

A Song for My Mother: *No Turning Back*

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by Sarah Syed

How do we come to know our parents' migration stories? What is revealed and not when they talk to us about their lives before they had children? What could motivate someone to leave their home country to an unknown one?

I remember sitting at home pondering such questions about migration. It was at that moment I decided to pick up the phone and call my mother. My mother was born in the Philippines and migrated to Canada when she was twenty years old. Since childhood, it had been a dream of hers to provide support and a better life for her family.

I had begun to ask my mother several questions about her journey to Canada. This led to a two-hour discussion. This discussion instigated my realization that a majority of the public are unaware of the processes that migrants can face in moving to a new country. This lack of awareness may be a factor that has contributed to the anti-migrant rhetoric spread within the media. Such portrayals involve the "othering" of migrants and perceived vulnerability in the face of uncertainty. To challenge these perceptions I was inspired to use music and songwriting as tools to explore my mother's migration. I was committed to this approach because minority people can go unheard unless we make a point of foregrounding our perspectives. By way of this creative approach, music and storytelling can recast people and bridge emotional distance.

Singing Stories

No Turning Back is a composition that explores the lived experiences of my mother's migration story. This video combines audio and visual components to uncover a self-reflected auto-ethnographic approach. I chose an auto-ethnographic method to establish rich insight into my mother's experiences of migration. This approach is beneficial because it allows for "social action" as referred to by Canadian sociologist Nancy Taber (Taber, 2012). Social action encompasses the art of research through a critical approach by way of linking one's self to the social (Taber, 2012).

With this idea of social action in mind, I engaged in social practice by way of interviewing my mother, encouraging her to share personal insights of her migration journey. I engaged in an unstructured interview with my mother to emulate the flow of an everyday conversation. By asking her open-ended questions, I was able to obtain in-depth responses. In this way, we were able to work in a comfortable and collaborative atmosphere. As a result, the insight I obtained allowed for me to produce lyrics that emphasized strong human emotions. The audio-visual discourse method was used in order to involve this dialogically interactive process. In this regard, artistic mediums serve as more than just a visual representation but rather, a social practice that involves engagement between the creator, the subject, and the viewer. Through this social process, I was able to work collaboratively with my mother to write her story into lyrics, providing viewers and listeners with a deeper understanding of my mother's migration story through an interactive process. Through analyzing my mother's stories of migration I was able to share her journey by *recreating* imagery of experience rather than simply *retelling* layers of the past.

As I listened to my mother talk about her past, I became aware of recurring themes. The lyrics and video for *No Turning Back* reveal themes of embodying vulnerability as a strength and the 'othering' of migrants.



click <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Mq3BcrZ94o> to watch the video

No Turning Back

FIRST VERSE:

I'm leaving my home
To places I don't even know
Wave my goodbyes
Tears in my eyes
No food on my plate
Can't breathe in this space
Oh it hurts to leave
But it hurts to stay

CHORUS:

I won't give up on living a "better life"
I'll keep my head held high through sacrifice
Migrate through hardship
Building new friendships
A world of uncertainty
But I won't stop until I reach my dreams

CHORUS:

I won't give up on living a "better life"
I'll keep my head held high through sacrifice
Migrate through hardship
Building new friendships
A world of uncertainty
But I won't stop until I reach my dreams

BRIDGE:

So I kept at it
And worked to the bone
No "us vs. them"
Come on let this be known
Resilient and strong, we all belong
Pain and glory
This is my story

VERSE:

My journey made me strong
Proud of where I came from
Mom said don't be scared
Whole world's for you out there
Breathe and work hard
Cross the border guards
Oh it hurts to leave
But it hurts to stay

CHORUS:

No I won't give up on living a "better life"
I'll keep my head held high through sacrifice
Migrate through hardship
Building new friendships
A world of uncertainty
But I won't stop until I reach my dreams X2

Perceived Vulnerability as a Strength

To start, the theme of embodying vulnerability as a strength is apparent throughout this composition. Such lyrics include, “*I’ll keep my head held high through sacrifice*” and “*my journey made me strong.*” To provide further background to these lyrics, it is significant to mention my mother’s upbringing in the Philippines. My mother experienced poor living conditions and extreme poverty. She was raised in a small hut, shared with her three siblings, mother, father, and cousins. This confined space was not easy to live in. Food had to be rationed in small portions so that everyone was able to eat – “*you get what you get and you don’t complain*” was a quote that my mother had told me. Although she did not have much, she had her family. She channeled her love for her family into strength by way of trading in the comfort and familiarity of her home with the possibility of providing them with financial resources and a better life. Thus, she departed the Philippines and was driven to migrate to Canada to achieve her ultimate goal.

