

Home as Relational, not Spatial:  
Considering Diasporic Identity and Displacement in Memphis

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**Abstract Thesis:**

This project examines how the physicality of relocation and displacement affects conceptions of home, belonging, and self. Against a background of diasporas, with the expulsion of Native Americans from their homelands and forced migrations as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (one of multiple iterations of the African diaspora), this research looks to current immigrant communities in Memphis to question whether modern migratory movements also have resulted or are resulting in similar diasporic identities. I have primarily focused upon narrative and have applied a diasporic theoretical framework to inform narratives of how place affects identity and a sense of home or being rooted. This project will strive to keep language people-centered, provide theory that is relevant or applicable to the communities it interacts with by making visible historically ignored or erased narratives. Findings from this project suggest that diasporic communities are not consciously present in Memphis: those who have physically relocated to a different country generally reject the confinement of an external diaspora, but are somewhat conscious of an internal displacement and, if that is the case, respond to that unhomeliness<sup>1</sup> by holding a dynamic, non-spatially-dependent conception of home and belonging. While perhaps a means of survival, born out of traumatic circumstances, it is also a radical way of understanding a world and identity without borders. Operating in an “in-between” space that becomes a home, a source of stability and belonging, this mentality encourages a more inclusive understanding of global networks and a radical, relational conception of home that creates the potentiality for a diasporic framework.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*

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**Introduction:**

My project has evolved enormously throughout the course of this summer institute. I entered seeking to understand how the physicality of movement affects cultural and linguistic temporalities, which led me to the interrelated-yet-distinct concepts of diaspora and displacement. Research of global diasporas exposed the much larger, communal networks created by migratory movements—accordingly, my focus shifted to community relations amongst people who have moved to the United States from another country. My decision to focus upon the southern region of the United States and specifically Memphis, while dictated by my research fellowship, was also intentional. James Gregory from the University of Washington remarks that “for as long as there has been something called the American South, southerners in significant numbers have been leaving” (1). And, within the South, multiple scholars have declared Memphis the largest under-researched city in the United States. My studies confirm this conclusion. In searching for diasporic communities in Memphis and the South, I have collaborated with a handful of relevant NGOs in Memphis, visited historical museums in the Delta, discussed the African diaspora with scholars in New Orleans, and have spoken with people who have moved from across the globe to reside in Memphis.

What refined my research was the conception of home—the examination of how the physicality of relocation and movement affects understandings of home, homeland, roots, belonging. It was by speaking with people, listening to their lived experiences that told of an “in-between”—yet also permanent—positionality that I began to see patterns emerging. The home, for people who have migrated to a foreign nation, is not a physical or spatially-located place. Rather, it is predicated upon relations: with family, with a god, with a community with self.

As I began to learn about people's stories and their truths, I noticed tensions emerge between my theoretical research and the participants' interests or desires. While I wanted to discuss concepts such as diaspora and displacement, many folks preferred to discuss their day-to-day struggles, systemic issues and practical means to resolve them. There was a disjunction, a disconnect, between my abstractions and their daily realities. Yet it is this disjunction and tension that catalyzed the restructuring of my work: learning to reconsider diasporic frameworks through the lens of peoples who could actually identify as such, instead of attempting to fit peoples' stories into diasporic concepts. In other words, reflecting upon narratives to critically engage with theory, rather than relying on abstractions to dictate the validity of lived experiences.

This project rests in that tension, in that in-between space, to make visible narratives ignored or marginalized within these theoretical discussions. Research and language about people should be people-centered; shared stories reveal theory and make applicable theories of diaspora and displacement. I have structured the results into individual chapters that focus on each individual while weaving together other narratives to portray the migrant community in Memphis. While it may not be diasporic, it has potential to radically reconfigure home and belonging to centralize relationships and affirm humanity.

The first segment examines the role of mothering within diasporas and relocations, how their resilience and strength provides stability and security for their children. Narratives of maternal sacrifice and support—unexpected findings within my research—revealed a gendered experience of displacement and home as well as recognize the importance of relational stability when physical spaces are not secure.

Because physical spaces are often quite unstable, many individuals who are later defined as refugees must flee to temporary bordering countries before being resettled to another country.

Dynamics between a first, second, third country are explored in the next section to expose the absence of a singular homeland—thus problematizing historical notions of diaspora, which generally rely upon a people’s relationship to an ancestral place of origin.

As elusive as the meaning behind a singular “place of origin” may be, it is necessary within this nation-dependent society to apply for refugee-status: the third section critiques current legal and socio-political categorizations of people who move across borders, such as immigrant, refugee, migrant worker, asylum-seeker. Language, determined through geopolitical complex legal negotiations, has very tangible effects in terms of the resources people can access once they have migrated to the United States, in many senses determining their experiences and quality of life.

While legal and political definitions often affect the available resources once resettled, definitions of diaspora and displacement look at how physical relocation affects communal and individual identity. Diaspora takes form when dispersed peoples unite for purposes political, economic, and social—this section explores when exactly displacement becomes diaspora.

Conceptions of home are integral to any discussion on diaspora and displacement, and this next segment highlights particular narratives of home and location to redefine our own understandings of a home or home-space. Not a physical location, home based on these experiences is created by and through relationships: with family, community, and self. Reconceiving identity as relational rather than physical offers new spaces to connect with others, infinite ways to find belonging and meaning.

The implications of this radical conception of home are profound and many: it shapes theoretical approaches to diasporic studies, suggests effective ways to build communities amidst

dispersed peoples, and teaches those who have not relocated a very different, more inclusive understanding of place. Looking at migration, community, and home, collective identity becomes a space for relational interaction based on shared realities of displacement but also togetherness and solidarity.

### **The Role of Mothering in Diaspora: Resilience and Home-making amidst Displacement**

Although about half of immigrants to the United States are unaccompanied children, there are many cases in which mothers and their children enter the country together. There may be a father, there may be a sister, but it is the mother who often ensures that her children are receiving an education, who is integral to the process of finding home and belonging amidst displacement. This chapter highlights these women's struggles, applauds their determination and resilience, and reveals their radically relational conceptions of belonging and place.

Even before the migration to the United States, mothers realize the importance of education in providing future opportunities for their children. Several of these women did not receive a formal education, or began but were forced to abandon their studies due to circumstances: in this sense, the formal education of their children becomes a fulfillment of the education they never received. Muna, who lived five years in Ethiopia and six in Kenya before migrating with her mother and siblings to Memphis at age eleven, recounts her mother's strength and resilience from her own adolescence, how her struggle became her children's' achievement:

“For her, I know she only had 7<sup>th</sup> grade education and her mom was not around the house a lot, so it was her hanging around playing around with the other neighborhood kids and her cousins... so for us, she said, “I only made it this far

and then had to get married and someone else supported me, and I wanted my children to have a different future”, so she pushed that throughout even though cultural boundaries of women demand having to do this and not being able to do that, and I guess we migrated because of the situation, of course, in Ethiopia, but she knew we needed to go somewhere where girls *and* boys can be educated, not just the boys.”

Amidst a country-wide war, amidst displacement and relocation and war-torn cities, Muna’s mother persevered to preserve her children’s education and future opportunities. They fled to Kenya, because there were school systems in which both those who identified as males and females could receive an education. The past affects the present, but her past did not become her children’s future: her inability to receive a formal education became impetus and compulsion to prioritize her children’s education even when others were simply striving to survive. She is a forward thinker, unbelievably strong, and even before receiving refugee status was challenging cultural norms. She sacrificed her time and personal well-being for the futurity of her children.

