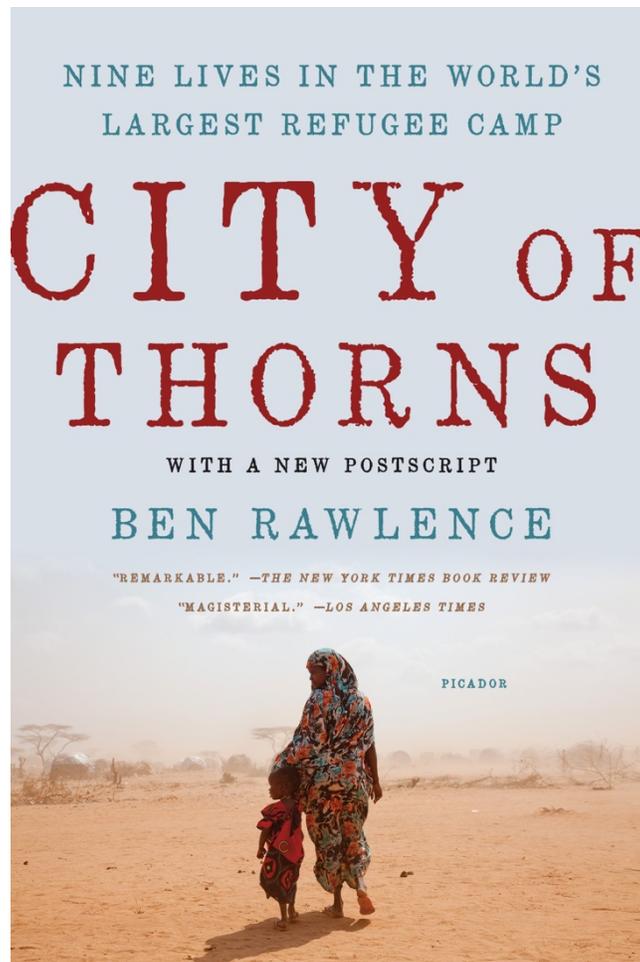# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Changing the Narrative of Displacement in Africa:
Counter-Narratives, Agency, and Dignity

by Husseina Dinani

CITY OF THORNS BY BEN RAWLENCE (2016). PICADOR PRESS

Discourses on displacement in Africa in humanitarian campaigns and the media tend to either sensationalize the suffering of displaced individuals, reducing their subjectivity to abject victimhood, or portray them as security threats. Both tropes, which lack nuance, context and human agency and dignity continue to circulate and proliferate as the number of displaced peoples continues to rise globally. The various social and digital platforms that humanitarian and development institutions are able to utilize to raise awareness and reach a wider audience to solicit funds from has further expanded and intensified the metanarrative of displacement centered on Africans' enduring suffering or enacting violence over the last few decades. Considering these factors and the recent resurgences of xenophobia around the world, particularly targeted at immigrants, it is imperative for instructors to disrupt the normative narrative of displacement based on the victim-perpetrator binary so that the agency and multidimensionality of displaced peoples across different eras and geographical locations can occupy center stage. Moreover, attuning students to comprehend displaced peoples beyond the various totalizing categories of victim or perpetrator ascribed to them – "stateless" and "refugee" or "terrorist" and "militia/rebel" – galvanizes young adults to view displaced individuals first and foremost as humans, thereby restoring dignity to them.

Drawing on my experiences of teaching two particular works in various undergraduate courses in History, African Studies, Women's and Gender Studies and International Development Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) in Ontario, Canada, over the last five years, this essay discusses some of the successful and challenging experiences of teaching about displacement and mobility in Africa. While these works were part of introductory and mid-level courses that covered overlapping and different time periods in Africa and encompassed a wide range of themes beyond displacement, they could very well be part of a course that specifically concentrates on (forcible) migration and mobility in different locales and eras in Africa or has a global and comparative focus. "How to Write About Africa" by Binyavanga Wainaina powerfully critiques the stereotypical ways in which "Western" media and literary works have characterized Africa, which includes reducing African experiences to abject suffering to over-emphasize the largesse and success of the "Western" humanitarian enterprise in Africa. *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp* by Ben Rawlence offers a nuanced and balanced rendition of displacement and mobility in Africa by highlighting the structural factors and hierarchical relationships compromising displaced Africans' welfare and security while also demonstrating displaced peoples' persisting commitment to live meaningful lives.

