

This is a rich collection of personal narratives from seemingly distinct communities. "They Were Very Beautiful. Such Things Are." promises to spark conversation and build relationships in the schools and community spaces of Lewiston and Dadaab!

'They Were Very Beautiful. Such Things Are.' Memoirs from Dadaab Kenya and Lewiston Maine

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**“They Were Very Beautiful.
Such Things Are.”**

Memoirs for Change

From Dadaab, Kenya and Lewiston, Maine

Editors: Patricia Buck & Rachel Silver

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¹ Names marked with an astericks (*) are pseudonyms.

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PART IV: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

The African Girl Child's Plea

Muno Mohamed Osman (Secondary School Graduate, Primary School
Teacher, Dadaab)
Homeland: Somalia

I can't understand why
Would never understand **why**
I don't need what my brother does
To school why I don't go while he **goes**

Am I no tomorrow's **mother?**
Is it that you don't **bother?**
Why not allow me to **venture**
Into what will help me in **future?**

I too need education
I too have my brother's **dedication**
Why be unfair to **me?**
While an equal God made **me**

God gave me the **brain**
To learn and **train**
Not to slave **around**
When by brother is at the **playground**

Why am I the one to **cook?**
When my brother is reading his **book**
Why is he treated like a king of a palace?
While I am the Cinderella of the **house**

Why am I married early by **force?**
While my brother is allowed to **choose**

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Doesn't a girl have the mind to **decide**?
Doesn't a girl have the right to **decide**?

To the society's ears we **plead**
For our children's sake, let us **read**
For our nation's sake, let us **learn**
For a better future, let us go to school

Staring Eyes

Khatra Arte (Edward Little High School Student)
Homeland: Somalia

When I was in Kenya in the refugee camp, I felt in place and I felt the same as everyone because everyone that lived there had the same experience as me. They had moved from other places because of the war. Living in the refugee camp was hard because everybody had left their things and their homes back in their country. They came to a new country to refugee camps and they have no food and no shelter. They may have left their people behind and be worried for them because they did not want them to get hurt. But they were happy because they were alive, because many people died in the civil war. That is why I felt same as them. When I came to the US I felt strange and different from everybody there. The first day of school I got in the bus and everybody in the bus looked up at me.

The bus was yellow and there were a lot of kids. I was the only one wearing a long hijab. At school you cannot wear a long hijab, but you can wear a short one, because you need to wear a uniform. When I got in the class they stared at me. I felt like, “Why are they staring at me”? Then I was just quiet and sat down. When I got off from the bus, I didn't know the place because I was in a new country and I walked around and I saw a girl who was my neighbor.

My neighbors were nice people. They were Sudanese and my other neighbors were from the Congo. They used to tell us when the bus got there. They used to take us to pray in the place we pray at Eid when we were new to the country. When I got home I was so tired.

The next day I went to school and it was better than the first day. After a while, I made friends and felt more comfortable. Then I moved from Memphis, Tennessee to Lewiston, Maine. I lived in Lewiston Maine for two years and a couple of months. Then I moved to Auburn to live at my brother's house. But I finally feel good because there are nice people in Maine.

Who Am I?

Maxine Danielle Wolff* (Bates College Student)
Homeland: South Korea/USA

Imagine walking into a room and everyone is staring at you as, desperately, you search for a seat. You think, how embarrassing it would be if you have remnants of your lunch smudged on your face, so quickly you wipe your mouth with the backside of your hand. People are still staring so you then you think, maybe it's your clothes; did you put your sweatshirt on inside out in your haste to leave the house this morning? Trying to be inconspicuous you slowly look down, no, that's not it. Still people can't help but look as you sit down, but then, like a freight train, it hits why everyone is looking; as you gaze across the room there is not a face similar to yours. Lower you sink in your chair as the uncomfortable feeling overwhelms your body. Think hard, have you ever felt this way?