This narrative is not unusual among migrants to the United States: mothers who received incomplete or no official education, who were compelled to marry early, will prove their resilience by creating spaces for education even in a foreign land and amidst displacement. Ruth, a woman from South Sudan who entered as a refugee in 2001, used her personal experience with the limitation of education in Sudan to make sure that her children received a better future:

“Growing up I was in a very poor family, where my parents have to decide between who goes to school and who stays home because they couldn’t afford it. In Africa, South Sudan, which was Sudan back then and now is South Sudan, we do not have public schools like here. Parents have to pay for tuition for any level

of education, so I was left behind and didn't go to school until our firstborn in the family started working (she's the one who actually enrolled in middle school). So when I was graduating from 8<sup>th</sup> grade and went to high school, she suddenly died in childbirth. So all my hope was gone, I was crushed down, life became too hard for me, and I continued through high school through struggle, and you know in my country there's not a lot of jobs, no companies, so mostly we would make money through brewing alcohol—through selling alcohol. So that's what I did for tuition for my high school. I completed high school and then got married early because I couldn't afford to go to college. And then when I had my firstborn in 1990, there was a rebel movement already which had started in 1983. So in 1990 it moved to the city where I was living and where I was working. So the rebels wanted to take over the city and we were pushed to go to the rebel control in the village. So I lived in the village for three years, and then again the government forces came and bombed the area where we were living. And then we have to walk through South Sudan to Congo from Congo to Uganda to the refugee camps. So I lived in Uganda from 93-95 and then I came to Kenya, because in Kenya there is a lot of opportunities for resettlement in another country and my goal was to get my children to another level because I didn't go to college, I wanted my children to get something, one step ahead of me, so I decided to come to Kenya.”

Narratives of trauma are mentioned casually, in passing. Yet when cultural and individual trauma are an everyday affair, one must focus on other aspects of survival. One must look to the future. There is no time to focus on bombs or deaths or

devastation—the Beloveds of the past<sup>2</sup> cannot be reckoned with until the future is stable, which often involves better education for mothers with children.

The maternal desire for education spans generation and continent: Cristina of Argentina, raised in the poor suburban neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, recounts her mother’s story of how she prioritized her children’s education even though she had never been to school. Her mother, a single mother with five children who never learned to read or write herself, went to work so her children could receive an education. Cristina was the only child who completed high school—and even then, she had to leave school at age 13 to work, but because of her “thirst for knowledge” she returned to school four years later and graduated at age 21. Though she wanted to be a teacher, she had to abandon her classes because she could not afford their cost. Nevertheless, she persisted, and found a scholarship for nursing school and graduated years later:

“Mi nombre es cristina Condori. Soy originalmente de Argentina, de un pueblo en las montañas en Mendoza, nací, pero crecí en buenos aires, en los suburbios, en los barrios pobres de buenos aires, si crecí de que tengo un ano allí hasta los treinta y cinco más o menos. Fui a la escuela y mi madre fue buida (¿) muy jovencita, creo que los treinta y cinco, que viuda con cinco hijos, una mujer que venia del campo, que no tenía escuela, no aprendió de leer ni escribir, me siento muy intificado con eso porque yo tampoco se leer ni escribir en inglés, y entiendo como ella vivió. Pero aun fue mucho más duro porque ella no sabía leer ni escribir en español. Y salí de trabajar y buscar recursos para sus 5 hijos. Yo a menos sé que leer y escribir en español, lo que me dijo difícil es en inglés... bueno, fue duro, una mujer con 5

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<sup>2</sup> from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

hijos, nosotros de los 5 la única que termino la escuela ‘high school’ fue yo. Mis hermanos son tobarones y ellos salieron de trabajar muy jovencitos.. yo también fui a trabajar muy joven... a los 13/14 anos todo trabajando, pero luego volvi a la escuela a hacer... tenía sed de aprender, entonces volvi a la escuela como los 17 anos, y terminé la high school la 21, 22 anos.

Trabajé en la comunidad como cuidadora de un daycare, y me gusto entonces quizás ser maestra, y estuve estudiando para maestra pero no pude costear los gastos, así que según un ano y nada más, abandoné. Luego encontré una beca para estudiar enfermera y estudié enfermera y gradué.”

This is her struggle. Yet her struggle is surrounded by pockets of success and desire—of completing high school, a deep desire to learn, graduating nursing school. Her mother, who had no formal education and could not even read or write, understood the importance of providing education for her children. Cristina carried on this maternal role in her work to provide her children the best education possible through her moves to Miami and Memphis. Narratives that could be written as traumatic take on an empowering light, when these mothers provide what they could not receive even in the midst of displacement and relocation.

Education amidst displacement is particularly difficult because of linguistic barriers. Muna, her mother, and six siblings, after fleeing the war in Ethiopia, resettled in refugee camps in Kenya while trying to receive refugee status to relocate. Amidst this process, her mother prioritized education.

“Everywhere we went... like in Kenya and Ethiopia, my mom put us all in school the first year, so even though she was helping us understand these other

languages, in school we had to always fit in with the kids, speak the language, and in Kenya we had to speak Swahili in school but also speak a different language at home, and then when you hung out with the kids another slang. So just being around and feeling comfortable with the kids you were hanging around, and we are Muslim, so she would find time to do Muslim school and regular school that everyone else was taking, and have tutors to help us out, though I don't even know how she got around to doing that... she was a single mother, maybe just by knowing people gave us perks so I don't think most of the stuff we had to pay for, but you do something for them and then out of their heart they do something for you. We always had support in that way and were good in an educated way."

Interviewer—"Your mom sounds like a superwoman."

*(laughing)* "Yeah, whenever we talk about it she was like "yeah, that's not a big deal"...she's just the person I come home to... and its through opportunities like working at REP<sup>3</sup> that I come to appreciate my mom more and more, how hard she's worked to get me here. I know she's had a lot of struggles, but we don't see that—we only see the good parts of it. As an adult now I get to understand what that's like and what she's been through and everything."

A demonstration of resilience and unimaginable strength, the mother hides the trauma from her kids. For those who went to refugee camps, trauma becomes an everyday experience, a numbing pain that can desensitize or motivate someone. When Ruth fled Sudan—walking on

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<sup>3</sup> The Refugee Empowerment Center, a nonprofit organization in Memphis that provides a dearth of services to refugees, including adult English classes, tutoring and mentoring, and specialized groups for reading or for STEM.

foot to Uganda and Kenya—she was pregnant with her firstborn, Isaac. She arrived with her children, her sister and nieces and nephews, but shortly afterward her nephew became sick due to malnutrition “because we didn’t have food, we were not registered. That means you are not a legal refugee yet. Because you don’t get refugee card to be able to get food from the UN.” Without a card, they could not get enough food and only found beans and corn flour, which was not proper nutrition for a malnourished child. He would not eat the available food and Ruth could not provide him with alternatives: “with a small child who is sick he wanted something like juice, he wanted soup, he wanted something different but I didn’t have money to provide him that... so he stop eating the cornmeal and the beans because he has diarrhea sometimes and I really watch my nephew die after six months. He did die. And I know that’s the cause of bad nutrition.”

Yet there was no time for grieving—after her nephew’s death she gave birth to her son Isaac, and only two weeks after went to look for a job “before I lose all of them”. She “left home at six and the came back home at six.” Her sister died in the refugee camps, so three years later, when the UN finally decided to screen individual cases, she was in charge of getting her children and her sister’s children into the United States together.

This narrative, while distinctly her own, is one of many birthed of trauma and loss, yet interspersed with moments of joy and togetherness. The arrival to the United States is similarly challenging, containing both the possibility of pain (though the pain is generally more of isolation or a psychological displacement) and of joy. As Ruth recalled, arriving to the United States, “to me, it was a paradise. A paradise because first of all, I was coming from a place where I was living under a tent, and when I arrived here, I had my apartment, it was set up for me, I had electricity, so I have places for my children to sleep in, and I have food stamps, I have Medicare,

so all of this was really a big blessing to me. I don't know about other people, because of my background I was born in a poor family and raised in a poor family, so I really did not see anything like that. So for me it was a blessing." She was also able to provide her children with a private school education "which as a single mother I would not have ever dreamt of."

For Cristina, who did not have refugee status but rather a visa, life was quite difficult, though she still prioritized her children's education: "Llegué a Miami y empecé trabajar como housekeeping, limpieza de casa, y hasta ahora lo estoy haciendo. Así pudimos sacar a nuestras hijas adelante. Y siempre buscando información y aprendiendo como lo que es el sistema educativo aquí, como, involucrarte de la comunidad." She endured backbreaking hours of labor so that her children could move forward, could receive a formal education. Amidst her strenuous work schedule, she sought out community organizations to immerse herself in the city and its people.

