



# Authoring Justice

Capstone Projects 2025

Collection



Right Livelihood



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*From 12 May to 20 July 2025 the Global Campus of Human Rights ran the second edition of its online course called "Authoring Justice". The course focused on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about human rights and social justice issues – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers and affect change around the world. The second iteration included lessons from award-winning authors, activists and publishers, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Kao Kalia Yang, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Shahram Khosravi, Jemma Neville, Casey Gerald, and Joel Rickett.*

*The cohort of students included human rights experts, journalists, climate activists, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from migration to racial justice, from youth-led social movements to climate advocacy and beyond. The following pages feature a few selected examples of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.*

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# Rooted identity: three generations of women across Europe and Latin America

## Maria Eugenia Alurralde

The warm smell of tomato, meat, onion, garlic, olive oil, and hot iron welcomed me every Sunday as soon as I stepped into my grandparents' house. I would run across the hallway into the dining room to greet my nonno, who sat at the big dining table reading the newspaper. The smell drew me to the room right in front: the kitchen. With her back to me, the stocky figure of my nonna and her short dark gray hair blocked the view of what was happening on the stovetop. But I already knew.

A large black iron pot was cooking the tuco (a bolognese-style sauce originally from Italy's Liguria region) that would accompany the homemade fettuccine for the family lunch. I was welcomed into the kitchen by my nonna's warm and comforting embrace. "Hola rosa!", she greeted me smiling. She used to call me that because she said that to her, I was a rose.

My nonna immediately grabbed a piece of bread, dipped it into the hot tuco, and gave it to me. The bread softened and turned red, soaked in the intense flavor of the sauce. I ate it in small bites so I wouldn't burn myself. That experience was even more sublime than eating the freshly made pasta for lunch.

The food I grew up with is what connects me the most with my Italian heritage. Along with the tuco and the homemade fettuccine, my childhood was shaped by pizza nights, olive snacks, and afternoons with pignolata - a traditional sweet and crunchy Sicilian pastry.

As the grandchild of two Sicilian immigrants who settled in Buenos Aires, Argentina, at the dawn of World War II, half of my ethnic identity is rooted in Italy, a country governed by the principle of *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) that recognizes the transmission of citizenship by descent. But according to my documentation, during the first 20 years of my life I was only Argentine.

Despite being born and raised in Argentina, my mother, daughter of Sicilian parents, is fully Italian by descent, and she only obtained Italian citizenship at the age of 50. “When I applied for Italian citizenship the consulate was closed, and it only reopened eight years later,” she tells me. It seems this was due to a corruption report involving a network that falsified Italian passports for football players.

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My nonna's name was Annetta. She was born in 1925 in Maló, a small rural village in the Sicilian province of Messina. She lived in a two-story stone house on a hill with her parents Francesco and Giuseppina, her younger sister Margherita, a cat whose name was lost in ancestral memory and the goat Gigia (many years later, at the age of eighty and after my nonno died, she would have a small white poodle she would name Gigio.) She had a third sister who died as a baby. They never knew what happened to her.

Her father Francesco worked at a lime kiln in the valley area until he emigrated to Argentina in 1931 in search of better living conditions for his family, just like millions of Italians did during those years marked by economic crisis and difficult social conditions. My nonna was 6 years old when her father left, and she didn't see him again until 9 years later. “They lived a peasant's life, marked by the poverty of the interwar period and, in many cases, by medieval customs,” my mother explains when I ask her about my nonna's childhood.

My nonna went to a small school in the village until third grade. She loved her teacher very much. Her teacher loved her dearly too and always praised her intelligence. My nonna was fascinated by the books, and she quickly learned to read and write. But, at that time, in rural Sicily children were part of the workforce, so she wasn't allowed to keep learning anymore. They taught her to embroider, and she helped with farm tasks like picking olives and milking Gigia. "If she had been given a choice, she would have chosen books," my mother says.

She couldn't choose.

Food was scarce, partly because there weren't enough men for labor. With her husband away, Giuseppina was alone with two daughters. "I believe part of my grandmother's violence was because she only had girls. She gave birth to three daughters, and she needed labor," my mother explains. My nonna grew up with an aggressive mother, so she spent her time hiding from her to avoid being hit. One day she was so scared of her mother's beatings that she hid in a barrel for many hours. The whole village went out looking for her.

In 1940, when she was 15 years old, my nonna and her family boarded the last transatlantic ship to depart from Genoa to America before the start of World War II. The ship was escorted by military submarines. My nonna didn't want to leave Italy. She didn't want to leave her friends, her family, her village, her cat, Gigia. Once again, she didn't have a choice.

Francesco was waiting for them in Buenos Aires, Argentina. They settled in a suburban neighbourhood a few kilometers from the capital. A community of Italians had taken root there - people who, like them, had come to the country seeking a better future.

Their first home in Buenos Aires was a small, cold room with a pit toilet. They didn't know anyone and they didn't speak Spanish. Having arrived nine years earlier, Francesco had already been working as a gardener for some time. Giuseppina made a living washing clothes for well-off families. Margherita was able to complete primary school in Buenos Aires. Like my nonna, her sister was very smart, and the school principal told Giuseppina to let her finish secondary school so she could become a teacher. But the family needed everyone to work. The most common thing there was to work in factories, yet Giuseppina wanted something better for her daughters, so they continued learning sewing, dressmaking, and embroidery.

Over time, my nonna grew to love Argentina. There was an abundance of food, growth and opportunities. The family moved to a better house, and my nonna and her sister gained recognition in the neighborhood as talented dressmakers and embroidery teachers.

When she was 22 she met Salvatore, my nonno, also a Sicilian migrant who lived in the neighbourhood. He came from Biancavilla, a town more developed than my nonna's Maló, and had a more comfortable economic background than her. He had been living in Argentina since he was four. They got married in 1953. My nonna continued working as a dressmaker and my nonno was a foreman at a factory of storage products for agricultural use. They had three children, two boys and a girl, my mother. In 1973 their eldest son died in an accident while practicing rowing. He was 16 years old.

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My mother's name is Adriana. She has the same dark hair and stoic warmth as my nonna. She is a geography and history high school teacher and loves languages. In addition to her mother tongue Spanish she speaks fluent English, French and Italian. "My mom didn't want me to speak the Sicilian dialect because she thought it was tacky. Saying 'u garuzzu' does not sound the same as saying 'il ragazzo'. That's why she was so delighted when I decided to study Italian in the Dante Alighieri Academy", she tells me. Even though she lived in Argentina her whole life, married my father Ignacio who was Argentinian, and raised me, my sister Sofia and my brother Nacho here, my mother does not feel like she belongs in this country: "I feel prouder when I say I am Italian than when I say I am Argentinian". Her friends call her Tana, a very common nickname used in Argentina to refer to people of Italian origin.

Even so, my mother tells me that she doesn't feel very connected to Italian culture, except for the songs. There was a lot of Italian music playing in the family, and that was also her first approach to learning the language before she studied it at the academy. I asked my mother whether she felt like my siblings and I had grown connected to Italy, and she says no: "I think that's also because I myself don't have a connection with Italian culture. Maybe it's something I still need to explore, which is why I would like to live for two months in Rome and two months in Sicily sometime," she elaborates.