I was born in Inchon, South Korea and was adopted by two of the most wonderful people. My mother is a hard working, career driven woman. She has put in the long hard hours and clawed her way to the top as manager of the roads department for the entire county. My father, on the other hand, is the stay-at-home dad who cooks, cleans and takes care of our family. He was always there to attend PTSA meetings or coach my tee-ball team. Lastly, my brother is a full-time college student and, like me, was adopted from South Korea. I almost forgot to mention, my mother is Caucasian and my father is Japanese American. The diversity of my family has allowed me to feel very uncomfortable with my ethnicity. It has been "normal" for me to be constantly surrounded by different races.

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My adoption was truly a blessing. I can't imagine living a life in Korea. The privilege entitled with being able to call myself an American is amazing, but abandoning a culture that is inherent to my being and knowing that there was another life I was supposed to live is indescribable. More mystery than answers come to me when I think about my adoption. I don't know who my biological mother is, if there was ever a father in the picture, or any of the circumstances surrounding my abandonment. Not knowing is easier to cope with because I can paint a romantically idealistic picture in my mind of why I became an orphan. I can shield myself from the harsh reality that could simply entail not being wanted. The nuances of adoption in Korea are riveting. Cultural expectations of women in Korea could have been responsible for my current life in America. Unwed women with children were estranged from their families and given very little hope for survival, thus being forced into giving their child up for adoption. This apparent lack of choice pregnant, unmarried women face in Korean culture is, in fact, reason behind thousands of adoptions in the past. Adoptions, maybe even mine, were more the result of societal inequality towards women rather than consenting choice.

Middle school was when I really became cognizant of my race. It was obvious to walk into the classroom and see that my peers did not look like me. They did not have my long, straight black hair or round, tan face. As I think back, I can't even remember one teacher who looked like me. People on my basketball team did not look like me. I became self-conscious of my race. People made jokes about how Asians have squinty eyes and then tried to impersonate *them* by pulling their eyes back towards their ears all the while talking in broken English. I did everything I could to not be *that* kid who my classmates were making fun of.

In high school I grew a little more comfortable with the skin I was in, but in one day, with one comment I was sent back into my middle school insecurities. A Chinese girl, glasses on, her pale white legs covered with denim jeans too short for her body walked down our narrow hallway. Standing upright, her hands clenched tightly around her Hello Kitty sticker-covered binder, holding it close to her chest, she

walked. Halfway down the hallway she stopped and talked to a group of Asian (mostly Chinese) students huddled in the corner. All of them are dressed similar and you could overhear them speaking the same broken English my classmates always make fun of. My friend turns to me and says, "I am glad you are not F.O.B. like them." In confusion, I respond, "What's F.O.B.?" and jokingly he responds "Fresh off the boat." I never acknowledged that group of Asian students again. It was like they no longer existed to me. I wanted to distance myself as far from their "F.O.B." qualities as I could to ensure I was never associated with them. I couldn't believe how superficial I was being, but I had to preserve my reputation. I quickly realized that you cannot hide your race. You can attempt to conceal socioeconomic status or religion, but your race is always the first thing people see.

I live in this strange paradox of not fitting into white America or into homogeneous Korea. While Korea is my "homeland," everything about its description seems foreign. I don't even look like native Koreans because I have not shielded myself from the sunlight. I cannot follow the strict culture all of its inhabitants obey, such as women are inferior to men because the United States values gender equality. The cultural differences are so great that it would be nearly impossible for me to assimilate with complete sincerity. Similarly, in America I can never fully fit in. The dilemma is different because I have adapted myself to American culture, but what I can never fully adjust to is becoming the majority race.

Wouldn't you know, college application time rolls around and I choose to go college in the whitest part of the country at a school that severely lacks diversity on its campus. The reason I made this choice is because now, more than ever, I am comfortable with who I am. The event that has fostered my ability to once again become proud of my heritage was a few years ago in Hawaii. Our family goes every year and I feel at ease when I am there. Local residents are so friendly and kind to me, my brother and dad. Only recently did I become aware of my mom's discomfort. She would always say, "You go into the

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restaurant first so they give us a good table.” It is refreshing to walk into a room and have people look similar to you. For once, I was in the majority population. Our family decided to go to a hole-in-the-wall, “locals only” restaurant. My mom felt incredibly anxious about that, but, from the write-ups, the food was supposedly worth the trip. I opened the door to the restaurant and everyone, with exception to a white couple, was Asian (whether it be Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, etc.).

