Maekelawi, Kerchelle, Kaliti

From June 2004 to March 2007, Gurraacha was held as a prisoner of conscience by the Ethiopian government. On that first evening at the Dream Desk, he told me this almost in passing. He explained that he was imprisoned because of the role he had played organizing protests when he was a university student.

“The court had no evidence to convict me of any crime,” he said. “But I was held anyway.”

I wanted to know more, but I did not ask. Instead, I continued listening, not wanting to interrupt his story or insist on him talking in more detail about what I assumed then, and have since come to understand, was a traumatic experience. Yet, this experience, I could tell, was an important one in the development of Gurraacha's interest in human rights advocacy. I learned more about this part of his life as our work together developed.

In June 2004, while at home in Fantalle after being expelled from Addis Ababa University for his role in the protests, Gurraacha was arrested again. When Gurraacha and I were discussing the draft bill that Congressman Ellison's staff member had sent him to review, he told me more about his arrest. We were discussing a section in the bill that described Ethiopian criminal procedure law, which Gurraacha felt was unclear.

"When you were arrested, were you brought before court in this way?" I asked. According to Ethiopian criminal procedure law, those who have been arrested must be brought before court within 48 hours. However, as Gurraacha had explained to me, this requirement is regularly ignored.

"I was arrested and kept in a military camp," Gurraacha replied.

"So you were not brought before court in 48 hours?" I had asked because I suspected that his experience was part of this pattern.

"Yeah, not in 48 hours. I think for about one month and a half I was there. I was transferred from one military camp to another. Then they tied my eyes and took me to Addis Ababa, to their federal police station, Maekelawi. So there I was brought before court. They told the judge they arrested me the day before."

"So did they charge you then?"

"No, the judge said 'So why you arrested him?' The police say 'This guy? He's one of the organizers, a university student.' I said 'I have nothing to do with that.' The way I think is within the framework of the law. 'You are violating the law. I can call the government right now,'" Gurraacha said, narrating his principled resistance to the police,

and then their response. “‘You will see. You are just a fool, just a student.’ You think there is a proof of this warrant.”

The stories Gurraacha has told me about his time in prison are focused on the law. This was true when reviewing the draft bill Congressman Ellison sponsored as well as when telling me about the testimony he gave to Ellison a few years prior. Like his appeal to human rights, appeals to the law are a way of describing the injustice he has witnessed and experienced as a result of the oppression of the Oromo people by the Ethiopian government. The Ethiopian government regularly ignores its own laws as well as the human rights standards of the international community.

“When they give you a charge, there are details of the crime. There is the side article. He is accused of this according to this article. They detail. They write down the crime committed. They accused us in a high court because the crime they accused us of is not a petty crime. It's a crime that make you sentence more than 10 years. So it falls under high court.

“First when I was in Maekelawi, just like Bekele Gerba and other leaders, I'm in prison now. When they give you charge, it's not police anymore. It's public prosecutor. According to the legal system, the police finished this investigation. The investigation is done. Actually they work with the public prosecutor too because the public prosecutor should check whether that evidence and whatever they have would enable them to convict that person or not.”

This mention of Bekele Gerba is important to note. Gerba is the Deputy Chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress. He appears often as a figure in Gurraacha's stories.

Gerba, as Gurraacha noted, has also been held as a prisoner of conscience. He was arrested in 2011 for meeting with Amnesty International researchers and released in the spring of 2015, just before President Obama's visit to Ethiopia (Kelemen, 2015). He was arrested again in late 2015 for connections to the protests that began in November (Maasho, 2015).

"Usually it's like that," Gurraacha continued, "but they don't do it for all legal issues. They don't care. Even though they know you will not be convicted. 'Let him be there.' He will continue coming to court some years. We will punish him like that."

"So they never convicted you?" I asked.

"Yeah. They didn't. This is for most people, most Oromos."

Gurraacha often generalizes his experiences to other Oromo people like this, and, when speaking about common experiences, I often hear resonance with his own experiences. When I asked if his arrest was similar to what he was describing when talking about the disregard for criminal procedure, it was because I heard this resonance. The time Gurraacha spent in prison is one such experience. In the affidavit he submitted when applying for asylum, his description of Maekelawi and the other prisons in which he was held moves back and forth between the general and personal.

