

The *Tales from Beyond the Ban* Project:  
Using Oral Tradition Tales and Oral Histories  
to Resist Discrimination and Rebuild a Sense of Belonging on Campus and Beyond

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**Abstract**

*As an artist/scholar who has also spent forty years as a performance storyteller, I tell folk and fairy tales to encourage public consideration of, and conversation about, social issues. The audience is my co-creative partner in the performance of the stories I gather around a given topic. In the fields of theatre and performance studies, these kinds of performances are considered performed research. When I ask my audiences to join me in reflecting on what we've learned – through surveys, interviews, or question and answer (Q and A) sessions – these are examples of performance as research. Both performed research and research as performance played a part in my current project, Tales from Beyond the Ban. The initial impulse for creating the project came on January 27, 2017, when the newly installed President signed an executive order banning entry to the United States of citizens from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This article describes storytelling and story-listening as acts of resistance – whether sharing oral tales from the targeted countries or sharing oral histories of those who have been impacted by the ban – and as ways to rebuild community in the face of discriminatory policies.*

**Keywords:** storytelling, travel ban, resistance, discrimination, community

**Introduction: Telling Traditional Stories as Performed Research and as an Act of Resistance**

As an artist/scholar who has also spent forty years as a performance storyteller, I tell folk and fairy tales to encourage public consideration of, and conversation about, social issues. To that

end, I collected and toured *Making the Heart Whole Again*, a spoken word concert of oral tradition tales and personal stories about peace, justice, and reconciliation following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11). I also created and toured *Changing Skins*, a performance of traditional and popular tales along with commentary on the prevalence and persistence of transgender folktales and folkways around the world. In the fields of theatre and performance studies, these kinds of performances are considered performed research.

By compiling and performing these research-driven spoken word concerts, I am learning by doing. I am learning about the narratives themselves and how to tell them, about the cultural knowledge and universal wisdom that they contain, and also about their impact on both the listeners and the teller. As my co-creative partner in this endeavor, the audience is learning many of these things as well. When I ask my audiences to join me in reflecting on what we've learned – through surveys, interviews, or question and answer sessions – these are examples of performance as research. Both performed research and performance as research played parts in my current project, *Tales from Beyond the Ban*.

In the introduction to *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*, Riley and Hunter (2009:xv) write: “While performance practices have always contributed to knowledge, the idea that performance can be more than creative production, that it can constitute intellectual inquiry and contribute new understanding and insight is a concept that challenges many institutional structures and calls into question what gets valued.” In this article, I describe *Tales from Beyond the Ban*, my latest intellectual inquiry using storytelling performance as research, and the new understanding and insight that it has afforded me as well as my audiences.

Annette Arlander (2018:134) observes that “artistic practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest. The artist-researcher is literally producing

phenomena – artworks or performances – and not only observing them.” She continues: “the artist-researcher...is mixing the object, method, and outcome of her research.” In *Tales from Beyond the Ban*, story is the object of my study. Storytelling/story-listening is my method. And the intended outcome is further story sharing from listeners who may have gained a new perspective from the stories they have heard.

This project embodies my intentional engagement with listeners, as well as the audience’s participation in the production of my performances. Together, we enter into the interactive, imaginal space (between the speaker’s voice and the listener’s ear) that is created by a storytelling event. For an engaged teller and her listeners, storytelling is the original immersive technology.

Traditionally, oral stories are meant to teach us how to be human in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environment. And that is the kind of environment that engendered this project – specifically, the hostile cultural landscape that followed in the wake of President Donald Trump’s initial travel ban. My performance project examines the intersection between traditional tales from the seven predominantly Muslim nations named in that first ban, and personal narratives gathered from those who have been affected by the ban. A cadre of international graduate students at a Midwestern university were both my inspiration and my most valuable resource in this endeavor.

