

BRIDGING COLLABORATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY AND ASSET-BASED EDUCATION:  
A CASE STUDY WITH KAREN YOUTH

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## **ABSTRACT**

Alison J. Kinney: Bridging Collaborative Ethnography and Asset-Based Education: A Case Study With Karen Youth  
(Under the direction of Dr. Glenn Hinson)

This case study explores the guiding principles of place and community-based education through an examination of a digital storytelling curriculum for Karen youth in North Carolina. The curriculum emerges at the intersection of collaborative ethnography and asset-based education, drawing on each methodology to offer a democratic learning framework which foregrounds family identity, language, and culture as assets to the learning process.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Some countries may think that we are a people without a name, that we are simply ‘refugees,’ period. But, what they do not know is that before we became refugees, we had our own form of government, schools, churches, traditions, flag, national anthem, culture and community. Most important of all, we have a name: we are Karen.”*

These are the words of Eh Nay Thaw, an 18-year old high school student and Karen refugee living in Louisville, Kentucky. In February 2014, around the same time I began working with the Karen-Burmese refugee community in Carrboro, North Carolina, Eh Nay Thaw spoke at Centre College’s convocation on “The Hidden Reality of Burma.” He commented on the threat of genocide faced by the Karen people, a pan-ethnic group from Burma that has endured violent oppression while fighting for autonomy and basic human rights in a sixty-year civil war<sup>1</sup>. Thaw began his speech with the words of General Maung Aye, former Vice Chairman of Burma’s State Peace and Development Council: “One day, if you want to see the Karen people, you’ll have to go and watch at the museum.” Eh Nay Thaw continued, “But guess what? It was a failure. Because here I am, a Karen person, standing in front of you, telling you the story of an ethnic nationality that has been persecuted for over half a century” (Smith 2014).

I begin with Eh Nay Thaw’s statement because his words testify to the power of activist storytelling in the growing Karen refugee population, and to the important roles Karen youth are taking as activists and ambassadors of their communities. Storytelling within marginalized communities such as the Karen can be “a necessity, a strategy for emotional, historical and

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<sup>1</sup> *Karen* is pronounced “*Kuh-ren*,” with the emphasis on the second syllable.

cultural survival” (Benmayor 2012, ix). As Karen youth and young adults learn English and begin to navigate both Karen and American culture, they become representatives in their schools, in their communities, and even in such forums as the Geneva Convention on behalf of an entire population of persecuted people.

As a folklorist and educator, I strive to facilitate learning and empowerment that supports Karen youth in becoming leaders in their communities. I see a need to work within a model of education that draws on the assets of Karen culture and invites students to learn from within their family language and culture. In this thesis, I present a case study through which I will demonstrate a set of guiding principles for this educational model. In bridging the methodologies of collaborative ethnography and democratic education, I propose that empowering education takes place when:

- Curriculum emerges collaboratively from within the community it serves;
- Students learn alongside educators through inquiry and dialogue; and
- Teachers understand students’ family culture and language as assets to the learning process.

In exploring my experience working with Karen youth to co-create a multimedia storytelling curriculum and to facilitate the making of a documentary, I build upon the work of engaged researchers, cultural workers, and educators who approach research as an opportunity for community engagement, and approach education as an opportunity for student and community empowerment. This multidisciplinary work draws on the critical theories of folklore, anthropology, education, and refugee studies, and offers an ethnographically grounded, collaborative approach to education. By reflecting upon my own successes and failures, I hope that this case study will offer footing for others pursuing similar endeavors.

The curriculum I present emerged through a one-year collaboration between myself and a local community farm project that works with refugees from Burma: Transplanting Traditions Community Farm (TTCF). I worked closely with the TTCF program coordinator, Nicole Accordino, and the Transplanting Tradition Youth Program (sometimes referred to as the Transplanting Traditions Youth Collaborative), a small group of motivated youth affiliated with the farm.

TTCF is a four-acre community farm outside of Carrboro, N.C., being cultivated by roughly 35 families. The farmers primarily identify as Karen, while a few are of Burmese descent. *Karen* is an umbrella term for a number of indigenous groups who have historically lived in southeastern Burma (Myanmar); these groups speak several dialects (of which Sgaw and Pwo are most common today), and practice religions ranging from Buddhism and Christianity to local animist faiths (Cheesman 2002). Despite this diversity within the Karen population, a shared history—marked by a shared understanding of historical roots, and the shared experience of political marginalization at the hands of the Burmese government—has led to a unified Karen cultural identity. Most Karen in the United States today are refugees from an insurgency that has been raging in Burma since the late 1940s. As a result of decades of war, thousands of Karen families have fled on foot across the Thai-Burmese border. TTCF farmers often refer to the United States as their “third country”: they grew up in Burma, lived for up to twenty-five years in Thai refugee camps, and finally achieved refugee status in the United States. While living in Thailand, they had no legal right to employment, and were subject to arrest if found outside the camps. In coming to the U.S., they hoped to find opportunities for education and employment, as well as a sense of freedom unattainable in the camps.

In 2013, Transplanting Traditions developed a youth collaborative in response to the farmers' desires to incorporate the whole family into their farm community. The participating youth were between 12 and 19; all identified as Karen, and all but one had grown up in Thai refugee camps. They all moved to Carrboro in the last 6 years as part of a large influx of Karen refugees to the United States, and to this area in particular. Throughout the summer of 2013, the students met regularly for workshops and fieldtrips related to their interests in environmental activism, their commitment to creating a healthy food system, and their experiences as Karen immigrants in North Carolina. During that time, the youth expressed a desire to make a documentary, something that would help tell their families' stories. In our conversations about how I could become involved in TTCF programming, in early 2014, Accordino proposed that I help facilitate this documentary process.

For the rest of that year I worked with the youth program, hosting workshops in fieldwork (photographic and interview-based), storyboarding, audio editing, translation/subtitling, and, finally, documentary production. The common denominator of our work together was Karen foodways. The Karen have historically been farmers, and their culture reflects this long tradition. Despite the economic pressures of living in N.C., where most adults work full-time janitorial and hospitality jobs, these Karen families maintain their farming traditions today. TTCF has become an important space dedicated to cultural continuity in the local Karen refugee community. In making the documentary, we partnered with three Karen women who farmed at TTCF, and featured their personal narratives.

This project was particularly fitting for my work at the time. I was seeking ways to do ethnographic research that fulfilled a community need. This goal was informed by the work of public folklorists like Deborah Kodish and Steve Zeitlin (the founder of New York's *City Lore*),

who pursue folklore research in the public interest, and seek to make folklore interactive, contemporary, and community-based. I have come to view Folklore as a venue where a deep understanding of personal and community story, aspiration, belief, and aesthetics becomes an avenue for activism, advocacy, and community development. This perspective draws inspiration, in part, from Steve Zeitlin, who argues that the field of folklore should define itself in its activism rather than in its object of study. He asserts that folklorists' study should "emerge from our activist stance rather than from definitions that attempt to contain the materials of folklore within abstract concepts such as oral tradition, expressive culture, and informal learning" (2000, 5). Claiming that advocacy is a "sine qua non" of the discipline, he asserts: "I remain a believer in the redemptive power of grassroots culture" (Zeitlin 2000, 3). This "redemptive power" takes shape when folklorists and educators make our communities our partners and our teachers, rather than the subjects of our study. As we move away from the old ways of learning *about* our consultants, and toward a practice of learning *from* them (a shift discussed in greater detail in chapter 4), we endeavor to learn from those "credentialed by their community, not the academy" (Kodish 2013, 435).

When I first came to work with the Transplanting Traditions Community Farm Youth Collaborative, we met once a week at the vibrantly colored Street Scene Teen Center, in the basement of the Chapel Hill Post Office. The youth, a fluctuating group of about 8 to 10 middle and high school students, arrived at the Center by city bus from their various schools, exhausted and hungry.<sup>2</sup> We gathered around a long table as they told each other of their days, celebrating

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen the word *youth* intentionally because of the diversity in the program participants' ages, and because this is the term we used throughout our programming. I intentionally shift between this and the terms *students*, *consultants*, and *collaborators* to emphasize the different roles we all played throughout our work.

and lamenting the rises and falls of their high school lives. They often fell into conversation in the Karen language, leaving me to wonder what their laughter was all about. They snacked on peanuts, crackers, and fruit, unloading piles of binders, books, laptops, and worksheets onto the table. After some time spent tutoring and studying for their school classes, we would take up the tasks of the TTCF youth program. In the first few weeks, our primary agenda was to design the work we would accomplish together.

The documentary curriculum that we created is ultimately a product of all who joined in the work. Though many people played significant roles, this project would not have emerged as it did without a few key players. The first is Nicole Accordino, whose fearless experimentation and open dialogue with students allowed for a truly democratic and empowering learning space, one conducive to the kind of collaborative work I hoped to accomplish with the youth. The second is my primary consultant, Tay Nay Sar, an 18 year old Karen high school student. She and her family have been immensely helpful in my own ethnographic learning guiding this work. I have chosen to include only the names of these participants, allowing the rest of the youth—many of whom are underage—to remain anonymous. This choice should not discount the value of all the other participants in the project.

