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# Art-based, narrative research with unaccompanied migrant children living in Johannesburg, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Migrant children are often represented through stereotypical narratives by media, governments and even researchers. These representations range from institutional narratives that reduce their experience to “pre-flight, flight, post flight” to psychological narratives that can represent them as traumatized victims of war. Using narratives collected over five years with unaccompanied migrant children, this paper shows that their past and present realities are perceived by the children to be much more complex and fragmented than the meta-narrative suggests. Additionally, their identities are so much more than “victim.” The narratives were collected through an art-making process with 27 children who had fled political conflicts in central and southern Africa and were now living in Johannesburg. Through a literal and internal “open space” created by the art-making, the children made some measure of meaning from the extreme events they had experienced. Often this meaning-making was done through the art alone, sometimes through stories told in metaphor and sometimes in small fragments that were pieced together over time. The narratives that emerged allow the children to be seen in their own terms and present us with what Chinua Achebe would call a “balance of stories” that move beyond the stereotypes that dominate our view.

## KEYWORDS

Unaccompanied migrant children; art-making; psychosocial support

## Introduction

This paper examines an art-based project that sought to create what Chinua Achebe calls “a balance of stories” in relation to war-affected children and young people who cross borders. For Achebe a balance of stories is “... where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people’s accounts” (Achebe 2013, 2). So many war-affected children, are “victims of other people’s accounts.” They are presented by the media as having no lives for us as outsiders “to apprehend” (Butler 2009). But it is not only the media that disembodies; development and aid agency discourse in its frequent use of the child as a “signifier of distress ... dehumanize[es] ... children, their families and their cultures, and render[s] them passive objects” (Burman 1994, 238) Also, research often applies a “paradigm of vulnerability and dependence” when looking at the

lives of children affected by war (Boyden 2003, 4). We so seldom hear the stories of children who cross borders in their own words and on their own terms. Very little of the ingenuity and creativity or even the sheer bravery needed to escape war, make dangerous border crossings and navigate unknown cities is present in media, aid agency and research accounts; very few of the complex tactics of survival are made evident.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge the extreme circumstances that many children have to face during war and its aftermath and the physical as well as psychological effect that this has. We also need to acknowledge the extreme vulnerability they face in their frequently hostile new environments. Obviously there is also a need to respond to war-affected children with interventions that reduce their vulnerability (Wessells 2017). However, this response needs to come from within their lived-experience and sense of social agency not from within the dominant discourse of disembodiment and distress. This is important because interventions that focus on agency instead of victimhood allow for a “... shared search for meaning, the social recognition and validation of distress and common effort towards overcoming adversity and reinstating normalcy [which] are all an essential part of integrating experience and healing in individuals” (Boyden 2003, 20). Additionally, an approach that acknowledges the child as agent allows us to focus beyond the individual pathology of the child and look at the social and political environment in which the child lives, opening a space for activism on their and our part.

Narratives collected over five years with a group of migrant children living in South Africa show that their past and present realities are perceived by the children to be much more complex than the meta-narrative would have us believe. This paper shows how use of an art-based approach applied over time can allow children to make meaning of extreme events and vulnerabilities. It illustrates too how the approach allows us to capture childhood as so much more than vulnerability, the children present themselves as social agents participating actively in the trajectory of their own lives. In this way the narratives add to the theorizing of childhood within the tradition of James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) by illustrating how children who face experiences that push them to the “edge-of-existence” can remain actors in their own lives. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly this paper describes how children’s participation in the making, collecting and sharing of their own stories provides us with the “balance of stories” that Achebe asks of us.

## Methodology: The Suitcase Project Process

The 27 children, aged between 6 and 18 years (just over one third were girls), who participated in the project had all fled political conflicts in Africa – Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Angola. Most had crossed multiple borders making long and complicated journeys by foot, boat, bus, truck, train and mini-bus taxi. These journeys had been fraught with illegal border crossings through forests and across rivers, arrest in some of the countries they passed through and constant negotiation with guides and peers who were also making the journey. At the time of the research they were living in inner city Johannesburg, in a situation of some vulnerability caused by poverty, dangerous housing in crumbling high rise apartments, xenophobia, precarious legal status and regular harassment by police. Though some of the children were nominally under the care of foster parents appointed by a local religious

organization, most looked after their own needs. This group of children met together every Saturday morning at a local school for five years in what was initially an informal group run voluntarily by the author (a child research practitioner) and an artist. Over time the informal meetings took the form of an art-making and storytelling process which the children began to call The Suitcase Project.

