PROMISE OF HOME: A NARRATIVE MODEL FOR ACHIEVING IMMIGRANT RETENTION IN NEW BRUNSWICK

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Introduction

The Promise of Home is a community-based narrative research project on newcomer experiences of belonging in Fredericton, New Brunswick, which began in 2019. Recently, many research and policy initiatives have been focused on issues related to immigration retention (McDonald and Miah; McDonald et al.). Our study proposes that barriers to community building can be overcome not only by immigration programs driven by the social and economic needs of the host communities, but also by meeting the needs of newcomers. We focus on a holistic, ground-up approach to sedentarizing immigrants through incorporating the stories of both recent immigrants and other Fredericto nians, to aid in restructuring settlement policies. Promise of Home pursues this approach through four phases of inquiry that embrace Fredericton as a place where immigrant youths aspire to belong, immigrant families find a sense of home, people share hopes of building a more inclusive community, and these aspirations inform effective grassroots policies. On a practical level, our study and analysis involve storytelling, performances, a visioning retreat, a Web-based collection of stories and visions, town-hall meetings, and policy workshops. These activities are used to develop community-driven recommendations regarding newcomer integration, accessibility to social services, and immigrant retention. Ultimately, we seek to enhance these activities through a model that will be replicable for other communities in the province. This invited essay briefly describes the context in which the project was created and implemented, its methodology, goals, and preliminary results.

Project Context: New Brunswick

In 2021, Dr. Manju Varma was appointed New Brunswick's first Commissioner on Systemic Racism. A few months earlier, the New Brunswick Multicultural Council (NBMC) had released the findings of a survey it conducted on racism in the province. In its press release, the NBMC's president, Moncef Lakouas, stated the obvious: "racism is living within our communities." Whether it is intentional or insentient, discrimination is pervasive in our province. To examine the extent of the problem, Varma is carrying out an inquiry, and the findings should be released in the fall of 2022. Varma's study is one step toward making the province a more diverse and inclusive place.

Historically, racism in New Brunswick has centred around three poles. First, it has involved prejudice against the Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq, and Peskotomuhkati peoples, who were slaughtered and oppressed by settlers (of all origins) in the region (Paul; Bear Nicholas). Second, Blacks arriving in New Brunswick as slaves of the White colonizers suffered discrimination even after the supposed abolition of slavery as well as during the settlement of Black Loyalists in the eighteenth century, notably in Saint John (Spray; Nason; Nickerson). Lastly, racism has targeted several linguistic or religious groups, perhaps primarily the Acadians, who have suffered abuse and marginalization from the British since the Deportation of 1755 (see Sclanders). Ongoing racism has also affected recent immigrants to the province, especially those of colour. In the late 1990s, Baker and her colleagues conducted a study of

racism in New Brunswick, and they found that teenage participants of colour had come to see discrimination as "an inevitable feature of their social landscape" (122).

Despite this history of pervasive racism following the historic waves of colonization, New Brunswick's government has recently determined that the province needs to encourage immigration from diverse nations around the world.[1] Due to its lagging regional economy and declining population, various levels of the provincial government and private sector agents have deployed new resettlement strategies to attract specific categories of immigrants (Fraser).

Over the last few decades, federal, provincial, and municipal immigration programs have offered a convenient and/or expedient route for immigrants into New Brunswick (Cox; Harris). For example, a recent New Brunswick Canada report ("Atlantic Immigration") explains that the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Project (AIPP) "is a three-year employer-driven immigration program to attract and retain global talent while supporting population growth and addressing labour shortages." Similarly, the Municipal Nominee Program, designed by the federal Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, is reportedly "giving municipalities, local chambers of commerce and labour councils more control in selecting which immigrants settle in their communities" (Cox A3). Clearly, public officials recognize that there is a need and a desire to attract newcomers.

On the surface, these immigration strategies seem to be effective for the provincial capital. In the first three months of 2016, the province of New Brunswick took in 1,994 immigrants, of whom at least four hundred settled in Fredericton (Jones). Even during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the province was one of only four provinces and territories to see gains in non-permanent residents in 2020-2021 over the previous year (Statistics Canada, "Annual Demographic Estimate"). In fact, "Fredericton has led the province, attracting more immigrants than any other city, accounting for roughly 30% of the province's immigrants on a yearly basis" (Ignite Fredericton, "Labour Force"). At the height of the newcomer influx in 2016, Fredericton had 8,255 immigrants (8.2% of the city's population)—more than any other city in the province (Statistics Canada, "Focus on Geography"). Since then, "Fredericton took in 1,570 permanent residents from 2018 to 2019," but the percentage of immigrants has declined to 6.8% (Huddle). Moreover, due to its post-secondary education institutions and its relatively large international student population (Gill), Fredericton has also become a place for exploring the potential for "edugration," which Kim and Kwak described as "the intermeshing of education and immigration from state level official discourse and policies to individuals and families" (269).