When my mother decided to migrate to Canada she had no prior knowledge or social connections to the country. Despite this, she braved her way through her challenges and remained motivated on the basis of helping her family. These challenges involved difficult processes with several institutions, leaving her family behind for years, adapting to a new social context – from learning a new language to culture and customs, exhaustively working multiple jobs, and creating social networks on her own – despite having established social networks in the Philippines.

These sacrifices and her hard work emphasized resiliency and adaptability. My mother’s experiences highlight characteristics that migrants often display. These include hard work, resilience, adaptability, and strength. My mother’s experiences symbolize the human strength and courage that migrants encompass in the face of uncertainty – crossing borders and leaving the familiarity of home (Khosravi, 2010). However, at the same time, migrants embrace this position of vulnerability and uncertainty as a strength by way of adapting into a world of the unknown and making it known (Bisaillon, 2018). After having lived and worked in Canada for several years my mother has been able to create a new place to call home, even though it was once an unfamiliar country.

Contesting Binary: “Us versus Them”

A recurring theme in *No Turning Back* is the ‘othering’ migrants. This theme was carried out in discussion with my mother which I deliberately emphasize in the lyric, “no us versus them” written in the bridge of the music composition. Through propaganda and media at large, depictions of migrants have a tendency to portray them as outsiders. Common labels of migrants that contribute to the persistence of the us versus them dualism include the use of terms such as, “invaders” or “foreigners” to describe migrants. Such labels encompass society’s common view of migrants being seen as an ‘other’ (Khosravi, 2010).

To contest this divide, the lyric I have written is decisively placed in the bridge of the song to accentuate the need for the bridging of an inclusive environment, stemming away from the ‘us versus them’ dualism that persists in today’s perceptions of migrants. To draw upon inspiration, a poem written by English poet Lemn Sissay, emphasizes the idea of a ‘multi-local world’ – one in which fruits and products are imported from varying countries around the world (Sissay, 2016). Here, the binary of ‘us and them’ is not applicable because the interconnectedness of our world perpetuates the sole entity of ‘us’- human beings working together to form one inclusive world.

When my mother began to work in Canada, she built social networks with diverse groups of people. Over the years, she has formed many friendships with people from countries such as China, India, Greece, and Spain to form inclusive networks in Canada. These inclusive networks have lead to the exchange of cultures such as sharing foods that originate from different parts of the world and

expressing different languages. As such, Canada and countries around the world have been shaped into one entity of 'us' through the collaborated labor and practice of various individuals originating from distinct countries. This mindset of an inclusive world is highlighted throughout my music composition of my mother's migration story by illustrating the belief that human beings are all connected through the practices of human emotion and desires. My mother's migratory experiences involved moments in which she felt pain, happiness, and the desire to strive for success. These are examples of characteristics that all humans experience and consequently, bind 'us' together into one entity.

Final Thoughts

My mother's migration story sheds light on the journey of a migrant and the hard work and resilience that she exemplifies. By way of constructing the music composition *No Turning Back* I hope to spark a conversation about migrants and highlight the human emotions of migratory practice. I use music as a medium to evoke emotion for listeners and readers so that they are able to understand the stories of migrants and relate to such people. We can challenge some of those negative portrayls of migrants – such as being represented as “vulnerable” or an “other” –by the reality that migrants actually build up strength in the face of uncertainties and are the main drivers of the multi-local world of today.

References

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About the author



Sarah is a student at the University of Toronto pursuing her BSc in Health Studies, Biology, and Psychology. Alongside her siblings, she founded the non-profit organization, Global Youth Impact (GYI) to empower young people to be leaders and change-makers within their communities and around the world. Together, they also use music as a platform for advocacy, professionally writing and performing songs that raise awareness on pressing global issues ([YouTube: DEYSofficial](#)). As a singer, songwriter, leader, and activist, Sarah is passionate about combining her interests and experiences to share stories, and make a positive, lasting impact in every way she can.

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