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An Anticolonial Land-Based Approach to Urban Place: Mobile Cartographic Stories by Refugee Youth

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This article introduces a mobile Global Positioning System app created by refugee girls in the United States as a social justice- and community-oriented media art project that provides visual and oral countermapping stories that reflect an anticolonial orientation in their presentation of the city of Buffalo, New York. Through collaborative work with refugee girls in a community media art educational setting in Buffalo, I centered our projects on challenging settler colonial geographies by presencing subaltern stories of place. I use a land-based, critical race educational approach to guide my understanding of the youths’ subaltern stories of place in relation to settler colonialism. This anticolonial mobile cartographic story app highlights land pedagogy; the young refugees’ palimpsest-like, subaltern stories of urban spaces, which serve as testimonies to their lived experiences; and countermapping, which challenges and rewrites the imperatives of settler cartographies.

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Reconfiguring Cartographic Stories

Since 2011, I have been working with Karen tribe¹ refugee girls² in a community art and media educational setting in Buffalo, New York,³ as a practitioner, researcher, community advocate, and mentor.⁴ I started facilitating community art workshops⁵ with this population in 2012, and early on, the girls and I brainstormed ways in which we could create art that emerged from the girls' daily lives in the United States and that reflected their needs and desires. When I asked about the latter, several girls expressed a desire to walk freely on the street. I asked them where they lived. The girls answered, "In the refugee camp." I asked them where the camp was, and they indicated it was in the West Side neighborhood, which was colloquially known as "the ghetto." I wondered if refugee camps existed in the United States, and I tried to confirm that the girls were certain. They confidently said, "Yes, we currently live in a refugee camp." Later, I found that there were no refugee camps in Buffalo; however, through my conversations with these girls, I realized that they were assigned to the West Side of Buffalo⁶ (Figure 1) for their resettlement. Furthermore, as they relied on school buses and carpool rides for transportation, their daily physical trajectories were typically limited to home, school, and a community church; in addition, the girls felt limited due to the perceived and real

dangers of their neighborhood and, thus, did not feel safe walking on the street. As such, their daily lives had become confined within the diverse, low-income community of the West Side, and I surmised that this sense of assignment to and confinement within the urban ghetto was "limit[ing] venturing out beyond their tight-knit community" (G. Wilson, personal communication, January 16, 2020) and had created this perception that they lived in a refugee camp.

According to the girls, this sense of being constrained to a refugee camp in Buffalo's urban ghetto was quite different from their living in the Thailand Mae La official refugee camp, which was located in the middle of jungle, where they used to roam around and live with nature within the zone. They expressed that they did not feel danger in the refugee jungle, but this ghetto made them feel more confined. It is an irony that, in the midst of Myanmar's genocide, they experienced the refugee camp as "protective space" within the confined zone, while their ghetto life in Buffalo was perceived as unprotective and confined. The (un)protective space seems not bounded to merely a territorial or physical entity United States; but rather, the space is metaphysical, imagined, and lived (Lyytinen, 2015).

The realities of the Karen refugee girls' lives revealed to me the ways in which the US's predominant *settler colonial land pedagogy*⁷ had an impact on their experiences and perceptions in the urban ghetto. In the US, the urban ghetto has largely been created by the government's attempts to uphold racial and class segregation for political, economic, social, and ideological purposes. The ghetto has primarily been

