

2017

# Narrating Refuge

Collete Daiute  
*CUNY Graduate Center*

## How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs)

 Part of the [Community Psychology Commons](#), and the [Human Factors Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Daiute, Collete, "Narrating Refuge" (2017). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs/499](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/499)

This Article is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@gc.cuny.edu).

## Editorial

# Narrating Refuge

Colette Daiute\*<sup>a</sup>

[a] The Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA.

Europe's Journal of Psychology, 2017, Vol. 13(1), 1–15, doi:10.5964/ejop.v13i1.1386

Published (VoR): 2017-03-03.

\*Corresponding author at: Graduate Center, CUNY/Psychology, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016. E-mail: cdaiute@gc.cuny.edu



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## Refuge is a Human Responsibility

As I complete this essay, people across the world are protesting a recent Executive Order banning refugees from entering the United States. Millions of people, organizations, other collectives, and even some corporations are crying out in solidarity that it is a human responsibility to provide refuge to those fleeing inhuman conditions. A detailed analysis of the ban and the reaction is beyond the scope of this essay, but my argument is deeply related to the issue at the center of the protests – refuge. I will argue that considering refuge brings to the analysis of contemporary conflict and displacement a focus on human capacity and responsibility. Millions of people protesting government bans against welcoming those most in need highlights the importance of understanding refuge – what it involves and who participates.

This essay presents an argument about refuge as an urgent and practical concept for understanding challenges and interventions, especially for children and youth affected by war and displacement. I introduce the related processes of refuge, symbolic refuge, and narrating refuge with a vignette of how a family in Yemen is coping with daily life in the midst of war. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, I build the definition of “refuge” as a political analysis of material and symbolic zones of purpose and responsibility. With this foundation, my central point is that research and practice in child and youth development should be supporting young people’s uses of language, in particular narrative, to mediate interactions in challenging environments and to foreground their perspectives on the issues. To illustrate this process of “narrating refuge”, I draw on examples from a study of dynamic storytelling by children and communities involved in conflict and displacement during and after the 1990s wars of the former Yugoslavia. Narrating refuge involves young people in interactions to make sense of what is going on in their environments, how they fit, and what they would like to achieve. The argument concludes by explaining how involving young people in such dynamic storytelling activities is an activist approach to practice and research in displacement.

## What is Refuge?

In October 2016, Mr. al-Asaadi, a Yemeni former journalist and communications specialist still living in his home in war-torn Sana wrote:

“During one of our family meetings, I asked my three daughters to write about what is happening around them. The oldest daughter at age 15 wrote the following:

“We, the children of Yemen, want to achieve our hopes: to study and play and achieve our goals. We sleep afraid, we wake up afraid and leave our homes afraid.” (al-Asaadi, 2016)

In spite of the air strikes shaking their house “badly, blowing open doors and windows... feeling like ... the explosions are inside your ears”, Mr. and Mrs. al-Asaadi tried to establish some kind of normal routine, by making sure their children went to school when it was open, did their homework, checked it, and also stayed informed of news in town, including about neighbors who had been killed in bombings of the day.

Dad explained to his daughters “what the war is about, who is fighting whom and why – that they are not the targets but could be collateral damage should we happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time”.

In addition to talking, reading, writing, the family did a big group hug, not always but especially when a bomb hit their house.

One of the children wrote,

“The situation is getting worse daily. ... However, I have two questions that are confusing me: How will our future be beautiful if they have destroyed Yemen? When will this war end and Yemen will be liberated and the future will be beautiful, God willing?” (al-Asaadi, 2016).

This story is not about trauma or resilience. It is about a different phenomenon – refuge. There are several dimensions of refuge in this family’s coping with war. One dimension of the family process that comes across most poignantly is their use of language – parents explaining violent events to children, rather than trying to protect them or distract them. The father’s encouragement led to children writing their experiences with others in mind, posing probing questions, and imagining a beautiful future. Such uses of language to make sense of what is going on in the environment, how one fits, and what one might want to change should occur much more than it currently does in research and practice with children growing up in extremely challenging circumstances like war and displacement. Such a psychology based on active engagement of children’s capacities is integrated with other social sciences and humanities, to maintain relevance in the contemporary world. This approach is consistent with positive youth development (Damon, 2004), but it goes further in our emphasis on language as a basic capacity and developmental process of humanity. While narratives by those in power are used to justify war, displacement, and humanitarian aid, we must consider whether and how using language for collective sense-making in violent like mundane circumstances might provide refuge for those suffering the consequences, especially young people.

