

Episode 101 - Aster Teclé: Where is 'Home'? Interpreting Youth Discourse and the Politics of Displaced Youth

[00:00:08] Welcome to living through a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Oduor Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed our podcast as evidenced by the more than 250000 downloads to date thanks to all of you. We'd like to know what value you have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. What is home. What does it mean to be safe and comfortable in who you are in a place or culture that doesn't always understand you. Aster Teclé is a doctoral candidate in social welfare at the University of Washington School of Social Work. Her research interests include international social work displacement and globalization and Horn of Africa Youth. She's conducted research on the social cultural and traditional factors affecting youth in her native Eritrea and the U.S.. In this podcast Ms. Teclé discusses her current research on the experiences of immigrant youth participating in youth programs.

[00:02:08] She examines the complexities of identity formation among Horn of Africa immigrant youth and how those youth create place and space and a larger social cultural structure that often labels difference as misfitness. Dr. Laura Lewis director of field education at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with Ms. Teclé by telephone. Hi this is Laura from UB School of Social Work. We're here today with Aster Teclé class Aster's research is entitled Where is home Horn of Africa Youth discourse and the politics of displaced youth. Aster, welcome. Thank you. I'm very interested to get started on our discussion about your work. But first I have to ask you your research is qualitative in nature and my understanding is that your hope is to understand better the lived experience Horn of Africa Youth. Can you tell me what brought you to this particular topic. My interest is basically with the Horn of Africa Youth in the Pacific Northwest and I'm interested about youth from this particular nation because because I am from the Horn of Africa and the Horn of Africa includes big countries in Africa starting from the Sudan Eritrea Ethiopia Somalia and Djibouti so coming from Eritrea I am part of this group which makes me more interested in that and to them it's the increasing number of immigrants from this region to the U.S. which drives me to know more about their experiences in the U.S. particularly to better understand what underlies the migration process in the first place because there are historically and politically significant processes that underlie that migration which is related to the strategic location of the Horn of Africa and the involvement of superpowers since the World War Two mainly the U.S. and ex Soviet Union.

[00:04:30] So it's not some of the major points that spread me to work with the Horn of Africa Youth. When you say Where is home what does home mean. My research is more focused on culture difference and the complexities of identity formation and the common understanding of home. It's a space of safety and comfort. And in the age of 21st century where there is rapid movement of information I believe that it's very hard to draw a fixed border of a certain culture. I put it in to show that is there any way that we can definitely say this is my home. This is my space where people are always seeing a continuous movement. I see. And so far in your work are you finding that the question of home is experienced differently by the youth that you're interviewing and can you say a little bit more about that. I notice you also talk about displaced youth and I wonder if you might elaborate on how you interpret that phrase displaced youth. One way of

looking at is that when we talk about this place with the picture that comes to mind is the youth who are in a new location physically and who may not fit in a certain culture of the whole society and the way I frame culture is more fluid and open. And since this kid have already been influenced by so-called globalist culture my understanding is that they might be physically displaced but they are not the type of feud that are labeled or categorized as unfit foriegners or aliens especially in the school settings.

[00:06:44] Can you say a little bit more about that Aster the school settings. Not necessarily considering the youth as displaced. Does that create problems for the youth potentially. Oh yes because there is a dominant way of representations for our youth that portray them as at risk because they cannot understand the culture with the assumption that they need to cut can catch up so that they can feed and integrate into whole society. Which ultimately labels them as deviant. Right. So my question is are they really at risk, or is it that the society is not making every effort to understand the youth in their own terms. Interesting. So we are very quick sometimes to label them as at risk. Yes. So in thinking about investigating this how you frame your research what were your research questions. My research questions focus on. As I told you before my focus is on culture difference and identity formation. So there is such questions focus more on language as culture and I try to look at what language they used to use when they talk about their experiences in youth programs and I focus on language because language always has a political significance and understanding the political nature of what they say or of the language it enables us to recognize how particular is about immigrant youth appear to be accepted while others are denied. And I wonder Aster I mean this is fascinating. Can you give us an example of some of the language that as to the meaning that you are able to extract from that one of the common expression that the youth were using in the focus groups that I conducted. How for instance the school categorizes them as black and African-Americans.

[00:09:01] They don't specifically talk about race and racism. I didn't even hear those words but when they say that I'm not black I'm African than that to tell you that there is something wrong with how the school is dealing with these kids. So they want to reorient the school administration by saying that could you please call me as an African or to use my country's name or my ethnic identity instead of because you were me as black/ African-American. This is one of the common examples. That's very interesting. So in a sense and perhaps not consciously but school personnel could be denying you their real identity. It's an oversimplification to say that they're black and the youth experience it potentially that way they want to be recognized for who they are. Yes because these kids have never been told that they are black while they were in Africa. Right. So coming here and knowing they see much as representation of African Americans in this country and the fear is attached to it. Of course these kids won't like to be called black. Right. It makes sense. And we do have what seems to be a very dichotomous way of defining people in our culture. You're black or you're white and that doesn't take into account the diversity of people's experience here and perhaps your research is opening up a dialogue about how that doesn't certainly represent the reality. Horn of Africa Youth that potentially doesn't represent the reality of many of our own youth.