Immediately, my eyes were drawn to the white couple seated in the back corner because they seemed out of place. It then dawned on me, “that must be what someone thinks when I am the only Asian person in a classroom full of white students. I must stick out like a sore tooth.” I shrugged it off with little consideration, but then glanced over to see the uneasiness building on my mom’s face. I could tell, it was that same uneasiness I had always feel. As we were walking to our seats, next to the white couple in the back corner, all eyes were on my mom. Glares and murmured snickers were abundant. The entire time I felt empathy toward my mom because I knew exactly how painfully stressing that situation is. This was one of the first times (and she is over 50 years old) where she has ever felt such discomfort with her race because being white in America is normally the majority. While the situation was incredibly awkward, my mom was given the opportunity to now be able to fully understand what it means to be a minority. My dad, brother or I could explain to her the insecurity we have walking into places where we are one of only a handful of minorities, but to experience it first-hand is the only way she could ever comprehend it. The feeling of subordination that engulfs your body is inexplicable, that somehow you don’t belong simply because of the color of your skin.

For the first time, I felt one hundred percent comfortable with being Korean. A sense of power overcame me. I thought to myself that the white couple next to us didn’t belong. I felt entitled to eat there and accepted because of my race. I enjoyed the privilege of the overfriendly hostess and waitress. Never in my life have I been idolized for being the majority. The sensation was unreal and inexplicable. Until that night, I never really knew the true extent that being a minority played in my life. It provided me with awareness to

the significance of racial power. Even as a minority, I could never grasp this idea of white privilege. I didn't understand it. The only way to fully understand this concept is to experience both being the majority and being the minority. You have to feel that unconscious power shift as you go from a world of being a majority to being a minority or vice versa.

This was, by far, the most powerful learning experience I have ever had pertaining to my race because I realized how, being surrounded by people that are similar, can make change your own feelings about your race. In a split second I went from a life of embarrassment to one filled with pride. Never should I allow my social surroundings to dictate how I feel about myself, for better or worse. I have an unfaltering quality of being Korean that will always live with, but it shouldn't take being around other Asians for me to be proud of that fact.

The next step for me is to face my fears. I now seriously consider returning to Korea so that I could see what it's like to exist in a racially homogenous society (where I am the majority), but the culture and language will be unfamiliar and distant. I will have the opportunity to search for my roots which may offer some sense of closure and answers to a mysterious life I had no choice but to leave behind.

How do we go from complete innocence about race and ethnicity to a society that fosters an undeniable racial hierarchy? I am not just the victim, but also the perpetrator of such offenses. One night I was walking to my car when an African American man in his twenties wearing baggy jeans, a suspicious smirk (whatever that means) on his face and a dark hooded sweatshirt over his head approached me on the narrow sidewalk. I proceeded to cross the street for fear of being attacked or harmed in some way. No matter how much I insist to myself that it isn't racism, the blatant fact is this is racism. For all I know he was an honest, hard-working man coming home from a long day at work. By crossing the street I committed a racist act. I do not consider myself racist in the slightest, but I cannot forget my natural instinct to cross the street. Is this right? No. Does this happen? Yes.

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Can it be changed? I’m not sure. I am fairly confident in saying many of us commit racist acts, but do not define ourselves as racists. Ranging from outright hatred for a race to racial stereotypes and generalizations, we have all thought about it on some level. It is just whether we choose to externalize those thoughts into actions, like crossing the street.

The experiences I have been through and will continue to go through for the rest of my life because my position as a Korean American may be shaped by my adoption, but it does not define me. It is an intrinsic quality I will always have that makes me uniquely myself. I am who I am because of choice. I do not define myself as Korean or as an American; I am simply a person who strives daily for the everlasting goal of happiness and fulfillment through reciprocal love from friends and family. I do not define myself by my physical characteristics; I am defined by my actions. I am not lost nor grappling with my uncertain identity, but instead I am on the path to discovery.

