CREATIVE NONFICTION Pittsbu

Mark Kramer

Immigrant Stories

Photo courtesy of Cynthia Kramer

Most Saturday afternoons, you can find Martha Vasser performing an Ethiopian coffee ceremony at Tana Ethiopian Cuisine for a handful of Pittsburgh diners who know little to nothing about her home culture.

"Coffee has a great significance in Ethiopia," she says as she walks past diners with a long-handled tin full of popping, browning coffee, a smoldering potpourri of equal parts espresso, dark chocolate and cedar. "It's folklore that it was discovered in Ethiopia by a young shepherd. And coffee comes from the region Kaffa, K-a-f-f-a. Therefore, the name coffee." She may also note that goats first ate the beans and then their young shepherd, witnessing their apparently inebriated states, decided he had to try some, too.

Some Saturdays, she wears a traditional Ethiopian dress, pale gossamer linen with loosely hanging cuffs, neckline and hem striped in green, red and yellow, the colors of Ethiopia's flag. Carletta, an African-American woman with straight hair and a deep but deliberately honeyed voice, precedes Martha, taking orders, filling water and tea glasses, and delivering platters of food. Then she distributes the coffee once it's brewed. Seifu, the owner, greets customers, works the register, checks on the kitchen. A stereo plays Ethiopian music, replete with trebling voices complementing electronic percussion.

"It's an Ethiopian tradition to brew coffee after a meal," Martha says, pausing at each table, her wide, undulating black curls pressed tightly together. Each table is glass-topped and padded by white cotton cloths decorated with traditional bunna embroideries, symmetric loops that form subtle Coptic crosses. "And then you let your guests smell the aroma, the coffee. That's when you get the opportunity to bless the house in which the coffee's being served." She invites guests to wave a wisp of smoke to themselves as they inhale.

Martha still refers to Ethiopia as "home," though she's trying to make America work for her. She went to college here. She opened her own business. She married a Pittsburgher and had two kids and tried to do the PTO and "whole super-mommy thing," she says. She tried to help her children integrate into Pittsburgh so they wouldn't be as rootless as their mother.

Ever since leaving Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, two decades ago to attend college in the United States, Martha-even now, as a wife and mother-has been befuddled by her inability to reconstruct a sense of home and belonging. She used to fight it, her desire to live in that sweet spot, that secure, communal, familial place in which loved ones-by blood or by choice or even by circumstance-look out for one another. She thought she had to fight it to blend into this new place. But Martha no longer fights her desire for home. Instead, she tries to recreate home here at Tana, here in Pittsburgh, because she trusts that if she spends herself thinking of others, she'll have enough people thinking of her.

Saturday afternoons, she describes the way Ethiopians welcome neighbors into their homes for coffee and conversation, the natural,

vivifying hospitality you may well find in the kitchens and living rooms of today's Pittsburgh homes, though likely less so as neighbors become increasingly temporary.

Incense smoke, wafting from a clay holder on the floor, caresses Martha's words with mood and gravitas, as if this restaurant space were no longer just the secularity of wood floors and wainscoted walls, but, like one of the myriad Orthodox churches in Ethiopia, a sacred space for praying over aspirations. As Martha yearns to make America work for her, to make America feel like home even when it's not, her aspirations become a gift to visitors, a reminder of the goodness of open doors and a shared, unhurried drink.

John Arbuckle, whose family immigrated to Pittsburgh from Scotland, was also into coffee. Like Martha, Arbuckle tried to make America work for him. After dropping out of college, he helped run a grocery store but then shifted his focus to coffee and eventually revolutionized the industry. This was the 1860s; like many Pittsburghers of his time, Arbuckle was among American industry's vanguard, entrepreneurs who paved the way for an industrial boom.

Industrialists and laborers alike came to live the American dream: jobs and prosperity; flourishing manufacturing; open spaces, to be filled by homes and churches and businesses; the freedom to innovate and invent and reinvent oneself.