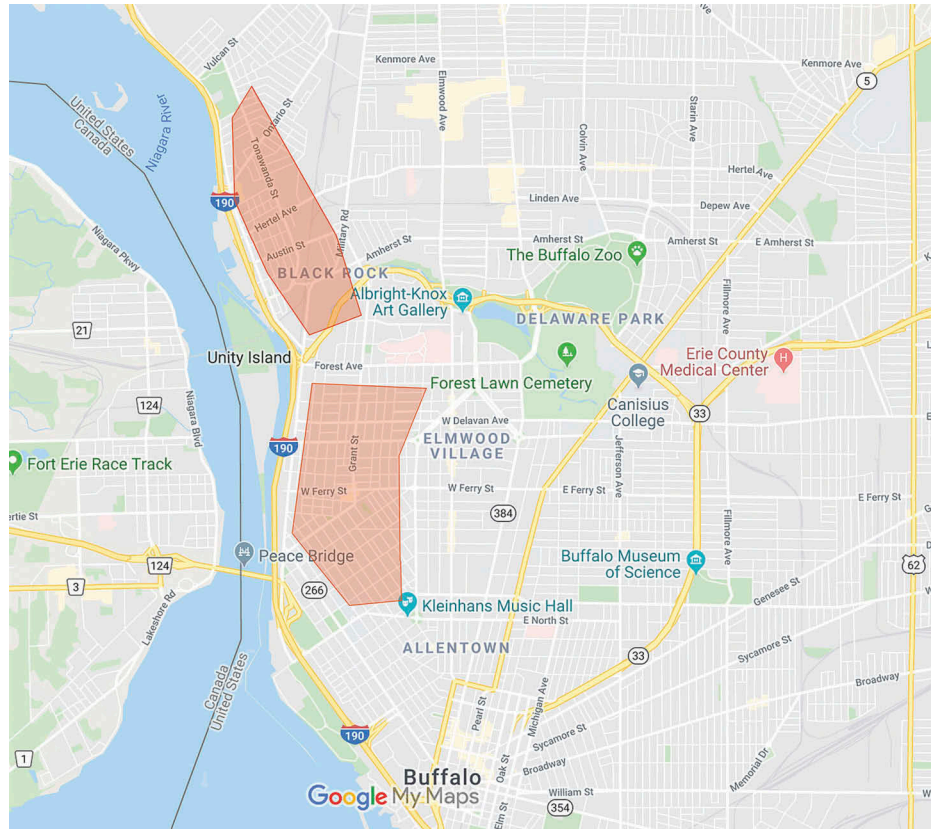


Figure 1. Google map of the city of Buffalo with an indication of the refugee “ghetto,” 2015. Photo courtesy of the author.

understood as a Black space occupied by Black bodies to which the dominant White institutions and culture have attached signs of impurity and immorality (Anderson, 2012; Ceri, 2009; DeLeon, 2012). While Paperson (2010) noted that the racial landscape of the ghetto has become more diverse, the negative signs attached to Blackness are still contained within the ghetto. As such, under the influence of settler colonial land pedagogy, U.S. resettlement institutions strategically arrange for refugees to live in the ghetto, which is a “murderable nonplace” (Paperson, 2016, p. 115) where their dislocation

creates a form of Blackness marked as “enslavability, illegality, murderability” as they are “cast out from the great metropolises of the empire” (p. 116).

Thus cast out from spaces of power, Whiteness, and wealth, the girls’ sense of being both confined to and placeless within the ghetto generated a sense of *unattended presence*.⁸ That is, they resided in but were also overlooked within the low-income, urban neighborhoods in which they lived, where Black American culture often dominated. Furthermore, they were also overlooked within middle- to upper-income urban and

suburban spaces, which often center Whiteness. In this way, the settler colonial fiction constructs the refugee girls' experiences in the urban ghetto to be confining so that they would not be able to know of or access other "great metropolises of the empire" (Paperson, 2016, p. 116).

Furthermore, the fiction disempowers them politically, displaces them socially, and disfranchises them economically so that the refugees are positioned as being in need of rescue from poverty within the ghetto. Moreover, this fiction disguises the erasure and dislocation of Indigenous/Black people so that the ghettoized refugee recognizes neither the absence nor the presence of Indigenous storied land but, instead, can see only White settlers' stories of settlement and conversion. Thus, just as Indigenous and Black voices are erased through this process, colonial mapping also relies on maintaining stereotypical stories of and paradigms for refugees and does not recognize the potential of their new presence in a place as seen through their own agency, voices, and actions.

The girls' lived experiences of being both displaced and confined, as well as their desire to create new stories about refugees, motivated them to collaboratively create a mobile Global Positioning System (GPS) cartographic story app called *The New Urban Wild* (2018). Six Karen tribe teen refugee girls participated in this youth-led mobile app project in the media workshops I offered between 2015 and 2019. As an art-based, youth participatory action research project, the process for this mobile app project was as follows: The youths and I decided to initially explore the city without following a particular curricular plan or choosing specific places to go in advance. When visiting places, we engaged in dialogue in a natural setting, and the participants shared their impressions about the sites, which were audio recorded. This dialogue also led the girls to choose certain places for further investigation of their histories and other social and

cultural issues. During this process, they listed what they wanted to learn about the places and designed a series of questions about each place that examined the following: what the place means to diverse communities; what the place means to them; who belongs to this place and who does not; what happened in this place in the past; what stories of the place were erased; and what would make this place a better place.

Using these questions, the participants gathered information about each place by interviewing local residents, community leaders, and passersby; taking photos and videos; taking notes; and doing online research. Sometimes they spontaneously did voice recordings on the sites. Sometimes, as the participants gathered information, they collaboratively selected and analyzed their data using voice recorders. Later, they transferred their audio/visual recordings from the places to locative app software,⁹ which connected the stories to specific locations on the map. After downloading the app to the girls' and my mobile phones, we tested the app by walking to each site and listening to the recordings the participants had made. Thus, rather than following a fixed set of procedures in chronological order, this process allowed for the emergence, divergence, and convergence of ideas and procedures. This process was accomplished by intricately blending moments of spontaneity with arrangement and bodily movement with critical rational thinking.

The purpose of this youth-led, art-based research project was to explore participants' relationships with dislocated urban places in the US as new citizens and to provide an alternative, socially just urban cartography that corresponds to the views, desires, and ideas of the participants. Eventually, by developing an app that included oral and visual stories that were anchored to places in Buffalo, New York (Figure 2),¹⁰ the project provided an arena for the youths' civic engagement by identifying and addressing social and educational