The project name came from the old suitcases collected from all over Johannesburg that the children used to make art on and in. The artist and researcher developed an approach that began with the idea of making “windows” (Morgan 2003) that tell other people about pieces of your life. The windows consisted of a range of art media each of which gave outsiders a view into a particular aspect of the children’s lives. The children placed the windows about their past inside the suitcase and those about their present were placed on the outside of the suitcase. The artwork suitcases became a powerful symbol of the various suitcases and other containers the children had packed and of the journeys they embarked on when they left home.

I remember when I left my country, there were many people waiting at the bus and there was a pile of suitcases. My suitcase reminds me of that time when we were all pushing to get on the bus, and we were afraid, and we wanted to get away because of the war. (Antonio, 14, Angola)

At one of the first meetings of the group the children discussed how South Africans did not seem to understand why they had come to South Africa. A young Ethiopian girl suggested that they make a book to tell people in South Africa why they had left their countries. In response to this, the author brought a tape recorder along every Saturday. As they finished a body of artwork for their suitcases the children were invited to talk about what they had made; to tell what was “inside their drawing (or painting or print),” to say what “this artwork tells about my life.” The storytelling took place under a tree in the school courtyard while the group worked in the nearby art room. Sometimes they came in pairs or small groups (usually friendship groups), sometimes alone. When working in groups the researcher and other children would listen quietly, witnessing the story with what Parsons’s calls “an ethic of restraint ... a respectful yet fulsome witness” (2012, 13) where none of us asked questions or probed the story in any way. The choice to talk was always the children’s, and for a long time some of the children did not come forward and tell stories, some never did. A strict code of ethics (approved by the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee: H14/11/28) was applied throughout the research. This included a process of ongoing consent to allow the children to withdraw from the project or the storytelling, referral for counseling if needed as well as complete anonymity in all publications which included the published book, exhibitions and research publications. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms chosen by the children. In some cases details that could identify children have also been changed.

During the storytelling the tape recorder was sometimes switched off if the children requested it, but most often it seemed that the act of recording gave the story more weight. In reflecting on the process of the project in 2004 the children had the following to say.

Researcher: What about the recorder? Didn’t it worry you?

No, I just forgot it.

I liked that you thought our story was important.

Yeah, that we had something important to say. Like you were really taking us seriously. No one listens to children usually.

It soon became clear that the children wanted other people to hear their stories.

It is like I need other people to hear my story.

Yes, we made these suitcases for some of the people out there. There are rich people out there who live large. They don't know how poor people, like refugees, live – they don't know. They got to know.

This prompted a series of public exhibitions of the children's work and then publication of the promised book (*The Suitcase Stories* 2006) based on some of the stories recorded. In addition, the data were analyzed for academic research.

The transcripts of the discussions and artwork were analyzed initially with a simple content analysis approach (Patton 1990). Once a set of draft themes had been developed an “experience-centered approach” (Squire 2008) was used, which went beyond simple content analysis to look at a “progression of themes ... their transformation and resolution” (Squire 2008, 50). In addition, the analysis assumed that narratives are the “means of human sense-making” (43). In particular, the aim was to look at how the children attempted to make sense of their present identities (through the artwork and their stories about it) in the context of their past and present circumstances (Kohli and Mather 2003) and the difficulties or “overcomings” they had experienced or continued to experience. What emerged from exploring the project praxis was an understanding of how to create an open space for meaning-making and a rich collection of narratives about how the children saw themselves, their past and present lives and even their futures.

The rest of this paper explores the narratives the children began to tell, giving us a balance of stories that reveal the complex and often fragmentary inner and outer reality of ordinary children who have overcome extraordinary circumstances. It also looks at what aspects of the art-based process allowed these narratives to emerge.

