

## **Sociality of the Story: Harnessing the Transformative Power of Storytelling through Creative Exchange Among Refugee Youth**

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Humans tell stories. The narrative process of storytelling is central to humanity and has evolved with a myriad of other traits that help define our social worlds and ensure our survival as a species (Gottschall 2012; Gotsch and Palmberger 2022). For young people, acutely attuned to the project of asserting agency and attributing meaning to their developing lives and emerging social worlds, the act of storytelling is central to self-expression. For children and youth living in circumstances of precarity, the intersubjective project of sharing perceptions and narrating experience through story can be a lifeline. Providing opportunities for young people living in refugee camps, and those living outside of such circumstances, to share stories together, as artists and writers, is a core premise of the Stone Soup Refugee Project, which I direct.

Formally launched in 2018, this ongoing project is designed to provide a creative platform to amplify the voices of displaced youth through publication, creative writing workshops, and a number of key initiatives that facilitate the exchange of creative writing and artwork between young people living in refugee camps around the world and those in the Global North. The specific initiatives completed at the time of writing, and which I broadly refer to throughout the article as “creative exchanges,” include a pen pal letter writing program and a collaborative art program called the Half-Baked Art Exchange.

The pen pal program began in early 2023 and facilitated fourteen participants from the United States and one participant from South Korea to exchange letters with twenty-five participants in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. The Half-Baked Art Exchange was launched in 2022 and facilitated three young people in Kakuma Camp to create a piece of art work in a workshop hosted by a Refugee Project collaborating organization. The original artwork was then built upon by three young people in the United States, following their participation in a workshop in which they learned about life in Kakuma Camp. The goal of this initiative was to facilitate a collaborative effort between both parties that represented solidarity, empathy, and partnership. Participants in both the pen pal program and the Half-Baked Art Exchange ranged in age from eleven to fifteen years old.

In the initial pen pal exchange between Jack, writing from his UK school, and Jamila, a Sudanese girl living in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya, Jack begins his letter with a familiar, upbeat rally cry.<sup>1</sup> “Things will get better,” he promises. As he continues, he commiserates, telling his prospective pen pal how brave they must be, how difficult their circumstances, how, on the contrary, he lives in a “solid house” and has a passport. His pen pal, Jamila responds with a picture of her coffee grinder looming large beside an image of her house. She writes, “We’re Ethiopian, we like coffee,” and explains the way houses look where she lives. She says she loves biology and football. Jamila’s letter, full of rich, vivid detail about her daily

experiences living in Kakuma, reflects a different story to the one Jack anticipated. But her emphasis is affected through this exchange. In an apparent echo of Jack’s offer of comfort, the words, “I will not give up,” are perceptible in small faded print beside the image of her house. Amid cheerful depictions and descriptions of the objects and activities that comprise her daily life, these words feel empty, like an afterthought.



*Image title: Full Pink Sun Half a Yellow Sun*

Through his participation in the Half-Baked Art Exchange, Lobola, a Sudanese boy also living in Kakuma Camp, shared part of his story through a piece of artwork. He said of the piece, titled, “Full Pink Sun Half a Yellow Sun,” “here in Kakuma it is like being in another world from the rest of the world and the sun is in the middle because it is so, so hot here.”<sup>2</sup> He shared his work with Anika, in the United States, who, after learning about the cultural practices and lived environment that influenced Lobola’s work through a shared video by he and other young people living in Kakuma Camp, was invited to add to the piece in a creative collaboration. To the original piece, in addition to some added detail and color, Anika attached a piece of paper with the singular word, “Home.” A nod to the fact, as she learned through the shared stories of Lobola and his peers, that Kakuma Camp, instead of a place of abstract suffering and longing, is a home, and for Lobola, the only one he’s ever known.

These collaborative projects are, in essence, storytelling acts. While they are not stories as such—there is no beginning, middle and end, they do not confine experience, messy, wild, and disordered into a narrative arc—I consider these exchanges storytelling acts as defined by a key element of the process through which they emerge. Like stories, which, at the most fundamental level, are crafted and shared for an audience, so too are these interactive creative exchanges among refugee youth. In both of the examples provided above, we see young people’s perspectives shift and their stories altered in intersubjective exchange with one another.