My sister Sofia and I don't feel quite the same. For us, growing up so close to our nonna connected us to Italy. I also think that the fact that my mother continued with the lineage of the language, the tuco, the homemade pasta, the pizza, and the Italian music filling our home contributed to this. "What connected me most to my Italian roots was my nonna. Mom too, especially during our childhood and in our youth after my nonna passed away. I think a lot of it was through music. I listen to 'Il ballo del mattone' by Rita Pavone and it feels like my childhood," Sofia tells me.

Three years ago we both returned to our nonna's home region. We now live in Madrid. Unlike my nonna, my sister and I finished school, had the opportunity to choose university degrees, and also chose to emigrate to Europe.

Sofia is 32 years old – a year and a half younger than me – and she is an English translator and an education specialist. She arrived in Madrid in February 2022. She currently works in the private sector and lives in the northeast of Madrid with her Dutch boyfriend, whom she met at work.

Last year Sofia and her boyfriend went on vacation to Sardinia, an Italian island nestled in the heart of the Mediterranean. They caught a bus at the airport that took them to the beach town they would stay at. "The journey was long, and I remember the bus passing through a mountain landscape. In that view, the first thing I saw was the Mediterranean Sea and the same eroded stone mountains with little green dots that my nonna used to show me in the postcards she kept with images of Sicily. That, for me, was like an awakening. I realized that I come from here, and I felt very proud," she describes.

We often do pizza nights at my sister's apartment. Her pizza is just as delicious as my mom's. My nonna's pizza had a thicker, fluffier crust, and my mom added her own twist by switching to a thin, crispy, stone-baked dough. There's always pomodoro sauce and fresh mozzarella, topped with a variety of ingredients like arugula and bacon, tomato and garlic, or ham and peppers. Recently, my sister introduced a new topping combination: mushrooms sautéed in olive oil and garlic, with a touch of lemon zest. That one is my favorite pizza these days.

When we emigrated, my sister and I entered Europe with our Italian passports, so in bureaucratic terms, here we are Italian. Mom comes to visit us every year, and she also enters the continent with her Italian passport.

It might be that for some people from Latin America an Italian passport is just that: a document that opens the doors to a region with more development, more opportunities, and better living conditions. But for me, my mom, and my sister, Italy is rooted in our history, our heritage, and our identity.

In May of this year, Giorgia Meloni's government approved a law that limits the scope of the *ius sanguinis* principle. Now, only those who have grandparents or parents born in Italy can obtain citizenship. Additionally, these ancestors must have held exclusively Italian citizenship or have resided continuously in the country for a minimum of two years before the descendant's birth. According to a BBC article, "(...) the decision aims to set clearer limits and 'prevent abuses' such as businesses surrounding the acquisition of the passport."

This doesn't affect my sister or me. But if either of us has children in Madrid, the situation could become complicated. A child of Argentine parents born abroad is not automatically Argentine; to obtain the nationality, a process called the "nationality option" must be completed. With the new law, a child of Italians born abroad no longer automatically acquires citizenship by right of blood either. Since our connection to Italy is quite direct because it comes through our nonna and nonno, everything indicates that, for now, our next generation could continue to be Italian.

The law is very recent, so we will have to see how this policy develops when the time comes. But one thing we are sure of: our identity goes beyond what the government and the current political trend decide, and if we ever have children, they will also be raised with a nonna, pizza, tuco, and Rita Pavone.



# Never again.

## Ena Bavčić

### Where I am coming from

When I think of my grandmother, I think of her hands. Soft and rough at the same time, she had the prettiest hands in our family. I was always puzzled by how her hands kept the softness and roughness at the same time.

The velvety skin, and the soft and moist sensation I felt when touching her hands matched her lifestyle and nature. Rarely leaving the house, she has managed to leave an impression of a well-guarded lady. But my grandmother almost never used hand cream. And she never lived a life of a lady. It was like she wanted her rough skin to stay as a reminder of the cruel realness of her stories.

Her long fingers have combed my hair so many times while telling tales. Her stories were never magical, but I always listened to them like they were the most imaginative fairy tales. I grew up listening to them. Stories of life, survival, war, and resistance.

My grandmother's name was Muša, nana Muša (Musha) we called her. She always regretted her name, saying that she was first called Hasena. But her parents had no male children, and they lived in a village where a son was needed to work the land. Her mother got pregnant again while my grandmother was still a baby, so the old ladies of the village advised her to rename her last daughter, my nana. She should give her name that would sound like a word "male" (muško), as this, they believed, would give them a son.

My nana passed away last year, seven months after her last great grandchild was born, and two years after I moved away to another country. The day that she died was the first time in a couple of years since all her grandchildren were supposed to gather to see her. Three of us have moved abroad, and it was difficult to manage our schedules to meet, and the pandemic did not help. I had my travels planned for that day. The night before travelling, I had dreamt of her, she came to me to say goodbye. In the morning my mum called to say that she had passed. I was the last one to arrive, and she was too weak to wait for me. But she made sure to say goodbye.

Her stories have stayed with me. Over time, I always joked about how my trans-generational trauma is stronger than my war trauma. Nana Muša was born in Višegrad, east Bosnia, near the border with Serbia, several dozen kilometres from Srebrenica. This part is known for brutal stories of wars.

Nana was a child when WWII started. She has lost seven siblings due to starvation and other ailments. Her father was killed for trying to defend his Serb colleague, who was in line to be shot at by the NDH, Nazi collaborators. The designated killer was their friend though, and apparently, he told them that he needed to shoot them, but he will aim to wound and not kill them, providing an opportunity for them to get away. My great-grandfather's friend made it alive, but my great-grandfather did not. Later, she told stories of her aunt being brutally killed in front of her eyes. Nana's uncle had been a double agent, and one of the stories says that he at some point helped Tito escape fascists by dressing him as a veiled Muslim woman. Ironically, after the war, he was put in jail for protesting the Communist Party's decision banning veils. In exchange for releasing her husband, the aunt threatened to expose a former chetnik, Serb Nazi collaborator who had just pretended to be a partisan. He told her to go home and not worry about it. While they were having a family lunch, the fake partisan came and killed my nana's aunt in front of the entire family. It was a warning kill.

I was never sure which aspect of her stories is true, and which one is exaggerated. Many of them missed important context details for me to actually verify them. Also, few of her relatives have survived the 1992-1995 war, and those who did became scattered all over the world.

But one thing is sure, these stories have taught me that things are not black and white. They also taught me resilience and resistance (even though I am sure it was never her intention for me to become a vocal activist, putting my safety sometimes at stake). Most importantly, they taught me empathy, understanding that it is important to help those in need, and that it is important to value people for their individual actions. But also, that some people can change their minds, while others never do in spite of their appearances.

### **Where we are now**

There is a folk belief in Bosnia that every generation needs to go through two wars. This was true for my grandmother and her mother. This perpetual cycle of violence has pushed women to develop mechanisms for teaching their descendants to be more resilient. A big part of these mechanisms were stories. Narratives that they tried to embed into younger generations of how to survive, how to resist, respect and, for girls, how avoid being raped if a military storms in.