### **Making Meaning From “Edge-of-Existence Experiences”**

The Suitcase Project's emphasis on meaning-making as opposed to healing was one of the aspects that allowed a rich and complex set of narratives to emerge. The concept of meaning-making is rooted in an anthropological conception of trauma rather than a psychological one that focuses more on “healing,” which might imply pathology (Young 1995). Lester (2013) traces the link between anthropology and trauma, pointing out that anthropologists have long paid special attention to

... events that push people to the very edges of their own existence, ... Such edge-of-existence experiences hinge on what Scarry (1985) calls the unmaking ... of worlds [where people] are pushed to the very precipice of physical and/or psychological annihilation, the bonds that tether a person to the everyday world become stretched, distorted, and even torn. (753)

Most of the children in the Suitcase Project had experienced events (often multiple events) that fit in with what Lester (2013) calls “edge-of-existence experiences.” These experiences pushed them to the extremes of their ability to cope physically and psychologically. Here is an example from Jean, a young man from Rwanda.<sup>1</sup>

But in the war, my mum was killed. We were living in Rwanda by this time, in 1994. I was ten ... We took organized transport. It was in the war. People were getting killed with knives. All of them. The cars were a lot on the way to Burundi. My mom says, “Drop the car, let’s just walk, because we can’t make it in the car.” We walked. And then there was shooting. In front it was me and my mom. My sisters were lost by now, just me and my mum and little brother. Then they shoot her in her intestines. I just stayed with her, with my brother. Many people were walking past ...

That’s it. It is a sad story. I get on with my life. If I think, it’s too much. I haven’t told no one this story. People don’t know this. They don’t deserve it ... That is part of life, but it is too much, it is too much. (Jean, 16, Rwanda)

The literature on children affected by war suggests that experiences such as that described by Jean create “a rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives” (Summerfield 1998, 16). The many stories like Jean’s reveal the extent to which a complex collection of events and losses had “untethered” (Lester 2013, 753) the children from the “ordinary” trajectory of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Their lives had become “unbalanced.” This untethering is perhaps most clearly seen in the metaphor that Antonio, who had been abandoned by his mother in South Africa at the age of about 9, used to describe his life as a refugee in South Africa. The metaphor came from the suitcase he chose to work on. After doing nothing on the suitcase for a few weeks he told me, “I don’t know what I should do on this suitcase. There is nothing in my life, nothing to say.” I suggested that he could think about why he had chosen that particular suitcase. He went off and made a simple print that he carefully glued on the suitcase where the handle had been. See photograph below.





This is what he said about it.

This sign here on my suitcase, “My life is like a suitcase with no handle,” it tells more about the guy in the picture [see image below, which was on top of the suitcase]. The person on the suitcase, his life is not balanced, it is not straight. There are a lot of things going on around the person in my picture. There is blood and dark colors and yellow. There are good things and bad things going on around him – most of it is bad. He is always falling and then needing to get up again. Like me. (Antonio, 14, Angola)



Antonio expanded on why he felt his life was “not balanced,” how far out of kilter it had become. Firstly, it was the xenophobia he experienced as a refugee that made him feel untethered. Then it was his recent experience of being arrested and placed in a cell with adults. But most of all his sense of being unbalanced came from being alone, as this quote illustrates.

I was thinking of the way my mum took care of us, loved us and spoiled us. She went to Angola, but rumors said she is dead, so I really don’t know. She went back and didn’t return. I wasn’t actually feeling sad. I was a survivor – life is what you make of it. I was feeling I am on my own, and I came home whenever I wanted and ate whatever I wanted. I was feeling a bit independent like that. The disadvantages were that nobody would support me and that I was really suffering. There was this time – there were days – when I went to bed without anything to eat. I didn’t feel bad that the other kids in the house had food and did not share with me. I had a no-care attitude, and this is what I have survived on. (Antonio, 14, Angola)

It is clear that Antonio feels sad about being alone but as with so many of the other narratives, what stands out is that he does not describe his situation as “... injury” (Lester 2013, 755), or being in a state of “hapless victimhood” (Bracken, Giller, and Summerfield 1995, 483) in the way some trauma discourse would have it. This is less a description of trauma in the pathological sense but rather an attempt to make sense out of experience. To make sense out of what Finnström (2008) calls “existential uncertainties ... [to] orient [themselves] and seek meaning as they engage the world and live their humanity” (28).

Through the suitcase Antonio is able to explain his situation and begin to see how he copes with it, he is making meaning.

The quote below shows another example of making meaning within the project, this time through dialogue. In the quote some of the older boys try to make sense of the identity they now had as young people who had no extended family. The dialogue allowed them to explore alternative families, such as the support they could give each other.