Arbuckle made it possible for the wider public to purchase freshly roasted coffee that remained nearly as fresh as the coffee Martha now roasts and grinds at Tana Ethiopian Cuisine. Arbuckle employed an automated method for bagging, weighing, sealing and labeling beans in a newly patented airtight bag, 10 times faster than any ensemble of Pittsburgh laborers could do merely by hand. Then, he invented an egg-and-sugar glaze that, once applied, protected freshly roasted beans from overexposure to air. Thus, he could package and ship his Ariosa Coffee quickly and distribute it widely with the efficiency worshipped by industrialism and appreciated by consumers worldwide. Arbuckle had begun what would become a coffee packaging and marketing empire. His entrepreneurialism even transcended the business of coffee; by the time he died in 1912, he was revered widely as a philanthropist who provided for ill children and the homeless. He left behind a $20 million estate, and his reputation reached legendary proportions in industry circles and even beyond. John Arbuckle developed ideas and products that his city and country embraced, an embrace that he returned in the form of charitable work. Clearly, America worked for him.

Of course, he wasn't alone: The list of famous immigrant families that built Pittsburgh is long. Another Scotsman, Andrew Carnegie-industrialist, philanthropist and one of the founders of U.S. Steel-is likely the city's best-known immigrant. In 1853, H.J. Heinz, the son of German immigrants, began his ketchup empire at the age of 9 by pushing his own brand of horseradish sauce, lemonade stand-style, in the streets of Pittsburgh. Thomas Mellon, who was Scotch-Irish, immigrated to America in 1818 as a 5-year-old and went on to become a famously successful banker, entrepreneur and lawyer, achievements emulated by his children, including Andrew Mellon, a Pittsburgh banker and industrialist who served as the United States Secretary of the Treasury for more than a decade. Arbuckle is said to have shared a desk in a Pittsburgh city school (the same school Carnegie attended, though he was in a different grade) with Henry Phipps, the son of an English shoemaker, who became a banker and steel executive.

Arbuckle's early work preceded massive waves of foreign immigrants to Pittsburgh, the steel and glass workers who populated Pittsburgh in the late 1800s and early 1900s: Italians, Poles, Croats, Germans, Irish, Scots and so many others in such neighborhoods as Bloomfield (otherwise known as Little Italy), Polish Hill and German-populated Allegheny City (now the North Side). Industrialists and industrial laborers alike came to live the American dream: jobs and prosperity; flourishing manufacturing; open spaces, to be filled by homes and churches and businesses; the freedom to innovate and invent and reinvent oneself. And Pittsburgh was on the cusp of serious prosperity, the legacy of which can still be seen in the city's pillared stone mansions and elaborate four-square brick homes laced by colorful wood trim. Today, these homes mirror Pittsburgh's fate. Some have remained occupied, well kept and have even been improved upon. Some have deteriorated beyond repair, though to many of Pittsburgh's East Enders, they remain lovelier than the predictability of suburbia, a beneficiary of Pittsburgh's 1960s industrial decline and white flight.

Spend enough time in Pittsburgh, and you'll meet people who can trace their families back to these immigrant industrialists and steel and glass workers. Many can even tell you what house their immigrant forefathers and foremothers lived in, and where they attended church and school. Most of them are white and of European descent. You can find a few Poles still living in Polish Hill and Italians living in Bloomfield, and you

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Today, Pittsburgh is one of the whitest, least ethnically diverse metropolitan regions in the country, and it doesn't attract large numbers of migrant workers or even immigrants in general, compared to most cities. And today's American immigration stories aren't Pittsburgh's immigration stories of yesterday. Instead of hearing tales populated by enterprising Carnegies and Mellons and Arbuckles, we hear fear: looping sound bites about the need to protect our borders from immigrants, the opportunism of illegal "aliens" and the burden they put upon our social support networks. We don't hear about home and the re-creation of self and the working class's building of a nation. Then again, maybe this isn't a new thing; war does this to people. The beginning of World War I, for example, also brought heightened nationalism, a suspicion of foreigners and a stem to the immigration flow. World War II saw even more blatantly xenophobic practices.

