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## Practicing Storytelling With and Learning From Migrant Youth

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As practitioners and researchers who live and work in the United States (U.S.), we understand the importance of addressing the interlocking oppressions migrants face; they are our colleagues, students, and part of our communities. This piece is a call to action: to consider the voices and stories of migrant youth as one way

to bring attention to their experiences of deportation, racism, and unattainable expectations placed upon immigrants in the U.S. Within this piece, we make use of the narratives of migrant youth in *Green Card Youth Voices: Immigration Stories from an Atlanta High School* to consider the violent realities of migration by directing attention to larger oppressive systems and structures in the American South.

*Green Card Youth Voices* is a text honoring diverse stories and experiences of migration in Atlanta, Georgia, which has a troubling history and present regarding anti-Black racism and anti-immigration—despite Atlanta being a hub or safe haven for migrants and refugees. The stories of migrant children and youth address how the Trump era continues to impact them—for better or worse. For many of the migrant youth in *Green Card Youth Voices*, they are using their knowledge and skills to rewrite their stories about what it means to call the U.S. home, retelling their stories of brutality in their countries of origin, and ultimately, sharing deep experiences regarding their individual biographies.

For us, storytelling has the ability to capture attention, create an emotional connection, and compel engagement in social change. As hooks (1989, 158) notes, “the longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release.” As a compelling gesture to retell traumatic experiences and remember them simultaneously, stories offer a powerful opportunity to listen and consider new (and sometimes differing) positions on social, economic, political, and cultural issues affecting all of us. The specific stories of migrant youth reveal how the larger and expected narrative of the “American Dream” is in fact the “American Nightmare” for some. The personal, familial,

and communal sacrifices that have been made toward achieving the “American Dream” have shortchanged young people by tearing apart their families, criminalizing their migration, and vilifying their existence. Within the Trump era, many migrant families continue to be the targets of violence; hence, making the topic of contemporary immigration important to discuss—especially for youth.

Here we address stories about the ways young people endure multiple and intersecting oppressions within their own migration experience. Young migrants’ stories are rarely taken seriously by adults due to larger racist and xenophobic discourses regarding the speaking marginalized subject—their voices are rarely heard or taken seriously (Greensmith and Sheppard 2017). As such, we share two stories of migrant youth who are retelling their experiences of migration from *Green Card Youth Voices*. We seek to honor young people, reveal the complex ways adults can engage youth through storytelling, and address how migration stories can challenge existing structures by bringing light to policies and practices that do not serve migrant youth well. These youth migrated to Atlanta, Georgia, to escape current economic and political conditions, gain access to sustainable education, (re)connect with existing family, and escape violence.

For example, Sean Cordovez, age 17 from the Philippines, discussed his experience adjusting to the American South:

Getting used to America was pretty hard. I felt like an outsider, and I didn’t feel welcomed initially. It was a long ... road to actually fitting in. I got to learn English as a second language, but I lost part of my Tagalog because there weren’t other Filipinos in the area except for my family (Rozman-Clark, Rodriguez, and Smith-Sitton 2018, 48).

In light of migration stories youth share, experiencing a new culture holds rewards and shortcomings. As Greensmith and Sheppard (2017) note, a sense of belonging for migrant children and youth is of vital importance, as they often will work to erase their cultural differences in an effort to fit in. For Sean, this experience of fitting in had the effect of losing some of his mother tongue. In effect, the assimilation into U.S. normativity has a cost for migrant youth as they often lose their language, culture, customs, and history.

Not only does migration require learning new cultural norms but it can also negatively impact the larger family unit. America, age 18 from Mexico, highlighted the way the “American Dream” can be harmful for her family:

My parents were the original “Dreamers” because they came to this country in search of the American Dream. They left everything behind because in their minds this country was everything for them. It was new jobs and more opportunities. ... It was escaping poverty in our home country, and it was giving their children the opportunity that they couldn’t have. My parents weren’t even able to reach high school, for them to see me being a senior and graduating in a few months is showing them that all of their sacrifices were worth something (Rozman-Clark et al. 2018, 81).

For America, the realities of migration had intergenerational effects; while she may have gained social and cultural capital for receiving her high school diploma, her parents had to sacrifice to provide her a livable future.

The goal of highlighting young people’s stories is to offer complexities to a taboo topic and highlight the need to consider the humanity of migrants (Rodriguez,

2010) especially within the current political climate where specific safety nets like the Deferred Action for Childhood Actors (DACA) have been defunded, resulting in the deportation of immigrants across the U.S. who have only ever called it home. Within the particular context of migration, storytelling can challenge narratives of the U.S. being a melting pot, by naming the persistent inequalities experienced. More generally, we believe that storytelling can offer migrant youth an opportunity to share their stories, connect surrounding their similar experiences, and become resilient in the face of inequality. Without a migration story or a counter narrative, we perceive that the current regimes negatively impacting immigrants and refugees will continually go unnoticed, and moreover, become unaddressed.

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