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## IMMIGRANT VOICES MATTER: AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN OREGON ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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### Project Summary and Narrative Description

In Fall 2021, during one of my African History classes at Portland State University, one of my students—an African immigrant—briefly shared her journey from Sudan to Oregon, USA with the class. Her story fascinated me and the entire class; it was also a learning moment for all of us. Later, after the term ended, she granted me the privilege of listening to and recording her journey and that of her family in detail. I was equally honored to interview her mother who passionately narrated her journey as she and her two children fled war-ravaged Sudan in 2007 to Portland, Oregon in search of asylum and a new home. Their story was one of courage, resilience, grit, and survival and reflected the reality of many immigrant populations in the United States as they make their lives in a new place. As I listened to them, I reflected on my own journey as an African immigrant—although under different circumstances—and was inspired to start this project. “Immigrant Voices Matter” is proposed as a community-based oral history, digital storytelling, and photo-exhibit project. It will be based on a growing repository of oral interviews and collection of photographs which documents the experiences and perspectives of African immigrants who have spent at least portions of their lives in Oregon.

In my initial research about Portland, I discovered that it has a relatively recent history as a “gateway city” for African immigrants.<sup>1</sup> In fact, over the past several decades, Oregon has emerged as an increasingly popular destination for many newly arrived immigrants looking to build new lives in the United States. According to the American Immigration Council, Oregon has a sizeable community of immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Statistics from the Migration Policy Institute reveal that between 1990 and 2019, the foreign-born (immigrant) population in Oregon grew from 139,307 to 410,552 (5% increase). Immigrants comprised 10% of Oregon’s population. The number of immigrants born in Africa grew from 2,146 to 17,249. The 2019 figures from the Migration Policy Institute state that more than 17,000 individuals born in Africa now live in Oregon with the largest number coming from East Africa (8,696).<sup>3</sup> And in contrast to the 1970s and 1980s when students from African countries came to colleges and universities and often took their degrees back home, from the 1990s on individuals more often came from African countries as part of the diversity lottery or as family members or as refugees. Many Africans, like me, came to further their studies and stayed in the U.S. for better economic opportunities.

Specifically, the city of Portland, Oregon, has used its cosmopolitan character to promote urban redevelopment and welcome African immigrants, especially refugees and asylum seekers. The population of African immigrants and refugees in Portland has significantly increased over the past three decades as a few favorable immigration policies enabled Africans to make the journey in much greater numbers than before. Recent statistics reveal that over 15,000 Africans are in the Portland metropolitan area. Yet despite the growing immigrant population in the state, African immigrant voices, reflecting on their lived and felt experiences in Oregon, are rarely heard and have been less frequently present in scholarship<sup>4</sup> or in discussions about inclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey Singer, “The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways,” (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, Living Cities Census Series, 2004); Thomas Harvey, “Portland, Oregon: Regional City in a Global Economy,” *Urban Geography* 17, no. 1 (1996): 95-114, doi: 10.2747/0272-3638.17.1.95

<sup>2</sup> American Immigration Council, “Immigrants in Oregon.” Accessed February 4, 2023. [https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/immigrants\\_in\\_oregon.pdf](https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/immigrants_in_oregon.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Migration Policy Institute, “Oregon.” Accessed February 4, 2023. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/OR>.

<sup>4</sup> Relevant studies include Susan Hume, “African, Russian, and Ukrainian Refugee Resettlement in Portland, Oregon,” *Geographical Review* 95, no. 2 (2010): 189-209; James Meacham, “‘Placing’ the Refugee Diaspora to Portland, Oregon: Suburban Expansion and

in the state. By undertaking this oral history project, I not only amplify voices of African immigrants as part of Black voices and experiences in Oregon but also stake a claim that immigrant voices *truly* matter.

### **Motivation and Intellectual Merit of Project**

In the face of a momentous period US history, where the word “intersectionality” has entered the public lexicon, and there are conversations about the erasure and underrepresentation of people of color,<sup>5</sup> this oral history project locates voices of immigrants of African descent who have made Oregon their home. At one level, this project contributes to discussions around the ongoing efforts to build mutually inclusive, racially tolerant, and economically, socially and culturally dynamic societies. As neighbors, business owners, taxpayers, workers, and students, African immigrants are an integral part of Oregon’s diverse and thriving communities. They, along with other immigrant populations, make extensive contributions that benefit all. Importantly, each voice adds a new dimension to the growing diversity and inter-cultural history of Oregon. It is my intention that the case of African immigrant voices in Oregon can be fruitfully applied in other US city contexts and that African immigrants’ voices can further amplified within the larger US polity. At another level, this project is part of an intellectual odyssey that uses oral history techniques to record localized immigrant experiences in the United States. It contributes to academic endeavors and scholarship that globalizes African immigrants’ voices.