- Etienne    This person I drew he is holding people in his arms – he is holding us together. He symbolizes my grandpa. He worked in this place for long and he built a big house, he had twelve children and many grandchildren and during the holidays we all went there. We used to be there together, kids, grown up people. That was a real good life when I think about it. All the family got separated because there was a war and they chased my grandfather away. If I have people who are around me who love me and that I love then I am happy.
- Jean        Can I ask a question? Like if you are not sure what to do and we have no home or people to ask. How can you find people to believe in, that you can ask?
- CJ          I think you can ask peer counselors at school.
- Jean        But what if you don't want people to know about your question. You need someone to trust.
- Etienne    I think friends. Like all of you [he refers to the boys in the group].  
(Boys, Burundi, Rwanda and DRC)

Lester (2013) points out that after war in the face of difficulty

People find ways to go on living – not just by resolving deep psychological conflicts or by reorganizing their experience to meet existing categories, but through ongoing, iterative, continuous processes of meaning-making that emerge in relationship with others, across a variety of levels and contexts, and through time. (754)

The Suitcase Project allowed Antonio and the older boys to make some kind of meaning to bring together again the narrative threads of their life and see themselves as more than victim – they saw themselves as survivors and supporters of each other, a new family.

The narratives describe very difficult situations, death, being alone, having no family to talk to, what White (2005) calls the “unmentionable” (White 2005, 20). For White making these experiences concrete in a way that the children can cope with is important. Telling a story can create an “alternative territory of identity” (White 2005, 11 and 12) where a child moves from an identity of powerlessness as “victim” to a position of “overcomer” or “survivor.” This is the process we see in Antonio’s account above and the discussion between the boys. It is though, most obvious in Jean’s story. After his mother was killed Jean, took his younger brother and they walked across the border alone. He acknowledged this resilience during an activity at a weekend retreat run by a clinical psychologist where we lit candles to remember people we had lost. Jean lit a candle for himself,

This candle is for the boy who was me, the ten-year-old boy. The boy who survived, who walked and walked and survived, even though he was ten years old and did not know what was happening around him. This candle is for the ten-year-old me.

He repeated this reference to walking, when he made a large map collage about the journey he had made, by pasting many, many magazine cut-outs of shoes on to his map.



They remind me that I walked. I walked and walked and walked. I was a small boy but I walked. They remind me that I was a survivor. That things were very bad and I was only ten years old, but I walked and walked. And I survived. The shoes remind me of surviving.

Yet, when Jean first spoke (see his description of his mother being killed) he suggested that he had been unable to begin making meaning from his narrative, “I haven’t told no one this story. People don’t know this. They don’t deserve it.” What was it in the Suitcase Project that allowed him to begin this process of making some small kind of meaning from such an “edge-of-existence” experience? What was it that allowed Antonio and the other boys to begin to find meaning and slowly tether themselves to the world they had found themselves in?

### Art-Making Allows the “Unmentionable”

The art-making was one of the things that gave the “unmentionable” voice and therefore played an important role in the making of meaning. There is acknowledgement amongst those who use the arts as a tool to help people cope with trauma that the process of art-making can mirror an internal process of reflection (for example, Haen [2009] and Buk [2009]). But often these processes use art as a way *into* “talk.” What we see in the Suitcase Project is an example of how the art itself was an *alternative* to talk.

The Suitcase Project’s focus on “not talking” was a conscious response to the children’s wish not to talk about the things that made them sad. When we first began to meet they avoided any talking about experiences or even games where they had to express feelings. One boy described a counselor he had seen as “... this woman [who] was pressurizing me to talk, talk, talk ...” (CJ, 16, Burundi). Another summed up her experience of previous counseling thus, “It didn’t help me. She (the psychologist) just wanted me to cry about it. I got bored so I did and then she (the psychologist) felt better” (Jenny, 15, Burundi). This is why a respect for the choice to remain silent was built into the project process. I was always very clear that the children could choose to talk about their art or not, that they could stop talking even if they had begun to tell a story. The fact that some of the children never talked about any of their artwork and that many did pieces of artwork that they never talked about is evidence of this approach. In the Suitcase Project the art was not used to *elicit* information (as in the photo-elicitation process of Harper [2002] for example), but as a form of communication in itself. This does not mean that we avoided the need for “opening space for people to speak of... the unmentionable” (White 2005, 20). However, it was the art-making, rather than words, that gave the unmentionable voice.