For Muna's mother as well, community and family were essential to their well-being, regardless of outside circumstances. Within all her living circumstances, her mother made the physical location a home-space. She would do this by "making sure there is food in the house, she always cooked whether she was busy or not, in the morning she would always wake everybody up for school, feed us breakfast and make sure you're on time, and when you get home she'd greet you with another meal, and then making sure we all go to bed on time, getting the right clothes, making sure we look clean, she just created that home-space, teaching us a culture, her culture, giving everyone chores and making sure we were taking care of everything... like she never showed that we were struggling, even though one time we had a 1 bed apartment with 7 kids all together in a 1 bedroom place, and she was able to manage everyone and say ok you are staying on that side, the older kids are supposed to be more

responsible—just teaching respect with that one person and seven people... She was the person you looked up to and was like “ok well mom said this you have to do it,” and who taught us to have each other’s backs, that the house is supposed to be clean at this time, and just like doing all that stuff at the same time as signing up for the visa and all that crazy stuff that was happening. In Kenya, there’s a lot of governmental issues, and if something happened outside she never brought it in the house. It was happy... any holiday she would go all-out, say let’s visit family, let’s do this... so it was, it just felt like somewhere you always wanted to go back to.”

Ruth also involved herself in the community, as it was through her own blessings that she realized the struggles other parents experienced and decided to begin the Refugee Empowerment Program: “living with refugees who are struggling, parents who cannot read and write, who cannot help their children... looking at that I say, “What am I supposed to do with this huge blessing, I really need to share it with the people around me”. And I decided to go to visit families to see if we can start an after-school program.”

Fifteen years later, REP has evolved into a much more comprehensive program now with paid staff; as a working member Muna can see daily the struggles her mother went through in her transition to the United States when assisting parents who arrive with children, who do not speak English, who need guidance and translators and interviews for jobs. Even with REP, the transition is difficult—for Muna’s mother, who arrived before REP was established, those services were not so easily accessible. As Muna reflects, “I see people who are in her shoes so I come around like “this is how it felt for my mom”. Except she had to do that all by herself. Like I don’t even know... I respect them [the parents] so much and I respect my mom’s position even more, and I don’t think I would have done it myself.”

## **First, Second, Third Countries: The Absence of a Singular Homeland**

Although scholars of diasporan studies contest the meaning and scope of diaspora, most agree that a diaspora involves the “dispersal of a people from its original homeland” (Butler 190). Yet an insistence upon an “original homeland”, is at best potentially problematic, at worst painfully archaic. In today’s increasingly globalized society, the presence of a singular, stable homeland is virtually nonexistent. Migration, travel, physical relocation have become commonplace as “fewer and fewer people are today living in the land of their ancestors” (Butler 190). Evolved communication and transportation technologies, geopolitical repartitioning, and warfare that leads to refugee or exiled populations have all restructured this global community.

Genocide and armed conflict in particular trouble the notion of an original homeland, as many refugees move to and through several countries in an attempt to flee violence and persecution. Multiple relocations are so frequent and common that language has developed to help define these socio-political relations to nation states: First Country, Second Country, and Third Country. As the titles suggest, the first country is one’s country of origin, where they were born; the second country the intermediary space when refugees are filing for refugee status; the third country intended to be their final destination. Basuze Magodo, a refugee who arrived in Memphis in October of 2014, recounts his own experience of residing in a second country, and why moving to a third country is desirable:

“When in my country, I lived in Mozambique and we leave to South Africa and we start this process, because when you leave your country, you go to neighbor country [Second Country] and you feel there like “I cannot make this place home”, so you leave to be somewhere else they call Third Country, maybe it’s a little far

from your home, and when you move there you start to integrate in your community, start fresh and start a new life there.”

For Basuze, the Second Country cannot be made a home because of its instability, discrimination, and perpetual state of fear, though people still relocate there because it is safer than their home country. It is a survival means:

“People, when they flee from their country, the easiest way is to feel a little safe in another country, a neighbor country. Most of those countries don’t want refugees or immigrants to be integrated into their society or the community. So you live there but anytime they can say you have to go home. So it can be really hard ...because you don’t know what will happen. They don’t grant you documentation and in terms of jobs or opportunities it’s a little bit hard.”

Yet even if the government is unfriendly, there are opportunities for community building, for meeting people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, creating relationships, and learning from people. Second countries can become a home-space, or at least a significant part of one’s identity and understanding of culture and origin. In describing her mother’s cultural identity, Muna describes its malleability, how through their experience in Kenya her mother adopted the language and many Somalian mannerisms:

“I say my mom is Ethiopian, but I feel like a lot of people call her Somolian because she speaks like a Somolian. Every time I meet someone from a different cultural background they’ll ask, “Is your mom half this, half that” even though my mom is Ethiopian, but when she gets into something she commits to it, so like with the languages Somali is a common language for her, she speaks it every day.”

For Muna, her identity has been shaped by five years in her first country and six in the second, and for that reason she views her own origins as much more regional:

“I identify a lot with east Africa, because I came here 11 years ago and I am originally Ethiopian, both of my parents are Ethiopian, and we grew up in Kenya. I have a lot of connection to Kenya because we moved there when I was 5 years old, so that is what I mainly remember.”

Residing in multiple places—multiple countries—creates potential difficulty in understanding one’s roots or one’s heritage. However, it also offers the potentiality for a stateless conception of homeland and roots. The homeland as a region surpasses the nation-state boundary to represent a culture not confined by artificial and divisive borders.

Yet relocations to several countries can also complicate one’s sense of the unhomeliness of internal displacement. Born in the Congo, Basuze “left home” in 1996 to stay in a refugee camp in Tanzania, returned two years later when the war ended, then went back to Tanzania after the one-month period of peace ended; from there he left for Mozambique to live with a brother, and later moved to South Africa in 2011 to live with another brother and flee warfare. As he recalls, the United States is his Third Country and South Africa is a Second Country, though the country in which he lived before (Mozambique) is not his first. The experience of living in so many different countries (five, in his case), especially in traumatic circumstances of displacement, makes the concept of a homeland and thus a diasporic identity difficult:

“I feel like I could say I’ve lived half of my age out of Congo so I’m trying to keep that identity because I am from there and when I applied as an immigrant, that’s where I said I was from. So I try to learn about the Congo because I don’t know that much, I was living at the border in *Burundi*, Congo is very huge so I

don't know at all, like I've never been inside [the country], so from where the war started I just crossed the border. I lived in Mozambique and I feel like... I like Mozambique. I cannot feel like I can identify myself with that place but I did like it. But now I am in the United States and in my country there is a war there and I don't know when I will be back there so that's kind of a little bit how I see it. Which among those countries do I identify myself with... right now I am in the process after 5 years to apply for citizenship... I don't know..."

The uncertainty in identity, the salience and vulnerability of Basuze's "I don't know" speaks to the complexity of identity and its ability to restructure itself. Theorist Stuart Hall suggests that identity represents an ever-changing process of construction within representation, rather than a self-discovery removed from the creative powers of narration. Because of the evolving nature of these productions, "cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (225). With every country one moves to, with every culture one experiences, identity evolves and shapes itself as well. It is "the name we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). The experiences of the past do not merely affect us in that moment, but continue to shape our present and future identity as well. That narrative of the past, for the majority of non-white people, is one of a "profound splitting and doubling... the ambivalent identifications of the racist world... the 'otherness' of the self-inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (233). The impositions of the nation-state upon lands already teeming with life and culture and people, the attempted erasure of tribal and indigenous histories produce a sense of otherness and

also of a “splitting” or “doubling” that strains the formation of a cohesive identity and understanding of heritage and past.