"Maekelawi is well known for its dire conditions and range of abusive interrogation methods to extract information and confessions," Gurraacha wrote. "Torture and ill-treatment to get confessions are common at the Maekelawi Police Station. Investigators slapped, kicked, and beat me with batons and gun butts. My parents were never informed of my whereabouts. I was never charged or given access to a lawyer and

I never appeared before a court or judge.” In his affidavit, Gurraacha cites a 2013 Human Rights Watch Report, titled “‘They Want a Confession’: Torture and Ill-Treatment in Ethiopia’s Maekelawi Police Station” that further details the human rights violations he and many others experienced there.

The coercive methods, exacerbated by the poor detention conditions, are used by the authorities at Maekelawi to maximize pressure on detainees to extract statements, confessions, and other information—whether accurate or not—to implicate them and others in alleged criminal activity. These statements and confessions are in turn sometimes used to coerce individuals to support the government once released, or as evidence against them at trial. (p. 3)

Gurraacha then briefly summarized the rest of his time in prison. “After one month, I was transferred to larger prison called Addis Ababa Prison Administration, Kerchelle, where I stayed for one year. We were transferred to another larger prison at the outskirts of the town called Kaliti when Kerchelle was given to African Union to extend its office buildings. I remained in Kaliti for nearly two years. The handling and the human rights abuse in Ethiopian prison were so grave that two students were killed by the prison guards among the 21 of us who had been moved there.”

Gurraacha has not told me much about these years in prison. I know little beyond what he said during our first conversation at the Dream Desk; however, I do know much more about what preceded and followed these years. Three years in prison was punishment for protesting. Regardless of what happened while he was in prison, the punishment was severe for it interrupted his schooling.

At the same time, prison strengthened Gurraacha’s image of himself as an activist. Like Bekele Gerba and other leaders, he was seen as threat by the Ethiopian government. The experience provides Gurraacha with additional authority to speak about human rights

violations in Ethiopia. Thus, while the experiences were traumatic, telling stories about them is one way that the meaning of human rights advocacy is growing in his life. The language of human rights provides a way to narrate these experiences with a focus on justice and the action needed to bring the Ethiopian government to justice. When Gurraacha tells these stories to me, what is most important are not the details of these experiences but the motivation they provide to continue our search for educational possibilities that will build Gurraacha's identity as a human rights defender.

Daniel Becomes Gurraacha Again

After Gurraacha was released from prison in March 2007, he returned to Addis Ababa University to complete his Bachelor of Law degree. It was at this time that he changed his name from Daniel back to Gurraacha. He explained this change in the conclusion to the story he told me about the meaning of his name. This story, it is important to recall, interrupted a conversation we were having about law school possibilities.

“So at some point you had to decide to change back to your given name. When was that?” I asked.

“It was while I was a university student,” Gurraacha said.

“How did you decide that?”

“When nationalism grew up, I said ‘Why wouldn't I become my old self? The religious issue was not that much important for me. So nationalism grew and we were pushing all Oromos to restore their names. An Oromo name is part of a self-respect, like talking your language. There is much nationalism movement within Oromo. I also have

to be a model. My name, Gurraacha, is not bad name. Why would I need to have other names?”

The significance of Gurraacha’s name thus grew in meaning even more. He reclaimed his “old self” who went by an Oromo name. The religious significance of Daniel was no longer as important to him after his time as a university student, and his pride in his Oromo identity had been strengthened through his activism. Moreover, changing his name back to Gurraacha could have a broader effect. It was a way of modeling self-respect, which was even more important after the violent suppression of the nationalist movement of which he was a part.

After Gurraacha finished telling the story about the meaning of his name, we returned to our conversation about law school possibilities. The practical discussion of selecting a program, studying for the LSAT, and preparing an application was more meaningful because of the story, and I recognized the importance of finding connections with faculty and other students in a program that could support Gurraacha’s human rights defender identity, which he hoped to build further through law school.