In my first interview with Tay Nay, she told about her experience as a new student in an American elementary school. She explained that when she first arrived in the United States, nobody—not even her teachers—knew who the Karen people were, or what it meant to be Karen. At the time, she did not speak enough English to give them an explanation. When I asked her what she hoped to gain by doing a documentary project about Karen culture, she told me:

I feel like when we do this project, it will be really helpful to Karen people, because here not many people know about them and their story. So I think, if we do this project, some

people will understand Karen people. They are not refugees who have come to America, without education, for nothing. (Sar 2014a)

Later in the interview, she extended her thought: “And, it can also help with our siblings in the future, because they might not know where they are from. They might feel stuck in the middle—I was born there, but grew up here. They might be confused about their nationality” (Sar 2014a). Finally, she noted both the challenge and pleasure she finds in telling her story: “I am from a country most people don’t know about, and it’s a poor place. It’s really hard to explain to people. The place where I’m from is really different. I really love to tell people about these things” (Sar 2014a). In Tay Nay’s statement, I heard three important notions that would guide my approach in this project. First, I heard a longing to share a story, to be recognized, and to be understood. I also heard a desire to maintain a sense of what it means to be Karen within the Karen community. And lastly, I heard that the *process* of telling, in and of itself, is meaningful.

In this case study, I will foreground the process of collaborative storytelling as a fitting response to Tay Nay’s desire (shared by others in the program) to be more widely understood by the community at large. In the first chapter, I discuss the educational experiences of first generation immigrants and second-language English speakers in public schools, where first culture and language are often understood as hindrances rather than as assets to their education. I then explore how the TTCF Youth Program, privileged to work with a uniquely specific demographic, can begin to fill the apparent breach in these students’ education.

The second chapter explores how my work as a folklorist has contributed to this project curriculum by providing an ethnographic framing for understanding Karen foodways as a relevant subject of study for the TTCF youth.

In the third chapter, I offer an expansive step-by-step explanation of the project curriculum, so as to provide context for a more analytical review in the next chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I explore the parallel between democratic education and collaborative ethnography, making the case that ethnographically-grounded curriculum is complementary to a democratic and empowering classroom. This chapter also critically assesses key challenges in this work: the balance in researcher-consultant relationships (and in parallel teacher-student relationships), and the dilemma of appropriate representation in ethnography and documentary.

In the concluding chapter, I reflect on the project experience as a whole, as well as discuss the understood outcomes of the engagement.

Throughout the entirety of this work, I emphasize that the curriculum we created fits the TTCF Youth program specifically because it has emerged from the program participants themselves. My role throughout has shifted from researcher to teacher to co-producer of a documentary; in each role, however, my voice has been one of many.

Despite the particularity of this program curriculum, its guiding principles can be applied in many settings, including afterschool programs, arts-based education, ESL education, and, with some finesse, the standard public school classroom.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **ESTABLISHING A NEED FOR THE PROJECT: FOLKLORE AND EDUCATION**

Having come to this work as both an educator and a folklorist, my engagement with the TTCF Youth Program was guided by a number of pedagogical theories. Complementing and deepening these are my training in ethnography; my esteem for the artistry in our everyday lives; my curiosity for diverse systems of knowing and meaning-making; and my experience in negotiating cross-cultural communication.

The TTCF Youth Program caters specifically to the youth as Karen, as second-language English speakers, as new immigrants, and as students interested in multimedia documentary. In so doing, the program begins to fill a gap in these students' public school educations. While most students born in the United States learn literacy and critical thinking through literature and history that reflects their own lives, culture, and family history, immigrant students (and those of many marginalized populations) are expected to do the same learning through material that is detached from their cultural identity, family history, and even their language. When I asked Tay Nay what most excited her about being in the Youth Program (trying to identify what motivated students to participate), she told me: "To remind me of who I am and where I am from, because here they learn about our culture and our story. That is what is most fun and important to me." I responded by asking if she felt like she had the opportunity to do this at school. "Um no, not really. Sort of," she replied (Sar 2014a). I took this ambivalence as a sign that meaningful

opportunities to bring her cultural identity into her formal education were infrequent. As the conversation continued, she told me about the few occasions of this kind that she could remember. In her ESL class, for instance, she was asked to do a presentation on her country of origin; and when her school hosted World Cultures Day, she wore a traditional Karen blouse. These minimal acknowledgements are the only instances she could recall of bringing her Karen life into her school.

Public school teachers often face the challenge of reaching diverse student populations; although most teachers are now trained in cultural sensitivity, this notion does not often extend beyond *sensitivity* to encompass a curriculum which actually draws upon students' cultural knowledge, empowering students to understand their own cultural knowledge as an asset to their (and their classmates') learning. This model of curriculum can unintentionally facilitate the intellectual, emotional, and physical marginalization of certain students. Education advocate Laura Olsen explored this dilemma in the public school system of California, where she documented the state of ESL education through extensive observation and interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Her analysis insightfully addresses many of the same high school experiences that the TTCF youth relayed to me. Olsen concludes:

There are three pieces to the process of Americanization that newcomers to these United States undergo in our high schools: academic marginalization and separation; the requirements to become English-speaking (despite many odds) and to drop one's native language in order to participate in the academic and social life of the high school; and insistent pressures to find and take one's place in the racial hierarchy of the United States. (2012, 240-241)

The educational framework Olsen describes forgoes the possibility of empowering students to treat their bicultural, bilingual experience as an asset in their learning, and essentially declares their first culture and language as a hindrance to their ability to integrate. Students in the youth

program express sentiments that parallel Olsen's conclusions. A number of them, for example, talked about the sense of alienation they feel at school due to language and cultural differences. One TTCF student noted that she had still never been to an "American's" house. Another told me:

I just have Karen friends, not much American friends, because I'm shy to tell them who I am, share stuff like that. But for Karen friends, I will chat with them, talk and laugh. For others, I can't really do that because I'm not close to them. But I wish to have other friends. Instead of Karen, I want to have mixed friends. I've been here 6 years and I don't have a close friend. Like some people have a best friend, but I don't. (Focus group participant 2014)

This sense of alienation could perhaps be resolved by academic curricula that give students opportunities to bring their own life experiences into their learning, and that celebrate their language and culture as educational assets.

A number of educators and cultural workers have theorized alternative teaching models that follow this impulse. *Culturally Responsive* teaching is one such model, proposed by esteemed education theorist, Geneva Gay; she encourages teachers to connect students' cultural knowledge and prior experiences to academic knowledge and intellectual tools, thus legitimizing the students' unique experiences and informal learning. Gay demonstrates that her model leads to higher student performance on multiple measures of achievement (2002, 2010). Gay's model begins to address my hope, that students' informal family knowledge and lifeways can become an asset to their personal learning, and an asset to classroom culture as a whole. Towards this end, folklore and education proponents Paddy Bowman (2004) and Elizabeth Simons (1990) write of the value of place-based curricula that draw upon local folklife and empower students to become experts of their own cultures. They suggest that teachers bring students' home and community life into the classroom through folklore fieldwork opportunities; in doing so, students

learn that their own lives are worthy of study, just as any others might be. Finally, educational researcher Luis Moll, teacher Cathy Amanti, and anthropologists Norma Gonzalez and Deborah Neff present a complementary notion, in which teachers recognize students' "households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resources with great *potential* utility for classroom instruction" (Amanti, Moll, Neff, and Gonzalez 1992, 134). They refer to these "cultural and cognitive resources" as *funds of knowledge*, and assert that in order for teachers to allow funds of knowledge to guide classroom learning, they must "assume the role of the learner," establishing "a fundamentally new, more symmetrical relationship with the parents and students" (Amanti, Moll, Neff, and Gonzalez 1992, 139).

Each of these pedagogical notions adds to a model in which curriculum aims not only to accommodate students with diverse ethnic backgrounds, but also to empower them to learn *through* their cultural identity. Unfortunately, most teachers only have the resources to make minor shifts in their methods; they often work within the bounds of scripted curriculum and strict guidelines, preparing students for standardized assessments. Without the advent of major policy changes, the public school system is not the most ideal setting for these alternative teaching models. Amanti, Moll, Neff, and Gonzalez stress that "fixing teachers" does not "fix schools," writing,

An emancipatory social research agenda calls for empowering approaches that encourage and enable participants to change through self-reflection and deeper understanding of their situations. Yet these empowering approaches must contend with a context that isolates practitioners, mutes autonomy, and pushes for standardization and homogenization. (2005, 2)

The Transplanting Traditions Youth Program has the unique ability to fill the gap in the formal education in which these Karen students are engaging. In working with a small group of students, all sharing a language and sense of ethnic identity, we were able to bring Karen culture

to the center of the learning process. The TTCF Youth Program utilizes students' family-specific knowledge, cultural aesthetics, folklife, and language as the foundation for project-based learning, while working toward particular learning goals chosen by the students themselves. In doing so, we experiment with a premise put forth by Kristen Luschen, educator and sociologist, who writes, "Pedagogies that encourage the sharing and exploration of students' experiences and knowledge catalyze critical engagement and transformation" (2014, 132).

In early 2014, I began my engagement with the youth through ethnographic observation of the afterschool program, interviews with participants, and facilitation of focus groups discussing project ideas, motivation, and learning goals. Students expressed their desire to work on English fluency, communication skills, and multimedia documentation. During this time, TTCF conducted a survey with youth program participants, to gauge their understandings of nutrition, their experience with hunger and food systems in their community, their confidence in communication, and their household and education experiences. On the subject of culture and communication, all but one student answered *yes* to the statement, "I feel it can be hard to describe to strangers about who I am and where I come from"; similarly, all but one answered *yes* to the statement, "I sometimes feel like it is difficult trying to BOTH fit in with the Karen community AND trying to fit in at school or when I am outside the Karen community." The students demonstrated different levels of confidence in their communication skills. When asked about speaking to strangers, speaking to people who are not Karen, or public speaking, most marked that they felt "very shy," or "a little shy" (Start of Project Survey 2014).

