

“The camp is a passing human, a book, a manuscript, an archive ... Bury it; smother it with its own dust, so it might return as a holy text devoid of intentions.

Only refugees can forever write the archive.”

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, *Writing the Camp*

In humanitarian contexts, poetry and creative approaches are often side-lined or presented as superfluous to the pressing needs that arise in emergency situations. A short-term emphasis on immediate needs has also led to creative approaches being side-lined, with such approaches often addressing narrative, memory, and history. However, as shown by the Refugee Hosts project’s research with nine local communities responding to displacement in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, creative approaches, such as poetry and writing workshops with communities, enable people to share past and ongoing experiences, and to build and sustain different forms of solidarity in the present and future.ⁱ Creative approaches can develop insights into historical, political, religious, and communal ways of being that provide important counterweights to short-term decision making.



The remnants of a library with pots and pans on the roof of a house in Baddawi refugee camp. (c) E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Finding ways to engage with communities through creative approaches helps to make space for the articulation of memories and narratives that better inform interventions in the short and long-term. Creative writing, historical narratives and the arts allow practitioners to better acknowledge the multi-layered, historical, and emotional complexity that exists in displacement contexts and offers approaches that support community dialogue.ⁱⁱ This Research Brief calls for humanitarian practitioners to meaningfully engage with creative writing, history and the arts when working in displacement-affected contexts.

Recommendations

Projects and policies that seek to support refugees and communities affected by displacement should **support the provision and maintenance of spaces for creative approaches as a means of engaging with and acknowledging peoples’ complex experiences, needs and rights**. This might include supporting existing initiatives, or providing space, time, and resources for writing workshops, poetry readings, and photography, narrative work, and film to be created and shared.

Engaging with literature and humanities-based methods, including writing workshops and community photography projects, facilitates **a more conversational and encounter-based form of engagement** that helps to build and sustain trust and connections in complex situations.

Humanitarian narratives can often silence refugees’ voices or lead to short-term and instrumental solutions. By contrast, literature and the humanities help **reframe humanitarian narratives in a way that supports more open, dialogic, and long-term engagements** with communities affected by, and responding to, displacement.

The humanities offer approaches and methods that lead to **non-instrumental answers to complex problems**, which have not only a troubled past, but also a future.

Humanitarianism needs the humanities

Mainstream ‘crisis’ narratives pervade humanitarian contexts, producing short-term and instrumental answers to complex questions.ⁱⁱⁱ These narratives act as barriers to understanding displacement and the complex histories and aspirations of those who are both affected by, and responding to it. By contrast, the humanities help us to explore and recognise the significance of human memory and narrative, both of which help us to connect with one another’s experiences.^{iv} Seriously engaging with the humanities and the arts enables a more complex and nuanced understanding of the needs of, and challenges faced by communities which are both ‘affected by’ and “always-already responding” to displacement.^v The humanities force us to recognise the complexity of human experience, whilst finding ways to collectively address this complexity. Doing so opens pathways to understanding and solution-finding that might otherwise be missed by one-directional modes of engagement, such as surveys, interviews and needs assessments. Arts-based methods include community-led writing workshops with members of both host and refugee communities, as were conducted as part of the Refugee Hosts project in Lebanon and Jordan.



*Participants writing during a Refugee Hosts workshop in Zarqaa, Jordan
(c) E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh*

Complex issues require an understanding of complexity

Creative approaches allow us to develop a more complex view of the multifaceted aspects of human experience in contexts of displacement.^{vi} This is important for humanitarian policy and practice, which often produces instrumental solutions to complex problems. A focus on narrative and history can address the long histories that underpin people’s experiences of and responses to displacement. For example, the diversity of experiences articulated at a writing workshop with both hosts and refugees, some of whom had never written before, some who will have been writing and/or reciting poems throughout their lives, resulted in open discussions, a coming together of members of different communities, and a collective identification of solutions. These solutions were developed through non-instrumental ways of thinking, as well as a recognition rather than simplification of complexity in contexts of displacement.

“In a brass bowl with dangling rings as raw as young earlobes, my mother would pour us water whenever a plane broke the sound barrier, thinking that this would calm our fears and interrupt the deafening cries.

There, they interpret life as a sign of life, no more, no less. When their old wall collapsed, they erected another using their house plants.”

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh,
Flesh when mutilated called God



*A woman waters flowers in Baddawi refugee camp, North Lebanon,
(c) E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh: Read the poetic response to this photo,
[To the Plants is Her Face](#)*

Literature, narrative and memory shape how people respond to displacement

Past stories of hosting, and of being hosted, constitute a unique window for those attempting to understand contemporary displacement today. Memories of having been displaced in the past inform how households and communities respond to new arrivals.^{vii} Likewise, past experiences of hosting refugees become an important source of knowledge for newly displaced people, framing their expectations. Creative writing and history, with their focus on memory and narrative, become specialized means for understanding these past experiences and how they impact on the present, and shape opportunities and impasses. These insights will be missed by surveys and needs assessments that focus on largely contemporary needs alone. Invitations to creativity offer the freedom to articulate complicated, personal, and occasionally antagonistic viewpoints and feelings.



