School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Stitching the fabric of life:

Refugee stories and the non-refugee narrator

A creative non-fiction manuscript and exegesis

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This thesis is presented for the

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262).

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Abstract

This thesis is presented as a work of creative non-fiction and an accompanying exegesis. Together, they explore how narrative identity can be developed by people of a refugee background through a collaborative process of working with a non-refugee narrator.

In 2017 the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018) reported that there were 68.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide either through violence, persecution or other human rights abuses, the highest number since the end of World War II. This crisis has become one of society's most controversial and polarising issues. In Australia the popular narrative about refugees and asylum seekers has become politicised, negative and de-humanising.

To counter this narrative in my creative work, *Stitching the fabric of life,* I collaborate with 11 women and three men to create a series of life stories to challenge the over-generalised notion of "the refugee experience". I use a framework developed by Behar (1996) to place myself in the text alongside each person of a refugee background to become what she describes as a "vulnerable observer" and to build a sense of "empathic unsettlement" as outlined by La Capra (2001).

The stories explore three main themes: home, identity and belonging. I demonstrate how the combination of biography, testimony, memoir and history can expose new ideas about who we are and where we belong.

Collaborative life writing with people of a refugee background presents ethical and practical challenges for the non-refugee writer. While my thesis has not resolved all these, it provides a contribution to life writing and human rights literature in its exploration of the issues through both scholarly and creative practice.

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The following paper has arisen from this thesis to date:

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A creative non-fiction manuscript

Introduction

In this collection of collaborative life stories, I aim to learn more about women who come from a refugee background. My goal is to uncover, and make visible, women who are often written out of history. I wondered would we share anything in common. Could I empathise and understand their lives? Would they understand mine? Could we work together collaboratively to develop and share stories? The answers are all yes; but the writing challenged me ethically and it often unsettled me. Our on-going conversations also raised just as many questions as answers over a three-year period. We talked in many different places, by ourselves or with family or friends. I followed the women through their daily lives at work, at "home" or in the community in which they lived. Historian, author and broadcaster Dr Bettany Hughes wrote*: "*It's the inconvenient truth that women have always been 50% of the population, but only occupy around 0.5% of recorded history…we need to actively look for women's stories and put them back into our narrative."[1] I certainly did not fully comprehend what it meant to live in a country while carrying the label of "refugee woman" as opposed to only the gendered label of "woman". These stories reveal moments of uncertainty, resilience in the face of trauma, what it means to be forced to leave home and find a place of refuge and a reimagining of identities. They show us that home can be one or many places, sometimes at the same time, stitched together in an intriguing fabric.

This is the second collection of collaborative life stories that I have written with people from a refugee background. This book presents a series of conversations about the stories eleven women and three men tell about their lives, based around three principal themes: identity, home and belonging. The three men featured in my first collection and helped provide a starting point for this manuscript.

During the conversations and reflecting later, I frequently found myself questioning who I was. I was forced to ask where my home was and to work out where, or if, I belonged anywhere. I collaborated with eleven women and three men from diverse cultures and backgrounds: Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Eritrea, Iran, Palestine, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia during

2015 – 2018. They were aged between 23 and 55 years of age. The women let me into their lives and together we tried to unpack our identities to find out who we are. In the process we laughed, we cried, we cheered, and we complained about our lives. We gave each other emotional support and we grew to trust one another. In some cases, we became friends, and writing made that possible.

For as long as I can remember I always wanted to be a writer. My mother read to me long before I could make the letters into words, but I still remember my early amazement at being able to understand groups of letters under my finger as it moved across the page. I looked up at our bookshelves with wonder. The fat red leathered set of Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia was displayed prominently on the top shelf. I became a precocious reader and a treat on rainy or sick days was access to the top shelf which meant I could spend time on the bed with my nose in a book of knowledge. I moved on to our collection of classic novels which formed an uneven line on the second shelf. Just touching and smelling the yellowed pages of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen was enough on some days. From an early age I wanted to create my own stories and was constantly scribbling ideas on the back of old inventory paper that Dad brought home from his job at the local council. High school English and literature classes fueled my desire to write and although I enjoyed my creative writing classes with the sharp-minded Elizabeth Jolley at university, I found myself being drawn towards the study of journalism and politics. I imagined myself as a younger version of Tom Wolfe or Joan Didion, writing pithy articles that would attract thoughtful readers frequenting cafes and libraries. Of course, I never came close but went on to have a moderately successful career as a journalist. After a succession of different career choices that involved business suits and brief cases, I ended up back where I started as a child, once again scribbling ideas on pieces of paper and trying to make words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into stories.

I write about people because the journalist in me wants to know every intricacy about a person and find the answer to five key questions that fire my curiosity - who, what, why, when, and how. Thus, when I ask a person to

let me into their lives, I try to enter with respect, compassion, honesty, and fairness. These values are central to me and who I am as a person.

At the end of 2017, around the world, there were 68.5 million people forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict and generalised violence. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regularly updates the world with reports and speeches that break down these numbers into sound bites – 25.4 million refugees, 40 million internally displaced, and 3.1 million asylum seekers. The number of new displacements is equivalent to 44,000 people being forced to flee their homes every day.[2] Whilst documenting these numbers is vital for the UNHCR to communicate with a global audience, I wonder how much an average person understands about these numbers. Does saying 20 people every minute are displaced from their home help us to understand the people behind the numbers?

When I wrote *More to the story: conversations with refugees* which was published in 2015, I wanted to shine a light on what was happening in different countries around the world and to personalise a small number of the millions of lives that were affected. My goal was to try and turn these statistics and faceless numbers into real people with homes and families. I still believe storytelling is the only way to understand the world and each other, but I wonder if it is possible to move past "the refugee story" or if that is always part of your identity. My friend Shokoofeh tells me Australians are fixated by the fact that she came to Australia by boat as an asylum seeker. "I am so much more than that. I am a mother, a daughter, a writer, a woman making her way in the world. Why do people want to label me as this one thing?" I don't have an answer. Perhaps it is too easy for us to think that we know a person when in reality we are only seeing one part of a person's identity. As I got to know Shokoofeh more I started to uncover some of the layers that folded together to build her identity. It was this friendship that inspired me to seek out women of a refugee background and their stories. Maybe I could understand more of the challenges and complexities that come from being a woman of a refugee background.

"I think people who live in safe countries like Australia must find it hard to understand what it is like when bad people come to your home with guns

and take everything away, everything you own, and kill people you love in front of you," one person told me.[3] Alongside the shrill shouting from populist governments around the world that there is a "refugee crisis", that any sort of "immigration is bad," and that the security of countries is threatened by the "waves of incoming refugees," it is hard to find quietness and time to listen and understand people's stories. At a writers festival I heard Arnold Zable interviewed. I noted that he said: "at the heart of storytelling lies the art of listening. If the listener is patient, he will allow the teller to find his voice and new understandings will take place." In writing this book I came to appreciate that we are all human beings trying to make our way in a complicated world and that, as Joan Didion writes, "we tell ourselves stories in order to live."[4] My collection of stories does not, cannot, attempt to produce answers to problems that need a concentrated global response, but I hope it provides insights into the lives of some so that we might begin to understand the many.

Collaborative storytelling is not easy but recognising that I needed to write *with* the person of a refugee background, not *for* the person, opened new ways of seeing and understanding for both the story-teller and for me as the writer. To research and write each person's life-story involved between three and five meetings and interviews. It also included us attending several other social occasions together such as a book launch, an art exhibition or a local football match. The interviews and conversations were conducted over an extended period in a conversational style at different locations chosen by each person, with no structured format or set time. I would record then later transcribe each interview, and from that shape the narrative into a story that included the direct testimony of the person and my own reflections and learnings. Each time we met, we would read the latest draft of the story together, add to it, change it or even delete parts of it until, we had a final version that the person felt represented their life. Conversations turned on: "Oh, we must include more about my mother," or " I don't think I want to say that publicly…it was OK when we were just chatting, but not for the manuscript, let's take it out," or "This is exactly right," or " No, Rose, I didn't mean that, you misunderstood." The other aspect of the stories related to the conversations about, and with, me. For example: "So where is home for you,

Rose.” “Why doesn’t anyone ask you about your religion or culture?” “How did your mother die?” “Why do Australians put their parents in these places (old people’s homes)? In my country, you look after your old parents at home. This is respectful.” By including some of these conversations and the interplay that resulted, I feel that the reader will experience a richer and more honest representation of a person’s life.

This collection of stories starts with a gathering of four old friends, men and women, from a refugee background, as we try and understand what home means to each of us. I then introduce other women who wanted to share their stories in the hope that more people come to understand the lived experience of refugees – their past, their present and their futures. All of these women wanted to explain that it wasn’t easy. All have built new lives in Australia, but for many the challenges seemed almost insurmountable at times. While there are similarities, there are many differences because each story is unique. They provide a window into lives that reflect our own; a desire for safety, home, a sense of belonging, and living a daily life in Australia either studying, working or raising a family.

I hope this manuscript honours each individual’s story and repays the trust they have shown in me as author and custodian of their story.

Searching for home

> "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."
>
> Maya Angelou.[5]

I know that I am lucky. I was born in a safe country in comfortable circumstances, and I can make my home in many places in the world. I have freedom of movement and choice. People from a refugee background don't. My friend Piok often reminds me that no-one chooses to become a refugee. Edward Said wrote that "survival is about the connection between things."[6] It is this connection that I want to understand. Am I right in believing that where you come from is now less important than where you're going? Are we rooted in the future or present as much as we are in the past? How do identity, home and a sense of belonging connect together to make us who we are, and what are the particular challenges for people of a refugee background?

I tried to understand my own position, before I embarked on trying to understand anyone else's. I ventured back to the state of Tasmania where I was born, to a special place from my childhood that always felt like home when I lived on the island. However, as I stood on Middleton Beach, I felt unmoored like one of the wooden dinghies bobbing on the bay. I curled my toes in and out of the cold sand and closed my eyes. It was a surreal experience. I could almost hear the voices of my five brothers as they laughed and waded around in the shallows, twisting the mussels off the rocky outcrops. We argued over how many we should eat, and as the youngest and the littlest, I felt the need to push my way into the circle and shout to be heard. What a little foghorn I was. The gum-scented smoke made my nose twitch as I crouched in front of the fire, waiting for the mussel shells to open in the water boiling in an old billy-can. I could almost taste the salty morsels on my tongue.

Decades on, not much seemed to have changed at the beach. As I walked, the ocean still gently foamed against the sand, strong gusts of wind made my eyes water as I kicked the line of dry seaweed pushed up by the

tides. I was glad that the beach remained an oasis devoid of people during my visit. The leaden sky seemed to grant permission for introspection. In those moments on the beach nothing had changed, but of course, everything had changed. The little hamlet of Middleton is set among the rolling green hills and pastures close to the Huon Valley. I looked with disdain at the new modern houses, with fancy architecture that now peppered the countryside. Uncle Harry's old weatherboard farmhouse with its wide verandas and gabled tin roof was long gone of course; destroyed by the 1967 bushfires. Why does this place still give me a sense of belonging? My cousin Brian says it feels spiritual in a way he can't explain. Maybe he's right, but for me it is more of a longing; a longing for home where mum, dad, my five brothers and I were a close family unit. There are only four of us left now living in different coastal cities around Australia, far away from Middleton and each other. Mum and Dad both died of cancer and two of my brothers passed away in sad, lonely circumstances but somehow, standing on that beach made everything seem alright again. A visit to Middleton is always a journey of loss and retrieval, a time of reflection, when I wonder if I could be happy there again. But I know my sense of belonging there is more imagined than real.

I tried again to find a sense of belonging in the suburbs of Hobart under the imposing presence of Mount Wellington. A simple weatherboard house that was built in the early 1960s was home for the eight of us. We squeezed into three bedrooms and shared one bathroom. It was the place from where we went to school, where we played, where we studied, where we started to plan our futures, where we celebrated and where we confronted grief. It was always a place where we felt safe. We had some lawn at the front and a white picket fence. Dad, like most men of his age, was a committed fortnightly Victa lawn-mowing man but we weren't gardeners, so the four rose bushes near the front steps always looked in need of attention. Around the back, another lawn rose up along a slight incline to the fence separating us from Mrs Dylan's posh brick and tile place. The hutch for my rabbit, who was poetically named "Lonesome", ran along the fence line. The dried covering of woodchips and bark, with a sizeable chopping block made it easy to spot the wood-heap and a flourishing apricot

tree somehow grew outside the kitchen and provided a bounty of summer fruit for eating and jam-making. We never went through the front door – that was for guests. We came home past the apricot tree, and through the back door into the warmth of the kitchen.

These days I live in an old Federation style house on a leafy suburban street in Perth with my husband. We still come and go through the back door while the front door remains one for guests. Our work and our travels have allowed us to choose many different parts of the world in which to live. It has become clear to me over the years that I don't have one single home; one dwelling that captures everything within its framework, in one country where one landscape is familiar to me. For me home is many places; a complex and emotional space to be navigated.

I invited a group of friends from a refugee background around to my Perth home to talk about their ideas of home and belonging. My friends were all forced from their homes in fear for their lives and stayed in other countries before coming to Australia. They had lived lives that I could only write about. I empathised, but did I really understand? They shared their stories for the first time in a book I wrote called *More to the story: conversations with refugees.* Since it was published several years ago each of them has returned to visit their country of birth, their homeland.

Paul, a Karen man from Burma, arrived at the same time as Piok, who fled from South Sudan. I smiled at my friends as we exchanged greetings at the front door where, as usual, they insisted on taking off their shoes. My Afghan friends, Fauzia and her husband Farid, arrived shortly afterwards carrying a bunch of flowers and added to the jumble of shoes at the door. Despite our different cultures and religions, the conversation was easy and the warmth and camaraderie tangible. We sat around our dining room table and I started the conversation by asking what happened when they returned to their homeland. It was over twenty years since Paul escaped from Burma. Paul uses the name Burma for his country because the name Myanmar was imposed after the 1988 military coup. The government passed legislation to replace the country's anglicised names in what many saw as a continued push for more control and power. The people of Burma were not consulted on these name changes and to call the country Myanmar is deemed by

many, including my Karen friends, as supporting the military government. The name change was accepted by some countries, but not others. Sometime in 2014, the name used on the website of the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade changed from Myanmar to Burma. However, when I checked in 2018 the government had changed it back to Myanmar. I have chosen to use the country name Burma out of respect for my friends and their homeland.

Paul was a high-profile democracy leader during the 1988 major uprising against the corrupt government in power at the time. After the military crushed the country wide protests, he faced persecution and probable death if he stayed in his country. Paul, his wife Hazel, and son Leigh escaped across the border to Thailand where they lived for eight years in a kind of limbo as stateless people. Australia accepted the family as refugees in 1994.

> Honestly, deep down, I will always consider Burma my true home, but it is not really safe for me and my family to return there permanently. I am not even sure that it would be possible, as we have built a new life here in Australia.

Paul sampled one of my Anzac biscuits with his cup of tea before he said:

> Inside, though, a part of me wants to go back home to Burma. I suppose in some ways I am a fence sitter. I want to return to my country of birth, to my homeland in Burma, but I can't. My family needs to be safe and that can't be guaranteed in Burma, so Australia is my home and I am very grateful for my freedom and the life I lead.

Like many in the West, I hoped that the election of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 2015 would bring greater peace and stability to Burma. Despite the landslide victory by the National League for Democracy, the military retain significant political power, with an allocated 25% of seats in Parliament, a veto over constitutional changes and control over key ministries. They continue to persecute ethnic minorities such as the Karen.

According to the United Nations there are still over 250,000 internally displaced people in Burma. Along the Thai-Burma border there are over 100,000 Karen, Chin, Mon and Shan people who live in nine refugee camps, plus the hundreds of thousands of families and individuals like Paul who fled Burma and crossed the border into Northern Thailand. More recently in 2017/18, the Muslim minority in Rakhine State, the Rohingya, began fleeing from Burma after violence against them by the military government. Almost 700,000 Rohingya people, who are regarded as stateless in Burma, escaped to Bangladesh. The majority are women and children who live in Kutupalong refugee camp, which is the largest and most densely populated camp on the planet. Most say they want to return home, but only when it is safe. The United Nations has called the treatment of people in Rakhine State "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya Muslims, hundreds of thousands of whom have crossed into Bangladesh since 2017 to escape a military crackdown.[7]

Paul knows first-hand what dislocation and persecution can do to a person. His return to Burma touched him in unimaginable ways.

> Somehow everything seemed magnified at once. My thoughts, feelings and conversations became deeper and richer with people. It is hard to feel connected down the phone line with someone who is so far away but when I got there, my brother and I sat on the veranda and talked for hours – no problems. Our shared memories came easily. It was like I had been stitched back into the fabric of my family and my community.

Piok's story was reflected through the prism of South Sudan's continuing civil war and bitter tribal conflicts. His journey had taken him from a peaceful, simple childhood of caring for his family's cattle and goats, to fleeing in fear for his life during the 1983 civil war in Sudan. He had been separated from his parents and conscripted into the rebel army as a child soldier. He then spent more than a decade scratching out a life in refugee camps in different African countries. He was eventually accepted as a refugee by Australia in 2007 and made a new life here. Despite almost

unspeakable violence and trauma experienced during his childhood, Piok explained that his return to his homeland produced feelings similar to Paul's.

> I was able to talk to people and remember my happy childhood when I was surrounded by my family. I could walk the land, *my land,* and listen to stories and traditional songs from my people. It seemed like I was connected in a way that is not possible in Australia. Do you know what I mean? I heard the cows in the village, and they looked just like the animals I used to look after when I was a boy. I felt their rough skin under my hand. Still I can feel it.

