



Creative Intervention

Accordion Books of Belonging: Self-representing Narratives of Seeking Sanctuary Through Participatory Photography

MELISA MAIDA
Newcastle University, UK

Introduction

The United Kingdom and other countries in the Global North have seen intensifying racist exclusionary politics, state-enforce hostility, and restrictions towards migrants and refugees. In Europe, this increasingly hostile environment has been especially acute in the wake of the so-called 2015 “refugee crisis” (Squire et al., 2021). Consequently, refugees and asylum seekers in the UK (and beyond) often encounter punitive exclusions and microaggressions motivated by nativist fuelled anti-immigrant narratives which are exploited by governments and typically circulated in the media (Cassidy, 2019; Hyndman, 2012; Yulal-Davis et al., 2018). State enforced exclusionary racialised tactics towards asylum seekers manifest in the form of long-term protracted waiting, daily precarity, detention and removal practices and complex bureaucratic systems. These violent conditions impact the day to day living and long-term futures of refugee communities.

As an attempt to disrupt and repair hostile narratives targeting refugee communities (or inadequate portrayals which represent them as passive victims or heroes), this article draws on recent research from *The Belonging Project*, part of my PhD (at Newcastle University, UK), which examined the negotiation of belonging of refugee families in the Northeast of England. At the centre of my work was a collaborative photographic project which was devised and carried out in partnership with a local charity based in Tyneside where I volunteered for a year. During this time, I conducted community-based ethnographic work and narrative interviews. My research with this charity also involved organising *The Belonging Project*, a participatory photography

Correspondence Address: Melisa Maida, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology,
Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, UK; email: m.maida2@newcastle.ac.uk

ISSN: 1911-4788



project developed with individuals seeking sanctuary in the Tyneside area. In this writing, I share reflections, stories, and insights from this project, focusing primarily on the creative work of two participants: Diego and Karim (pseudonyms). Following training on the photovoice method, participants used both new images and old photos to depict a range of themes and emotions that represented what was important and meaningful to them as they were rebuilding new connections and dreams in Tyneside. With these images they created accordion books (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Accordion books from Belonging Project. (photo: Melisa Maida)

The Belonging Project aimed to offer an opportunity to a group of individuals seeking sanctuary and living in Tyneside to creatively explore and reflect on their everyday lives, enter in conversations with other refugees within the group and craft their own accounts using images. Their creative work was shared with the wider community through two exhibitions, at the charity where the project took place and at a local museum. This project was developed within an existing group session in the organisation where I

volunteered. Individuals participated in the research in different ways. Some engaged solely in the artistic side of the project and others in the exhibition and research elements. This flexible approach was developed as I encountered various ethical and practical challenges, which were resolved in a collaborative dialogic negotiation with the participants. For instance, some created different versions of their accordion books (such as a personal, a public or research versions), some wanted to be credited for their work whilst others wanted to remain anonymised. Further, the copyright of the creative work (the images, accordion books, and accompanying narratives) produced by the project participants was owned by them and I requested permission and consent to use their creative work in subsequent academic and non-academic publications and outputs. Some participants were happy with their work being used in this way and gave me permission, whilst others decided that they wanted their creative work to remain for personal use only.

Although the visual aspect of photography can support inclusivity, particularly for individuals with language and literacy barriers, it can also involve certain risks particularly to refugee communities; for example, by making them vulnerable to misinterpretation, exposure to an unsympathetic audience or potential political violence that they or their families could experience if they were recognised (Milne & Muir, 2020). However, the participatory, self-representative and dialogic nature of this project provided participants with opportunities to explore and manage risk. As highlighted earlier, making their own informed decisions and choices in relation to their level and type of engagement at various stages of the project (i.e., choice of being involved in just the artistic side of the project or research, exhibition, level of exposure, visibility and outputs of images) reduced the potential risks that accompany photography.