“Immigrant Voices Matter” is firmly grounded in the methods and traditions of oral history. Various motivations drive my interest in this project: 1) The need to locate and document African immigrants’ individual journeys of strength, resilience, and determination, especially *in their own voices*. I am not content with just speaking about them in research papers and academic events like conferences. Beyond that, I want to capture their stories and ensure that their unique voices, travails, experiences, and personal narratives are preserved and accessible. Altogether, immigrant voices tell a lot about their [re]settlement, experiences, contributions, multilayered identity, conflicts, prejudices, and challenges. Locating their voices is a way of “making memory” of their lived experiences as immigrants in diaspora. 2) Situating the cultural diversity in Oregon brought by African immigrants. It is the need to situate the historical complexities, multiculturalism, and tolerance which define Oregon today through voices of African immigrants. African voices and presence must be seen as an important asset in Oregon’s cultural diversity and efforts to reposition itself within the national geopolitical hierarchy. 3) Historicizing and engaging these voices to amplify the agency of African immigrants in Oregon. Indeed, the local experiences of African immigrants scale up to contribute to national debates and policies on immigration, inter-ethnic relations, racism, national security, foreign policy, and other trans-continental issues. Besides, many Oregonians, and Americans, know little to nothing about Africa, its peoples, cultures, histories, and stories. And since so many stereotypes and false assumptions still trail the continent and its countries,<sup>6</sup> what better way to learn more about and connect with continental Africa than from Africans who have journeyed from there to the US! These shared stories are powerful and can serve as inspiration to other African immigrants, new and/or old.

Furthermore, this interdisciplinary project will contribute to several areas of study, including oral history, Black studies, African history, sociology, literary studies, and indigenous studies. It recognizes the significance of personal narrative and will contribute to teaching us about Africa, its peoples, and the multilayered experiences of African immigrants in the US, particularly in Oregon. Since a percentage of the students are from immigrant families and come from marginalized backgrounds, this project will serve as a space in which they feel safe and

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Densification in a Re-Emerging Gateway,” In *Twenty-first century gateways: Immigrant incorporation in suburban America* edited Singer A, Hardwick S, Brettell C (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press; 2008); Larry King, Clark Hidden, Gary H. Searl, and Kate Simon, *Uniquely Oregon* (Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1992); Carl Abbott, “The Everyday City: Portland’s Changing Neighborhoods,” In *Portland’s Changing Landscape* edited by Larry W. Price (Portland: Portland State University, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Curry-Stevens, A. and Coalition of Communities of Color. *The African Immigrant and Refugee Community in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile* (Portland, OR: Portland State University, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Bright Alozie, “How to Write About Nigeria,” *Black Perspectives*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.aaihs.org/how-to-write-about-nigeria/>; Binyavanga Wainaina, “How to Write About Africa,” Accessed February 9, 2023. [www.granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/](http://www.granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/).

can be themselves and share their stories. Through this project, it is my hope that many of African immigrants' voices will become part of Oregon's story.

### Competencies, Skills, and Previous Research

I began research on this topic in 2021 following my experience narrated at the introduction of this proposal. From interviewing one of my students and her family in 2021, I now have four additional recorded interviews across the Portland-Beaverton-Hillsboro metroplexes in Oregon. I have also done archival research at the Oregon State Historical Society. At the African American Intellectual History Society (AAIHS)'s Seventh Annual (virtual) Conference titled "Everyday Practices, Memory Making, and Local Spaces" held on March 11-12, 2022, I presented a preliminary report of this project in a paper titled "Multicultural Voices of Oregon: African Immigrant Minorities in Perspective." I also enjoyed presentations from other scholars which focused on memory making and oral testimonies of everyday people in America and beyond.