Today farming remains impossible for many South Sudanese because civil war again rages across the country. Since he returned to Australia, Piok dreams of a time before the soldiers came to his village in South Sudan, and his life was simple. "After they came everything was different and life was horrible. You just waited for your day to die, because surely your turn must come," he told me. An estimated 5.5 million people (nearly half the population) suffered severe food shortages in 2017. Of that number over a million children were estimated to be acutely malnourished. [8] As a man who spent years in different refugee camps Piok told me "you never forget what it feels like to be really hungry".

Both men described a deeper yearning for the homes they used to have and for villages that no longer existed, destroyed by war. Paul asked me for an English word that described 'a deep-down sadness in the soul'. I wasn't sure there was one but suggested melancholy, nostalgia or longing. Later, I came across the Welsh word *hiraeth* which has no direct translation into English, but roughly means a longing for a home that one can never return to. In his book *Istanbul* Orhan Pamuk writes of something similar when he describes the Turkish expression *hüzün,* which he says, rises out of the pain the Turks feel for everything that has been lost. The Portuguese have a word *saudade.* It also means a vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist. For Paul, if he could afford it, the perfect solution for him would be to return to his homeland as often as he wanted so

he could make a contribution to his country as it starts to rebuild and to satisfy that longing. But like Piok, Paul would always want the option of returning home to Australia.

It is different for Farid and Fauzia. Farid was wanted by the Taliban. He fled with hundreds of others and found his way to Indonesia where he boarded a boat bound for Australia. He hoped to find asylum in a country that he had been told was free and democratic and welcomed people from other countries. His idea was to then bring Fauzia and their children to Australia. Farid's journey took a turn for the worse when his ill-equipped and overcrowded fishing vessel suffered major mechanical trouble and its engine blew up and the boat began to take on water. Farid was one of the 428 people desperately trying to keep the sinking boat afloat, when they were rescued by a Norwegian freighter called the *Tampa*. They found themselves at the centre of an international diplomatic stand-off that made headlines around the world. The Australian Government locked him in off-shore detention on the island of Nauru for two years. Even after he was released, Farid and Fauzia remained separated for a further six years, because of conditions on Farid's visa. Eventually, Fauzia and her three sons were accepted through Australia's planned humanitarian intake of refugees. Now, Australia is their home, not Afghanistan. "We have built a new life here, a new home, we have freedom and our family is all together and we are safe." When they returned to Afghanistan last year to visit other extended family they were devastated. Their home country was still torn apart by war.

"It was like nothing had changed since we were both forced to leave so many years ago. In some cases, it had got worse," Farid told me. They saw cities destroyed by years of fighting and bombing. The Taliban were back, along with al-Qaeda and ISIS. Western forces had largely deserted the country after years of fighting to stabilise it.

Farid looked around the table and asked: "how can things still be so bad in my country?" Despite the trillions of dollars spent by the United States and allies such as Australia, the country is still unsafe. Thousands of Afghan people and allied forces have been killed since 2001. The reality today is that the Taliban once again control almost all the major roads in the country

which they can shut down when they choose, thereby isolating the major cities and preventing the supply of foodstuffs and trade.

In 2014, former Australian Army Colonel and defence strategist for US General David Petraeus and Security Advisor to Condoleezza Rice, David Kilcullen, forecast exactly what is now happening in Afghanistan. “The worst-case scenario is not that ISIS and al-Qaeda continue to be rivals, it’s that they pal up. You end up with a precipitated withdrawal from Afghanistan, creating space for the Taliban to come back, just like ISIS did in Iraq.”[9] I pictured an Australian soldier in 2018, back from extended tours of duty in the Middle East, watching the news on television. The hard-fought battles to defeat the Taliban in places like Uruzgan province and to then improve security and assist villagers re-build their lives, must have seemed a complete waste of time. The country seemed to be back where they had started from. Right in front of him on the screen all the good work that he thought they had done was unravelling in fast moving pictures. Several years ago, at the Byron Bay Writers Festival, I interviewed Major General John Cantwell, Commander of Australian Forces in Afghanistan in 2010, and I asked him was the effort by Australian, and allied forces, worth it? What had we achieved in Afghanistan? Was it worth all the lives that had been lost? Cantwell answered that even though such comments seemed disrespectful to a life-time soldier, steeped in a sense of duty and service, he had to answer, “No. It wasn’t worth it.” In another part of Australia, Farid sat in his chair and watched a news report about the resurgence of the Taliban. “There, look,” he murmured, gesticulating at the television. He pointed to several men who were pictured “helping build a new Afghanistan” alongside US and Australian forces. These were the very same men who had previously fought and killed in the name of the Taliban. A decade before, these men had kidnapped him and threatened his life.

Many retired and serving military have stated quite openly that Australia and its allies have no understanding of the rural, tribal and religious nature of Afghan society where Western style support and nation-building is a futile enterprise. Cantwell wrote in his book *Exit wounds*: “The unpitying mountains of Afghanistan have watched the dust of that harsh, beautiful country absorb too much blood already for little profit.”[10] Everyone in this

book comes from a land that was occupied by others; they suffered in and survived wars between different ethnicities and tribal groups, and outside invaders. A common thread of the afternoon discussion was how we had not learned anything from history.

At the time of their visit to Afghanistan, Fauzia's brother still worked in the southern capital city of Kabul. He was unable to visit his wife and family in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and because of his academic profession and ethnicity, Fauzia feared for her brother's life. Since her return, Fauzia's brother and family have, however, escaped to India and registered with the UNHCR as refugees. She told me India is not their home; it is a transit place where they can be safe on their way to a new country to make a new home. For Fauzia there is sadness about the loss of her home.

> Afghanistan cannot be my home now because the fighting has destroyed the country and the home I knew. The important thing for me after so many years of war, oppressive Taliban rule and living in limbo without Farid is that we can be safe and have a peaceful life altogether as a family. I can do that in Australia, in my new home. I couldn't do that in Afghanistan.

For Farid and Fauzia, there is no yearning for Afghanistan. Their anger and disillusionment colour their memories. Shaking his head, Farid commented that even though everyone was working hard and trying to make a life, it was an unjust and unfair country because all the money and power was with the leaders of the country. On this Paul and Piok agreed, citing corruption as one of the major problems in their countries. Even though Farid wanted to empty his pockets of memories about his homeland, I doubted it was possible. I knew he was often drawn to his computer and television to track what was happening in Afghanistan. Perhaps this was *Huzun,* pain for all that is lost.

I looked at my friends laughing at some joke as the teapot was passed around. If you didn't know their stories you would only see people enjoying each other's company, but these are people who have lived through horrors that I struggle to comprehend. I was humbled that all of them shared their

stories with me and were so positive about the impact of doing so. They explained how they often used the stories we had written together in my publication *More to the story: conversations with refugees* to highlight the on-going plight of refugees and asylum seekers around the world. Fauzia explained:

> Lots of my friends bought and read the book. They were surprised by our stories. I think there has been some change in how they think about asylum seekers and this has to be helpful, right? My English is not good enough to write about my own life, so it was better to tell you everything and work with you. Farid and me still felt like we had control over our story. You helped us highlight many things that we might not have remembered.

Remembering is like that. As Penelope Lively wrote: “There’s what you know happened, and what you think happened. And then there’s the business that what you know happened isn’t always what you remember.”[11] Personally, I think of my own memory as a large box of index cards. When I pull some out and read them, I don’t always put them back in the same place. To remember is to have two selves, one in memory and one thinking about memory but as A S Byatt writes, “the two are not precisely distinct, and separating them can be dizzying.”[12]

“My life has so many parts,” Paul told me. “You know more about me than any-one, Rose, because you listened to me. Together, we could make the story of my life.” The final text of any collaborative life story shared with me by a person of refugee background becomes a co-production, one of compromise and discussion. One of the more enjoyable aspects of working as a collaborative narrator is reading and re-reading numerous drafts with the person, absorbing each other’s comments, answering further questions and re-writing the next draft. One of the challenges in this continuous loop of writing together can be finding a satisfactory end-point for both the storyteller and for me as a narrator. Sometimes we both accept that open-ended questions will remain because all the aspects of our lives simply can’t be understood.

Piok reflected that it had been hard at times to share such personal things about his life. He was concerned about what people would think of him and if his words could somehow be used against him, but ultimately, he decided it was a good thing.

> These are our individual, personal stories in the book. It's us and we are real people. I think it helps for people to know that we are describing the truth of our lives. It carries more weight. For example, I just assumed everybody knew I was a child soldier. They didn't. But being a child soldier was what I was, and it gives me the opportunity to tell people that this practice is still going on today despite international condemnation.

UNICEF estimates that some 250,000 boys and girls under the age of 18 are involved in more than 30 conflicts around the world and despite progress in South Sudan, there are still around 19,000 children serving in the ranks of armed forces and armed groups in South Sudan. [13] The abhorrent practice of training children, like Piok, in the use of arms, fighting, and how to kill continues. Piok has become a strong advocate for his country, his people, and for the freedom of all children safe from a life of imposed war.

As everyone packed up to leave, we all agreed it had been a thoughtful discussion. While many of us reflect on the meaning of home, for people of a refugee background it seems such reflections are more complex and come with a sense of urgency because of the forced nature of their migration to other countries. Home becomes more subjective. It becomes a fabric of different parts stitched together to create individual ideas of home.

In the following chapters you'll meet 11 women from a refugee background who discuss the freedom they enjoy in Australia and the extent to which they feel safe in their new home. In this context, it needs to be acknowledged that freedom and safety is not the reality for all Australians. Since Aboriginal Australians were dispossessed of their traditional lands following the arrival of Europeans, they have struggled to find their place in white Australia. This discrimination has meant fewer opportunities and this has given rise to societal issues such as family violence and alcoholism. It

must be said, too, that many non-refugee Australian women don't feel safe in their homes. It has been argued that domestic violence is the biggest under-reported crime in Australia. The country's harsh immigration policies mean that some people who seek asylum, are locked unlawfully in detention while different minority groups, such as the Muslim population or people of an African background are facing a discrimination that is on the rise. I'll touch on some of these issues in the stories that follow as the participants search to develop an identity and a home in Australia.

A Writer's Life – Shokoofeh's story

> "I would like to thank my father for teaching me to fly in the sky of literature freely. I owe a debt of gratitude to my mother, without whose support I would not be living in the free country of Australia, able to write without censorship."
>
> Shokoofeh Azar [14]

I ran my fingers over the words of acknowledgement penned by Iranian Shokoofeh Azar inside her novel *The enlightenment of the greengage tree*. I love the sense of anticipation I feel when I open a new book. The pages are crisp, and no-one has been inside this imagined world. It's like falling onto a bed and being enveloped in a soft duvet and there are few falls more thrilling than those taken through the imagination of a good novelist. But these two sentences stopped me from turning the next page. The words expressed love and gratitude, of course, but I understood the sadness too. Persecution and politics had separated the writer from her parents, family, and home.

I did not know much about Iranian writing. As a long-time member of PEN International I knew being a journalist or writer in Iran was a hazardous occupation. I knew there was a rich Persian literary history and I understood that poetry and art are central to many Iranian people's sense of identity. Researcher and writer Sanaz Fotouhi highlights so-called 'trauma texts' by Middle Eastern Women and notes that "of the 50 or so memoirs published in the last 30 years, nearly half use the formula of a veiled woman with exotic eyes looking at the reader from the cover."[15] I remember the flood of books produced by Western publishers who tried to exploit the concept of women from the middle-east as "the other" by supposedly giving readers an insight into life beneath the veil. Shokoofeh loathed this style of book. I had read the memoirs of Azar Nafisi and Roya Hakakian years ago and I was working my way through a translation of Attar's *The Conference of the birds*. People I had met from Iran in Australia often seemed pained by the negative ways

their country was portrayed in the west. The rich Persian culture and language was often ignored by readers, book sellers and the media, willing only to think of an evil and corrupt regime. I looked forward to getting to know Shokoofeh better and learning more.

A ping on my mobile phone signalled an in-coming text. “This is me,” was the message under the photo of a woman with piercing eyes and dark curls around a soft olive complexion. I smiled to myself, found my own photograph and sent back a reply. “And here I am. See you tomorrow.” At that first meeting in the courtyard of the Fremantle Arts Centre, Shokoofeh and I didn’t notice the clusters of people scattered around in shady corners. I think we were too interested in each other. We sipped our tea and began a friendship steeped in literature.

Shokoofeh was born into an intellectual middle-class family. Her mother was a teacher and her father was a respected poet and literary figure who craved a peaceful lifestyle to pursue his creativity. When she was a baby, the family moved to the north of Iran away from the capital city Tehran. Two-thirds of Iran is either desert or mountains, but the family’s home was situated in the beautiful Hyrcanian Forest. Now registered by UNESCO, this unique heritage area of lush lowland and mountainous forests covers about 55,000 square kilometres near the southern shores of the Caspian Sea in Iran and Azerbaijan. The forest is named after the ancient region of Hyrcania which means wolf land. It is a rich wonderland blooming with great biodiversity thanks to its rich soils, high rainfall and temperate climate. Deciduous broad-leaved trees of beech, oak and chestnut attract diverse bird life alongside native fauna that includes the leopard, lynx, wild boar, wolf and badger. As I scrolled through image after image on-line, I felt as if I had entered a magical dream world. Images of ancient gnarled trees and splashing streams filled my screen and I was sure much of JR Tolkien’s imagined Middle Earth must have looked like this. I also began to understand why nature plays such a large part in much Iranian writing, including Shokoofeh’s. The garden or forest may be a physical setting, but it is also an allegorical space referring to a person’s relationship with the spiritual or divine. Shokoofeh explained:

> We owned about 13 hectares of land and if I close my eyes, I can still smell the fragrant plant blossoms, hear the wind in the trees and imagine our gardens. My father's studio was full of paintings, sculptures and books. Every day we passed our time with reading, art and music. There was so much light and joy in my life both inside and outside our home. My grandfather and uncle were poets, my father was a writer, artist and journalist and my mother was a teacher. I remember growing up in a home where every room was filled with books. These help give a home an identity, I think.

I smiled because books remain an abiding love for me; not just reading them but seeing them on the shelves, knowing I can escape into another world whenever I want. If they start to pile onto tabletops, I think of them as artful decoration. An architect once told my husband, Terry, as he surveyed our bookshelves, that books don't just hold stories between their covers, they tell a collective story about the people who live with them.

As a writer of non-fiction, I often draw on my own experiences to develop my storylines and I knew Shokoofeh did the same in short stories and novels. She was in primary school after the so-called Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 which changed the country's socio-cultural landscape permanently. I can't imagine my country caught up in a revolution. Iran's king, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was ousted and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was installed as the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic by his radical, conservative allies. Two and half thousand years of monarchical rule ended immediately, and Iran's revolution set off a series of events that triggered conflicts in the region, starting with Iraq's attack on Iran. It is from these times that Shokoofeh drew inspiration for her novel *The enlightenment of the greengage tree*. She wanted to explore the pain and suffering of the Iranian people after the revolution. 'We must never forget what happened to human beings,' she told me.

> I was forced out of my own country and I was so angry when I came to Australia. I wanted to stay in Iran with my family and friends. I miss

> my mother so much and I can't tell you how much I yearn to sit in my own garden in the shade of my trees. I am devastated about what has happened. But it wasn't safe for me to stay so *The enlightenment of the greengage tree* is my revenge on Khomeni.

The novel is written in the style of magical realism and is a way of seeing reality through all of its cultural aspects, fantasies and beliefs. "Metaphor and allegory allow me to show the reality of life in Iran through fiction. Does that make sense?" she asked me. Actually, it did. After I had read *The house of spirits* by Isabelle Allende, I understood the lure of the style. Like Allende, Shokoofeh uses magical realism to explore an oppressive regime that she knows intimately. Her book is a family portrait with extraordinary characters, both real and mystical, alongside a dramatic political commentary. It draws you into the lives of an Iranian family caught in the chaos and brutality that swept across Iran in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The important themes of the novel - the unfolding family story and the graphic polemic about the revolution are populated with jinns, faeries, spirits and ghosts who represent parts of Iranian society. The tortured souls of the family and others who spill anguish and horror from the pages bring into focus some of the trauma suffered after the revolution. The ghosts of five thousand prisoners murdered by the regime, the haunting of Khomeini in the palace of mirrors and a brutal assault of a sister turned mermaid are powerful allegories. Shokoofeh says while she drew inspiration from her own family none of the characters is exactly one person. She used aspects of her own life and her father's struggle after the revolution to represent the struggle of all Iranians.

I asked her if she had thought of writing about these experiences as non-fiction to use her journalistic background. My sense of news and current affairs would have dictated that style to me, but Shokoofeh felt the only way to write this story was through fiction. She believes that the more deeply we are cast under a story's spell, the more potent its influence.

> After my third draft, I decided that this book must be written for an English audience and the narrative voice that I found was in magical

> realism. My ‘go –to’ book is the classic *A hundred years of solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. I read it every four or five years because it inspires me. I knew I could show the truth of Iran – both the beauty and the politics – through magical realism.

I asked Shokoofeh to reflect on her early influences and education. Her parents played a major role, alongside one of her favourite uncles, who was a regular visitor to their home. Shokoofeh was taught by her mother at the local village school for the first five years of her primary schooling before changing schools to finish level six, seven, and eight.