It is important to detail the diverse backgrounds of students in my courses as this factor significantly shaped the ways in which students engaged with the works during class discussions and assignments and my facilitation. The majority of the students in my classes are racialized individuals and almost half of them are African, either international students from or second or third generation Canadians tracing their lineage to various African countries including, but not limited to, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia,

Ethiopia, Eritrea, The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon and Liberia. While very few of the students had experienced displacement, many had family members who had previously been uprooted from or compelled to flee their homes and were separated from kin and loved ones due to various political crises and instabilities. Several of the elderly kin of the second and third generation African-Canadian students had immigrated to Canada as asylum seekers and shared their first-hand accounts of displacement and resettlement with their children and other family members, some of whom were students in my courses. Additionally, regardless of their backgrounds or whether they or their family members' had experienced displacement, most students had been exposed to the contemporary politics of displacement as the Canadian government had launched "Operation Syrian Refugees" towards the end of 2015, which aimed to resettle more than 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada in 100 days.

My teaching experience of the two works, and others that I will be unable to discuss here, demonstrates that pushing forward the pedagogical agenda of locating the human and affective dimensions of displacement in Africa provides an inclusionary space for students, particularly for those who or whose family members had previously experienced displacement. The works discussed prompted students in my courses to articulate rage, discomfort and uncertainty as they were propelled to grapple with the simplistic ways in which mainstream (and some scholarly) narratives have continued to flatten and depersonalize African human experience and because some aspects of the works resonated with their own life and familial trajectories of displacement and immigration. Some students organically weaved their and their kin's experiences into discussions, at times even declaring solidarity with some of the more contemporary African actors they were learning about. Other students expressed a position of indifference on the politics of representation and challenging the status quo of knowledge production and dissemination, perhaps due to their distance (both in terms of time and geographical location) from a particular event and set of historical actors, and a general fatalism about the hegemony of narratives that victimize Africans and those residing elsewhere in the "Global South." The entanglement of students' various experiences with those of diverse migrant African peoples they encountered in the assigned works resulted in incredible moments where students critically engaged in the production of narratives of displacement that foregrounded the diversity of human experience.

Challenging the Stereotype of Victimhood

"Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment. Moans are good. She must never say
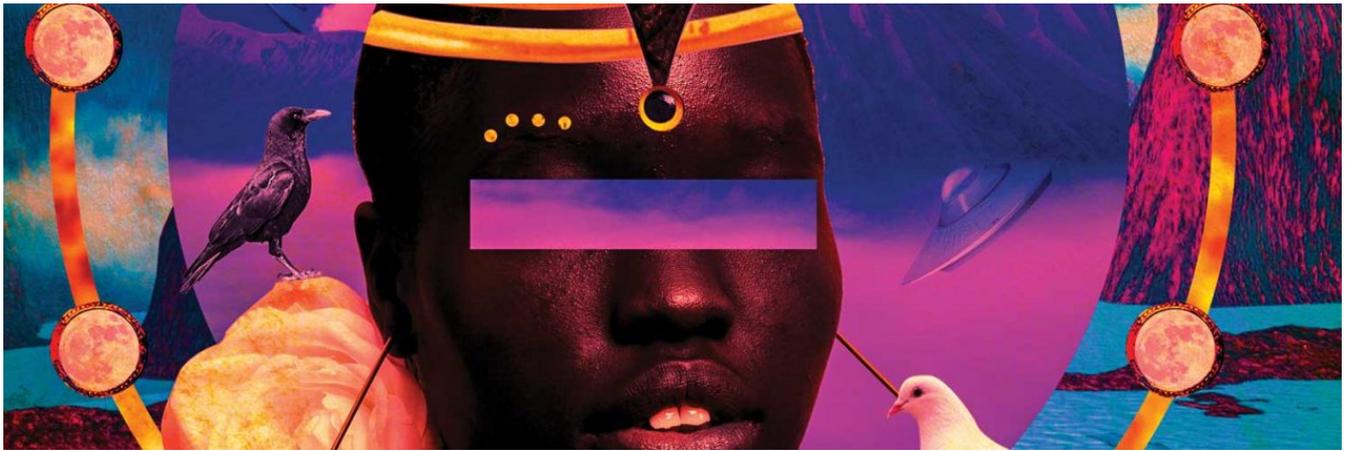
"HOW TO WRITE ABOUT AFRICA" BY BINYAVANGA WAINAINA

anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her (unspeakable) suffering." – Binyavanga Wainaina (2005)

In many of my undergraduate courses I assign Wainaina's satirical essay "How to Write About Africa" in one of the first weeks of classes (Wainaina, 2005). I normally assign with it a scholarly and primary source to examine the politics of representation in Africa. Wainaina's creative use of humour and irony to guilelessly expose mainstream media's and literary works' stereotypically negative, generalized and vague narratives of the continent and its peoples functions as an excellent icebreaker and provides me, as an instructor, with a poignant way to foreground the importance of considering African perspectives and seeing Africans as agentive actors.