Students also reported on home and school responsibilities that were unique to their situation as recent immigrants and as the primary English-speakers of their households. All of them described filling out applications for themselves and their family members, and translating

important information or conversations for their parents; they also described feeling a need to help their families financially in any way that they could. When asked about academic experiences and goals, all of the students expressed feeling that they have a lot of catching up to do in school compared to other students; all spoke about their desire to go to college; and all agreed that “if they had the training and gained the right skills, they could really help their community to become a better place.” Finally, all of the students affirmed an interest in learning how to cook Karen food, answering *yes* to the statement, “In the past, I have asked my relatives or parents how to cook Karen food or tried to learn how to cook a new dish from them (before joining the program)” (Start of Project Survey 2014).

Our work in the coming months would respond to these survey results, taking into account the teens’ experiences, sentiments, and learning goals. Having decided from the start that I would help them in a documentary endeavor, I began by leading short workshops on interview techniques and audio recording. In these workshops, the students conducted interviews with each other, practicing the techniques I had demonstrated: asking open ended questions; engaging in dialogue rather than interrogation, by actively listening; asking relevant follow up questions; and allowing their interviewees to guide the conversation. Students recorded their interviews with iPods and iPhones rather than with high quality audio recorders, reminding them that this work can be done without special equipment.

The initial task of interviewing was a difficult one. In the first few exercises, the youth conducted interviews in English so that Accordino and I could offer guidance on technique. Many students were nervous about both asking and answering questions; some spoke softly, while others spent quite a bit of time giggling. I saw that confidence in speaking was a skill that we would need to develop over time. The students asked their peers to talk about Karen food,

their favorite dishes, and how they learned to cook. Despite some initial hesitation, they successfully asked questions that inspired their peers to tell stories. This was one of our primary goals. In the following instance, one student told her interview partner of her own experience cooking in Thailand, which led to a sorry about her father.

J: In Thailand, I used to cook rice, but it was really hard. It was really different—we used coal instead of gas. And also it's scary, too.

H: Why was it scary?

J: Its like, when you put the fire in, after that you have to put the coals—so I was afraid the fire was going to burn my hands. The fire burned my hand once when I was little, so I am still afraid of that. . . . My dad mostly does the cooking, because he likes to cook. He has cooked since he was little; like when he was nine, he cooked for his whole family.

Later J. went on to say more about her dad:

Since he was young, and he's the oldest child (he had three little brothers and sisters to take care of), and my grandpa is a soldier and my grandma had to find money for them—so he would stay home and cook. So now he always cooks. Anytime there is a ceremony, at church or New Year's, people will always call him to cook. (Peer Interviews 2014)

Paddy Bowman makes reference to folklorist and educational researcher Lynne Hamer's astute statement, "When students become interviewers, they also become teachers by helping the people they interview learn about themselves at the same time that the students learn from the interviewee, who is usually someone whose story—whose knowledge—has been left out of the classroom curriculum" (cited in Bowman 2004, 394). We hoped to use Karen culinary traditions as a launching ground to tell of the students' experiences both in the Thai refugee camps and in their homes here in North Carolina. This was a way for them to gain confidence in both interviewing and telling their own stories; our underlying assumption, following folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, was that telling one's life story empowers an individual by "letting him speak for himself" (1989 131).

In early spring of 2014, students chose short pieces of their recorded interviews and edited them together, creating a collective narrative that reflected their experiences with Karen cooking. We paired this audio narrative with a photo slide show of the students cooking a favorite Karen meal: Kaw Naw. While the photographs explained how to make the dish, the voice-over shared stories of how the teens learned to cook. We worked together to translate the Karen method of cooking into American terms, finding English names for common Karen ingredients, and learning what constituted a teaspoon, a tablespoon, a cup, and so forth. When we compared the family recipes, however, we found them to be quite diverse. Finally, the students decided to include the oldest girl's recipe in the short documentary. They called this first digital storytelling project: "A lesson on Karen cooking: It will make you very hungry."

In each step of this process, students began learning the basics of documentation, while bringing their home lives into the educational space: sharing recipes, telling stories of their own experiences and those of their families, and discovering and discussing difference while "translating" Karen ways of cooking for the American viewer. Digital storytelling as a medium provided space for the cohesion of culturally responsive learning moments. Just as oral historian Rina Benmayor describes, digital storytelling is an "active learning process that engages cultural assets, experiences and funds of knowledge that students bring to the classroom" (Benmayor 2008, 189). It was clear to me that this learning framework was valuable not only because it engaged students in the content and the digital medium, but also because it provided opportunities for individual and group work, for thinking creatively, and for feeling, discovering, and expressing identity. Additionally (and importantly), it offered moments when students could become teachers.

This first project was an important learning step for both the students and myself. As facilitator, I was building a foundational knowledge of Karen culture while establishing the afterschool program as a collaborative learning space. Meanwhile, the students were learning a critical method of engaging in cross-cultural communication, as well as new skills in documentation and translation. Despite this, the project still had its problems. It was rushed; the youth did not reliably show up to meetings; and there was too little time in those tired after-school hours to do the kind of creative collaboration I had hoped for. We finished the project at the end of the school year when many students' schedules were filling with soccer practices and the stress of final exams. Levels of engagement dropped, and students began taking less ownership in the work. The documentary reflected this hurriedness and lack of engagement. In the end, we all understood this project to be an introductory phase in a more extensive engagement. I saw the importance of taking the time to build relationships with the students and to better understand the community aesthetics from which we would construct a *culturally responsive* curriculum. We agreed to reconvene when school was out with a slight restructuring and updated agenda.

## CHAPTER 2

### PROJECT THEME: FOODWAYS

The youth program agenda is an extension of the Transplanting Traditions Community Farm (TTCF) project, which provides land and education to Karen farmers, creating the opportunity to maintain a long tradition of farming, while also providing supplemental income and a nutritional food source. TTCF was established in response to Carrboro's growing population of Karen farmers, whose flourishing gardens were expanding beyond the borders of their small plots at the available community garden. Knowledge of farming was proving to be an asset to the Karen community of Chapel Hill/Carrboro, and—when given the space—could be of economic and social benefit. TTCF has grown steadily since 2010, when it was formed as a project of the Orange County Partnership for Young Children. The project now serves 35 families and the farm has become a primary community space for the local Karen population. One farmer said, “I see many of my friends here from when we lived together in the refugee camp. We come here together; we talk together. This is the most beautiful thing” (TTCF Farmer Surveys 2013). Another explained,

What this farm does for the refugee community, especially the older people and myself, is important. We feel healthier, and a lot of people talk about the fresh air and how they miss their country. Before, when older people didn't have a farm here, they just wanted to go back to their country; they have nothing to do, and they want to go home, to their homeland. And now, because of the farm, they don't want to go home; they work here and feel really good. (TTCF Farmer Surveys 2013)

Coming to my work with the TTCF youth program as a folklorist, my first task was to explore the role of farming traditions in Karen culture. As I grew to understand the importance of farming for the Karen—not only as a profession, but also as an expression of community values and aesthetics—I realized that Karen foodways provided funds of knowledge from which the youth program curriculum could grow (Amanti, Moll, Neff, Gonzalez 1992, 2005).

For generations, the majority of Karen people have been subsistence and cash-crop farmers. Through conversations with Karen consultants in Carrboro, I learned that in Burma, Karen lifeways wholly reflected the farm as a cultural context. Tay Nay's father, Aung Oo, explained to me that they had no need for clocks to tell the time. He laughed, telling me that in Burma, the land and the animals kept time. You go to work when the chicken says so, he explained, and work until the cow gets tired. "You cannot force a cow to work," he said. "Even if they work, the path that they are taking, it won't be in a good way. They are feeling tired, just like a human, just like people. If they don't want to work, they won't do it." You'll know the day is over when the frogs croak, he continued; and if you stay at work until the crickets have begun to chirp, then you have stayed too late, because it is too dark to walk home, and you'll have to spend the night in the small hut on the farm (Oo 2015). In Aung Oo's memories of life in Burma, such fundamental, day-to-day aspects of living as time and work ethic are understood in terms of farming and the natural world.

Aung Oo explained that their family continues to emphasize the importance of community and family in the terms of the farm. For instance, they teach their children the agricultural proverbs that their parents taught them. He shared two with me. The first, "A single piece of bamboo can easily be broken; many pieces tied together in a bunch can never be broken," speaks to the way that people who stay together will overcome hardship. The second,

“A cow who stays in his herd will be safe; the cow who leaves his heard will be tiger meat,” speaks to the importance of staying close to family for safety and success (Oo 2015).

Karen farmers at TTCF grew up in farming communities in Burma; many were able to maintain some semblance of a small farm in the refugee camps in Thailand. Now, despite working full time jobs and raising families, they maintain their tradition of farming in North Carolina. TTCF has become a unique space where Karen farmers maintain continuity between the vastly different lives they lived in Burma, Thailand, and here, in a setting where moments of continuity are rare. The Karen have undergone a major shift in the landscape of their daily lives: from cooking on coals to cooking with microwaves; from walking from here to there, to driving; from completing the daily chores of the farm and refugee camp, to full-time janitorial and hospitality jobs.