> We walked the seven kilometres each way in all kinds of weather – snow, sunshine, wind, and rain. For us, we knew no other life, so we considered it an ordinary thing to do. I have such fond memories of those years when I look back now. I learnt so much from the village girls. Of course, I was always different because I came from Tehran. I was a city girl and my parents were teachers and artists. People still call my mother ‘Miss Teacher’ in the village today. I loved that time.

High school was a different matter. Located 20 kilometres away in another town, she needed to catch a mini-bus at 5.30am each day. After the revolution, many schools enforced strict conservative Islam codes and at Shokoofeh’s high school girls were forced to cover themselves. The chador is an outer garment worn by women particularly in Iran and Iraq. It is a semi-circle, floor-length covering that hangs from the top of the head, flowing over the clothing underneath in order to hide the shape or curve of a woman's body. In Farsi, the word *chador* literally means ‘tent’ and Shokoofeh hated it. She also hated the compulsory praying and participation in government protests organised by the school.

After high school Shokoofeh studied classical Persian literature at a university in Tehran. Female students were required to wear a Maghn‘e, which was better than a chador according to Shokoofeh. It is a long rectangular scarf wrapped around the head and tucked or pinned at the

shoulders. Students were scrutinised at the entrance of the university by inspectors.

> You were not allowed to wear make-up or nail polish. I remember being sent back home because my Maghn'e was too short or I was wearing white socks or the wrong type of shoes. I didn't find attending or studying at university particularly satisfying. Life and teaching from my family had already challenged and expanded my mind. Sometimes I found no stimulation at university.

Shokoofeh began her career as an editor. She loved the work and developed many skills over a number of years. She wrote and co-edited *The Encyclopedia of Persian Literature* with a group of other writers and editors in 1997. It was awarded the distinction of being the best book in Iran that year.

> During this time, I lived in Tehran with my father because this was expected in my culture. By then he was a publisher with his own small press. My parents had separated which was difficult for me, but I knew they both loved me. After a number of years, I realised I did not want to stay behind a desk, like all the other white-collar workers, for the rest of my life.

A friend suggested journalism to Shokoofeh, and she began freelancing as a writer before securing a full-time position as a newspaper editor. She studied for her diploma of journalism at the same time. We talked and laughed about our early working years in newspapers. She clearly remembers the first article she wrote about the importance of literature in Iran. My first by-lined story as a journalist was about a broken water main in a suburban street.

Under President Mohammad Khatami, elected in 1997, independent newspapers began to flourish as he relaxed many of the social controls that had been in place. This included the easing of women's strict dress codes. The scope of Khatami's reforms, however, was limited by opposition from hardline conservatives and the security forces that were ultimately

answerable to the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamene'i.[16] Over the years, the leadership of the Islamic republic has remained overwhelmingly conservative and Shokoofeh forged her journalistic career under these restrictions. The situation continues to deteriorate, and the government is relentless in its persecution of independent journalists, citizen-journalists and media outlets. It uses intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and long jail sentences imposed by revolutionary courts after unfair trials. In 2018 the organisation Reporters Without Borders ranked Iran 164th in the world for press freedom alongside countries such as Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Burundi, Bahrain and North Korea.[17]

"It is different for many journalists in the west," she murmured. "It was a hard life for me in Iran. Your salary was not much but you wrote because you loved it and it was important. My editor told me he could always smell the blood pouring from my stories."

The journalist in me craved to write stories that mattered like Shokoofeh's, but when she told me after the first few months that she had started to think about how lucky she was to be alive, I reflected that maybe that wasn't a good idea. We discussed why writing the news mattered so much to each of us and agreed that journalism is critical for society as a way of communicating information, keeping those in power accountable and, above all, keeping people connected to each other. "I wanted to write the truth about what was really happening on the street and in Iranian politics," Shokoofeh told me.

> I wrote about human rights issues: women's rights, child rights, labour rights and teachers' rights. Sometimes I had to meet my sources in secret to protect them. Every few months the government would come and close down an independent newspaper and arrest many journalists for what they wrote. I was jailed three times. I was interrogated and kept in isolation in rooms or cells with no light. I was frightened and feared for my life, but I don't want to make a big deal out of it because twice it was only a few weeks. The last time was two months. That was the worst but many of my colleagues spent years behind bars. Some are still there now.

I felt distressed imagining this vibrant woman who had become my friend, locked up in isolation and in the dark for weeks. We stopped talking for a while. I looked up through the branches in the trees and realised I take the blue sky for granted. It reminded me that I never have to think about having freedom; it just is. Spending “a few weeks behind bars” sounded like a big deal to me.

Each time we met we discussed writing and journalism. Shokoofeh agonises over her English skills and gets frustrated when she can’t find the right literary term. I tried to imagine not being able to find the words I wanted. It must be like digging in the dirt for nuggets you know are there. I keep telling her that her English (her second language) is very good. Frankly, I don’t have many discussions with native English speakers about the influence of Camus and Sartre as great French moralists.

One day when we were discussing Persian poets, I began to think about the challenges of translation. I knew some of the difficulties from working in China. Business translations from English to Chinese were often fraught with difficulties. I remember a discussion between two of my Chinese colleagues about how best to translate the word ‘trust’ for a media release that continued over several days. Some people also told me I would never understand the great Chinese poets because they could not be translated into English in any meaningful way. Shokoofeh now told me the same thing about classical Persian literature. She hid her face in mock horror when I asked about the common translations of Rumi and Hafiz, seen in the west on posters, cards or fridge magnets. Most of them seemed to offer words of wisdom and are obviously bought like talismans for inspiration.

“I want to tear out my hair in frustration when I read some of them. Sorry Rose, but they are just so bad,” she laughed.

She tapped out different rhythms on her knee like a musician keeping time and explained how different rhythms are important in classical Persian poetry. I wondered if it was possible to translate rhythm in any language.

> Every line of Iranian classical poetry is full of simile and metaphor, innuendo and references. For example, if I wrote: ‘my lover drinks wine,’ it does not literally mean my lover drinks wine from a bottle.

> Wine could mean the inspiration and love between you and another person, or between you and God. There is a history to the word, and you draw on this as a poet. Wine can imply many things just like the greengage tree in my novel which is a metaphor for life.

English literary translators work in two ways. Either, there is a word for word translation, which often means what is written doesn't make sense, or the translator can try to create the same sort of meaning in English, with different words and then it is not the literature as it was written. I am not sure that there is a perfect translation solution. In 2005, the *New Yorker* magazine featured an article that highlighted the centuries old debate again. Author David Remnick reminded readers of the work of Constance Garnett, "a woman of Victorian energies and Edwardian prose who translated seventy volumes of famous Russian prose including all of Dostoyevsky's novels and hundreds of Chekhov's stories."[18] It is argued that without Garnett the nineteenth century Russians would not have been as influential, but apparently Garnett worked with such speed that when she came across a word or phrase that she didn't understand she would skip it. Multilingual Russian scholars and writers such as Nabokov, who followed were scathing in their criticism of her work. But then we may not have had any knowledge of the Russian classics at all. Is that better? I don't know. The award-winning Iranian-American poet and translator Sholeh Wolpe says translation is a scalpel because it cuts to reveal and to heal. As a bi-lingual and bi-cultural poet, she believes the freshness of a text is best communicated when the translator does not attempt to translate the untranslatable. [19] Wolpe states the obvious - that twelfth century Persian and contemporary English are as different as sky and sea. I especially like the explanation she gives about her translation of Attar's *The conference of Birds*: "the best I can do as a poet is to reflect one into the other. The sea can reflect the sky with its moving stars, shifting clouds, gestations of the moon and migrating birds – but ultimately the sea is not the sky."[20]

For Shokoofeh's first novel in English she was determined to use a translator whose first language was English.

> I did not want a translator whose first language was Farsi. I wanted an English speaker who was intimately connected to the Persian culture who had grown up with a strong literary tradition and was able to understand the magical realism style. I believe our sense of spirituality is guided by art not by a god. Life is a continuous cycle in nature, and we are part of that. I feel there is energy in the universe that influences us. When someone is really alive and has a kind of knowing through life experience, we say they have 'erfan'. This is not religion; it is a connection between your heart and mystery.

I decided I could do with some erfan. As a former Catholic, totally disillusioned with my religion and church over its dark past of abuse and secrets, I wondered whether finding erfan would help me more. Shokoofeh laughed. The environment and everything in it is an important pillar in her life and to stay balanced she spends as much time as she can outside and in nature. I used to be a girl who enjoyed the outdoors and camping and hiking, but now my family laugh because I have more T shirts monogrammed with five-star resort names than most people. When I learnt that Shokoofeh became the first Iranian woman to hike solo along the Silk Road in 2004, it was hard not to be impressed with her three-month journey. She set off on her trek after she and her husband separated. "When you can walk for days and days, so full of sadness and emotion experiencing new things, it gives you a different perspective I think." Ernest Hemingway felt that it was easier to think if you were walking and doing something. As I took my daily walk around the neighbourhood to clear my head after hours at my desk, I felt there was some truth to that. But not all of us can immerse ourselves in walking and thinking for three months, and for Shokoofeh the experience was life changing.

However, even for such an independent and self-assured woman, it can't have been easy. It was certainly unusual for a single woman to undertake such an arduous journey and she became "the news" on her return, as the media sought out her story. Reports and photos of her three-month journey were published in the leading newspaper *The Shargh*.

I used to have a romantic notion of the Silk Road. I imagined strings of laden camels winding along routes that connected grasslands, passing over mountains and through deserts, stopping at oasis towns where busy bazaars exhibited fragrant spices and rich silks. Of course, this notion of the Silk Road is more fantasy than fact. It is not one single road with an identifiable point of departure; it is a loose network of mostly land but also sea trading routes. The Silk Road stretches from China to Korea and Japan in the east and connects China through Central Asia to India in the south and to Turkey and Italy in the west. While it's true that trade was a key focus along the ancient Silk Road, according to historian Valerie Hansen, trade was not its primary purpose. She notes: "The Silk Road changed history, largely because the people who managed to travel along part or all of the Silk Road planted their cultures like seeds of exotic species carried to distant lands."[21] For an adventurous traveller like Shokoofeh the ancient route provided an opportunity to see other countries and experience different cultures with a magnificent backdrop for self-reflection. Some routes now transit war zones; many pass-through regions that used to be hidden behind the Iron Curtain – the so-called 'stan' countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzebekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

Starting her journey in Iran, Shokoofeh walked or hitch-hiked her way through Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, through parts of China to Pakistan and India. She lived a simple life, often staying with nomads in the mountains or taking refuge at villages when she happened upon them. "I didn't have much money, so if I found myself in a city, I could not afford to stay in a high-class hotel," she explained.

> Living and travelling the way I did I came to understand what I call the heart of life. I realised how important it was to understand different cultures and ideas then you can free yourself from sadness and emotions through this type of experience. I learnt about choices by taking charge of my life this way. When I returned, I knew I wanted to focus all my energies on being a writer.

She had written a children's book before she left for her Silk Road adventure, and I asked her what it was about.

"Love between a butterfly and a crow," she smiled. "Before I became a serious writer of short stories and novels I used to live in this kind of suspended imagination of childhood."

"Weren't you already a serious writer when you were a journalist?"

"Yes, but I wasn't a literary writer. Now the literary voice inside me is so strong that I must listen to it and write what I feel."

Shokoofeh came to Australia by boat in 2010 as a political refugee and sadly some Australians find this the most interesting thing about her. *"*How I got here is not what I'm about. I have stories I want to tell. I had a life before I came, and I have a new life now*."* She's right of course. Surviving a boat journey should not define a person for life. Shokoofeh's short-stories and novel have been published in Australia, translated into several European languages and won national prizes for literature, but the label that is sometimes still used to describe her is "boat person."

Writer and journalist Ben Dougherty[22] argues that refugees and asylum seekers are defined by the language used by others to describe them. They are often voiceless in the public discourse and some stories surrounding refugees and asylum seekers go to the heart of our anxieties about 'the other'. Shokoofeh, like many people from a refugee background, is not voiceless and doesn't consider herself any sort of victim. "I am so much more than a refugee who came to Australia by boat. I am a mother, a daughter, a writer, a woman making her way in the world. Why do people want to label me as this one thing?"

I am at a loss to explain this adequately to her, other than to say a succession of Australian politicians have become fixated with asylum seekers arriving by boat painting it as national security issue rather than a humanitarian one. How can I explain that many Australians do not understand that it is legal to seek asylum? I can't explain how some Australians don't understand that it is a fundamental right set down by the United Nations. The Australian government makes little fuss about the estimated 7-9,000 asylum seekers arriving by plane each year. They are not

being kept in detention centres around the country or on an offshore island. Politicians shout they have “stopped the boats” to keep us safe from terrorism and to stop people smugglers exploiting our immigration system. They mischievously manipulate language and stories to their own advantage when discussing people who seek asylum. We both shake our heads.

Shokoofeh gained Australian citizenship and is now making a new life for herself and her five-year-old daughter Rama. At our next interview she is keen to talk about her writing process and the positives of life in Australia. “I want to build my life here. I don’t know the future for Iran. I once had a beautiful home and it was destroyed. Of course, I miss my life in Iran, but I can’t go back. It is over.” Seeing her sadness, I was reminded of Sholeh Wolpe’s short poem:

Home is like a missing tooth
The tongue reaches
for hardness
but falls
Into absence[23]

We discuss how hard it is to be without family in a new place. Shokoofeh misses her mother enormously and we don’t continue this conversation because it obviously upsets her. I chose to live in different countries without my family and while I missed my mum, I could not imagine having her or my other immediate family, torn from my life with little chance of seeing them again. My mother died from cancer and losing her was heartbreaking, but I was with her until the end. She is gone, and I know I can’t see her anymore, but I wondered how it would feel not to be able to see your mother, but to know she is still alive, a phone call away, but unreachable in so many ways. “It’s not just about family; it is about place too,” Shokoofeh tells me. “I miss my favourite streets in Tehran; I miss the smells of my homeland and I miss my favourite trees and gardens. Some days I can almost hear them whispering in the breeze because my yearning for the past is so strong.”

> I have 40 years of history from Iran. I am like a snail… I carry this home around on my back wherever I go. In my writing I always want to stay true to myself and who I am. This has not changed. Inside, I am the same person in Australia, driven by the same goals, as I was in Iran. Of course, in the first few years I felt bewildered and lonely in Australia because I had lost connection with my language, and I did not have the words in English. When you have no language in a new country you have nothing.

Her views echo what every person of a refugee background has said to me. Language isn't simply an optional extra: if you don't have the opportunity to learn, you are cut off, not by wire and fences, war or persecution, but by the language barrier. My friend Piok commented that he would like all Australians to be more patient and understanding about the language capabilities of new arrivals. "People come from different countries, with different backgrounds and different exposure to schooling. Many people come from villages, have no literacy skills or have spent years in a refugee camp. You don't learn English in that environment especially if you have suffered trauma or live in fear."[24] Each person may need different lengths of time and support in learning English and he compared learning English to running a marathon. Some people run fast, some people run slowly, and everyone finishes at different times.

I find it interesting that Shokoofeh feels she will never be able to write her fiction in English. "I could not find the words and the richness of voice and language for a literary novel in English," she explained. She will always write in Farsi and work with the best translator she can find. We discuss Milan Kundera, one of Shokoofeh's favourite novelists from Czechoslovakia, who lived in exile in France. After 20 years he wrote a novel in French which was heavily criticised and he was told to go back to writing in Czech with a French translator. "Imagine that – even after 20 years," Shokoofeh exclaimed. "I am certainly no Kundera. While I feel confident about my writing and art, I must continue to write in Farsi," she concluded.

One of the interesting insights she gained after four decades of living in a country with an autocratic government was how self-censorship had become her default position as a writer.

> When you live with censorship for so long, you are always thinking, can I say that? I must change that. Of course, this affects your creative process. You see how your country is censored and you begin to write accordingly. When I first sat in front of my computer in Australia, I felt heavy and unable to write anything and kept telling myself, no, no, no, I can't say that. But of course, I could.

I reflected on this as I sat down in front of my own computer to write. I don't know what it means to be censored; to be unable to write. Shokoofeh said: "When Australians complain about their lives and their government, I feel like saying try living in Iran. Don't forget the freedom you have, the benefits of democracy and the beauty of your country."

When we talked about women's rights in Australia, Shokoofeh laughed when I rolled my eyes and grimaced. She talked about her Australian friends who felt like me; that women were still a long way from achieving equality. She patted my hand and again suggested if I thought it was a problem in Australia that I should try living in Iran.

As we finished our coffee, hugged and said goodbye, we promised to keep in touch. I hoped she would find the peace and sense of belonging that she still desperately craves. Six months later, in an attempt to do just that, Shokoofeh and her daughter re-located to Melbourne, one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world. According to the 2016 Census, 28 percent of 5.93 million people in Victoria were born overseas and came from over 200 different countries.[25] These factors and because her Australian publisher, Cathi Lewis from Wild Dingo Press, lives in Melbourne made the decision easier. Regarded as the arts capital of Australia, Shokoofeh hoped Melbourne would help inspire her writing more and enable her to connect with a larger literary community.

When we next saw each other at the Margaret River's Writers Festival, I discovered she had settled in Geelong, Victoria's second largest

city, 75 kilometres from Melbourne. As much as she wanted to be in the heart of Melbourne, a booming real estate market made finding a rental on a budget impossible. Life in Geelong is good, she told me. They have a small place and Rama is happily settled at school. According to Geelong city's website the region is home to 51 different cultural communities and welcomes migrants and refugees from around the world. Shokoofeh tells me the place has a good vibe. Her immediate focus was to improve her English language skills, so she returned to TAFE for further study and has recently been accepted into a creative writing master's program at Deakin University.