Inquiry into displacement as a global process can usefully shift from the current focus on refugee to refuge and what is at stake in that shift. Considering child and youth development, in particular, this discussion involves an analysis of concepts that “conceal the scenes of their making” (Stoler, 2016, p. 68, after Derrida, 1982, p. 213) and “reveal[s] conflicting discourses enacted in the process” (Stoler, 2016, p. 69). With refuge and similar

concepts such as sanctuary, those of us concerned with the sustainability of childhood as a developmental period of life even in extreme circumstances can advance our inquiries by paying close attention to causes and consequences of displacement – as implied in refuge.

With their narratives, like those of the al-Asaadis, young people can mediate the system of purposes and responsibilities of displacement, rather than being positioned only as victims for others to interpret. The broadened perspective of such an analysis embeds symbolic and physical meanings by those front and center in migration scenes *and* those directing behind the scenes. In this way, rather than standing alone as the object of inquiry, the figure of the refugee is integrated in broader scenes of interacting narratives from diverse relevant perspectives.

## Implications of Focusing on “Refugee”

The category “refugee” does important work but also limits the scene of the plight of those it attempts to name. A brief review of benefits and issues of such labeling provides a background for a shift to refuge.

Focus on refugees reveals the human face of displacement and its consequences. A persuasive argument for labeling comes from refugee studies asserting that since 1951 formal categorizations of displaced persons co-occur with policies, rights, and benefits (Zetter, 1995; Zetter, 2007). Multinational agreements based on the 1951 Refugee Convention identify qualifications and rights of refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). Non-governmental organizations employ such categories to seek funding for and provide assistance to migrants. Because the nature and frequency of political conflict and displacement intensified since 1951, the Refugee Convention was updated in 1967, and is currently being debated in European, American, and other courts. Convention updates, the relevance of the original labels, and the use of the labels to assist those in need have fallen behind the original plan, which promised: “Since, by definition, refugees are not protected by their own governments, the international community steps in to ensure they are safe and protected” ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

Research in the field has shown that ingenuity by individuals and nation-states in contemporary mobility challenges humanitarian functions of labeling. Mass migrations out of wars in Syria, Libya, Eritrea, and South Sudan and displacements from gang violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, among other situations globally involved over 60 million “persons of concern” in 2015 ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). Forced by inter-state violence, assisted abusively by traffickers, and detoured by governments placing obstacles in the way, the persons of concern included for human rights protections have walked across continents, hopped on and off trains, traveled on small boats, backtracked, been claimed and rejected by governments making deals, languished in detention centers, then escaped to begin the process of seeking refuge again. Although many young adults are escaping processing centers, detention centers, and refugee camps, some have spent entire lifetimes in such places (Rawlence, 2016).

With such dynamics of mobility, “push versus pull” factors no longer clearly characterize migration factors. While migration studies continue to define “push” factors – displacement caused by wartime destruction or expulsion – or “pull” factors – promise of a better life – contemporary migration involves much more complicated movements, including “... ‘iterative’ process, and ‘staggered’ or ‘cyclical’ return” (Harild,

Christensen, & Zetter, 2015, p. x). Each step along the way of contemporary displacement journeys provides new obstacles, hopes, abuses, and inventions.

Analyzing displacement in terms of push and pull forces fails to capture evolving dynamics, such as secondary migration and knowledge afforded by digital technologies in the migration process. The situation is so fluid that governments and multinationals cannot keep track of appropriate categories and rights for different circumstances. While sending and receiving nations might once have handled much of the process, contemporary categories fail to characterize the complexity of the process, as suggested in the following account of the broad migration zone from the perspective of a settlement in Calais, France:

“... many migrants will take big risks to reach one European country over another. Most of the Jungle's inhabitants have trudged right across Europe, taking advantage of its Schengen passport-free rules, to arrive in Calais. As they slipped through rich countries with an obligation to consider asylum claims, refugees in effect became economic migrants. As if, an enterprising Afghan who has set up a small grocery shop in the camp, says he has already been granted asylum in Italy. Yet he was unable to find work there, and so he, along with most of his fellow Jungle-dwellers, will continue to seek a brighter future in Britain” (“[Learning From the Jungle](#)”, 2015).

Also indicative of the fluid nature of contemporary migration, an ethnographic study in detention centers in Southern Italy, where many migrants arrive on rickety boats, described “undeportability”. Undeportability characterizes the chaotic process of survival and striving in the midst of institutions that scramble, for the most part, unsuccessfully, to control human needs (Campesi, 2015). Migration and criminality, humanitarian aid and rigid border enforcement interact when migrant processing centers become de facto prisons (Campesi, 2015). Before being deported or after multiple cycles of deportation and return, migrants are forced to ensure for themselves that they are not returned to states that they had been forced to flee. These escapes are problematic, thus adding the label “criminal” to “refugee” (Campesi, 2015). Such fluid migration systems also defy humanitarian functions of labeling, in particular in the light of increasing border closings.