As an African historian, I have received training in oral history techniques at all levels of my educational and professional training from the University of Nigeria (undergraduate and master's degrees levels) and West Virginia University (PhD). Oral interviews have become an integral part of my research in the field of African social and political history for the past 14 years. In fact, I consider myself a "historian of voices" as there is hardly any of my published research that did not include oral interviews, traditions, and testimonies as primary sources. I recognize that oral history is, to use Ron Grele's words, "envelopes of sound" produced by the oral historian and his project's narrators, with each having (equally valid) renditions of historical events described.<sup>7</sup> I employed oral history methods in my doctoral research on colonial petitions in Igboland, Nigeria. During my doctoral research, in addition to collecting over 2,000 colonial petitions written by Igbo subjects of colonial Nigeria from the archives in Nigeria, Ghana, and the United Kingdom, I conducted 27 face-to-face interviews across several villages and towns in eastern Nigeria. Although many people who experienced colonial rule in Igboland are now deceased, a few remaining elders who served during the colonial period as court clerks, chiefs, writers, carriers, and messengers shared valuable first-hand knowledge of their colonial experiences. Indeed, I gained insights that only came about by talking to people who experienced colonial rule—analyzing events from their viewpoints, ascertaining the meanings they ascribe to their actions and the interpretations they provided.<sup>8</sup>

My forthcoming monograph, contracted with Michigan State University Press, titled *Voices in Ink: Petitions, Petition Writing, and the Colonial State in Igboland, Nigeria, 1892-1960* includes thirty-five oral interviews and employs the oral traditions of Igbo people of Nigeria in its narrative. Three of my most recent studies, "Female to Female Marriage in West Africa" forthcoming in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, "Spilling Anger on Walls: Protest Graffiti and the Art of Resistance Politics in Contemporary Africa" (supported by the 2022 ASMEA research grant) forthcoming in the *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, and "Between the Sensuous and Sacred: (Re)thinking African Spirituality, Female Power, and the Erotic through Mbari Art in Igboland, Nigeria," forthcoming in the *Special Issue for Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* includes seven, ten, and thirteen oral interviews respectively.

In Fall 2020, I initiated an online data/memory project, a collection of written voices of Nigerian protesters documenting their experiences during the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria.<sup>9</sup> This data collection, intended to serve as a documentary historical text and database for historians and scholars to study the #EndSARS protest event, now has fifty-six submission. Evidence from this project led to the production of a research paper titled "Let It Be Known that the Feminist Coven Did That": Nigerian Women's Voices and Coalition Against Police

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<sup>7</sup> Ron J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory, and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony* (Chicago, Precedent Publications, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 1–30.

<sup>9</sup> Bright Alozie, "More than Just a Hashtag (#EndSARS, #EndSWAT #EndPoliceBrutality): History, Narrative, Trauma and Memory of the Protests in Nigeria," 2020 #EndSARS Nigeria Data/Memory Project, <https://forms.gle/i2uVdtd29jW6yyvL7>.

Brutality during the 2020 #EndSARS Protests” presented at the fourteenth annual Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA) Conference held in Washington, D.C., November 13-15, 2021. My research, which also included an additional nine oral interviews, is now expected to be published in the forthcoming issue of *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*. Due to some security risks and volatility of the subject, some of my interlocutors—who participated in the #EndSARS protest—chose to remain anonymous.

Since 2022, I have been conducting library (literature) and digital archival research to learn more about digital archiving and new ways to present stories for public engagement.<sup>10</sup> Last year, I participated in the “Digital Projects”, a three-part workshop series taught by the University of Oregon Libraries Digital Scholarship Services, designed for anyone who is planning a project with a digital component.<sup>11</sup> At the 2023 American Historical Association conference, I attended three sessions on digital projects, stories, and archives: “Emergent Thinking: Creating Digital Stories for the Public” hosted by Joanna Brooks of San Diego State University and Andrew T. Mink of the National Humanities Center; “Digital Projects Showcase” convened by Jeffrey W. McClurken of the University of Mary Washington; and “Using Digital Archives for Teaching, Research, and Public Engagement” by Edward L. Ayers of the University of Richmond.

My skills and experiences in integrating oral history techniques in research make me competent to undertake this project. Moreover, I live in the Portland-Beaverton metropolis which makes my narrators easier to locate. I am interested in preserving the voices and histories of African immigrants in Oregon through a more elaborate oral history project that would include the archiving and digitizing these interviews for future researchers.