Shokoofeh stood for press freedom in a country that locks up its writers. She walked and explored countries along the Silk Road unaccompanied. She escaped persecution from her government and found her way to Australia where she spent months locked in an off-shore detention facility while her asylum claim was processed. As a refugee she made a new home in Australia for herself and her daughter and wrote and published her English novel. She taught writing classes to women from Persian backgrounds and she painted vibrant canvases infused with magical realism that were always popular at local art exhibitions. Before she left Perth, she reminded me that one of her dreams after she arrived in Australia was for her writing to be considered "seriously" in literary circles. She achieved that when her novel, *The enlightenment of the greengage tree* was shortlisted for the Stella Prize, one of Australia's most prestigious literary prizes, named after Australia's iconic female author, Stella Maria Sarah 'Miles' Franklin. Shokoofeh found herself in demand for media interviews and appearances around the country, alongside some of the giants in Australian women's literature. I hope that Victoria becomes a place that she can call home; a place where she feels safe; where she feels she belongs and where her literary aspirations continue to be met.

The Girl with the Rainbow Hijab – Amran's story

> I have more identities than I know what to do with. First, I am a woman. Secondly, I am black, thirdly I wear a head scarf and fourthly I wear the refugee label, but don't forget I am a teacher, a writer, a mother, a daughter and a sister.

I thought about how I would describe her. Amran Abdi is a 22-year old Somali mother, childcare educator and emerging writer. She is an entrepreneur and role model in her community. I wanted to get to know her better.

Heat bounced off the pavement in a shimmering haze as the temperature climbed to 37 degrees. I kept flapping the invitation card like a fan in the hope that I would find a waft of afternoon sea breeze. We made our way to offices located between a cluster of Vietnamese and Middle Eastern restaurants and it was a relief to step into the air-conditioning. In the room, several people were arranging cakes and deserts for afternoon tea on a long table, one young woman was on her hands and knees focusing a projector and a lap-top, while another was up a ladder attaching a string of paper rainbow-fans across the front of the room.

Amran, dressed in a beautiful cream and brown hijab, greeted her guests before the official proceedings began. We were here to celebrate the launch of Amran's first children's book, *The girl with the rainbow hijab.* The book follows the story of Ameera who loses her favourite hijab and while looking for it, reminisces about the memories she made while wearing it. Amran told me she wanted to create a heroic character for young girls to look up to, to help empower them and to bring about a better understanding. Standing confidently at the front of the room, Amran read the story to her audience while her illustrator's animated characters scrolled across the screen. This was a talented young woman who understood the power of words and images. I learnt that hijabs for children are usually made in severe plain-coloured cotton. Her own experience of such hijabs encouraged her to write her book, but when she thought back, she decided the real inspiration came when she working as a young Sunday school teacher.

> I started teaching at my local Sunday school and was given a class of 10-15 girls. Towards the end of the class, three little girls came up to me and said: “Miss we love our hijab, but we get teased about it at school.” What shook me to the core was the fact that these girls were between seven and nine years old. Now, I hope that a little Muslim girl can pick up the book and say Ameera wears the hijab so can I.

We agreed that in the West “the veil” seemed to dominate public perceptions of Muslim women, often in a negative way. For Amran, wearing the hijab is a beautiful experience.

> I choose to wear it – no-one forces me to wear it. Personally, I see it is a symbol and expression of my faith. I understand people who don’t want to wear it. I have many friends who are non-hijab wearers and that is fine but for me, wearing a hijab is very important.

Over afternoon tea at my place Amran also expressed concern about a mono-culture in book publishing that does not adequately represent the Australian community.

> Most of the characters I see in children’s books are white and western looking. If Australia is truly a multicultural society, we must change some of the images we give our children. I don’t believe my culture is represented on book shelves in shops and libraries and I think that is a shame.

I had not noticed this. I conducted a survey of the books displayed in the children’s sections of several bookstores and libraries. They showed mainly white, western characters populating pages. I smiled at the row of Enid Blyton books. I had followed Julian, Dick, Anne, George and Timmy the dog, through pages of their adventures in *The Famous Five* series and it was interesting to see that they still took up a lot of shelf space. I flipped through an array of the now popular science fiction and vampire adventures in the young adult reading section and found mainly western characters. While the

landscape has changed in recent years as writers such as Shaun Tan, Sally Morgan, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Ahn Do, Mark Greenwood and Grace Lin reflect more diversity with their books, there is still a heavy dependence on books with European, American and English white characters. There is a distinct lack of diversity.

> I think people are frightened of what they don't know. We all seem to be afraid of people who don't look like us. That is why it is so important to me that we teach students in both primary and high school about a broad range of cultures and history. People can't understand unless they know the facts.

I nodded in agreement and wondered why so many of us felt qualified to express views on subjects we knew little about. Amran explained:

> If people seem confused or insult me, because I am a Muslim I try to behave in the opposite manner. I am very polite and calm. I try to explain the facts about my history, my culture and other aspects of Islam if they are interested.

I wondered how often that happened. She was buying an ice-cream for her son the other day when a woman shouted at her that she was not acceptable in this country.

"I tried to have a conversation with her," Amran told me, "but she just wasn't interested. I like to talk to people straight because people on both sides of this discussion seem to be very angry right now."

I reflected on how the Australian parliament and other governments around the world seemed angry about so many issues these days. There was no conversation or discussion, and politics seemed to have degenerated into shouting matches and one-upmanship.

Amran has been searching for a way to explain the rich intellectual history of Islam and its influence throughout the world for some time. She wants people to know about the Islamic scholars who changed the way we think about mathematics, physics and medicine. Muhammad bin Mousa Al-

Khawarizmi is considered the founder of modern algebra and the Islamic mathematicians who followed him, made even more impressive contributions. Ibn Sina's text, the Canon of Medicine, was used for centuries in Europe and some historians claim its popularity put the books of Galen and Hippocrates in the shade. It did not surprise me that Amran had a second children's book in mind. It will feature two children who travel through history with modern day problems, to meet Islamic scholars from the past who help them understand today's problems. She is also looking into the development of a virtual reality app to support this project. This is a young woman with big ideas.

As Amran continued to talk about her busy life, I was horrified as she described some incidents that have occurred in her role as an early childhood educator. A nine-year-old girl came up to her one day and told her she hated all Muslims because they killed people. Amran was so shocked she did not know how to respond. We both wondered what was going on in the child's home because surely comments like this must have been influenced by the views of others around her. The comment clearly hurt Amran, yet she doesn't feel that Australia is a racist country. Overall, her personal experiences have been positive.

> I made a school visit to Methodist Ladies College in Perth with 10 other people, on a speaking engagement recently and the students and the teachers were beautiful. The classes had been divided into small groups so each of us could have intimate group discussions with different students. We all agreed we had thoughtful conversations with the students who were really engaged and wanted to know the differences between refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, and if we faced stereotyping and how our cultures were different.

More texts about and by people from a refugee background are clearly needed in our school curriculums. Ahn Doh's, *The Happiest Refugee* and *I am Malala* by Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai were the popular choice of teachers. Amran also wants teachers to be equipped to discuss racism up front.

> It is kind of shocking to me how this gap has opened up between the Muslim world and the Western world. We are not what Pauline Hanson and others like her say. We are not a swarm of people who all have terrorist tendencies. Of course, there are bad people who are Muslims - look at the Taliban and Boko Haram - but there are bad minorities among Christians, Buddhists, Jews and others. I certainly don't know any terrorists. Every person is different – groups of people cannot be lumped together and called the same because of their religion or how they look.

When Pauline Hanson from the One Nation Party was elected a Senator in the Australian parliament for a second time, Amran felt people had given her a platform to say untrue things about Islam. We were both appalled when then minister for women (Michaelia Cash) hurried to congratulate Hansen on her racist and bigoted maiden speech. Senator Cash told people she couldn't understand why people would be upset at her response.

The rhetoric by some of our politicians and others in the community seems to have enabled more people to express similar views. Writing in *The Conversation*, Associate professor Gwenda Tavan wrote that Hanson was exercising "the privilege of the paranoid right, where the normal rules of political engagement – coherence, consistency, fact, logic, and proportion – do not apply."[26] Sometimes, it is hard to find a sustained and consistent counter-narrative to Hanson and those like her who promote this toxic discourse. But as social researcher Hugh McKay reminds us, "we're all very accomplished at wringing our hands about the state of the world. It's not always so easy to acknowledge the state of the nation actually starts in our street.*"* He argues how each of us choose to live helps determine our neighbourhood which in turn determines our society. He asks in his recent book *Australia Re-imagined "*just how responsive are we to the needs of our neighbours? How conscious are we to needs of those around us, and how invested are we in contributing something to our community?"[27] Of course, there is still plenty to wring your hands about.

The re-emergence of Hanson and far right groups in Australian politics, reflects a similar populist sentiment around the world. By positioning herself to speak for people who feel left out of Australia's economic success and helping them to find a group to blame for their problems, her party has gained a solid base of support. Hanson first came onto the political scene in 1996 when she was elected to the Federal seat of Oxley in Queensland. At that time, she argued that Australia was “in danger of being swamped by Asians” and called for Australia’s immigration policy to be radically reviewed and multiculturalism abolished. In her second maiden speech to parliament in 2016, on election as a senator for Queensland, she used the same terminology when she said Australia was being “swamped” by Muslims. Hanson’s attention officially shifted from Asian Australians and Aborigines to Muslims. She went on to say mosques needed to have security cameras, that there should be a national enquiry into Islam and that halal-certified food was funding terrorism. The Oxford English Dictionary declared the 2016 word of the year was ‘*post-truth’* which presents incorrect information as truth. Hansen lives and speaks in her own personal post-truth orbit, but it is also one that can spin out of control into the general community. In 2018 the Scanlon Foundation found that while 83 per cent of people are in “strong agreement that multi-culturalism is good for Australia,” there was a rise in negative attitudes about Muslim people in its 2017 survey. Fourteen per cent of Australians indicate that they are “very negative” and 11 per cent are “somewhat negative,” making a quarter of the population opposed to Muslim people.[28]

I wonder about this figure every day and ponder how many people know someone from a Muslim background, and how we can get different groups of people together. Eid Al-Fitr marks the end of the month of Ramadan, which is the month in which Muslims fast every day from sunrise to sunset. At its conclusion all the family comes together for special prayers and celebration. My husband Terry and I attended a community festival for Eid this year. There weren’t many Western faces in the crowd which I thought was sad. It was a free event open to everyone, there were camel rides for the kids, the usual bouncy castle and hundreds of stalls with food and clothing. I thought back, wondering how many years it took a good

proportion of the Australian community to accept and attend Chinese New Year celebrations. How many do now? I wasn't sure. Terry and I soaked up the ambiance of Eid, watched the celebrations and welcomed conversations with people who stopped for a chat as we sipped our tea and ate sticky baklava.

Amran and I met over several months to discuss our writing, and we continued to discuss the perceptions of wearing of the veil. The word hijab describes the act of covering up generally but is often used to describe the headscarves worn by Muslim women. The one most commonly worn in the west covers the head and the neck but leaves the face clear. When an additional veil for the face is added, leaving only the eyes clear this is called the niqab. In all cases the veil symbolizes devotion and piety and is woman's own choice in most parts of the world. Sadly, there are terrorist groups like the Taliban and Boko Haram that operate under the guise of Islam who force women to dress in clothing like the burqa, but this is only a small minority. Amran explained that the simple floor-length gown with long sleeves that she was wearing is called an abaya and it is worn with a headscarf. It comes in a variety of colours, fabrics and styles.

As Amran showed me her clothing more closely, I wondered why more Western women didn't think about wearing the Abaya – it was, after all, like a long maxi dress or kaftan and it looked super comfortable to me. I worried that I had been calling the entire ensemble a hijab, but Amran assured me this was acceptable. Curious, I asked Amran how she secured her head scarf so beautifully.

"Pins," she laughed, undoing her scarf, and demonstrating to me how it stayed firmly on her head.

I made an effort to learn the different names for veils throughout the Muslim world. The al-amira is a two-piece veil. It consists of a close-fitting cap and a tube-like scarf. The shayla is a long rectangular scarf popular in the Gulf region. The khimar is a long, cape-like veil that hangs down to just above the waist. It covers the hair, neck and shoulders completely but leaves the face clear, and the chador is a full-body cloak worn by many Iranian women outside the house. Amran is frustrated that whenever the western

media run a story about what Muslim women wear –voices like hers are never heard.

"Why don't they ask us for our views? I generally get asked if my father forces me to wear a hijab or if a husband or brother insists, I do. It's none of that. I choose to wear it," Amran tells me.

> When I put on my hijab, I feel validated as a woman. We really should only care about what is inside of a person, not how she looks on the outside. The hijab, in my mind, prevents women from being treated as objects. If a guy looks at me, he's not looking at a piece of flesh. If he wants to get to know me, he must make an effort to talk to me and understand who I am. I am treated as Amran: *who* I am and not *how* I look.

After Amran left, I reflected on a western society obsessed with the physical appearance of women. Magazines, newspapers and on-line media devote an inordinate amount of time to how women look, what they wear and how they can make themselves more beautiful. We see images of women that someone has decided are beautiful and we are encouraged to aspire to be like this person. Popular writer and colleague, Liz Byrski, wrote a thoughtful essay about this a few years ago. In it she reminds us that the feminist lobby argued fiercely that the focus should not be entirely about women's appearance because women were worth so much more, but that "unfortunately the image industries have reduced our worth to anti-ageing creams and mascara wands…progress on feminism has been trashed by the market-driven concepts of crippling standards of beauty and style".[29]

I'm with Liz and Amran on this. There are many types of beauty and as a society we need to promote the concept of inner beauty and forget about the marketing hype surrounding the external self. I don't want to be bombarded with information about the best make-up, the best clothes for my figure or even the best cream to refresh my skin which, because of my age, must be tired and old.

The concept of identity – who we are – has always interested me. Not just the way our appearance can shape what others think about us, but how

our heritage, language, and culture influence it. Amran confesses that she is sometimes confused about her identity. She is of Somalian heritage; her first years were spent in Kenya until the family was accepted by New Zealand as refugees. However, she migrated to Australia and this is where she has spent most of her life. “I am Somalian,” she tells me, “but somehow I am not Somalian enough even though I speak my language and follow the traditions and religion of my culture. Yet, I am also not Australian enough to feel totally at home here either.”

I have heard this problem articulated before. My South Sudanese friend, Akec Mayor Chuot, told me she was just a baby when her mother and family fled from South Sudan to Kakuma refugee Camp in Kenya, where she spent much of the first twelve years of her life. For a while, Kakuma was her concept of home. Even though she was born in South Sudan it was never really her home. She never got to know it, to love it or to understand it despite still having family there. She’s been back to visit and found it quite difficult because she didn’t fit in. She lacked the language; her western style clothing was wrong, and her sense of belonging was confused.

Similarly, my young Afghan friend, Zee Sultani, told me of her challenges when she made her first return visit to Afghanistan.

“I live in between cultures. I feel more at home in Australia, of course. I love it and don’t want to leave, but I was born in Afghanistan and lived there until I was ten years old, so it is my heritage.”

Zee found herself bewildered when she arrived in the teeming city of Kabul.

> My senses were being assaulted from all sides – the noise, the languages, the people, the clothes, and the smells. None of it was familiar but I felt like it should be. I couldn’t read any of the signs in the main streets of the city.

Unlike Zee, Amran has not been able to travel back to Somalia because it is too dangerous. Some of her relatives have travelled back to Kenya to see family, however today Kenya has its own problems. It faces security threats, most notably from Al-Shabaab, the Somalian based Islamist

group that has carried out a string of terrorist attacks. Amran's family were forced to flee from Somalia during the height of the civil war in 1991. Her parents became separated during the fighting and upheaval of the escape, something that occurs to families in the rush to flee war and persecution. Thankfully they were re-united several years later. Many refugees are not. Somalia's history has long been shaped by occupation, war and natural disaster. Two and a half decades of conflict, concentrated mainly in southern Somalia, destroyed much of the country's governance structure, economic infrastructure, and institutions.

According to Amnesty International, more than 1.3 million Somalis were internally displaced in 2015 alone. Rival fighting forces, including al-Shabaab have, at times, blocked supply routes disrupting humanitarian access. The fighting has destroyed much of the country and continues to wreak havoc on local communities. This continued conflict coupled with weather conditions brought about by El Niño has meant no rain and severe drought which has added to the country's woes. Even aid agencies that have long histories of providing relief have given up. After having worked continuously in Somalia since 1991, Médecins Sans Frontieres, usually the most stoic of agencies, closed all its medical and humanitarian operations several years ago as a result of a series of extremist attacks on its staff in different parts of the country. The international Red Cross, one of the few organisations still working in Somalia, reported in 2016 that more than 300,000 children in Somalia were malnourished, including nearly 60,000 under the age of five who were in a critical condition and in need of urgent, therapeutic feeding.[30] For Amran, these images and statistics are distressing. Every time she sees a small child who has been forced to flee the fighting or is facing starvation, she knows that could have been her.

> I often think about my life and compare it to a young woman my age who is still living in Somalia, facing the fighting and wars that continue today. My mum who wasn't that much older than me was amazing and brave to escape to Kenya when she did. There was widespread famine, so she didn't have enough food. She was unwell and suffered from anemia. This meant she could not breastfeed, so she travelled

> from village to village on her own in search of food. Mum tells stories of protecting my older sister from attacks by sheltering her with her body. My mum is an inspiration to me. Because of my mother's bravery I get to live in this beautiful, safe country. I have to make my life count.