In gathering and telling folktales from the targeted countries, I am performing an act of resistance to the discriminatory ban itself and reaching out to those impacted by it. And by celebrating cultures that the Trump administration has demonized with its rhetoric, I am offering a counter narrative, illustrating admirable and universal themes in stories from those cultures. But the project goes beyond both performance and resistance, striving toward rebuilding a sense

of community and belonging as detailed below.

### **Origin and Context of a Performance as Research Project**

In the fall of 2014 as a newly minted (nontraditional) PhD, I was recruited to teach a semester-long course on communication and American classroom culture for international graduate students who wished to be teaching assistants. Students tested into my intermediate-level class through an oral proficiency exam required by the state. A score of 1 means “not ratable” and students with that score are directed to an Intensive English language class taught by another program. The rest of the scores – 2P (provisional), 2, 3P, 3, 4P and 4 – indicate increasing levels of oral fluency in American English. Those students with 2P-4P scores are the population that my program serves. The various provisional scores allow students to perform at various levels – to grade papers, hold office hours or oversee lab assignments; to lead a review section, or to teach a 50-minute recitation class – as long as s/he is simultaneously taking an oral proficiency class like mine.

My course helped the students let go of fossilized mispronunciations and replace them with the standard sounds for vowels and consonants used in American English. It included grammar reviews and lessons on American speech music – that is, which syllables in a word, or words in a sentence, Americans stress and which ones we don’t. My students also completed frequent micro-teaching assignments aimed at American undergraduates, and attended one-on-one tutorials to address the specific linguistic challenges that each one faced. In addition, I asked them to share culturally specific information about traditional festivals, foodways, crafts, costumes, etc., as well as literature from their home countries, as a way to honor their heritage and to acknowledge the humanities in the STEM-heavy world of academia. At the end of the

semester, the students took their next oral proficiency exam. With consistent effort throughout the semester, they moved forward an average of one half a grade, say, from 2 to 3P. Getting a high enough score allowed them to teach independently for their departments. Not moving ahead meant that their assistantships could come to an end.

Every semester I taught a new set of students who had been speaking English in their home countries since they were adolescents. However, their nonstandard pronunciation, unusual syllable stress or inconsistent grammar usage made them hard to decode by the average American undergraduate. Each semester, I began by acknowledging the students for their accomplishment of being accepted into a graduate program to earn a Master's degree or PhD while speaking, learning, writing and reading in a second language, thousands of miles from home. And then I offered them the ear of a professional listener and public speaker who could help them move forward if they were willing to work hard. I was always moved and motivated by what these students were striving to do in the unknown landscape of an American university.

The initial impulse for creating *Tales from Beyond the Ban* came on January 27, 2017, when the newly installed President signed an executive order banning entry to the United States to citizens from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It was the second week of our Spring semester. For the students from those countries enrolled in my class, and others whom I have taught in previous semesters, the ground had shifted. The country that had initially welcomed them as emerging scholars, researchers, and professionals had become not only an unfamiliar landscape, but also a hostile one.

The following day nationwide protests broke out against the ban, followed by chaos at airports where some international travelers were stranded en route. Attorney General Sally Yates was fired for declining to defend the ban, and an ongoing push-pull between federal judges and

administration officials began. A month later, in a bar in Kansas, an unbalanced man shouted, “Get out of my country!” before fatally shooting an Indian man – whom the shooter thought was Middle Eastern – and injuring two others. Needless to say, this endless turmoil disrupted any sense of safety or sense of belonging among many international students, immigrants, refugees and others across America.

I started my Monday morning class two days after the executive order by expressing my anger and distress over the situation and encouraging my students to contact the Graduate and Professional Council (GPC). The GPC governs the students in the graduate and professional programs on our campus and sends lobbyists to Washington, DC, to engage our representatives on issues of concern to the students. Outside of class, I was beside myself with a sense of injustice. My professor husband responded to my distress by urging me to find and tell stories from the targeted countries as both an act of resistance and an effort to rebuild the students’ sense of belonging. For, as folklorist William Ferris (2017) said at his Lifetime Achievement Award ceremony at the American Folklore Society: “Folklore allows you to go in at the foundation of understanding and respecting others.”

