Cindy Horst

# CREATIVE RESISTANCE

## The social justice practices of Monirah, Halleh, and Diala

Forced Migration Studies

Collection Editors

T. ALEXANDER ALEINIKOFF

&

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LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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**T. Alexander Aleinikoff & Laura Hammond**

LPP

First published in 2023 by Lived Places Publishing


British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781915734389 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781915734402 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781915734396 (ePUB)



Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing UK

Lived Places Publishing
Long Island
New York 11789

www.livedplacespublishing.com

# Abstract

How can hope and political action flourish from the devastation of war, oppression, and forced migration? For Monirah, Halleh, and Diala, this is not a philosophical question—it is a lived reality. Drawn from firsthand experience of violent conflict and displacement, the stories in this book belong to three extraordinary women who found a path to hope through their social justice practices in the face of violence, oppression, and exile. This book highlights the extraordinary actions of ordinary people in dark times, and draws particular attention to the transformative mobilizing power of narratives.



## Keywords

Hope; conflict; refugee; displacement; gender; anthropology; social justice; activism; lived experience; war

# Acknowledgments

This book, as all academic writing, is the product of the work and love of so many people. There is no way I can do justice to that reality and express my gratitude to each and every one of you in words, even less so in a single page. Here's me trying:

Monirah, Halleh, and Diala: Thank you so much for sharing your stories with me and allowing me to transform them to text that others can read and be inspired by. Monirah, your story evolved in the months that we worked together. I thank you for your trust in me. Halleh, you have been in my life from the time I was writing my PhD—way back—and I continue to be inspired by you. To many more collaborations! Diala, we are just at the start of our friendship and I want to thank you for making an artist of me. Thanks for the same, to all those who took part in the PRAKSIS Residency 22 in Oslo (Praksis Oslo: transnational arts and culture catalyst. https://www.praksisoslo.org/organisation).

I also want to thank Maja Korac, whose chapter left the book for all the right reasons, and then led its own life by developing into a beautiful special issue titled "Stories of violence, war and displacement."

The TRANSFORM research project team: Ben Dix, Tamar Groves, Marte Nilsen, Kjetil Selvik, Trude Stapnes, and Ebba Tellander. What an amazing group of people, with such depth and breadth of knowledge and humanity. Thanks for our collective learning, your incredible generosity, respect, and humor. A special thanks

to Trude, who coordinated the 2019 seminar series for the Centre on Culture and Violent Conflict (CCC) and conducted two of the interviews. And to Ebba, whose PhD on the civil–political actions of a group of teachers and doctors in Somaliland during the dictatorship in the early 1980s shaped so much of my understanding of the extraordinary actions of ordinary people in dark times. Thanks also to Sara Christophersen, who created the TRANSFORM virtual exhibition and from whose work on hip-hop artists in Palestine I learned the importance of embodied knowing. I hope we will all find new ways to continue to work together.

TRANSFORM was preceded by the ACT research project and followed by the INSPIRE research project. I am grateful to the Research Council of Norway for putting its faith and money in us by funding all these exciting projects. Thank you also to the ACT and INSPIRE research teams, and in particular to Noor Jdid and Kasia Grabska. I have learned so much from you, both professionally and personally.

The PRIO community, for being such a wonderful intellectual home with so many smart but equally generous, inspiring, and fun people. Odin Lysaker, for helping me read Arendt. Rebecca Lowen, for her brilliant editing. You enable me to express my thoughts so eloquently, helping me to get to the core in such a professional way. Thank you.

The team at LPP, for loving this book when I started to lose hope. Thank you all for helping me complete the final part of a long journey. Laura Hammond, Alex Aleinikoff and Ebba Tellander for such excellent and constructive feedback on an earlier version of the book.

Miriam Latif Sandbæk, for somehow managing to be my friend and coach at the same time. I cannot even begin to express how much of my sanity, joy, and gratitude for life I owe to you. My parents and brother—the stories in this book make me understand even deeper what it means to have a home. Mine was full of love and safety, and I am immensely grateful for that privilege. My urban family (you know who you are) for making Oslo home.