So now, at the moment when we feel like each wrong move may lead to a global war, I start to wonder if the time for our “second war” would come. Despite all rationalisation, this fear is strongly embedded in me. I have managed to fight it off in my local context, where politics is playing with this fear of war to make people numb to corruption. Also, moving away made me more preoccupied with international politics.

My mum, on the other hand, who was in her early thirties and with two small children when the war in Bosnia started, is more concerned by the local politics. She does not want to make the same mistake of naively believing that a war could never break out in Bosnia. My mum has done miracles for us during the war. But now, like for most Bosnians, her main worry is if another war is breaking up. And this is true for most of my co-patriots, one way or another.

The war in Ukraine scared us. It made us relive some memories as a group of people who were sieged. But the western reaction gave us hope, a hope that maybe if the next time comes, things would be different, we would be seen.

Then another genocide started.

Scenes from Gaza completely broke us. The starvation, the abandonment, targeting of civilians under a pretext of self-preservation and security are all too familiar strategies. Just this time we can follow them live and on a much larger scale (the population of Gaza is almost the same as the entire Bosnia and Herzegovina).

And we feel so helpless.

The reactions are different. Like with any PTSD, people deal with trauma differently. Some are ignoring and being completely silent about what is going on, some are raising awareness, exposing themselves and protesting, some collecting aid, while others are getting away from seeing the images. There are those who are trying to coordinate with international movements and raise their voices in this fora, and those who are falling into ignorant generalisations which we have seen too often to lead to hate.

Helplessness can bring out the worst in each of us. And just like my grandma's stories, second-degree trauma rubs off differently, as the perspective is different.

I am still struggling to find a meaningful way to contribute and feel less helpless. My main contribution is in training my META algorithms to show only Gaza and similar situation videos. I've managed to train it after one year. One year of baby and cooking videos popping up in my reels constantly. This algorithm is so fragile though. One baby or a dog video, and you are five steps back. Don't even think of liking or commenting on some random video, then you are twenty steps back.

Of course, I join protests and national rallies. They offer a soothing comfort of not feeling alone and of actually doing something. Protests for me are probably the most important freedom, as they provide a much-needed counterbalance to all other individualised rights. Peaceful protests require solidarity, conviction, connections and joint goals.

Seeing people mobilising around Gaza gave me hope that Palestinians are seen, that I am not the only one who feels this way. The images from the protests though show that the main strength is in the mass mobilisation. While we rejoice the images of massive protests calling for a stop to genocide, we see that similar ones with couple of hundreds of people are being forcibly dispersed. Increasingly, protesters are violently detained and symbols of peace being treated worse than the symbols of hatred.

Somehow, we have come to live in a moment in history where resisting for peace is literally treated as terrorism. At the same time, the scale of atrocities makes us feel like nothing suffices. Whatever we do will not change the grand scheme of things.

Then we see activists like Greta Thunberg and Freedom Flotilla, a march to Gaza. And even though ultimately unsuccessful they give us hope. Hope that not all is lost. Hope that we can do something. She and her comrades showed that there is true intersectionality in all our fights, and that we cannot only choose a fight for climate and not fight for humankind.

In a moment when we feel energised again, another threat of war comes. The war becomes like a football match, and we see people cheering and watching in tension. But the truth is, that we all feel paralysed again. All the global efforts, mobilisation, resistance come at stake just by one malicious move.

This is when we realise that what is driving our mums' fears in Bosnia today, has transferred to the entire globe. The political play of constant fearmongering is becoming a new normal. My friends here start to joke that Bosnians are so politically progressive, that whatever was happening with us thirty years ago, is now happening globally. This may be funny, but it is not comforting, as we know that there is no real end to it, thirty years in.

### **Where I want us to go**

If you had asked me thirty years ago, I would have been sure that “true” Bosnians are incapable of hate. It was a childish belief that once you go through such targeting and trauma, you know better. This was before I became an activist and before I saw how a potential to commonly hate the weaker one, serves as a potent incentive for developing nationalism. I still believe that most people who have seen the war have an understanding that this is not ok, whether they want to admit it or not.

Likewise, when I see how the cycle of violence develops globally, and I see pockets of ignorance, silly comments, generalisations, I realise that it is so easy to fall into this abyss of perpetual conflict. I fear for the new generation, those with a second-degree trauma, but also for me, for my child. In what kind of world will she grow up? As much as I fear for her not to have to go through war, I do not want my daughter to grow up believing she has some special immunity because her mum went through it.

The lessons my grandma taught me became more important than ever. She never went out to protests but she taught me not to hate. Yes, you can know who wants you harm and who is not your friend. Yes, you should stay away from these people, you can protest them, and you can push for their accountability. But we cannot fall into the trap of perpetual hatred and violence.

Sometimes, the best resistance is to teach our kids not to hate. To teach them empathy, resilience and strength. That things are not black and white, but that there is a difference between good or bad. But also teach them that they can confront the power, that state is not the same as a group of people, and that the true strength lies within us.

I would really like to keep hope that there is another way. That my daughter and I will not need to live through our two wars. That we can make our voices heard. That pockets of resistance exist everywhere and that we will prevail. If we want to change the world, we start by changing people around us. It is up to us to share and teach people around us that never again means never again for everyone. Because if we do not, the cycle of violence will inevitably get back to us.



# Orphaned by Fate, Devastated by the Taliban, and Sentenced to Life

A Story of heavy pain, wounds, and resilience of an Afghan father

## Tamana Farewar

Choghadak District lies quietly on the fringes of Mazar-e-Sharif city, a place neither too distant to forget, nor too close to be changed by the city's stream. According to locals there, this place was named after owls that once lived among the ruins, creatures that made their home far from people. In my younger years, I often saw them in the old garden of our neighbor above the big and old Platanus tree. It is also said that the first khan of the Mongol Empire, Chingiz Khan, during one of his great military campaigns, once paused in the Choghadak briefly to rest. People there are mainly not well-educated but are busy with livelihood, shop keeping, agriculture, and handwork. It seems the lack of education and slow pace of modernization has not reduced the district's conservative and cultural values. The district might be one of the last areas where the municipality of Balkh province allocated time and resources to concrete the streets and valleys.

Almost at the end of its longest and smallest valley, where cars cannot reach, is a big house made of mud and clay with water furrows crossing it. This peaceful house, which is the most desired place to be, especially during the 40-degree summer of Mazar, belongs to an orphan boy who lost both his father and mother in early childhood. He was too young to discover the meaning of life, left alone and lost among pain and sorrow.

His name is Jamal, which means 'beauty', a name that suits him perfectly. He grew into a tall, well-proportioned young man with a bright, flawless good looking face with his appreciating thin, high-bridged nose. Of medium height, he had full, thick, connected eyebrows and a lean, well-toned body without a trace of extra fat. He can barely remember his parents faces, voices, or any memories. He went through many ups and downs in life to live on his own after all five of his elder sisters got married and separated. When his mother passed away, he was like a traumatized child who didn't know where to go, until his elder sister opened her arms to him.