### **Oral Tradition Tales as Inquiry and Outreach**

I went to my home library to begin my search for oral tradition tales in collections like Bushnaq’s *Arab Folktales* (1987), Ragan’s *Fearless Girls, Wise Women and Beloved Sisters* (2000), Shah’s *World Tales* (1991) and Gold and Caspi’s *The Answered Prayer* (1990). Where my own collection was lacking, I ordered books and researched online collections like the one created by the Lyndale Community School S.P.I.R.A.L. Project in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Lyndale Community School 2018).

I began to build my repertoire, selecting one story from each of the seven countries named in the ban. I chose tales about hospitality and connection like “The ‘Pink Pearl’ Prince” from Iran, “Djuha and the Figs” from Iraq, and “Djuha’s Sleeve” from Syria. I collected tales about marginalized characters who wanted more than fate had offered them, as in “God Will Provide” from Libya, “Fox and Crocodile” from Somalia, and “The Wanderer” from Yemen. And I looked for tales about the perseverance of those forced from their homes by need – like the hero in “The Kindly Ghost” from Sudan. In other words, I looked for stories that strive to teach the listener how to be human in an increasingly complicated world. Those whose cultures were named by the ban, as well as Americans who had no firsthand knowledge of those cultures, were my target audiences.

Why did I choose folktales as my vehicle of inquiry and outreach in this project? Over the last forty years, I have found that their metaphoric power allows audiences to deeply engage in topics that might otherwise be too sensitive for a more direct narrative approach. In *Burning Brightly – New Light on Old Tales Told Today*, folklorist Kay Stone (1998:250) puts it this way: “[Folk]tales offer a path into the woods of inner vision and creativity; one returns to the external world with new wisdom and new vision, paralleling the journey of the protagonist of a folktale. The wedding feast that concludes so many of the wonder tales symbolically marks this union of inner and outer realities.” As a nationally known storyteller who has worked from coast to coast, in Europe and in Asia, I have observed that these kinds of stories are intellectually stimulating and emotionally evocative to audiences of all ages. And as a scholar/artist, I have surveyed audience members who confirm this observation, while also noting that the stories have impacted their thinking and feeling about a given subject.

Next, with the support of my program's coordinator, I sent several email queries to students who had been through our program, inviting them into conversation with me about oral tradition tales – the ones I had selected and the ones they grew up hearing – and also asking if any would be willing to share their experiences with regard to the proposed ban. Capturing the fear of reprisal engendered by increasingly vocal anti-immigrant sentiment, one emailed me back, saying: “I have no doubt my story would be what you are looking for. But...can you guarantee that my name would be kept anonymous?” Yes, I could make that guarantee, but I couldn't hope to assuage the daily fear that student felt. Others within my class – from countries that had not been targeted – also expressed concern about whether or not their welcome to the United States might be rescinded by the current administration.

In late May of 2017, I offered two “listening days” for individuals or, if they wished, for small groups, to listen to the stories I had found and to tell tales of their own. But building relationships in these fraught circumstances has its own tender timeline and, with summer nearly upon us, response was limited. I postponed the “listening days,” but kept working on my storytelling performance.

In June of 2017, I taught a summer session for my program. For the first time, I asked my students to share an English language translation of a fairy tale from their home countries. A community-building device introducing the class to culturally specific narratives, the exercise also gives the narrator a chance to build vocabulary, vary inflection and intonation to keep the listener's attention, and practice the correct use of verb tenses. Far away from their childhood libraries, the students looked for familiar stories on the Internet. One student told an excerpt of a much longer tale, referencing Simurg (also written as Simurgh and Simorgh,) a mythological bird, both wise and benevolent (Narbaraz 2002). A top-of-the-food-chain raptor like America's



Bald Eagle, Simurg is also a nurturing spirit. The magical bird will come to your aid in an instant, if you burn one of its feathers. I learned later that, in a student's home country, if you appear suddenly among friends, they will say "someone burned a feather and here you are," as a reference to Simurg.