In acknowledging the various needs for encouraging immigration, the former mayor of Fredericton, Mike O'Brien, stated in 2020 that

> The city is growing rapidly, our businesses are expanding and it's well known across New Brunswick that 120,000 people will retire in the next 10 years, so there is going to be a great need for replacement workers and even more people within our city and province. (Cox A3)

The demand for new migrants seems to be constantly increasing. As a now-archived government website put it, the province "is facing an unprecedented challenge of a shrinking workforce. Employers consistently identify that a lack of skilled workers is their number one challenge and it's expected to affect the province for several years ahead" (New Brunswick, "We Are All NB"). The COVID-19

pandemic has only exacerbated the situation in the city and across the entire province (Silbermann, "N.B. Tourism Industry").

In extreme cases, businesses involved in these programs have taken advantage of the immigrants that they attract and hire. For example, a recent article warned that

> so-called "ghost" agencies are taking advantage of weaknesses in the program. They convince immigrants to turn over sometimes tens of thousands of dollars, paying off select companies to hire the person for no pay or to simply forge their payroll. (MacIvor)

Without assigning blame for these issues, we note that loopholes continue to exist for fraudulent businesses to exploit immigrants for substantial sums of money, and the agencies concerned must work to prevent such exploitation. These practices do not meet immigrants' needs, nor do they foster sustainable relationships between newcomers, their host communities, and employers.

Although Fredericton has indeed experienced a new phase of immigration over the past decade, and it is becoming a growing centre for newcomers, the city faces challenges in retaining its immigrants. The benefits of economic immigration programs for enhancing retention of newcomers in New Brunswick are well-documented (Ibbitson; Ramos and Yoshida), and these programs are supported by various levels of government (New Brunswick, "New Brunswick Population" and "New Brunswick Provincial Nominee"; Public Policy Forum; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; McDonald et al.). Even so, achieving retention continues to present challenges, since newcomers to more rural provinces commonly use these programs to seek opportunities elsewhere in Canada (Petz). Recent findings highlight this retention trend in New Brunswick: after five years, nearly 50 per cent of immigrants have moved away from the province (McDonald and Miah 17). To avoid merely attracting sojourners who will soon move on, immigration programs must include opportunities for creating the sense of well-being that is essential for new inhabitants to grow and flourish.

According to *The People Imperative* (the federal government's most recent public policy report on immigration, 2018), which was published prior to McDonald and Miah's findings in 2021, New Brunswick had a migrant retention rate of 50 per cent in 2015 from 2011. This level of out-migration is definitely problematic for the province's economy, which is why it is vital that the government ascertain its causes. New Brunswick faces a dearth of trained workers, and this problem is exacerbated because the province suffers from one of the lowest retention rates in Canada. As journalist Sarah Petz points out, "figuring out how to retain immigrants [remains] key to solving New Brunswick's population challenges" (para. 13).

Despite the general obscurity of data related to the concrete causes of out-migration, the literature shows that immigrants generally experience

> limited career opportunities given the relatively small labour markets in New Brunswick, limited employment opportunities for spouses and other adult family members, and limited ethnic and social networks even in the urban areas given the relatively small proportion of immigrants and visible minority groups in New Brunswick. (McDonald et al.)

The Fredericton Region Five-Year Immigration Strategy is the capital city's official project for settling and retaining a thousand immigrants per year from 2020 to 2025. The project's managers acknowledge that the personal experiences of settled immigrants illustrate how the city has been failing to keep

newcomers satisfied. During the project's focus groups, international students, immigrant entrepreneurs, and other participants have disclosed their "frustrations [about] barriers to employment, access to services to ease settlement, and difficulty in locating/understanding information that could improve the settlement experience" (Ignite Fredericton, "Fredericton Region").

