

IASFM20 Podcast Series Full Transcript
Episode 7. Interview with Craig Mortley
on Innovative Approaches to Belonging in Urban Spaces

Opening credit

Forced migration due to war, conflicts, disaster, climate change and urban development impacts is a critical issue requiring attention from multiple stakeholders. The International Association for the Study of Forced Migration, or IASFM, is a global interdisciplinary association committed to advancing research, policy analysis and understanding of forced migration and displacement. The 20th Conference of IASFM was held on the 21-23 January 2025 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with a topic of “Forced Displacement in an Urbanizing World”. This audio series, supported by the Washington University in St Louis, presents various reports from this conference.

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Host: Dr. Staci Martin

I want to welcome you to the IASFM podcast. I am a guest moderator, Staci Martin, from Portland State University. And I have Craig Mortley, if you wanted to talk a little bit about who you are and what brings you to this podcast?

Guest: Craig Mortley

Yeah, thank you for having me, Staci. So, as you mentioned, my name is Craig Mortley. I'm happy to be here and to share a little bit about my journey and the work that I do.

I'm currently a 3rd year PhD student at the University of Connecticut, School of Social Work, where my work predominantly focuses on exploring belonging for queer asylum seekers, as well as looking on integration and displacement of folks, and the inclusion of folks with lived experiences and their voices within decision-making spaces. You know, my work is kind of deeply intertwined with my background, my journey, as well as the communities that I've worked with over the course of time. I was born and raised in Jamaica. I spent most of my life there, received most of my formal education there. But as a queer man living in a country that had limited protections for LGBTQ folks, I was forced in 2013 to kind of seek refuge somewhere else, and I became displaced. And I came to the US and arrived in Worcester, Massachusetts, through the support of the LGBTQ asylum task force.

Based on that experience, the challenges, the joys, the struggles of navigating the US asylum system, the whole experience of being displaced, kind of being caught between cultures, my expectation of what the US would be, and the reality of my life, and trying to find meaning since, you know, things were disrupted and displaced, it kind of created the space for me where it has informed my work. So prior to

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coming to the US, I didn't know too much about refugees. I didn't know too much about asylum seekers, or even thinking that that would have been a trajectory of the kind of work in my life. My academic background focused on public policy and public administration. And I thought, that's kind of where I was going to go in terms of academically.

One of the things I realized early on in the process was the profound sense of isolation that one faces, and I think of if there was language barriers which I didn't have, but also the cultural barriers that are there, the challenges that create and the sense of isolation. And when you layer identities on that, such as a queer person, then it creates more isolation because there are many spaces that are not safe for folks. So, one of the things that I noticed early on out is I felt isolated. I felt lonely. I was questioning where do I fit in with things and out of that curiosity brought me to the work of focusing on belonging for newcomers in the time period.

So if you understand the asylum process, there is a wait time in the US where you are not able to work. 180 days, for some people it's a little bit longer now because of just delays in the asylum system. And so within that time while I was waiting on work authorization, I started doing voluntary work with the LGBTQ asylum task force that was supporting me. We did public awareness campaigns. We went and did workshops in congregational settings, mostly, just to raise awareness around the experience of asylum seekers. But also workshops to help these congregations to host asylum seekers.

Within New England area, there are these small communities that are rather interesting and unique. These are predominantly white communities hosting mainly asylum seekers from Africa and the Caribbean. So there's this interesting dynamics that you see. And I always question the piece of how do these people fit in in these predominantly white spaces? You go to a church and you see this one black family and everybody else around them is white. I always kind of question that piece and be like, how do they fit in? And so that have brought me to the space of trying to understand belonging and how they're experiencing belonging, especially spatial belonging. What exists in these places that supports these newcomers? Or are they even being supported?

Additionally, within this time period, I was out in the community because I needed to keep myself busy. And I got into spaces, voluntary spaces, spaces that were looking on diversity, equity, and inclusion. And so, some of the work that I've done with Worcester Shared Belonging, Making Worcester Home project, came out of being in those spaces, those collaborative spaces with academics and migration practitioners. And one of the pieces I want to highlight from that is co-founding an initiative called Share the Platform, which IASFM I think 2 conferences ago actually had a statement from us about amplifying refugee voices and creating opportunities for folks with lived experience to be in decision-making spaces. Those were some of the initiatives I kind of got involved in.