Engagement in the project came with its own limitations and challenges. Individuals in the group were from a range of nationalities and backgrounds, had varying levels of English proficiency, and were at different stages of immigration. Some had been dispersed to Tyneside recently and were living in local hotels. Some were experiencing health or personal challenges. Further, Easter and Ramadan took place during of the project. These circumstances affected some participants' attendance and levels of engagement but also our outcomes. For example, initially I planned for participants to develop a narrative to accompany their books so that they could attach clear meaning to them and minimize misinterpretation. However, due to language and literacy barriers this became challenging, and I opted for an open discussion where everyone shared their books and stories with the help of volunteers and friends. I took notes and then created a joint description of the exhibition about what was shared in that discussion. Slowing down and taking the time necessary for dialogue opened the possibility for greater collaboration and coproduction. It was a modest attempt to create a more caring and welcoming space through which to work through the challenges that arose during the project. I also interviewed eight of the participants to gain further insights and elicit meaning

from their accordion stories and to reflect on their engagement. These interviews about the participant's accordion books, their images and previous interview material from my PhD research was used jointly to put together Karim and Diego's stories in this creative intervention. The interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language. If this was English or Spanish, the interviews were conducted directly by me. If participants chose other languages, I used community interpreters already known to and trusted by participants. Although using interpreters can disrupt the reading and meaning of participants' stories, using trusted interpreters helped the participants to express their views and stories more freely.

The project aimed to exhibit the creative work developed by participants with two audiences. First, we exhibited the project for migrant and refugee communities, community practitioners, and those who access or are familiar with the charity where the project took place. Our aim was to celebrate the group's achievement and share reflections from their creative work with peers and friends. Second, we exhibited the project with various members of the Tyneside community, including individuals who would consider themselves native to the area and more recent residents (i.e., migrants and refugees). These two very distinct exhibition spaces offered different opportunities. The first provided an intimate, relaxed, accessible, and familiar space to migrant and refugee communities and the second reached a broader audience, including those who potentially have little contact with refugee communities. Through these exhibitions the intended audiences were able to witness refugee participants' self-representations, in the hope that they would not only understand something about the participant's intimate lives and challenges, but also have an opportunity to draw parallels between their own and others' stories of belonging and acceptance. We hoped that the exhibitions would offer a counter-voice to mainstream representations about refugees which often inadequately portray them as passive, heroic or fraudulent.

This project shared many stories about the everyday exclusions and precarities experienced by those seeking sanctuary in Tyneside, as well as the challenges, feelings, and realities these communities encounter as they navigate new terrains, negotiate new and existing relationships, and lead liminal lives. The project illuminates that even when refugees encounter challenging circumstances they are not passive victims. Rather, they navigate and recreate new senses of belonging and home beyond bordering and borders. In the following section, I will showcase photo stories of weathering, resilience, belonging, and hope alongside accompanying reflections and ethnographic observations from interviews with participants.

Diego: Weathering, Longing and Connecting

Diego arrived in London from El Salvador in 2020. As Diego describes his first days in the UK, he recalls the unpleasant and unwelcoming first encounter

he had with a Border Force Officer who kept ignoring him: “it was a horrible experience.” He recalls the officer telling him: “Do you speak Spanish? You have to go to Spain. They will help you there.” He also remembers waiting for extended periods at the airport after disclosing that he was running away from El Salvador. This was the start of Diego’s emotional journey of resettlement. In what follows, Diego depicts and narrates many stories. They are stories of loss, longing, and exclusion, and accounts of new and exciting experiences, people, and dreams that he has encountered in the UK:

It is a book about what I have been experiencing and what has been happening in my life ... and that even if things have been uncertain. There are always beautiful things that happen to us, people that come to our lives and who give you a hand.

Through photography you can even capture a moment ... a memory a compilation of everything that has happened to me.

Diego’s book (Figure 2) has 12 carefully selected, emotionally charged images about his life. As he talks about his book, Diego tells me about enduring the first days and weeks in the UK, when he hardly had any winter clothes or shoes and was staying in a hotel (for two months) in London waiting for “permanent” accommodation.



Figure 2. Diego’s Accordion Book.