That same month, an upcoming performance commitment provided me with a deadline for performing the first version of my performance. I premiered *Tales from Beyond the Ban: Folktales from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen* for the university's Scholars Academy, a three-week residential experience on campus aimed at academically-gifted, rising high school juniors from all over the state. With permission from the Academy staff, I invited my interested graduate students to attend the spoken word concert. Three came, two with their husbands in tow.

My performance that night was one of several offerings, so the high school students who attended were self-selected based, in part, on the show's title. A hundred teenagers and my guests listened for ninety minutes, and several lingered afterwards to comment on the show. Two girls in head scarves as well as several of their bare-headed colleagues expressed excitement about hearing the tales I told. The husband of one of my graduate students said quietly, "Thank you for telling our stories."

That evening, I asked the two couples from my program – who all happened to be from the same home country – if we could meet for a meal after the semester's end. I explained that I hoped we could talk about the stories I had told, the tales they heard growing up, and the stories of their own experience under the threat of the travel ban. They agreed, asking that in the meantime I send them the text of that night's stories so that they could translate any English

words that were unfamiliar to them. I scanned the stories digitally and emailed them the next day.

In the meantime, while attending an event with a United States senator from my state, I asked her what she would tell my international students about the President's targeting of them. She said: "Tell them that the heart of the President is not the American people's heart." I carried her words back to my students.

### **Listening as an Act of Outreach and Reconciliation**

Now it was time for me to listen. When the summer session ended, I conducted an interview with the two couples at a brunch in my home. Three of them had been to the house previously at an end-of-semester potluck for my class. One couple were engineers, having worked in the industry back home. She was getting her PhD. Her husband was not in school and he didn't have a green card, so he couldn't work. He was in the United States to offer support to his wife during their many months away from their home county. The other couple were both PhD students, in Education and Biology respectively.

Our after-brunch conversation began with a review of the stories they'd heard in my performance, followed by a query about the stories they knew from relatives, teachers or community members back home. All four had heard oral tales growing up, particularly episodes of a cultural epic concerning several generations of kings. They explained that a poet who lived a thousand years ago collected this epic cycle of oral tales over a thirty-year period. His intent in writing them down was to preserve both the stories and the language in which they were told. Here is a snippet of the epic, told by one of my guests who proved to be a gifted and prolific storyteller:

The bird, Simurg, is [sometimes compared to the] phoenix. Rostam's father Zal, was born all white – an albino – and that was not a good sign. So, the baby was left on a mountain to perish. Simurg came to the child, rescued and raised him. S/he is a wise bird [and] knows the solutions [to problems]. Later in Rostam's story, the hero faces a warrior like Achilles who is invulnerable – except for his eyes since he closed them while being immersed in a particular water. Rostam is getting beaten by this man. He goes to his father Zal for advice and is given two feathers of Simurg. Told that burning a feather will make Simurg appear, Rostam does so and Simurg is there, telling [the hero] how to make an arrow with two heads to shoot out the eyes of his foe...

During a pause in the epic, another of my guests said that his grandfather had also told the story of Rostam to him when he was a child. But his grandfather told it *as if the events had happened to him*. I told my guests that this strategy of an older narrator placing himself in the context of a traditional story told to children is also well known in the United States. The source of his grandfather's story eventually came out because the tale of Rostam was taught in the grandson's high school. Even today children in their country of origin are named for the heroes in this epic tale. The engineer husband of my engineer student bore one of those names.

His wife then talked about her father telling a dragon story at bedtime. After everyone else in the house was asleep, she said that she lay awake long into the night watching a blinking red light in the distance and believing it to be the dragon's fiery breathing.