Participants reflect on archival images of refugee camps during a writing workshop in Jordan. © E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Reflecting on displacement through photography

Photography has played a key role throughout the Refugee Hosts project,^{viii} not only ‘documenting’ (or ‘archiving’) the dynamics taking place across the camps, cities and towns in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey where we have been conducting research, but also as a means of reflecting on the process of research itself. One approach we have advanced through the project is an emphasis on “spaces and places, not faces”.^{ix} This approach, outlined by Prof. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, has allowed us to rethink the potential benefits and limitations of different modes of photographic inquiry. A photographic emphasis on spaces and places aims to foreground an understanding of the contexts in which displacement takes place, and to move away from a

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focus on faces which tend to individualise and decontextualise displacement-affecting settings. This approach also shapes how we understand and represent local communities. For example, through engaging with archival photography during workshops with local residents, participants were able to trace the long and overlapping histories of local communities and how these play a role in responses to displacement today. Photography offers alternate modes of seeing, understanding and engaging with local communities. Given the prominent role photography plays in humanitarian awareness raising campaigns, there is an opportunity to consider how a “spaces and places, not faces” approach might lead to more nuanced, contextualised depictions and understandings of displacement.

Beyond ‘seasoning’

The humanities offer a great deal to social research and policy but are often only engaged as a way of adding ‘seasoning’^x. Throughout the Refugee Hosts project, we have committed to interdisciplinary modes of research that have taken humanities, narrative, history, literature and photography seriously. The humanities allow us to “challenge and reconfigure what it is we take for granted”^{xi} within our own disciplines. In contexts of humanitarian policy and practice, such engagement with the humanities should not only be seen as offering a ‘better’ way of responding, but also a way of listening^{xii} and of challenging narrow or mainstream understandings or representations of displacement, and the role these play in sustaining short-sighted, unsustainable and inequal interventions.^{xiii}

Reflecting on the past

For some participants, seeing archival photos of their neighbourhoods led to reflections about how places have changed over time. One participant in Hamra, Beirut, mentioned how wide and safe the streets were compared to today. The photos evoked an image of safety, comfort and stability that they felt was lacking in their lives. Another noted that:

“The architecture was beautiful; later on, the architecture of Beirut became worse. [...] There is land (أرض) around the houses. Everyone would like to live in such a house. I feel you can imagine this part of history.”

Reflecting on the past became helpful in articulating, contextualising and addressing challenges faced by local communities today.

Working through poetry

Central to the Refugee Hosts project has been the work of our Writer in Residence, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, a poet and scholar born and raised in Baddawi refugee camp. His poetic work has been integral to our analysis, informing our understanding of encounters in contexts of displacement and hosting, and of the urgency of rejecting the notion of 'giving voice'.^{xiv}

"Refugees ask other refugees, who are we to come to you and who are you to come to us? Nobody answers. Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds share the camp, the same-different camp, the camp of a camp. They have all come to re-originate the beginning with their own hands and feet."

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, *Writing the Camp*

Background

This Research Brief is based on the AHRC-ESRC funded Refugee Hosts project, which investigated local community responses to and experiences of displacement from Syria in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Visit www.refugeehosts.org

Suggested Citation

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E., Stonebridge, L. and Greatrick, A. (2021) "Engaging with Narratives and Histories of Displacement," Refugee Hosts Project Recommendation for Research and Practice #2, October 2021.

Refugee Hosts Recommendations for Research and Practice Series

- #1: [Understanding Local Responses to Displacement](#)
- #2: [Engaging with Histories and Narratives of Displacement](#)
- #3: [Refugee-Host Relationality](#)
- #4: [Local Faith Community Responses to Displacement](#)
- #5: [Critical Approaches to Voice and Writing in Displacement](#)

References

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- ⁱⁱ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2019) "[The Poetics of Undisclosed Care](#)" *Refugee Hosts*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Stonebridge, L. (2015) "[What History Tells Us about the Refugee Crisis](#)" *New Humanist*. Greatrick, A. (2017) "[Externalising the Refugee Crisis: A Consequence of Historical Denial?](#)" *Refugee Hosts*. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2020) "Introduction: Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing refugee and migrant journeys across disciplines," in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (Ed) *Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing refugee and migrant journeys across disciplines*, London: UCL Press, pp. 1-20.
- ^{iv} Holm, P. et al. (2015) *Humanities World Report*. Pg. 12.
- ^v Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2016) "Refugee-Refugee Relations in Contexts of Overlapping Displacement" *IJURR*, 42(2); Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2018) "[Shadows and Echoes in/of Displacement](#)" *Refugee Hosts*; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2019) "[The Poetics of Undisclosed Care](#)" *Refugee Hosts*
- ^{vi} Stonebridge, L. (2015) "Statelessness and the Poetry of the Borderline: André Green, W.H. Auden and Yousif M. Qasmiyeh" *Textual Practice*, 29(7): 1331-1354.
- ^{vii} Stonebridge, L. (2018) "[Memory as a Host: Poetry and History in Baddawi](#)" *Refugee Hosts*.
- ^{viii} See the Refugee Hosts gallery: <https://refugeehosts.org/our-work/gallery/>; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2017) "[Refugee-Refugee Solidarity in Death and Dying](#)" *Refugee Hosts*
- ^{ix} Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) "[Representations of Displacement: Introducing the Series](#)" *Refugee Hosts*
- ^x Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2019) "Disaster studies at 40: looking forward" *Disasters*, 43 (S1): S36-60: pp 44-45.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xii} We have also used soundscapes to 'listen' to and think about displacement. See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) "[Representations of Displacement: Introducing the Series](#)" *Refugee Hosts*; Greatrick, A. (2018) "[Sounds from Istiklal, Turkey](#)" *Refugee Hosts*; Ager, A. (2017) "[Sounds from Hamra, Lebanon](#)" *Refugee Hosts*.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiv} See Qasmiyeh, Y. M. (2021) *Writing the Camp*. Wales: Broken Sleep Books.