Within the project we also acknowledged and respected the fact that silence was a choice; that some experiences “could not be storie[d] into sense” (Squire 2008, 44). Sutton and De Backer (2009), explore how the use of what they call the “aesthetic paradigm” allows for “sound and silence, gesture and stillness, color and the blank canvas” (119). Because it worked within an esthetic paradigm (privileging art over talk), the Suitcase Project allowed for silent meaning-making. The children did acknowledge

that the art they made sometimes included reference to feelings (“when we draw, we don’t just draw, we draw how we feel at the time”) but what was important to them was that the process was not centered around talk, “because some problems that some of us have, we don’t want anyone to know” and “there are certain stories to be told and some not to be told.” The following extract from field notes and artwork illustrates this point.

The group had been meeting for about two years when Pierre started to hang around. To begin with, he came in for twenty minutes, drew some pictures – usually with pencil or pencil crayon – and then disappeared, seldom staying for lunch. He obviously had artistic talent, but the drawings were disturbing – usually tortured faces. Diane (the artist) praised his drawing, bringing him special high-quality crayons one week and special drawing paper the next. At first we were not even sure if he was a refugee, but after a few weeks he told us he was from the DRC and lived with his uncle. One Saturday he brought his younger sister. She was 11 years old.

We began working on body maps, and Pierre stayed long enough one Saturday to let one of the other children draw around his body. Then he took the paper outside and worked alone under a tree. He produced an image of a corpse-like body covered in blood, in the top corner he had cut out a photo of the face of a woman from a magazine, and written “missing” across it.



When asked if he wanted to say anything about what he had shown Pierre, said, “This [shows] my future and present and ... My mother passed away last year ... This is her – she is missing (he pointed to the magazine cut out).” He could say no more. Pierre could not say how he felt about his mother’s death (his mother was simply

“missing”) but his art allowed for an extremely vivid representation of this significant silence.

The use of an esthetic paradigm allowed also for the use of metaphor in place of a factual narrative. Metaphors allowed the children to express what had previously been unrepresentable and unmentionable. For Pierre, it was the metaphor of the missing mother. A nine-year-old girl who had been abducted and abused by an uncle who had been entrusted with her flight from DRC depicted her uncle as a lion.

This is a lion getting out of the jungle and coming to the city. He is a big lion. He is coming to the city to eat people. He is like my uncle, bad. Trying to kill people and jealous of people. He will harm them and take their things. He wants things to be his. (Isabelle, 9, DRC)



She could not talk about what had happened but she could represent it in metaphor.

It was not only the focus on art-making and the use of an esthetic paradigm that allowed the children to begin making meaning it was also the *nature* of the art work. The many different art processes and myriad materials of the Suitcase Project allowed the children to work in layers and over time, encouraging reflection and the layering of memory and experience. Jean's story above illustrates this as does a piece of artwork made to tell a story of gang rape and a subsequent pregnancy. The story of the rape is told in magazine cut-outs and then the story of how the young woman was helped to cope by friends and service providers is told in drawings made in tissue paper pasted over the magazine cut-outs.





This same young woman showed her strength and ability to cope on her suitcase too. Like Antonio, she chose a suitcase without a handle, but she constructed one, reminding us of how she had coped over time.



When asked why she had made this carefully constructed and attached handle she told the story below. The story illustrates what Boyden (2003) calls the “extraordinary ingenuity” of the child faced with impossible circumstances. A story far from the narratives of hapless victimhood.

After escaping war in Burundi, Jenny was living in a refugee camp with a foster mother.

That lady, she does not want us to go to school, that lady made me to wash her children’s clothes, that lady made me to clean the house, everything by myself.

One day I have to run away, because she beat me up for nothing. And it was like, what can I do next? Now I am eleven years old, what can I do next? That day when all of them went out, I told Françoise [Jenny’s sister], to stay behind when they go – there we sit. I went to her room, I take the money and I take the taxi until Dar es Salaam. The day when I stole the money I was so afraid. I was asking myself, “God is going to punish me?” And I stop ... Then, “Agh, let me take it. I must go!” And I just take the money and I go ... I think maybe they have been looking for us for long because of that money (she laughs) and they never find us. (Jenny, 15, Burundi)

Jenny and her eight-year-old sister then made a journey on buses and taxis to South Africa asking for help from adults along the way. It was the magazine cut-outs that allowed her to represent the unmentionable and the tissue paper to describe her fragile

coping mechanisms. It was the cloth and string and the suitcase that allowed her to fashion the handle and tell her story. The many textured materials of the art-making process were there for her to fashion some kind of meaning out of her experiences and in the process to find an identity of some considerable strength and initiative.