I was struck by the love and gratitude Amran feels for her mother. Listening to stories from other people of a refugee background, the extraordinary strength of women in dire circumstances is often mentioned. Stripped of the protection of their homes and often their family structure, women living in exile are vulnerable to violence, abuse, and illnesses. However, despite these and other challenges, many mothers from a refugee background, courageously rebuild their lives and rise above their ordeal. Over and over I have listened to mothers describe what they have done to keep their children safe. Sadly, I have also met mothers left too broken and traumatised by what they suffered, unable to help themselves let alone their families. Many can remain trapped in this depressing cycle for years. Sometimes it is hard to find the words, or women are too frightened, to explain this reality. Perhaps it is one of the reasons many of their stories remain untold.

Some women have the resilience to re-build and begin again. Amran's mother runs a successful retail business called *Kaah Express* in the outer suburbs of Perth. She imports Arabesque style furniture, while Amran's father manages a Western Union operation in the same location. There are nine children in the family. Amran's eldest sister completed a university degree in business management and another sister has a degree in oral health. One of her brothers completed a plumbing apprenticeship, one lives in Melbourne, and four other children are still at school.

Amran's schooling presented an array of challenges for her. I find it hard to picture the quiet, introverted student she paints of herself. Her primary school years were spent at an Islamic school where she felt comfortable among people who were the same as her. It's probably similar to the way white Aussie kids feel when they are all together in a group.

However, Amran's mother wanted to expose her children to all of society so they could develop a more diverse outlook and understand Australia better.

"For most of the first year in public school I was terrified of being bullied."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well I was one of three students with a brown face in my school cohort and one of two girls wearing a hijab in the whole school. It is easy to feel the odd one out. I sat quietly in all my classes hoping no-one would notice me."

That all changed the following year when Amran's love of writing and English gave her the confidence to speak up in her classes.

"I was a bit of nerd really, so I eventually decided to 'own my nerdiness' rather than my other differences."

Like many of us, she can remember the names of teachers who had a profound effect on her life, and I am sure they would be pleased to see this confident young woman now. I thought about my high school maths teacher, Mr Grieve, who never gave up on me when I showed so little aptitude in the subject. He would be amazed that I spent three years in business at a large international bank in Hong Kong. I visualised him scratching his head about the weekly background briefings I gave to financial journalists on the Federal Reserve's next rate cut and what it would mean for the HK dollar. Amran remembers being given her first journal by her English teacher and the influence that blank book had on her writing.

"Suddenly, I felt free to express my views in my journal, so I wrote, and I wrote. That was where it all began."

We agreed that for some English teachers, the classroom wasn't just a room where you met each week; it was a magical creative space that inspired its students. Since her book launch and thinking about her past, Amran has been able to re-connect with this special teacher through social media. Amran describes herself as a dabbler in life.

I thought I wanted to go to university after I completed year 12, but that didn't happen because I chose to get married and became a

mum. Now that my son Leith is two years old, I feel this great passion to get on and do a number of different things with my life while remaining a good mum. I know I can try uni at some stage, but I feel like I am more of an entrepreneur like my mother. When my husband and I separated, I moved back home with the family where everyone has provided great support. It's not always easy being a single mum, but Leith fills my world with joy. On top of that my mum and dad have always encouraged me to believe that I can do and be, whatever I want.

For Amran that means writing and marketing her books and developing the Ameera brand. She has become an in-demand public speaker, is popular at libraries around Western Australia, festivals in Melbourne and at TEDx talks. She was invited to a Malaysian literary festival and conducted school visits there. There are now three Ameera books in publication. *Ameera's adventures* is a colouring-in book and *Ameera's big Eid party* is a follow-up to *The girl in the rainbow hijab.* Amran continues to work as a child care educator, to study Arabic (her third language) and to look for other entrepreneurial opportunities, as she markets her Ameera brand. I'm not sure that equates to dabbling; it sounds more like an unfolding adventure to me, just like Ameera in *The girl with the rainbow hijab*.

The truth of it

I grew up with the words "you must always tell the truth" ringing in my ears. Even when I thought about telling a fib as a child, one look at my mother's questioning face would lead me to blurting out everything, whether it was the right thing *or* the wrong thing, that I had done. Along with the truth mantra from my mother came the call for respect from my father. He frequently said: "I don't care who it is…the Queen of England or the street sweeper, they each deserve the same respect." This was the moral compass they instilled in me and it has held me in good stead.

I assumed for many years that everyone had such a moral compass, but these days I know that is not the case. I'm someone who watches a lot of news and current affairs, and I now have a basket of socks next to my chair. My husband's idea. Instead of shouting "lies," "how can you say that," or "where's your compassion," at the television or iPad screen, he thought it would less of an interruption to him (and more satisfying for me) if I picked up a pair of my old hockey socks and threw them at the double glass door to ease my frustration.

When politicians resort to using race to advance their agendas, they inevitably excite racial anxiety and division in the community. It is the one thread that has run consistently through the historical fabric of racism: the fear that a certain "other" poses a danger to a national identity or way of life. The narrative of "them" and "us" used in discussing immigration and multiculturalism seems to imply if you are not one of "us" – whatever that means - then you must be bad. As Perera (2014) argues "such charges are characteristic of hate manifestos designed to mobilise communities against targeted groups. They are recognisable as the grievances that historically inform racist propaganda." The aim, she contends, is to scapegoat and intimidate different sections of the community. Thus, the divide between "us" and them widens.

When populist, far-right political and media commentators such as Andrew Bolt, have opined that there is no "us" any more as a tidal wave of immigrants sweeps away what's left of our national identity, I throw my socks at the door. I read his widely distributed column for News Corp, because I

want to understand what all parts of society are saying about issues. Mickler (2019) argues Bolt's commentary frequently resonates with the ideas and sentiments of the Far Right - ultra-nationalism, cultural chauvinism and a reactionary hostility to progressive thought. Recently he claimed: “that Jews, Indians and Chinese were forming ethnic colonies across the country.”[31] Tim Soutphommasane, argued there was absolutely no compelling evidence that Australian multiculturalism was in danger of veering towards separatism.[32] I wondered what the Australian community really thought about multiculturalism and migration numbers, so I sought out the Scanlon Foundation. For over 11 years the Scanlon Foundation’s Mapping Social Cohesion survey has posed hundreds of questions across a wide demographic of the Australian community each year to understand community attitudes and concerns. It is a sound base for knowledge and fact. The Foundation, based at Monash University, supports ongoing longitudinal research into the indicators of social cohesion. It was formed with the view that Australia, apart from Australia’s First Peoples, is and always will be a migrant nation. In the 2018 survey, despite immigration policy, including that relating to refugee intake, being contested almost daily in politics and the media, just 7% of respondents felt that immigration was the most important issue. Australians continue to endorse the view that their country is an immigrant nation and that immigration benefits the country and will continue to do so in the years ahead.[33] You can spend hours digging into the Scanlon Foundation research, but clearly it doesn’t suit some people’s agenda to discuss the facts. Social commentator Hugh McKay notes that our success is “based on relationships forged between friends, neighbours and workmates that crash through the barriers of prejudice and make us realise that tolerance, tempered by a healthy curiosity about our differences, is the hallmark of Australian culture.”[34] That’s the Australia I want to live in.

And it is not only in Australia that fear of “the other” is being highlighted. It seems to be happening around the world. We have several American friends, both Democrat and Republican who worry about the direction their country is taking. The Economist magazine has written repeatedly that “the world has been forced to come to terms with, and

repeatedly adjust to, having Mr. Trump in the White House." They described his first 365 days hurtling by like an out-of-control fairground ride.[35]

"It's just horrible. When we wake up each morning, we turn on our phones to check the news to see what extraordinary announcement by tweet has come out of the White House," my friend Bob explained. Terry and I arrived in the United States to visit our long-time friends from Hong Kong, Anne and Bob, at the start of Donald Trump's zero tolerance policy on immigration which included the arrest of all refugees and migrants trying to cross the US /Mexican border. The administration then began separating children from their parents, placing them in detention centres in different parts of the country. Bob, like me, is a former journalist and interested in the facts – or lies – and how they were reported in each day's news cycle. Each morning, as the coffee gurgled through the espresso machine and the aroma filled the air, we gathered around the kitchen table to read the papers, and review the news online, and discuss how lies had become truth, what was lost in "fake news" and how real facts sometimes seemed diminished.

Recently, Rudy Giuliani, President Trump's attorney said on a live TV interview: "truth isn't truth." He went on to assert that "facts are in the eye of the beholder."[36] I wonder how people can nod along with these outrageous statements. A recent suggestion made by Canadian researchers about why Trump is so popular, despite the lies he tells, suggests it is because he is a consummate storyteller. [37] I had not thought of his presentation style in that way. It's easy to see he is a slick, if rude, media performer but could storytelling be part of his success? The researchers suggest that stories do not have the same relationship to the truth as other statements. Can it be that some people "accept stories even when they contain factual errors because they resonate with their own experiences and provide them with an active role in their own narratives?"[38] Can fiction become reality in the minds of people? As a storyteller, for whom fact is the primary element of my work, I struggle with this concept.

That said, sales and subscriptions to what I call "the honest media" like the New York Times and The Guardian have increased significantly. Last year the New York Times made more than $1 billion in overall subscription revenue, which makes Donald Trump's tweets about the "failing New York

Times" seem ridiculous. Last September, the Washington Post crossed the one million mark for digital subscribers. While Trump was attacking it as "fake news", the New York Times was cleverly packaging subscriptions to high-schoolers as an act of resistance. The marketing included a testimonial from one student, Mary, who said: "Supporting the Times is my way of fighting back against fake news and alternative facts. I wanted to give till it hurt."[39] The Guardian group of newspapers has announced a similar rise in subscriptions. In 2017 The Guardian media group Britain announced it had increased total revenues and more than quadrupled its paying members. I hope the Guardian Australia is planning a New York Times style campaign to tap into future voters such as high schoolers, so people can learn to tell the difference between fake and genuine news.

In reflecting on this changing attitude to truth, particularly when applied to journalism, I was reminded that Shokoofeh had gone to prison and spent time in solitary confinement because she had written the truth as a journalist. My mentor and friend, John Brown, whom I worked with for over three years as a young journalist on a country paper, was forever asking me to check my quotes by listening to my tape again to be sure it was accurate. Trained journalists, he claimed, always found three independent sources to verify their story. John wouldn't let controversial stories go to press unless we had asked people on both sides of the issue for comment, so we could always present a balanced story. His daughter, who is bureau chief for a major newswire in Washington, says the press corps now expect to be damned by their president each time he speaks and that the most common way they all get to talk to him is by shouting questions across a stretch of grass cordoned off by security with the spinning rotor blades of Marine 1 as background noise.

It's hard to get to the truth of a matter when fear and mis-information bubble along beside the facts. A survey of 1,000 young Australians aged eight to 16 indicated one third felt they could distinguish fake news from real news, one third felt they could not make this distinction. The other third were uncertain about their ability.[40] I asked my own class of third-year university students where they sourced their news. The unanimous response was, "from our phones" and that is true for many of us. The internet is our answer

when we need to connect with our family and friends on Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp. Who hasn't googled their health or quickly looked up other information? However, many of my students could not distinguish clearly between news, lies or opinion in their feeds. Lies masquerading as news are as old as news itself. But in the past, it was usually only governments and powerful figures who could manipulate public opinion. Today, it's anyone with internet access. As we all know this means access to a much wider range of information, much of it coming from sources with no sense of responsibility or commitment to the truth. The Pew Research Institute, reported in 2017 that 66% of people in the US use Facebook, and a majority of those users get news on the site.[41] The fact is that fake news spreads faster than true news. In an unprecedented study in the US, researchers used a data set of rumour cascades on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. About 126,000 rumours were spread by around 3 million people. False news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people.[42]

Race and gender issues seem to me to be an area, where fact and falsehood march strongly alongside each other, influencing attitudes and what people believe they know. In these areas the discussion can quickly degenerate into hate speech, aided, it seems to me, by the anonymity of social media. Stereo-types emerge. Still, I must admit I can default to stereo-types easily. When I see a man or woman in high vis clothing, I think "tradie with vocational training." I don't initially acknowledge the possibility of an engineer with several degrees. I used to have stereo-types about alcoholics in my mind, until I realised a close family member was a functioning alcoholic who could work and contribute to his community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have known about stereo-typing for a very long time. My friend, who is the artistic director of one of Australia's largest Aboriginal theatre companies, told me that almost every week he noticed people who crossed the street when they saw him coming. I shake my head that this is still commonplace in my country. Another friend, Rashida, told me she is still astounded when the conversation turns to the colour of her skin or her ability to speak English so well. High profile writer and activist, Yassmin

Abdel Magied, a migrant from Sudan, found herself demonized around the country because she had the temerity to link the remembrance of Anzac Day with detained asylum seekers on Manus Island or Nauru. She moved to London to escape the unrelenting racial harassment, but on her return, she received the following Instagram message:

> Go to Flinders Street Station, cut your wrists and let them bleed out so we can watch you die. Lest we forget. Hopefully I'll be able to distinguish you from all the other Sudanese niggers, but I know you will be the ape wearing a ridiculous towel over your head.[43]

I felt physically sick. I knew Yassmin – but even if I hadn't, I still would have felt sick. Shouldn't we all feel sick? I was saddened when my friend Sara wrote on her Facebook page:

> This is what terrifies young people like me. Many of us identify with the outspoken migrant in Yassmin, the powerful educated black woman, the Australian who has contributed so much to her country…it's terrifying to see that regardless of what we have achieved or contributed there is always a line we as people of colour cannot cross.

Around one in five Australians say they have experienced race hate talk such as people using race hate slurs, name calling or other types of verbal abuse.[44] In a speech about discrimination and abuse in the Australian Army, Lieutenant-General David Lindsay Morrison AO, and former Australian of the year, spoke some words that I try to live with every day…"the standard you walk past is the standard you accept." [45]

I am disappointed with myself that too often I still walk past, fail to call out lies, and speak the truth.

There are four of me – Moe Moe's story

> I have been thinking about things, so I can tell you my story. There is my life in Rangoon Burma, my life living in the jungles on the Thai-Burma border where my parents were rebel fighters, my time spent living in Thailand in a refugee camp and Bangkok and, of course, my life now in Australia So, you see, there are four of me.

Aye Moe Moe is a petite, beautiful young woman. She opened the door and extended her hand with a confident smile when I visited her for the first time. I liked her immediately. My Karen friend Paul suggested she might be willing to share her story with me. "She is my niece and I think she will find the process of telling her life story with you a helpful experience, like I did," Paul told me.

The Karen people have been a persecuted ethnic minority in Burma for decades. Moe Moe's family joined the Karen guerrilla fighters during the 1980s in the jungles of the eastern part of the country. As I explained in Chapter One, the Karen are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Burma. The Karen have been fighting for independence since the British conceded national sovereignty to the Burmese after World War II. The dispute between the government and ethnic minorities in Burma remains one of the longest civil wars on record. Despite the euphoria surrounding so called democratic elections in 2015, in which Aung San Suu Kyi lead her National League for Democracy (NLD) to a majority win in Burma, she and the rest of the majority military government show little desire to improve the rights and living conditions of the country's poverty-stricken and often persecuted minority groups.

The night of my first visit, the family of Moe Moe's husband was visiting from Burma and it was the first time they had all seen each other for many years. I was reminded how war, persecution or other circumstances can separate families. 'The ones left behind' is a phrase often mentioned to me when I have conversations with people of a refugee background. In some of these conversations nothing can be said; it is a time when feelings cannot be translated into words.

There are many reasons why refugees and asylum seekers become separated. Sometimes it happens in situations of conflict, war and persecution. At other times it is a matter of luck – who had the good fortune to be chosen for resettlement at a refugee camp by the United Nations. In reality, the system works more like a lottery than a queue. Very few resettlement places are available globally and, according to the UNHCR**,** less than 1 per cent of the world's refugees may be resettled in any given year.[46]

Moe Moe and her family were eventually some of the lucky ones. Her father was a lawyer and her mother an entrepreneurial woman who over the years, had a number of different small shops in Rangoon. But beneath their middle-class success, they were driven by a desire to serve their people. Moe Moe's father changed from practising law to working as a teacher in an attempt to lower his profile and over three or four years, they planned a new direction for their lives. Moe Moe was eight years old, with an older sister and a younger brother, when the family packed up and left their home quietly, to begin the arduous cross-country trip. They travelled east from town to town to get to the Karen military headquarters in the jungles close to the Thai-Burma border.

I wondered what sense of duty led a man to join an army of rebel fighters. He asked his family to leave everything they knew to join him in a fight for freedom. Moe Moe's own sense of resolve is still obvious when she talks about this period even though she was a young girl at the time.

> We all believed it was the right thing to do. On our arrival, my father told an Army General that he would serve until the Karen people had freedom. He remained with the army for 12 years before we came to Australia as refugees.

In the course of our conversation she explained how her grandfather had been arrested many times by the Burmese military for no apparent reason.