I am proud of who I am, not just my race, heritage and ethnicity, but also my character. I am now content finding my place in a society that focuses on racial inequality. In my perfect world, created in the idealistic imagination of hope, race would never be talked about because of its complete insignificance. The word ‘race’ would be obsolete because there is no distinction between African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian, etc. This time when someone walks into a room and is stared at by their peers, it *is* because they have mustard smudged across their face and not because of the color of their skin.

Where do I belong?

Fátima A. Diaz (Bates College Student)

Homeland: Dominican Republic

“Where do I belong?” This one of the questions I continually asked myself over and over during my sophomore year at Bates as I was not a new student on campus anymore and was more aware of the resources available to me. “Oh! Sophomore year, the year that you

decide whether you stay or go, make it or break it at Bates.” A year filled with conflict, decisions and finding my place at Bates.

At Bates Christian Fellowship (BCF) I found support and served as a source of social support to many that were affected by the racial climate that the campus was experiencing in the 2005-2006 school year. I felt bad for only affiliating with BCF and not being present for WOC or Latinos Unidos and I thought I would lose my friends in both groups. I was questioned multiple times because of my absence in the group meetings but I stuck with what felt right. I joined WOC and Latinos Unidos in the events that attempted to respond to the racial tensions at Bates just as long as these actions did not violate my faith and values because before being Latina, or a woman of color, my identity lies primarily in Christ.

I have learned so much during my time at Bates, about myself, the community around me, and my thought processing. The experiences that I have encountered at Bates have helped me connect with other people and other places outside of the Bates community. My experiences of struggle have been an opportunity of growth and greater understanding. My awareness of the world and the differences that lie outside of Bates has expanded significantly. I have learned to be thoughtful in my expressions of positionality in certain situations and have shared my leaning and identity development. I have gained the skills to resist the obstacles of difference that separate me and take away the opportunity to connect with others that have different positionalities. I am motivated to confront conflict as long as I can build understanding and create positive changes by accepting challenges and working through them.

Leaving My Comfort Zone

Fatima Hersi (Edward Little High School Student)

Homeland: Somalia

I have felt different many times. Coming to this country was one of them. When I came to the United States my whole life changed. I grew up in Iraq where I was not different. Every one spoke the same

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language, everyone practiced the same religion, everyone was the same. I lived in Iraq till I was in the sixth grade; I was 11 or 12 I think. In Iraq I had a lot of friends, I knew my neighbors, I knew my teacher, I knew almost everybody that was involved in my life. It was my life, and I was comfortable with it.

When we had to leave Baghdad we went to a camp in Jordan. Even at the camp I was comfortable. There were new faces and new people, but the language was still the same. I could still understand them and communicate with them. The root of who I am is in my culture, my religion, and my language. In Iraq and Jordan, even though they were different places all of those things were the same.

When I came to the United States I did not speak any English, and the people around me dressed different than the way people dressed in Iraq. When I got to the United States all I spoke was Arabic, and little bit of Somali. When I first went to school I was put in sixth grade. In Iraq I was in the sixth grade also. The first few weeks of school I saw that in this school the kids didn't have a uniform. in Iraq we all had to wear black and white uniforms. I thought that it was okay that we didn't have to wear a uniform here, but in Iraq I didn't mind them. As time passed by I started to realize that I was being kept in the same class for the whole day. I was in there learning English with a lot of other kids. But the kids in there weren't nice, just because they spoke some English they thought they knew everything. I was there everyday and not in any other classes, it was like I had some kind of a disease or something. Being in this one room, made me feel [like I was] different from other kids. All the other kids had friends that they talked to in the hallways between classes. I wasn't used to being treated like that, like I'm some kind of stupid person.

In Iraq I was always around people that spoke the same language as I did, and we all had the same lifestyle. In Iraq I was not different; I was the same as everyone else was. When I came to the United States I had to start from the beginning.

This is a rich collection of personal narratives from seemingly distinct communities. "They Were Very Beautiful. Such Things Are." promises to spark conversation and build relationships in the schools and community spaces of Lewiston and Dadaab!

'They Were Very Beautiful. Such Things Are.' Memoirs from Dadaab Kenya and Lewiston Maine

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