The image below (Figure 3) was taken whilst he was waiting in a queue to enter a church which was about a 40-minute walk from the hotel. The church offered him warm clothes, shoes, and food. It is where he met friendly volunteers who spoke a little Spanish, “so I started to feel welcomed,” he explains. This was one of the first acts of kindness that he encountered in the UK.



Figure 3. Image taken while Diego was waiting in a queue in London.



Figure 4. Image taken by Diego in Wakefield.

Figure 4 was taken by Diego by a castle close to a park in Wakefield, where he stayed in another hotel for four months after staying in London. He recalls going to this park to run and relax because at that time he was feeling stressed and disappointed:

I had nothing to do or nobody to do anything with, so I was going out to breathe, change the environment, spend time in the sun, lie down ... Without money, options, without much, when I was out, at least I saw people, I felt alive.



Figure 5. Diego reflecting on leaving El Salvador.

Diego took the above image (Figure 5) to describe a memory from when he was departing El Salvador. He recalls looking out of the airplane window at what he was leaving behind and wondering what he would encounter in his new life. He explains feelings of loss, disappointment, and exclusion as he weathers the harsh conditions of seeking asylum in the UK:

Then we left, it was something very abrupt. I had to leave everything, I thought about the distance. I am crossing an entire ocean, and it is going to be kind of like falling into another new world. I remember a lot the absence of my mother. It was as if I was comparing this window to an airplane window because it looks like that. And I cried, I cried, I cried with this photo. The absence of having left everything. I was like, well no one said it was going to be easy. This is the price to pay. And

the good things always cost something...] you have to even love your tears ... I feel like a stranger, because I am to a certain extent, because I feel as if I have no rights to many things, I am an outsider to this country. I feel some people think that you want to take what is theirs but that is not really my intention. So, I feel entitled to nothing, sometimes ... If they tell me “no!,” well, they have more rights than me, so it’s not easy to start over, to put your feet on the ground and settle. It’s like breaching a wall. It is like even ducking my head, but I keep going.



Figure 6. Diego visiting Aston Villa Football Club.

In Figure 6, Diego is in Birmingham standing in front Aston Villa’s football club. “It’s like living a dream, in the middle of the pain that I am feeling, a bitter dream,” he says. Aston Villa was his favourite English football team before coming to the UK. He recalls watching football videos in El Salvador, dreaming that one day he could take a picture of the stadium. While seeking asylum in the UK, he had the opportunity to visit friends in Birmingham and straightaway he told them, “I want to go to the Aston Villa Stadium.” Diego reflects how dreams can happen in the most unexpected times and ways. He did not know he would end up in the UK seeking asylum, but small acts have helped him endure hard times.



Figure 7. Rocks that Diego and his friend stacked into a pile in Morpeth.

The above image (Figure 7) was taken by Diego at the outskirts of Newcastle, in Morpeth. Diego and his English friend stacked rocks into a pile

while they were hiking in the area. It was the first hike he had done in a very long time. He recalls telling his friend that he wanted to walk because he loves forests, rivers, and nature. His friend invited him to Morpeth: “We did this stone pile after having something to eat by the river, I still can’t believe how it managed to balance.” By the river he recalled thinking about differences between Tyneside and El Salvador:

If this was in El Salvador, there would be people washing clothes, fishing, bathing. There is a different style of life there. The poverty, many people don’t have water in their houses. They don’t have what to eat so they go fishing. They don’t have enough money to go to the beach or swimming pools, so they go to the river. Even if the rivers are polluted, they go. It is very nice to see crystal clear water flowing, but at the same time there is nobody here, no life, everything is untouched.

His friend has helped Diego to feel more settled in Tyneside. They started to meet regularly to talk about their lives. For Diego, this photo (Figure 7) has a very important meaning about friendship, connection, and doing what he loves and longed to do: reconnecting to his own self and to others.

Diego’s five pictures and accompanying stories illustrate the richness of his accordion book of belonging. The remaining images tell other stories which demonstrate a tension between his experiences. A tension about living in a country, which is becoming increasingly hostile towards migrants and refugees and instances of care, welcome and humanity. Tension between his vulnerability and agency, between longing, loss, connection, and curiosity.