The struggle for assimilation characterizes most immigrant stories, but in today's context, Martha, who is black and from Africa, likely struggles to make America work for her, to make America her own, in markedly different ways than John Arbuckle did. In his time, immigrants represented something new and robust and undefined. They came to Pittsburgh and helped create it. Today's immigrants discover a city already well grounded in a particular history and identity, and they must, therefore, integrate, likely without ever fully belonging. Martha struggles, though she, too, is an American citizen and a Pittsburgher.

When John Arbuckle first walked the streets of downtown Pittsburgh, the current site of Tana Ethiopian Cuisine wasn't even part of the city. It was pastureland just beyond Pittsburgh's eastern border. In the early 1800s, Jacob Negley built a manor there and developed a village he called East Liberty, which, with the help of his son-in-law, Thomas Mellon, he quickly made into a regional transportation hub. In 1868, just as sales of Arbuckle's Ariosa Coffee really began to explode, Pittsburgh annexed East Liberty. Village merchants of the time served the wealthy in nearby Highland Park, Point Breeze and Shadyside, as well as in working class Garfield and Bloomfield. East Liberty eventually became Pennsylvania's third busiest retail center, after the downtown districts in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. By the 1960s, however, doomed and contentious attempts to develop East Liberty into an outdoor shopping space enclosed by what is now Penn Circle-an urban answer to suburban shopping malls-resulted in massive demolition and sequestered East Liberty to the lengthy list of economically failing urban areas in America.

Today, many African-American Pittsburghers call East Liberty home, and you can see that East Liberty remains a hub of "village merchants" serving nearby neighborhoods, though this wheel's spokes are a bit more diverse and varied than their forerunners. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's intermingle with Jamil's Global Village and Nigerian-born Ogbonna Moses Onwubiko's convenience store-sized Global Food Market, where he sells African and Caribbean foods. Center Avenue's Borders, Starbucks, and chocolate and wine shops lead into Penn Circle's small business mélange, which includes a Rent-a-Center, The Shadow Lounge ("an urban coffee & tea performance lounge & gallery"), Sam's Bostonian Shoes (one of the few remnants of the business district's heyday) and at least four beauty supply stores.

Tana Ethiopian Cuisine, once a boarded-up property on Baum Boulevard, is the fruit of an immigrant's dream. Its storefront, with wall-sized windows just six steps above street level, looks out on East Liberty and its border with Shadyside, East Liberty's southern neighbor. Seifu Haileyesus opened its doors to diners for the first time in December of 2007, after months of construction delays and years of planning.

On a summer Saturday afternoon, Tana's recessed ceiling lights, which pock a white tile ceiling, are turned off. Shadows temper yellow walls split horizontally by dark golden molding, wainscoted with a strip of textured faux wood the color of chocolate butter cream icing. Besides the sunshine reflecting its way into the dining area, the only other light in Tana comes from orange pyramided track lights above the bar, the restaurant's centerpiece. Above the usual shelves of liquor and wine, rests a large, flat-screened television, muted, showing a soccer match. Wanting the place to reflect a touch of home, Seifu has grouped artwork from Ethiopia around the room. On one wall hang woven-grass discs with angular words and images, including a simplified rendition of the regal lion that once

emblazoned Ethiopia's flag in reference to Haile Selassie, the king of Ethiopia for more than 40 years and the self-proclaimed Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah. On the back wall near the kitchen, a framed poster depicts a slender woman with muddied, woven hair; long silver earrings; and multiple beaded necklaces. The poster reads "Ethiopia" vertically and "Thirteen Months of Sunshine" along the bottom, a reference to Ethiopia's generally beautiful, mild weather and the country's preference for the 13-month Ge'ez calendar, a derivative of the Alexandrian or Coptic calendar. By the front window sit three round mesobs, traditional communal tables woven with natural fibers dyed in an assortment of colors. Ethiopians eat with their hands, using injera, a spongy flat bread, to scoop up meat stews and vegetable and lentil dishes. Most Tana diners take up the challenge of eating in this way.