Over time, several other latent deterrents to retention have also become apparent. In a study of other constituencies, Arat-Koc found that

> outside the labour market, lack of proficiency in either official language leads to difficulties in communicating with and relating to individuals and central institutions.…The results have been marginalization, isolation and extreme dependency on family members to carry out even basic daily activities and relationships. (39)

At the local level and for specific subgroups, studies conducted by sociologists Catherine Holtmann and Luc Theriault have reiterated that

> it is important to address dependency and social isolation among immigrant women in Canada and to offer them immediate and improved services for learning official languages, finding employment and accessing information concerning their rights. (109)

Thus, practical deterrents to retention endure. As the previous data seems to indicate, the issue lies not in attracting and settling immigrants, but with the current strategies for retention. We must ask, what motivates newcomers to relocate outside of the province?

One issue that is usually overlooked is that Fredericton offers few opportunities for immigrants to express any sense of belonging to their new community. This need is generally ignored because most immigration programs are focused on meeting the area's economic and labour needs. Communities and governments tend to forget or ignore that immigrants are human beings with families, hopes, dreams, and aspirations of their own. Therefore, the task of retaining immigrants requires providing both newcomers and long-time New Brunswickers with more than statistical data about the province's economic needs. Many interested parties are concerned about a unified approach to welcoming and including newcomers. However, this process of social diversification faces challenges when new policies of inclusion encounter popular nostalgic attachments regarding the region's origins as an Anglo-Celtic and Acadian settler society (Allain et al.). In a recent CBC New Brunswick interview, economist Constantine Passaris explained that "New Brunswickers' own personal hardships of retaining their own children and families in the province created great emotional disturbance when [they were] asked to welcome immigrants" (CBC NB). Thus, on the one hand, long-time New Brunswickers have their own challenges with keeping their own family members and friends in the province, given the local history of high unemployment rates and of interprovincial rotational work, mostly to western Canada (Lionais et al.). On the other hand, given the recent demographic shifts and the ongoing presence of racism, there is a dire need to convince people that immigration is a positive thing for the province.

Undoubtedly, more opportunities are needed to explore and express the sentiments of belonging, especially in a community whose very survival depends on growing its population by way of immigration. For that reason, all of the partners involved need to move beyond a theory of attraction and accommodation. They need to move toward creating a more authentic space of inclusion in the province. Our project hopes to provide examples of and solutions to some of these issues.

The Promise of Home Project

The overarching goal of the Promise of Home project is to provide community partners (both newcomers and other individual and groups who have a vested interest in the well-being of newcomers and other immigrants), policymakers, government authorities, and non-profit organizations with feedback from newcomers. This feedback can shed light on the newcomers' lived realities and experiences of belonging in a new social environment. The resulting discussions can indicate ways we can all work proactively to redesign community-based strategies for retention. The process of forging reciprocal relationships with newcomers and the community is key to improving living conditions and retention rates for immigrants. For example, according to Stepick and Dutton-Stepick, if newcomers are "welcomed, if they are given legal status and access to work, housing, and other amenities, they are more likely to prosper." (3) Regional econometric analysis also finds that "new immigrants will choose to settle in smaller areas if they are able to secure employment and the area has an existing immigrant and visible minority population" (Akbari and Sun 133). Until that critical mass of newcomer population is achieved, the area will continue to bleed immigrants to larger centres.

Promise of Home aims to address three concerns. First, newcomers have complex attachments to other places. The objectives of labour migration programs (such as the New Brunswick Provincial Nominee program and the AIPP) typically ignore these nostalgic attachments, and they fail to explicitly address the aspirations of immigrant families for social attachment (Ramos and Yoshida). Second, Fredericton's marketing campaigns strive to project a welcoming, multicultural environment, but research demonstrates that the reality is often far less welcoming (Allain et al.; Wilson-Forsberg). Finally, many partners in immigration are working to build the skills and resources for meeting the challenges of retention and integration. Creating community-based policies based on the newcomers' own experiences will serve to integrate the efforts of local officials, programs, and communities.

The foundational goal of Promise of Home is to create social cohesion while supporting the needs of immigrants and refugees. We plan to pursue both of these goals in this project. By facilitating and recording the stories, experiences, and concerns of newcomers and of other immigrants participating in our research, we hope to enable these people to express their experiences, and to transform their knowledge and stories into policy suggestions for the local, provincial, and federal government agencies that are responsible for considering the effects of integration strategies on retention rates.

Promise of Home has structured its research into four phases. In the first phase, the project looked at immigrant youth narratives. As schools are places of convergence, contestation, and negotiation, the project offered immigrant high-school students opportunities to share their insights regarding their school experiences. In these discussions, we explored our first question: "How do school communities address contradictions between the aspirations of immigrant youth and the school system's policies?"