Jamal remembers how her sister healed his pains and never took a risk that might hurt him. Even when he was a teenage boy, she would lift him up to put him on the donkey, to carry wheat to the mill for flour or to travel somewhere. A strong woman, both physically and spiritually, but this shelter didn't last long. Later, his sister was forced to immigrate to Pakistan with her family, and Jamal found himself back at the starting point, alone once again. And now after decades, he is no longer a little boy, but a retired teacher, broken by fate, punished by the system, the father of 13 children, and a grandfather in his early 80s, whose body and spirit are both severely broken after the diaspora and displacement of his children following the fall of Afghanistan in 2021.

In his time, over 80 years ago, education was a rarity for an Afghan orphan like him to pursue. But he knew that only education could save him from such a miserable life by bringing a light of identity and respect by his society. So, from the time his tiny hands could pick up objects, he worked, as a farmer, a daily wage worker, and a street vendor, while still attempting to follow school. When he was accepted into vocational training to become a schoolteacher, he took a deep breath. In the blind of eye, he felt satisfaction in life with a thought that at last, the physical labor is over, and a new chapter as a young and hopeful teacher begins.

But life didn't allow him to pause and his job required him to travel to very remote district schools. That's how he left this big house behind, filled with all his uncertainty and loneliness. His dedication to education and schoolchildren became his purpose in life. After serving many years in underprivileged schools, he eventually moved back to city schools, closer to home and his married sisters.

This time, he returned as a respected and educated man, one of the few educated people in his district. He found a woman he admired and married her, hoping to fill his home with people, love, and laughter, things he needed most. Now life was kind to him for a while as he started a new life with his wife, building from nothing: no parents, no siblings to help, no money, no friends, no support, no high morale, and no real hope. To him, the only possible option was to keep going and not give up.

He threw himself into work to provide a good life for his family and beautiful children. When his fifth child was born, just a week later, his beloved wife, his life partner, passed away. This pushed him into trauma like never before. Providing for his children, maintaining his job, dealing with life outside, and now raising five children, especially a newborn, overwhelmed him.

But he showed that no matter how far life may push him down, he has to have the strength to stand again. For seven years, he played both mother and father, taking responsibility for both home and work. In the middle of this hardship, he had another chance to marry again, this time to an orphaned neighbor girl with beautiful soft skin and rare green-and-blue, two colored eyes.

His life, after a long struggle, entered a calmer phase. His children from the first marriage began to build their own lives. Due to restrictions on girls' education, his daughters married young, around sixteen or fifteen. His eldest child, a smart boy became a

doctor, filling him with deep pride, and moved to another city. His youngest boy moved to Pakistan to avoid being recruited into the domestic war of Afghanistan.

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Now Jamal lived with his wife and the children from his second marriage. His wife became his main source of patience and comfort. But once again, his life was shaken, not by exhaustion or work, but by war. The conflict between the Taliban and the Afghan government, especially after the U.S. targeted the Taliban following the September 11 attacks, forced him to send his family elsewhere, including his three sons and two daughters.

Witnessing the fighting and the fall of the Taliban regime for the first time in 2001 destroyed much of what he had built. But as the head of the family, he stayed strong. He remained hopeful. A newly elected government was in power, and international investments flowed into Afghanistan. He hoped this time thing would change.

His elder daughters didn't finish school or go to college, but now, with more freedom, he had real hope that his younger children could live a peaceful life with access to education and work. As time passed, age and illness began to weigh down his body. Years of hard physical work left him tired and sick. His children grew up and started helping with the house, the garden, and small income-generating activities.

Eventually, the time came to retire from teaching, even though he didn't want to. He didn't choose to stop, but he had no choice. After retirement, he began to feel useless staying at home. He tried to stay busy by reading books, working in his garden, and growing different vegetables and fruits. His big family rarely needed to buy from the market, they had fresh produce and fuelwood from his garden.

He fully stopped his livelihood activities, as it became hard to manage. His children didn't enjoy living in a farmhouse either. But cultivating beautiful flowers gave him great joy. He always told his daughters, "I grow them so you feel happy." Spending his entire days in the garden, even late into the night to water the trees, brought him peace. Walking through the garden and breathing its scent gave him purpose, to wake up before sunrise every day.

But as aging and constant sickness limited his work, he had to stop the heavy gardening. This deeply broke his heart. Watching the plants he loved die and the autumn face of his garden made him feel like he was losing loved ones. Even after constant requests from his children to rest, he would still go to the garden, even when he was seriously ill. It was his joy.

As his children grew up and moved abroad in pursuit of education, his sadness grew. His children from the first marriage had already moved or married when they were young. He had always hoped to see them during Eid or Nawruz (New Year). Despite all his heartbreaks, nothing brought him to tears until life's hardest hit came when the Taliban retook Afghanistan overnight in August 2021. His children, like the collapsing government, disappeared overnight.

This crushed him completely. He felt like someone who had lost everything after decades of struggle. Saying goodbye to each child, his life's entire purpose, put him into unimaginable trauma. Since nearly four years, this pain consumes him from the inside. Being separated from his beloved children, who brought him joy and happiness, felt like living in a prison of sadness. He never stopped his children from emigrating. He knew that after years of studying, working for justice and human rights, and building dreams, they would be in danger if they stayed in the country. So he chose their safety over his own comfort and preferences. But in the meanwhile, the death of his beloved and only friend, with

whom he had shared both the best and worst moments, hit him deeply, leading to an unbearable period of grief.

Now, alone with his wife and youngest child, old age, white hair, a tired heart, and a weary body took him faster than expected. He felt more broken and old than a normal aging process. Sometimes, he wondered if life would have been easier had he been born somewhere else. Perhaps his efforts wouldn't have been wasted. Perhaps he wouldn't have had to live apart from his children and grandchildren.

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World leaders play games of power, but ordinary people like Jamal suffer across generations. Millions like him, orphans who struggled all their lives, saw everything they built fall to pieces due to regimes that care only about extremism, fascism, and authoritarianism.

Millions of parents like Jamal fight their lives to head up from the misfortune to have an extremely basic life and to raise their children properly, but is in any context unfair to lose them in war, poverty, sickness, suicide bombings, insecurity, or in the search for a better life. Why did humans make the world such a miserable journey to some people like him? Why did they sentence to such trauma? Now under an authoritarian regime, they continue to pay the price. Elders endure unbearable pain, while their children suffer from injustice, statelessness, loneliness, depression, and being last-class citizens elsewhere.

Yet, even after all of this, Jamal's story is one of knife edge resilience. Though life broke him again and again, he stood up, again and again. He gave everything for his children and dreamed of a better future, even if he wouldn't live to see it fully realized. This world owes him a decent, happy, and peaceful life where he can hug his loved ones and have dinner gathered

around a Dastarkhwan (dining table) rather than suffering so extremely.

Padar Jan (Dear Dad), I need your jacket to stay warm. You always checked on me late at night to see if I was cold, placing your jacket or Patoo (Shawls) on my shoulders. I was always cold, just didn't fall asleep to study, but I melted in your love and sacrifices. I just wish I could go back, love you more, and spend every possible minute with you. I may be lost in exile, but I live on in you, as you are my forever home and identity.