Another problem with a focus on the figure of the refugee is that while it garners sympathy, current right leading geo-political movements use the refugee as a focal point for blame and weakness. Beyond providing a foundation for status claims, visual and verbal media narratives of individual refugees highlight the inhuman nature of the plights of those living in the midst of bombed out villages, camps, and along railroad tracks. Images of children suffering from wounds, isolation, filth, or starvation may invoke sympathy and outrage, but a residual use of those images is to point to those persons in terms of deficits and security threats. The very appeals for sympathy then imply that refugees do not have thoughts, feelings, or arguments on their own behalf. With all these deficits implicated in the label, refugees become scapegoats of broader problems or symbols of different political orientations. That kind of focus on refugees renders them as exceptions to the norm of people who have self-determination, control over their lives, and something to say about their circumstances. The emphasis on “refugee” allows for ongoing exclusion from human communities who perceive newcomers as counter to the nation-state’s political-economic goals and power. If the refugee is always represented as an individual victim, object of sympathy, scorn, or fear, the responsible collectives with motivations to enact inclusive projects are undermined.

Research and journalistic focus on gathering stories can also undermine attempts to humanize the situation. Stories of individual refugees are used to highlight their positions as victims or resilient heroes. Narratives offer

specific details of strife about circumstances of displacement. Those details can be used in policy decisions, such as in appeals for asylum status, when an individual explains why she cannot return to a homeland ravaged by violence. Nevertheless, in the absence of a theory of collective narrating, researchers and journalists who highlight individual stories isolated from the broader range of purposes and responsibilities may not be serving their noble goals. Gathering stories from refugees could instead usefully shift to dynamic storytelling from the perspectives of those involved, as I discuss later in relation to narrating refuge.

Also suggesting a broadening from a focus on the individual refugee is the argument for open borders. Drawing on three political theories, one scholar argued that there is little justification for keeping the many “poor and oppressed people [who] wish to leave their countries of origin in the third world to come to affluent Western societies” out of places where they have a better chance for life (Carens, 1987, p. 251). Thinking beyond borders also gains force from questioning the label “citizen”. Just as rights claims with the label “refugee” often shrivel in displacement politics, “citizen” invites scrutiny. As one scholar argued recently, citizen is a double-faceted issue that includes and excludes (Bosniak, 2007). “Recognizing citizenship as a liminal concept revolving around political conflicts contributes to understanding why non-citizens though marginalized and subordinated in significant ways are also in many respects treated as citizenship subjects” (Bosniak, 2007, p. 5).

In summary, the problem is not isolated in the refugee or group of refugees. Something is wrong with structures. While the syntax implied by refugee embodies the problem *in* the individual, the syntax around refuge broadens the scale of analysis. “The proposition is to move away from treating the migrant population as the unit of analysis and investigation and instead direct the focus on parts of the whole population, which obviously includes migrants” (Dahinden, 2016, p. 11). Even beyond whole populations, the geo-political contexts must become the unit of analysis. This approach of broadening to a global system was useful in shifting the analysis of children as helpless victims of war or potential perpetrators of ethnic violence in an earlier intervention study with young people growing during and after the 1990s wars across the former Yugoslavia (Daiute, 2010). Working with community organizations who engaged children experiencing wars and displacements, that study involved young people in their own analysis of the political as well as the personal situation, via their use of oral and written narrating for one another, for the community, and for public officials (Daiute, 2010, 2016). My proposal here extends findings from that project to employ the concept “refuge” and similar ones like “sanctuary” to broaden analysis the migration process.

## Refuge as Zones of Purpose and Responsibility

Refuge derives from Latin “refugium” roughly “to flee” (“Refuge”, n.d.). This concept implies a complex zone of participation across time and space. Implicated in any sentence with refuge and its synonyms, “sanctuary”, “asylum”, and “shelter” are circumstances of danger requiring people to flee and circumstances of safety by those in positions to offer support at least temporarily. Refuge, thus, involves zones of purpose and responsibility. The concept, refuge (and similar concepts), begs questions such as “refuge from what?” “refuge where?” “refuge with whom?” and so on. Considering these questions invokes a scene with multiple persons in diverse roles, with diverse purposes and resources, engaged in activities, across dimensions of space-time. When mapping a zone of refuge, we identify a system of structural relations - causes, consequences, and participants. Zooming back from the individual or group implied in the figure of the refugee, the inquiry becomes

complicated, as it should. In this sense, refuge is a process of interactions albeit often implicit across individuals, groups, and institutions enacting purposes and meanings relevant to displacement journeys.