Their imaginations stimulated by story, children often use story images to make sense of their environments. It shouldn't be a surprise that oral tradition tales are so easily remembered across decades. Storytelling studies researcher Kendall Haven (2007:4) writes that according to

evolutionary biologists, “100,000 years of reliance on stories have evolutionarily hardwired a predisposition into human brains to think [and remember] in story terms.”

At the brunch that day, further episodes of the epic unfolded, all recounted by the same narrator, occasionally assisted by his wife. After the tale of Rostam, he spoke of an earlier king, who was seduced by evil, so that two serpents grew out of his shoulders. The snakes demanded the brains of two boys each day for their meal. In time, a generation was being lost to the endless appetite of the malevolent serpents. Two chefs came to work in the king’s kitchen, killing one child selected for sacrifice, and, by mixing sheep’s brains with human brains, saving the other. The boy who was spared was sent to live in the mountains. Eventually a blacksmith raised an army from that group of spared children, and they defeated the wicked king. Despite my familiarity with a storehouse of oral narratives from around the world, this image of murderous snakes wriggling about the shoulders of a ruler and devouring a kingdom’s children was new to me. For this listener, it has potency and resonance as a metaphor for the writhing self-interests of those who refuse to ban assault weapons even as our children die in their schools.

My husband and I – and the others – listened for two hours that morning. We heard another tale about a queen (like Phaedra in Greek mythology) who coveted her husband’s son. Rejected by him, she misuses her power to slander the boy. And though the youth proves his innocence by walking unharmed through fire, he is banished from his father’s kingdom to avert a scandal. We heard, too, about the ongoing tradition of telling epic tales in tea houses using woven or painted images to illustrate the narrator’s words. We learned that grandfathers tend to tell the epics, and grandmothers, the wonder tales. And we saw – not for the first time – that sharing food and stories is one way that human beings make each other welcome and build a sense of attachment to one another.

During a pause in the storytelling, I asked if there were any images in the narratives they'd grown up with that stayed with them, particularly during difficult times. The epic teller at the table circled back to Simurg and its origin story in "The Conference of the Birds," written down by 12<sup>th</sup> century poet Farid Ud-Din Attar. He told us: "Simurg means 'Thirty Birds.' It's a story from Sufism. [Searching for a king in a time of great trouble, the birds of the world] travel through seven lands, mountains and seas [seeking] this legendary bird. By going through the difficulties, [the thirty who travel to the end of the journey] find that the bird they are seeking is themselves."

That's when another of my guests spoke up, saying of herself: "I'm going to be a Simurg."

### **Sharing Personal Narratives as an Act of Trust**

With food in our bellies, and bridges erected among us by way of shared folktales, I asked my guests to talk, if they were comfortable doing so, about the impact of the ban on their lives and studies. In an act of generosity and trust, they said that they were willing to do so. And they did. Excerpts of their oral histories are found below, used here with their permission.

In an essay on oral history methods in *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research*, Della Pollock writes: "Oral history is itself a performance in the sense of a multiply constituted, culturally rehearsed, relationally charged, and radically contingent practice of responsible witnessing" (147). By reading the narratives below, the reader now stands with me, as a responsible witness to the experiences of these students from a targeted culture. The engineer began:

Do we have a pack of tissue in the house? My eyes are crying every day. It's really hard. First of all, it's not fair. Almost every day I am thinking to give up education and go home. Everything has a value, but it's not fair that you should [have to] choose between seeing parents [back home] and studying. I'm not sure [if] I should say goodbye to education and it's really pressure on me. I feel that every day. It affects all my behavior.

Turning to her husband, she said, "It affects him more because he suffers for me." She added: "It isn't just about studying and getting [a] PhD. Most of us came here for starting a new life. Every day it becomes harder. I live in two countries each moment. It takes a lot of energy."