# Enemies Within

## Loubna Reguig

### Mother: the Beginning

I scan the walls with my eyes, white, or maybe gray. My gaze pauses for a few seconds on the clock. Tick. Tock. Slow. Heavy. Our eyes meet. Behind her metallic desk, she is looking at me. Why is she looking at me? The civil servant repeats herself, articulating slowly each letter. I think she is waiting for an answer. I nod timidly. Small, my legs dandling, too short to touch the floor. She keeps talking. Keeps staring. There is something off, or is it only in my head? She speaks to me again. Why is she speaking to me?

I'm only eight.  
It's an administrative appointment.  
My mother is with me.

She is sitting beside me. Calm, dressed with care, her organised folder resting on her lap.

So why is she talking to me? Why won't she look at my mom? Why is she repeating herself, gesturing? Why does she pretend to not understand? Why is she correcting every word? *Why is she humiliating her?*

"Speaking means existing absolutely for the other," Fanon once said. My mother speaks French. She understands French. She earned her Master's degree here, in France.

But my mother has an accent. And my mother is Arab. And my mother is an immigrant. And my mother wears a headscarf.

Tick.Tock. Each second in that office landed like a slap. Sitting there on a chair too big for me. And in that small-cowardly nod — without realizing it — I became complicit. Complicit in a silent theft of dignity. Complicit in systemic humiliation. Complicit in the quiet violence aimed at my mother.

Later, I'd be the one targeted too. Karma?

Activism, for me and many of us, stems from this.

From bureaucratic humiliation.

From media hatred.

From unjust treatment.

From police violence.

From this repeated mantra: *You do not belong. Your existence does not matter.*

Fear. Anger. Sadness. Exhaustion... Hope?

Bell Hook wrote "Being oppressed means the absence of choices." Our activism is not a choice. It is an imperative. It's raw. It's primal. It's animal. A reflex. A need to protect. A constant state of alert. A high sensitivity. A precocious lucidity. The crushing weight of having to prove your humanity over and over.

*At the beginning, it was my mother who took me to my first protest.*

### **Building of the Enemy: History repeats itself**

"But what a patch of mud on your name — I was going to say on your reign — that this abominable Dreyfus affair! A council of war has just, by order, dared to acquit an Esterhazy, the supreme bellows of all truth, of all justice. And it's over. France has this stain on its cheek. History will write that it was under your presidency that such a social crime could have been committed." — Emile Zola, *J'accuse*, 1898

Stretched out on a bench under the blazing Marseille sun, we lazed in silence, eyes lost in the vast, calming blue of the sea. Between bites of slush that numbed our brains, our conversation drifted, inevitably, back to “EMF”.

Not long ago, a report was deliberately leaked by the Ministry of the Interior. It warned of "entryism", the Muslim Brotherhood, and an alleged underground plan by Muslims to infiltrate the Republic. Etudiants Musulmans de France (EMF) was named. An association that supports students. That distributes food parcels across campuses. That organizes social and cultural events to fight isolation. That advocates for students' rights.

That was our association. Our work. Our faces. And overnight, our commitment became suspicious. Food drives? Proselytism. Public speeches? Manipulation. And our faith? A testimony against us.

“This is like the Dreyfus affair”, Kayode starts. He is wearing his signature glasses: the exact same pair as my sister’s. He literally bought the same, a woman’s frame, because they gave the “diva” look. That’s Kayode: flashy, hilarious, unbothered, yet very modest and polite. "It's the same story... And by God's grace, it'll have the same ending." he continues.

I am not sure if it is the scene or my reflex of always downplaying, second-guessing our pain, convincing myself *it's not that serious* that made me think that he was being dramatic. But once back home, I decided to open my laptop and to read about it again. It's a required part of French school syllabus: In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French military, was arrested, tried, and convicted of treason. No solid evidence. Publicly shamed. Deported. Why? Because he was Jewish. That was enough. The military knew he was innocent. Still, they chose to protect the real traitor rather than clear a Jewish man's name. In 1898, Emile Zola published his famous open letter "J'accuse...", denouncing state antisemitism, judicial manipulation, and the silent complicity of the press.

Today – and for some years now – there's a new name whispered with suspicion. Not Dreyfus. "Muslim."

Our visibility became a threat. Like Dreyfus, we aren't condemned for what we did, but for who we are.

The language has changed, but the machinery is the same: the creation of an internal enemy.

Back on that bench, I asked Kayode, who is EMF's current president, what he felt the day the report dropped.

"I think it was a Wednesday" he said "Ines\* was the one who sent it to me. It hadn't even been officially published yet, it was leaked through a government site. But honestly, the signs were there before. On Sunday or Monday, right-wing media had already dropped their 'exclusive' previews. We got an email from *Le Point* Monday morning with a series of questions. Supposedly for an article about EMF, but it was clearly about the report. So we knew we were being named. We could feel it."

"It was stressful, waiting for the hit, but also realising it had already landed."

"When the report dropped" he continued "my first instinct was CTRL+F — EMF, étudiants. Given the media frenzy, I was bracing for the worst! But weirdly... I felt some relief. Out of 70 pages, we were mentioned only three times. Two of those were factually wrong. It was sloppy work. Then my second reflex? I searched for our names. Just to make sure we weren't directly targeted. That we were, at least, still somewhat protected."

*Neither of us was named, but one of our friends, a former president of EMF, was. Others we knew were there too.*

\* different names were used

And then came the work. Immediate, urgent.  
Writing a response.  
Publishing a statement.  
Questioning our lawyer.  
Reassuring members.  
Making sure we were the ones speaking, not just being spoken about.

"But we wanted to go beyond that," Kayode told me. "We wanted to inspire. To show the image of a strong young Muslim, representing an association, speaking clearly and confidently. No fear. Beyond refuting the claims, it was about visibility and hope. Letting others know: *you're not alone*. That seeing someone take action can help others get through their own frustration and despair. Making them also want to engage. For us, mental health matters, and that's part of it too."

And it worked. A few days after appearing on television, Kayode received a message on LinkedIn: Thank you. Just two words, but they meant everything.

### **Blessed is the one at the service of others**

"Slowly! Slowly!"

On the first floor, Zayn\* and I were gripping the back legs of the table, carefully inching it toward the open window. Down below, Ayman\* stood with arms outstretched, ready to receive it, directing us like an air traffic controller guiding a landing. It wasn't very high up, a floor, maybe two, but the doorway was too narrow, and this was the only way.

I know this might look like a heist. I swear it is not. In less than an hour, just a few steps away in the open courtyard of this university campus, we'd be hosting a free food distribution for students. And for that, we needed tables. So we improvised. Borrowed a handful from the quiet study hall. Just for two, maybe three hours. No one would miss them.

\* different names were used

After a few careful back-and-forths and some tense balancing, the big truck finally pulled in. The back doors creaked open, and out came our cargo: bags of pasta, rice, oil, sugar, flour, canned goods, milk, cereals, hygiene products, even a few crates of fruit. We sorted everything, category by category, lining the tables one after the other. Students were already starting to arrive, shopping bags in hand. They began to queue. The line grew fast, so much that at the end, some could not get anything...