Prisoner of Conscience: Nazareth/Adama

After graduating, Gurraacha was arrested again. He had offered to give an interview to a BBC reporter to draw media attention to a protest that was taking place near Fantalle. Two hours after arranging the interview over the phone, he was arrested.

I learned about this when I read Gurraacha’s asylum affidavit. I had not understood that he had been arrested again after being released from prison. This time the

length of his imprisonment was much shorter, but no less traumatic. Gurraacha describes the torture he experienced in detail in his asylum affidavit.

“During my one week stay in prison at Nazereth/Adama,” Gurraacha wrote, “I was tortured by police every day for an hour. I was interrogated and accused of organizing, recruiting and inciting students, peasants and trainees who were members of the opposition party. They beat me with an electric cable folded into sections, gun butts and belts. They forced me to do exhausting physical tests. At midnight, two police men took me to a dark room right next to the prison cell and they told me to take off my clothes and ordered me to sit on a chair right in the middle of room. They tied both my hands and legs to the chair. I kept on asking them what is going on but they didn’t answer. ‘You must tell us who you work for. Are you Merera’s dog?’ one of them slapped me. (Merera is the chairman of OPC). ‘Tell me before I repeat this’ he said and he gave me a slap on my face again. I said I have nothing to tell.”

Dr. Merera Gudina is another important figure in Gurraacha’s stories. As Gurraacha notes, he was the chairman of the Oromo People’s Congress, and he is now the chairman of the Oromo Federalist Congress, which formed when the OPC merged with another opposition party. Dr. Merera is a prominent Oromo activist. His activist work began, like Gurraacha’s, while he was in high school. The protests in which he participated at this young age led to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. He has spent most of his life struggling for Oromo self-determination (Amimo, 2010).

“They repeatedly told me that I should never act against the government while getting its salary,” Gurraacha continued in his affidavit. “The police men again continued

to torture me taking turns interrogating me about my role in the protest.” Gurraacha was accused of organizing the protests, as he had been when he was a student. And like when he was a student, this accusation led to violence meant to intimidate and physical scars. “One of the police angrily jumped to me and gashed on my right arm with sharp dagger and in which case I cried loudly ‘kill me, kill me; I still support the protest but I didn’t organize it’ and I finally fainted. The next morning, I found myself lying on the ground. They noticed that I was awake and put me back into the crowded prison cell. After a week, they released me without any charge.

Leaving Ethiopia

In February 2014, Gurraacha left Ethiopia and came to the United States. He told me this story first while explaining why he submitted a request for asylum. He does not want to live in the United States, but he knows he cannot go back to Ethiopia, at least not until there is political change. This was important for me to understand. While our efforts have focused on ways that Gurraacha can recreate his sense of self in the United States, specifically through building his identity as a human rights defender and becoming part of the social networks organized around U.S. policy towards Ethiopia, he does not want to remain in the United States.

“I didn't really chose to live here,” Gurraacha said. “What happened at the airport when I came was that I was on the list so the guy said, put me over there. Then I bribed the security guard. He said ‘don't think of getting back again.’”

Gurraacha told me the story again in March 2016 while discussing how Dr. Merera had recently been stopped from coming to the United States.

“You were almost prevented from leaving when you came to the United States also,” I said, wondering about the similarity with Gurraacha’s story. “Was it the same way?”

“I was stopped but later on they let me go. They kept me some place. Actually I have to give some money,” Gurraacha explained.

“Right, you told me that. Did they stop you in the same way, just by saying your passport didn't work?” I asked, inquiring again about the connection to Dr. Merera’s experience.

“Yeah, at the same place,” Gurraacha continued, “but I was kept in a different place, somewhere away. I was told to wait.”

“Did they tell you it was because your passport didn't work?” I asked again.

“They just told me to stay while others go.”

“And they didn't tell you why?”

“Yeah, so I talked to one of the security persons, who worked in the same department, so then they released me. I'm not still sure whether they simply override their system or if they have really communicated to a higher official. But I don't think they communicated.”

“Yeah, right because you said you bribed the security guard,” I said. “I guess he probably isn't supposed to accept that.”