For the Karen people living in Carrboro, the standard vehicles of identity maintenance are challenged. Time constraints and lack of resources make it difficult to create community spaces and maintain relationships that provide opportunities for cultural performance. The youth often described their home lives as disjointed and un-communicative. In a group discussion about home life and parental roles, for instance, one TTCF student explained, “My mom was a housewife in Thailand, but now she has to work. We don’t really have time to see each other because my mom works in the day and my dad works at night” (Focus Group Participant 2015). Tay Nay went on to explain, “If both our parents don’t work, then there is not money to pay the house bill or the energy. If only my dad worked, we would be kicked out of the apartment, because it is not enough” (Sar 2014b). All but the essential daily tasks are lost to busy days of work and school. Aung Oo told me,

I don't know, but for me 3<sup>rd</sup> shift is really hard, because I can't do anything. I can't take care of my children. I can't study or listen to the [English] recordings. I can't look at my children's papers. All I know is that if my children tell me to sign, I will just sign for them. If the children study or not . . . what's the signature for? I have no idea. So my littlest child—he didn't do well in school because I couldn't help him out and take care of things for him, or tell him to do his homework. (Oo 2015)

For Karen Christians, church services are meaningful occasions for cultural expression; they offer opportunities to wear traditional Karen clothing, gather as a community, and sing and worship in Karen. Tay Nay's mother, Mi Htoo, explained that only those who have "government jobs" with fixed schedules can go to church. Others often have to work on the weekend, as was her situation when she first arrived to the United States: "For me, for the first year that I got a job, I didn't get to take a day off on Saturday or Sunday, so there was no time for me to go to church" (Htoo 2015). With few opportunities for cultural performance, the essential tasks of daily life—like eating—have become central to Karen identity maintenance.

Foodways is one aspect of Karen lifeways that has been sustained through all the challenges of immigration. Karen farm and culinary traditions have undergone many makeovers, adapting to scarcity and abundance in ingredients and land resources. But despite their adaptations, they have endured the journey from Burma, to many years spent in Thai refugee camps, to the United States, and remain despite the pressures of American living. The TTCF serves as a structured space to maintain culture through this long tradition of farming. One TTCF farmer expressed, "It reminds me a lot of when we lived in Burma. In Burma, we also lived in a community together, [and] worked together on the farm" (TTCF Farmer Surveys 2013). The farm, as a landscape of cultural continuity, is important for identity maintenance. The TTCF youth recognized this, and saw it as an ideal space to document Karen stories.

Foodways scholar Charles Camp writes, "Food is one of the most, if not the single most

visible badges of identity” (1989, 29). Like most everyday expressions of culture and identity, foodways often go unnoticed; historically, they’ve been considered more a means to meet the basic human need of nourishment than a daily practice that celebrates cultural cohesion, provides contexts for the performance of cultural identity, defines limits to group identity, and at times engenders a sense of pride for one’s community (Brown and Mussel 1984). Sharing food is an important part of Karen relationships, in which hospitality is a cornerstone. Mi Htoo, explained, “For us, when the guest comes over to our house, the first thing that we ask is ‘have you eaten yet?’ If they say no, then we offer the food that we have.” Later she added, “If they get into your house, if you have food, just feel at home, and just take and eat. Karen people, if they ask you, ‘Is there any food,’ and you say, ‘Yes there is food,’ they just go and help themselves, eat and take care of themselves” (Htoo 2015). This connection between food and hospitality is echoed in the writing of Zoya Phan, a renowned human rights activist, and the daughter of a former General Secretary of the Karen National Union. In her memoir she writes about the garden her father kept in Burma:

My father’s flower garden ran right down to the banks of the Moei River. People traveling on the busy river used to comment on how lovely it looked and wonder who might live there. One dry season my father built a bamboo summerhouse in the midst of the garden, with a view of the river. When it was hot we’d go there to read, and it was somewhere to take visitors. That was my father’s idea of how to make people feel truly welcome (Phan 2010, 53)

Small flower gardens and bamboo shade-trellises speckle TTCF and offer spaces for farmers and visitors to gather, just as Zoya Phan describes here.

For immigrant communities, food can be an especially important signifier of identity. It is not only a way to maintain community identity within the group, but it’s also a way to express cultural identity to those outside the group, transcending cultural boundaries. The TTCF youth

understood that food was a way to communicate Karen identity to the Chapel Hill/Carrboro community at large. Tay Nay told me,

I love to cook; I want to make Karen recipes for other people. Like Chinese or Spanish, there's a lot of people that know about their food. And then like, I want people to know about Karen food too. Because Karen food is also good and healthy, so I want to share it with other people too. (Sar 2014a)

The students asserted that if Americans ate Karen food, they would perhaps begin to recognize, understand, and value Karen culture, and begin to see the Karen as *people*, and not just as refugees, or—in Tay Nay's words—as “just poor people.”

In interviewing members of the Karen community, I have found that their narratives reflect both a traditional Karen way of life, and also of a culture of displacement, movement, and adaptation. After spending almost a decade on the Thai-Burmese border working with displaced people, human rights activist Chris Cusano proposed, “Displacement starts as an aberration but becomes a constant way of life” (Cusano 2001, 1). Karen foodways have become a means not only for expressing traditional Karen lifeways, but also for expressing the story of survival, of this displacement and the hunger that accompanied it. Cusano writes of the way in which Karen people deal with their displacement by talking about it within the terms of their natural environment and agrarian way of life.

They say they are like ‘drops of water on the *Khu* leaf, never settling down and always in danger of being shaken off’; or like ‘chickens sleeping at night, never resting and always on edge’; or their predicament makes them like fish: ‘swimming upstream, we are caught in a trap; swimming downstream we are caught in a net.’ (Cusano 2001, 168)

The youth of the TTCF program tell of their experiences through stories of food and farming. Tay Nay, for instance, shared with me this story of a Karen porridge and its role in her family's escape from Burma.

Tacabah. It's a kind of porridge.

You mix it with a leaf called Bulida—a vegetable in traditional food. You put it with bamboo shoots, salt, garlic and onions. They did that because while they were running away from Burmese soldiers, there was not enough rice. If you cook rice and eat it with bamboo shoots and fish paste, it would not have been enough, because my grandparents had so many children. So they would make enough porridge—Tacabah—for everyone to eat and have energy . . . because if you just cook rice, it won't be enough. Because there is tomorrow, and *tomorrow, what will happen?* If there is no food, the children will starve. Also, when the Karen people were running from Burmese soldiers, there were no plates. They couldn't carry them. They would cut bamboo and put rice on it and bury it under the ground to cook it . . . *and it smells so good.* When it's ready, they take it out and eat it. They eat it on the banana leaves. (Sar 2014a)

Tay Nay's story about Tacabah is one that her grandmother told her, and one that begins to explain that the Karen have been on the move for a long time, fleeing the violence of civil war.

When Tay Nay's older sister Hser Ku told me about life in the Thai refugee camp, she began,

When we were young, we were really poor. . . . We don't even have our own money to get food. So every Saturday when our parents would give us the money to give to the [church] offerings, we would keep it for ourselves to buy a snack. We would get candy or pickled mango [laughing]. (Ku 2014)

Later, she went on to tell me about leaving the camp for the United States. She lamented not being able to eat the ripe fruit on the trees before leaving.

It was September, so the fruit was ready to pick, but we couldn't eat it. The reason is—before we came here, we had to do medical checks, and we waited for seven months to get over this. I was really disappointed; we couldn't eat the fruit because if we got sick, we couldn't come. The animals got a disease that they could pass through the fruit, because it was raining and there was malaria. So we couldn't eat any fruit. If we get sick, then every member of the family couldn't go to the U.S. And we really want to get out of the camp. We really don't want to stay there. And the reason is, we really want to have a good life and education. So yeah, we listened to our parents; we didn't want to get stuck in the camp. We spent our last thirteen years there. (Ku 2014)

Throughout my dialogue with students in the youth program, it became clear that Karen lifeways and stories of shared experience are tied up within each farming practice, meal, and plant. Here is where we would find our place as a documentary team at the farm. The students were interested in documenting the farmers' stories to share something about Karen culture with

the greater community, while the Karen adults were happy to share their farming traditions with the youth. One farmer explained, “My future goal is to teach our next generation of children about how to eat healthy vegetables and how to grow them successfully; our body needs vegetables every day” (TTCF Farmer Surveys 2013). Through discussions with the youth, we agreed upon the importance of food and farming in Karen culture and I began to understand how a digital storytelling curriculum could emerge from this content.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **PROJECT EXPLANATION**

After spending the winter and spring working with the TTCF youth once a week in an afterschool program, all the while noting differing levels of student engagement and commitment, Accordino and I decided to take a new approach to the farm's youth collaborative for the summer. We held a meeting with interested youth, polled them on their goals for the summer, and found that they all wanted to keep learning multimedia work; they also wanted to document the stories of members of their community. This time, Accordino invited interested youth to submit applications to participate in the program, which asked them to describe why they wanted to participate and what they hoped to learn and accomplish. All of those who were able to make the time commitment were then interviewed and subsequently accepted as interns of TTCF. The interns committed to a specified number of workshop and work-trade hours in exchange for a yearly stipend. We hoped that this internship format would encourage students to be more accountable, while also providing valuable job training skills. In addition to the documentary project, interns would have the opportunity to give visitors tours of TTCF; lead tours of the Carrboro Farmers' Market for new Karen immigrants (showing them how to use their EBT<sup>3</sup> funds, and where they can find locally grown Karen vegetables); or give cooking

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<sup>3</sup> Electronic Benefit Transfer: benefits issued by the State Welfare Department, formerly known as Food Stamps.

demonstrations at the Farmers' Market (showing customers how to cook with traditional Karen vegetables). My role as documentary facilitator had by this point developed into a more general role of participant in the collaborative: being present, getting to know the interns and their families, assisting and guiding when possible.