Like refuge, home, colony, camp, and sanctuary have become reference points for scholars of displacement and migration. Each of those concepts implies collective spaces fueled by intentions and affects, thus, living manifestations of imposition and responsibility. For example, “colony emphasizes the movement and containment of peoples by imperial political forces, pushing people into enclaves” (Stoler, 2016). Colony is also an analytic lens for tracing shifting and shifty processes of imperial power grabbing. Examining “colony” as a process of exclusion then sheds light on “camp”. While refugee camps are places of humanitarian aid, examining them as consequences of “messy troubled spaces of ambiguous colonial lineages” reveals the value of identifying zones of displacement across time and space (Stoler, 2016, p. 75).

The concept home in migration studies also extends beyond individual refugee with an emphasis on the human need for safe shelter, preferably a permanent one. Some scholars have also acknowledged the circumstances of conflict and instability in claims to home. For example, home is a contested space in West Bank settlements of Israel and Palestine (Kotef, 2016). In the politics of home and belonging in Israel/Palestine, people develop attachments to spaces and places when these attachments themselves facilitate nation-state violence. Processes of those having to move out of areas and those moving in involve affects and justifications of one’s right to displace another (Kotef, 2016). The political transfer of homes plays out in very personal ways, such as when a young Israeli who moved in to the former home of a Palestinian woman shared tea one afternoon. For one of these young women the scene of their cordial tea evoked a robbed childhood home, and for the other it was the unquestioned foundation of her future. With a detailed analysis of the psychological dimensions of home in this political conflict, Kotef examined the affective experiences of these conflicting homebodies in terms of memory and entitlement within a half-century of displacements.

Examining the meaning of displacement as environmental spaces, like colony, camp, and home, requires paying attention to subjective processes. The affective dimension of home in political tensions of displacement was indicated in another study in Canada (Alinejad, 2011). Discourse in a blog by Iranian-born young people living in Canada and the United States evoked home as past and present. Analyses of Iranian diaspora blogs indicated that sensory memories and emotional reactions expressed longing for their homelands in terms of their present experiences, creating trans-geo-spatial realities. This study situated home in emotional connections between two distant nation-states. In these ways, people’s accounts of their once and current lived environments enact home as a politically extended zone (Alinejad, 2011, p. 59).

More explicitly political than home, sanctuary is a concept relevant to contemporary displacement. Sanctuary as a place of refuge is an old concept. Sanctuary has traditionally referred to consecrated places, such as a religious temple, and as a place of refuge and protection. Sanctuary is now a common practice in over 200 American cities, having declared actions and/or written policies against federal laws that require reporting information about neighbors, clients, students, and others whose citizenship status might be questioned.

Sanctuary has emerged as salient in the context of mass migrations and expulsions in Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere. Although not a scientific test, an indicator of this emerging focus was a “Google trends” search of “sanctuary” compared to “colony” and “camp” in “Law and Government News” from October 26 to January 26, 2016 (Daiute, in preparation). “Sanctuary” rose considerably over “camp” during that period of time, with notable peaks one week after Donald Trump, won the U.S. Presidential election (November 8), in part on an

aggressive anti-immigration agenda and during his first week in office when he wrote Executive Orders including one to punish sanctuary cities by withholding federal funds (January 26). Also contributing to the upsurge in news about sanctuary in fall 2016, the French government cleared the Calais “Jungle” settlement where people displaced mostly from several African countries had been living while waiting passage for productive lives in England. While “sanctuary” and “camp” varied in terms of the frequency of their mention in law and government news, “colony” continued to appear, albeit with much less frequency. This analysis offers support of an argument for analyzing displacement in terms of zones of purpose and responsibility – that is the political significance of the concepts. Political tensions captured in “sanctuary” include international pressures to assume responsibility for human consequences of wars, including civil wars where imperial powers have intervened and spaces of daily life where migrants are involved in and enriching communities in a variety of ways.

The material and symbolic embodiments of displacement as a global process come to life in conflicts over sanctuary cities and sanctuary universities. This excerpt of a recent report acknowledges debates between federal laws requiring local governments and institutions to share information about citizenship status.

“Supporters of sanctuary cities (and universities) argue that many cities have higher priorities than serving federal immigration enforcement goals, and that local efforts to deter the presence of unauthorized aliens would undermine community relations, disrupt municipal services, interfere with local law enforcement, or violate humanitarian principles” (Garcia, 2009, p. 2). Increasing acknowledgment of the politics and psychology of refuge in public discourse around sanctuary cities indicates a useful expansion of units of analysis from individuals to social structures of humanitarian intervention.