And finally, Ndirangu, Nina, and Tim. My passion for my work—including this book—has led me to be less present than I would have wanted to be. Nina and Tim, thanks for your patience, but even more so for being such amazing human beings. Ndirangu, you are a rock. There is no way I could have done this without you.

# Contents

# Learning objectives

This book explores the transformative potential of experiences of war, oppression, and forced migration for those who work artistically or academically with these themes from firsthand experience as well as the role of storytelling in this process. Focusing on the central theme of the transformative mobilizing power of narratives, it has the following aims:

1. To nuance stories of lived experience of forced migration, creating awareness of intersectionality and positioned agency.
2. To show the interlinkages of interests and insights from peace and conflict studies with those within forced migration studies, recognizing continuities in the human consequences of war and exile.
3. To foreground experiential knowledge and to make a case for the need to develop new ways of researching embodied knowing—in particular about violence and oppression.
4. To provide insight into the interdependent roles of storytelling and witnessing, and their relationship to individual and collective healing.

# 1

# The role of storytelling and narrative in transformation

## Introduction

> I am a teller; a storyteller. Telling is a kind of breathing. I can't stop myself. I can't stop breathing. I am a storyteller who would like to light stars in dark spaces, to attach stars to a dark sky, a dark roof. Still there are endless black spaces that need endless stories
>
> Monirah Hashemi, *Who lights the stars?*

This book arose from my curiosity about what motivates individuals to try to advance social justice in contexts in which doing so involves great risk and uncertainty. The women whose stories are presented in this book, as well as the individuals I have interviewed in the course of my broader research, speak of the **responsibility** they feel to take political action (Horst and Lysaker, 2021; Horst, 2022; Stapnes, Carlquist and Horst, 2020). In line with Arendt (1958), I understand political action in the broad sense of

individuals critically inserting themselves into the human world through speech and action. When do individuals feel called to speak up or act in the face of suffering and abuse? Why do some people act for the benefit of others even in situations in which doing so poses great risks to themselves or their families? What are the defining moments in a person's life story that trigger their political agency?

This book explores the transformative potential of experiences of violent conflict, oppression, and exile for those who have firsthand knowledge, and who currently work artistically or academically with these themes. It is based on a narrative research approach and focuses on three remarkable women: Monirah Hashemi, an Afghan actress and theater producer whose mother fostered in her the urge to speak out about injustices and who does so now through her art; Halleh Ghorashi, who became politically conscious as a teenager during the 1979 revolution in Iran and is currently an engaged academic in the Netherlands; and Diala Brisly, a visual artist from Syria whose collection of paintings and drawings reflect both the everyday horrors of war, oppression, and exile as well as her visions of an alternative future.

Each of these women experienced and witnessed traumatic events and incurred immense losses as a consequence of violent conflict, oppression, and exile. One could argue that it is unsurprising that people would fight for justice in such contexts considering the sheer magnitude of the atrocities being committed. However, there are many mechanisms in place that aim to silence criticism and prevent resistance and that make speaking up and acting against the status quo downright dangerous. Even after escaping war and oppression, it is often

difficult to speak up and act against social injustices. In this book, I choose to focus on the narratives of three women who despite the risks and challenges continue to work for social justice, as academics or artists, building on their own experiences.

I have listened to the life stories of refugees and others affected by war and authoritarianism over several decades. The dissonance between, on the one hand, these human encounters and stories, and on the other hand, the public narratives about refugees and others affected by war—widespread in media, policymaking, everyday life, and academia—has troubled me, and left me frustrated by my inability to "make a difference". In public discourse, only rarely are the experiences of individuals who have lived through violent conflict, oppression, and exile shared in sufficient complexity, and ordinary people and policymakers alike spend too little time really listening, witnessing, and caring about those affected by violence and oppression. While the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine brought the reality of war into sharpened focus for Western audiences, unnuanced knowledge and limited understanding of lived experiences of war and exile remain a challenge—not least against a backdrop of the many other conflicts around the world that continue to devastate the lives of individuals and communities.