### Layout of Interviews

Starting this summer, I plan to interview the Oregon residents in person through structured and open-ended interviews. Since more than half of African immigrants in Oregon live in the Portland metropolis, many of the voices will be drawn from Portland while some will be from neighboring cities. At least six of these interviews will be video interviews while the rest will be audio interviews only. Up to ten African countries will be represented in this project. Respondents are either residents in Portland, and staff or students at Portland State University, community members and affiliates of the African House in Portland, students or staff of the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon, while the remaining are in residents of Beaverton or Hillsboro. I will also interview employees at housing organizations who work with immigrants and refugees. The following 17 individuals have agreed to audio or video interviews for this project:

S/N	Name	Origin Country	Profession	Location
1	Aisha Osman	Eritrea	Student, Portland State University (PSU)	Portland
2	Mayak Bikuei	Sudan	Student, Portland State University	Portland
3	Abdirizak Duale	Somalia	Student, Portland State University	Portland
4	Jola Ajibade	Nigeria	Professor, Portland State University	Portland
5	Dele Oyemaja	Nigeria	Member, Africa House	Portland
6	Paul Oga	Nigeria	Gynecologist	Hillsboro
7	Juma Hareb	Ethiopia	African Fashion Store and Restaurant Owner	Hillsboro
8	Milcah Banda	Malawi	Nurse at Local Hospital	Eugene
9	Caleb Muturi	Ghana	Student, University of Oregon	Eugene
10	Victor Appiah	Ghana	Professor, University of Oregon	Eugene
11	Kwabena Lynn	Ghana	Student, University of Oregon	Eugene
12	Bashir Siraj	Somalia	Sales Rep, Local Car Dealership	Eugene
13	Bethy Temelso	Rwanda	Cashier at local store, student (PSU)	Beaverton

<sup>10</sup> Leonie Jones, “Reframing Creative Practice for Telling Factual Stories of War and Trauma Through Oral History Interactive Documentary (OHID)” In *Interactive Documentary* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> UO Libraries Digital Scholarship Services, [https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/library\\_workshops/digital\\_projects](https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/library_workshops/digital_projects)

14	Riziki Hussein	Egypt	Truck Driver for Freight Company	Beaverton
15	Wash Ouma	Kenya	Cleaner at Cleaning Company	Beaverton
16	Sam Munyandamutsa	Rwanda	Member, Africa House	Portland
17	Farrine Leslie	Cameroon	Artist and Story Writer	Portland

Each interview is filled with tales of how they came to Oregon, and why; who they left behind or who they brought with them; reminiscences of their homelands and cultures; how their journeys have unfolded in a new country; and their contributions to Oregon growth and diversity. The following areas will be of interest:

*Personal details and bio:*

Tell me a little about yourself. Where were you born? How about your family? What was growing up like? What did you enjoy most about childhood? Did you attend elementary school, high school and/or college? Are there any stories from your childhood you would love to share?

*Culture and people of your home country:*

Tell me about your hometown and people? How many languages are spoken in your country? What is the culture of your people like? Any specific cultural memories that you would like to share?

*Misconceptions about their country and educating Americans about their country:*

What is one misconception about your country that you would like to share and correct?

*Coming to the U.S., motivations for leaving home country:*

When did you come to the US? What motivated you? Were you sponsored? By Whom? Why Oregon?

*Life, Identity, and Belonging in Oregon:*

What challenges did you experience upon arrival? How did you adjust? What were some of your coping strategies? Did you get any help from the African immigrant community in Oregon? How do you self-identify? How do you earn your livelihood? Since arriving in the United States, what traditions and cultural practices have they preserved, e.g., foods, language, religion? How do issues of race affect you? Do/did you feel a strong sense of community and belonging to where you live? Why/why not?

*Positive and negative experiences:*

Are there specific experiences, as an African immigrant in Oregon, that you would love to share? Did you experience any prejudices and racial discrimination? Did/have you experience(d) discrimination in housing, religion, or jobs? Any cultural shocks that you experienced upon arrival and settlement?

*Family in the U.S. and the homeland:*

Do you have any family here and back home in Africa? Do you sometimes feel a sense of alienation from your home country? How do you stay connected to your home country? Have you ever visited your home country since arrival in the US? What do you miss most about your home country?

*Contributions to Oregon by Africans:*

In what ways have African immigrants have contributed to Oregon diversity and development?

*Any other topics of interest:*

Are there any obstacles/challenges to success currently facing African immigrants in Oregon? Any other thing you would like to share? Do you think that your voice is important in this story? Why?