[00:10:51] Would you say. yes which is why examining the significance and implications of discourse is that we produced institutions produce helps to reveal how the youth already their group is present at in the everyday conversation and conversations that engages into political critique of power and culture in any context which I believe could possibly help us move beyond any binary structuring of large social issues. Now after you mentioned that you used focus groups as part of your methodology. You also used in-depth interviews. What were the other methods that you utilized. Quite a range. You know I was already involved with youth programs where we did some of the agencies here and the participant observation was very common way of looking at the future in some of the activities how they engage with each other with their programs that they their concentration on what they talk about what interests them. That gives me a good context to situate

everything they say about their experiences in the youth programs. Then I had focus groups three focus groups from three agencies that are Horn Africa Youth and I had aged 14 to 18 year olds which were mostly high school students. They were 30 youth in total eleven of them were males and 19 females. Most of them had over two and half years experience in these programs and they were second generation youth who were born and raised in the U.S.. But there were also some which are referred to as one point five generation. This youth who come at an early age with their parents and have spent most of those years in the U.S..

[00:13:05] So I find that fascinating that you did participant observation that a somewhat unique approach in social work would you say it brings to my mind anthropology for example and opens up the possibility I think of understanding at a much deeper level what the youth's experience might be but would you say that's a unique approach and social work. I would say it is unique because we don't find many social workers using this approach. And for me it's not only a deeper level of understanding of people's people's experiences but also it allows you to address complex processes involved in peoples experiences. It moves us into exploring not only what is out there but also what were the conditions that led for such any experiences that people or these youth would have to go through. And that understanding of complexities opens up for more open and flexible frameworks and certainly a more nuanced understanding. Oh yes. So can you tell me what are some of the themes that you were able to uncover. Yes. One of the themes says I have already indicated as I call it what's in our region because this youth feel very proud of their tradition. And their cultural heritage of their history they claim for and they traditional culture. At the same time they don't completely ignore their parents values. But you can see that. I call it they recycle it. They listen to what their parents have to say about the tradition and culture and history. But at the same time you see them as rethinking it. So they're trying to balance both so they'll say yes I'm African the authentic European or Ajahn and I'm proud of my culture. But at the same time I'm also American. They're looking for an equal legitimacy for both identities.

[00:15:25] I call it what region because I see this youth most of the youth have never even been to Africa. It's only through the narration of their parents that they are claiming that they have their regions right. So what is it that is driving them to look for this origin. And where would that home be for them. So what I saw is that there is isolation and exclusion that makes them feel a space of comfort and that space of comfort is what they hear from their parents about their culture and history that they want to associate with. But at the same time they have so many cultural influences here that some they embrace and some they reject and still try to balance all these complexities. So I call it what's in our region. There are commonalities across the youth and certainly in the struggle that you're talking about. Do you find. You mentioned the term space of comfort. Is that different across each of the youth or do they each find their own niche their own balance between their cultural identity and the way they're perceived in society. I haven't tried to compare across groups so far because I was looking up on the language. But it's an interesting topic that I planned to write about out of the data that I have because they have different historical background they have different processes of migration. Right. And these will of course come up with something and I hope I read that in the future by saying well it's a fascinating topic.

[00:17:16] Aster I wonder if there's any other part of your research that you would like to share something that was surprising to you that you found were something that really stands out in your mind as significant. One of the themes that I came about in our discussion was the use of Christianity as resistance which I found to be very interesting because there were some males who were sending us programs that are church affiliated. So they were upholding traditional faith based and ethnic based practices. And these are not the modern Christian movements but the Coptic Orthodox which is faith that is practiced by most Eritreans and Ethiopians and I find that practice as an very interesting way of resisting Western culture that seems to be inviting the youth as consumers. That also detracts them right. Strangers for a. And they were trying to use this religion

based practices to reinforce their culture. And I saw an interesting intersection of religion into this politics of identity and culture. What is your hypothesis about that. Aster do you think that there's a reason they were attracted to that faith was it the availability was it that they found similarities between their own backgrounds and the other people who attended those churches. I think it's more a way of reacting to the social environment. That's how it was portrayed because they were comparing themselves and their experiences in these faith based programs with their friends from school or from the neighborhood who don't go to church who don't practice their religion and how that relates to the traditional culture and protects them from dangers that are out there in the neighborhood or in the schools. So it's a way of using it as a buffer a place of acceptance there for them. Yes. I see. Well thank you very much.

[00:19:42] Aster I'm certainly leaving today with a more nuanced idea about the Horn of Africa. And I will certainly be following your research. Thank you for engaging in this discussion. I appreciate your time and good luck with your future work. Thank you. You've been listening to Aster Teclé discuss her research on the complexities of identity formation among Horn of Africa immigrant youth. Thanks relisting and join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smith Professor and Dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.