We need to listen to the stories of those with lived experience of war, oppression, and exile not just to ensure that all human beings, including refugees and others affected by violent conflict and authoritarianism, are treated with respect. Listening closely to and caring about the tellers of these stories is, in fact, vital if a society seeks to guarantee human dignity, freedom, and peaceful coexistence to all. These stories—set in contexts of

violence and oppression—offer powerful evidence of the value of individual freedom and collective responsibility. They are also necessary reminders that those public goods must not be taken for granted, and that, potentially, any society at any time can exclude and limit freedoms. These stories furthermore enable societies and individuals to gain access to their own trauma and explore tools for individual and collective healing.

The current civic and political engagements of Monirah, Halleh and Diala are shaped by memories of the past and hopes for the future. These women enact their visions of a desired future in a range of creative and inspiring ways. In this book, I zoom in on three aspects of their stories and work: the forces and inspirations that drove them to act; the kinds of actions they have engaged in; and the impact of their actions—as they understand them. In studying their inspirations, actions, and impacts, I seek to understand how experiences of violence and oppression can inspire individuals to engage in political action and how their actions might inspire wider societal transformations. The ripple effects of smaller actions and the narratives about them sustain individual and collective political action, but they remain largely unexplored by social scientists. This reality inspired me to write this book.

## Why this book?

For several decades, I have conducted research on the human consequences of violent conflict, oppression, and displacement. Since 1995, I have been engaged in ethnographic research with refugees in a wide range of contexts, including refugee camps, regional urban centers, resettlement contexts, and in

the home country to which they have, in some cases, returned. While a student of anthropology, I volunteered in a center in the Netherlands for asylum seekers, which enabled me to develop an understanding of the first phase of refugee life in a Western host country. Between 1995 and 2007, I conducted two years' worth of ethnographic research in the Dadaab refugee camps of Kenya, where most of the inhabitants were from a neighboring country and had spent most of their lives in exile (Horst, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a). I have also conducted research on those internally displaced (Horst and Nur, 2016), on those who return to their country of origin (Horst, 2018; Horst and Sagmo, 2015), and on those resettled in the United States (Horst, 2007) and Norway (Al-Sharmani and Horst, 2016; Horst, 2008b). Additionally, I have supervised students working on the human consequences of violent conflict and authoritarianism (Christophersen, 2020, 2022; Stapnes, 2018; Stapnes, Carlquist and Horst, 2020; Tellander, 2022).

One of the most striking findings of my combined work has been that experiences of war, oppression, and exile can trigger civic and political participation by creating a political awareness and a strong sense of responsibility to act in the face of injustice. Throughout my research career, I met refugees and other conflict-affected individuals who were powerful citizen–activists, occupied with and working toward justice and civic virtue. Through these inspiring encounters, I also learned that there is great power and often poetry in the stories people tell about their lives, their inspirations, their actions, and the waves they make. Unfortunately, the full potential of personal narratives cannot be explored in academic articles and book chapters. I have so often felt that the publications that I (co-) wrote in recent years did not

quite do justice to the rich narrative research behind the work and the uniqueness and power of people's stories.[1]

Presenting more extended personal narratives, as I do in this book, can achieve several things. Such extended narratives allow the reader to relate to the story being told, which often consists of recognizable everyday human relations and objects, and creates a connection between individuals who might otherwise feel they have little in common. Often, the stories create understanding on an emotional, embodied, and, not just, cognitive level. Furthermore, a personal narrative can be both unique as well as reflective of the experiences of many people. Stories of violence and oppression, as well as of people's resistance to these realities, have many common traits. And finally, in-depth, holistic representations of life stories make possible more accurate theorization. We are only able to create sound theories and concepts that reflect people's everyday realities in different contexts if we listen attentively to their full stories, rather than asking them only to answer our (academically) positioned questions.