In one version of an introductory undergraduate course entitled "Experiencing Development in Africa," the above excerpt from Wainaina's essay prompted a student, who was seated at the beginning of the front row of an auditorium classroom, to stand up and turn to face her peers during discussion so she could express her frustration with western media's and humanitarian aid campaigns' persistent characterization of Africans as helpless individuals awaiting the "west's" generosity. The student argued that the victimizing and depersonalized ways in which African refugees have normatively been represented did not align with her and her family members experiences of displacement. Although the student did not provide details about her experiences of displacement, she confirmed the impoverished circumstances of people in camps but pointed out that many took care of themselves. When she turned around to take her seat, I noticed that the student had tears in her eyes. The student remained facing the front of the classroom with her back to her peers for the next few minutes of the continuing discussion. I was able to briefly ask her if she was all right, to which she responded with a nod and smile and subsequently turned to join the discussion. After this incident, the student would frequently visit me, sometimes accompanied by other students from the class, during and outside of office hours to continue class discussions and form new conversations, which were usually focused on various past and unfolding political issues in Africa. She and her peers were excited to talk about matters that resonated with their and their family members'

experiences. These students and many others in my courses brought their own experiences and histories to bear on course readings and materials.

The student's rejection and invalidation of the predominant tropes of African victimhood based on her and her family members' divergent experiences of displacement is illustrative of the numerous instances where African students in my classes challenged western-centric frameworks that reduced their and their peoples' multifaceted experiences to a one-dimensional narrative of victimhood and suffering. Students organically used their experiences and familial stories to establish counter-narratives of African experience within and beyond the continent that included nuance and diversity, and simultaneously recognized African agency and suffering. Following the student's intervention and contribution to the larger unfolding class discussion on (mis)representation in humanitarian and development discourses, a second-generation Somali-Canadian student pointed out that even though the instability and insecurity caused by the Somali civil war significantly contributed to her parents' decision to leave their birthplace in the mid-1990s, their decision was strongly based on their aspirations for a stable and secure future for themselves and their children. The student underscored that her parents made difficult and critical decisions that prioritized what they perceived was best for their family and pointed out that these narratives never receive much attention in the media. Students in this course and in other courses drew from Wainaina's essay and argued that the media normatively bombards viewers with visuals of masses of displaced Africans, particularly women and children, or a dejected looking individual, who become representative of all refugees. By drawing on their own and family members' experiences of immigration to engage with the hegemonic narrative of displacement in media and humanitarian discourses on Africa, students critically contributed to the construction of narratives that veered away from interpreting human experience merely "through *a negative interpretation* (Mbembe, 2001, 1) or as reduced to "bare life" (Agamben, 1998).

Embracing the palpable energy culminating from class discussions about Wainaina's and Aubrey Graham's research on "humanitarian crisis images" consistently perpetuating

the victim-perpetrator binary over the course of a hundred years in the DRC, I often urge students to go beyond negating or correcting accounts that over-emphasize African suffering by asking them to think about why these particular narratives continue to have dominance and a wide reach (Graham, 2014). The shift in focus results in a lively discussion about how the (visual and discursive) trope of the perpetually struggling African, particularly the displaced African, in mainstream media and humanitarian aid campaigns strategically enables institutions to accrue the much needed funding and resources without having to acknowledge the deeply political dimensions that contribute to the dislocation of people and poverty and environmental and health crises more generally. Additionally, and also in reference to other sources discussing similar issues about (mis-)representation, students pointed out that people tend to sympathize more with other people's plight when their pain and hardship is simplistically presented, i.e. when they are framed as victims. Students emphasized that this streamlined narrative of victimhood propels viewers to donate, which explains the hegemony of depoliticized and depersonalized narratives of human suffering in humanitarian campaigns. Some students offered introspective reflections revealing that they and others in their households had a few times responded to donation calls from various organizations, such as World Vision Canada and Save the Children, which depicted displaced peoples in various parts of Africa (and also Syria, probably due to the unfolding Syrian civil war at the time and Canada's commitment to resettle a significant number of Syrian refugees) as being destitute and desperate. They noted that at the time they did not pause to ponder the complicated historical and political reasons for why these groups were dislocated and needed help. Nor did they question the scripted nature of the visuals and accompanying texts. Some candidly admitted that they felt sorry for the individuals and were saddened to learn about their circumstances. Many students recalled seeing and feeling distraught by the viral photograph of the three-year old Syrian boy, identified as Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in Mediterranean waters, along with family members, and whose body washed up on Turkish shores in 2015. Students pointed out that the image and many others like it that captured the plight and death of various refugees crossing turbulent waters on unsafe boats to seek asylum in Europe impelled them and their family members to make donations.