So many young people live in precarity in France. In 2024, over a third of them reported skipping meals regularly or from time to time due to lack of money. To respond to the crisis, we organise regular free food distributions across 25 university campuses in France. During Ramadan, our distributions – food packs and hot dinners – become daily.

Janaya Future Khan, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter Canada said once in *Time* "Activism is about being alive: about fighting for life. Activism is being for someone else who you needed most in your most vulnerable moment. There's something inherently spiritual and supernatural about what happens when we tie our fate to another person: we discover who we are in service to others."

I could not agree more...

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"Obviously I lost my chance to get a job in the public sector," Kayode tells me, with a faint, bitter smile. He had always wanted to be a school teacher. To work with children. To pass something on. He had the patience. That natural warmth. The humour. But after the report, he knows. "With EMF on my record, it's over. I'm blacklisted."

"Welcome to the club, I was blacklisted the day I decided to wear my headscarf" I responded trying to make things lighter.

*The slush probably froze our brains...*

“If I have kids one day, I hope they’ll join EMF” I look at him surprised. “Because even with all the internal challenges, the external pressure, the sleepless nights, the police summons, the ignored partnership requests, the frozen bank accounts... EMF is still beautiful. You know what I love the most about EMF, beyond what we do? It's what we become together. It's the friendships. The people who meet here, work side by side, fall in love, get married. Some have kids now. Can you believe it? EMF builds families. It's precious. It's the most beautiful thing.”

*I cringed, the slush definitely froze his. We laughed.*

Because yes — there are numbers, distributions, reports, events, motions, conferences... But more than that, there is this. This thread. This invisible string that holds us together, even when everything else falls apart.

In our faith, we say: Whoever gives for God (their time, their energy, their wealth) will surely be rewarded. Maybe not with what they hoped for, but with what they needed. Maybe our activism won't change the world tomorrow, but this commitment? It already frees something in us.

It restores dignity. Together.

*In that office, on that stiff chair, my mother's hand held mine.*

## **Belonging**

We are second, third, even fourth generation. We don't have an accent and we know the codes. We study. We vote. We contribute. We engage and serve our society to make it better. Yet somehow, for some, we are still too much. Too visible. Too organised. The dangerous other.

On July 7th, 2025, Emmanuel Macron announced new legal measures targeting the so-called “entryism”: a law is expected by the end of the summer. It includes freezing the assets of organisations – modeled after anti-terror legislation – expanding power to dissolve associations without trial, and financially punishing those who refuse to sign the Republican Commitment Contract (ECR), a pledge critics say is being used to police belief and right to dissent.

This is not new.

This is not a rupture.

It is a continuation.

After her visit to France in 2018, The United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms warned “the conflation of Islam with terrorism in government policy and in the implementation of administrative measures unduly singles out this community, alienates the community from the State, and creates a form of political and social disenfranchisement that is inconsistent with the State’s obligations under international human rights law”.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 2021, they said we kept to ourselves. They called it “separatism”. So they wrote a law that shut down our institutions, raided our mosques, interrogated our children in school. All in the name of breaking the “separatists”. At the time, Amnesty International warned the bill risked reinforcing negative stereotypes and would “seriously attack rights and freedoms”, disproportionately targeting Muslims.<sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> [Preliminary findings of the visit: UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism concludes visit to France | OHCHR](#)

<sup>[2]</sup> [France: Amnesty International’s concerns regarding the bill “to strengthen respect for the principles of the Republic”](#)

Now in 2025, the narrative evolves. Now, we're too integrated. Too engaged. Too confident. So it's suspicious. Because when Muslims succeed — visibly, confidently, collectively — it disturbs the narrative. So they invented a new word: "entryism."

A seventy-page report full of errors, approximations and fantasies. No proof. But there was never a need for it. It was enough to name. To shame. To blacklist. Enough to turn our mere presence into a threat and start the witch hunt.

This is not just a national debate. It is a deliberate attack of equality and human rights.

So what happens when a state demands loyalty while denying belonging?

Again... This is not new. This is not a rupture. It is a continuation. From that day in the office, and even before...

*We don't sit silently on that chair.*

We refuse erasure.

We speak up.

We organise.

We build.

Collectively.

*This Capstone Project has been realised as part of a twinning scheme, between the author and Right Livelihood Laureate Sheila Watt-Cloutier, supported through a scholarship offered in collaboration with Right Livelihood.*



# Borrowed Motherland. Stories of Migrant Women Rising Families Alone

**Matilde Tassinari**

It was the fifth day of the fifth month, the year 2015, when Angie [1] arrived in Finland with her husband. A date so precise, so symmetrical, she believed it must mean something: perhaps a sign, a blessing folded into numbers.

Just weeks before arriving in Finland, Angie and her husband were married in Manila. It was a warm celebration, a fairytale wedding, simple and good. Then came the move: her husband's fatherland would be her new home. A new place, a new beginning; nothing she hadn't done before, in other lands, other languages. Starting from zero was a language she already knew, and the move did not frighten her. The plan was simple: find an entry-level job, learn the language, settle in, like any other time. But life here did not unfold the way it had in other places.

When Angie learned she was pregnant, she was living in a crisis shelter in Helsinki, after fleeing a home that had grown dangerous. The country was still a stranger to her, with unfamiliar streets, a language that hadn't settled on her tongue. The workers told her they had booked her an appointment for an abortion. As if they expected her to be grateful, as if it were helpful. Angie stood, confused. She hadn't expected this, and for a moment, she wasn't sure she understood. "No," she said, gently but firmly. This is my child.

[1]The stories in this piece are drawn from real lives. To protect the privacy of the women who shared them, all names and identifying details have been changed.

Other women in the shelter shared similar stories, similar silences. Many accepted one-way tickets home. "At least your family is there," they said. But for Angie, going home as a mother, and yet no more a wife, was not an option. In her hometown, that would have followed her like a shadow. So she chose to stay with the quiet clarity of a woman who knew her choices did not require explaining.

It was night when the contractions began. She was alone. A taxi wasn't an option, not then. So she put on her coat, paused at the door, and walked through the quiet Helsinki dark until the hospital.

Today, that child tells her she needs more time with her best friend and less with her mother. Angie smiles, a softness in her eyes. "It's that time when they start becoming who they are," she says wistfully, even though she has told harder stories without a hint of melancholy. Maybe she's recalling when her baby was small, falling asleep in the most unlikely places. Across the floor or on the highchair, legs flung like tired exclamation marks. And gently, she lifted her into her arms, and brought her to bed, as if moving a sentence to a softer line. Maybe that's what she did too, by staying. By raising her children here. She carried them to a softer place, even if her own feet stayed tired.

There's something magnetic about Angie. Her eyes smile before her lips do. Apologetic is not a word you'd use to describe her, and you will find yourself agreeing with her without knowing why. She got herself a pendant, a silver Kalevalakoruu. Someone once told her it was the mark of warriors (quiet ones, perhaps, who carried on without ceremony). She thought that sounded right on her.