> They tortured him badly, really badly. He died last year in a refugee camp where he had waited for six years to be reunited with my

mother's family in Australia. His eyes never recovered from the torture. By the time he died he couldn't see out of one at all, couldn't move one of his arms and had become depressed and angry because of all the pain he suffered. My grandmother said sometimes they brought him back from a so-called interrogation and he couldn't remember anything that happened to him because he was so badly hurt. Every time my grandfather was sent back home from being tortured, my grandmother thought he was going to die. A year after my grandfather died, my grand-mother was granted a visa to resettle in Australia and now lives in Sydney with my mother.

Moe Moe's anguish was obvious. I closed my eyes briefly and explained we didn't have to talk about everything if it was too hard. "Thank you," she whispered. "I can barely think about what he went through, but I must; I want to – because people need to listen and understand." Moe Moe's father did everything he could as a lawyer, to try and free his father-in-law but was unsuccessful each time. I thought about what I would do if these unbearable things happened to my father or grandfather. Certainly, I would have fought for justice against those who had perpetrated these crimes against my family. I might not have taken up arms, but I would have protested. My brother Anthony, a career soldier, told me I probably would have ended up in jail and no help to anyone. He would have taken up arms, joined the cause and fought in the jungle.

At its peak the Karen Liberation National Army (KLNA) was said to have had at least 80,000 soldiers. Those numbers are much lower today, and despite on-going peace negotiations, the military wing of the Karen movement continue to hold arms to fight and defend themselves from the Burmese military. The Karen controlled region was nominally divided into seven brigades and Moe Moe's family was first sent to Kaw Thoo Lei (the main revolutionary area) in a part of the country known as Division Four. Moe Moe's father became Principal and senior teacher in a village called Moe Taung which means Sky Mountain. The family stayed for two years. Her mother worked as a voluntary teacher and managed to set up a small shop

selling basic supplies. Moe Moe reflected that they were probably quite naïve about what to expect.

> When I returned from school one day, mum said our soldiers told her we must pack up and move immediately. We were told to go across to the Thai side of the border which was close because Burmese soldiers were attacking our area and it was too dangerous to stay. Mum and I didn't take this too seriously. We had never been in a war environment before and we got caught on the wrong side of the border.

Moe Moe moves quickly over what happened but looking at her face, I can see talking about events like these brings back unwelcome memories. With the help of Karen soldiers who found them not far from their home, the family just managed to escape to safety on one of the last transport vehicles. They arrived at a small refugee camp about two kilometres across the border. "It was dark. I could hear loud guns firing close-by and I was very frightened. It was really the first time I understood fully that I lived in the middle of a war. I saw many horrible things."

They stayed for a week before crossing back over the border to where their house had been. There was nothing left. "All our belongings, our house, animals, everything was gone. My dad built a new house for us in the same spot and we stayed for a while." But after a second major attack by the Burmese military and major losses by the Karen they were forced to relocate again. I asked if she thought of these places as home. "No. No, I don't. I always felt like I was travelling, or running, or moving on to the next place."

I thought about what I was doing at the age of nine. Wearing my straw boater hat, smart navy Sacred Heart Convent school blazer, pleated skirt, woollen tights and shiny brown leather shoes, I commuted on a reliable suburban bus across the small city of Hobart, to attend my private girls' school. I wasn't running through the jungle in the dark to escape from soldiers firing guns. Like most people, I can compartmentalise past feelings and sad thoughts. I put them in a box at the back of my mind and allow conflicting ideas to exist alongside happier memories. However, I don't have

to push aside traumatic experiences of war and violence. Would I be able to keep them in the confines of a box I wondered?

The next decade provided more stability for the family in a village called Htee Hta close to the Tenasserim River. Her father helped set up a better legal system for the Karen community, and eventually worked as a judge. Her father was away on court business much of the time and her mother ran a grocery shop and a hairdressing business to support the family. The more I listened, the more I felt like Moe Moe's parents adapted to their harsh conditions and saw any suffering as part of their commitment to the cause. It was more difficult for a teenage girl.

> I hated the school on the border and was glad to leave it behind when I turned 17. Some teachers were mean and used to hit us with sticks, so I escaped down to the river and caught fish. I wanted to play sport rather than study. I was really good at volleyball. Both my parents really did not have time to look after us. My father was always busy with his job and my mother was so busy with her shop trying to earn money for our living. When I didn't understand multiplication tables one day, the teacher hit me very hard over the head. I remember crying to my mother and she told me I was too soft.

A soft heart clearly doesn't do you much good in a war zone. I watched Moe Moe with her daughter and smiled at their obvious pleasure in each other's company. What different lives mother and daughter have led? At the same age, one was in the jungle with her family and rebel fighters; the other is safely cocooned in her Australian home.

> I see all the facilities and opportunities that children have in schools in this country, during my working day as a teacher's assistant. What a contrast! Of course, I didn't know any different at the time or realise there was anything missing in my life. I sat on a mat under the trees with my fellow students listening to a teacher with one blackboard on wheels.

In Htee Hta, the family were safe from the Burmese soldiers because it was further from the front line. However, they still needed to be alert for government military planes that conducted bombing runs, particularly during the summer months. Acknowledging that it must have been very hard for both her parents, Moe Moe explained that their devotion to the cause never wavered and that her mother seemed to accept her father's long absences.

> Today my mother doesn't talk about her life then or the decisions they made to move around and support our people. She told my sister, brother and I that she was sorry for the hardship and any anger she showed during those times, but I don't blame her. It was a tough existence. I wanted her love so very much, but sometimes she didn't seem to have the energy left to show her feelings because of the crazy situation we were in.

I kept thinking Moe Moe's life sounded lonely, but she says she made her own life with activities like fishing and sport and spending time with her siblings.

According to The Border Consortium (TBC),[47] the ethnic and pro-democracy organisations on the border where Moe Moe was, had become a united front of opposition by the mid-1990s. However, the biggest blow to the border rebel groups took place in 1995 with the fall of Manerplaw, the cherished headquarters of the Karen resistance. Conflict and abuses continued, and hundreds of refugees were forced to flee across the border to Thailand. Three temporary sites were established for the displaced persons: Huay Sot and Bor Wii in Ratchaburi Province and Pu Mwan in Kanchanaburi Province. The conditions at these sites were very rudimentary. People slept on the ground with only thin plastic roofing and skeletal bamboo structures. Two months later, these three temporary sites were combined and re-located into what is now known as Tam Hin refugee camp. Moe Moe's family made it to Pu Mwan, but she contracted malaria just before they fled Burma, so she struggled even more in the dire living arrangements.

I asked about treatment for her malaria. She looked at me strangely and told me that was a 'secondary' consideration. The first thing was just to

survive. There were sick people all around them and when someone died the body had to be disposed of quickly.

> I can still smell the dead bodies burning. It is a smell you never forget. Even though they took the bodies away from the camp and I couldn't see anything except for the smoke rising in the distance…you could smell what was happening. To make things worse sometimes animals scavenged body parts that remained.

Driven by what I can only assume was growing despair and anger, Moe Moe's mother announced that they could not live as they were and took control. They were also helped by a volunteer Thai doctor who visited the camp regularly and treated Moe Moe's malaria.

Moe Moe's mother was determined to find a safe place for her family and do whatever needed to be done to make a better life. There are many refugees from Burma who find work both legally and illegally in Thailand. According to the Burmese embassy in Bangkok there are about 4 million Burmese migrants in the country. Only 1.7 million have work permits.[48] The rest work illegally and face deportation or jail. Moe Moe and her family left the camp illegally, without passports and supporting papers, and walked over twelve hours to the village of Sesawad to seek help from their doctor friend. Two hours from Bangkok, near the town of Kachanbury, he offered them accommodation on a farm.

> The doctor's brothers and sisters were so angry at him because he was taking illegal people to live on the farm that belonged to the family. He told his brothers and sisters that if there was any issue with the authorities, he would take the responsibility alone. The doctor could have lost his job, his position and have been prosecuted for supporting illegal people, if the authority had found out about us. But this doctor selflessly helped us despite the danger.
>
> We had a simple shelter with only a roof and a floor. It was mainly used as a temporary resting place for farm workers and it was heaven compared to the temporary refugee camp. We had no idea of what to

do next, but we helped the doctor with clearing land for crops and vegetables for the next two months.

My dad and I would also go into the mountains to cut bamboo to sell. My little sister had been born in Htee Hta, so there were four children now and even though it was safer, we still did not have enough money to support ourselves.

During this time Moe Moe's mother made several unsuccessful attempts to contact her sister who lived closer to Bangkok. Eventually, with the doctor's help, they found each other, and Moe Moe's aunt offered the family a place to stay and the chance of employment at a wood factory in the town of Nakhon Pathom. The work was very demanding. Moe Moe explained she and her mother were the only women among 15 other workers.

"We were now the lowest of the low and I can remember how another woman who worked in the office used to look at us. She looked at us like we were nothing."

Moe Moe worked doubly hard at the mill, often alongside the men when it came to un-loading and loading because it paid more. I expressed my concern about this hard-manual laboring work. "I just did what I had to do over the year we stayed. The only things that made me happy were that I could help to support my family and that I was able to go to Church again each week. I celebrated my 18th birthday at the factory," she told me. I thought back to when I turned 18; I celebrated the event with a big party of friends on a summer evening, dancing in my parent's garden with the smell of frangipani perfuming the air.

A friend of Moe Moe's father, who worked with the Burmese Legal Council in Thailand, helped the family move to Bangkok and her father applied to the UNHCR to register them as refugees. Moe Moe found work in the construction industry. She carted sand and carried rocks and wood. Most afternoons she went to a second job as a cleaner.

It was my first time in a big city like Bangkok, so I found it pretty interesting. We didn't have much. We rented a small place from a

Karen man and lived in one big room sleeping next to each other on a floor mat. We had a little stove and a toilet but not much else.

The UNHCR rejected the family's first application as refugees. "It broke our hearts and we lost all hope for a while. How could we be rejected?" she asked me. I shook my head in sympathy, but with no answer. After five years of collecting stories from people of a refugee background, I know that UNHCR registration and acceptance can be unpredictable. There are 25.4 million registered refugees worldwide, with nowhere near enough places in the small number of resettlement countries who work with the UNHCR. In 2017, the UNHCR was only able to settle 102,800 people.[49] That's not many out of 25.4 million. Moe Moe's family lodged an appeal and on the second attempt, they were successful with the UNHCR. In 1999 they moved to a transit camp for refugees that was originally used for the detention of Burmese student protestors from the 1988 uprising against the military government. At that time, many thousands of Burmese from different ethnic groups and backgrounds protested around the country about the corrupt military that were in charge. They were ultimately unsuccessful, and many people were detained and interrogated in Thailand and Burma during the military crackdown. Moe Moe's uncle, Paul, had told me about these camps.

Moe Moe's family nominated Australia and waited two years in the refugee camp for their application to be processed. Other people who nominated countries, like Canada or New Zealand, seemed to wait only three to six months, but Moe Moe's father had been advised that the best education systems and support networks for newly arrived refugees from Burma were in Australia. So, they waited. I've come to understand that waiting is a huge part of being a refugee. People wait at borders to cross, people wait for help from aid agencies, people wait for visas or passports to be issued, and of course they wait in hope that one day, another country will offer them an opportunity to start a new life. Moe Moe told me that you get used to waiting. "You just have to keep trying to move forward." Finally, the day came for the family to leave the camp and travel to their new home in Australia. She remembers each step she took across the gravel to climb up and into the back of the transport truck. She was excited and happy about

the future but felt a great sense of sadness about the people they would leave behind; those still waiting. After a night in Bangkok they boarded their first plane, for the journey south.

I thought about my ease and comfort travelling by air. I accept flying is a part of my life and I never think much about it. I was five when I experienced my first plane trip; a domestic flight with my mum from Hobart to Melbourne that took an hour. It was full of wonder and joy for me. But what about getting on an international Qantas flight from Bangkok to Sydney, as a teenager from a refugee camp who spoke no English? I tried to imagine sitting in a strange machine shaped like a tube restrained in my seat for ten hours flying across the world.

> We did not know what to expect before we got on the plane. We couldn't understand any of the PA announcements, so we had no idea of what was going on. We had no idea even of how to eat the food on the tray. We had never seen knives and forks before and wondered what on earth the white bread was on our plates!

I looked at this sophisticated young woman, who now seemed comfortable in both Australian and Karen cultures, laughing at her recollections. I vowed to think about flying in a different way to try and imagine the challenges for a non-English speaking person. Instead of my usual practice of sinking down into my seat, stuffing the seat pocket with my kindle and water bottle and wearing headphones to discourage conversation, I would take some time to put myself in Moe Moe's position. I would look around more at the people and the inside of the plane. I would try to imagine seeing a food tray for the first time. I would listen to the PA announcements throughout the flight and think through what could be missed or misunderstood. I was relieved when Moe Moe explained that she and her brother were seated next to a very helpful Australian man who assisted them with immigration forms and service during the flight.

They arrived in a strange country where they had been told to expect "a lot of white people and very tall buildings". They were greeted and supported by the well-established Karen community in Sydney and over the

next ten years they lived in a variety of rental properties in the western suburbs. Perhaps because of the transitory nature of their life in Burma and Thailand, the family worried every time there was a house inspection that they would be told to leave. A highlight of that time was meeting the man who would become her husband. She wasn't looking for a partner, but Saw Eh Hser Kay, a family friend, introduced her to a Karen man in Singapore who worked as an electrician. The two exchanged long telephone calls over five months before finally meeting in person. On her way to visit her grandmother on the Thailand border, Moe Moe went via Singapore to meet him. She and her-husband-to-be clicked and he joined her for the trip to Thailand. It is very unusual for a woman from the Karen culture to choose her husband and spend time with him like Moe Moe did, but her parents trusted Saw Eh Hser Kay's views and supported their daughter. The pair were married in December, 2006. First, in a registry office in Singapore and secondly in a bigger Karen celebration after Saw Aukaw Po arrived in Australia on a spouse visa.

"We are very lucky," Moe Moe tells me.

When their first child was born, in keeping with the Karen culture, Moe Moe stayed at home with Olivia, until she was four years old. This seemed to curtail her free spirit and by the sounds of it she found life very constraining.

> I have many happy memories from Sydney, of course, but I wasn't able to get out much. I was at home with my baby. I wanted to study again to keep my mind active, so I studied a variety of courses before I settled on early childhood education which gave me the career I have now in Perth.
>
> Living in Perth is the first time I have felt a sense of home and belonging in my life. I am a person who loves peace and quiet and simple life. I found that Perth gives me these things. My husband and I both have good jobs; Olivia is in a good school and we have bought our own home. It's ours. Of course, we wouldn't be here without Uncle Paul's help.

She explained her uncle's support and I marvel yet again, at the generosity of my friend Paul who sensed the young family were not settled in Sydney. He explained the benefits of living in Perth – houses were cheaper, it was quieter, the potential for jobs was better and he offered to host the family in his home until they got settled. They stayed for a year in Paul's spare room and became part of the family during 2014.

> Uncle Paul is such a remarkable man, who is so generous and an unbelievable role model for our community. He and Aunty Hazel would not let us pay rent because they wanted us to save money to buy our own home. He looked after us and even though we felt bad about not contributing any money, we wanted to make him proud when we achieved our goals. Actually, when we bought our first home after that first year, we didn't want to leave Uncle Paul's because we felt loved and safe.

However, they are settled in their own home enjoying a Perth lifestyle. The couple live between cultures according to Moe Moe. I asked her to explain more.

> When I go to work at the child care centre most of my colleagues are Australian and I speak in English all the time. Everyone asks how I am, and I have different conversations about life and family, which is wonderful. My co-workers are a blessing. They are very supportive, and I feel a sense of stability with my full-time permanent job. I can have my second child and return to work after my maternity leave.

This is different to the warmth she feels when she and her family go to Church. There she says she is among her people and everything is spoken in Karen of course.

> She wonders about the different cultures and identities for a few minutes and says she feels lucky to live comfortably in both worlds. While a clear identity is important; Moe Moe feels that no-one should

have to deny parts of themselves. “They all make the whole person of me,” she smiled.

Moe Moe did not consider anywhere in Burma or Thailand home because the family were always on the move. She cherishes some of the memories from her time in Thailand, but it is not a place to which she wants to return. As a child, she felt no-one treated her with respect; she was expected to be obedient and say yes.

“I think my life was pitiful really,” she told me.

I don’t know what to say. I explain my admiration for her bravery and wonder if I would be resilient enough to survive in Moe Moe’s circumstances. I did not think her life was pitiful.

“It is good to hear you feel that way. Thank you.”

I imagined a child making the best of a hard life. I saw only her courage and spirit.

We talk about the challenges of making a good life in Australia. For Moe Moe it is all about language and education because without it, people can’t feel part of their new community.

I would help everyone if I could. I have worked with Karen people, Vietnamese people, those from the Middle East and even Aussie kids who have come from a disadvantaged background. Without language and education everyone is in the same boat. Isolated. I know what it feels like to be alone and not to have what you need.

Moe Moe and I kept in touch as the birth of her second child drew closer and have shared several exchanges about women’s rights. We discussed the growing number of organisations actively working with refugee women on the Thai- Burma border. She follows their activities closely.

They empower women and young girls and help educate men about the concept of gender equality. This is the only way women can actively participate in their communities. Some of the groups advocate

for human rights, education and training, as well as providing health services.

The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), for example, has 49,000 members who are working either in development relief in refugee camps or living inside Burma. They commented recently that they understood the situation in Rakhine State clearly because they had already lived it. "We have seen the devastation caused by this criminal military against our people for many years. Even in the past year we have continued to see them attack civilians in Shan and Kachin States…the reports of unspeakable human rights abuses continue as more than 300,000 Rohingya people are forced to flee for their lives even while they watch the torture and death of their friends and family."[50] Moe Moe and I talked about some of the expectations surrounding women.