These discussions would often concretize into students having a shared perspective that donors, including themselves, their kin and friends, play an important role in providing support and resources but that their uncritical participation inadvertently perpetuates and reifies the victimizing narrative of displaced peoples. In thinking about how donors could perhaps change their engagement with dominant narratives of Africans as abject victims, students would debate between the need to provide resources to vulnerable people, particularly during emergency situations, and the importance of presenting them as nuanced individuals, who could express a range of emotions and have multitude aspirations. Many students came to the conclusion that the reductive narrative of victimhood imposed on displaced peoples, particularly in the context of conflict, would persist because it generated the strongest (emotional

and material) humanitarian response from people. Yet students argued that because humanitarianism predominantly thrives on narratives of human suffering, it becomes critical for people, especially donors, to be exposed to diverging narratives so that they are self-aware when responding to solicitations. They pointed out that scholarly work, such as Wainaina's and Graham's individual works, offer nuanced accounts of African experiences and contexts, but that mainstream media and literary works should also be responsible for disseminating these narratives because of the tremendous capacity these channels have to reach a larger and wider audience.

The critical discussions that works such as Wainaina's and Graham's have sparked amongst students in the various courses I have taught at UTSC has enabled me to learn more about them, their past(s) and how they make sense of the world they inhabit and their positions within it, than straightforwardly asking them to introduce themselves to me and their peers. Additionally, the spontaneous and energetic discussions Wainaina's essay has propelled in many of my classes has facilitated students to form relationships of friendship and solidarity with their peers based on their shared histories and backgrounds, which have extended beyond the classroom and after the conclusion of a course. In many ways, teaching a source like "How to Write About Africa" in the first or second class of a course that has a substantial number of students identifying as African, racialized, and the children and grandchildren of immigrants, including previously displaced peoples, can unexpectedly create an inclusive and productive classroom environment for the remainder of the semester, where students feel safe to share and critically reflect on their personal stories and forge communities beyond the parameters of group assignments and discussions. Moreover, by using their and their family members' personal experiences to approach course materials, students participated in creating an enriched archive on displacement and African experience that engaged with contexts beyond those assigned in the course. In so doing, students established a range of counter-narratives on African (and human) dislocation to the dominant narrative of the perpetually struggling and voiceless displaced African.

Struggle, Agency and Dignity in the Everyday Lives of Refugees at Dadaab, Kenya

While Wainanina's essay has pushed students in my courses to establish their own counter-narratives on African displacement, informed by their own personal and familial experiences, *City of Thorns* has offered students with powerful counter-narratives to the hegemonic narratives of displaced peoples being victims or security threats. In my classes I have assigned the prologue, epilogue and chapters from the book that centrally focus on two of the nine displaced individuals featured. The prologue and epilogue provide students with critical historical and political context to understand the conflict and ensuing political instability in Somalia and the eastern horn of Africa more generally and how this situation led to the establishment and expansion of

Dadaab, resulting in an unprecedented situation of protracted refugees – those who have resided in camps for five years or more – from the 1990s and onwards. The remaining chapters focus on the life stories and everyday experiences of Guled and Kheyro in Dadaab. Guled, who was born in Mogadishu in 1993, made the difficult decision to flee his birthplace for Dadaab in 2010 after he was taken as a child-soldier by al-Shabaab – a militant group connected to al-Qaida – leaving behind his sister and newlywed wife. Kheyro arrived at Dadaab with her mom, Rukia, when she was two years old in 1992. In 2015, both Guled and Kheyro continued to reside in Dadaab. In addition to providing students with the rich and varied perspectives of displaced Somalis, the stories of Guled and Kheyro expose students to the multiple actors and power dynamics shaping the daily operations of camp life.