The aim of the book, then, is to explore—through in-depth personal narratives—the key insight that experiences of violent conflict and oppression can impel civic and political participation and create a strong sense of responsibility to act in the face of injustice. In the pages that follow, I explain why this is the case, how it manifests itself in political action, and what the potential societal impact may be. I provide a detailed presentation of the life stories of three of the many extraordinary people I have met over the years, to show just how inspirations, actions, and impacts are intertwined in their narratives. I also illustrate how

both personal and collective narratives have real-life implications as they influence what individuals do and how they may inspire and shape other people's narrative identities and actions. This belief in the real-life implications of narratives extends to the narrative of this book.

I wrote this monograph to inspire an audience of academics, artists, and activists who work on and for issues of social justice. I see it as an important supplement to my earlier work because it enables me to present personal narratives in detail, connecting stories in situations of violent conflict and authoritarianism with those that take place afterward, in exile. Thus, I connect findings from peace and conflict studies with those from forced migration studies. The monograph also allows me to present a variety of different but related findings within one book. Further, the articles I have published so far have mainly focused on people's motivations to challenge social injustice in contexts of violent conflict and authoritarianism, and to some extent, on their concrete actions. Prior to this book, I have not published on the impacts or—perhaps more accurately put—ripple effects of these actions.

I have chosen to focus specifically on individuals who contribute to our intellectual and embodied knowledge on violent conflict and displacement through scholarship and the arts. In recent years, I have found it particularly inspiring to explore the human consequences of violent conflict with academics and artists with lived experience from war and exile. Collaborating with these two groups allows me to understand how experiential, embodied knowledge influences work on peace and conflict, civic resistance, trauma and healing, forced migration, and a

range of other topics. Academics and artists play key roles in creating public narratives. While mainstream academic and arts institutions may be central in supporting dominant, imperial narratives, many academics and artists—working within and independent from these institutions—are also crucial in contesting such dominant definitions of reality.

In academia, contributions are mainly verbal and numerical and largely ignore more sensuous and grounded ways of knowing that draw on a more fully embodied exploration. Many artists, on the other hand, work nonverbally and engage a range of senses in their art, producing alternative forms of knowledge (Grabska and Horst, 2022). Focusing on artists and academics also allows me to move beyond the public political action, including large-scale mobilizations and political protest, that is so commonly the focus of peace and conflict studies. Many of the individuals whose life stories provide the basis of my work have also participated in various social movements and protests, despite the risks involved. But in this book, I focus on their artistic and academic contributions to societal narratives during and after violent conflict and authoritarianism, with the aim of contributing to studies on everyday resistance to power and domination. In studying the moral inspirations of people's acts of resistance, I seek to develop new ways of theorizing political agency in the context of violence and oppression[2].

## Narrative research

In 2000, encouraged by my supervisor, anthropologist Joke Schrijvers, I first started asking refugees from Somalia living in the refugee camps of Dadaab in Kenya to tell me their life

stories. During my studies in anthropology, I learned about oral history research and the use of life histories by anthropologists. In a methods course, I used a life history approach to explore a period in my grandmother's life during the Second World War, when she lived in the Netherlands, close to the German border, in an area accidentally bombed by American planes. Throughout my academic career, I have employed the life history method in a range of research projects, and I used it as the key methodology in a study of the civil–political role of women in Somalia since the 1960s. I have also trained others in life history research, which, over time, has become a central research method in much of my work. Over the years, I have collected over one hundred life stories, the vast majority of which were told by individuals who had experienced and fled violent conflict or oppression. In this work, I have often collaborated with (prospective) academics from communities that experienced violent conflict.