I do think women should be able to carry the same load as men, and women should be able to do the same things men do. For example, when a husband is in the workforce, a wife should be in the workforce if she chooses.

I ask Moe Moe about the best thing about living in Australia and without hesitation she replies: "human rights, we did not have those in Burma or Thailand".

I consider myself, my mother and sister, strong individual women who never give up. We fight all the time physically, emotionally and spiritually. In fact, I think many women are stronger than men because they carry and nurture their children as well as work. So, when you have a father, a husband and leaders in the community who understand the concept of gender equality and are willing to support it, you are very blessed. This does not happen in our culture all the time because as women we grow up learning to be submissive to men.

In Australia, you have human rights as a worker, human rights as a student, human rights as a child and human rights as a woman. These are very important to me.

Even the good guys need guns

"He's a nice bloke isn't he," my brother commented to me.

"Yes, he certainly is. What did you talk about for so long?"

"Oh, nothing much. We just had a good chat, you know…"

I didn't know. I wondered what "a good chat" between a former child soldier from South Sudan and a career soldier in Australia's armed services would mean. Would they have discussed the futility of war, the inevitability of war or even the need for war sometimes? For Anthony, the decision to join the military was driven by his desire to serve and protect his country. He was ready to be deployed to a war zone if needed. My friend from South Sudan joined the army to survive as a refugee in a war zone. He told me his life was horrible and he was waiting for his day to die when the rebel army began recruiting boys like him in the refugee camps. They convinced him that even if he stayed in the camp, other soldiers would come and kill him and that he may as well get trained as a soldier to defend himself. It all seemed quite reasonable to a starving teenage boy struggling to survive on his own. My brother said he would have made the same decision in the circumstances. I was reminded that so much of life is random. Freedom and safety, important aspects of "a good life," come down to the luck of where you are born and where you grow up. But, how do you define "a good life"?

I have always considered myself a pacifist. But the more I listened to people's stories the more I came to realise that I would take up arms to survive and defend myself and my family. I reflected on what had previously been unthinkable to me and how now, despite this, it would still be "a good life" for me. My friend Naw Pi used a machete in the jungles of Burma to protect herself and her younger brother, who had been shot by government soldiers. Naw Pi had been separated from her family when the Burmese military attacked her village. It was devastating. Everything was burnt down or destroyed. Many people were killed, and she did not know if her parents were alive or dead. She described what happened:

> They began shooting at us, so we had to keep running and hiding. My brother was shot in the knee when he was turning to run away, and I

> watched another man get shot in the eye…there was no going back then.[51]

I knew when I really thought about it that if my brother had been shot in front of me, I would have fought back to try and protect him. I imagined my family born in a different country that wasn't free or democratic and in a state of war. I even imagined my four grand-daughters and I being chased by soldiers. In my mind, I could see us huddled under cover in the bush, with rain dripping from the leaves and gun-fire and smoke filling the air. My mind rushed through the options that would be available. There seemed to be only two: run with them if I could or, if not, stand up and defend them. How could you not? While I could never experience what happened to some women, after listening to their stories, I found I could transpose my own family into those circumstances. It was completely unsettling. Anthropologist, Dr Chris Coulter, who undertook extensive field work in Sierra Leone, found that "most of the research on women and war focusses on women either as inherently more peaceful or merely as victims, and often unwittingly re-produces in 'war-affected women' a corresponding lack of 'agency.'"[52] She found little about women who voluntarily took up arms and fought alongside men. My friend Paul told me:

> Everyone wants peace, but if you are being shot at and the lives of your family are at risk, you fight back in any way you can. I don't know too many people who would just stand by and watch. You see Rose, sometimes even the good guys need guns.

I needed to reconcile the idea that "the good guys need guns." I respected and admired women in the military and armed forces but the idea of firing a gun was abhorrent to me. Still, one sunny afternoon, I headed out with our farmer friend to learn to fire a rifle. Of course, I know it is not a war, nor am I under attack, but I wanted to know what it felt like. Rifles are high powered firearms typically used to hit targets at long distances so for my farmer friend, that meant rabbits, foxes and other vermin. I told him the three rules my brother had instructed down the phone to me: always treat every

firearm as if it were loaded, always keep a firearm pointed in a safe direction and always keep your finger off the trigger and outside the trigger guard until you have made a conscious decision to shoot. He smiled and said it was good I understood the rules. He said it would be easier for me to take a squared stance. I assumed I would be in a side on position in what is known as a bladed stance. That's what you see in action movies and crime shows, but apparently that's for experienced and competition shooters. We dry fired the gun many times. I felt like every action had to be mindful and deliberate. Dry-firing is how shooters get better. After time you can train your hands until eventually it becomes second nature. That way you can hold it properly without even thinking about it, to quickly shoot foxes amongst your sheep or, I supposed, in the middle of the night, half asleep, if you are under attack.

I would like to be able to detail the rest of what happened but once I brought the rifle level to my head and pressed my cheek firmly into the gun stock, I forgot everything that came afterwards. Apparently, I fired a number of times and was able to say: "Thanks that was great," but I don't remember much else. I let Terry and my friend fire off at a few targets and leaned against the fence wondering what I had proved. OK, I could fire a gun. But would I ever be able to fire the gun at a person? I knew I would if my life or my family's life was in danger, but frankly the chances of me hitting anything from long range were negligible. Shooting a gun felt uncomfortable and a bit scary but I admit there was an adrenaline rush of power. Would you ever get over the knowledge that you had fired a gun and wounded or taken another person's life? A policeman I know said: "You never get over it, you learn to accept it and move on."

By listening to stories from women of a refugee background I came to respect and admire those who chose to fight. I admitted to my brother, who I had previously told it would be better to protest and advocate rather than to take arms, that I would now pick up a gun and fire it to protect him or other family. What did that say about me? I have come to believe that with the realities of war and profound injustices people, just like me, are always going to be tugged and propelled into action that they had not previously imagined. I have considered Walzer's position on "just wars" and he argues that wars are justified when the community is threatened with elimination or it is subject

to coercive transformation of its way of life.[53] Does this make the Karen's fight for freedom from oppression and persecution just and acceptable in Burma? Does it make the Palestinians fight for a homeland just and acceptable? Perhaps, because in these circumstances some of "the good guys use guns".

I meet many people from a refugee background whose families have been impacted by war and conflict. The question of whether military forces with guns should be dispatched to a foreign country to help "save" people from persecution, massacre or even famine has been debated for centuries and I have been asked many times by people who have come from a war-torn country, why nobody in the West helped them when it was a humanitarian crisis. Who determines who gets saved, who gets help? Who is the "good guy" and who is the "bad guy"? I've come to the conclusion that sometimes you just can't tell.

A half-completed jigsaw – Bella's story

I can't wait to see Grandma! I'm going back for the first time since we fled our country. I was 12 or 14 months old when we went to a refugee camp where we spent the next seven years. Mama went back to Burundi a few years ago. It had been 15 years since she had seen her mother. Can you imagine not seeing your mum for that length of time?

"No," I replied. It was hard enough that my mother died five years ago. Sometimes when I unearth little boxes of grief, not seeing her is like missing a limb. Bella's mum fled to a refugee camp in Tanzania and walked the hundreds of miles, carrying her small daughter on her back, to escape war and violence in Burundi. Grandma (Bi Bi) stayed to look after the other 14 members of the extended family. Now aged 84 years old, she remains the respected matriarch of the family.

Bella and her parents were accepted for re-settlement in Australia. Her father had been a soldier outside the refugee camp, and Bella saw little of him over those years. She suffered from malnutrition and remembers having a big belly as she was held in her mother's arms, amidst all the confusion when they came to Australia. She had never experienced electricity and there were "so many white people everywhere."

Now a vivacious 21-year-old, she is a respected youth advocate and mentor, working with young people from a refugee background with several different organisations, and an influential member of the multi-cultural community. A child of war, taken from a land of death and persecution, Bella found herself in a land of safety and peace. She is, in many ways, a typical young Australian woman post-high school, struggling with all the usual issues: moving out of home, deciding what to do with her life, deciding on friends and relationships as well as stretching herself physically and mentally to achieve her goals. Bella coaches and plays AFL football, is a musical and visual artist and has her own social media start-up business. In 2018 she was named a Deputy Youth Ambassador for Western Australia and sits on the Ministerial Youth Advisory Council alongside Peter Tinley, the Minister for Housing, Veteran's Issues and Youth.

“I want to contribute to the community but at the same time I am trying to understand myself and where I come from,” she told me.

So, it is the big overseas trip later in the year, that occupies a lot of Bella’s mind. She and her mother will return to Burundi where Bella will meet the family she has never known. I think of the number of stories I have been told about the strength and resilience of women, both young and old. Women from a refugee background are often portrayed as victims in the international media and by some NGOs. They are pictured looking confused and hungry, on the move, or in tent-housing where they seem unable to make decisions. While this is a reality for many women, there is another. I think our Western perceptions often don’t allow us to see past the stereotype of “the woman refugee”. While seen as a vulnerable refugee, she can become an object for our pity. However, as I have found through our interviews and conversations over many years, each of the women I have met, who has come from a refugee background has a number of different identities. The woman may be a person of great bravery and courage. She may have participated in political struggles, like Shokoofeh and Moe Moe, or her status may mean she is the one held in high regard and with respect. Often, she is the protector and keeper of family and cultural history like Amina. The fact that a woman is from a refugee background does not mean she doesn't have agency, voice and power to shape her circumstances. Bella’s grandmother and her mother knew exactly what they were doing in the face of war and all the killing around them.

“Strong women - your mother and grandma,” I comment.

“Of course!” Bella shrugged – as if it was a given- “women must be strong in these circumstances to survive.”

Bella doesn’t like the label refugee, but as a person who fled war and danger and sought refuge, she nodded that she is a refugee. “But I am so much more than that,’ she commented. I want people to look past any labels.” I asked Bella what she hoped she would find in her country of birth. She told me her priority was to sit and listen to her grandmother, so she could understand her family roots and culture.

> I don't know much about Burundi, but I want to meet the aunties and uncles and others who celebrated my life when I was born. I definitely think there is a part of me that is not fulfilled. I hope I can find that spiritual self and the home that I was forced to leave behind when I return. I want to hear the stories that will help me put those pieces of my life that are missing, into the puzzle of who I am.

Burundi and the neighbouring country Rwanda were once part of a Belgian colonial enclave in eastern central Africa, just south of the equator. Two separate countries were created with independence in 1962 and the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups fought to be the dominant power in both. The majority of the population in Burundi are Hutu farmers. The remainder are Tutsi, and there are a small number of Twa people.[54] Political instability and inter-tribal conflict have been part of the story of Burundi for much of its history, particularly since independence, with several major eruptions of violence that led to mass killings. In 1993 Burundi was plunged into ethnic conflict which claimed 300,000 lives and triggered ethnic killings in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994, that left 800,000 dead.[55] I certainly remember watching the television with horror, as the war unfolded in Rwanda and Burundi when neighbours and friends of different ethnic backgrounds were pitted against each other. There was outrage, but as I recall the world sat back and did not intervene until it was too late. I wondered again about who decides which wars are just. I felt the West should have intervened before it was too late. In 2018, Care International reported that Burundi was still the site of one of the 10 most under-reported humanitarian crises so perhaps it was too far from our reality.[56]

"Home is not a physical place for me," Bella told me. "It is inside me and these deep feelings help guide me. Home is where my soul and happiness lie."

I am reminded once again of author and commentator Pico Iyer who writes: "How do refugees understand home? How do I even understand home? How do we combine the many different homes each of us has built, physically and in our minds?"[57]

I certainly can't label one single place as "home". I was born in Tasmania (I think that was "home"); went to school and worked in journalism in the Pilbara region in Western Australia (definitely "home"); went to university in suburban Perth (didn't feel like "home"); worked and lived in China for ten years (definitely "home") and now live comfortably in suburban Perth again (not sure if it's "home").

I asked Bella if she and her mum will be safe when they return to Burundi for the month. "Yeah, I think so," she tells me.

> Mum is already lecturing me about the importance of blending in, so I am growing my hair and thinking about the modest clothes that will have to replace my usual footy shorts and t-shirts. It seems there is no such thing as being yourself in Burundi. I will have to be careful what I say as there are so many culturally sensitive boundaries. My plan is to hold Grandma and Mama's hands the whole time and keep pretty quiet!

We smiled about that challenge, but then she looked at me seriously.

"It's so sad that the place where I was born is still a politically unstable, violent country. You could get killed easily. I need to remember that."

I am worried about Bella and her mother already. This is the reality for many refugees who choose to return for a visit to their country of birth. I frequently worry about my friend, Paul, who returns to Burma regularly to help his people who are still being persecuted by the Burmese military. Will his Australian passport be enough to protect him from the military who wanted him dead thirty years ago? Has the political situation really changed that much for the persecuted Karen people in Burma? I don't know. He seems to think so. I reflect on how lucky I am to be able to get on a plane and fly to the safety of another state or country, to visit my family. I don't have to think about being killed.

Today there are two influencers in Bella's life - both of whom give her inspiration, support and homes. They are her mother and her colleague, mentor, and friend Joe. Bella describes her mother as the powerhouse of her

life. Without her mother's love and support she says quite solemnly she wouldn't be here.

> As a refugee Mama walked with thousands of others who were fleeing the war. Families got separated and she saw many dead bodies along the way. It still traumatises her today but thank God, she survived.

Bella's mother, Trinity Uwimana, was an educated young woman who had worked as a teacher before the war. A fluent French speaker, because of colonization, she found work with UNICEF in the refugee camp as a project manager. However, when she came to Australia and set about building a new home for Bella and her brothers, she had limited English skills and her qualifications and experience were not recognised. Like many migrants and refugees, she wanted to work but was unable to find a job. These days she enjoys her work as a disability carer. After a few years her husband left, and they went through a long, difficult divorce. Bella describes the violence, the misery and the lies that engulfed the family during the time her parent's marriage was breaking down. She was estranged from her father for many years. 'He just left. I don't know how mum kept it together on her own as a single mother with five kids.' She did it with help from Bella who, as the oldest in the family, shouldered some of the responsibility. Both she and her mother have suffered from severe depression over many years but push on as best they can. More recently, Bella told me, she has connected with her father and feels she has made peace with him. "I feel like I am moving forward from a position strength now. I am in a much better place."

A recent report from Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service (IWDVS) and Victoria Health, found that while domestic and family violence occurs in most societies, it has been identified that immigrant and refugee women are particularly vulnerable. [58] Some features of domestic and family violence are universal (for example, community acceptance of violence against women and the low social status of women); many are more specific to the experiences of refugee or immigrant women. The additional, often unseen, features among refugee and immigrant women include not speaking the host-language and limited access to education, the struggle to find

employment and not having a car or access to local transport, which can all lead to isolation from mainstream society and support networks.

> You have to try and understand what it's like when you arrive in a new country where the lifestyle is so different, the language is different, the clothing is different, the way government services work, paying taxes and everything to do with food, is different. In large parts of Africa, you eat whatever you can, whenever you can get it. For some of us, the idea of breakfast, lunch and dinner and the focus on healthy eating are difficult to comprehend. Even these simple things make it challenging to be an Australian.

Initially, Bella's mother did not know how to connect with support services for people of a refugee background. She called her family in Africa every day until eventually she was put in touch with the Salvation Army. From there she found other support services like Parkerville Children and Youth Care and the Edmund Rice Centre. For Bella's family, they provided help and hope for a better life. Today, Bella's mother likes to help as many people as she can. She was the first African foster-carer in Australia. "I tell you sometimes it seemed like we had our own mini-orphanage at home, but mum loves caring for kids who are disadvantaged. That's kind of funny, as I say it, because we were disadvantaged ourselves."

Mental health issues have clouded Bella's life and we discuss what this means for her. I was concerned when I had not seen her for a month, and I read several Facebook posts.

> In March I lost so much weight it was scary. I lost about 7kg because I felt weak and couldn't eat or sleep properly…I think I was in a dark place, man, it was difficult to just get up and do something. …everything is right outside but nothing inside seems to catch up. I tell myself it is all about heart because the mind is a curse.

When we finally speak, she assures me she is okay and that she has a counsellor and support. I wonder about the fact that Facebook has become

the diary of this generation. My diary was the place I went to with my pen to pour out my daily troubles and successes. The pages were meant for me and only me. Facebook allows a person to pour out those troubles and successes, but it is open book for everyone to read. Like many young people, Bella's social media tracks her mental health, her successes, her disappointments and her milestones in life.

Bella explained that after months of not being involved in anything, she has started working out and training again with West Perth Football Club and finding her lost creative spirit.

> Sport and making music help me to manage my mental health issues because being part of a team makes me commit to other people and that helps me keep going and I find balance again. People from a refugee and Aboriginal background are vulnerable to depression. They just don't talk about it. I'm sure it is like that for all people who suffer from depression, but I really do feel there needs to be more meaningful assistance and resources for refugees.

Bella has started her own initiative called "the mental health discussion group" which meets once a month. Through Facebook the word spread, and 25 people attended the first session which was supported by two mental health nurses and Lifeline.

> Facebook has allowed me to be loud about mental health and my own personal experiences, but this group is not about me, it is about providing a platform for people to talk. We met for three hours and everyone had a chance to tell their story and we all listened. Storytelling is important.