## Symbolic Refuge

Symbolic processes fuel systems of refuge. This idea is consistent with capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) and social imaginary (Vigh, 2009) offered in previous analyses of life in extreme adversity. Social imaginary is

“the imagined unfolding of social life which orients our movement and positions in the present... [and] allows us to anticipate, position and act in relation to a world that is constantly approaching and engaging us rather than merely being subject to our command or a solidified surface of enactment” (Vigh, 2009, p. 100).

The capacity to aspire has been described as a future-oriented cultural capacity, taking into account traditional foundations and aspirations (Appadurai, 2004). While capacity to aspire was initiated in populations growing up in poverty, an imagination for a different condition is likewise relevant to those living in other circumstances, typically co-occurring with poverty, such as violence, displacement and the related unpredictability of a pathway for different lives.

Circumstances that limit cultures of aspiration include social structures constraining people to adhere to norms that have defined them as less-than-worthy of full access to cultural resources (Appadurai, 2004). An inherent material human capacity, storytelling by those in adverse circumstances rather than only stories about them reveals and supports the capacity to aspire. Narratives in non-refuge circumstances tend to emphasize struggle and sadness rather than participants' engagement in activities to make policy changes. Policies and practices in all kinds of places – families under attack, in camps, schools, or community organizations – can organize to

assist people seeking refuge in their capacity building, such as with local education about the situation and a possible time beyond it. This can occur by listening to their reasoning in specific communication and creative activities. Life in extremely challenging circumstances may become more bearable and transformable in such imagined spaces.

Fieldwork among would-be migrants in Guinea-Bissau and migrants from there to Portugal traces the social imaginaries of young men from Bissau. The study reported on young men's aspirations for peace, prosperity and progress they saw as possible elsewhere, such as from the concrete evidence of remittances of those who have already emigrated. Migration became a process for imagining better lives in other times and places than possible for Black men in their country. Young men who migrated to a country that did not fully accept them because of racism and other discriminations found that being able to provide remittances back home fulfilled a dimension of the social position they had sought (Vigh, 2009). This result is clearly not ideal but illustrates the dimension of symbolic refuge.

Although aspiration is not typically described as embodied in language, I argue that narrating makes symbolic refuge material and, thus, available as a catalyst to social action. In some ways, the research projects that engage people on the move in extended social narrating are serving a function more than simply gathering stories.

## Narrating Refuge

Language can be a means of creating refuge. Although narrative can be an overly general metaphor obscuring dialogic tensions within and across narratives from different perspectives, narrating is a cultural activity that integrates collectives and individuals, in tension as much as in harmony. Narrating is thus a form of refuge in that it involves interpretation and critique as well as voice and creativity. Like the al-Asaadis, those of us working with children and youth in the midst of war and displacement must recognize the sense-making process – narrating experience, conflict, and possibility – as a dimension of refuge. Gathering individual stories often serves to show suffering, exclusion, or a few resilient stars. What would it mean to think critically about how uses of language in conflict and mobility circumstances are useful to everyone involved? In what ways, if at all, do they serve as refuge?

Language is a powerful tool for sense making and development, yet its function in extremely challenging and changing circumstances requires more integration in research and practice. Research has relied on children's language as they read or listen to items on research instruments, answer questions about their experiences, and sometimes share their stories. While those methods offer information, shifting to practice and research with relational uses of language – such as narrating and other expressive media – involves developing knowledge, not only reporting it. Drawing on cultural-historical activity theory [Vygotsky, 1978], I explain that discourse is a relational means of development.

Language is the quintessential tool to “conduct human influence on the object of activity” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55). Language and other symbolic products are “externally oriented ... aimed at mastering and triumphing over nature” (p. 55). Purposeful uses of cultural products (newsletters, narratives, surveys, etc.) further development as “tools” become “higher order consciousness”: “a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55).

Extended for this discussion of narrating refuge, what that means is that none of us has one single story. Instead, we use storytelling as a complex process for connecting with others for a wide range of purposes. We use storytelling to do things in the world – to figure out what is going on, to connect with others, and sometimes to imagine how life could be (Daiute, 2014). Language genres like narrative are thus human resources for making sense of extremely challenging circumstances, gaining symbolic control over them and possibly creating a path for action.

Several examples indicate the power of future narrating could be explored further as refuge. Future narrating is a means of describing what may be past but re-cast toward the future by narrating experiences from a variety of perspectives. Language involves creating novel sentences each day, that is using old words in different arrangements fitting with what a child by the age of 4 knows as the native language. As the child learns new words, this range of novel sentences, never before spoken by her or maybe anyone, increases as does the world she/he perceives, understands, and wants to engage. Likewise, with the familiar ways of narrating characters' involvement in sequences of events, children by the age of 6 or 7 who have had the opportunity of verbal interchange can express new meanings, new possible scenarios. In this way, the narrative becomes a possible world (Bruner, 1987).