Storytelling is an intersubjective practice whereby individual real-life experiences acquire meaning through being heard as well as through being told. Telling one's story to others can be a transformative practice that changes the narrator as well as those who are listening (Maggio, 2014). Storytelling bridges private, individualized passions and collective, shared views (Jackson, 2002). Individual experience is given public meaning through the intersubjective relation created by the storytelling situation (Arendt, 1958). The political philosopher Hannah Arendt's political thought rests on the idea that humans have the capacity to act narratively, and potentially transformatively, and in so doing, to insert themselves in the world by sharing their personal and collective narratives—in short, by storytelling

(Horst and Lysaker, 2021). The listener as well as the storyteller is central in creating this potential transformation. For the narrator, telling one's story can contribute to sense-making and to regaining a sense of agency in relation to one's own life. For the listener, the storytelling process provides access not only to new ways of narrating the past but also to alternative visions of the future.

Narrative research has been used in a wide range of disciplines within the social sciences since the 1980s (Goodson et al., 2016; Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007; Polletta et al., 2011). It incorporates a variety of practices and includes narrative inquiry as a research methodology as well as narratives as objects of study. Some researchers are interested in personal narratives and storytelling—often using a life history research approach—whereas others study the mobilizing potential of collective narratives. The narrative approach is grounded in critical traditions that question the epistemological foundations of positivist social science, recognize the historical and social specificity of all viewpoints and subjectivities, and emphasize the perspectivity intrinsic to knowledge production (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008). Narrative research is furthermore concerned with understanding individual agency, and as such, with challenging structural determinism. At the same time, narrative research often focuses on individuals and communities facing high levels of structural inequality and exclusion, and thus illustrates how the extent of an individual's power and choice is always positioned in unique ways within larger societal structures.

Narrative research, then, includes both research on narratives, where narratives are the object of study, and research with

narratives, where data on human experience are collected through recording and analyzing personal or collective narratives (Bamberg, 2012). Research practices involving the narrative as study object or as research methodology are closely interwoven. Although in the following two sections, I discuss the two separately, my interest in collecting and analyzing personal narratives is closely connected to my interest in the transformative potential of narrative ways of thinking about events and experiences. In line with the professor of education and lifelong learning Torill Moen (2006, p. 57), I use the narrative approach as "a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study". I seek to uncover the thematic meanings, acts, motivations, and normative understandings of those sharing their stories, to explore these themes across individuals, and to consider how stories function socially to create possibilities for political action.

## The personal narrative or life story

> I didn't give up telling the stories and emphasizing the importance of stories even though I heard enough times that people would say "that is **her** story". Or people would say...people would actually say, "That is too little to consider or too limited to consider. It doesn't give a generalized picture. It is not about refugees, it is about a small group, highly educated…" People who want to disregard these kinds of narratives always find a way to do it. (Ghorashi, 2020)

Halleh Ghorashi is an anthropologist who works with the life stories of refugees as I do. The criticisms that she describes here are familiar to me. Fully aware of the charge that personal narratives are anecdotal or nonrepresentative, I offer here a discussion of some of the epistemological principles behind this approach. In the process, I also situate myself within the wide range of disciplines and perspectives in the social sciences that work with storytelling and (personal) narratives.[3] In my work, I have largely made use of the personal narrative or life story as "a retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and social context" (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008). The psychology professor Dan McAdams (2008) highlights principles with respect to personal narratives that have guided my work throughout the last decades: that the self is storied; that stories function to integrate lives; that life stories are told within social relationships; and that the focus and content of stories change over time as they are told in the context of lived culture, affected by norms, rules, and traditions at a particular time in a particular place.

## Narrative identity

The aim of narrative research is to study how people experience the world, given that individuals construct narratives to create coherence, situate themselves in the past, and move toward an anticipated or imagined future (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998; Moen, 2006; Riessman, 2008).