Additionally, what became clear from an analysis of the recordings and from looking at the artwork was that a fragmentary process of narrative creation was also an important part of the meaning-making process. What the children present are fragments of the past, the present and even sometimes the future, all muddled together. There is no attempt on their part to create a single narrative.

It is important to note that even though the children presented their lived-experience as fragmentary, that did not mean there was no need to help them see some kind of narrative thread in their lives. As discussed above it was important for them to create a “handle” to hold on to the suitcase, to make sense of their lives. But, by acknowledging the fragmentary nature of their tropes of trauma the Suitcase process allowed them to work in a fragmentary way and to build up the narrative slowly in their own time and in their own way. Even within the project process their narratives were never seen as complete, the suitcases were always there in the art room even when we had moved on from working with them so the children could add something to them or change them in any way they chose.

Many of the organizing concepts used in the work also allowed for fragments, for example, the idea of representing a “window into your life,” which did not require a linear logical narrative to be presented by the children. It recognized the fractured and fragmentary nature of their experiences and allowed these fragments to be used by the children to build their own narratives over time. The adult facilitators were an important part of the process too. At no point did we demand that the children make sense of what they wanted to say before they said it. The children chose what to represent in the artwork and what to say about it. When they chose to tell us about the images they had made no one asked for logical, linear narratives. As the story-recorder I did not even ask for “truth”; fact and fiction mingled with metaphor and direct accounts. We were happy with windows, with fragments. No one ever asked, “... and what happened then”; what was given was accepted and given weight through the recording process.

Another part of the process that allowed for fragments was the fact that they were able to use small pieces of paper and many other kinds of materials, slowly adding these to build up their stories on their suitcases. Many of these materials were fragmentary in a literal sense; cut cardboard shapes, mosaic tiles, torn paper, beads and found objects such as bottle tops. This variety was in itself significant for meaning-making because the haphazard collection of materials represented or mirrored the chaos of their past and present lives. By building “scrappiness” into the process we were mirroring the children’s outer lives and allowing an internal ordering or meaning-making through the external process of making the windows and placing them onto and into suitcases until they formed some kind of coherent whole.

But there was more – the art-making allowed them literally to craft their past, their present and their future (Kohli and Mather 2003). As “poor refugees” or “victims” they might have been seen as people without a past or future, merely as needy, as victims. But the children used the art process to show that they were much more than this, for example, that they had a past in which they were loved, cared for and nurtured by



natural environments and people. They came from communities where they were known and were not strangers. This literal creation of a past worked at an internal level too; it reminded them of who they were. It allowed them to express their role as social agents in previous stable environments. The following quotes are examples of this.

When I was young, I liked to go with my mother to the fields. Sometimes when there was too much sun I would go and sit on the cloth in the shade on her Kitenge [patterned cloth worn in east and central Africa] cloth. She was working and I would watch her work. (Aggie, 16, DRC)

This is me when I was small and this is my roof and my house and my sisters and this is the grass. This is me, and this the avocado tree and the mango tree, the flowers, the two birds and the dog. This is the house. This is a tin roof. (Esther, 11, DRC)

This is when we went to the village to visit our grandfather and this is where he lived. He had a garden and a lemon tree and an avocado tree and there was a nest in the avocado tree and there was also three houses and he had a neighbor who always left his door open so that air can get inside. (Isabelle, 10, DRC)

As well as remembering places and people they also recalled the everyday rituals of the past. The walk to school, the fetching of water, leaving the door open so air can come in, gardening, climbing a tree; these are all everyday rituals that connote normalcy. There are everyday objects and rituals everywhere in the artwork and narratives.