And as I was doing that work, I realized that there was a disconnect between what academics were doing and what practitioners were doing, and so that fueled my goal of pursuing a PhD. I've always had a goal to do a PhD, but kind of shifted where I wanted to do more like translation research around belonging for asylum seekers.

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Host: Dr. Staci Martin

You talk about the politics of navigating urban space. Is there a story that really stuck with you? Something that captures both struggle and resilience when you're trying to belong in the city of Worcester?

Guest: Craig Mortley

Yes, so I could sit here and share many, many stories with you around that. But I think one of them that stood out to me was a young Caribbean man from Jamaica that I did some work with. So one of the things that I think sometimes might not be evident to people is for many newcomers, they will sometimes struggle whether that is they have never finished school or they have learning disabilities or those struggles that sometimes we don't necessarily think of while we're supporting folks. So there's this person who had learning disabilities, who was I would say functionally illiterate if that's a proper term to use, where you know they would not.. they weren't able to read signs, if they saw the name on paper they would not know that is their name, and so that adding another level and layer of challenge for that person with the asylum process but also to secure like a job. The task force does support people and they came in through the task force for 180 days or longer that they get work authorization. But one of the things I started noticing is that for some folks, because of the challenge, other challenges whether they have a disability or they have no work experience that does, you know, make it a little bit more difficult.

And this person had a difficult time securing a job. Things like navigating the bus, which folks takes for granted. And this is somebody who spoke English. Things like navigating the bus roads, being able to read the signs of where to get off, or those kinds of things was challenging for this person. And throughout that, one of the things I admired about them is that they had a goal. They had 2 goals at the beginning of this process. One was to get asylum, which they had very little control over, and the other was to get a driver's license and a car so that they would be mobile to be able to get around. With those goals in mind, they set out to acquaint themselves with the city and eventually they were able to navigate the bus system with the help of myself and others who were working with them to the point where they then became kind of like a unofficial ambassador for newcomers as they were coming to help them to navigate like spaces.

So one of the spaces that people will have to go to when they get their work authorization is the Social Security Office to get your social security card. And for some people you go to the DMV to get a state ID, because you do need an ID for most things. And so over the course of time they became kind of our go to person to do a lot of that and to help people to navigate the city of Worcester and to share their experience, but also that they, you know, chose to go to ESL classes, so English as a Second Language classes. Those are not meant for literacy. They're really meant for people who can't speak English. But within that space they're able to get some of their literacy needs met which eventually helped them to, you know, be able to read and to get around. I did some classes with them.

But one of the things that I admired most is their strength, their will to never give up and persevere. I, even though I've had the similar experience, will sometimes see people in this deficit way that many of us tend to see folks from displaced background only within their displacement. And this young man

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helped me to kind of shift perspective to see that within sort of the... experience their joys their achievements that folks make, and seeing him kind of rebuild community and have community, some of it online, some of it in person, brings me joy, and it's one of those stories that I like to highlight.

And on this point, last year this person actually got asylum after waiting for 10 years. They eventually was granted asylum and was able to get the driver's license and the car that they had initially set out to do, though it took them a little bit longer than the initial plan. For me, that is part of the motivation of continuing to do this work.

Host: Dr. Staci Martin

Yeah, it sounds like that he really made Worcester home. And just going talking about your project, you do have a project called Making Worcester Home and it focuses on young refugees and their experiences and you use a variety of methodologies. I was curious of if you could talk about what methodology you used and how you incorporate youth in that.

Guest: Craig Mortley

Yes, so the Making Worcester Home project was one of those that again came out of being in collaborative spaces. So the PI on the project is a professor at Worcester State University and through the Urban Action Institute that was a state cut that he directs, through some community funding they came up with this project. I initially joined as a guest presenter in the 1st year, and then in the 2nd year I was invited on to be one of the co-instructors on the project.