It's at a table next to these mesobs that a party of four-parents and their 20-something daughter and her boyfriend-sits for lunch this afternoon. It's 1:30, but they're the only patrons eating, just the second party to come in for lunch today. Ethiopian music plays, overlaying drums with the hum of a masinko, a bowed instrument. Martha's son Theo, a college student, brings ice water to the table and pulls out a pen and small pad of paper. Each of them orders the vegetable platter, which includes five different vegetable dishes served on top of injera.

Seifu is a genial blur as he runs into the dining room from his back office. In his later 40s, he has short-shorn hair along the sides and back of his head. When he smiles, it's hard to see his eyes. Putting in 14-hour days helping with everything from food prep to greeting and sending off customers to tending bar, Seifu is somehow both harried and hospitable. He greets the parents, whom he's clearly met before, with warm handshakes, and after the white-bearded father introduces his daughter, who's in from the West Coast, and her boyfriend, Seifu shakes their hands and leans over the table, bracing himself on the high backs of two chairs.

"How's business coming along?" says the father.

The gray-haired mother says, "We've been telling all our friends about this." Then she looks to the younger couple and adds, "They live in a different world from us. They live with this little iPhone, and it allows them to tell all their friends they are eating lunch here today."

Seifu, ever eager, straightens and asks, "Oh, what time will they come?"

"Oh, no," the woman says as she smiles. "She's just letting them know. Their friends aren't coming right now."

Everyone laughs at the misunderstanding.

Then the man pipes in, the diction of his words carrying his voice throughout the restaurant. His hair is particular, parted and wavy. He wears gold-rimmed glasses and a navy blue polo; like the others at the table, he is white. "I have discovered a small brewery here in Pittsburgh. It's called the East End Brewery. The owner, he has quite a following." The father describes the brewery's small operation and its local popularity, and then suggests that Seifu and the brewery owner hold a tasting here, during the Sunday buffet perhaps. Some of their beers, he says, resemble tej, the popular Ethiopian honey wine. "Beer and Ethiopian food go well together," he adds.

Some of Seifu's customers and supporters have been to Ethiopia or have loved ones there and want to understand what life is like in the East African nation. Some, like this father, just love the food and culture. He says he discovered Ethiopian food while in Washington, DC, and has been sampling Ethiopian restaurants around the country ever since. Then, of course, local Ethiopians, of which there are anywhere between two and four dozen by unofficial counts, come to Tana, wanting the same thing that Seifu and Martha want-a place to enjoy a semblance of home. Many of these supporters and regulars share with Seifu their ideas for helping Tana succeed. Even Martha, who's known Seifu for 20 years now, came to work at the restaurant, in part, for his sake. Seifu seems to attract this kind of help and personal investment.

Several minutes later, Seifu and Theo each walk plates topped with stew-laden injera to the table. After some discussion, they decide food is missing. Seifu flits back to the kitchen and is speaking in Amharic even as he opens the door and a woman's voice responds. Minutes later, he returns to the table with an oblong ceramic dish of steaming food.

Seifu came to the U.S. in 1987 to study business at Robert Morris University and then completed graduate work in Tennessee before returning to Pittsburgh. From the start, he'd wanted to open a restaurant but discovered he lacked the necessary credit history and equity. He spent several years working for an agency that helps minorities launch their own businesses. Then, in 2004, a Pittsburgh lawyer with a growing appreciation for Ethiopian food opened Abay Ethiopian Cuisine, also in East Liberty, in partnership with a few Ethiopian immigrants. Over time, Seifu and some other Ethiopians in town wanted something more authentic, according to their own palates, and so Seifu decided the time was right for him to pursue his own dream.