Phase 2 examined intergenerational immigration stories. Building on Phase 1, we invited anyone older than sixteen who had either immigrated themselves or whose parents had immigrated to Canada and were now residing in Fredericton. We invited these people to share their intergenerational stories of belonging, and thus addressed our second question: "How do the different parties involved interpret and negotiate the contradictions between the expectations of immigrant families and settlement policies?"

In the project's third phase, which is planned for the near future, Promise of Home will carry out community-enrichment narrative visioning. In this phase, the project will expand to include Fredericktonians of all backgrounds. By engaging with the narratives expressed in the previous phases, the participants in Phase 3 will seek answers to our third question: "What are the shared hopes and aspirations for a more inclusive community?"

Finally, in Phase 4, researchers will formulate grassroots policy proposals. Policymakers, community partners, business owners, and participants will reflect on the insights from the previous three phases to answer our fourth question: "What grassroots policy proposals emerge from these narrative-making activities?"

I Have a Story to Tell: Promise of Home's Preliminary Findings

The Promise of Home project has received research funding and support from St. Thomas University, the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In Phase 1 of our research, project staff worked with young people to collect narratives and analyze them qualitatively, to clarify the participants' ideas of home and the immigration process.

Previous participants in Promise of Home have included (in alphabetical order, with details included to demonstrate diversity of participation) the following people: Nasridiin Axmed Abdi (born in Somalia), Farima Afzal (born in Iran), Heba Alsamman (born in Jordan), Nermin Alsamman (born in Jordan), Nisrein Alsamman (born in Jordan), Hala Bakhash (born in Syria), Ranem Bakhash (born in Syria), Riham Bakr (born in Syria), Mehak Banday (born in Fredericton), Mash Ismael Guliye (born in Somalia), and Shaima Zinah (born in Syria). These participants were engaged in shaping all aspects of their narratives and videos. The project website (https://wp.stu.ca/promiseofhome/) includes an archive of the participants' narratives under the "Participant Stories" tab.

Despite the interruptions that the project faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the newcomer teenage participants were prepared and committed to the process of creating their stories. They were courageous and unapologetic about the content of their narratives. Through their accounts, they held project staff and the general public accountable for the promises that were made to them. The participants also had clear expectations of themselves in crafting their stories. Their commitment to sharing their journeys often outweighed the difficulties of revealing their vulnerabilities. They trusted the project staff with their personal stories, despite the pain and risk of exposing their struggles.

The contributors embraced the narrative experience as an act of truth-telling. They were intentional about sharing what they understood from their journeys and deciding how they wanted to communicate their experiences. They insisted on showing that they wanted others to see them as individuals. Their strength emerged from their many levels of engagement: remembering and telling their struggles or adventures, committing to communicate their insights, deciding what they wanted to say, and planning how they wanted to say it. They bought into the Promise of Home because of their commitment to truth-telling.

In the participants' recollections of home, family, and friends, their feelings of loss, grief, and nostalgia were as prominent as those of hope and gratitude. As they chronicled their journeys, they revealed numerous struggles: internal, external, personal, and communal. They were truthful and

intentional about conveying both the costs of emigration and the benefits of immigration. When the participants spoke of their futures and hopes, they mentioned their aspirations for education, freedom, and equality. They narrated their dreams, motivations, disappointments, and expectations. In their chronicles, they showed their diversity of backgrounds and desires. Their dreams and ambitions showed their sense of responsibility. They stood up for respect. As they expressed their aspirations, the ambivalence of life itself flowed through their narratives. The patterns that emerged reflected the complexities of life and different societies.

In their accounts of moments and/or memories, or pieces of advice to their peers, the participants' narratives conveyed their need to fight the personal fears that could otherwise paralyze them into inaction. As Farima Azal noted, "Immigration is the hardest thing in the world." Acknowledging and naming personal struggles led to a sense of responsibility. One common message emerging from the stories was that the newcomers intended to succeed in making this new place their home. They could root themselves here, and reconcile that shift with the struggle, pain, and grief of being uprooted from a previous life. As they kept their roots from back home, they could re-root themselves to this home. They dreamed of finding that in-between space, where both the places of their birth and Fredericton could co-exist as their home.