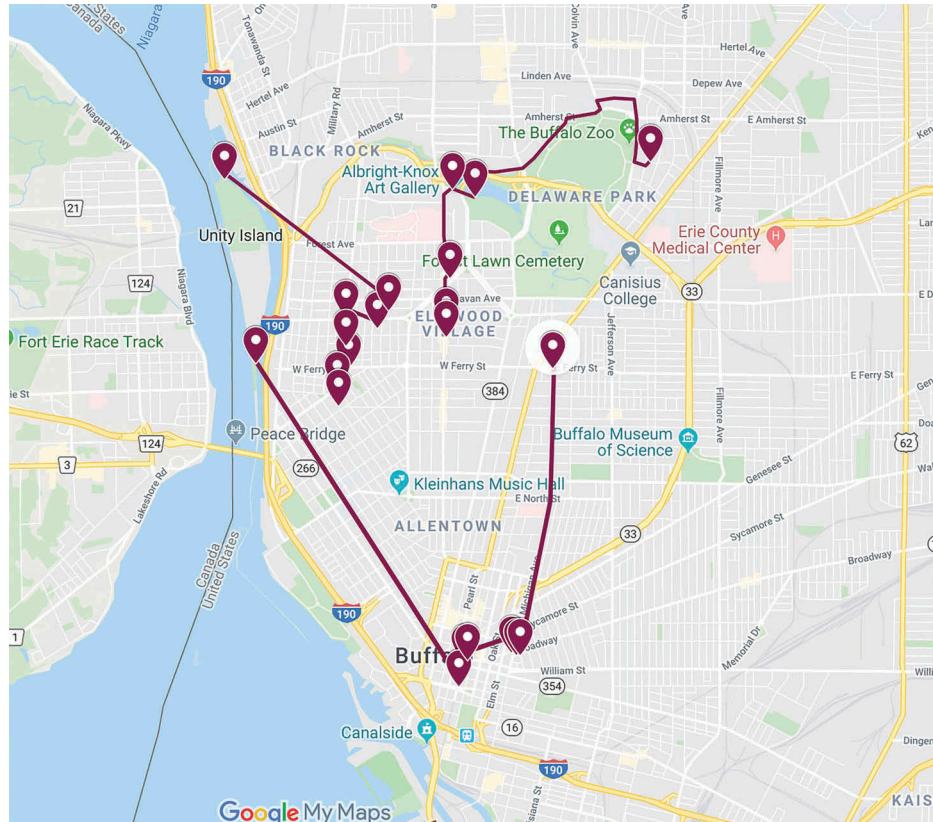


Figure 2. Google map of the city of Buffalo with an indication of the refugee girls' movements within the city, 2019. Photo courtesy of refugee girl participants and author.

injustices and inequities using refugee youths' perspectives and voices. Through this, the girls and I hoped to provide counterstories that would challenge the dominant histories created by White Americans. Through this research, the girl participants and I sought to reveal the erased stories of Indigenous and Black people in the U.S. city by identifying and challenging the settler colonial cartographic rules that segregate people and land by race, class, gender, ability, and so on. Specifically, we aimed to rewrite the oral and

visual stories of urban places from refugee participants' own perspectives by remapping areas throughout Buffalo using GPS mobile technology.

With this youth-led mobile project as a launching point, I further explored the following questions: (1) what urban spaces mean to refugee youth; (2) how cities as colonial (art) curricular spaces shape the ways in which refugee youth live; (3) how the alternative mobile stories of refugee youth can contribute to a new geographic understanding in which

refugees' presence is perceived in a different way; and (4) how the mobile countermapping created by these youth pushes the boundaries of art and media curricula. First, I introduce an anticolonial, land-based approach, and I follow this with a discussion of urban spaces and their relationship to settler colonialism. Then, I discuss the conceptualization of rewriting new spatial stories, which will finally segue into an analysis of select oral stories from *The New Urban Wild* (2018) app.

Toward an Anticolonial Land-Based Approach

I use a *land-based educational approach* to cultivate an understanding of the girls' stories as counter-cartography, moving beyond attitudes that see place simply as a social space. The land-based educational approach is an important mode of anticolonial thinking regarding place and land that critically responds to the settler colonial ideologies and practices that conceal the erasure, displacement, and exclusion of Indigenous, Black, refugee, and other minoritized communities and normalize the violence these communities have experienced (Ballengee-Morris, 2010; McCoy, Tuck, & McKenzie, 2016; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). This orientation calls on art educators to acknowledge that the entire U.S. places where we live are on Indigenous land and to recognize that it is essential for us to form relationships with Indigenous people and the land to (re)learn about the places we live (McCoy et al., 2016; Styres, Haig-Brown, & Blimkie, 2013; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

From a refugee perspective, the land-based approach further calls for the unsettling of settler colonial views. A refugee perspective can be effective in cultivating refugees' connections to the places from which they were forcibly dislocated in ways that do not reduce the refugees to uncivilized objects that can be exploited for White settlers'¹¹ profitability. Refugee resettlement education's deliberately normalizing force encourages refugee youth in the US to naturalize the understanding of the

land on which they live as owned by White settlers, a form of "deliberate miseducation" (as cited in McCoy et al., 2016, p. 26). Rather than accepting settler colonialist views of urban places, a land-based approach creates an un-/relearning space in which one can critically examine the settler colonialist imperatives imposed on urban spaces and find the erased Indigenous and Black stories of the past and present. As McCoy et al. (2016) have suggested, this un-/relearning begins by examining what it means for displaced Indigenous, Black, and refugee people "to walk on stolen Indigenous land" (p. 13) and "how place and land in relation to contemporary practices of settler colonialism... shape a relationship to land and people in particular ways" (p. 13).