Basuze’s experience living on the border of the Congo exposes the complicated tensions between a national culture or a diasporic identity with a homeland. Gloria Anzaldua, a famous Chicana writer, claims her “border experience” in a space she names the borderlands (20). Not an artificial line, an unnatural border created to separate two spaces, the borderlands is the space around it that refuses complete assimilation or integration. Different regions bring out dissimilar cultural practices, so Basuze’s experience at the border of the Congo is very different from central Congo, a region he has never visited. Desiring to know his roots, to know his country, he hopes to learn of central Congo’s history and cultural practices as well.

Along with learning more of one’s at-times elusive or troubling origins, many people who have moved to Memphis indicated a desire to return to their countries of birth, even if only temporarily. Like the desire to learn of one’s country, it stems from a return to roots, to finding answers to the uncertainty of cultural identity. Muna, identifying with eastern Africa, would hope to re-visit each country she lived in to “see which one makes me more comfortable and which one I can relate to, I know there is family in Ethiopia, they would probably welcome me with open arms and stuff, I feel like I am fearful to go back because I haven’t seen them in years since I was a kid but I feel like I need to go back. But Kenya of course I relate to it, I can walk the streets and see how it’s changed... Ethiopia, I have no memories of it except the language and what my mom tells me... I feel like it’s a tradition to take your kids there one day and show them every year... but I have no idea where I want to live in my life. Until I finish

college and go around and travel a little more... I think I'll be more a traveler than stick to one place." The experience of an internal displacement, of lost-origins that may or may not be recoverable, may manifest itself in a non-fixity with physical place, an ability to uproot and relocate oneself with ease.

Of course, even First- and Second- country distinctions cannot capture the complexity of modern global movements: some people possess incorrect birth certificates that mislabel their country of origin, and some do not have any birth certificates, which at times leads to a necessary erasure of country of origin to secure a current identity in this geopolitical atmosphere. In other words, people are forced to deny a part of their identity, their country of origin, because affiliating with that country may have dire consequences in this current political climate.

The First/Second/Third Country distinction generally applies to the refugee experience, though there are similar relocations in parts of the world that are not recognized as refugee-producing countries as well. The United States, practically, acts almost as a Second Country for many Spanish-speaking immigrants. Muna describes it succinctly:

"Hispanic immigrants remind me of when we fled Ethiopia to go to Kenya. Kenya is welcoming but only to an extent. It's not your country, the government can harass you, that fear of being put in jail, being sent back to home... the fear of going to second country just because of how they are. But for us [refugees], we are placed with more safety, we have papers... but they are struggling to find a structure, a home. I guess the US is not very welcoming, like if you are accepting these people you have to accept everybody else."

## Categorical Distinctions and Geopolitics: On Refugees, Immigrants, and Asylum-Seekers

On a Saturday evening in Mason, TN, roughly one hundred people quietly gather around the outskirts of the city's for-profit detention center. They are mothers, fathers, relatives, families, individuals, immigrants, native citizens, professionals, manual laborers, students, black, brown, white. Carrying signs bearing "Ni una mas," "Liberation not deportation," and "Stop the raids!", they quietly gather in a semi-circle, backs toward the menacing barbed-wire and metal gates blocking an array of dingy concrete buildings behind. Someone passes out candles and the organizers begin the vigil, bringing leaders of

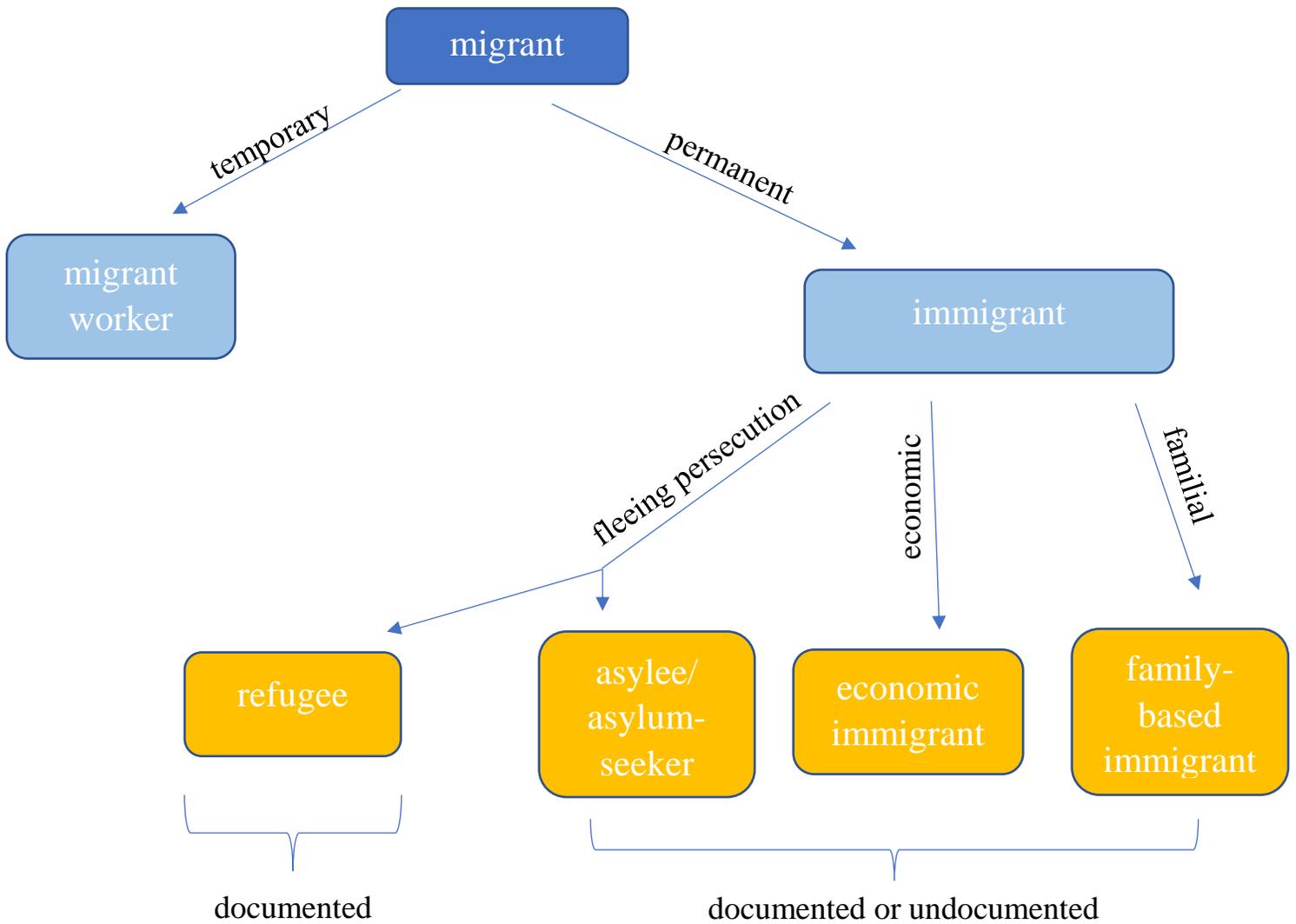


different faiths to pray for those wrongfully detained, explaining the inhumane practices ICE has conducted—within these past few weeks, quite visibly—but also for decades before. A woman testifies about her experience with her husband's deportation, how her daughter, a US marine dedicated to serving her country, can no longer cross the border to visit her abuelos. The second testimony is announced and is met with silence, because the man who was going to share his experience is too frightened of immigration authorities to attend the vigil. Two children whisper to each other, and a woman wearing a "chinga la migra" pin gently admonishes them. A flame is lit at one end and, person by person, the flame spreads down the line until every person is holding a candle glowing in solidarity against the unjust raids and policies of ICE. An imam waves a sign declaring, "Not in MY town".