“He's not supposed to and usually the system is corrupt and a lot of people know that,” Gurraacha explained. “Higher officials get millions.”

“And you knew that too. Did you feel pretty certain that if you bribed him it would be okay?”

“No, all I was thinking about at the time was to leave.”

In this longer version of the story, I was feeling the risk that Gurraacha had taken in leaving Ethiopia to come to the United States. Comparing it to Dr. Merera’s experience emphasized that. Gurraacha was not a public figure like Dr. Merera and so did not have the protection that comes with that prominence.

“What would have happened if that security guard didn't accept?” I asked, growing more concerned, even though I knew he had left successfully.

“It would have been worse, but I was a little bit confident because the guy was Oromo. There are few. Most of them who are in such places, they know more about what is going on because they are in the system. They see all injustices more than an ordinary Oromo in some other place.”

“You've told me about this before too,” I said. “He'd accepted a position in the government and he's in some ways complicit in what's happening but when he meets someone like you, you knew that there was a chance he'd be a little flexible.”

“Yeah, mostly such people even when they get a chance to leave, they don't. They don't get back and they usually betray the system. The reason why they are working in the government, usually there is no other means. Mostly the employer is the government in Ethiopia, especially the military. The Derg was socialist and made everything public and usually abolished the private sector. During Haile Selassie, the king, emperor, there were private sectors growing. They destroyed all that.

“Now when TPLF comes, TPLF basically is socialist, communist mentality itself, but tried to act like they left that position. They are still there and there is no private sector as such and so the major employer is the government. Mostly all the sectors, all the service, important things like communication, banks, electric power, and all this are monopolized by government. Most of the people have to be employed in the government whether they like that position or not.”

“So that particular security guard is not necessarily loyal to the government,” I said. “He just needed a job and that maybe was his only opportunity. You've talked about that before, how you saw opportunities like that for yourself.”

This story establishes connections between two figures: Dr. Merera, a prominent Oromo activist and an Oromo security guard working for the government, yet not fully aligned with it. These figures represent alternative paths in Gurraacha's life. Gurraacha had considered working for the government in the legal system. While such a position may have been less complicit than this security guard's position, it is nevertheless radically different than the path of devoting his life to activism and resistance like Dr. Merera.

Testimony to Congressman Ellison

On June 5, 2014, Gurraacha gave testimony at an event at the Oromo Community Center that Congressman Ellison attended. This experience has shaped our work together. The meeting with Congressman Ellison, which occurred one year after Gurraacha arrived in the United States and a little over one year before we met, was an early indication of the possibilities associated with legislative advocacy.

“I volunteer to give analysis on different events for the Oromo diaspora community,” Gurraacha said. “That’s why Oromo community officers invited me there. So they gave me that chance, as one of the people who suffered there.”

“So when they invited you it was a combination of your personal experience, suffering in Ethiopia, like being in prison specifically and-“

“I was in the movement too, but not a leader,” Gurraacha said.

“Right, because you led those student protests at your university, right? It sounds like maybe they also invited you because of your legal knowledge and that legal analysis. Is that true?” I asked, connecting Gurraacha’s experiences of suffering with his study of law.

“Yes, yes.”

“So, it was a combination of both of those things,” I said, emphasizing this connection, which I see as an important part of Gurraacha’s identity as a human rights defender. He is more than a victim of human rights violations. His work has transformed those experiences into the basis for his activism. And it is through the various forms of his activism that the meaning of human rights advocacy grows in his life.

“Oh yes, that’s true,” Gurraacha said confirming the significance of the connection between these experiences.

“So how did that go, that first time giving testimony to Ellison? Do you remember what you said? Do you remember how he responded?” I knew that he had not been able to tell stories in detail. I was curious to know if the stories he was able to tell seemed to have the effect he desired.

“I just explained what happened to me and how we organized the protests, how peaceful our demonstration was and how brutal the government cracked down. Then what the prison looks like and prison life. And then I just say to conclude that I'm very sad. I have deep sorrow and I'm pretty sad because the same thing that happened to me is happening to these boys back home. They're facing the same thing. They're facing what I faced.”