Through this approach, one can critically view refugees' relational positions in the US as minoritized refugee settlers who have been forcefully dislocated to Indigenous lands that were stolen by White European settlers and who are continuously displaced. By using a land-based approach to develop an understanding of place in the US, geographic stories can be created about and by refugees that make anticolonial consciousness visible.

Understanding Urban Spaces as White Settlers' Cartographic Desire and Terror

While the land-based educational approach is useful for challenging settler colonial consciousness, in combination with critical race theory, it is also useful for analyzing the settler colonial perspectives of the ghetto. The urban context of the ghetto remains defined by both settler colonial desire and terror as expressed through racially exclusionary practices and policies (Rowe & Tuck, 2016). Through this territorial project, those of White European descent (and the institutions they create and uphold) continue to invent and expand the contours of settler colonial power by accumulating land and property while restricting Indigenous, Black, and refugee people's relation to the land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The settler

colonial territorial project of land modification involves both compartmentalization and ghetto removal,¹² which can occur at different times or simultaneously.

On the one hand, through the settler colonial territorial project, White settlers divide space into compartments by which colonized spaces become what Franz Fanon (1963) referred to as “a world without spaciousness” (p. 39). Within such spaces, it does not matter where or how minoritized people of color live or die (Fanon, 1963). The violence of the spatial division caused by colonial legacies continues to have a pervasive impact on everyday lives, both invisibly within the settler consciousness and in determinations regarding whose lives matter and whose do not. The critical insights above led me to see U.S. urban centers and the strategic creation of racial and class segregation within them as part of the settler colonial project. Particularly, as previously noted, the settler colonial project places the ghetto in isolation and connotes it with pathological racial markings (Anderson, 2012; Ceri, 2009; DeLeon, 2012).

On the other hand, ghetto removal often takes place by the settler states’ urban development when the settler states begin to view the ghetto as having potential cultural and economic value. While the ghetto is already a form of dislocation, with the influx of diverse ethnic immigrants, it becomes dislocated in a more complex manner, in part because of the recent increase of White settlers’ multicultural consciousness and their demand for multicultural integration within the ghetto (Paperson, 2010). Thus, establishing colonial sovereignty over a multicultural ghetto becomes part of the colonizer’s “positional flexibility” (Said, 2002, p. 1009), by which the colonizer can have “a whole series of possible relationships with [the colonized] without ever losing the upper hand” (Said, 2002, p. 1009). In other words, just as Paperson (2010, 2016) noted, the recent emphasis on the multiracialized ghetto illustrates a new colonial design that allows an open territory of

exploration for White settlers with the promise of an encounter with the exotic other. Through this, White settlers create a permeable border for the ghetto, which allows for their consumption of the other.

As illustrated in the case of Buffalo, New York, I observed that the West Side urban ghetto still remains largely compartmentalized, as the refugee youth participants had perceived, on the one hand. Simultaneously, I also observed that, with the influx of refugees in the past few years, the ghetto has become more multiracialized¹³ than it was in the past, illustrating another form of settler colonial cartography-in-progress by the White settlers’ land modification, on the other hand. That is, the compartmentalized ghetto has very recently been moving away from being a zone that is considered abandoned and dull. Instead, its multicultural nature brings White settlers’¹⁴ attention back to the ghetto as a site of desire in terms of economic and cultural capital.

Through my observations, I have seen that refugee communities have brought rich cultural diversity to the ghetto in Buffalo, which attracts White settlers to embark on the city’s gentrification. These urban development projects have initiated a form of de-ghettoization by which White settlers push existing refugee residents out of the ghetto while keeping select “authentic” cultural products to shore up settlers’ multicultural consciousness. Therefore, the settler colonialists’ urban strategy uses both containment within and removal from the ghetto to meet their desires at the expense of refugee communities’ constant dislocation and dispossession. The settlers’ tasks of emplacement, displacement, replacement, and erasure thus operate in a loop of “unspeakable violence” (Rowe & Tuck, 2016, p. 6) that silences the lives and stories of refugee and other minoritized populations. Nevertheless, existing analyses of the urban ghetto offer new possibilities for spatial reconfiguration that work against White settlers’ cartographic imperatives through the

creation of new spatial stories, as discussed in the following section.

Rewriting Spatial Stories

An anticolonial approach to cartography invited the creation of alternative spatial stories created by the refugee youth with whom I worked. Such an alternative rewriting explores the metaphor of the palimpsest,¹⁵ as retheorized by Nirmala Erevelles (2019). Erevelles's use of the palimpsest functions as a methodological tool for "enact[ing] a critical race spatial analysis of dis-placement via exclusionary practices into segregated spaces" (p. 3). Here, palimpsestic stories of displacement by refugee youth can help to show the existing exclusionary practices. Mobile cartographic stories use palimpsest to "reopen a view of past landscapes where the terms of today's normalization were laid down" (Erevelles, 2019, p. 4) via counterstorytelling. I used Erevelles's (2019) insights to create a curricular space in which refugee youth could engage in critically reading the layered structures of meaning and practice that shape their displacement in U.S. urban spaces. More importantly, though, I used Erevelles's (2019) theories to assist refugee youth in creating their own palimpsests as they rewrote stories of urban places in connection with their displaced bodies as a "testimony to [the] possibility" (p. 8) of their presence.