> Central in narrative research is a focus on the role of narratives as sensemaking tools with the capacity

> to produce, challenge and change the identities of individuals as well as collectives. Through narrative and narrativity (the principles and structures of storytelling) we constitute our social identity. (Andersen, Ravn and Thomson, 2020)

The construction of narratives involves connecting individuals with individual others and larger collectives as well as connecting events that have occurred with how they are understood. As the psychology professor Lieblich and her colleagues (1998, p. 7) comment: "We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell." These stories are always reconstructions, conveying experience by reconstituting it. This is an ongoing process, whereby the intersubjective telling of the story contributes to this meaning-making process (Squire, 2008).

The relationship between life story and self can be explored through the concept of narrative identity, which refers to "a person's internalized, evolving and integrative story of self" (McAdams, 2008, p. 242). The life story has the important function of integrating disparate elements of life, giving order to, and making sense of, what happened, and thereby attempting to explain and normalize what has occurred (Bamberg, 2012). According to McAdams (2008), this process of integration functions in two ways. First, personal narratives aim to bring together various aspects of the self in a way that expresses the individual as a whole despite the many complex and contradictory parts of which an individual consists. Second, people tell their stories to provide causal accounts that explain personal transformations. Doing so requires a retrospective and

self-reflective singling out and sequencing of events that shows transformation from past to present self (Bamberg, 2006).

For the narrator, storytelling can be a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (Jackson, 2002, p. 15). The anthropologist Michael Jackson makes this point based on an ethnographic exploration of Hannah Arendt's view on storytelling as a bridge between private and public realms within the context of interviewing refugees and others about violence and displacement. "Storytelling is a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's experiences of the world" (Jackson, 2002, p. 16). These processes never happen in isolation but take place in a particular societal context.

> The stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggles to reconcile who we imagined we were, are and might be in our heads and bodies, with who we were, are and might be in the social contexts of family, community, workplace, ethnicity, gender, social class and culture writ large. The self comes to terms with society through narrative identity. (McAdams, 2008, p. 242)

Given the importance of personal narratives in creating an integrated sense of self that can inspire action, the common anthropological approach to "examine the connections between people and the larger forces that shape their lives" (Waterston, 2020, p. 119) becomes meaningful. Employing a life

history approach makes possible the exploration of motivation, personal transformation, and the interlinkages between the personal and the collective. Historian Mary Jo Maynes and her colleagues (2008, p. 23) translate the key components of motivation into the following questions: "How do individuals come to understand their options, what do they bring in from their past experiences, what is the impact of emotions or values on their choices, and how do they themselves understand their capacity to act?" Answering these questions within the historical and social context of the meaning-making individual will afford new insights into individual agency.

> Agency is embodied in persons who evolve in context; people's stories build upon their lived experiences over time and in particular interpersonal, social, cultural and historical settings that they in turn continue to work through and transform in their present. (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008, p. 33)

Research based on life stories facilitates an understanding of human agency as simultaneously individual and social. Life stories have the potential to promote social action that may lead not just to personal but ultimately also to societal transformation. By working with life stories of individuals with experiential knowledge of "dark times" (Arendt, 1968) of oppression and violent conflict, I recognize both the unique nature of the stories, and simultaneously, their fundamentally collective nature.

## The impact of time and place on narrative

Classical anthropologists have often been accused of working in a timeless reality, capturing a life world in a particular community

in the here and now in ways that imply this reality to be fixed and unchanging. Collecting personal narratives makes it possible instead to understand the historical dimensions of a person's story as well as societal developments in modern history. Doing research among refugees in the Dadaab camps in Kenya, for example, focusing on refugee life in the here and now, was important for exposing the many injustices that individuals in the camps faced. But to get a sense of life in the camps without reducing individuals to their particular social positions in that moment—refugees living in marginal conditions in a semidesert location—I needed to understand their lives before Dadaab. Listening to their life stories was essential to this.