In his testimony, Gurraacha made a direct comparison between his experiences and the experiences of the people in Ethiopia during the protest that was taking place then. Many Oromo activists share these experiences. They are similar to the experiences of Dr. Merera and Bekele Gerba. They are similar to the experiences of protesters in Ethiopia when Gurraacha told the story. This similarity in their life stories is part of what keeps Gurraacha connected to Ethiopia while building his identity as a human rights defender in the United States. It is also what marks a difference between his experiences and the experiences of many of the Americans he encounters in the United States.

“And it's just continuing that pattern of Ethiopian government discriminating against the Oromo people and taking violent actions to suppress protests,” I said acknowledging his suffering and conveying my understanding of how these experiences are related to the larger problem of the Ethiopian government oppressing Oromo people. This problem is one that remains largely unrecognized by the American people among whom Gurraacha now lives. Yet, in this story, Gurraacha and other Oromo people received acknowledgment from a representative of the United States government. As reported by the Madda Walaabuu Press (2014), the president of the Oromo Community

of Minnesota, Mathias Gudina, expressed his appreciation to Congressman Ellison. When welcoming him to the event, he said “by becoming the first Congressman and senior US government official to grace our community center with your presence, you have distinguished yourself as a great friend of the Oromo, thousands of whom are your constituents.” This story about giving testimony to Congressman Ellison has been important in our work because it represents a success in drawing the attention of Americans to the human rights violations taking place in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The experiences narrated in the life stories in this chapter trace the two trajectories of meaning identified during our search for educational possibilities deeper into Gurraacha’s past. While I retell these stories in the context of our work together, Gurraacha’s experiences remain distant from mine. Most of the experiences narrated took place in Ethiopia, a place that is literally distant from the place where I live and work. More importantly, they took place in the context of social, political, and historical worlds that are unfamiliar to me. Even those experiences that took place after Gurraacha arrived in the United States, while set in a more familiar environment, remain remote from my experiences for the simple reason that Gurraacha and I had not yet met. Unlike the stories told in the previous chapter, the only stories I have heard about these experiences are stories told long after they occurred.

This requires a different interpretive perspective. The meaning of human rights advocacy grows through the connections established when Gurraacha tells these stories, but the stories are told with different purposes than the stories he told me about more

recent events. These stories about more distant experiences are not reports on experiences that are part of our search for educational possibilities. Rather, they guide the search by marking connections with memorable experiences, perhaps even reshaping the meaning of those experiences in the process.

For example, the stories about the meaning of Gurraacha's name are stories that Gurraacha has certainly told before. My interpretations of these stories, while different to the extent that my perspective is different, are by no means novel. The meaning of these stories, however, is reshaped in the context of our work. Each is told as part of a focused project of continuing the growth in meaning of human rights advocacy in his life. And these stories, specifically, were told in the context of his plans to go to law school.

The reordering of stories involved in our collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history also reshapes the meaning of these stories. By arranging the stories in the order of the events narrated while retaining the context of their telling, the connections across the stories become clearer. For example, while Gurraacha was no doubt aware of how important the question of justice was to him, this reconstruction allows that question to be traced over many years. It was formulated when he was young, a question he derived from the Christian teachings of his father. Its importance was confirmed when he witnessed the revolution in 1991. It was later articulated as a challenge to police officers acting unjustly when Gurraacha was a student protester at Addis Ababa University. And it was raised to me as I negotiated the symbolic level of our relationship and my contribution to ongoing injustice as a citizen of the United States.

These stories about Gurraacha's past have a direct influence on our search for educational possibilities. My interpretive retelling requires an ethnographic contextualization that leads to a deeper understanding of Gurraacha's learning dream. I saw how the two trajectories of meaning I identified in the previous chapter formed through experiences in the past. His efforts to influence U.S. policy towards Ethiopia are part of a longer trajectory of working towards political restructuring through advocacy efforts in Ethiopia. His participation in protests are also part of a longer trajectory, which began early in his life, when Gurraacha witnessed the OLF freedom fighters contributing to the downfall of the Derg in 1991. It then continued through his work organizing protests as a university student. These two trajectories then continued when Gurraacha left Ethiopia and came to the United States. And the possibility of more concerted legislative advocacy was indicated by his testimony to Congressman Ellison.