In June, we accepted ten students to the new internship program, a number of whom I had worked with in the winter and spring. In July, together with the TTCF interns, Accodino, and professional photographer and community advocate, Peter Eversoll, I began training the students in documentary photography and interviewing. The project would extend into the fall, and would entail creating a short documentary that would necessitate training in audio editing, digital storytelling, translation, and subtitling. The documentary that we envisioned would be a food-based story, drawing on the assets of the Karen community, not unlike the kinds of digital storytelling projects that oral historian Rina Benmayor has written about. Benmayor articulates the power of digital storytelling to draw on the assets of the students, stimulate them creatively, and offer a number of media through which to learn:

Digital storytelling is an assets-based pedagogy where students can bring their own cultural knowledge and experiences to the fore, including their skills and comfort with technology, to transform their thinking and empower themselves. The multiple creative languages of digital storytelling—writing, voice, images, and sound—encourage historically marginalized subjects, especially younger generations, to inscribe emerging social and cultural identities and change lived cultural discourses in a new and exciting way. (Benmayor 2008, 200)

It was precisely this “inscribing of social and cultural identities,” along with the goal of bringing fuller understandings of Karen culture to a broader public, that was the purpose of our project.

### Step 1: Fieldwork

Our first step in the documentary process was to host a two-day intensive workshop at the farm in which we would prepare students to do documentary fieldwork. The Center for

Environmental Farming Systems loaned a high quality digital camera to each student in the workshop. We met at the Transplanting Tradition Community Farm outdoor barn, where we gathered first around a long row of picnic tables. Most of the students had been there many times before, and a few had come a couple hours early to help their parents on the farm before the workshop.

The first morning of the workshop was spent on photography. Students viewed a number of photographs, with Eversoll guiding them in considering how the framing and perspective affect our perceptions of the subject. In his lesson, Eversoll reminded students of the power they had as photographers. In the words of Katie Hyde, director of the Literacy Through Photography program based at Duke University, “We isolate our subjects, deciding how to strip away or give context. We decide how others will see our subjects with framing that adds mystery or enhances meaning” (Ewald, Hyde, and Lord 2012, 8). Eversoll took pictures of students from above, making them look small, and others from below, making them look giant; he then asked the students to describe which pictures made the subjects look powerful, and which made them look weak. Hyde goes on to make a parallel between her own work as a sociologist and the work of a photographer: “A sociological lens reminds us to look once again at the ordinary, and beneath its surface. It urges us to connect the large and small scale, the local and worldly, the bewildering and mundane. A camera lens likewise helps us look more closely at our looking, giving subjects due attention, seeing them anew” (Ewald, Hyde, Lord 2012, 8). As a folklorist, I saw this also as my own task, and hoped to bring this understanding to the TTCF interns.

Throughout the lesson, Eversoll helped students to understand the difference between “taking” a photograph and “making” a photograph, with the second being a more intentional crafting rather than a snapshot, which brings with it a responsibility to the subject. Eversoll spoke

to the importance of forming a relationship with the subject of a photograph. In commenting on the relationship of photographer to subject, educational photographer Wendy Ewald, co-author of the book *Literacy & Justice Through Photography: A Classroom Guide*, writes,

However one went about making portraits, there was always an intense relationship between subject and artist, a deep courtesy that called, if only briefly, the recognition of mutual humanity. The ongoing, half-mute dialogue between the photographer and the subject (and inevitably the viewer) became for me the essential point of a photograph. (Ewald, Hyde, Lord 2012, 8)

Eversoll's discussion of the photographer's responsibility to the subject of the photograph and the desired relationship between the two helped to establish our intent to bring integrity and respect to the representations we offered in our documentary.

After lunch and a break filled by arm-wrestling, soccer, and a walk around the farm (well documented by the students, excitedly experimenting with their new cameras), we reconvened for a workshop on documentary interviewing and audio recording. I led this workshop, drawing from my training as an ethnographer. We covered interview ethics, etiquette, and strategy. Students who had participated in the afterschool program had the opportunity to teach new students what they knew about interviewing. We worked together to "translate" closed questions (yes/no, either/or, short answer) into open-ended queries. We noted particularly helpful phrases in this process (for example, beginning questions with "how," "why," and "tell me about," rather than, "what," "who," or "do," in order to stimulate more expansive responses and storied answers rather than informative/didactic replies). We also explored what it means to be an active listener, and practiced listening and creating follow-up questions that stimulated a dynamic of dialogue rather than interrogation. These strategies are difficult for any speaker to master; the task became even more challenging when we added the variable of Karen-English interpretation.

This became an intensive exercise in English and Karen language use, active listening, critical thinking, and perhaps most importantly, confidence.

That evening, the students took their borrowed cameras home with the assignment of *making* ten photographs of their home lives. The next morning, some students arrived early, taking their cameras on a walk around the farm, photographing the bamboo shade structures; the mud boots hanging out to dry; the yellows, greens, reds, and pinks of the summer harvests and blooms; and the farmers out early to avoid the burdening July heat. When everyone had arrived, we broke into small interview teams consisting of a lead interviewer, an interpreter, and an audio producer. The students were all prepared to help each other in their tasks. We would conduct three interviews. The women who volunteered to be interviewed were all Karen farmers of the TTCF; many of the students knew them in some capacity, either as relatives, from the farm, from church, or from the refugee camp in Thailand. (I found out later, for example, that one of the students had been in a kindergarten class taught by one of the interviewees back in Thailand.) The teams rotated in their roles; while one group interviewed, another would take photographs, and the last would help to prepare a lunch of fresh farm produce. Here, I began to see the words of folklore and education proponent, Paddy Bowman, come to life:

The prolific, authentic content of folklore engages students, and the fieldwork methodologies of cultural documentation through observation, note taking, photography, audio- and video-recording, and mapping build many skills that students need to improve their literacy, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and self-awareness. Folklore and fieldwork offer *all* students opportunities to be experts as tradition bearers, creating primary sources, interpreting and comparing cultural data, and connecting across generations and cultural groups. (Bowman 2004, 386)

Each student engaged in the activity in a different ways. Some were clearly focused on the challenging social interaction of the interview, working primarily on interpersonal skills, while others (seemingly more comfortable in the interview setting) were more outwardly engaged in

the interview content, asking questions specific to their own interests, and taking the opportunity to learn about these women's experiences, and about their knowledge of farming, medicinal plants, and cooking. After all the interviews had been conducted, the photos made, and the lunch eaten, we reconvened to debrief the process. Students compared interview experiences, challenges, and conclusions.

The interviews varied in length and subject matter, depending on where the student-consultant dialogue led. In general, the narratives focused on the women's experiences farming in North Carolina, their memories of farming in Burma and Thailand, the specific crops that they grew, and their agricultural and culinary techniques. The task of interviewing was challenging. It required speaking with an adult in a new, unfamiliar format in which the rules of cultural etiquette were not always clear. It also meant coming up with questions on the spot and translating Karen to English and English back to Karen, in front of other group members. Students responded differently to the pressures. Some were shy, while others willingly took the lead. The students did a nice job of self-correcting when necessary and helping each other when they saw that their peers were struggling. The interviewees were often terse in their answers, and the students had to work hard, employing follow-up question techniques, to receive substantial answers.

Youth-adult relationships in Karen culture are heavily dictated by respect and etiquette; these norms contributed to a formal interview atmosphere, making it difficult to push beyond surface-level answers. As a non-Karen speaker, it was difficult for me to know to what degree the youth-adult dynamic informed how questions were asked and how they were answered. At times, students would look to me for help (for instance, when a long awkward silence stalled the conversation). When possible, I would help them come up with another question of interest to

them and the interviewee. When apparent nervousness had paralyzed everyone, I would step in with my own questions. In this way, I was both a teacher and a member of the fieldwork team. I will consider my role in the documentary process more extensively in the following chapter.

### Step 2: Story Analysis

Later that month, I logged the rough translations of each interview. I then met the students at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, where they were hosting a Karen cooking demonstration and providing tastes of a fried water spinach dish, seasoned with garlic and ginger. I gave them each a copy to the interview log and asked them to look it over before our next workshop. Some of them took a few moments to review it there at the farmers market, despite all the distractions. One student (who had acted as an interpreter in one of the interviews) was particularly excited to see his words written on the page. After reading through the log, though, he pulled me aside, embarrassed. He realized how often he had embellished his translations, adding his own thoughts to the interviewer's statements. Later we would go back through the recordings and correct the translations. This became a good learning moment for everyone in what it means, as a translator, to be someone else's representative.

In August, I hosted a workshop on story-construction and analysis, and asked the students to find the stories within each interview. This was both a necessary step in storyboarding our documentary and a valuable learning moment in which Karen oral histories became literature subject to analysis. First we discussed what components made a compelling story. Sharing stories we all knew—for example, of movies—we agreed that stories tend to have a setting and a character who is faced with a challenge; when the character makes a choice to confront that challenge, it leads to an outcome. We played with this concept of story construction through a collaborative storytelling exercise in which students each wrote a component of a story, passed

the paper on to their neighbor who wrote the next portion, and so on, until the story was complete. We read the stories out loud and laughed at what we had created.