Business has been slow at times, and, Seifu tells the father, only the weekends have kept them going. Martha fretted over a local newspaper review's description of Tana as "quiet." "You don't want quiet," she laughs, "because that means no one is here." She and Seifu have added a Sunday brunch buffet, advertised coupons, tweaked the menu a bit. They hope the bar is a draw for customers not wanting to BYOB as they must at many other Pittsburgh restaurants, including Abay. They've considered bringing in jazz or Ethiopian musicians on the weekends, maybe from Washington, DC, where there's a large Ethiopian community, but, of course, that takes money. "He's a worrier," Martha says, recounting Seifu's concern over the small crowds. "Every moment of the day, he worries."

Martha came to the U.S. a few years before Seifu, though he's several years older than she is. At 17, she immigrated from Addis Ababa, a city of more than 1.4 million at the time, to Willimantic, Conn., population of about 15,000 and home to Eastern Connecticut State University, where her parents had been educated. She'd actually been born there; when she was 7 months old, her grandmother came to the U.S. to retrieve her so that Martha's parents could complete their schooling. Her father went on to earn a Ph.D. from Columbia University, and when Martha was 2, her parents returned to their homeland.

Martha found Willimantic wasn't "conducive" for an immigrant, however. The town had few blacks, never mind Africans. She had a few relatives in New York City, so each Thursday night, she'd catch a three-hour bus to New York, work at an Ethiopian restaurant for a few days, then return to Willimantic Sunday night and attend classes the next morning. For two years, she did this, until she discovered Pittsburgh, where her father was a visiting scholar at the University of Pittsburgh. She found Pittsburgh to be good middle ground between New York, where she felt she'd disappear, and Willimantic, where she couldn't. Martha transferred to Pitt and completed a degree in elementary education and psychology before working as a school advisor and substitute teacher and in real estate. She married Ted, an African-American and Pittsburgh native, and had two kids. She also opened Abyssinia, which she believes was, at the time, the only African art gallery in western Pennsylvania, just blocks from where Tana is today. While she consistently received positive feedback, few people purchased the artwork, and the gallery lasted only a few years though Martha still sells artwork to individuals. Then Seifu opened Tana, and she joined up.

Seifu notes that while Ethiopians in Pittsburgh are few and scattered, it's in their culture to retain strong bonds. "I'm glad that we have this place," he says. "At least from time to time, we can get together, and we can talk about our country and of each other.

"And we're lively people." He raises his hands here. "Extroverts by nature."

Like Seifu and Martha, each Ethiopian Pittsburgher has his or her own immigrant story, and Seifu sees Tana as space for tying these stories together.

Seyum, one of Tana's regulars, is broad-shouldered and dread-locked and drives a taxi for a living. Seifu describes him as a childhood friend and brother and as an Ambassador to Ethiopia, noting Seyum's Ethiopian flag license-plate holder and his tendency to self-identify as an Ethiopian with customers. Seyum visits Tana almost daily, oftentimes calling ahead with an order so that by the time he arrives, his injera and wat and tibs are hot and on the table. On weekends, Seyum helps out as Tana's host. Tsegaye, Seifu's brother-in-law, stops by most Friday and Saturday evenings for a drink or a meal because he wants to help Seifu. He came to the U.S. before his brother-in-law and is now a lawyer with an Ethiopian-American wife and two kids. Ethiopian students at Carnegie Mellon and Pitt and other universities also drop in at times.

For these regulars and for Martha, Tana is one room of a reconstructed home because, as Martha says, "You're not a nomad so you have to make someplace a home." So, she is remaking her home here in Pittsburgh, where she's a restaurant manager and mother of two teenage children. "You have to create your own family," she says, then happily recalls sharing a Highland Park street for many years with an international crowd-a man from Senegal, a Libyan and a second-generation Italian-American. Another step in her re-creation of family.