In her pivotal work, *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt argues that through storytelling, individuals engage in the work of transforming and selectively reworking individual experiences for public consumption. For Arendt, the politics at play through which our individual experience is translated to the public domain, engaging our conflicting roles as individuals and community members, represents what she refers to as the “subjective in between” (Arendt 1958, 1973). In her conceptualization, the relevance of storytelling lies not in its contribution to projects of individual empowerment, but rather in how it reflects our sociality by allowing us to cultivate meaning through the dynamic act of crafting stories with and for an audience. Taking up Arendt’s argument, anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013) argues that just as fundamental an existential goal is to rework public knowledge to carry private meaning through individual imaginaries. Both of these acts, Jackson argues, demonstrate the human need and capacity to exercise a sense of agency over our lives through reworking events in narrative frameworks (Jackson 2013; Klinkmann 2015).

As these conceptualizations demonstrate, storytelling plays a central role in mediating our relationship with the outside world (Bloom 2016; Wulff 2016). This premise comes into sharp relief when we consider storytelling practices of youth living in circumstances of precarity where social upheaval, environmental disasters and displacement have dismantled the power dynamics between peoples’ immediate worlds and their broader social context (Jackson 2013, 52; Stickle et al. 2019). When stripped of the ability to narratively frame and share experiences, one’s subjectivity is diminished. Without a storytelling outlet in circumstances of violence, as Jackson (2013, 69) argues, one loses the ability to translate private experience into the social currency that comes with public validation. Circumstances of violence and trauma hinder one’s ability and opportunities to tell stories by disrupting the social context and ubiquitous measures of existence (e.g., space, time) necessary for their telling and comprehension (Jackson 2013, 102).

Maintaining narrative ability, on the other hand, is essential to one’s sense of humanity and enables a sense of control over our lives in circumstances where there is little. The very act of telling stories offers social actors a means through which to critique events and circumstances in ways that lead to deeper understanding, as well as allow for confirmation of one’s experience and emotional perspective by sharing it with others (Arendt 1958, 50).

Narratives then, are employed for making sense of and assigning meaning to a life (Berger 1984; Serpell 2019). The ability to tell stories provides the sense of agency and control necessary to see ourselves as people. The ability to hear and receive stories provides the nuanced understanding necessary to see one another as more than a narrative; to see one another as people. This is particularly true for young people, arguably on the frontlines of grappling with diversity and multicultural inclusion in their daily lives both in circumstances of violence and rupture, and those outside of such circumstances. Storytelling, as a form of self-expression among youth, is a restorative process that enables young people to make sense of, assign meaning, and assert control over their own lives and to allow others to do the same, in intersubjective engagement with one another.

The nuanced yet transformative effect of storytelling emerging from the analysis of storytelling acts among a contained group of youth provided here can be made generalizable to the experiences of youth in circumstances of precarity provided with opportunities for intersubjective exchange. The broad themes emerging from the exchanges detailed between Jack and Jamila, and Anika and Lobola, demonstrate how storytelling enables subtle shifts in perspective that have the power to imbue the teller with a sense of agency and control, and the listener with increased understanding.

As demonstrated here, through the acts of writing letters and creating collaborative artwork, preconceptions fade as richer understandings surface (*see also* Berlant 2004; Blook 2016; Hollan and Throop 2011). Jack, for example, came to see how his perception of a refugee camp as dull and devoid of hope failed to capture the joy and life depicted by the young people who lived there through the stories they shared. Anika, through the drawing she created with Lobola, added depth, perspective and nuance to her understanding of what a home could be. And Jamila, despite Jack's references to the difficulties of her life, despite his insistence that he couldn't live in such a way, with an "alien identity" and little stability, harnesses the power of storytelling to describe her experience instead in unmistakable terms of contentment. She writes of walking up a hilltop, "silent as a grave," on her school compound. How she sees her peers in the distance playing, and hanging up the wash, and hears the echo of people singing in a neighboring community as the sun sets, "glorious," as it was that Sunday evening, "all rosy and salmon-pink."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The names of some of the young people in this piece have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Photos courtesy of the author.

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