**Deliverables and Proposed Outcomes**

Expected outcomes can be grouped into three categories 1) teaching, 2) research, and 3) public engagement. So, this project is expected to develop into a tangible resource database for both researchers and the general public. Support from the Charlton Oral History Grant will allow me to conduct interviews in Oregon metroplexes including these major cities: Portland, Beaverton, Hillsboro, Salem, and Eugene. I envision the creation of an interactive storytelling website with the tagline “Immigrant Voices Matter” (updated from time to time with new interviews) which will include full audio and video interviews, transcripts, and any photographs collected from my respondents. The interactive nature of the website offers a unique way to engage the public in oral history

narratives by merging oral history with documentary in such a way to achieve narrator agency.<sup>12</sup> Already, I have received verbal commitment from Portland State University library staff to assist me with developing the website for onward unrestricted access.

There will also be a physical exhibit following the creation of a website which will feature my narrators and will be presented to Portland State University and Portland communities. I intend to develop a public lecture that focuses on key themes and memorable excerpts from the interviews. Already, I have established relationships with the following institutions and organizations to facilitate the exhibition and lecture: the School of Gender, Race, and Nations (SGRN) Brown Bag Lecture Series, Portland Art Museum, the Portland State University Library, Oregon Historical Association Society, and Africa House in Portland, Oregon. Wherever the event is hosted, I will invite the African immigrant community to be a part of the presentation of their story. I have also initiated contact with Africa House—the only culturally and linguistically specific one stop center targeting the increasingly diverse and rapidly growing number of African immigrants and refugees living in Oregon.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, I will propose to present this research to the meeting of the 2024 Oral History Association. I will also use it as one of two case studies to propose a paper at the annual African Studies Association conference in Washington, D.C. in 2024, the American Historical Association conference in 2024, as well as at the Oregon Historical Society's Mark O. Hatfield Lecture Series in 2024 or 2025. I also expect to use this project to expand my earlier research on "Multicultural Voices of Oregon" after which I plan to submit the manuscript for publication in the *Journal of Black Studies* or *Oral History Review*. Because a major aim of this project is to popularize voices of African immigrants, I will also publish summary articles about these voices for the non-professional audience, ideally in *The Conversation Africa* and *Black Perspectives*—two academic blogs where I have published summaries in the past.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, starting in the summer of 2024, I also plan to feature many of these voices in a collaborative podcast series with PDXplores—a Portland State research podcast.<sup>15</sup>

Making this project a resource for teaching and research within and far beyond PSU is a major outcome. I plan to integrate it into the Black Studies Methodologies, a project that I am currently completing for my department. As a primary source database, several courses offered in Portland State University, and indeed other universities, could benefit from this project. Examples of courses which we offer that could potentially benefit from my project include: BST211 Introduction to African Studies, BST 384 African Immigrant Communities in Oregon, BST201 Introduction to Black Studies, BST396 Methodologies, BST319 Traditional Cultures in Africa, BST305 Africa before 1800, BST306 Africa since 1800, BST335 The Multi-Racial Experience in Africa, and BST 489/589 Afro-Latin@ Narratives. Indeed, faculty and students across several fields in the humanities would benefit from this project and can easily use it in their teaching and learning exercises. While students can engage in both oral histories and archival research outside the digital world, combining digital storytelling with oral histories can help students create meaning in a digital space.

Finally, I hope that this oral history project will lead to the preservation of the voices and stories of African immigrants to Oregon while blending personal narratives and archival record together in a digital story to animate meaning in ways students, researchers, and the public may not get from text alone because *immigrant voices matter*.

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<sup>12</sup> Kathleen M. Ryan, David Staton, "Oral history, visual ethnography, and the interactive documentary," In *The Routledge International Handbook of Ethnographic Film and Video*, edited by Phillip Vanini (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Africa House, <https://irco.org/who-we-are/africa-house.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Bright Alozie, "How to Write About Nigeria," *Black Perspectives*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.aaihs.org/how-to-write-about-nigeria/>; "Did Europe Bring Homophobia to Africa?" *Black Perspectives*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.aaihs.org/did-europe-bring-homophobia-to-africa/>; "'Undressing for Redress': The Significance of Nigerian Women's Naked Protests," *The Conversation Africa*, September 3, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/undressing-for-redress-the-significance-of-nigerian-womens-naked-protests-144823>; "How Igbo Women Used Petitions to Influence British Authorities During Colonial Rule," *The Conversation Africa*, August 6, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-igbo-women-used-petitions-to-influence-british-authorities-during-colonial-rule-143309#:~:text=Petitioning%20allowed%20women%20to%20occupy,of%20political%20and%20socioeconomic%20power.>

<sup>15</sup> PDXplores, "A Portland State Research Podcast," <https://www.pdx.edu/research/pdxplores>.