Through this project, the rewriting of spatial stories in the form of new oral stories also serves as a counternarrative to the existing hegemonic racialized structure of colonial urban geography. Oral stories by minoritized communities are crucially important, as they allow such communities to name their own realities using their own voices (Lorde, 1984). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) pointed out that the socially constructed, particularity-oriented nature of oral stories runs counter to the transcendent, universalist scripts of the dominant legal system, and as such, oral stories offer a "psychic self-preservation" (p. 57) space with a "medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression" (p. 57).

Because of their personal, emotional, and literary nature, oral stories often are discounted as not "truth." Even worse, minoritized youths' stories often are neither taken seriously nor considered "reality," leading to their voices being ignored. Thus, through mobile oral stories, minoritized individuals can take stories that have been otherwise disregarded and transform them into action by anchoring them to locations in virtual realms, thereby also reconfiguring the very places surrounding them.

Such rewriting of spatial stories also helps to create a vision in which the colonial cartographic "rules are alterable" (McKittrick, 2016, p. x). By (re)writing new spatial stories, individuals can resist the notion that who they are is defined by where they are. Rather than engaging in this subjugated practice, it is necessary to question and reveal missing stories in the production of a space as well as the hegemonic colonial system's concealment of sites of resistance, subversion, pain, struggle, love, and reimagination. The following section introduces several such oral (re)stories of place in the app.

In and Out of the Ghetto: Oral (Re)Stories of Urban Place

While engaging in their mobile cartographic project in Buffalo, the Karen refugee girls' initial outings into the city were accompanied by numerous unfamiliar sensorial experiences—the sights, smells, and sounds of a city (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2016; Powell, 2010; Richardson, 2011). After processing these experiences, the girls and I focused on places they could see, and they started asking questions about their presence and surveillance in the White-dominated neighborhoods they visited. Based on their experiences of being considered strangers, they questioned how each place and district in Buffalo has been divided by race and class, why certain places are for certain races and classes, what and who are allowed and not allowed in those places, and how such stories became naturalized. The questions that arose through their comparisons of different districts

in Buffalo became a motivation for their ongoing investigation. I then prompted them to question what other stories are available that are invisible or unheard; how places are erased, obscured, and made present and for what reasons; and what stories of place can be re-storied.

After we discussed these questions, we began exploring how to (re)tell such hidden stories. Our explorations started with planning casual and semiformal interviews with community leaders and residents in Buffalo. The girls gathered information through a myriad of interviews, site investigations, and online research so that they could conduct voice/sound/visual recordings on their own to make the mobile app. We discussed different ways to present our research to the public so that they might engage in action in response to

the stories we discussed. Through the youths' research of different media through which to tell these stories, they proposed creating a mobile GPS-based app that would include a collection of their oral stories. They proposed that their oral stories would include their views, desires, and critiques of the city as well as their new relationships to dislocated places. The following stories are transcripts of the girls' conversations held in several parts of the city: Delaware Park, Elmwood Avenue, and Parkside Neighborhood.

Delaware Park

On a winter day in 2017, we walked in Delaware Park, a green space in Buffalo, which was designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted¹⁶ (Figure 3). During our walk in the park, the girls saw a little lake from a distance;



Figure 3. Photos taken in Delaware Park and compiled, 2018. Courtesy of participant Shwizen.

they were so exhilarated to see it; it was as if they had found a treasure. They all were running toward the lake. Then they saw a sign that said “no ice-skating” next to the lake. The following is a recorded conversation between Ayebay, a 16-year-old girl participant, and Blatsay, a 14-year-old girl participant:

Ayebay: Delaware Park is really beautiful with the lake. We are walking along the park. It is areally snowy. And there are snow and the water turn into ice. I am so disappointed when I see a sign that says, “No Ice-Skating.” Because I want to do ice-skating. When I was in Thailand, I thought we would have freedom in America. When we came here, we can’t even ice skate. There is so much restriction. In the Thailand camp, we can swim in a river. But, here, they protect us so much and take away our freedom. So much safety takes our freedom.

Blatsay: It is for our safety. So, like, we can’t deny it.

Ayebay: Well. Safety? Does it mean that they have to take our liberty away? So we can be more safe? That is not really true freedom.

Blatsay: I agree. Many public places here have many restrictions. When I see the green grass, I could not go there to walk or lay down. I see the signs of “Do Not Enter or Walk” “Do Not Trespass.” “Do Not Touch.”

This mobile story illustrates the youths’ perceptions of land use in the settler colonial state, which sanctions and legalizes the use of public spaces in restrictive ways. The youths’ perceptions led us to a further conversation on who sets the rules and policies in relation to the land, how such rules are used to manage people’s behaviors, the underlying ideologies behind the restrictions, who has and does not have access to the land,

and how these rules cause disconnections in terms of people’s relationships with the land. The settlers’ access to and use of Indigenous territories were not based on any legal system or permission from the Indigenous people who were originally on the land. Thus, the settlers’ establishment of these restrictions, whether for safety or not, is a territorial practice through which they can claim ownership of the land.