Like so many other immigrants in cities all over the world, Seifu is capitalizing on the romance and sense of exoticism that a foreign culture can bring to a relatively homogenous place. Here Seifu and Martha have something to

In addition to making a home for Ethiopian Pittsburghers, Seifu wants to help Americans get past the mid-1980s images of famine and poverty, real and tragic and alarming images truly, but partial depictions of Ethiopia nonetheless. Then, of course, he wants to make money, a living. Tana is a business. Like so many other immigrants in cities all over the world, Seifu is capitalizing on the romance and sense of exoticism that a foreign culture can bring to a relatively homogenous place. Here Seifu and Martha have something to offer Pittsburgh that the Arbuckles of yesteryear lacked. More specifically-and more

and Martha have something to offer Pittsburgh that the Arbuckles of yesteryear lacked. More specifically—and more substantively—they're connecting this aging city and its immigrant past to a globalized world.

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As the family finishes lunch, Seifu, rather than Martha, enters the dining room with the long-handled tin full of sizzling coffee beans. He then explains the Ethiopian coffee ceremony.

"Every morning, we invite friends in for coffee," he says. "You never drink coffee alone. And you offer whatever food you have."

"You can smell the wonderful aroma," says the mother.

Seifu describes the brewing process and the way Ethiopians use the same grounds three times, brewing ever-weaker coffee with each pot. Moving the tin from one person to the next, he says, "You breathe in the aroma, and then you bless your host."

Seifu walks the beans to the kitchen, where he grinds them-opting for an electric grinder rather than the traditional mortar and pestle-before pouring them into a large jebena, a round-bottomed clay pot with a thin handle and swan-necked spout. He adds boiling water and plugs the spout with a top-shaped stopper. While he waits for the coffee to steep, Seifu sits on a very low stool in the coffee ceremony corner and burns incense. Eventually, Theo holds out a tray of small cups, and Seifu lifts the jebena high, carefully pouring a gurgling thread of coffee into each.

Theo weaves his way through empty tables before gingerly delivering these full cups with a clank against the glass tabletop. The diners thank him and continue their conversation. Demitasse spoons ting against cup sides, stirring sugar into coffee that's just slightly weaker and less grainy than Turkish coffee. Ever so slightly.

Later, the daughter, frail in glasses and denim capris, approaches Seifu on his stool. Seifu jokes with her, noting that as he pours the coffee and it gets darker, it's time to brew more because this means you're reaching the grounds in the bottom of the pot. With a pocket-sized digital camera, she takes a photograph of him pouring a second round.

Ask Martha and Seifu about their "immigrant stories," and both will shake off the question with a claim that their experiences haven't been all that exciting, that neither of them really has an immigrant story-as if leaving your homeland as a young student to create an entirely new life in a place that clearly demarcates you as an oddball outsider is run-of-the-mill. They point you, instead, to Tsegaye Beru, the husband of Seifu's niece, who's also a longtime friend of Martha's. He's the lawyer who drops in on weekends. "He's got a tale that has more juice," says Seifu.

As it turns out, Tsegaye's tale is, in fact, fascinating. He was part of the student movement protesting Haile Selassie's monarchy in the late 1960s because it neglected land reform and left farmers hamstringed when nature withheld the nourishment of rain. After the 1974 revolution, when Selassie lost power and the country moved toward communism, Tsegaye and his friends became targets of the ruling Derg party: The vast majority of Tsegaye's friends were killed by government thugs. Through personal connections, associations with the United Nations and such strategies as living among tourists and keeping a public profile so that the government, leery of exposing itself to outside criticism, wouldn't touch him, Tsegaye survived-though he believes he escaped at least five attempts on his life. By the mid-1980s, when he found himself traveling around Africa on business, he decided it was time to get out. After spending more than a year as a refugee in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, Tsegaye worked some of his connections in the U.N.'s World Food Program and High Commissioner for Refugees and made his way to Pittsburgh, where he had family. He's since completed degrees in information sciences and law, and has worked at Duquesne University for more than 20 years, currently in their Center for Legal Information. Though he was never without education and connections even in Addis, his is a story rife with violence and winning against impossible odds, an underdog's fight for peace and justice against an oppressive, weapon-wielding regime out to strip him of life and liberty. In short, Tsegaye's story is also the American story.