In the few times that I have taught this book, I have had the majority of students reveal to me that prior to reading the assigned chapters in my course they had not before heard of Dadaab or realized that many displaced peoples had lived in camps for the entirety of their life. "Protracted" refugee was a new category of displaced peoples for many students. In one class, a student from Nairobi, Kenya, abashedly told his peers that he had been unaware of Dadaab despite, as he learned from *City of Thorns,* it (at the time) being the world's largest refugee camp, which had been in existence for more years than he had been alive and located in his country of residence. The student said that many of his friends in Nairobi were equally ignorant. The student admitted looking up the camp's location online. To emphasize to students that there were many others who did not know about displaced peoples that were geographically proximate to them, I shared with the class that while I was growing up in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in the 1990s, I too was unaware of the existence of refugee settlements in the northwestern parts of the country, which at the time were expanding due to the influx of refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire and Somalia and added that my knowledge of these camps developed more over the last fifteen years as a result of

REFUGEES ARE NOT TERRORISTS.

THEY ARE OFTEN THE FIRST VICTIMS OF TERRORISM.
- ANTONIO GUTERRES

FIGURE ONE

my research interests and teaching. I also pointed out to the class that most refugee camps were located in the "Global South." This conversation allowed me to encourage students to rethink their initial articulations of disapproval of the Kenyan government towards the camps and refugees it hosted. Using material from *City of Thorns* on the economics of maintaining expanding camps like Dadaab, and pointing out the high unemployment and continuing internal political tensions in Kenya, I would encourage students to reevaluate the antagonistic approach of the Kenyan government

towards inhabitants in Dadaab and displaced peoples within its borders more generally. I also directed students to consider the role of prior historical tensions between Somalia and Kenya, going as far back as the colonial period, in shaping the mistrust and xenophobia that citizens in both nation-states had for each other and particularly towards displaced populations. To nuance their understandings of the impoverished conditions in Dadaab, so that they were not simply attributed to the Kenyan government's negligence, I would ask students to consider the role of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Food Programme (WFP) in providing emergency relief rather than sustainable development. Additionally, I would ask students to think about Rawlence's arguments about member countries' individual political agendas and material support shaping UN humanitarian initiatives, which diminished the prospects for encamped refugees to be resettled. By guiding students to think about the multiple and complex factors that *City of Thorns* discusses to explain the birth and continuing longevity of Dadaab, my goal has been to urge students to think beyond simplistic frameworks of accountability that inadvertently foreclose discussions of displacement as a global issue.

The remainder of this section will discuss class discussion and student assignments on the assigned chapters from the book in "Experiencing Development in Africa," offered in Winter 2021. (Wherever I reference the identity of students and their published work, I do so with their permission.) When I asked students in this course to think about why they may not have known about Dadaab, they drew on the prologue of *City of Thorns* to substantiate their claims of underlying religious and racial xenophobic elements contributing to western countries' and institutions' negligence of Dadaab. These students specifically pointed to Rawlence recalling that the members of the National Security Council, who he met with at the White House in 2014, were more concerned about whether the refugees at Dadaab were on the path to becoming radical extremists or members of al-Shabaab than about their welfare or the longevity of their stay in Dadaab. One student pointed out how the voices of African refugees at Dadaab were absent at this meeting and that this type of omission is not new and particularly reminiscent of the colonial period and contemporary development policy in Africa. Kruti Sukhadia powerfully articulated some of these sentiments in a multi-layered visual she submitted as part of an extra-credit assignment (see Figure One). The visual has an image of Dadaab in the background, with an animated image of individuals who look like they have been walking in harsh conditions over a long distance placed on top. The visual is framed with António Guterres' quote -- "Refugees are not terrorists. They are often the first victims of terrorism." –
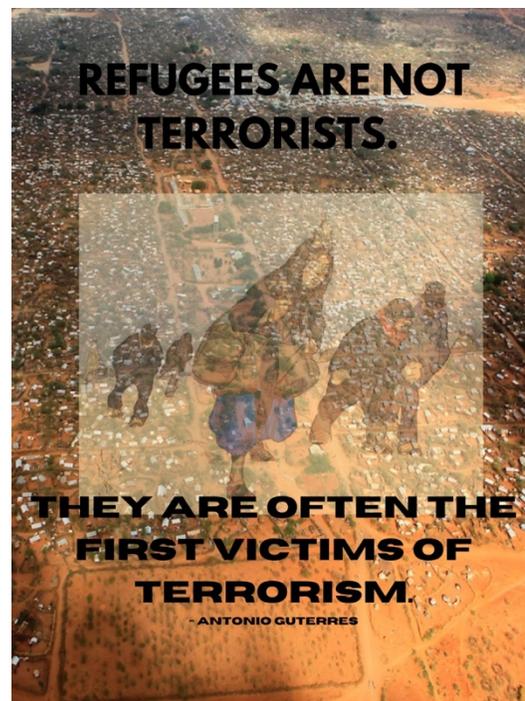
which was part of an address he gave in 2005 when he was the United Nations' High Commissioner of Refugees. Kruti conveyed to me that she deliberately used an animated image to represent displaced peoples making their way to Dadaab rather than an image that contained (unidentified) Somali refugees in order to be respectful of and avoid depersonalizing the identity and experiences of African refugees. In her explanatory paragraph, Kruti mentioned that the book dispels the normative view of African refugees as posing a security threat and her image attempts to do the same. Kibati Femi-Johnson also reiterated the theme of refugees at Dadaab wrongly being labelled as terrorists in stanzas two and three of a poem titled "A Refugee's Resiliency," which he wrote for his assignment (see end of section).