The ICE raids they are protesting often occur between 12 and 4 in the morning, employ terror practices to terrify people—at times people who do not speak English—into cooperating with them, and are conducted unthoroughly and improperly. They tear families apart and often invoke violence, unprompted. This unsubstantiated violence results in the deaths of individuals entirely unrelated, as well: Ismael Lopez was shot and killed by Southaven police the early morning of July 25<sup>th</sup>. Evidence suggests the police fired their weapons through a closed door. The warrant the police produced revealed they had gone to the wrong house—and instead had shot an entirely innocent person. The Memphis Police Department has stated officially that they do not work with ICE, but immigration legal attorneys have assured me that ICE is in fact collaborating with the local police. Even more horrifying, individuals are impersonating police officers and impersonating ICE officials to illegally detain immigrants and demand money before releasing them. These practices are a direct result of inhumane policies the United States has endorsed regarding the treatment of immigrants, documented or undocumented. They are the result of racism, colorism, xenophobia. They are the result of nefarious geopolitical decisions designed to divide peoples into categories that determine whether they “deserve” to be in “our” country.

Muna’s troubling of the “Second Country” dynamic between the United States and people who have moved from Spanish-speaking countries exposes the consequences of these politically-motivated distinctions. Categories of “migrant,” “immigrant,” “refugee,” and “asylum-seeker” all exist in their current political iteration today because of exceedingly complex geopolitical and corrupt relations. This section will explore the geopolitical factors that affect who gets refugee status, who doesn’t, and how the legal systems and the Memphis community respond to these distinctions. Below is a chart that portrays the relationship between

generally-accepted legal definitions for people who have moved to Memphis from different countries, created by consulting with two legal firms here in Memphis as well as a variety of online legal sources:



The word “migrant” has been extrapolated to represent a variety of people, which depending on the person invoking it may have a positive or negative connotation. Put most simply, the work refers to someone who migrates, or physically relocates, from one place to

another (*OED*). Entrance into another nation-state is not required, though it is almost-always implied, especially as the legal definition of migrant has developed<sup>4</sup>. As this language has evolved, “migrant” has now come to represent someone who moves to a new country temporarily. According to US terminology, if someone who migrates to another country intends to reside permanently, that person is an immigrant. A migrant worker, on the other hand, is someone who migrates to a different place to work for a temporary period, after which that individual will return to a permanent residence. For this reason, the word “migrant” in the US is now at times associated with a temporary temporal stamp, while “immigrant” refers to a separate, permanent category. Yet, according to accurate definitions, all people who move to a different country are migrants, though people who reside permanently in the new country are immigrants (*OED*)<sup>5</sup>.

Even within conversations with two attorneys, there was some ambiguity regarding the meanings of these terms. As Sally Joyner from Mid-South Immigration Advocates revealed,

“Obviously some of those are terms of art. So many times I am trying to argue that my client is a bonified refugee and not an economic migrant, for example. And of course the truth is always really in the middle. Because, I mean, how many people leave their country for one reason? So technically speaking a refugee is someone who is unwilling or unable to return to their country of nationality or last country of residence because they have reasonable and well-founded fear of persecution based on their membership in a particular social group, their race,

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<sup>4</sup> Some have primarily distinguished “migrant” as nomadic, in which case the physical movement occurs regardless of nation-state or other artificial borders.

<sup>5</sup> This is primarily in the United States, which generally differentiates between immigrants and refugees. In Europe, the comparison is typically between migrants and refugees.

religion, nationality, and that is the definition of refugee. It's someone who is running away from something they are scared of. An economic migrant is someone who is migrating to a different country purely for economic opportunities—generally in that case the push and the pull factors are equal—whereas with a refugee we are only looking at the push factors. And an immigrant is somewhere in the middle. An immigrant as a legal term of art is anyone who comes to a country with the intent to stay permanently. So an economic migrant might not be an immigrant if they don't intend to stay permanently. They just want to come work for a few years then go back. But they may also be an immigrant, they may have come for economic reasons and plan to stay indefinitely. A refugee is apparently someone who just can't return. And so of course they may also be an immigrant if they plan to stay in a country permanently. Technically for a refugee that is not a permanent status: if the status changes, things improve, a new leader takes charge, then you can be deported back there unless you intend to become an immigrant and a resident of the country. So I use those terms in a legalistic sense.”

Referring to these categorizations as “terms of art,” Sally Joyner reveals the glaring limitations of these legal distinctions: they require that one pursues one motivating cause for migration, when in truth it is often myriad reasons. These legal categorizations classifying why people migrate, while resulting from a multiplicity of complicated negotiations and motivations, are often simplified into either a “push” or “pull” factor. The primary “pull” factor most think of when explaining why an immigrant moves to a new country is economic opportunity: economic immigrants are those who, as the term suggests, migrate for primarily economic reasons—a

better job, fair wages, work-related mobility or opportunity. However, as attorney Sally Joyner from Mid-South Immigration Advocates reveals, one of the underlying bases for the American immigration system is family-based immigration. Family-based immigrants include those who migrate to reunite with family members, though typically, the relation needs to be intimate for this category to legally apply.

While “pull” factors are positive, “push” factors are negative. Most push factors include violence and persecution, whether targeted or general. This can include armed conflict, dictatorships or oppressive governmental structures, genocide, tribal warfare, gang-related violence, or more. Individuals who are legally acknowledged as fleeing persecution will be categorized as either asylees or refugees. The definition of a refugee is rather strict: as the 1951 Refugee Convention dictates, a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Yet despite the clarity of that definition, the process of determining who can and cannot be given refugee status is quite complex. Casey Bryant from Latino Memphis’ Derechos program elaborates on the complexity and politics associated with classifying someone as a refugee.

“Generally, an immigrant is a person not from a country that comes to a country.

A migrant is someone who moves from place to place within a country, and a refugee has a very specific legal definition and most clients aren’t refugees because they cross the border into the United States. But, the definition of refugee changes to asylee once they apply for refuge in the United States. And so most of our clients who come to the US are fleeing some kind of danger: whether or not

they fall into the legal category of refugee is one thing, but they *are* refugees of a bigger system that has displaced them. Whether they are running from generalized danger in their country to very specifically one person is targeting them, the US has really major culpability in the areas where people are fleeing from and coming here. I think that we have a really huge responsibility to accept these people and what we are doing is creating really rigid boundaries for them that they have to get through just to have some stability in their lives.”

Casey Bryant precisely identifies the gross injustice within this system of categorizations: it creates rigid boundaries that prevent people from safety, from security, from being able to find a sense of home and belonging. Those who enter without refugee status—even though they should be a refugee, the US government will not recognize them as such—must struggle to find work, housing, and healthcare, all aspects that refugees are assisted with through federally-funded organizations. More than political, the legal “refugee/immigrant” split has affected society’s perceptions toward refugees and immigrants to make the experience for those who do not have refugee status even more painful and unwelcoming. While several refugees interviewed indicated they felt welcomed into Memphis, for the most part, people entering without the refugee label resoundingly replied that they were not welcomed into the city.

To be explicitly clear, this is not to say that the refugee experience is one of acceptance and ease, or to erase or diminish the discrimination that refugees face daily. There are still large misconceptions regarding the status or intentions of refugees, within communities and larger bodies of government—Trump’s Muslim ban and increased hate crimes toward refugees expose the prejudice, discrimination, xenophobia, colorism within society today. However, entering without a refugee status adds additional burdens to an already-challenging experience, and the

determinations of who enters with or without refugee status is often determined by nebulous political desires by powerful white men. If these powerful leaders have good relations with the leaders of another country, these American politicians are unlikely to count that country's people as refugees even if they should qualify as such. Sally Joyner from MIA expounds upon corrupt and artificial geopolitical distinctions:

“When dealing with legal terms of art, they don't always reflect the reality. I would say almost all my clients came here escaping violence. So generally speaking most lay-people would consider them to be refugees. You're fleeing violence, your home was destroyed, if you go back someone will kill you—that sounds like a refugee-type of situation, and those are my clients. Yet when you hear refugee you think someone from overseas, because it is--there's not a refugee camp in Tegucigalpa. Even though the level of violence merits that. It's geopolitical. It comes down to we might help fund the 2009 coup in Honduras and therefore we don't want to say we created all these refugees, we say they are economic migrants or people fleeing general crime. By putting our stamp of refugee or asylee, the government is saying they are unable or unwilling to protect you, we are kind of saying we screwed some things up... like if you're Cuban you are pretty much automatically granted legal status. If it's someone we are buddies with, you're not going to get asylee status because it's almost impossible.”