Hearing her classmate speak of living in two countries, the other woman said, "Right... for example we are driving [here] and we see a sign of our country, a similarity in the landscape."

Her husband added softly: "We just enjoy the scene."

It should be noted that in January, after the initial announcement of the executive order, the president of our university system along with the students' advisors, instructors and colleagues all assured our international students that they were welcome on our campus. My interviewees appreciated these gestures of support. The biologist said, "I have lots of good friends in [the] department. I didn't expect... that they follow the news. Since I'm the only student [from my country] in our program – all the others are American – I never thought they know about me. But then I got lots of emails and I had support. We are surrounded by good people."

The other couple had something to say about this as well. The husband said, “I have kind friends and one told me: ‘It doesn’t matter. We are always friends whatever happens with government.’”

I asked the four if the university’s Graduate and Professional Council had reached out to them beyond an email of support I had seen after the executive order was announced. The epic storyteller said, “No one has reached out. I don’t have any idea how that works.” He added: “There’s nothing they can do politically, so many things are out of their control and hands. What they can do and have done [is to say] we know that this is an issue, something that [has] detrimental effects on you and your feelings. It might affect your performance in academia. It shouldn’t, but for some people [it may.]”

Another of the four shook her head and replied: “I received support from our department. I just got an email from [the] university that ‘we’re going to support you’ but another says ‘don’t leave the country till we see what happens.’” The two couples were very aware that the verbal support of well-meaning members of the university does not guard against the possibility of a hate crime enacted by an unstable stranger who has been inflamed by anti-immigrant rhetoric in our national discourse.

The education student said:

Coming to [the] US and going back [home] has never been an easy thing. For me what has changed, in particular, after [the] election, administration, bans and similar things: I felt, okay, this is not a place for us. I didn’t have that perception the first time I was here; I really felt welcome. My advisor came for me at the airport...My program...is very supportive. I didn’t feel that I’m not welcomed here. Now I can say through [this presidential] campaign, probably this country is

not what I'm seeing here in campus. When [the] results [of the election] came out and the signs after, I said, "Okay, we have been in a bubble at the university, protected, not knowing what was going in on the country."

At my university, many international students have a single-entry visa, which means that if they go home for any reason before their program has ended, they may not be able to return in time to finish their degree. Each of the students at my table that morning was vetted for a single-entry visa when they came to the United States. Here's how one put it:

You can enter [the US] once, but whenever you leave the country, you must go through the interview process [again]. With no US embassy [at home], we went to [another country to get our visas]. So, it's hard to [go home] with single entry visa because it's risky; if you leave, you may not get back. Some friends have multiple entry; it's by chance.

Another said: "We [applied for a visa in another country too and] got it one day before our flight. I was hopeful to get [a] multiple entry visa. When I saw it was single, I knew [that I could not return home during my studies]. The pressure for me is more than I thought."

Thus, even before the proposed travel ban, these students arrived knowing that they must stay in the United States until they have completed their degrees. However, most came expecting that family members or significant others would be able to visit during their several years of research and study. That no longer seems likely.

As welcome as they were, assurances by administrators, advisors or American friends fall short of the restorative power of a visit from family members long unseen. Here's how one student put it: "When we got [the] visa, we knew we weren't going to leave till [the] end. I was hopeful to have my family for [a] visit – my mother and my sister – but after [the] ban I am not



hopeful for that. Maybe moms can get the visa, but my sister is young...and wants to visit me. It's been three years..." She went on: "A friend says the first days when you come to a new country, the first month is exciting. The first days like a honeymoon, and then you miss your family; then time passes, you miss more, you miss more, and then a time comes that you feel numb. You don't feel anything and then you don't know even [that] you miss them."

I asked if the university's student organization representing their country was taking any action on their behalf, and the four laughed. It turned out that the president of that group was sitting at my table. He explained: "We have a club supportive of newcomers and holding some events. Usually we are more dedicated to doing two events: one at the winter solstice and the new year. And usually at the beginning of each academic year we hold an [event] to meet each other...It's at that level. But most of the [students from our country who are] here are connected with each other."