Affordances of narrating also include, for example, a pull to a plot – a beginning, middle and end. Across many linguistic cultures, plots include an initiating action, complicating actions, resolutions, and a moral – a framework for plotting possibilities. Plot conflict is, of course, likely to be one revolving around building from a current situation, often a problem or trouble, complicating that situation, perhaps with additional troubles but also characteristically with surprises and suspense. A turning point or high point is typically expected and is a move toward resolution. Possible worlds (Bruner, 1987) can thus be nurtured with fictional stories if not “true” stories, as models in collectives.

In practices like dynamic storytelling workshops, we allow for possibilities with certain genres, like writing letters to those in power with suggestions for improving lives in the future. For example, in one collective storytelling activity in an indigenous community in Colombia that had suffered bombings resulting in deaths of village children, youth used future and subjective tenses, which we refer to as “imagined time”. Analysis of the collective narrative honoring the mothers of children who had been killed revealed that adults reified current circumstances, while the young people narrated going to the city and at least having a chance for a different life there. Some of the adults in the story circle observed that life in the city was not going to be a utopia, but the youth emphasized possibility.

Children and youth growing up in political violence and displacement have urgent needs to connect with others and to influence the course of their own and others' development. In that process, language is a major relational and developmental tool, especially with positive engagement in collectives addressing bad situations. Symbolic refuge involves using affordances of cultural media – such as narrating – to engage with others and the environment. The anecdote of the al-Asaadi family indicated involving children in focusing on what was going on around them, how the events affected others as well as themselves, and using a variety of cultural media to express and reflect on different issues from different perspectives to different audiences.

In previous practice-based research in conflict related displacement, we have found that narrating experiences in informal as well as formal community organizations, young people used different narrative genres – including autobiographical and fictional narrating – for future aspiration. Evidence from hundreds of narratives, with three

by each participant, showed that the 12 to 27 year old participants used first person narrative genres to express past events. These brief narratives by Aida, 21, who had been displaced from the 1990s Bosnian wars to Germany for several years and then to the U.S., wrote these stories in an informal workshop at a local Bosnian bakery.

*Write about a time when you or someone you know had a conflict with someone your age. What happened? How did those involved think and feel about the event? How did it all turn out?*

In high school American kids would always pick on Bosnians telling that we get everything for free from government, we don't pay taxes. They thought that they are right and that they know everything. I tried to explain the way it is but they didn't listen.

*Write about a time when adults you know or your community had a conflict with someone your age. What happened? How did those involved think and feel about the event? How did it all turn out?*

My cousin got into a fight with my parents because we were going to visit Bosnia and my cousin's son was going to Hawaii because he's in the military and we didn't know that and we got mad because they didn't come to wish us luck with our flight. As we came back from Bosnia they still don't come over and we haven't seen them in 3 years.

*Write another story:*

*\_\_\_ and \_\_\_ (from two groups) met at a ground-breaking of the new town center building. Everyone at the event had the opportunity to break the earth for the foundation and to place a brick for the building. It was an exciting community event and everyone was pleased that the new building would mark a new future. As they were working to begin the new foundation, \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ had a conversation about how they would like to make a difference in their town so children could live happily together. All of a sudden, someone came with news that changed everything! What was the news? How did everyone involved think and feel? How did it all turn out?*

Nina and Elma

The news was that the mayor canceled the event. Everyone was so sad.

They canceled it because they didn't like everybody in the community. Everyone went up against the mayor and they won and the mayor went to prison for discrimination.

Aida used these three narrating activities in different ways that might have offered her different types of relief. She recounted a past unpleasant experience, an event that appears to have been confusing for its lack of resolution, and a future event with collective action going against a negative force.

Recounting past conflicts is typically considered relief, so in that sense, there may be symbolic refuge. Nevertheless, also narrating possible yet fictional events, invited refuge with what may have been aspiration. If empowerment comes, at least in part, from uses of cultural tools in relation to others and to environmental circumstances, these diverse narrative enactments are symbolic and perhaps even physical refuge. Narrating in speech and writing is symbolic activity connecting with emotions and context. Concrete affordances of diverse narrative genres, such as the use of "I" or "he" or "she" as well as other qualities point directly to beings in the world. Narrative sense making is, moreover, dynamic, meaning that when accounts of specific events

and different perspectives on events (such as whether autobiographical or fictional) change over time and between expressions with different narratives, the speaker/author and listener/reader creates a new orientation to the event. Such linguistic changes enact different perceptions and interpretations. For those youth on the move and in great need of refuge being able to narrate their experiences in real and diverse ways might constitute resilience. In most cases, such narrating more than individual traits, is worthy of supporting as refuge.