The meaning of human rights advocacy in Gurraacha's life grows along these two trajectories of meaning, which extend far into his past. Through our collaborative reconstruction of his life history, I have come to better understand how they project into his future as well. Retelling these stories and discussing them with Gurraacha has, moreover, been important as we orient our search for educational possibilities towards those possibilities that are most meaningful to Gurraacha.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In my work at the Dream Desk, life stories are important. In my work with Gurraacha, this was especially the case. Indeed, as described in the preceding chapters, life stories became more important than our search for educational possibilities, which I had understood to be the purpose of life stories told at the Dream Desk. That is, when the people with whom I work tell life stories, I usually interpret them as explanations of why their learning dreams are meaningful to them. These interpretations suggest ways of proceeding with our search for educational possibilities. In my work with Gurraacha, I have come to a better understanding of the educational possibilities offered by life stories themselves. More specifically, through our collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history, the meaning of human rights advocacy has continued growing in Gurraacha's life. The telling and retelling of his life stories allowed us to establish and strengthen an educational relationship, which involved negotiating the different perspectives we brought to our work together.

This negotiation was especially important because of the protests that began in Ethiopia shortly after Gurraacha and I met. These protests were vitally meaningful for Gurraacha and, at the same time, they were a source of suffering and sadness. The present suffering of family, friends, and colleagues, as well as memories of his own suffering, demanded urgent action from Gurraacha. The life stories he told, while suggesting educational possibilities, also required attention to these difficult experiences. They required attention from Gurraacha because he was telling the stories to me,

recontextualizing his experiences in our search for educational possibilities. And they required attention from me because I was participating in this search, listening to his stories in order to support the growth in meaning of human rights advocacy in his life.

Our collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history is based on this intersubjective negotiation of the meaning of human rights advocacy. That is, this version of his life history is based on our educational relationship and the specific meaning of his life stories that emerged between us, as a result of our relationship. While contributions of the kind I usually make to the search for educational possibilities in my work at the Dream Desk were less than usual, my presence as Gurraacha's interlocutor and my attempt to provide this kind of educational support affected the way he told his life stories. Our collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history was shaped by competing modes of entitlement in the interpretation of these stories. As Shuman (2005) explains, in storytelling, certain rights are accorded those who have experienced the events narrated and those who have not.

[Certain] individuals have firsthand knowledge that grants them a privileged position as knowers and a legitimate stake in the interpretation of their own experiences. Competing with this premise is the historiographical view that privileges the distant knower who has perspective and, by virtue of less or different stakes in the interpretation, the possibility of objectivity. (p. 4)

The educational possibilities offered by life stories themselves derive from the intersubjective space created in the dialogue between these two perspectives. The two trajectories of meaning that I identified in my interpretations of Gurraacha's life stories are not an interpretation of his life or the meaning of his life. Rather, they are proposals for adopting a perspective with pragmatic value for guiding our search for educational

possibilities. In this way, Gurraacha's life stories, as reconstructed in this life history, offered educational possibilities themselves.

As Jackson (2002) describes, storytelling is both a strategy for "transforming private into public meanings" and a strategy for "sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (p. 15). That is, life stories do much more than provide life with coherence and order (Linde, 1993; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Life stories have democratic and existential imperatives. In my relationship with Gurraacha, I felt this most strongly in the way that Gurraacha shared stories about his experiences of persecution with me. When telling these stories, he was addressing me personally in my educational role and, at the same time, he was addressing me at symbolic level as an American citizen, introducing these experiences into our work and continuing the process of introducing them into American society, which he began when he gave testimony to Congressman Ellison in 2014. It is important to recognize the educational possibilities present in life stories themselves because the power of storytelling to fashion identities is constrained in many communities (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). The process by which the private meanings of life stories are made public is part of the educational process by which meaning grows in human lives, yet this process is restricted. In many relationships defined as educational, there is little space for life stories. And while a collaborative reconstruction of a life history may not be practical in most educational relationships, the discussion of life stories on which it based is an important way in which the growth of meaning in another person's life can be recognized and supported.