I asked them what their American friends, faculty, and staff can do and was met with silence. Then the epic-teller said: "Just know that these things are going around. Don't close your eyes on that."

### **What Have I Learned so Far by Looking for and Listening to Other People's Stories?**

At this point, I have conducted interviews with two individuals and three couples. In each interview, I review the stories I've selected to perform, identify the oral stories my interviewees know and/or tell, and then move the conversation to their personal experiences in the face of the ban. In every case, I have been heartened by the willingness of my interviewees to join in this inquiry, traveling back and forth with me between traditional story and oral history. Beyond the

campus, I have reached out to potential interviewees from other targeted countries to try to schedule interviews.

At this writing, I have given seven live concerts plus one for an online storytelling platform. During the summer of 2017, after the premiere of the show, I gave a second concert at a local World Refugee Day fundraiser for Refugee and Immigration Services. The following fall I told the tales at a Regional Youth Conference at the local Unitarian Universalist Church. That same semester I met Amer Ahmed, the Director of Intercultural Teaching at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, when he visited our campus. Wanting his feedback, I asked him to address the issue of cultural appropriation given that I was performing tales from cultures not my own. I told him about the project's intent to support targeted members of the community, while also attempting to influence those who might see immigrants as 'other.' And I outlined the project's two-pronged approach of linking the telling of traditional tales to the sharing of personal experience. At the end of our talk, he encouraged me to continue this work.

In October 2017 I took the project into my professional community when I presented a paper on *Tales from Beyond the Ban* for the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Then, back on campus, I spread the word about the project through the university's office in charge of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity, and they forwarded my email to their campus partners. Through that connection, I was invited to perform at the Women's and Gender Studies Department's graduate conference in the Spring of 2018. There I told stories, read from my American Folklore Society paper, and took questions. For the benefit of their students, the two faculty members running the conference asked me to address the issue of cultural appropriation in my use of the folktales. Yet, at the end of my response, one professor invited me to tell the stories to undergraduates as part of the university's partnership in an

upcoming book festival. And the other asked me to submit my paper for consideration in this journal. As it happened, two of my original interviewees were able to attend the subsequent undergraduate performance. They graciously participated in the question and answer session afterward, unpacking the significance of one story's cultural markers in response to a student's question. In this way, I learned more about a story I'd been telling.

I left my position at the university last spring to pursue my work in another state. Before my departure, colleagues in the international teaching assistant program and its sponsor, the Office of Graduate Studies, hosted a farewell party for me. They had invited my students from ten semesters of teaching, and quite an array attended. One man said he came, though he had not taken my class or seen my performance, because his friends had spoken so highly of me. This suggests that stories retain their potency when they travel on the tongues of listeners to fresh ears.

A group of my former students gifted me with an illustrated copy of the Persian epic of the kings. I accepted the book with gratitude, as a symbol that my students and I have succeeded in making one another welcome. Since then, I have returned to the university periodically to consult for its Three Minute Thesis program and other professional development events, checking in with my former students during those visits. Even when we are apart, my interviewees contact me for assistance in developing elevator speeches and crafting cover letters. In other words, we have become community resources for each other.

I continue to perform *Tales from Beyond the Ban* both near and far. In June of 2018, I championed my students' plight while presenting a paper at an international theatre conference in Nancy, France. The following month, I taped "Tales – and Conversations – from Beyond the Ban," a short story about the project, for Chicago's RaceBridges Studio, an online resource bank

of community-building social justice stories “dedicated to continuing vital conversation about race relations through respectful discussion, reflection and action” (RaceBridges 2018). Next, I told an excerpt of *Tales from Beyond the Ban* at the National Storytelling Conference in Kansas City. That audience is made up of storytellers. Many of them are social justice activists and several expressed appreciation for my modeling this project. One wrote to me afterward:

Your story...was beautiful and then the surprise of telling us of your work and of the students who are afraid to return home because of Trump policies. Now you are learning stories from the countries on Trump’s list. How wonderful. You make us all proud to be storytellers. I have made a resolution to find Palestinian poetry. Thank you.