So part of what we had set out to do is to explore what it means to belong, as you mentioned, for young people from refugee background. Some of these young persons were actual refugees themselves and some of them were American born but their parents were refugees. We incorporated things like photovoice, community mapping and journaling as part of the process. The youth use those tools to think through their lives and surroundings and reflected on their identities. And how those shape how they were experiencing the community and their perspective on the wider society and the community.

They initially, at the onset of the project, would identify a social problem in line with youth participatory action research where the youth are seen, as co-developers and co-researchers in the process. And so the decisions are made with the youth. So it's not like as academics, we're coming in and saying, hey, this is a social problem, we're going to research this social problem, and you are the subjects of the research. This is where they're co-researchers. And we're coming up with what is of interest to them. And so we use the community mapping exercise as a tool to help them to identify where they fit in.

So one of the things is, what does Worcester mean to you is one of the questions we ask. What does home in Worcester feels like for you? And they drew these nice maps. And in subsequent sessions, they explained to the group what the maps mean, the places that they identified with, places that were important to them, places that they felt welcome and belonging in those spaces. We didn't really use the word belonging per se in those conversations. Spaces where they felt safe, where they felt at home, places like school, the public spaces at the library. In one of the groups, predominantly the population

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was Asian, and so Boba tea shops were some of the places that folks identified as spaces that they felt belong in.

As part of the project as well, because with belonging does come on belong in sometimes. Right? And there's a duality that happens oftentimes when we think of belonging oftentimes within the traditional literature, people think that is a linear process where you move from on belonging and then you belong. And then that's it, right? There's duality that happens that there are spaces that you feel belonging and there are spaces that you're not feeling belonging in those spaces.

And so we did photovoice to elicit how they were experiencing the city. And with their camera phones, they took pictures of spaces that weren't welcoming and spaces that there were barriers to belong in. And so an example that stood out to me was somebody took a picture of a chain link fence to represent those spaces where there are barriers as they were thinking about resources in school. Because one of the project focused on resources in school. And so, the picture represented being barred from accessing certain resources as a newcomer. One of the things that cohort had identified is that they were not able to, as newcomers, access AP (advanced placement) classes and almost like the school did not believe or think that they would be able to go to college. And so they were relegated to service industry jobs, and not placing these AP classes to further advance themselves and make themselves more marketable to colleges.

Another thing, another picture that stood out to me was there were these friends at the bus stop. But New England is snowy, and climate change has shifted that, but Worcester was a place that got a whole lot of snow. And they took a picture of these folks at the bus stop but there's banks of snow around them and the walkway is not being cleared to highlight the challenges and struggles that newcomers oftentimes face as they try to navigate cities, institutions, whether that's school or getting permits at the city hall, or just even doing businesses. But also just mobility of getting around. You know, some of the New England cities are not really walkable cities. You don't have a car. There's not a reliable bus system and it goes to show the challenges that newcomers face as they try to blend in sometimes, but not really blending, because oftentimes they stood out in the city as they make the city and Worcester their home.

Part of why we took this approach was for them to come up with a social issue, so that they can work on, continuously work on that social issue to make life easier for other newcomers coming in. In subsequent cohorts, folks had focused on housing. In the last cohort that we did and the one before that, it happened during COVID and the racial uprising and one of the projects focused on the youth's role in social justice movements. Many of them didn't see themselves as having a role or a space in those movements.

Host: Dr. Staci Martin

Just thinking about the comment about climate change and snow and a lot of our newcomers are coming because of climate change, a lot of newcomers are coming from hot areas and I guess snow could be a culture shock and understanding. Maybe for you, too. Jamaica's really hot and muggy and sweaty and just coming... what what was your experience with snow?

Guest: Craig Mortley

I have an interesting story. So prior to coming to Worcester, I spent, I think, a month or 2 months in Georgia. There's an area in Jamaica that is relatively cooler. It's a place called Manchester in the Hills. I was familiar with the temperature because I've been there a few times and that's what Georgia kind of had represented. I came in the dead of winter. As a warmer climate country, I only had a small hoodie that I brought with me and Converse, a cloth Converse shoes. That's what I had, right? It did not dawn on me that I was going to somewhere that was cold. And so this was the first experience with snow.