Lluisa would not call herself a warrior. Her voice is calm, shaped like a stream threading through stones. Her story comes softly, a carving more than a blow. She speaks from a place of stillness.

She arrived in Helsinki with no intention of laying roots. It was to be a bracket in her life, a chance to study, learn English, experience life somewhere new. But something remained unfinished, a chapter just opening. The pages felt thin and full of promise. Months later, she returned: not because she wanted to write an ending, but as the words kept forming, she felt compelled to write more.

Lluisa was a blossoming artist. She dreamed of a studio, canvases and clay. That dream softened when her children came, and the stability that children thrive in became her art. But still, she paints, captures, sculpts when time permits, her hands still fluent in the language of form and color, as if they never paused.

Finnish nature has become her quiet companion. In the forest, among birch and moss, she finds a home that doesn't ask her to speak a foreign tongue. She feels most herself when she can speak her own language. And yet, there is something quietly grounding in the pull of the sea. She often walks the shore in Kaivopuisto, where the air feels less like distance and more like space. There, among rocks smoothed by waves, she notices names carved by others. People who, in their own way, had wanted to say "I was here." That gesture brings her into brief contact with them, as if they'd waited to be met by a mother searching for a sense of home on a Finnish shore. Her closest name is Wallenius, etched into the stone in 1897. Here especially, people find ways to be near each other, even when no one is speaking.

Unlike Angie, Lluisa does not share her story freely. Not because she carries any secret, but because she hopes for a life that doesn't ask her to explain herself, where her children can grow up surrounded by the comfort of things being simple. She doesn't need to be seen as anything other than a mother at the leikkipuisto. She's done everything by the book, learned the language, earned the passport. But in the playgrounds, she still feels the invisible walls.

She has the lingering thought that at the leikkipuisto, conversations rarely cross certain lines, that Finnish mothers orbit the same space, but at different distances. And though she's done everything by the book, no book tells you how to bridge the quiet between mothers.

Angie knows that silence too. Her child longs to play with a friend. Angie asked the friend's mother many times. "Maybe next week," she'd reply. "I'll give you my number next time." But next week never came, and her name never filled the pending a spot among Angie's contacts. A year passed, and the playdate remained a vague possibility. "Maybe she's just a quiet person," Angie says. "Or maybe it's because of me" she wonders aloud, the way someone does when trying to make sense of silence.

Where Angie is from, friendship means visiting each other's homes, cooking, sharing meals. But in Finland, it's different. She speaks of her friend, Sanna, who has been in her life for over a decade. Over the years, Sanna's answers came gently, like the closing of a door without sound, a rain check that never turned sunny. And though more than a decade had passed, she had never seen the inside of Angie's home, nor had Angie stepped into hers. And yet (not often nor deeply, but reliably, like a note slipped under a door that stays closed) Sanna remembers to check in.

There were days, Angie admits, when the walls of her apartment felt like a cage. Days when the children were small and the silence loud, and she thought she might go mad. Some nights all that went wrong in her life pierced through her chest and kept her awake. Some days passed without much more than the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of squeaking toys. Other days, she found herself watching the light move across the room, slow and disinterested, like it had somewhere better to be.

But even then, there were the small things. Her child's breath steady in sleep, steam rising from a mug, small socks to pair.

A window that fogged and cleared, fogged and cleared, without asking anything of her. Those days didn't lift her, but didn't let her go either. And in between long stretches of stillness, Angie held.

Lluisa was lucky. She felt that, at a time when she could barely trust her own voice, she had found a guardian angel, who went by the name of Rabija. Those days, Lluisa had lost track of where she ended and someone else's judgment began. The boundaries had blurred so gradually she barely noticed. But Rabija noticed. And with time, with long conversations and quiet reminders, she helped Lluisa remember the shape of her own self. Not all at once, more like a river reshaping the riverbank. It took two years of slow unfolding for Lluisa to feel herself again. She had once returned to Helsinki because a story felt unfinished, because the words kept forming. But this also became part of the story: the realization that some chapters carry you too far from who you are. And that part of writing more is knowing when to set a book down.

"When you raise your children alone, people always find a way to tell you what you're not doing right" said Angie. That the children should eat better, sleep longer, scream less, sit quiet. That your house is messy and your Finnish broken. Everyone has a measure, but no one ever handed her a word of praise.

So, she began saying it to herself. Not every day, but sometimes, at the end of a working day, when the dishes were done and the apartment finally quiet, she would sit on the edge of her bed and wrap her arms around her own shoulders. She would say, barely loud enough for the words to settle somewhere inside her: "You did well today."

The children had eaten. They had laughed. They had fought and made up. She had paid a bill, answered a message, remembered to buy milk.

There was no script for the life she was building. No model to hold up and say, "like this." She made it up as she went along, stitching mornings to nights, meals to memories, folding small pajamas and haunting memories into the same drawer. And if no one clapped, she didn't wait for applause, but her one hand holding tight the other hand.

# Coming to terms with uncomfortable truths: The Phoenix riots.

Josephine Vaccaro

It came as a dreadful shock to South Africans to find themselves, all of a sudden, engulfed in the devastation the looting and rioting had been causing come July 2021. Nothing but wreckage was left with buildings brought down in flames and shops and other ventures looted leaving behind towns in ashes and completely trashed. Tensions had risen high while chaos ensued. 340 lives were lost amidst the frenzy. It is alleged that the fuse that sparked these crimes and set the streets ablaze was the arrest of the country's former president Jacob Zuma for contempt of court. Was this catastrophe haphazard or was it rather orchestrated, as it may as well have been? How else could crimes so grave prolong into weeks.

The mayhem it produced in the country turned indescribably tragic, remarkably quickly, in the township known as Phoenix taking on, to make matters worse, the unsavoury trait of racial profiling which led to acts of extreme violence against Black Africans. The stories of its survivors come together speaking of a much-needed healing process for South Africans and for South Africa alike.

Phoenix has been known for being a predominantly Indian area as it had been assigned to the Indian indentured labourers during Apartheid. At present its population is mixed accounting the Indian community to be the majority in comparison to Black Africans and other groups. As of the relations of the ones with the

others, these have been described “not to be bad” (SABC News), for the most part amicable though far from idyllic. So, how did these relations turn sour so fast? After all, peaceful resolutions had been reached prior 2021 or better after the massacre of Cato Manor in 1949, event which seemed to be echoing over and again during the aggressions perpetrated at the population passing through Phoenix and the neighbouring KwaMashu and Inanda in July 2021.

These onslaughts were being committed on behalf of members of the Indian community who whilst assaulting the first of the survivors, smashing his car and manhandling him, were spuing racial slurs and remarking “what Black people did in 1949, it’s their turn... they [the Indians] do it to Black people!” (SABC News) as Chris B. describes his experience. Chris B. was making his way as any other day unaware of what awaited ahead calmly approaching Phoenix. It was then that he noticed two vehicles being torched whose suffocating flames and smoke rendered the air unbreathable. One of these was a Toyota Corolla also teasingly called ‘a cockroach’. The other a small truck, possibly a bakkie. Chris B. continued on his journey only to be stopped in his tracks and for the brutal assault to commence with the assailants approaching him from the driver’s side of his car. Viciously dragged out of his car the torment was underway until the moment of his escape, as he recalls it, by a fluke.