To further push students to think about why refugees at Dadaab continue to be neglected, I asked students if they thought Dadaab's geographic location might, in part, play a factor. A couple of students pointed out that the refugees at Dadaab were not the ones who reached European shores after crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and therefore they were not on the radar of the "Western" world and mainstream media outlets. Students substantiated their viewpoint by pointing out that the Canadian government and Canadians more generally have over the past few years been assisting Syrian refugees over those located elsewhere in the world, particularly in Africa, because their European allies have been paying attention to this particular group of displaced peoples. Two Eritrean students pointed out that the current conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, and the resultant displacement of Ethiopians from the region, is barely receiving any attention by Canadian media and major international news sources. Students' responses highlight that they held mainstream media responsible for their unawareness of Dadaab. Moreover, they held western nations, including the Canadian government's uneven resettlement policies towards different groups of displaced populations, accountable for the protracted refugee status in Dadaab. By bringing their presentist lenses to understand the continued marginalization of Dadaab, students constructed critical interpretations about displacement that engaged with and went beyond the frameworks offered in *City of Thorns*.

After discussing the structural and historical factors accounting for the establishment and durability of Dadaab, the remainder of the class focused on the individual stories of Guled and Kheyro. Guled's story sparked varying reactions and conversations from students. Some students interweaved their family members' experiences of resettlement when discussing Guled's displacement.

Students were struck by the challenging and dangerous journey Guled had to undertake in order to leave Mogadishu and gain entry into Dadaab. Guled's experience reminded one student of her father's long and challenging resettlement journey several decades ago when he left Eritrea on foot, heading towards Egypt through Sudan, and then immigrating to Canada. This story resulted in a couple of students expressing their surprise and awe at the long distances displaced peoples are compelled to undertake when their security and welfare have been severely compromised. Other students pointed out how these stories significantly departed from the dominant ones featured in the news, which focused on displaced peoples crossing dangerous waters that led to Europe. Another student articulated his admiration for Guled, perceiving his decision as courageous--to leave his home and family, including his new wife, knowing that the journey ahead was unsafe. He argued that refugees like Guled are rarely, if ever, portrayed as brave in dominant discourses. Similarly, for her assignment, Afomia Selemon drew a picture to capture Guled's strength and resiliency, while also portraying the numerous challenges he faces in Dadaab (see Figure Two). In her accompanying commentary, Afomia mentions that Guled's story reminded her of her parents' decision to leave Ethiopia "to seek a better life and protection so that [they] could] build their family away from the violence and chaos

FIGURE TWO

." Afomia explains that the jagged red line in the middle of the image represents the Somalia-Kenya border, as well as Guled's and refugees' "sense of separation" and hope for "a better life." Afomia used consistently darker shading on the Somali side of the border versus a combination of light and dark shading on the Kenyan side to represent the better security refugees encountered in Dadaab, particularly in terms of access to education, healthcare, food and shelter. Afomia includes a radiant sun and some birds in the sky on the Kenyan side of the border versus the automated rifle and a crescent with a star to represent the Islamic Courts Union on the Somali side to further reiterate the relatively greater stability Somalis had in Dadaab. But Afomia also acknowledges the obstacles and hardships that refugees face in Dadaab, which she represents through the patches of darker shading. Some of the obstacles Afomia lists are: the permanency of Dadaab, "the emergence of diseases," and the challenges of navigating the bureaucratic process of accessing food rations from the WFP, which were often inconsistent and insufficient due to inadequate donor funding, concurrent crises elsewhere and poor security conditions within the camp.