I think it was actually the day before Christmas. I think it was Christmas Eve. In 2013, the week prior, Worcester had gotten I think like 13 or 14 inches of snow. Banks of snow kind of piled. The Boston Logan Airport is not one of those integrated airports. They have different terminals that are disconnected, and I needed to move from one terminal to the next, so you actually have to walk outside. And I'm seeing the snow outside and I'm like, Oh my God, this is so pretty! Until I went outside and wind chills kind of hit me and I'm like, Oh my God, this is so terrible! Only having a hoodie and a cloth shoes on.

I had that for some time until I was able to secure winter gears. Navigating snow, not wanting to leave your house because it's so cold and then taking the bus on top of that. You actually had to walk a distance to get to the bus stop, and walking carefully so that you don't fall on the ice. That was challenging in and of itself. And realizing that life goes on during the winter. In these spaces, life does go on and you have to get up and go to work. You have to get up and go to do life. And for some people, that is a culture shock for them. And it does take them a minute to be able to get coats and to get winter supplies.

Host: Dr. Staci Martin

A lot of refugee support are immediate crisis response, which the crisis response was to get you a coat and proper shoes but we want them not only survive, but thrive. And so just curious if you could talk about some of the work that you're doing that is more long term.

Guest: Craig Mortley

Yes, definitely the focus on immediate needs as folks are arriving, providing emergency, food or shelter, medical care or safety is necessary, and we do need those people on the front lines to do that work. But part of my work and part of... from my own experience, because one of the things that I experience was that after the first 2 weeks or so and the excitement of this newcomer and the gift baskets and the flowers and all of those things, you're left on your own.

I came in a period where a few of us came together. So I think around that time, it was like six. There were folks who had I guess, more needs than I had. There was a family that was the first time they were having a family, and so a lot of the focus was on that. There was somebody who was trans and getting them set up was something that the task force needed to do. And as a single man come in, and as somebody who by Western standard was relatively educated and being able to navigate spaces, I was left on my own. And it had me thinking, what next? Beyond, when nobody start, when nobody was coming around. During those weekdays, when you're sitting at your house because you can't work with nothing to do, what next?

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And then I realized the resettlement agency, the focus was on economic self-sufficiency, even though that's not the word that they had used, but it was about getting you to your work permit or your work authorization. And then one month after that, you were then placed on your own to financially take care of yourself.

But in that time period, nothing was done in order to prepare folks for job preparation. As I mentioned, some people do come here, they might not have finished high school, or they might not have high school equivalency. There was no encouragement of folks to do whatever high school equivalency test that was there. But it also relegates people to take service jobs such as in retail. My first job as somebody who at that time had 2 master's degree, I started working in a retail because that was the only job I could get. It had me thinking about what happens beyond this. How do we really build community? This benevolent model that we have, that comes from social work and other spaces, the church as well, helping the less fortunate but not seeing the less fortunate as actual people is something that I set out to push against.

One of the things in my work that I advocate for is one, creating long-term friendships. So within some programs they have, whether those are volunteers who... various places call them various names, so instead of tokenizing folks and seeing them as almost like little helpless people, what about shifting that to creating genuine friendships? I've heard volunteer share that they go to spaces and newcomers will offer them tea or cook a meal for them and they feel bad in taking that meal. So when I'm in those spaces, I sometimes refrain that for folks to be like, Hey, this is, this newcomer family or this newcomer person trying to create friendships and bonds with you. It's not just you always inviting them to Thanksgiving. Pick up the invitation one time to go into those spaces.

So there's that piece of it, of within the grassroots level and at the initial level where you're providing support to really create those lasting friendships and groups of folks. It's also creating spaces where folks aren't so isolated. So whether that's a drop-in center or a support group or even just coming together for a social or a house party, or something like that, those are initial of the very low kind of hanging fruit that can do but also to think long term and more holistic in terms of on the policy front and service delivery front that we shift how we think about integration.