The girls’ story of the public park illustrates a case of the normalizing practices of settler colonialism, through which the settlers exert control and ownership over the land by preventing people from accessing nature (McCoy et al., 2016). From the perspective of the Indigenous refugee girls who used to live in jungles within a camp located at the Myanmar–Thailand border, the new bodily restrictions related to nature and public spaces troubled their notions of freedom, pointing to settler colonial land politics. Thus, their mobile (re)storying of Delaware Park brings a subaltern view that illustrates their bodily/psychic/cognitive relationship to the place.

Elmwood Avenue and Parkside Neighborhood

The following excerpts from mobile stories were created on Elmwood Avenue and in the Parkside neighborhood. Elmwood Avenue (Figure 4) is a well-known, trendy commercial/residential area with multiple historical structures. On this day, the girls and I walked along Elmwood Avenue, a part of the city of which they never knew the existence. Their eyes were busy watching all the scenes, shops, and people, which seemed to evoke their curiosity. However, they were more quietly moving along the street. With some positive impressions, they also shared their views when asked about the differences between Elmwood Avenue and Grant Street, which is located in the West Side ghetto where they live. Shwizen, a 13-year-old girl participant, noted the following:



Figure 4. Photos taken on Elmwood Avenue and compiled, 2019. Courtesy of participant Ayebay.

There is so much difference in Elmwood Avenue and Grant Street where we live in the West Side. Elmwood is a White rich place. The street is much cleaner than Grant Street. The roads are much safer. It has good smell and quite welcoming look. In contrast, Grant Street is dirty, and sometimes comes marijuana smells. It is not that safe. However, when I walk on the Elmwood Avenue, I do not feel welcomed in Elmwood. It has mostly White people. I feel I do not fit in. I feel like I am in a totally different world. I am not welcomed. What does safety means? All White people's place. However, when I go to Grant Street, I can see some Asian and diverse people.

Wearing Karen tribe dress is not strange in Grant Street. If I wore the dress in Elmwood, everybody would look at me.

Of the Parkside Neighborhood (Figure 5), a renowned historical place where the Martin House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is located, Lydia, a 15-year-old girl participant, said:

Parkside neighbor[hood] looks great and peaceful. All the grass is well-maintained and clean with a good smell. No noisy. I can tell this is where White people live. However, when we walk on the Parkside neighborhood, White people here watch over us. I do not feel comfortable and safe. I do not feel I belong to here.

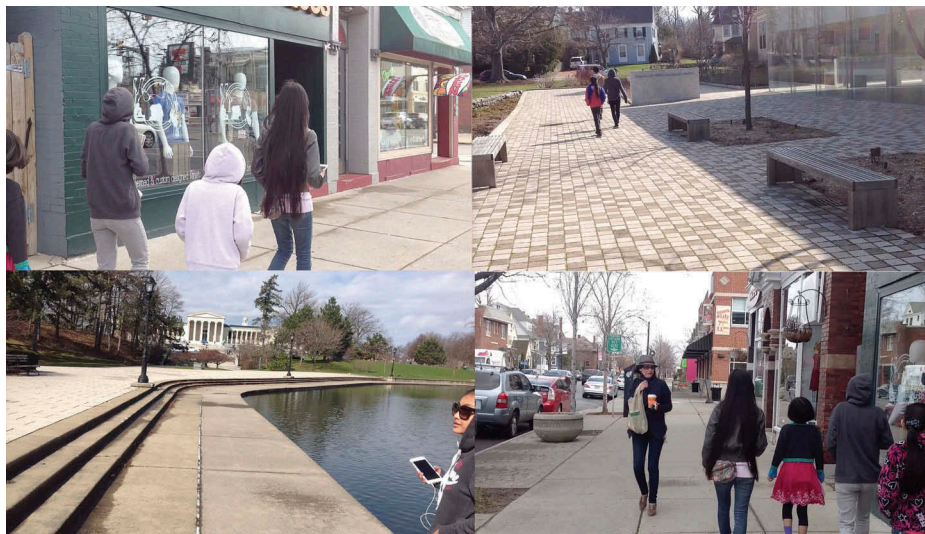


Figure 5. Photos taken in the Parkside Neighborhood and compiled, 2019. Courtesy of participant Blatsay.

These oral stories, as shared through the app, communicate the Karen refugee girls' experiences of the colonial urban landscape as racialized and classed, as expressed through their feelings of strangeness as racialized others in relation to the territory. Their realizations of how race is linked to location are seen through their discussions, which highlight the city's segregation based on race and class—a strategy of the settler colonial landscape. The girls' stories of (un)belonging in relation to these places complicate existing, dominant stories of those places, which often present them as contemporary, rich, and trendy or representative of the prosperous "good old days" of U.S. colonial history. While the dominant stories present seemingly universal and objective knowledge of the places that are centered on White settlers' perspectives (i.e., that such places are safe, wealthy, "good," etc.), the refugee girls' experiences of disconnection and feelings of being unsafe or

unwelcome complicate and challenge these "universal" stories. The retelling created by these girls allowed them to critique the physical and psychic boundaries of the city of Buffalo, which can ultimately respatialize the dominant geographic arrangements and spatialize the perspective of their struggles.