Karim: Hope, Luck, and Friendship

Karim and his wife are from Syria, a country that has been devastated by war. They have been living in Tyneside for five years now. One of their sons recently joined them there, but most of their family are living in other countries in Europe and the Middle East. Karim describes the challenges of rebuilding his life:

It’s difficult when you leave your country and go to other country ... generally British people are very kind, but the language is a barrier ... There is a big difference between the houses in the UK and the houses in Syria, but we need to adapt to that ... the friendships are different, when we came here, we missed our friends but there are some places which helped at the beginning to build relationships and make friends.

The biggest challenge for Karim has been living away from his family. He explains that in the Arabic culture people live very closely: “before the war my son got married and my grandchild was always with me. My other children lived in my house or close by.” When the war started everybody separated to different countries: “since this has happened, I have been suffering a lot.”

Thanks to free social media technologies (WhatsApp and Viber), he has been able to rebuild his relationships with his family:

Every single week I speak with my grandchildren twice to three times a week for an hour each time. It's building a bridge between us. We laugh, communicate. If we didn't speak to each other, I can't imagine what would happen to me. So, technology is very important, I use it a lot to speak to my children and grandchildren as well.

Karim's book of belonging (Figure 8) articulates a message of hope, friendship and resistance. His book has three images, each accompanied by a story.



Figure 8. Karim's accordion book of belonging.

Karim's first image below (Figure 9) is a message to everyone who is going through difficult situations: "do not despair, continue with your work, try to overcome the difficulties. You must succeed it the end." This image centres on a tree which has improbably grown despite harsh conditions:

It is a tree that has grown in a wall of stone and cement, on the edge of the Tyne River in Gateshead. This photo was taken in April 2017, and I actually chose this photo for two reasons. First, that it grew in an inappropriate place like the rest of the trees that grow on flat dirt land, but it managed to continue its growth and cling to life despite all the difficulties it faced. The second reason is that the tree has resisted for many years and did not grow horizontally because of the place or the difficulties! Rather, it was able to grow and grow like other trees to the top and raise its head high as if it was saying I will live despite all challenges!



Figure 9. Karim’s image of a tree growing by a wall in the River Tyne.

Figure 10 (below) “Tree of Luck” is a message to everyone who believes and relies on luck. Karim reflects: “luck does not come with wishes, or by passing through holes at the bottom of trees, or by carrying some empty snails, luck is on your side when you make more effort and work towards achieving your goals.” This image represents Karim’s calls for action:

This photo was taken in December 2021 when we were on a trip to the Burnlaw Centre to see the sights in that village, including a temple of the Baha’i faith and others. While we were wandering, we saw this tree, and someone told us that some people call it the tree of happiness [the tree of luck]. They believe that whoever can

pass through this hole at the bottom of the tree trunk will live happily and will be lucky in all his life. I really loved that because it is a living example of ancient legends! It also reminded me of a story they used to tell us when we were children. The story was titled [The Tree of Hope].



Figure 10. Tree of Luck.



Figure 11. Image of Karim’s pigeon friends.

Karim’s last image (Figure 11) demonstrates that friendship and connection can be found in the most unexpected places. The photograph captures a befriended pigeon who has brought along another pigeon friend:

This is a picture of a cute wild pigeon, over a month ago it was wandering in the front of the house, I gave her some food (small pieces of bread) she ate it and flew away. The next day while I was standing by the window, I saw her come calmly and cautiously, and I gave her some food again. And so, she came several times and after a few days she came with another pigeon, but she was afraid at first! But after we gave them food and water, they became our friends. They visit us every day more than once, they eat and drink and then fly away.

Karim’s accordion book gives a hopeful and empowering message to other refugees who are experiencing similar hardships like him. It is also a universal message of solidarity, courage and strength to all humans who might be experiencing some sort of suffering. For Karim, his hopes for the future are altruistic. He would love his second son to come to live here in the UK. For Syria, he hopes that the war will stop, “so that all homeless Syrian people to go back to their homes.” Although he would not want to return to Syria, he dreams of visiting his homeland.