This, of course, is why Seifu and Martha will tell you he has an immigrant story with "juice." By these standards, many of today's immigrants to Pittsburgh lack "real" immigrant stories. Most Ethiopians in Pittsburgh aren't fleeing tyranny or living a rags-to-riches saga. They aren't risking their lives as illegal aliens or as refugees in need of social support. Instead, they've come from middle-class families with some

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education and enough money to settle into a new life. If these Ethiopians were once refugees a few decades ago, like Tsegaye, they've long since established themselves. In short, for Seifu and Martha-and likely for the majority of Pittsburghers-most Ethiopians in this city don't fit the romanticized immigrant mold.

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In Pittsburgh, however, we like romanticized immigrant stories-and I do include myself here, a white transplant to Pittsburgh of mostly English and German descent-because we want our city to be a refuge for the huddled masses and a place where anyone can do most anything if they try hard enough. But these refugee and pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps stories aren't the only-and likely aren't even the majority of-immigrant stories in today's Pittsburgh.

Tana Ethiopian Cuisine brings these stories into focus more than any discussion on policy reform or border crossings ever could. This restaurant-this immigration story-cobbles together Ethiopian and American cultures. It's about raising children and celebrating community. It's about securing financial futures and one's way of life. And Pittsburghers who've just moved here, like those whose families have lived here for three, five, a dozen generations, all want pretty much the same thing: an enduring sense of home, which is the real essence of any immigrant story.

The question for Pittsburgh is this: How open will we be to the complex life, the complex sense of home, that results from the friction of people encountering people, a friction that defines this country but also leads to conflict and misunderstanding?

There's no avoiding this question. Each year, between 1990 to 2006, an average of well over 7,000 more people left the Pittsburgh metropolitan area than moved in, and as remaining Pittsburghers age, deaths now outnumber births. Yet, during the current decade, 2,000 more foreign immigrants have come to Pittsburgh each year than have left, and this figure could be as high as 4,000 if you include new births among all immigrant families. This is significant in a city that's been losing people for years and is now half the size it once was. Foreign immigrants are helping mitigate population loss in Pittsburgh, and a disproportionate number of these immigrants, compared to those in other U.S. cities, are skilled and educated with at least a bachelor's degree. Oh, and just to quiet that little voice in your head that's absorbed years of immigration reform banter: The vast majority of these Pittsburgh immigrants are legal.

Still, unlike a century ago, Pittsburgh ranks low in new international immigration rates compared to other cities, with just over 3 percent of our population being foreign-born. The good news, depending upon your point of view of course, is that, in recent years, this number has begun to increase.

Today's immigrant to Pittsburgh doesn't necessarily come from the same continent as previous immigrants. While many people from Russia and other former Soviet states continue to make Pittsburgh home, the city's other significant immigrant groups include Indians, Chinese and Vietnamese, as well as people from various African nations, and Pittsburgh is beginning to receive more Hispanics, as well. However, in a region that's about 90 percent white-in most other metro areas, the figure is more like 70 percent or less-acculturation can be difficult for immigrants, and they can face challenges as innocuous as language snafus and as dreadful as outright racism.

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The friction of encountering people in America has, of course, changed Seifu and Martha, even if just in simple ways. While not a speaker of Pittsburghese ("Yinz redd up the room n'at?"), Martha throws around clichés like a native English speaker ("When in Rome do as the Romans," "The more things change, the more they stay the same," "In the gray cloud, there's a silver lining"), and her kids speak very little Amharic. Seifu says he's come to see America's individualism as rather pragmatic and even sophisticated. This exchange, however, isn't unidirectional. Tana patrons learn about one of the oldest countries and cultures on Earth. They eat communally, relationally, and they sip coffee for more than just taste and caffeine. They leave with a handshake from Seifu or even his arm around their shoulders. That

family of four left with the smell of berbere, a spice mixture, lingering on their fingertips.