Mobile Media + Oral Story as Social Justice Activism

Contemporary mobile media art practice recognizes oral storytelling as a powerful art form and tool for the production and practice of space because the meaning of a space is actively communicated through the stories attached to those spaces, as observed in the works of media artists such as Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Bathroom Stories* (1991), *Jena Walk: Memory Field* (2006), and *The City of Forking Paths* (2014); and Jeremy Hight, Jeff Knowlton, and Naomi Spellman's *34 North 118 West* (2003), among others. In particular, locative

technologies adopt and expand orality to create more site-specific ways of connecting intimately with audiences, and the art spaces created through these technologies can provide alternative communal experiences that seamlessly unfold in both virtual and material spaces (Farman, 2014; Hjorth, 2011). By weaving together oral storytelling and mobile GPS functions, this new artistic mode creates a means by which the participants in this study could transport their knowledge and bodies to places via a “seamlessly migrating computer environment that is moving along with the users” (Strauss, Fleischmann, & Zobel, 2004, p. 105). Through art created in this way, participants in an art space can advance a given narrative via both bodily movement and participatory action.

Additionally, the mobile media offers the potential to preserve minoritized communities’ oral histories, which are often handed down by word of mouth, frequently become modified, and/or simply disappear. As such, the locative mobile story greatly contributes not only to remembering these histories, but also to preventing the disappearance of their stories, places, cultures, and languages. With the mobile media, practitioners can capture non-elite, minoritized experiences, generating greater equitability in this way.

While this type of art has great potential to promote social justice, mobile art that employs and captures oral stories also challenges conventional forms of narrative storytelling: In place of a singular, linear narrative, this form of mobile art offers a nonlinear, rhizomatic structure via multi- and mini-narratives, which can disrupt the dominant narratives typically advanced in the histories of White settlers. The refugee girls’ mobile oral story project illustrates this art form’s power to unlock their voices and generate irreducible, nonlinear meanings that imbue the urban space with alternative narratives that are visible, searchable, browsable, presentable, and participatory. This disruptive art space thus invites refugee girls to be not merely passive listeners but active

storytellers and bodily navigators. Aligned with Sandoval and Latorre (2008), as a model of social justice, mobile “artivism,”¹⁷ the refugee youths’ mobile oral histories refuse to follow the usual circuits of dominant art practices, instead challenging the oppressive modes of unjust social realities by transforming social and political awareness and reflection into artistic action. This innovative, resourceful, and proactive move to empower the refugee community’s ties lies in the “human-technology convergence that allows for creative” (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 83) social action through mobile media.

Afterthought

Drawing on Dewhurst’s (2011) suggestion, as social justice media art, the refugee girls’ project of making mobile oral stories anchored in Buffalo first grounds their work in their lived experiences within the dislocated urban ghetto. Second, their media making engages them in critical inquiry of the existing stories of settler colonial urban cartographies, thus creating a subaltern geography, highlighting the girls’ “sayability” (McKittrick, 2016, p. xxiii)—their acts of expressing and speaking about places and land—and showing what kinds of geographies are available to these refugee girls. Last, through their mobile story app-making, the girls examined the social locations in which settler colonial imperatives have unjustly organized urban places in relation to Indigenous, Black, and refugee lives and shaped refugee resettlement into continuous displacement.

Their subaltern cartographic stories contribute to the poetics of a new landscape and provide a way to make knowable the lived, fragmented experiences of dislocation while also unfixing settler colonial geographies. Their claims regarding alternative geographies are not derived from the desire for social and economic mobility but rather from a grammar of liberation, through which ethical human geographies can be recognized and expressed. Their rewritten cartographies bring us a social justice art educational vision of counter-mapping in which the new cartographers’ agency

and positionality are inherent and apparent and in which personal experiences of displacement can be converted into the transmittable and collective knowledge of Indigenous lands. Through this, the

girls' mobile project provides a sociopolitical witness to ongoing settler colonial terror and desire and transforms existing maps into a new cartography using voices from society's margins.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Karen tribe is an ethnic minority group in Myanmar, which is linguistically and ethnically diverse. British triumph in the 19th century brought Christianity to Myanmar and converted many Karens, who, in return, were favored by British colonial authorities. The Christian Karen resists the Burmese military government that aligns with the Buddhist faction. The name Karen is an anglicized Burmese word, *Kayin*, which originally referred to the non-Buddhist ethnic group in a derogatory manner. Of the total Karen people, 65% are Buddhists, along with animism, which created huge tension with Christian Karen who represent 15–20% of the population in Myanmar. The religious/political/ethnic factions created continuous tensions until now.