In addition to highlighting for students the physical and material hardships displaced peoples endured while travelling to and residing in Dadaab, Guled's story drew

students' attention to the psychological adversities they experience. Students empathized with Guled's continuing fear and sense of dislocation after he had successfully escaped from al-Shabaab. Two Eritrean students were struck by Guled feeling homesick and helpless when his wife, Maryam, left Dadaab with their children to return to Somalia while he could not join them because he feared al-Shabaab would target him. The students shared that Guled's vulnerability resonated with them as family members dear to them continued to feel similar longings for "home" after they left Eritrea several decades ago. The students mentioned that the current conflict in Ethiopia, which involved Eritrea, reminded their families that returning home was not a possibility and confirmed to them that they had made the right decision to leave Eritrea. Bryanna Blake expressed feeling shocked when she read about Guled being taken as a child-soldier by al-Shabaab while he was attending school and realized the prominent role that (psychological and physical) violence played in the process of displacement. Like her peers, Bryanna recognized Guled's

FIGURE THREE

continuing embodiment of dislocation and feeling of imprisonment, yet Bryanna also acknowledged the hopefulness of refugees at Dadaab. Bryanna strikingly illustrated these sentiments of refugees through an illustration that depicted a hand that had bandaged cuts and bruises on it reaching through an opening from barbed wire to touch a colourful butterfly, which signified hope (see Figure Three). Bryanna explained that while her illustration depicts the manifold "struggles or hurdles that the people within the city of thorns [Dadaab]" face, it also recognizes the inspiring factor of hope shaping the lives of refugees at Dadaab. Contrary to the uncertain and bleak future Rawlence sees for refugees at Dadaab, Bryanna's visual signifies a hopeful outcome. Afomia (mentioned earlier) also evokes a more positive outcome for refugees at Dadaab, basing her perspective on the relatively improved political stability in Somalia today than when Rawlence was writing.

Students similarly evoked the themes of hardship and hope when discussing Kheyro, yet they found her story more relatable than Guled's because of her aspirations for post-secondary education. Due to "the demands of providing for the family" Kheyro was forced to drop out of school a few times so that when she was nineteen she was in form four – equivalent to grade nine in Canada and USA (156). Most students in my courses are a few years younger than Kheyro and while they had not fallen behind in their education to the extent that Kheyro had, students shared that they too had experienced similar challenges as Kheyro when it came to their educational performance. Many students in my courses, and at UTSC more broadly, simultaneously juggle

familial commitments and part-or full-time employment. For Daniel Cherkas, who was enrolled in my winter 2021 course, Kheyro's story, particularly her desire to successfully complete secondary high school so she could attend university in Canada through a scholarship from World University Service of Canada (WUSC), was relatable because he recognized that "even in the best of conditions the pressure around school can be difficult." He pointed out that these challenges have increased for students over the last year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, Daniel pointed out that many of the challenges Kheyro faced – "the difficulty and dangers of her everyday living conditions, pressures of needing to care for her family, the threat of war and terrorist attacks, and even the corruption in the very academic system that is providing her hope" – are specific to her being displaced and residing in Dadaab, making her situation "unimaginable" and reminding him "how fortunate" he and others are to live where they do. Daniel recognized that Dadaab provided Kheyro with greater educational opportunities that "would [not] have been possible in her home country of Somalia due to the socio-political situation" but he realized that the challenges of Dadaab kept her dream of studying in Canada "out of reach." To visually represent the challenges Kheyro faces, Daniel constructed a collage made of different images taken from the web; in the center of it is a girl who is attempting to navigate an unsafe landscape while balancing a stack of books on her head and carrying a child on her hip (see Figure Four).[1]

In contrast to Daniel's nuanced account that captures both Kheyro's difficult circumstances and her aspirations to exit Dadaab through WUSC, the majority of the discussion about Kheyro centered on students expressing their astonishment and admiration for Kheyro's disposition and accomplishments within Dadaab. For instance, one student mentioned that when Kheyro found out she achieved lower than the C+ she required to be eligible for a WUSC scholarship, he was surprised by her calm behaviour and resolve to attempt to earn a higher grade in the next round of the exam. The student shared that he is rarely composed like Kheyro when he receives an unsatisfactory grade on an assignment, and he does not have the enormous financial and emotional caretaking responsibilities that Kheyro does. The student's surprise with Kheyro's behavior continued when Kheyro selflessly abandoned her educational goals for a paid job within the camp because her mom refused Kheyro to retake the examination, arguing that it was her turn to

FIGURE FOUR

contribute financially towards the household. Another student in the class was equally impressed with Kheyro's maturity. The incredible support Kheyro and her household members extended to each other amid precarious and challenging circumstances stood out for this student. The student pointed out the extensive encouragement and material resources that Kheyro's mother had extended towards Kheyro's education over the years at the expense of her own health and mentioned that this supportive element was something that she too had experienced from her own family, although her socio-economic circumstances were drastically different. Moreover, the student found Kheyro's individual successes – completing high school, becoming a certified teacher, and teaching at a school in Dadaab – particularly the transformative impact they had in augmenting Kheyro's own and her family's well-being, inspiring.