The dominant culture gives, but it also receives. Foreign cultures finally mix with national cultures to create something new. A city founded on the hard work and innovation of foreign immigrants has an opportunity to revitalize and benefit from its international connections if it can embrace the friction of real community.

Along Tana's bar on a warm weeknight sit Seyum, the taxi driver; an African-American woman who once served as this area's police chief; her teenage daughter; and a couple of middle-aged men, Nigerian immigrants with dark complexions. I'm there, too, having a beer. It's 10 p.m., and we're the only diners as we watch the Pistons-Celtics game. Martha later tells me even this bit of business from friends, whom she calls family, helps. Martha and Seifu are behind the bar, but they, too, crane their necks to watch the television. Jamal, a thin African-American high school student in a waiter's white shirt and black pants, arranges tables nearby. Ethiopian music plays overhead.

Seyum cups injera between his thumb and fingers to mop up the last of his doro wat, a red stew with chicken and a hard-boiled egg. He's more a fan of hockey and football but roots, here, for the Detroit Pistons. The teenager says Boston will win, and the two decide to bet on it.

"For a beer," Seyum says and then changes the stakes to dessert, laughing and noting that he can't corrupt a minor. Boston sinks a three-pointer and the teenager smiles a braces-laced smile and turns to Seyum, who simply shakes his head.

"You need to watch these two" the girl's mother says and wags a finger in their direction.

Later, after several minutes of basketball, Martha and one of the Nigerian men are standing together, and she begins laughing with him and Seifu, who's still behind the bar. Martha sways a bit to the Ethiopian music and, fingertips on her hips, begins rolling her shoulders to the beat. She's showing him how to eskesta, a traditional Ethiopian shoulder dance, something she's frequently trying to get friends-Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian alike-to do at Tana. Whether alone or in choreographed unison with other men and women, eskesta dancers thrust their shoulders back and forth, often escalating their movements into intense gyrations. For a very quick moment, the Nigerian mimics Martha's more subtle moves, gently and out of step with the music, and she and others laugh congenially, congratulating him on his attempt.

In Amharic, Seyum and Martha and Seifu discuss the music. Seifu replaces one CD with another, and Martha joins him behind the bar. Seyum leans over the bar from his chair and tells Martha to toggle to a particular song. Finally, she lands on the one he wants, and they turn their attention to Jamal, who has silently wandered to the counter near the register. Now, they want him to eskesta. Jamal is quiet. He's only recently come to work at Tana. He shakes his head and says he won't dance.

"Come on, do it," says Martha.

Seyum also tells him to dance, and Seifu grins. Finally, Jamal steps out from behind the bar and into a clearing. Everyone's eyes are on him now. Someone has turned up the music.

Jamal holds his arms several inches from his body and pauses. He fixes his eyes downward. Then a quick quiver courses between his shoulders, back and forth, like an electric shock rattling him for a brief few seconds. His eyes remain concentrated downward, and he keeps shaking, now flailing to keep in step with his own American version of this Ethiopian dance.

This mix of people, these Pittsburghers, we laugh and applaud.

Jamal's torso relents as quickly as it began to eskesta, and he relaxes and grins. After more applause, he walks to the kitchen to finish up for the night. It's well past closing time. The music continues with a thump and a trill and a thump, and everyone watches basketball as Seyum loses his bet.

Mark Kramer's first book, Dispossessed: Life in Our World's Urban Slums (Orbis Books, 2006), is a collection of stories from slum communities in Manila, Nairobi, Bangkok and other large cities in developing nations. Kramer currently teaches creative nonfiction at the University of Pittsburgh, where he is an MFA condidate. He lives in the Polish Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh with his wife and two young children.

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