Concluding Thoughts

In this piece, I have shared images and accompanying narratives from Diego and Karim’s accordion books. Many more stories were shared during the collaborative photovoice work and broader PhD research. Diego’s and Karim’s work narrates experiences and emotions that many refugees encounter as they rebuild their lives in a new country. Their stories highlight how refugees navigate precarious and challenging everyday exclusions, state-enforced

violence, and feelings of loss, isolation, and longing. And yet, they also exceed these framings. Something more is going on. There is complexity to their experiences that demonstrate how refugees weather, resist and find ways of forging new relationships and inhabiting new spaces. They offer poignant views into everyday life: the meaning of a favourite tree, or value of more-than-human friendship, or the rush of a football stadium, and more. These images help perhaps to reassert the agency of refugees which is so often flattened and subject to racist caricature in mainstream media.

Diego takes us through a timeline of stories that unfolded while he was rebuilding his life in Tyneside, from feelings of painful loss and longing when leaving his country and loved ones, to the effects of state enforced exclusionary policies on his everyday life. He also shares his agency and willingness to rebuild his life by making new friends, pursuing his interests and achieving his goals. Diego makes links between landscapes here and in El Salvador, between his past and present. Karim's accordion book is crafted differently, it serves as way to communicate and inspire resistance and hope through strength and agency. The image of the tree, which grows in a wall of cement by the River Tyne shows how he observes and makes connections with his new surroundings to symbolise his beliefs and motivate others to resist and grow despite their struggles. Karim's image of his pigeon friends shows how he made new connections and friendship in unusual circumstances.

Through the process of crafting and designing accordion books, participants had an opportunity to reflect on and critically explore their experiences of home and belonging. Borrowing from Paulo Freire, this method invited participants to raise their consciousness (*conscientização*) by noticing their personal and shared day-to-day struggles, as well as the agency deployed to negotiate new relationships and futures (2017). The creative work produced by refugees and asylum seekers in this project offers insight into intimate, emotional and complex experiences. Not only are such accounts of refugees typically silenced or erased, but their complexity is ignored. These stories are political in so far as they disrupt mainstream binary discourse that tends to portray refugees as either "threat," "victim" or "hero." This has become even more relevant now in 2024, as we are witnessing anti-migration riots in the streets of England and ongoing hostile rhetoric demonising refugees. Participants' visual work disrupted representations that so often construct non-westerners or racialized others as "powerless" or victims in need of representation (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338). Photovoice and DIY accordion books have been a vehicle for participating individuals to reflect on their own and collective stories and to negotiate their own representation.

Acknowledgments and Credit

I would like to thank, acknowledge and credit the collaborators of *The Belonging Project*: Edjee, Keren, Manal, Maye, Lily, Victoria and many more

individuals who were involved in creating the artwork in this project, participated in co-curating the exhibitions and contributed to this research and creative project. Special thanks to the Comfrey Project and Nicola Maxwell at the Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums. I would also like to show appreciation to my PhD supervisors Caleb Johnston, Matej Blazek and Alison Stenning.

References

- Cassidy, K. (2019). Where can I get free? Everyday bordering, everyday incarceration. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44(1), 48-62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12273>
- Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (13th ed.). Penguin.
- Hyndman, J. (2012). The geopolitics of migration and mobility. *Geopolitics*, 17(2), 243-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2011.569321>
- Milne, E. J., & Muir, R. (2020). Photovoice: A critical introduction. In D. Mannay & L. Pauwels (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of visual research methods* (pp. 282-296). Sage Publications.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(13), 333-358. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>
- Squire, V., Perkowski, N., Stevens, D., & Vaughan-Williams, N. (2021). *Reclaiming migration: Voices from Europe's 'migrant crisis'*. Manchester University Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., & Cassidy, K. (2018). Everyday bordering, belonging, and the reorientation of British immigration legislation. *Sociology*, 52(2), 228-244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702599>