With this in mind, I propose a way of extending what I have learned in my work with Gurraacha to my work with others at the Dream Desk. More specifically, I propose an ethnographic inquiry into the educational possibilities available in the communities around East Lake Library that begins with the collaborative reconstruction of additional life histories. In making this specific proposal, I hope to also inform the efforts of others who could create more space for life stories in their educational work. That is, to the extent the relationships formed during searches for educational possibilities are similar to other educational relationships, the recommendation could be extended further. While a collaborative reconstruction of life histories may not be practical in most educational relationships, the life stories on which they are based are an important way in which the growth of meaning in another person's life can be recognized and supported.

Towards an Ethnography of Educational Possibilities

Over the past two years, nearly five hundred people have shared their learning dreams with me at the Dream Desk. I have not worked with most of these people as closely as I have worked with Gurraacha, and among those who I have, none have shared life stories as frequently and in as much detail. However, almost everyone has shared a few life stories while explaining why their learning dreams are meaningful to them, and these stories have guided our searches for educational possibilities.

On this basis, I propose an ethnography of educational possibilities that would involve inviting life stories more frequently, recording them more systematically, and reconstructing life histories in more detail. These reconstructed life histories would provide a foundation for an ethnographic inquiry into the educational possibilities

available in the communities around East Lake Library. In the same way that the reconstruction of life stories in a life history allows for the identification of trajectories of meaning in one person's life, an ethnography of educational possibilities would support the systematic analysis of the educational possibilities in a community.

The collaborative reconstruction of Gurraacha's life history is an illustration of how an ethnography of educational possibilities could be developed. An ethnography of educational possibilities would similarly be grounded in life stories told during searches for educational possibilities. The search is a kind of ethnographic fieldwork. It involves participation in the process by which meaning grows in a person's life. Through this participation—through life stories told and retold—an ethnographic description of a life is collaboratively produced. This description, moreover, has educational effects. Through reflective discussion, it leads to the identification of trajectories of meaning, which, as conceptualizations of growth, have direct and immediate benefit as they guide searches for educational possibilities.

By focusing first on life stories, this form of educational ethnography is not defined by any specific educational institution or setting. Rather, it explores the particular possibilities for creating educational experiences based on what is meaningful to specific people as well as the obstacles that prevent the realization of those possibilities. Such an inquiry could begin at a small scale, applied to one other person with whom I work and then another. Ultimately, as the inquiry is extended to involve more and more of the people with whom I work, it could provide a more comprehensive perspective on the educational possibilities available. In a similar way, attention to life stories in other kinds

of educational work can also provide a more comprehensive perspective on the educational possibilities available when those stories lead to specific ways of recognizing and supporting the growth of meaning in another person's life.

The nearly 500 people with whom I have worked at the Dream Desk comprise a diverse group. Reconstructing the life histories of each based on their unique learning dreams and the particular obstacles they face would reveal many educational possibilities as well as specific forms of educational inequality. This inquiry into educational possibilities would strive for comprehensiveness, but not of a general sort. The goal would be to understand "education as a comprehensive matter that encompasses schooling but cannot be reduced to it" (Varenne, 2009, p. 1). It would, in addition, be a local comprehensiveness, developed in reference to the educational possibilities available to the people who come to East Lake Library and the communities of which they are a part.

This local comprehensiveness creates the foundation for a comparative perspective, which is presently underdeveloped in the anthropology of education. In his 1979 address to the Council on Anthropology and Education, Dell Hymes (1980) proposed an "educational ethnology," which would address this underdeveloped comparativism. His proposal, however, was limited by a narrow definition of education as schooling. He proposed an ethnology that would consist only of comparing similarities and differences between schools. An ethnography of educational possibilities contributes to the broader anthropological project of "expanding our sense of human possibilities (Rosaldo, 1980). Following Ingold (2011), it is "a sustained and disciplined inquiry into

the conditions and potentials of human life” (p. 1). It is an inquiry that participates in and invites stories about the process by which meaning grows in human lives.

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