Because of corrupt and inhuman political policies, migrants who move to the United States will have radically different experiences based upon where they come from and the nature of their country's relationship to the U.S. Even more troubling is how the public receives it: In an article written about the New York Times specifically created in an attempt to explain the legal

implication and clarify the misconceptions surrounding the “migrant/refugee” discourse, the author states that “briefly, a refugee is person who has fled his or her country to escape war or persecution, and can prove it” (Sengupta 1). That language of “can prove” is critical and exposes public misconception even amidst professionals or intellectuals: they believe people do not receive refugee status because they do not have the evidence, not because they are trapped in a corrupt political system that refuses to allow people with a certain color of skin or particular country of origin to qualify. And those misconceptions then fuel more xenophobia and racism toward immigrants, the public believing that immigrants who cross the southern border freely “choose” to do so and thus must accept the difficulty of survival and burden of integration once they arrive. Even refugees upheld this distinction between refugees and immigrants; one person asserted the following:

“As an immigrant you are empowering yourself by moving around—you are taking that choice to move around, it’s a smarter choice, using your brains, but as a refugee you’re fleeing from fear. It’s a choice versus fear thing. Because as a refugee you have your home taken away from you, you have nowhere to be, its safety safety safety, whereas an immigrant is trying to go find better education, better life opportunity, so you are pursuing something wherever you are going.”

Yet this understanding cannot account for the complex push and pull factors that all people experience when relocating. It places immigrants and refugees on opposite ends of a binary system, when really refugees who plan on residing permanently in their new country of residence are immigrants and many immigrants without refugee status should receive that categorization. People migrate for a cornucopia of reasons, there rarely solely one motivating factor. To reduce one’s story and experience to a one-or-two word label that does not and cannot

capture the complexity and intricacy of that person's experience is wrong and dehumanizing. These categories encourage further divisions and dispersal amidst communities that have the potential to join in solidarity amidst displacement.

### **When Diaspora Takes Form: Diaspora versus Displacement**

An academic word with Greek and Latin origins, "diaspora" signifies a scattering, sharing the root "spr" with other Indo-European words such as "spores," "spread," "sperm," and "disperse" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, Butler 192). That last word, "disperse," is particularly pertinent, as the Greek root for diaspora also translates directly to dispersion. Yet there are critical differences between diaspora and dispersion: dispersion will not necessarily lead to diasporization. Similarly, a displacement is not indicative of a diaspora, whose definition is historically rooted in ancestral ties to a homeland. While people or a group of peoples may be displaced from a country of origin, that in itself is not enough to qualify a physical relocation as a diasporic movement.

Scholars have attempted to define and refine what qualifies a migratory displacement as a diasporic one by creating models or lists of requirements, notably Kim Butler. According to her model, there are four essential components to qualify a dispersion as a diaspora: 1) At least two destinations after dispersal; 2) Some relationship to an actual or imagined homeland<sup>6</sup>; 3) Self-awareness of the group's ethnonational identity; and 4) A temporal-historical dimension spanning at least two generations. The relationship with homeland, hostland and the group itself

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<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Butler argues, gypsies or other nomadic cultures would not be diasporic because there is no physical homeland, and not all migratory movements will lead to a diasporic identity.

must lead to a self-consciousness of a distinct identity, and thus self-identification with a diasporic community. Theorist Okpewho defines this relationship-based configuration of diaspora as “a global space, a worldwide web, that accounts as much for the mother continent as for wherever in the world her offspring may have been driven by the unkind forces of history” (xiv).

To examine whether diasporic populations at present consciously identify as such, participants in this study were asked if they were aware of the terms “diaspora” and “displacement,” and whether they identified with either concept. The response, overwhelmingly, was that individuals did not identify with “diaspora,” though some resonated with “displacement.” The tension between these two labels, both rooted in narratives of trauma or loss, exposes a deeper disconnect between external diasporic communities and an internal psychological displacement.

Among those who had heard the term “diaspora,” one understood it as a solidifying force and one as a more stagnant concept. For Iris Mercado, it has a very restrictive definition limited by temporal fixity:

“Diaspora seems to have a very specific start and end from the whitewashed history I’ve been taught. I understand its use as very finite. So I don’t feel like I can fit into that definition and those examples in history books. Again, kind of going back to the refugee definition, which is more socially acceptable... I [still] don’t feel like I identify with that. The people settle in one place, even in multiple countries throughout the world. They are there, they are established, they are a part of that new nation. Whereas in the context of the US, historically there has been so much pushback against different waves of refugees and immigrants who

have been forced by the US to come into the US, that for me that definition doesn't apply. I would.. I don't even consider myself a political refugee even though I would fall under that category in Argentina. I feel like it's not something I can claim."

Interviewer—"Out of respect for people who can?"

"I think so, and also out of misunderstanding for what diaspora is, and I don't have research to feel like I could 1) belong and 2) be accepted by people who use that word. As much as I identify to a certain extent as an indigenous Latinx person from Argentina, there isn't a specific indigenous population that would claim me; therefore, I don't feel comfortable saying that very openly. The word diaspora for me has a very hard beginning obviously to struggle and displacement but it also has an end and I feel like I don't, which is why I have this tattoo—it's by Fabiano Rodriguez (*portrayed below*). The butterfly is used in many movements because the monarch butterfly follows a very unnatural pattern of migration—and because of climate change, their pattern throughout the Americas has significantly shifted; a lot have been found dead on the interstates because of heat waves, and they don't know where they should be going, and they don't follow physical border lines, just like people don't. They've just been imposed upon places, most of the time by other countries and puppet presidents (Central America, USA). So [the tattoo shows] two people looking at each other, the ancestors and future family reflecting continuously on what is happening."



Iris' astute observations on diasporic theory expose one of the problems of diasporic political self-identification: the ability to self-identify with a diasporic community is a form of epistemological privilege, one that many peoples cannot access. Scholars barely understand what a diaspora is; expecting displaced peoples to not only understand but identify with an abstract concept is unrealistic and indicative of academic privilege. Language of displacement is more common, though it still only reaches limited groups of people.

Even when one has the academic privilege and education to understand "diaspora" or at least be familiar with the term, one may still reject the term due to its intimacy with narratives of sorrow and loss. Several refugees and immigrants have indicated that they choose not to focus on the unhappy or traumatic experiences in their lives, but rather on their "blessings" and "opportunities". Identifying as diasporic may appear to be aligning with sorrow as a core element

on one's identity, especially when examining historical diasporas<sup>7</sup>. Even identifying as displaced, or desplazada, can have painful psychological effects. When Cristina meditated on the concept of displacement as it applied to her life, she was brought to tears by the guilt--"la culpa"-- she experiences for her children not being able to grow up around their aunt, uncles, cousins, and grandparents in Argentina.

"Diáspora.. lo escuchado pero no se... Desplazada? Cuando uno tiene que moverse obligatoriamente de su espacio. Es políticas se ha usado globalmente con los países pobres, ha hecho un bombardeo para los estados unidos, porque ha hecho con vicios y con países, y esa política afecta a toda la población, que ha hecho a que, es una política a inmigrar la gente. Por ejemplo, los estados unidos ponen producto en México que quiebren la economía del pueblo, destruyen los pequeños economismos. Entonces que hace la gente? Entonces tienen que inmigrar al país del norte. Si no han tomado esta acción, la gente no estaría aquí. Si no le vendes armas a algún país, los refugiados no estarían aquí. Todos quieren estar en el lugar en que se crecieron. Si que le gusta viajar, visitar, pero uno quiere seguir con su familia, creciendo con sus primos, con sus tíos, y yo siento que le quite.. les prive de la familia. Y siento una culpa. Siento culpa que no crecían con sus primas, con sus tías, con sus abuelas, porque no podemos volver. Y eso pasas con las 11 millones personas que están aquí. Y que mucha gente desconoce lo que

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<sup>7</sup> The Babylonian exile in 597BC, when Nebuchadnezzar deported tens of thousands of Judeans from their homeland to Babylon, marks the beginning of the Jewish diaspora. It is a displacement birthed out of trauma, loss, exile, and victimization. However, the notion that a diaspora is necessarily disempowering or principally founded upon traumatic collective experiences is too narrow a definition. Even the original Jewish diaspora, while certainly a forced migration founded in oppression, trauma, and loss, also provided the means for creativity and folklore.