This past fall, I presented *Tales from Beyond the Ban* at the Hans Christian Andersen statue in New York City’s Central Park where it attracted families, park staff, and storyteller/activists from as far away as Huntington Beach, Long Island. Two weeks later, I shared excerpts of the show and my students’ stories at the Grapevine series held at a venue called Busboys and Poets Takoma in Washington, DC. Busboys and Poets’ founder, philanthropist Andy Shallal, was in the audience that night. Afterward the show’s producer wrote that Shallal “was so impressed with...the stories you shared. He’s from Iraq and the fact that you shared stories from his culture was so great. He said how he is learning about a whole new art form and how you transported him.” In each venue where I have taken the stories, audiences have listened with rapt attention and wanted to talk about the stories after the show. Invariably, international listeners have said how much it meant to them to hear their stories told, and American listeners have thanked me for modeling an act of resistance, respect, and reconciliation through story performance.

So, I will persist in my effort to perform the oral tales interwoven with my students' stories, inviting listeners of all ages to consider the wisdom and the humanity revealed within both kinds of narratives. I will persevere in reaching out to other potential interviewees, identified through my contacts and through their contacts. Whenever possible, I will continue to invite my interviewees to participate in future performances and/or present their personal reflections in post-show audience talkback sessions. And I will try to bring this thought-provoking performance to as many different kinds of audiences as I can on campuses and in communities across America.

### **Conclusion: Performance as Transformation**

Erika Fischer-Lichte reminds us that all performance has transformative power when “the relationship between the observer and the observed, the artist and the audience [is] reconfigured and changed into a dynamic and transformative event. There is no longer a difference between the artwork and its production; the audience becomes part of the work” (quoted in Arlander 2018:340). Storytelling is just this sort of intra-active, transformative event. Any story performance, and especially one in pursuit of social justice, is meant to invite listeners into a communal space beyond the borders of their everyday lived experience. Within that space, the storyteller's job is to move images from inside her own head into the heads of her listeners. And during that process, the willing listener steps through a virtual doorway into the story world and imagines the events – the choices made and the consequences that follow – alongside the story's characters. When the story is done, the listener often returns to the “real world” *changed* – as does the protagonist in the story – having learned something new about self or others.

Meanwhile, change seems to be coming nationwide. As an artist, a scholar, and a citizen,

I was heartened by the outcome of the recent midterm elections. Yet I will keep actively pushing back against the white nationalist narrative of the President's party. By listening deeply to our neighbors' stories, and other tales that we have not heard before, we have the opportunity to be transformed, to see with a wider perspective. With the *Tales from Beyond the Ban* project, I have modeled one way to stand as a witness to those who are marginalized by national rhetoric and discriminatory policy, and to assert the value that diverse populations bring to nations that welcome them.

In my own ongoing inquiry, I will continue to listen for the links between folktales and lived experiences shared with, and by, international populations on college campuses and in the community. In doing so, I hope to inspire public reflection on the relationship between traditional tales of empowerment and oral histories of exclusion. May listening make us willing to travel across vast distances and to brave the hardships we encounter to forge a common future from our shared humanity. In this endeavor, may we be as persistent as the Thirty Birds.

### **Acknowledgments**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Missouri (MU) excludes the collecting of oral histories from its purview. Although this project is not covered by the IRB, I secured the permission of my students and other interviewees before talking with them and recording their oral histories for my research. As I have written and revised this article, I have stayed in touch with my interviewees and other sources. All who are quoted have indicated their permission for me to use their words in a published article.

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