Next, we read over the interview logs together and tried to identify each component of the narrator's story, discovering that in some interviews our consultants were telling multiple stories at once. The students separated again into their interview teams. Each team sifted through the log, highlighting components of the content that would make a cohesive story. We discussed the students' power in this moment to decide what the audience would see of their consultants' telling. This exercise allowed students to see that media is constructed with intention, and the author's hand is always present in the final product, an outcome that sociologist and education scholar, Kristen Luschen, emphasizes in her forward to *Crafting Critical Stories : Toward Pedagogies and Methodologies of Collaboration, Inclusion, and Voice*. She writes, "Production requires students to make choices about how they construct stories. In doing so they can transfer that experience to formulate questions about how the images, knowledge, and discourses they take for granted are formed" (Luschen 2014, 134). In a similar vein, Steven Goodman, director of New York City's Educational Video Center, emphasizes that multimedia and community-engaged curriculum teaches students the power of media to "represent ideas, values, and voices," and their own power, "as learners and cultural producers, to use media as a tool to educate, inform, and make change in the community" (2005, 207) This activity inspired discussion about what the students wanted to share with the community at large, and how that information would affect the viewers understanding of Karen people. This is a discussion that would come up throughout the editing process and which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

### Step 3: Audio Editing

In late summer, I met with students in groups of two and three to work on editing the recorded interviews into the stories they had pieced together in the previous workshop. We sat together in front of my laptop, using a simple audio editing program. The students quickly became experts in working with the program, using short cuts, slicing the audio, moving the audio sequences, and piecing them back together in an order to form a story. They worked primarily from the storyboard they had created in the last workshop, making some necessary edits due to the incongruities they found between the actual Karen speech and their English translations. For many of the youth, this was the first time they had the opportunity to critically analyze a story within the context of their first culture and language—certainly a valuable experience. I found that the students excelled in critically thinking about the stories they were constructing, working not only with functionality in mind, but also with artistry. Because they were editing exclusively in the Karen language, this step of the project became very much their own. When they solicited my help in an editing choice, they were obliged to explain their intentions, the artistic choices they hoped to make, the representation they wanted to provide, and the predicament they needed help with. This moment of communication was often very challenging. Some students took it on with patience, while others expressed quite a bit of frustration with their English skills.

The youth are most often asked to learn new skills and concepts from within the context of their second language. Within this frame, it is difficult for them to demonstrate their full capacity in critical thinking and analysis; their efforts are thwarted by the complexity of translation. One student who was excited by the work she was accomplishing in Karen proudly told me that she wished her English teacher could see how well she was doing. Along with this sense of independent accomplishment came a sense of ownership over the project. I saw that

students' motivation and commitment to the work increased as they stepped into the editing. As they took more ownership over the work, I had to be more aware of my role as “collaborator,” rather than leader, in this project. (I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 4.)

#### Step 4: Translation and Subtitles

In September 2014, I began working with students individually and in pairs to create accurate translations of the final audio-documentary they had created. First, we chose from the pool of photographs that the students had taken during our first workshop. They arranged the photos in a slide show that would accompany and complement the audio narrative. Next, the students worked individually, listening to the audio and translating to the best of their abilities. They highlighted areas they were unsure of; I worked with them to correct the grammar and syntax in their English, and then sent the translation off to another student to edit once more. Finally, I worked with three students who were particularly dedicated in the final stages, matching photographs to the audio and aligning English subtitles with the Karen speech. By this time in the process, I had gotten to know the students better and we were now meeting at their houses. We would sit on the front porch in the all-Karen neighborhood, sometime calling over to a neighbor (also a student in the program) for advice. Or we would sit on the living room floor until 9 and 10 at night, asking older siblings and parents for their advice on final translation choices. This exercise led to valuable cross-cultural conversations and learning moments for both myself and the students. In finding that certain words were more difficult to translate than others, we noted that perhaps cultural practices were particularly divergent in these realms. When trying to translate farm and plant descriptors (for example, terms like ‘perennial,’ ‘biennial,’ ‘cash crop,’ ‘slash and burn,’ and ‘crop rotations’), we discovered that there were many more Karen words to describe life on the farm than there were in common English. My primary challenge

and concern in this portion of the process was that of representation, which I will deal with in more depth in the next chapter. Suffice to say, it was difficult to insure the our translations were accurate enough to fairly represent our consultants' intellect and articulation, particularly given that English translations were being constructed by youth who were themselves new to the English language.

#### Step 5: Presentation

In October 2014, after spending a number of weeks working with students one-on-one in their homes to make final editing choices, the youth had the opportunity to present their work at a farm-to-table benefit dinner for Transplanting Traditions. This was a powerful culminating moment in our work together. The students stood in front of a room of funders and presented their work. Together, we watched their documentary on a big screen, and saw that the audience was clearly moved, some to tears, by the final product. I think that in seeing the effect the documentary had on the audience, the youth understood that they were using “media as a tool to educate, inform and make change in community” (Goodman 2005, 207). One student eloquently captured this understanding when she told the crowd why she wanted to make this documentary. She explained that when stories are not told, they are forgotten; she then asserted that these women's stories should not be forgotten. In this statement, she acknowledged that Karen stories were not being told—or at least not being broadly heard—and that she was taking action to change that.

Each step of this process placed value on the Karen community as worthy of study; it showed students that learning history and social studies did not require studying somebody else, a history separate from their own. Judith Flores, an educational researcher with a focus in social justice education and oral history, elaborates on this notion when she writes, “Educational

practices should not define historical knowledge as a secular discipline detached from the experience of those who have lived or are living it” (Flores 2014,117-118). In the same vein, education should not define knowledge (contemporary or historical) as a realm detached from students’ family language, beliefs, history, and culture. By making their lives, cultures, and communities part of the learning process, students learn that they themselves are just as important as any other subjects (Simons 1990, Bowman & Carpenter 2004). Throughout this work, I hoped the youth would take charge of their own education, understanding that they do not have to wait for someone else to tell their story, but that they can tell it themselves.

This extensive project explanation provides the reader with a full understanding of the curriculum, offering a framework to build upon and adapt to comparable contexts, while also providing a foundation for the following critical analysis of our process, method, and intention.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS: ON COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

The Transplanting Traditions Youth Collaborative was designed to engage refugee youth in culturally responsive leadership training. “The end goal of programming,” declares the project’s website, “is to provide teens with the tools and experiences to be able to make positive and lasting changes in their communities” (TTCF 2014). When I first began working with the Youth Program, I immediately noted Accordino’s perceptive method of facilitating an ongoing dialogue with the students; she involved them in every aspect of program planning, from dealing with scheduling difficulties to planning projects and designing key learning goals. The culture of dialogue that she encouraged allowed this program to develop its successful, culturally responsive curriculum. Part of the daily routine of the winter/spring afterschool program was dedicated to planning and prioritizing our activities for the future, and debriefing from previous activities. Although Accordino facilitated these conversations, her voice did not overpower those of the students, thereby giving the students an opportunity to take leadership roles. Accordino’s teaching choices reflect the advised teacher-student dynamic in Geneva Gay’s theory of culturally responsive teaching. Educator Elizabeth Kozleski reflects on this dynamic in the following statement:

Culturally responsive teachers negotiate classroom cultures with their students that reflect the communities where students develop and grow. This is no small matter because it requires that teachers transcend their own cultural biases and preferences to establish and develop patterns for learning and communicating that engage and sustain student

participation and achievement. . . . When the cultural heritages and assumptions about what is valued, expected, and taught compete with other compelling realities, teachers take on a facilitator role while they relinquish their status as knowledge brokers. (2009, 1)

Like the teachers cited by Kozelski, Accordino “relinquished” the status of “knowledge broker” and assumed that of facilitator. As a result, the Transplanting Traditions Youth Program became a truly collaborative and democratic learning space that empowered students to design their own education, leading to a meaningful curriculum that was molded by their own desires, interests, and cultural understandings. Operating in this way, students’ voices are uplifted, while their life experiences are brought into the learning space as worthy of study; teachers, in turn, are more prepared to offer learning opportunities that the students will find engaging. And when students are *heard* by their teachers, as foundational education scholar Paulo Friere suggests, they learn to be more active as listeners.

It is through hearing the learners, a task unacceptable to authoritarian educators, that democratic teachers increasingly prepare themselves to be heard by learners. But by listening to and so learning to talk with learners, democratic teachers teach the learners to listen to them as well (1997, 116).

Having come to this work as a folklorist and ethnographer, I noted how these guiding principles of democratic education (which I witnessed in action in the TTCF Youth Program) aligned with the guiding principals of collaborative ethnography. I saw that my work as educator and my work as ethnographer were merging with more fluidity than I would have imagined, and that the two modes were complementing each other; this complementarity allowed community engaged research to become an opportunity for empowering education.

As I worked with the youth at Transplanting Traditions, I endeavored for the project to emerge from the dialogue between myself and the students. Rather than dedicating myself to observation, interviewing, and interpretation—working toward a final product that might only

meet academic eyes—I hoped to foster a space where the community in which I was working could learn from each other about themselves, and create a product with their own audience in mind. Finally, rather than documenting a community and asking for the community’s *assistance* in planning and conducting that work, I hoped to provide my consultants with the resources to plan and conduct *their own* research with my assistance. In this way, my work with the youth extends an emergent tradition of collaborative and community-led ethnography and documentation.

Writing on the history of collaborative and community-led documentary work, and the more recent “digital landscape” which allows communities to easily document themselves, documentary filmmaker and scholar Elizabeth Coffman notes that, “Documentary scholars are returning to the history of early video because these predecessors bear striking resemblances to the current digital landscape.” She points to such 1960s/70s media collectives as Videofreex, Raindance Corporation, and Kartemquin Films, who were “handing cameras to their subjects and publishing training manuals and operations instructions on how to record both persuasively and democratically” (Coffman 2014, 102). Although I am not handing cameras to the youth and stepping aside for them to do the work, I am handing them cameras and then standing *at* their side to do the work together; I wanted my voice to become just one among many within a collaborative production.

Despite understanding that this idealistic attempt would undoubtedly be undermined by my perceived position of authority (as outsider, adult, “teacher”, etc.), I chose to strive for it anyway. I hoped that even if I could not meet the ideal, I might find an acceptable compromise: a sense of balance of authority in my research relationships. In attempting to find this state of balance, I have turned to other practitioners in the field of Folklore who have, in the last few

decades, taken a critical and collaborative approach to their research, paving the way for my own experimentation. In later pages I will explore how my authority did and did not undermine the idealistic notion of collaboration.