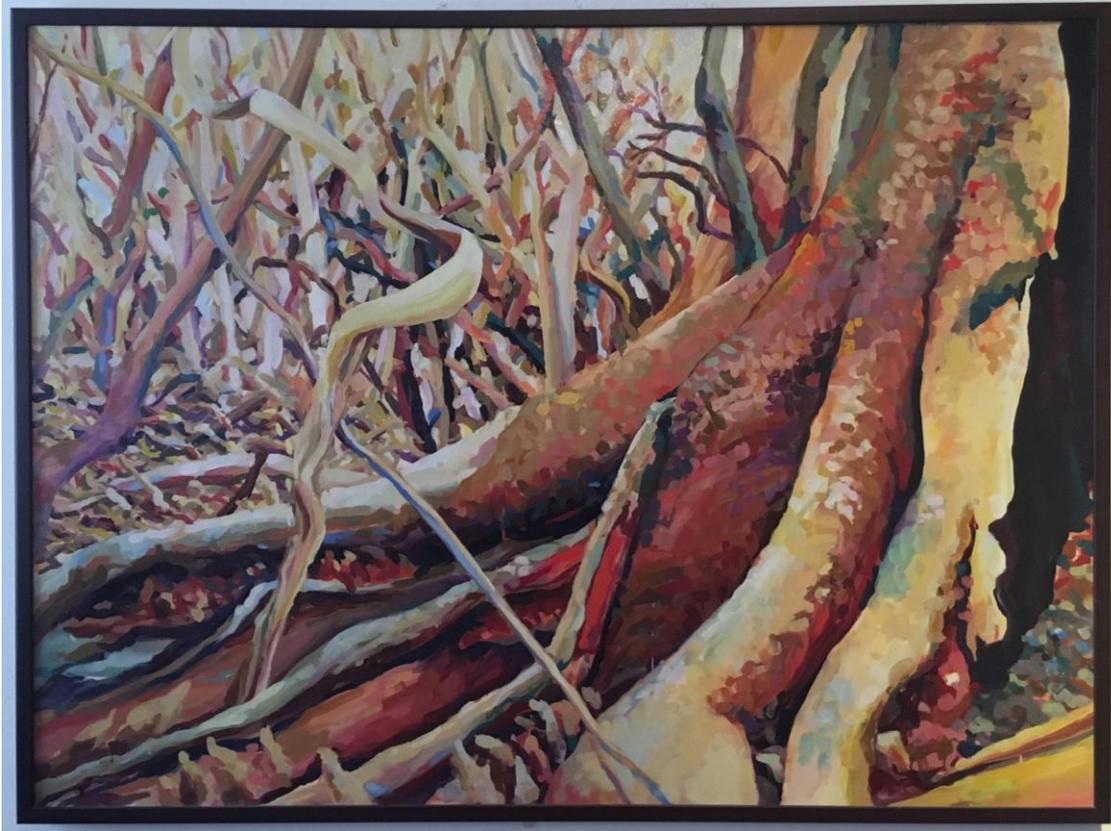
está viviendo un inmigrante. Las medias de comunicación pasan una mentira, la gente si no tienen contacto con un inmigrante, no pueden comparar los medios de comunicación y dicen que es la historia de una persona. Tenemos que salir a la luz y compartir una historia para que la gente no escucha a nosotros y no dice la periodista.”

While displacement is intimately related to her personal identity and emotions, it is also connected directly to corrupt politics and colonialism. Demonstrating how the US government actually forced the displacement of thousands of people in Mexico and Central America, Cristina asserts that if that United States had not destroyed economies in Central America, people displaced from that country would not have moved to the United States. If this country had not sold weapons to particular countries and leaders, there would not be refugees. Since she believes that everyone desires to live in the place they grew up in, the place with which they are the most familiar, she urges that narratives of the eleven million immigrants here be told to the public, that one can overcome corrupt media communication to share their real stories.

Perhaps this is where the diaspora enters as a potential politically and culturally unifying structure. The African diaspora, one of the most well-known diasporas, has succeeded (with limitations) in politically and culturally uniting peoples in solidarity against colonialist and imperial forces. However, it existed for nearly four centuries before that identity became operative—until they came to know each other and group identity coalesced around “blackness” and shared ancestral histories of enslavement and New World oppression (Butler 207). Muna Mohamed, who identifies with east Africa, considers herself part of the African diaspora and frames the diaspora as empowering:

“Where people feel like there’s a cultural background they are identifying it or are a part of, it’s something that connects everyone together so we feel we are connected, but we can’t express it in a way but feel how... it’s understanding how we are connected to each other. It’s one statement that connects everyone together so if you can’t identify or pinpoint exactly where you are from, but you know you are from the continent or something... a lot have the same cultural background so we can relate in that way, there’s something that you share that brings you together.

I feel like I am a part of it, I have people who I connect to and people who I am different from, but we are all African, we all came from a few people who dispersed and made the world... like I came from somewhere, there’s a spiritual connection to it... just being open and not very pessimistic, not thinking about everything as a negative, almost a tolerance of others. People can argue and be exclusive, but diaspora is everybody. There is a part of you that connects to this place, and that is what brings everyone together.”



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A painting by self-proclaimed African diaspora artist Ron Bechet, it is a metaphor for how the African diaspora connects people together. Each root is connected to the motherland, and they are all intertwined so intricately that they cannot be pulled apart. When displaying his art, Ron Bechet announced that “if we saw ourselves as a tree, how connected we would be as a black people.”

This painting is one of hundreds residing in the McKenna Museum for African American Art in New Orleans, LA. It is one of two black-owned museums on African American history, neither of which are funded by the government. Upon a research visit to New Orleans, I was struck by how central the diaspora was to black identity in New Orleans. Instead of assimilating, communities united together via membership in a “black race” and joined in solidarity to affirm and celebrate African identity. For this reason, identity is integral to diasporas, as it “transforms

them from the physical reality of dispersal into the psychosocial reality of diaspora” (Butler 207). It forges a sense of belonging, of preserving roots, even amidst a landscape of displacement or instability.

### **Conceptions of Home**

Portraying the home as part of identity and as connected to place and belonging reveals its connection to diasporas. Although few people who had moved here from another country carried concepts like diaspora or displacement with them consciously, all had elaborate, non-spatial understandings of home and its relational nature that suggest potential for diasporic communities. Supporting Hall’s continually-evolving construction of identity and its representational nature, Ruth reveals a highly imaginative working of home, in which individuals themselves enact the home and create homes wherever they go:

“I think to me home is... is not a place. It is what you make. That what I think. Your own country can be a home or cannot be—you can make it a home or you can make it not be a home. Home is just what you make out of [it], to me. So even if I was back home, I can be frustrated, I can be depressed, if I do not make it a home for me to enjoy. And there are so many people in their own countries, in their own countries, who are depressed because they feel out of space, they feel not wanted, they feel all this kind of stuff. So for me, home is not a place. It’s you.”