- ² The participants were girls ages 13–16 years old at the time of their participation. They were originally from Myanmar and were dislocated to a refugee camp named Mae La in Thailand before they came to the US. At the time of the project, they had been in the US for approximately 4–7 years.
- ³ Buffalo is the second largest city in New York State. The current demographics of the city are approximately 42.5% Whites of European descent, including Irish, Italian, Polish, and German; 34% Black; 12% Hispanic; 8% Asian; and 3% Native American and other races (<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/buffalo-ny/>). As of 2019, the population was about 256,300. During 2003–2013, the city took in a total of 9,723 refugees, but under the Trump administration, the number of incoming Buffalo refugees has dramatically dropped by two thirds, and approximately 588 refugees have resettled. The city contains refugee people from 15 different countries. The majority of the refugees are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burma (<https://buffalonews.com/2019/09/29/number-of-refugees-coming-to-buffalo-set-to-drop-again/>).
- ⁴ My racial and ethnic identity as a Korean immigrant in the US has played a positive role in helping me build a close connection with the Karen refugee girls. As Asian immigrants, we have some shared cultural background, which has provided us with a comfort zone of emotional/psychological affinity. Additionally, the girls' love for Korean popular culture made our relationship closer as we shared stories about K-pop and discussed Korean culture and language. However, I am deeply aware of my position as a Korean adult and university professor, which provides me a certain amount of privilege. Thus, I am conscious of my positionality and the power hierarchies that such privilege can create. For the past 8 years, I have spent a great deal of time building relationships with and accountability to this community through participating in refugee community events, providing tutoring and mentoring, and establishing a college prep/art and media program for refugees that prioritizes the community's needs and desires.
- ⁵ The first workshop was held in summer 2012 at a local community academic center. It involves our drift of the city and our project attempt to create a site-specific art event at certain places the girls chose (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2016).
- ⁶ On this Buffalo city map, two areas along the river are marked where a large number of refugees currently reside. Since the 1800s, the shores of the river have been heavily industrialized, specifically with chemical manufacturers, which adversely affect the health of the river and land due to industrial discharge and waste. Unlike the waterfronts of some other U.S. cities, the riverfront of Buffalo has been a dull and poor area with many abandoned buildings and little commercial development.
- ⁷ Settler colonial land pedagogy, as described by McCoy et al. (2016), is a predominant teaching of White settlers that promotes their ownership of the land through converting tribal lands into their own property. This type of pedagogy centers White European settlers' narratives and focuses on the White settlers who declared their sovereignty over land belonging to Indigenous peoples and who established laws and policies to legitimate their rights and position.
- ⁸ I use the term "unattended presence" to describe the way in which refugees and immigrants live in places as community members and citizens but are often treated as nonexistent/unimportant through ignorance or indifference via the settler state's policies and laws.
- ⁹ We used an app service provided by the company OnCell.
- ¹⁰ This map shows where the participants created mobile oral (visual) stories, and it traces the routes participants created to connect them. There are three different paths: The upper-left path follows stories of refugee life, the upper-right path focuses on Buffalo's main cultural and commercial sites where White upper- and middle-class residents usually spend time and reside, and the lower path is a Black history path that includes stops along the Underground Railroad. These paths were drawn by the girls using Google Maps, which was a part of their mapping activity.
- ¹¹ In this context, this term refers to a current-day White descendant who is an existing resident of a place and/or who moves to the area to take ownership of a place. In settler colonial theory, White settlers are differentiated from refugee settlers in that the latter's relationship to the land largely remains one of displacement and dispossession rather than ownership.
- ¹² I use this term to mean that the settler colonial state has continued managing and modifying the land's functions and purposes based on their economic benefit.
- ¹³ The area contains racially and ethnically mixed groups of Black, Latino, and White individuals, most of whom are living in poverty, along with refugees from 15 different countries, the majority of whom are from Africa and South Asia, particularly from Burma. Even most White working-class people in poverty

have owned their own properties in the ghetto for many years, but Blacks, Latinos, and refugees have rarely owned their properties. Urban development has granted economic benefits to White residents by raising the real estate market price, while Blacks, Latinos, and refugees become dislocated and dispossessed.

- ¹⁴ In this context, this term refers to a current-day White descendant who is an existing resident of a place and/or who moves to the area to take ownership of a place. In settler colonial theory, White settlers are differentiated from refugee settlers in that the latter's relationship to the land largely remains one of displacement and dispossession rather than ownership.
- ¹⁵ This term was originally used in literary work and describes when the original writing has been erased, but the page can be reused for more writing. Many different fields have adopted this term, particularly urban studies, architecture, and history. For example, Andreas Huyssen's *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) introduced a reading technique for understanding urban spaces and their unfolding over time; through this technique, Huyssen suggested that, to understand an urban space, one cannot simply convert the city and its architecture into text but, instead, should view it as lived spaces of a collective imaginary that reveal the multilayered pasts of the city.
- ¹⁶ Figures 3–5 are a combination of several photos taken by several of the participants that Sweizen, a 15-year-old participant, put together using Photoshop. All the participants collaboratively selected several photos. We discussed ways to protect their identities, and, as such, the participants decided to use photos showing their backs rather than their fronts.
- ¹⁷ This term refers to a blend of artistic production and activism. It emerged at a 1997 gathering among Chicano artists from East Los Angeles and Mexico. Artivism describes the generation of a political intervention via artistic production, which is created by adopting diverse forms of art to enact political intentions (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008).

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