For the Somali refugees whom I interviewed, experiences of violent conflict and flight were only part of their full stories, which, for most, included living peacefully in a city or rural area in the south of Somalia. The stories of some started in Ethiopia or Somaliland and included several cycles of war and displacement. All of these stories provided insights not just into historical dimensions of the refugees' lives but also into different geographical realities without which their circumstances and experiences in the here and now were not fully comprehensible. For example, neglecting the full life story, with its temporal and geographical transformations, of Ayaan Moxamed—whom I spent considerable time with during my one-year stay in the camps in 2000—would have reduced her to a suffering refugee in a camp in a semidesert border area. This would have rendered invisible her life before the war, which involved being a diplomat for the Somali government, traveling the world, and speaking several languages.

The "indivisibility of past-present-future" (McLeod and Thomson, 2009, p. 8) or what sociologist Barbara Adam (2005) calls "timescape" is what makes understanding the historical dimension of a life essential. A particular narrative that includes individual meanings, acts, motivations, and normative understandings is always created under conditions where past, present, and future interconnect. Personal narratives document the lifelong consequences of transformative experiences as well as details in everyday life that often prove only in retrospect to have been salient (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008). What happened in the past influences people's understandings of the world and their own actions. One's narrative identity, while mostly based on a sense of one's core being, is also continually reconstructed in relation to experiences in and narratives of the past as well as imaginings of the future.

A personal narrative does not simply play back past events; it is always mediated by the storyteller. It involves perspective through which past events are tied together and made relevant for the here and now, with an eye to the storyteller's future orientation (Bamberg, 2006). Further, how one understands oneself—the narrative one tells about oneself—influences one's present-day understanding of the extent of one's power and choice as well as how one imagines possible futures. This understanding, in turn, influences one's actions and potentially the course of one's life. Ultimately, "we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears of the future" (Bruner, 2003, p. 210). This personal process is also integrated within the larger context in which a

story takes place and is told. The stories that people tell about their lives "provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and collective forces and institutions beyond the individual" (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008, p. 3). Life stories are never simply individual and fixed; they are told in historically and geographically specific times and places.

Narrative research acknowledges the close interaction between individuals and collectives, within specific sociopolitical and historical contexts. Dominant narratives in specific contexts influence how people create their own narratives, as postmodernists and critical theorists have argued. Any claimed voice consists of a plurality of culturally and historically situated voices (Bakhtin, 1986 in Moen, 2006). People's voices are shaped through dialogue with others throughout their lives, and what people say is also influenced by the audience they envision listening to them. This reality has been described as "the stranglehold of oppressive metanarratives that establish rules of truth, legitimacy and identity" (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010, p. 4). And yet, I would argue, narratives are both uniquely personal stories shaped by the experiential knowledge, values, and feelings of individuals as developed through interactions with thousands of others, and they are fundamentally collective stories that are shaped by the cultural, historical, and institutional settings in which they are shared. They represent the dialectical reality that individuals are always part of collectives, with the many opportunities and challenges this creates for establishing individual authenticity and autonomy.

## Introducing marginalized stories, creating counternarratives

Most narrative research focuses closely on voices and stories that have been silenced or marginalized, often with the aim of refuting universal claims and generalizations. Many of the researchers who collect personal stories seek to expand the narrow empirical base on which the social sciences rest and to show both the range of agency from below and the significance of factors not captured through other modes of inquiry (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008). This tendency has received renewed impetus from the revitalization of the decades-long call to decolonize research approaches within the social sciences, arts, and humanities. By employing a more holistic, detailed, and inclusive approach, dominant narratives based on the perspectives and experiences of the privileged can be challenged. Rich accounts of the particularities and complexities of the lives of real people can call into question dominant narratives that are at odds with the experiences of individuals whose perspectives and stories were excluded from past research (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010). Further, personal narrative research can reveal social or historical aspects that have been deliberately silenced or distorted by interested parties (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2008).

Without such efforts to draw on a greater variety of experiences and perspectives, dominant narratives are easily taken for granted. As Ghorashi (2017b, p. 2428) argues, "the particular impact of discursive power—especially of the discourses that are most salient at a given time and in a given space—is that it works through normalization." Those in dominant positions, whose experiences and perspectives are well reflected in