In the life stories generated in Promise of Home's first phase, the storytellers were often the main characters. The stories that they chose to share—regardless of where or how they started, and where or if they ended—were up to each participant. Nasridiin Axmed Abdi described a simple life in his home country with his friends: "In Somalia, we used to go swimming and the place was far from us." Heba Alsamman philosophized about the meaning of liberty:

> What about freedom? Freedom is when you want to do whatever you want without being forced to. Freedom is when you get to do what you love. Freedom can mean so many things. It can mean having more opportunities and being able to express who you are, and feeling safe inside and outside.

The decisions that the participants made mattered, because their stories were as much about being a critical lens to a larger picture as they were about making claims to the teller's own reality.

Most participants made definite claims that their own reality mattered: "I get a second chance. Immigration gave me a second chance," declared Farima Afzal. The participants were conscious of the social impact of migration on their lives, and how they were reshaping their lives in their new community. They were aware of the way immigration had affected their understanding of life experiences that happened before their migration, and how it affected their ability to adapt and move forward.

The participants also told a larger story as they narrated their individual experiences. For example, Nisrein Alsamman discussed respect for women within Islam: "A women's beauty is not in her features, the shade of her skin, in her possessions. True beauty is in her heart, her Iman, her Taqwa [relationship to God] and love for her Deen [religion]." The space of individual stories expanded into a larger story. The narratives were intimate regarding their own experiences, but at the same time they were never simply personal.

Some collaborators decided to write something that was not personal, and others decided to tell their stories through fiction, poetry, or advice. For example, Nisrein Alsamman told the story of a

woman named Farah who wore a hijab, but Hala Bakhash chose to reveal her reasons for choosing to wear a head covering. Mehak Banday wrote and recited two beautiful poems on the theme of change and familiarity. The participants also showed an eagerness to share and a willingness (especially in the lengthier personal stories) to give a plethora of details to create rich narratives.

For example, Ranem Bakhash shared recollections of pre-immigration times in Syria:

> I can't forget our teachers trying to keep us safe from the shrapnel and to keep us calm waiting for our parents to come pick us up from school. I remember when my dad came and took us home. He was afraid to lose one of us. I can still remember the look in his eyes.

Riham Bakr's extensive account, overlaid onto images of her joyful experiences in Fredericton, provided an assortment of details about her complicated journey from Syria to the city.

The chronicles of the migrants' journeys incorporated strong emotional components: joy and relief, pain and sacrifice, hopes and dreams, resilience, inner strength, and lessons in life that were hard for people who were so young. Farima Afzal expressed the sorrow of a particular moment after having migrated from Iran: "When my grandpa died, my dad went to Iran and everyone was sad. I couldn't even be with them to try to calm them down or at least we could have been sad together." For Ranem Bakhash, fear was the strongest emotion before her journey:

> Me and my sisters were really scared and we ran home, away from the soldiers with their guns. We couldn't ask the military why our dad was arrested.…We were so happy to have him home, but we couldn't escape our fears that next time we wouldn't be so lucky.

Originally from Syria, Shaima Zinah was very matter-of-fact about the situation in her war-torn country of birth: "Sorry, Corona[virus], I do not think you would like to visit our people. They are originally dead."

The personal stories also demonstrated the participants' willingness to adapt, although they were not usually expressed as direct lessons on how to become a better person. Nermin Alsamman chose to title her narrative "Improving Your life," and she gave a series of recommendations on how to be happy. The chronicles of the participants' journeys usually included messages about the lessons they had learned. For example, Heba Alsamman commented on respecting differences among people:

> We all have the power to do what we want; we are all beautiful from the inside and the outside.…We are all unique and special.…We are all different and different is good. Just because you are from a different country or society, you are still beautiful and unique, so remember that always because in the end, it just doesn't matter.

Mash Ismael Guliye gave similar advice to his peers: "Do you want to be successful in life? Then respect and take care of your mother."

Future Directions for Promise of Home

The Promise of Home project continues with its second phase into summer 2022 and beyond, with renewed funding applications and a collaboration with the City of Fredericton. The investigators' hope is that this model of research will provide valuable information that enables the thoughtful

inclusion of newcomers into the community, both within the city where the research is occurring, and in the rest of the province. This approach may provide possible models for research in other cities in the province and the region. Promise of Home suggests a practical process to address and begin to overcome the racism that is engrained in the social fabric of New Brunswick.

To comment on this essay, please write to editorjnbs@stu.ca. Si vous souhaitez réagir à cet essai, veuillez nous écrire à editorjnbs@stu.ca.

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Note

[1] For this study, we use the United Nation Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner's definition of racism (1965): "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life."

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