Underscoring this argument, we can observe responses to the prompts above by Diana, also aged 21, whose family remained in Sarajevo during and after the wars. Notice that Diana used the different narrating opportunities to focus on the past more consistently than Aida did.

*Write about a time when you or someone you know had a conflict with someone your age. What happened? How did those involved think and feel about the event? How did it all turn out?*

The discussion was about Yugo-nostalgia. The girl that I was talking with thought that it was stupid to love something you never saw or experience, thinking about my nostalgia for Yugoslavia. I was thinking the same for her religion. We did not talk too much about it, everyone has its own view on life and I respect that as long as it does not harm others.

*Write about a time when adults you know or your community had a conflict with someone your age. What happened? How did those involved think and feel about the event? How did it all turn out?*

There is a debate about building a monument for children killed during the war, and it is very sad to see disagreement whether or not it should be for all children from all of Sarajevo or only for its Federation part. They still debate this issue, tensions are really big, and parents of those children feel used.

*Write another story:*

*\_\_\_ and \_\_\_ (from two groups) met at a ground-breaking of the new town center building. Everyone at the event had the opportunity to break the earth for the foundation and to place a brick for the building. It was an exciting community event and everyone was pleased that the new building would mark a new future. As they were working to begin the new foundation, \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ had a conversation about how they would like to make a difference in their town so children could live happily together. All of a sudden, someone came with news that changed everything! What was the news? How did everyone involved think and feel? How did it all turn out?*

Foreign nationals found a massive graveyard again. It is still unknown whose it is. Old wounds are freshened once again and mistrust is growing among people. Activities/work on the tomb brought mild, and untold uncomfortable feelings.

That Diana did not use these narrative experiences flexibly as Aida did to engage a range of pasts and futures suggests that narrating refuge is worthy of more inquiry.

In summary, narrating may enact refuge, when opportunities to narrate are supported in the context, allowed to be flexible (that is not just one narrative), and orient to future possibilities rather than only the past. Because such narrating interacts with contexts, especially as different genres pull those contexts into the text, family and community may or may not support narrating as refuge. Based on differences between the narratives of youth

who remained in Sarajevo compared to their cousins and neighbors who migrated, the ongoing instability of the political situation in Sarajevo during the time of our study seems to have supported more past-oriented preoccupations for older youth like Diana than for adolescents. Future research can consider whether and how such relational narrating provides a sense of refuge for young people in ongoing challenging circumstances like Aida and Diana. These examples of uses of different genres as providing symbolic refuge are worth enacting in practice and considering for their developmental potential, for the context as well as for the individual young people.

## The Activist Potential of Narrating Refuge

An important dimension of symbolic refuge is its activist potential. Interventions building on the fact that children continue to interact, play, think, and desire with verbal and other symbolic means is long overdue (Wessells, 2016). Toward that end, I propose that future inquiry could examine narrating refuge as a relational theory and practice. We can ask “What is the activist potential of symbolic refuge analysis? How can researchers, educators, and community organizers support symbolic refuge? What is at stake?”

Organizing migration studies in terms of symbolic refuge is activist research in several senses. Symbolic refuge designs include stakeholders whose influence and consequences in the process openly interact, while more typically interacting only implicitly. Symbolic refuge analyses can occur in practice, as workshops or projects with young people at the center. Outlines of relevant actors occur in relation to local contexts, as obvious and as gently guided by diverse participants. Participants like Diana and Aida in dynamic storytelling workshops could, for example, reflect on their own and others' narratives, considering whether and how they provide a sense of refuge. Of particular interest is the use of such dynamic storytelling to imagine and aspire to collective action.

The ethics of this shift to refuge as an organizing concept of migration studies, especially for children and youth, rests in this activist challenge. We must craft a research method that occurs within the context of intervention with best practices encouraging and listening to diverse individual and collaborative, oral, written, autobiographical, and fictional narratives. Broadening occurs with more than one narrative, across diverse stakeholders not only examining those of children and youth but also pointing to those of the forces causing migration and creating policies.

## Conclusion

Defining the problem in individual bodies of those labeled “refugees” averts the analytic gaze from the broader problem, while a focus on “refuge” shifts our gaze to the politics of displacement. I have argued that focusing on concepts implicating a range of actors in the migration process is a way to analyze and consider possible interventions for children and youth in migration. In addition to highlighting purposes and responsibilities in the migration process, this shift from the individualistic focus on refugee to refuge also provides a perspective for more powerful engagement of children’s perspectives than showing images of vulnerability or gathering stories. I have offered several examples of symbolic refuge to adapt and explore in other circumstances. Narrating as a deliberate form of refuge provides a context for aspiring to better events and idealized characters. Having

multiple opportunities to do that, like the al-Asaadi children and others mentioned in this essay, allows for refuge in expressive connection, imagination and action.