The collaborative framework in which I am attempting to work necessitates readjusting the conventional research relationship, one in which the researcher acts as an “authoritative scholar” and the consultant acts as a “passive yielder of data,” forming a relationship of “subject to object” (Yow 2005,1). By robbing the “object” of study of her own voice, this traditional method makes full authority available to the scholar, leaving ample space for misrepresentation. Anthropologist Luke Lassiter begins his comprehensive guide to a new critical ethnographic methodology, *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, by describing this shift in the researcher-subject relationship:

Many have taken to heart critiques by such anthropologists as James Clifford, George E. Marcus, and Renato Rosaldo and accordingly have replaced “reading over the shoulders of natives” with “reading alongside natives.” They have thus sought to develop ethnography along dialogic lines and have in their individual accounts shifted the dominant style of writing from authoritative monologue to involved dialogue between ethnographer and interlocutor. (2005, 3)

Following a contemporary trend in the field to reconsider the ethics and outcomes of this relationship, I shift my research mode to one of consultancy, in which I attempt to work within a more egalitarian relationship. In doing so, my work necessarily becomes dialogic. Through dialogue, I find avenues for collaboration.

A collaborative approach to research asks that both consultant and researcher commit to the project, and that both parties gain equally from its completion. It not only asks that there be reciprocity, with an even give-and-take in the consultant-researcher relationship, but it also requires that both parties share in the commitment to develop and implement the research.

Hence, a collaborative method might provide an academic researcher with a product to enhance her career (e.g., a documentary, written ethnography, or a theoretical reflection), but should also offer a process and outcome equally valuable to the consultant community. In my work with the Karen community, I was primarily concerned—at least in this initial phase of work—that the youth leave our engagement with a sense of accomplishment and empowerment, with new skills to transfer to their next projects, and with a valuable learning experience to reference as they continue educating themselves. Additionally, I hoped that the adult participants in the documentary would feel well represented, that they would have a positive encounter as consultants, and that they would build on their relationships with the youth. If the engagement were to continue, now that the students have undergone training, there would be less need for the didactic tone in our relationships and more opportunity to collaborate in focused ethnographic research; the end goal and product would then take new form.

The parallel between this method of collaborative research and that of democratic education is particularly evident when comparing Lassiter’s description of the shift to collaborative ethnography as moving from “reading over the shoulders of natives” to “reading alongside natives,” with Freire’s description of democratic education as moving “from talking to learners to talking to them and with them; from listening to learners to being heard by them” (1997, 111). Here, Freire expounds upon the important shift from authoritarian to democratic education, emphasizing the necessity of a dialogic relationship—in this case between teacher and student rather than researcher and consultant. He details the importance of assuring students a voice in the classroom, just as it has been my work as research-facilitator to assure that my consultants have a voice in our collaborative research, and my work as collaborative

documentarian to assure that my production partners (TTCF interns) have a voice throughout the documentary process.

My engagement with the Transplanting Traditions Youth Program has been ethnographically grounded, which is to say that my interactions with the youth (my consultants) were guided by the methodology of collaborative ethnography, and that the curriculum arose out of intentional, exploratory, cross-cultural dialogue. We were teaching the students to be observers of their own culture and to work with older members in the community to document Karen foodways and stories of shared experience. In this way we gave students the tools to learn in an inquiry-based education framework (a framework in which teachers pose questions to students, rather than present them with facts). I have found, and folklorist and educator Anne Pryor confirms, that ethnography is an ideal tool for establishing this framework. In referencing Dewey's foundational work, *Democracy and Education* (1916), Pryor notes the overlap between ethnography and alternative models of education, and asserts that an ethnographically-grounded curriculum insists on inquiry-based pedagogy.

Bringing ethnographic processes into a curriculum breaks the mold of conventional teaching. Ethnographic fieldwork is a methodology in which the ethnographer has cultural questions about which to seek enlightening information. Ethnography does not fit with the model of students receiving knowledge; it requires that one discover and so is more aligned with inquiry-based pedagogy. (Pryor 2004, 397)

Collaborative ethnography as an educational model allows teachers and students to create and facilitate learning spaces in their communities. In these learning spaces students *produce* rather than *receive* knowledge. Paulo Freire explains that it is in these very circumstances (in which teachers “create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge”) that transformational education takes place (1998, 30).

The balance in authority—when one is both ethnographer and educator—is delicate and

challenging to locate. In a discussion of reciprocal ethnography, folklorist Elaine Lawless comments on this fine balance of authority in collaborative research. “I have not relinquished my role as interpreter, as thinker, as objective observer,” she writes. “But I have given up the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar’s position as more legitimate because it is the more educated or more credible one” (1992, 312).

Finding this balance was difficult for both the youth and myself. In each step of the process, my voice was very much present, in some moments more than others. While interviewing, I often stepped in with questions when students indicated that they were stuck, or helped them think of ways to rephrase questions so that interviewees might be more expansive in their answers. While storyboarding and editing, my voice was also present in discussions about intention and representation. As a teacher, I wanted the students to take ownership of the work, to stay motivated and empowered by it. As a researcher, though, it was admittedly challenging to hand so much decision-making power to the youth. I was constantly challenged; at every turn, I struggled to maintain balance between their voices and mine. It seemed that the interns also struggled to know how to work within our relationship. Was I a teacher, their elder, a friend? Were they allowed to say “no,” to disagree, to debate with me? One of my key goals in conducting collaborative research was to introduce the students of the TTCF Youth Program to an alternative framework in which they were empowered to voice their desires, goals and concerns, and to help them understand themselves as actors in designing work that they would accomplish together.

That said, egalitarian communication would remain an idealistic goal, never to be fully reached. Educators Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins, addressing the complications inherent in collaboration between parties of unequal power, propose that although there is no need to reject

the collaborative method altogether, we should “unpack its difficulties to suggest a less dialogical and more uneasy, unsettled relationship” (2008, 471). Working with the Karen youth, I was aware of this uneasiness. They have told me many times that “Karen are not like Americans”; they listen to their parents, they listen to their teachers, they are respectful. What would this mean for our so-called “collaborative” research relationships? This made me even more hesitant to give guidance, for fear they would not turn down bad advice. Jones and Jenkins problematize the notion that collaboration can transcend the hierarchies and differences in a research relationship. They argue that collaboration does not soften or erase difference, and assert that the researcher should not assume that a collaborative approach will allow for research free of power structures. I appreciate this critique, in that it recognizes the power of long-standing hierarchical structures to dictate relationships, despite the intention to cultivate egalitarian relationships.

One way I attempted to deal with the hierarchy inherent in our relationship was to pose each piece of guidance as a question. As I sat in on the small group discussions, students would ask me questions like “What is this documentary for?” and “What are we trying to say?” They would point to an underlined passage of an interview log and ask, “Is this important? Should we include this?” The youth hoped that I would lead the documentary process, telling them who the audience was, what the message should be, and how to accomplish the task. As a teacher, and as a research facilitator, I opted to challenge them to do this work on their own, to discover what *they* thought was important to share and who *they* wanted their audience to be. It was essential to allow them space to form their own opinions before I added my two cents. To do this, I responded to their questions with questions. For instance, to the question, “What is this documentary for?” I would say, “What was it that made you want to make a documentary in the

first place? Is that still your motivation? Has your idea changed?” To the question, “Who is our audience for the documentary?” I would ask, “Where might we be able to show this documentary? Who would you want to invite?” When they asked if a certain interview sequence was important, I would respond, “Does it help to tell the story you want to tell?”

There were also moments when I would intervene in their work, stepping carefully, and doing my best not to abuse my authority in our teacher-student relationship. At times I may have been too cautious (an overcorrection to a long history of monologist research and misrepresentation in the field of Folklore). One such moment came when we titled the documentary. The first title the students suggested was “Three Refugee Farmers.” This became a prompt for a valuable discussion about representation and identity. I asked the students whether these farmers would identify themselves first as refugees, or first as women, as farmers, or as Karen? The students agreed that these women would most likely think of themselves as “Karen” or just as “farmers,” but not as “refugees.” They then changed the title to “Three Karen Farmers.” Soon two camps had formed in the group: those that liked the name, and those who found it dull. The second hoped to find, in their terms, “a more powerful” title. They proposed: “Three Lives, One Passion,” or “Three Farmers, Many Struggles, One Passion.” A number of students found these titles “cheesy.” If it were merely an aesthetic choice, the interns might have never agreed.

As we gathered around the large kitchen counter at a local restaurant, preparing traditional Karen vegetables to be cooked for the farm-to-table fundraiser dinner, the debate unfolded, with the students exploring what they were really trying to say in the documentary. Did they want to emphasize the struggle? The art of farming? The life stories? Was farming a passion, or simply a way of life? These are just a few of the questions we considered. Somewhat

frustrated, in the end they compromised, accepting the simple title, “The Story of Three Farmers,” as the least controversial. Titling the documentary led to the most outspoken discussion of Karen community representation. Though this was a moment of particularly heightened awareness over representation, less charged—but no less important—moments happened throughout the summer.

The collaborative method of my work with the TTCF Youth Program is one that responds to a long history in the fields of Folklore and Anthropology of offering authoritative misrepresentations of consultant communities. Since the 1990s, folklorists have begun to consider the power they assume as they go about representing another’s story. Now, the issue of appropriate representation has become a central question for myself and my colleagues. The consequences of our predecessors’ negligent representations have become our wounds to mend, and the consequences of our contemporary representations have become criteria for judging the success of our work. I work under the assumption that a good representation of a consultant is necessarily complex. Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie speaks eloquently of this notion in her talk, *The Danger of The Single Story*. She says, “Show a people as one thing, over and over again and that is what they become. . . . Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person” (2009). In the case of this project, the collaborative approach has led to a thoughtful telling of these women’s stories; however, the dilemma of representation remained a primary challenge throughout the work, arising in three primary ways: the youth-adult dynamic, translation, and the story content.