The incident recalled in the unrest refers to the massacre of the Indian community in 1949 on behalf of some members of the Black communities of which Chris B. confesses having no prior knowledge. He even had to look it up to make sense of what they we’re vindicating. It became clear to him that he had borne the brunt of an unhealed wound that resurfaced the day he drove through Phoenix. Clippings from back then show a scenario not dissimilar to that of the unrest of 2021, that of desolation. However, reputable authors have discussed by far and large the occurrence of Cato Manor pondering a query that holds true to this day though roles have been reverted: are these “a symbol of African antagonism against Indians or an abnormal eruption

symbolic of a frustrated and abnormal society” (Ramamurthi, 1994, 543).

Despite making it out alive and virtually unscathed, Chris B.’s neighbours, unfortunately, met a different fate. Lokishi, for instance, was left to fend for himself lacking the support of the local police the day of the incident and plainly told to bugger off and “go die in hospital” (SABC News). He suffered facial abrasions and lacerations. Mr Mokubung, instead, had an arm and leg broken and was bed ridden. He also mentioned how this angered his son and how, as a concerned father, he had taken him out of school in Phoenix so as to prevent him from redirecting his anger and retaliating against his Indian classmates. There is a serious need to face racism head on or “it cannot be rooted out” (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2024, 101), in his view.

The ideal of non-racialism and colour-blindness has not been achieved. As noted by the Collective, a group of community leaders, “we have to confront painful truths but [also] rely on the overwhelming goodness of the vast majority of the people” (SAHRC, 2024, 133). The clear need for greater social cohesion has been cast aside, it would appear, also by the government which has seemingly been leaving “the sores festering” (Ramamurthi, 1994, 546) and distrust to grow, in this specific instance, between Indian Africans and Black Africans, contrary to what had been stipulated in the interim Constitution of 1993 which, in short, advocates:

*“to transcend the divisions and strife of the past [calling for] a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation” (114).*

The impression drawn from Chris B.’s experience is that there is still trauma around the massacre of Cato Manor which is made even more significant when considering “the narrative around those events had been communicated either directly or indirectly

across generations and this has formed a distorted view of reality of the present situation that led into a violent reaction” (SAHRC, 2024, 140); testament to the fact that it is the social process that is also the focus and that, despite classical judicial responses, a more comprehensive and holistic approach needs to be taken on.

The lacklustre approach of the national police had people forming community neighbourhood watches including community policing forums to safeguard their properties and their lives and to prevent looters and rioters from entering. Convener Maharaj also warranted against the role played by social media in aggravating the situation as it contributed to “instilling the fear of God” (SABC News) amidst the Indian communities, he exclaims. For the most part, these posts were functional and peaceful. Sadly, though, the same cannot be said for Phoenix where the violence took on racial connotations and the end result was gruesome, to say the least.

Ntethelelo carries the scars not just on his body, but has been deeply emotionally affected. Ntethelelo was out with nine of his friends, some of which acquaintances, after having enjoyed some game they were invited to eat. That day, the 12th July, Ntethelelo with his friends decided to take a short cut on their way home through Phoenix only to be stopped at a roadblock, one of those patrol blocks set up independently from those informally formed by the community. Here his vehicle was searched: “The way they requested to search [...] was laced with insults and anger, that’s how I viewed it. There were comments like ‘Zuma’s people’, ‘monkeys’. They checked the vehicle, didn’t find anything, and told us to proceed” (SAHRC, 2024, 105). As he was making his way, a member of the patrol axed his car, and the group then started to throw stones. Some chose to fight back, but got hit on the head, instead. Armed as these groups were, Nzuzwa was then shot while Magwaza was assaulted. All of this occurred in a matter of a heartbeat. In fact, Ntethelelo tried to drive away whilst some of his friends attempted to flee on foot only to be assaulted. As he drove shots were fired against the vehicle. “There was another group approaching me as I was fleeing [...] Then the man

who shot at Nsele, shot at me, two bullets. They entered the left-hand side of my back. One exited from my front [...] It was like a game, some [...] were laughing and shouting at us. They were taking photos and videos as this was happening.” (Daily Maverick, 2021). By the time Ntethelelo was able to escape, he lost consciousness only to wake up in a clinic a few hours later and to be transported to Addington hospital but by the following day. The nightmare was not over, though: “I was discharged on 24th August and went to my home in Eshowe. That’s when I was told that Nzuzo, Nsele and Jiyani, who had been in my company [...] had died” (Ibid.), and his car torched for the sake of it.

The platform provided by the South African Human Rights Commission plays a pivotal role in the healing process as it unveils horrid truths that need to be spoken and heard first in its diagnostic of a troubled country. Thulile Ngcobo, for instance, lost her son in the most gruesome manner she recounts “He was attacked in his vehicle and his body was charred beyond recognition” (Daily Maverick, 2022). It is true that South Africa is a State, but it is also true that it is not yet a nation as it has been pointed out by professor Zulu during his statement of the unrest. (SAHRC, 2024, 138). Just as in 1949 opposing parts had come to an understanding to unify against the Apartheid regime, could this be considered as another occasion for people to unite so as to support and sustain nation-building? Is this not the will of the people? Are the people ready for change? The unrest and the brutality of Phoenix are an important example of the ungovernability of the nation, showcasing, at the same time, similar patterns arising from the country’s past illnesses that come to haunt the present again and this time under a different tune, that of ‘kill the farmer, kill the Boer’ no longer in resistance to Apartheid, but in retaliation to it.

Therefore, concerns raised by the South African Human Rights Commission on the unrest being the wake up call the country needed marks the urgency and necessity of the people

coming together, but also of facing the uncomfortable truths as we piece the many stories together. This is the case for all South Africans irrespective of colour, race, creed.

Past grievances still appear to manifest with bitterness. Reconciliation knows alternative avenues as those that derive from the communal life in finding ways locally to be able to cope. At the grassroot level means of healing can emerge locally, for example, in forging bonds and, in the aftermath of the riots, bonds were forged and the Phoenix Ubuntu Forum was created from the people of Phoenix and led by Convener Maharaj, to sustain and support those affected by the violence. This took on many forms of local contribution whether this meant providing food supplies or arranging sport initiatives, but one of the major concerns was for their youths fearful of going back to school and the efforts made in collaborating with the department of education to overcome this. Similar peace committees to those of Convener Maharaj began to emerge. It goes farther than that. Known by its acronym PINK (Phoenix, Inanda, Ntuzuma, KwaMashu), this agglomeration, comprised of 15 members belonging to a range of organisations, has developed into a peace and development committee, mostly to avert the furthering of violence, but also to rebuild trust between communities. It is understandable how informal forms of relief are just as important to help healing in the comfort they provide in their quest, among things, for justice. There is, nonetheless, a general sense of dissatisfaction in the lack of meaningful assistance received by some. It runs deeper Bishop Paul Verryn asserts “I think there is a deep, deep sense of pain among the victims, pain that has not been recognised by society at large” (Daily Maverick, 2022).

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