## Funding

The author has no funding to report.

## Competing Interests

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

## Previously Presented

A previous version of this essay was presented at the University of Neuchatel, MAPS Meeting, November 1, 2016.

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks Antonio Iannaccone, Flora DiDonato, and the assembled group at the University of Neuchatel, MAPS Meeting, November 1, 2016, for their generous comments, questions, and suggestions.

## References

- al-Asaadi, M. (2016, October 11) 'We sleep afraid, we wake up afraid': A child's life in Yemen. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/world/middleeast/yemen-children-in-a-war-zone.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/world/middleeast/yemen-children-in-a-war-zone.html?_r=0)
- Alinejad, D. (2011). Mapping homelands through virtual spaces: Transnational embodiment and Iranian diaspora bloggers. *Global Networks*, 11(1), 43-62. doi:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2010.00306.x
- Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp. 59-84). Stanford, CA, USA: Stanford University Press.
- Bosniak, L. (2007). *The citizen and the alien: Dilemmas of contemporary citizenship*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press.
- Bruner, J. S. (1987). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press.
- Campesi, G. (2015). Hindering the deportation machine: An ethnography of power and resistance in immigration detention. *Punishment & Society*, 17(4), 427-453. doi:10.1177/1462474515603804
- Carens, J. H. (1987). Aliens and citizens: The case for open borders. *The Review of Politics*, 49(2), 251-273. doi:10.1017/S0034670500033817
- Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the 'de-migranticization' of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2207-2225. doi:10.1080/01419870.2015.1124129
- Daiute, C. (2010). *Human development and political violence*. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Daiute, C. (2014). *Narrative inquiry: A dynamic approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications.
- Daiute, C. (2016). A relational approach to human development research and practice in 21st century violence and displacement. *Human Development*, 59(2-3), 128-151. doi:10.1159/000448230

- Daiute, C. (in preparation). *Crisis and sanctuary in the 21st century community college* (Manuscript in preparation). Available upon request: cdaiute@gc.cuny.edu
- Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 13-24. doi:10.1177/0002716203260092
- Derrida, J. (1982). White mythology: Metaphor in the text of philosophy (A. Bass, Trans.). In *Margins of philosophy* (pp. 207-271). Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press.
- Garcia, M. J. (2009). "Sanctuary cities": Legal issues (CRS Report for Congress, RS22773). URL: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homesecc/RS22773.pdf>
- Harild, N., Christensen, A., & Zetter, R. (2015). *Sustainable refugee return: Triggers, constraints, and lessons on addressing the development challenges of forced displacement*. Washington, DC, USA: The World Bank Group.
- Kotef, H. (2016). *Home and the ruins that remain: An inquiry into the desires of settle colonialism*. Presentation at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, NY, USA.
- Learning from the jungle: Migrants in Calais. (2015, August 6). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21660581-camp-channels-edge-sideshow-europes-migrant-crisis-it-offers-important>
- Rawlence, B. (2016). *City of thorns: Nine lives in the world's largest refugee camp*. New York, NY, USA: Picador.
- Refuge. (n.d.). In *OED Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.oed.com/nim>
- Stoler, A. L. (2016). *Duress: Imperial durabilities in our times*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press.
- Vigh, H. (2009). Wayward migration: On imagined futures and technological voids. *Ethnos*, 74(1), 91-109. doi:10.1080/00141840902751220
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press.
- Wessells, M. (2016). *Supporting the rights and well-being of children and youth in settings of forced migration: A resilience approach*. Presentation at the 9th Annual Psychology Day at the United Nations: From Vulnerability to Resilience: Using Psychology to Address the Global Migration Crisis [Webcast]. Retrieved from <http://webtv.un.org>
- Zetter, R. (1995). Labelling refugees: Forming and transforming a bureaucratic identity. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4(1), 39-62. doi:10.1093/jrs/4.1.39
- Zetter, R. (2007). More labels, fewer refugees: Remaking the refugee label in an era of globalization. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 172-192. doi:10.1093/jrs/fem011

## About the Author

**Colette Daiute** is Professor at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, in the Ph.D. Program in Psychology/ Developmental Psychology and the Committee on Globalization and Social Change. Dr. Daiute does research on individual and societal development in extremely challenging and rapidly changing environments. She has created and implemented

innovative research methods in education and community interventions, highlighting child, youth, and adult uses of language and technologies as means of empowerment. Colette Daiute's recent book publications include *Narrative Inquiry, A Dynamic Approach* (Sage Publications, 2014) and *Human Development and Political Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Dr. Daiute also recently edited and authored "Collective strategies for human development in war and its long shadow", a special issue of the journal *Human Development*. Website: <http://www.colettedaiute.org>