Guled's and Kheyro's individual stories provided students with concrete and some relatable examples of the multifaceted experiences of displaced peoples. The commonalities that students identified between themselves and the refugees at Dadaab that they were learning about enabled students to better empathize with the latter's everyday experiences. In class discussion and assignments, students identified Guled's and Kheyro's individual hardships, triumphs, affective relationships and self-presentations, while they also considered the varying structural and historical factors that shaped their everyday lives. Kibati's poem below is a powerful example of the ways in which a work like *City of Thorns* can equip students to create nuanced narratives of displacement that simultaneously attend to context and displaced people's agency and dignity, thereby disrupting the normative binary framework of perpetrator-victim used in humanitarian and media discourses to characterize displaced Africans.

A Refugee's Resiliency

Have you ever, with a thousand other people, stared at the night sky?

Have you ever, with a loved one, in pain locked eyes?

Have you ever, with a family, choose who should be safe?

You may say yes, but your experience is unlike mine.

Welcome to the Horn of Africa, the arc of instability,

Plagued by extremism but saved by humanity,

Ignore me, I am not a terrorist, know I pose no threat

They've already taken my freedom, they cannot have my dignity.

You argue politics and religion to decide if I live or die,

I am neither Christian nor Muslim, nor left nor right,

Yet my life is bought by your prevailing ideologies,

I choose to be alive, you cannot determine my price.

Our camps are full, but our stomachs are empty,

Black steel birds amidst plastic white houses,

Cries of orphaned daughters in the silence of the city,

Opposites attract but I will find serendipity.

In your world, children skip classes, but where else would we be?

You never know the value of a thing till you only see it in a dream,

Education is now my escape route,

My mind will set me free.

Among us are football players and teachers and everything alike,

We each have our ambitions when we daydream in the night,

As circumstances crush curated passions,

We turn our minds to our delight, and not to our plight,

Refugees flood in and trickle out, but water never comes,

My confidence is bold, I will strive till I am done,

The scorching sun ignites a fire in my heart,

I will not be discouraged; not till I have sung.

There's no place like home, there's no place I call home,

Even in the Land of the Free, it seems I am not welcomed,

The home of a refugee is wherever will accept them,

So I accept myself, I am where I am from.

Conclusion

Although my teaching experience on displacement in Africa has thus far been limited, the works discussed in this essay have served as effective teaching tools for me to encourage students at UTSC to widen their perspectives about displaced Africans beyond the victim-terrorist binary employed in mainstream discourses. The effectiveness of these works largely comes from the strong counter-narratives that each provides and the relevance each has to past and contemporary narratives of displaced Africans and other populations. By considering historical and contemporary context and perceiving displaced Africans as multifaceted humans that have agency and dignity, these works equip students, regardless of their background, with critical tools to question the normative depoliticized and depersonalized accounts of dislocation in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Moreover, these works galvanize students to identify and deconstruct their implicit biases, particularly when it comes to how they may have unknowingly contributed to the continuing portrayal of displaced Africans in victimizing ways, either through their uncritical humanitarian participation as donors or their narrow understandings of political identity being tethered to the nation-state polity.

In addition to providing students with the critical skills to think about displacement in nuanced ways that take into account historical context, gendered, cultural and religious dynamics, and varying African subjectivities and identities, these works empower students who have themselves or have family members who previously experienced dislocation to share their experiences and use them to build counter-narratives. In so doing, students construct an enriched archive of displacement that goes beyond the frameworks offered in course materials. Moreover, students can utilize this archive to understand processes of displacement beyond the particular contexts discussed in the classroom.

Notes

[1] For one of the images used in the collage, Daniel Cherkas referenced Saltytowel. (2013). *The lost city of Thorns* [Digital Painting]. Deviant Art, https://www.deviantart.com/saltytowel/art/The-lost-city-of-Thorns-388990862.

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