Wendy Walters, author of *At Home in Diaspora*, argues for a similarly non-spatially-confined conception of home, one that becomes “an enacted space in which we try in and play out roles

and relationships or both belonging and foreignness” and a search for the self (xvi). For Ruth, home is not only a search for the self, but a discovery and celebration of self: it is an intimate relationship to your psyche. In this sense, one avoids the “ideas of fixity, boundedness, and nostalgic exclusivity traditionally implied by the word home” by instead envisioning home as “a pastiche, a performance” of identity (xvi). The nation-state, the politicized physicality of location is “not the ultimate horizon of social membership,” as people search internationally “for viable homes for viable selves” through dynamic and relational means (xv). The creation of a viable home, for Ruth, is primarily focused upon an inner mentality, an inner sense of quiet confidence and belonging:

“Wherever I go, I know this is where I belong. This is my place. I have to make my living here... whatever I can to make it a good place for me to enjoy, because that’s where I live and I want to make a living out of it. When I was back in South Sudan, I made a lot out of that—to settle my mind, that this is where I belong and this is where I am going to make a living; this is where I am going to settle. So when I came to the refugee camp, it’s the same thing. I was there for 6 years before I get the [visa]—and I was settled, I was working, even in this desert—that’s where I am going to stay, that’s where I am going to make my living, that where I am going to say in my mind ‘this is my home’. I want to feel comfortable, I want to feel okay here. So nobody else is going to make your life feel comfortable or make you feel home; it’s you to make yourself feel home. So when I came to the United States it’s the same thing: I’m going to make it here. And that’s why when I got here, the first year I get here I went to Catholic Charity, and thinking about starting an organization because this is the way it is,

this is the way I am and this is the way it's going to be. I started straightway with it, find out what we can do for our community. Because this is where I belong, and where I am going to be. I want to make it a place where my mind is settled that this is it, this is home.”

Physical settlement is less important than internal, emotional, mental settlement. If her mind is at peace, than Ruth is at home. Yet aside from its existence as a mentally-constructed state and emphasis on psychological comfort and stability, “home” still has physical connotations for Ruth—Sudan is her people, so she sends money “back home”. Reflecting on whether she misses her homeland, her response is relational:

“I missed [South Sudan] in the sense I miss also—my people. Yeah. But not really very much in a sense of—because I don't really have—for assets or maybe material, there's nothing I can really think of... but my people, of course, I... I wish that I had them here. Yeah. But I was blessed that I am here, I am able to help back home. That's my biggest thing, the biggest thing was that God brought me here in a place where I can work and help my needy people.”

Similarly, when reflecting upon that instant bond of community she experiences with other refugees, whether from Asia or Africa, she remarks that they “just know each other” because they “have that sense of community back home and have it here too”. Again, home seems to denote a physical land of origins in this instance, even though previously she defined it as an abstract way of understanding your place in the world. Gloria Anzaldua has a similarly physical yet nonphysical relationship to home, commenting that she “had to leave home so [she] could find [her]self” (38). In the next section, however, Anzaldua clarifies that “yet in leaving home I

did not lose touch with my origins because lo mexicano is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home” on my back” (43).

Cristina Condori also invokes a physical bodily structure to describe her relationship to home—for her, it is the “vertebral column of a community” in that it is essential to the movement and well-being of a community:

“El hogar es lo más importante. Es la columna vertebral de una comunidad. Si hay un hogar hay bienestar, hay seguridad, estás construyendo una comunidad fuerte. Pero sin el hogar, hay falta de trabajo o las salarias muy bajos, como está destruyendo, no hay consistencia en la familia entonces no hay estabilidad en la comunidad. O si la papa trabaja tantas horas, no puede ser modelo para los niños porque está ausente, los niños crecen solos... Me entiende el hogar como la familia.”

Family was the majority response for conceptions of home amidst people who have physically relocated: it was this support system that tied people together. When Muna describes her large community of “aunts” and “uncles” and “cousins,” she remarks that “at the end of the day, the people that were with us, my mom being that person who was managing us, making sure we were doing what we needed to be doing...that was more important that the space we lived in. Because I don’t remember all the places we moved—I remember a one bedroom apartment, and stuff—but I remember her doing stuff and keeping us going. That person who brings safety, as long as she’s there, you’re going to be fine.”

And, although physical space was less important than familial ties for Muna’s family, her mother still made their physical spaces home-like through establishing routine and stability:

“It was just the day-to-day stuff she did that made it more home. Made her feel like a mother, us a family, gave us that bond. In Kenya, there were lots of light outtages... most times when you know how to work together, when your home doesn't work properly how do we function together to do it so you find a way... the big kids find water, there's a line you have to go through and there's this place where water is available, candles always there, always having stuff backed up just to be ready. In a tough time like that it was hard to be a person who found stability in her house, but she found that and made it that way... In the house, it was always the Ethiopian culture, and she picked days so that every Friday, we would do the coffee ritual. When you bless the house, in a way. So you make coffee then walk about and bless the house, like spread incense around, then you all sit down and have a shot of espresso. So she does that and has popcorn and invites guests and we do a prayer, just bless the house, you know. So those things happen in the house, you know. But there was also going to other people's houses, a Kenyan person's house and eat with them and be friendly with them, and she would also go and talk with neighbors as her way of washing clothes and doing things and their way of like, asking how do you do it so she could learn and teach things to us too. Just by communicating with neighbors and making them feel comfortable like I'm not an outsider, I'm just trying to be here around you and live a normal life just like you are doing, find peace in my life, try to make them feel comfortable.”

Along with the stability of routine, Muna's mother would invite neighbors to partake in their weekly house-blessing rituals, and would learn to experience other cultures' conceptions of

homes as well. Relationships, whether with immediate family or community, were always present and essential to Muna's recollections of home. However, ultimately, it was her family that represented home: "There were times where we had to leave everything and move. So it was either choose to stay close to your extended family or choose what is better for your family to do and move around. So my mom was like as long as I have my kinds with me, they'll take care of me when I'm old, let me do the best for them now and move."

Iris has a similar understanding of home in that it is not reliant upon extended family—for her, it is the community, the people who share similar core values: "My definition of home focuses a lot more on people and people who are a part of my community, not blood-ties."

Basuze, while employing "somewhere" and thus the notion of place or location in his response, defines home as a mentality, a non-spatial place "where you have peace of mind and in your soul. Somewhere you feel welcome or you feel accepted in society and also you feel like you belong there and you are able to do everything to help or to be involved in."

The desire for peace, ease, and comfort, while expressed in slight variations, was a consistent theme amidst everyone who spoke of their conceptions of home. While the physical location of a home, a stable house is not essential, a nonmaterial space to feel at home was. Looking at migration, community, and home, collective identity becomes a space for relational interaction based on shared realities of displacement but also togetherness and solidarity. As Muna reveals, "as I said it was never really about the place but about the people, feeling comfortable, knowing your neighbors and feeling comfortable... like I feel attached to Memphis, of course, but I don't feel like Memphis is where I have to be. I can feel at ease with myself being anywhere that I have to be. I feel like I can build relationships everywhere. If you are attached to a place it will be a lot harder to detach yourself from it. A place shouldn't have to be

so much to you, it should be the people you are around. If something happens to the place, it's a material thing, but a person's life is not materialistic." Narratives of displacement tell of a home built by people and relational ties, not stones or brick. This home as a concept can be transported across borders, provides a secure sense of identity while encouraging a dynamic and nonphysical conception of belonging and home.

### **Implications**

Though this project began with diasporic theory dictating my approach to Memphis migrant communities, with time I realized the framework needed to be adjusted: it was through the narratives that I could examine whether modern diasporas were present in this region. The narratives I heard indicated that there are no diasporic communities in Memphis, though there is potential. Relational conceptions of home suggest the importance of networks and of people to a sense of belonging or identity. With increased communication and celebration of differing identities, those who have been displaced can write a narrative rooted in solidarity and relationship, even if dispersion catalyzes that connection.

This investigation into Memphis communities is, in many senses, a preliminary examination—examining the conceptions of home resurrects a cornucopia of other relevant factors to be more fully explored, including geopolitics, gender politics, connections to capitalism, class disparity, the capital of home, the privilege of home as a physical space, and cultural differences. Due to time constraints and my positionality as an outsider, it was quite difficult to connect with people who have migrated, and the majority of individuals who participated in this project were from Central Africa or Latin America. Continuing this research,

I hope to learn from members of other immigrant communities, including people who identify as Chinese, Vietnamese, or Arab. I want to examine how experiences of home is mitigated by disruption or how that disruption develops alternate conceptions of home. Home as a physical place itself can be a source of security and thus a privilege—influencing the politics of marriage, of parenting, of the types of homes people with differing financial stabilities construct. Home is an in-between and interstitial space where all of these complex identities influence and intermingle—through further narratives and research, I hope to nuance this understanding of a relational home catalyzed by displacement to consider and analyze all these other compounding factors.

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