I made this bowl from clay. It is the plastic bowl my mother washed me in. Every morning when I was little, outside the house she washed me. Sometimes the water was too cold. This was in the town Shashemane. I put my name here in Amharic on the basin. (Zai, 14, Ethiopia)

This is a jacket I remember. I had it when I was very small. They bought it for me – the pastor at the church – that is why I like it. I wore it to church. It was back home in DRC. I also got a bible, I read and I learned something. These are girls - they used to be in the choir. We sang a lot of songs, French songs. (Pascal, 13, DRC)

This is my Sunday shoes. (Meli, 17, DRC)

The recalling of these rituals and objects is resonant of what De Certeau (1984) calls the “tactics” of survival. Tactics are

... victories of the “weak” over the strong (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, “hunters’ cunning,” manoeuvres, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. (xix)

There are examples in the children’s narratives of “clever tricks” and “warlike manoeuvres” but in the quotes above what we see are a “joyful discovery” of past everyday rituals and objects. In their present context of uncertainty these remind them and any of us who see their work that their lives *were* normal. They are poetic narratives of how they exist beyond the chaos of war and migration and the precarity of the refugee.

Another important part of the process was the community it created. Tolfree (1996), in his work on refugee children, describes the need for “a special form of interaction ... with which people themselves can discover and build on their own and each other’s personal resources” (113). The Suitcase Project gave the children the space to create such a community. It encouraged interaction through the communal art-making, the dialogic nature of

the storytelling, the simple meal the children ate at the end of the meeting, the asking after the children who were missing, the sense of identity created by the public work of the project. All of this contributed to the creation of a community of support amongst the children that has extended beyond the life of the project, even to the present in many instances. Walker (2015) describes how, through the processes of grieving and mourning, members of an informal support group that formed during the Sri Lankan violence of 2005 were able to use their vulnerability and their sense of personal dislocation to make personal meaning. She also applies Butler's (2004) work to suggest that being part of a group allowed for a "new form[s] of political community [created] through ... using [their] dependency on others, and mobilizing bodily vulnerability as a means of transcending fear and forging connection ... against the destructive powers of control and manipulation" (Walker 2015, 121). This is exactly what the children in the Suitcase Project did. Through their stories and images the children shared their vulnerability and fear and through this they created connections among each other and between themselves and the viewers at their exhibitions or the readers of their book.

There was, from the start of the project, a sense of connection with outsiders. At the beginning of the project, for example, they said, "We want to make a book to tell people why we are here," "We want the rich people out there to see how refugees live." They did not want to be seen as mere "foreigners" or refugees. They wanted others to see each one of them as a loved child. A child placed carefully on a cloth in the shade to keep cool while their mother worked in the field, or a girl who had Sunday shoes, a boy who climbed a tree after school and whose father taught him to look after ducks, as well as a person who had lost all of this.

## Conclusion

The narratives collected through the Suitcase Project highlight the very edge of existence to which the children had been thrown by their experiences of war, their journeys away from it across many borders and their new lives in a hostile environment. But by allowing them to tell their stories through an art-based approach they also allow us to glimpse their past lives where they lived as "ordinary" children who were part of loving families. They allow us to see their resilience and power in the way they have negotiated the challenges of war and its aftermath. They allow us to apprehend them as so much more than victims of war; to understand being a child refugee through their balance of stories. The richness of lived-experience represented in the narratives is partly the result of the time the children spent working together, pointing us to the need to take time if we wish to represent the complexity of life lived within a landscape of vulnerability.

The art-based methodology played an important role in allowing them "to contribute to a definition of themselves" as Achebe puts it. It was the art-based approach that focused on meaning-making through the re-creating of the layers of their lives and thus allowed them to be agents in the making and telling of their stories. The art-based approach took the emphasis away from direct talking about difficult events, creating a measure of emotional distance by allowing the children to use metaphor, silence and the art materials themselves to tell their stories. It also allowed them to work in a fragmentary way which reflected their own past and present life experience thus making it easy to slowly build up meaning over time. The process allowed them to apprehend their own strength and agency, seeing the

boy that walked and walked, the girl who found ways to cope with gang rape and a subsequent pregnancy and the boy who, though he sometimes felt alone, also enjoyed his independence.

Additionally, the depth of the community the children created through being part of a regular project of activity helped them to make meaning of their personal loss but also to make a statement of advocacy about being a child refugee in South Africa, a political community. It is a deeply political act for some of the most marginalized and vulnerable of society to speak out in this way. Allowing those who have previously been invisible to be seen through a balance of stories, those whose lives have not been worthy of notice to articulate how they are not disembodied children but daughters, sons, brothers, frees us as outsiders to apprehend their lives. This apprehension allows us, perhaps to respond with our own activism against war and the extreme circumstances it places children in.

## Note

1. All names have been changed.

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