The first challenge came in the youth-adult dynamic that framed the landscape of the interviews. The generational divide was both a blessing to the documentary process and a detriment to the documentary product. On the one hand, it meant that only certain questions were

asked, and that answers may have been abridged to meet the adolescent audience. The Karen youth were nervous and extremely polite. If at first the interviewee did not answer a question thoroughly, the students were very hesitant to ask the question again. There were also moments when I would suggest questions that the students did not relay. Although I trust their judgment as to what is culturally appropriate, I do wonder if the rules of “culturally appropriate” were dramatically guided by the age difference of the interviewer and interviewee. By the same token, however, the Karen adults responded well to this opportunity to share their stories with the Karen youth. I believe they were less interested in sharing their stories for the sake of the documentary, than they were in teaching the youth about Karen culture and experience. This sentiment added to the value of the interview exchange. Accordino noted at one point that the youth were able to make a more profound and meaningful documentary than many of the documentarians who had entered the same space. This, I believe, was largely due to the adults’ commitment to sharing their stories with the youth, thus showing their appreciation to the students for valuing their own community history; it was also due to the youth themselves being members of the community.

The second challenge arose in translation. It was important that we convey both the women’s expertise in farming and the elegance with which they conveyed this in the Karen language. Not speaking the language myself, it was difficult for me to guide the students in their translation process. Considering their young age, and the few years they had spent speaking English, I imagine that the translations were simplified versions of the original Karen wordings.

Finally, my greatest concern regarding representation was that we present these three women as full and complex human beings, rather than diminishing them to the simplified status of “refugees.” I hoped that by focusing on these women’s work as farmers, we would sidestep the common tendency to place immigrant stories within the paradigm of victim-survivor. In this

regard, I have turned to social work scholar Jay Marlowe's discussion of refugee representation and the outcomes of essentialized representation. In an article focusing on portrayals of Sudanese refugees, Marlowe asserts the need to step away from trauma-focused representations:

From an exclusive trauma-focused understanding, a thin description of the individual is created where other important considerations of identity and history (social, political, cultural) are easily lost or hidden. Thus, the story of a person's experience(s) or trauma associated with forced migration and how it has negatively influenced his/her life can overshadow other co-existing stories which can emphasize something very different about what a person values and readily identifies with. (Marlowe 2010,183)

Marlowe differentiates between the "*ordinary* understandings of one's history, spirituality, culture, background, folklore, etc. as distinct from the *extra-ordinary* events usually associated with and underpinned by trauma" (Marlowe 2010, 184). I appreciate Marlowe's emphasis on going beyond Chimamanda Adichie's "single story," and understanding a person beyond the ascribed status of *refugee*. One way to do this is to focus less on the extra-ordinary life stories of trauma and forced-migrations, and to make space for stories about ordinary, day-to-day life. In the case of the Karen community, some of the binding narratives of group identity are of oppression and trauma. That said, I hoped that in working with the Karen youth, we would move beyond these narratives, presenting not only the *extra-ordinary* events of their lives, but also the *ordinary* ones.

The way we choose to represent our consultants can affect their daily lives in myriad ways. The example of refugee representation demonstrates how the dilemma of scholarly representation moves beyond the bounds of the academy and into the community. Marlowe writes, "When society views refugees more as ordinary people beyond the category of passive victim, there is greater potential to see 'them' as more like 'us' and consequently as members of the community" (Marlowe 2010, 188). Such members of the community are more relationally

available, more employable, and more appreciated for the perspectives and experiential histories that they bring to a community. Also, they are less likely to experience social exclusionary practices related to education and other community resources. By allowing our representation to *complicate* group identity, problematizing the presupposition that a group is inherently bound by a single variable like race, class, ethnicity, age, gender, etc., we stray further from the tendency to “other” a group. Folklorists Martha Sims and Martine Stephens write on this issue, claiming, “If we always see a group as preexisting in some sense, then we risk falling into the us/them trap, in which ‘our’ group is always different from ‘their’ group” (2005, 37). With all of this in mind, we took on the task of storyboarding and editing interviews, allowing each major decision to prompt a conversation about the representations we were crafting.

When the TTCF students were excerpting interview sequences in our storyboarding workshop, they first pulled out immigration stories, and then selected ones that chronicled the challenges these women faced in the U.S.; stories related to farming were their last choice. Despite this ordering, I nonetheless saw that their original interview questions, which focused primarily on farming experiences, had led them to a fuller story than that which is often told about the hardships of forced migrations. These stories emphasized the women’s roles as knowledgeable farmers, as experts in their trade, while also telling their stories as refugees. In this way, I believe we succeeded in sharing a piece of the *ordinary* to bring balance to the *extraordinary*.

Now returning to the documentary after many months, I notice that within the stories we told there are glimpses into the cultural wisdom, memory, and belief of these three women. In the time since we conducted the interviews (about 10 months), I have become more involved in the Karen community and more knowledgeable about Karen culture and folklife. With this

deepened understanding, I see the possibility of a more layered telling, one inclusive of the contemporary story and experience (which we offered in this documentary), as well as traditional knowledge and storytelling (which although present at the farm, is not foregrounded in the documentary). As in any ethnographic endeavor—collaborative or not—the more time committed to the engagement, the more profound the cross-cultural understanding becomes, thereby producing fuller, more complex representations.

In valuing our process as a whole over the final documentary product, I recognize all the challenges discussed above as important learning moments, in which students had opportunities to develop critical thinking skills; form, articulate, and defend opinions; and feel a sense of responsibility in their work. In working through representational issues, I and the interns had the opportunity to critically engage our work and participate in fruitful dialogue, thereby developing the tools to be better documentarians and ethnographers in our future endeavors.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUTCOMES: A CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have presented a detailed and critical analysis of a year-long, ethnographically grounded educational engagement with Karen youth. I have advocated for culturally responsive, community-based education that allows family language and culture to guide curriculum. All throughout, I have demonstrated how academic research can translate to community-based collaborations, and also how the methodologies of ethnography can contribute to democratic, inquiry-based learning. In providing a critical explanation of my methods and intentions, I have offered a case study that puts into practice the guiding principles I proposed at the start of this thesis.

While working with a culturally responsive curriculum, (co-created through dialogue with students), and learning side-by-side with students through ethnographic inquiry, I saw TTCF interns excel in tasks that challenged them to expand their literacy, critical thinking, and communications skills. Additionally, I saw them recognize their family culture and language as assets to their education rather than as hindrances.

A few weeks after presenting their film at the TTCF fundraiser dinner, the youth reported on their own experiences in a quick survey and focus-group conversation. In response to the prompt, “Through this project I learned . . . ,” they wrote:

*How to be serious but also comfortable with what I do and who I am.*

*How to translate Karen to English verbally and written.*

*To speak louder and more clearly to people, so they don't have a hard time understanding.*

*How to make/edit a documentary.*

*How to start a conversation and how to ask engaging questions.*

*Computer skills that can apply to future jobs.*

*How to have more confidence talking to strangers.*

*Time management.*

*Speaking in front of a group of people without being scared, feeling like a leader and representative.*

(End of Project Survey 2014)

One student wrote and in an email to Accordino: “I help with workshops and tours around the farm and support the farm projects because I love doing those things. . . . Why? It gets me out of my comfort zone and talking to other people, which can help me a lot in my future career.” He noted that he felt more confident and was more aware of “voice projection and eye contact,” and talking to new people at school. Finally, he emphasized that he was now teaching his friends these skills: “I’m now teaching other friends these procedures and I hope that one day they can use these steps to get a job or just meet people in general” (Participant Feedback Email 2015). This testimony, and the survey responses cited above, speak to the diverse educational outcomes of the project. While some responses focused on the technical skills that the youth learned (e.g., acquiring computer skills and making a documentary), others were more broadly interpersonal (e.g., building communication skills). The students’ responses demonstrate the varied outcomes of our work together, ranging from knowledge that they see as affecting their day-to-day lives to skills they understand as being important to future careers and engagements both within and

outside of their community. Resting completely beyond these categories, though, is the first response: “how to be comfortable with who I am,” which speaks pointedly to identity-formation and negotiation, a process highlighted when students’ personal and family identity informs curriculum.

Ultimately, I have come to understand our work together as preparing students to be cultural ambassadors, readying them to take positions as translators, cultural interpreters, case-workers for incoming refugees, and activists, and helping them transition into higher education.

I recently asked Tay Nay if she thought life would be easier for the Karen who arrive in Carrboro in the next ten years. She said *yes*, because people like herself will be there to advocate for them. Our conversation arose as I sat in her home, working with her on a school project for which she was asked to interview someone in Carrboro about a current political issue. She chose to interview a Karen woman from her church who is active at the Karen Community Center, about the challenges of immigration. Although the project did not require a documentary, this was the path Tay Nay chose; she asked me to come over and help edit her audio footage. She planned to subtitle the interview and present the work to her class. As we edited, Tay Nay explained that the TTCF project had inspired her to tell her classmates about the issues the Karen community is facing. Our work together had clearly informed a more formal practice of cultural outreach. While not all students will take this path, I have no doubt that they will each, in their own way, put these skills to use, raising the voices of Karen people in Chapel Hill, Carrboro, and beyond.

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