So right now, integration really focuses on economic self-sufficiency that we need to shift that and to incorporate belonging as an integral piece of how we measure successful integration. People might have a job, but are they going back to an empty house? Are the only people they know are the two people that they interact with at their job? Are we intentionally creating space where folks feel like they have a voice, not even just feel like they have a voice, they actually have a voice. They can participate in decision-making spaces in their community.

In Worcester, I'm not quite sure how far this had gotten, there were proposal to shift how we think about city committees to include folks who are not citizens, because in many cities you had to be a citizen. You had to be a voting member to be on these city committees like the status of women or public safety, or those communities, that they were shifting those to focus on residents and not so much the kind of

immigration component of it, that you're a resident for 5 years regardless of your immigration status that you do have a voice and can contribute.

It's also thinking within the academic realm that is not just going into these communities and using the extractive kind of methods that some folks do, in terms of just always extracting from folks. I do know that some universities, some of this, there is challenge in terms of sometimes folks cannot be like co-investigators on projects, but finding ways of advocating for those to be changed. And if those can't be changed, that we are doing projects that are meaningful to the community. So yes, you might have to produce your academic scholarly journal article. But at the same time, is there a more public facing project that would be beneficial to the community? Or how do we translate that academic work into something that translatable for, say a refugee group, so that they can use that data to apply for a grant and expand their services.

So those are concrete ways I'm thinking of how do we shift from just thinking about integration, to think about belonging but also to reconceptualize belonging. That it's not just a linear process. That it's a back and forth sometimes process. It's a messy process, and using equity-driven approaches to thinking about and to change how we engage with communities with lived experience. That there is the one size that fits all approach that we sometimes take and that's what the resettlement agencies do. Promising space for this as a community co-sponsorship model. I know under... within the political administration that sometimes some of these programs go by the wayside. But that's one of those approaches that I see as really creating community for these newcomers. Because one, it's providing the immediate needs, but because it's a more long term process, there is a duality in sharing ideas and sharing lessons that helps the community as well to host new families and to learn the other pieces.

One of the things that's not really talked about within these spaces is when they're working with communities of color, issues around racism and working to advocate with and on behalf of communities to address systemic racism. Even within the group to identify that some of the practices in of themselves does perpetuate white supremacy and racism and does not create wellbeing. One of the things that I experienced personally, people would not know your name, but then would identify you as the refugee or the asylum seeker and that's the only thing they would see you as. And then the microaggression that comes with it. I remember people saying, oh, you speak so well. And I, in my snarkiness, I'd have to remind them that I'm actually from an English speaking country. I actually went to school that they taught in English. And that was a snarky way of saying, we're just people. Folks who do forced displacement work or migration work realize that after a while some of the same challenges that settled people experienced with housing, with cost of living, with climate change, you name it, it's the same thing that newcomers will face after a while as they integrate.

This is going to be my final point, it's also shifting from this assimilation mindset that though some of this is not really practiced in academic spaces, but within the community, and even within newcomer communities, this assimilation mindset that folks have, that you have to assimilate, you have to learn to speak the language, you have to throw your foods and your culture, to embrace this multicultural space. And to create these spaces of resistance, where people retain their music, their dance, their food, their

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cultural practices, their religious celebration, their cultural celebrations, because it's a full sum of you that makes you up. Not so much losing pieces of you because you were forcibly displaced from your country of origin.

Host: Dr. Staci Martin

Yeah, I love that. I also feel that a lot of the things you're talking about could be expanded just to the general population. We see that a lot of populations are lonely in general and they go home to an empty house. So that's something that we can also learn from what you're learning about these communities of how we can make it even broader and expand it.

With that I think that you closed it beautifully.

Guest: Craig Mortley

Thank you for having me and thank you for doing this series highlighting folks work. This is a good tool and I do encourage people to use these recordings in their classes and in their community spaces for educational purposes and just conversations.

Closing credit

The 20th International Association for the Study of Forced Migration Conference is organized by the Resilience Development Initiative in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada.

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