Former Australian of the Year and founding director and board member of the National Youth Mental Health Foundation (also known as Headspace), Professor Patrick McGorry, says Australia is in the grip of a mental health crisis that is leading to the unnecessary deaths of thousands. The Commonwealth Government currently spends about $10 billion a year

on mental health but McGorry says about half of this was spent on welfare payments, which were the cost of failure, not the cost of direct care. Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians aged between 15 and 44, with almost seven people taking their life every day, and it is estimated 50 per cent of Australians suffer mental illness at some point in their lives.[59]

"I could easily be one of those statistics," Bella confides.

She reiterates the value of being part of a sporting group and the positive impact it can have on children who are new to Australia.

"A small amount of support for one person can make a huge difference, but it is almost impossible for a refugee family to find that sort of money for club fees," she said.

The children thrive in this environment as they meet people, learn new skills and become part of a team that is supported by motivated and caring coaches and team leaders.

> The thing that disappoints me most is that we get very limited support from refugee parents. They have so much else going on in their lives that sport and hobbies are seen as something that is not important. Let's call them mainstream families…they drive their children to sporting activities; they stay and watch and offer support during the game. Then they gather up their child, maybe a couple of others, have a BBQ or some sort of a meal together before driving them home. There's none of that for kids who come from a refugee background.

I thought back to my own childhood. Everyone in our family of six played a number of sports and weekends at our place were crazy; people shouted they needed new shoelaces for their boots; Brendan wandered around in a daze because he couldn't find his shorts and mum gave Anthony a severe lecture about leaving all his clothes in his bag from the last week and losing one sock. Dad escaped the melee inside, to sit on the back porch with his cardboard box of tins of Nugget and brushes, to polish up a small mountain of playing boots and to make sure the studs were clean of dried mud and grass. He also took charge of the oranges. I can't imagine how many oranges he cut and quartered on his big wooden board. The tangy zest

filled the air as juice dripped on his trousers. He meticulously counted and sealed them in plastic containers, for each of us to take for the team at half time breaks. Then Dad's taxi service would begin: several boys would be dropped at their football games; one would be dropped at athletics and me and one brother would get out at the last stop for our hockey matches. I was seven and remember Dad running up and down the sidelines of the frosty field shouting encouragement. I still remember that moment of joy when I scored my first goal. I turned and looked at him straight away and he was clapping and jumping up and down. He seemed so proud of me. In contrast to this, the Butler Falcons Football team and members of other sporting teams from a refugee background are often unable to experience that. They rely on each other and their coaches.

Bella sometimes feels she has grown up in a country that celebrates diversity. She is still perplexed why new arrivals don't learn very much about Aboriginal history and culture. "I learnt a lot about other countries, but none about my own new home and I feel very strongly that you should know your own history first. I take the time to talk to Aboriginal people to understand their lives, their land their dreaming and their art," she tells me. I have heard this point of view expressed elsewhere. A young participant from a refugee background, at a conference commented that it was only after she had spent time with Aboriginal Elders on country, that she was able to develop her own sense of belonging and understanding of who she was in this country. Bella is proud to be an Australian and thankful for the shelter and freedom that it offers.

But she also wears the scars of school bullying and racism. She didn't really understand in her years at primary school except she was made to feel the odd one out. It was only when she entered high school that she began to understand the meaning of racism and why it was wrong. She tried to reason and explain to the bullies but when that didn't work, she started to fight back – physically. When several white students started taunting her and shoving her around, she punched out and gave the ring-leader a black eye. That led to one of many suspensions. On another occasion, she had a one hundred dollar note her mother had given her to purchase new clothes from the uniform shop.

A white girl ran past and snatched it out of my hands. She shouted that I was too black and didn't deserve to have this money and ran away. I was furious. Why did she think she had the right to do this to another person? I chased her and got my money back after a fist fight. She got two weeks suspension and I got one but after that I didn't want to go back to school. I was sick of the way I was being treated.

Bella isolated herself in her room, barely spoke to anyone and stayed away from school for six months. Her family did not know what to do and Bella found herself entering a period of depression.

You start to think bad thoughts and wonder how you are going to get through it all. The people from Edmund Rice kept calling in though and checking on me and finally they convinced me to join in some of their programs and activities. It changed my life. It was like another big family where no-one was judging you or bullying you. There were a few other girls from Africa, and I met kids from other countries and slowly began to feel better about myself. I was happy again. The Edmund Rice people helped me back into school and I got more involved in their youth programs.

This is how she met Joe the manager of the Edmund Rice Centre's youth programs. When she ran away from home she didn't know where to go. She went to Joe. Their relationship defies categorization; he's a father figure without being a father. He's a mentor and a friend. It's a completely platonic relationship that has been transformative for Bella.

Joe's a funny guy who cares so much about young people in need. At his suggestion I started to do a morning meditation, stretching and breathing followed by a gym session, before heading out to work. I found quietness and peace at Joe's that I hadn't felt before. He sat me down after a while and asked me if I wanted to join a youth leadership program at the Edmund Rice Centre. No-one had ever asked me something like that before, and he has helped me become a better person inside and outside. I stopped fidgeting and looking nervous,

> did all sorts of confidence-building work and public speaker training. Then Joe asked me if I would be interested in coaching one of the Edmund Rice football teams. Can you believe that? Footy changed everything for me.

She remains a team-focused person and laughs at the notion that she might follow her friend Akec Mayor Chuot, another former refugee, into the AFL women's league. She feels that would limit her skills. "When you score a goal as an athlete you are praised, when you coach it is the team that is praised. I like that." Bella also likes her fledgling personal-training business. She has a number of clients and finds it is another way to give back while earning some money.

Bella is in a good place at the moment but knows that can change quickly. After much thought she has moved back in to the family home and that hasn't been an easy transition for anyone.

> I know I have been away for five years but right now I think I can help Mama. I am sharing a bedroom with my little sister as she is just starting high school and I know that can be hard. I want to be around so I can be a role model. I want to be present.

Perhaps it is that sense of calm that led to her being appointed deputy Youth Week Ambassador. The theme for the week and the year is *Nurture the Now,* and it really resonates with Bella. She tells me, it encourages her to think about her growth in the present moment and to appreciate the power she has to reach her true potential. Despite this, Bella still longs to understand her heritage more and hopefully a trip back to her homeland of Burundi, will fill in some of the gaps.

"Right now, I am like a half-completed jigsaw. I want to make my mark in society and to do that I need to figure out the missing pieces."

Living in-between

If you grow up between cultures …
it's easy to find yourself always on the outside of things, looking in.[60]

Driving through peak-hour traffic on my way to meet five young women in their twenties, I cast my mind back to what I was doing at their age. I was at Curtin University studying journalism and politics. I had never lived in the city before and I recall feeling anxious and homesick a fair bit of the time. A numbing loneliness engulfed me when my best friend moved out of our share house near the beach to live with her boyfriend. I didn't have a boyfriend – well I did for about a year, but it ended badly - so I found myself alone in a three-bedroom house, a long way from the campus. I didn't have many friends and like most uni students I didn't have much money. I scraped by with a small grant and income I earned on semester breaks working as a radio announcer and cadet journalist. I grimaced remembering the cheap unhealthy meals of polony sandwiches and pancakes that were a staple of my diet, because I thought these choices would stretch my meagre funds further. I socialised with a group of people who played hockey, but I always worried that I didn't fit in. I dreamed of becoming a big-time journalist starring on metropolitan radio and writing important articles under my by-line. Reading became even more of an obsession and how politics worked around the world fascinated me. There were always newspapers piled up next to my chair, dog-eared magazines spread over table surfaces and each room had its own stack of books waiting to be read.

I wondered where home was for the young women from refugee backgrounds that I was meeting with today. I wondered if they felt lonely and confused about who they were, as I did when I was their age. They seemed like the kind of women I would enjoy spending time with, but I only knew a few basic facts about each of them.

Sara: a university student studying chemistry and psychology who is a youth leader at the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) and is originally from Eritrea. She had lived in Ethiopia before making her home in Australia.

Amran: a published author of children's books, entrepreneur and child educator of Somalian heritage, who had also lived in Kenya and New Zealand, and who I had also interviewed for Chapter two.

Jamila: a university student studying law, originally from Afghanistan, who had lived in Pakistan before coming to Australia.

Tamkin: a university student studying journalism and international relations, originally from Afghanistan who also works as a youth leader at MYAN and in retail.

Nafiso: a university student studying business law and international relations of Somalian heritage who has lived in Kenya, Egypt and New Zealand.

I met four of the women when I conducted several public speaking seminars with the Multicultural Youth Action Network (MYAN) which aims to strengthen youth engagement in policy making and advocacy. I asked them whether they would be prepared to share their stories and insights about living between cultures as young women from a refugee background. We kept in touch via social media over the next few months and eventually found a meeting time that suited all of us. Our meeting took place in the shadows of Donald Trump's election as president of the USA, a Brexit vote in the United Kingdom that passed on a strong anti-immigration platform, and the rise again of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in Australia. With the noticeable rise of Islamophobia around the world, I wondered how these issues were impacting the lives of these mostly Muslim women or if they managed to tune it out.

Balancing a takeaway coffee in the same hand as my oversized bag full of different notebooks and recorders, I heard laughter down the corridor at the offices. It was such a pleasure to see these women again. We spread ourselves around on comfortable lounges and bean bags. As Amran's small son, Leith, played quietly with his toys. I started our conversation by asking the group about home. Some of the women came to Australia as refugees or asylum seekers and others came as migrants. I was the only person born in Australia. My great-grandparents emigrated from Ireland and England. Everyone looked at each other hoping someone else would start the

conversation. Jamila took the lead. “For me home is a very complex subject because I have moved around so much,” she said.

“I think it is complex for all of you,” I ventured, and Tamkin nodded. Tamkin reminisced about her happy, stable family life in Afghanistan and how it changed after the Taliban came to power.

> I lost my home in Afghanistan and that changed everything. We were constantly on the move. My mother and my siblings seemed to be the only constant in life, so they were my home I guess, wherever we all were.

For Tamkin, Australia is now a home she loves very much, but many of her extended family remain in Afghanistan. She misses them.

> Afghanistan gave me roots – it was my first home. I think when you are surrounded by your loved ones, it feels like home. I know it’s a cliché, but you can have a roof over your head in a structure that looks like a home but with no one to love you and keep you safe, it isn’t really a home.

Nafiso nodded. “Australia is home.” Then on reflection she qualified: “well there’s home, then there is home away from home; the home where you were born or the one that holds your soul.” Her family have spread all around the world as a consequence of the wars and famine that have ravaged Somalia.

> My parents fled to Kenya when things got too bad in Somalia but when I am in Kenya, I feel I don’t fit in. It is interesting when we go back, because we are referred to as an Australian family. I don’t think I could live there even though some of my close family live there. I choose to live in Australia. I am studying law and international relations at uni and feel comfortable here. I understand the culture and I am familiar with things. I know what is going on. For me, that isn’t the

case in Kenya. It's not home, even though my father returned to live there in 2013.

It is, however, different when Nafiso returns to another country – Egypt - and I wondered if this was what some writers called "a home of the soul". The family spent five years there and it's where she completed her high school education. "It is etched in my mind as a peaceful and happy place and time. I felt at home there because I fitted in. There was so much going on and I loved it." Amran seemed to sum up the feelings of the group.

Home is not one place – it can be multiple places. I still regard Somalia as my home, but I lived in Kenya too and I enjoy going back there because I have close family living there. Surely this is the same for all migrants and even you as an Australian Rose? You have made your home in many different places.

She's right. I was born in Tasmania, moved to Western Australia in my teens, left Australia to live in Hong Kong for ten years before returning to Western Australia. For the past twenty years, I have visited France two or three times a year and I also feel some sense of home there too. Home *is* multiple places for me, but these are homes I have chosen. I haven't been forced to leave my home and I don't know how it feels to be constantly on the move to stay safe. The only similarity I can see to my life is that my parents made the place that I called my home a loving, safe place. Without them, my husband, Terry, and I now make that loving, safe place together. We both have established roots in Australia and an affinity for this country, but those roots have been nourished by the other places we know as home. There is not any one physical structure or landscape for us. Rather, it is the friends and the connections we feel to the communities that have made different places our home.

Writer and commentator Pico Iyer states: "whole lives will now be spent taking pieces of many different places and putting them together into a stained-glass whole. Home is really always a work in progress."[61] I wonder whether the homes that are forced upon you as a refugee and the ones you

are forced to leave behind, can ever enable you to make up a whole stained-glass window. I fear there may be gaps and broken pieces that never fit together. Tamkin told me:

> I only lived in Afghanistan for the first four years of my life, but when I think about it, I feel like part of me is missing somehow. I feel upset that I never got to understand or explore my birth country. Australia is certainly home, but in the bottom of my heart there will always be Afghanistan.

These comments made me think of a South Sudanese mother I met several years ago. She fled her home leaving most of her belongings behind because of the continuing civil war. She told me that when you are forced to leave, "your home becomes whatever you can carry around inside you. You must do this, so you can always begin again with your family".[62]

Sara's family, who fled Eritrea as political refugees, lived for years under a cloud of uncertainty and fear, always on the move. When she was 10 her father was forced into exile because of his political beliefs, and her mother was denied the right to work. When Sara turned fifteen, she was refused entry to a school of her choice for no apparent reason other than who her father was. Her future included a period of mandatory military service. The family escaped to Ethiopia, where they lived for several years before they were accepted as permanent residents to Australia in 2011. They cannot return to their home in Eritrea because it is not safe.

> We had a good life in Eritrea that was stable and happy. I loved learning and education was important to all of us. Eritrea was home, but our lives unravelled and it was all destroyed. It's hard to explain this to anyone who hasn't lived under a corrupt dictatorship in fear for their lives. As refugees, we were on the move and staying in different places for many years. I have a strange concept of what home can be, but the one constant in my life as a refugee was my family. I knew they would keep me safe. They created a sense of warmth; a deep sense of belonging and home within me.

I wondered if Sara was aware, she placed her hand on her heart as she spoke.

“My parents gave me opportunities in Australia and my goal is to try and foster a more equal and tolerant world.”

Jamila, too, has never returned to her country of birth, Afghanistan. As members of the heavily persecuted minority, the Hazaras, she and her family fled their country to neighbouring Pakistan for a brief period, but like Sara and Nafiso they were constantly on the move as refugees, staying with different family members or friends. She described it as an impossible life. Many of her extended family still live in Pakistan.

> I have been back to Pakistan heaps of times to see them. When I am there, I always want to come back here. From here in my home in Australia, I want to be there in Pakistan with my loved ones “back home”. It’s funny I want to go there so badly sometimes, but when I am back there, I get sick of it quite quickly. I miss Perth very much and want to pack my bags and come “back home”.

The return to Australia is difficult for Jamila because it exposes the separation from loved ones again. It takes her a few weeks to overcome feelings of loss and longing. She describes her life as “being stuck between two cultures and places”. Other young refugees have used the term “in-betweeners”. Much has also been written about the idea of “third culture kids”; children who grow up or spend a significant part of their childhood living outside their parents’ home culture. I also assumed the coming and going to and from Pakistan reminded Jamila of her family’s escape to Australia and the trauma that followed.

When they arrived in Australia, government policy determined that they were locked in a detention centre for an indefinite period of time. As frightened refugees who had come by boat, to Australia seeking asylum, this was not what they expected. Jamila, who was a small five-year-old girl when she arrived in Australia, expected to be re-united with her father, who had arrived ahead of them. She wrote on a human rights advocacy website blog that:

> If the Taliban hate your guts, then you're probably doing something right, right? When I was five, my mum, younger brother and I fled Afghanistan, arrived here and were imprisoned in a detention centre for seven months. These multi-purpose centres that process asylum claims…these detention centres…are really good at making people develop mental health problems, resulting in self-harm and suicide. I would know; I saw it all…my low self-esteem resulted in me trying to "white-wash" myself. [63]

How could the scarring and this wretched need to change herself to fit into the largely white population of Australia ever be erased? Seeking asylum is not illegal and by imprisoning people Australia contravenes international human rights laws. We are not meeting our international legal obligations and nor, I would argue, are we demonstrating the core values that Australians say they hold dear – decency and "a fair go" for everyone. Australia's immigration detention laws are applied to those it calls "illegal maritime arrival" children. This also creates a detention system that is fundamentally inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).[64] The first time I heard Jamila's story I was appalled and felt the need to apologise for what my country had done. It was, after all, *my* government that locked her up in detention. She smiled at me in her quiet way and told me it wasn't my fault. I didn't feel any better about being Australian. After her release from detention Jamila told no-one she was "a boat person" for many years. Her "white-washing" continued because she desperately wanted to fit in her new country and was enormously grateful for her safe, peaceful life.

As we talked, some of the stories that were shared were met with a strained silence by the group. Often, I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't sound trite. Some made me sad or angry, but other times we laughed about how ridiculous life could be.

"It sounds like changing perceptions is one of the coolest things about being a young Muslim woman in Australia right now," I commented at one stage. They all smiled in agreement and it confirmed what I already knew, that they were all passionate advocates for human rights.

“I love challenging the stereo-types and the ideas that some people have. We are not what people think we are,” Amran stated.

Tamkin told us that no-one ever thinks she is Afghani or Muslim because her skin is lighter, and she chooses to dress in a western style.

> Most people assume I am Indian or Turkish but when they realise I am Muslim a lot of people ask where my hijab is. For me, now I am older and more comfortable with who I am, it means I get the opportunity to challenge the stereo-types that we’ve talked about and to fight against this type-casting. I explain the facts about Islam and that people shouldn’t be afraid of a woman wearing a scarf.

I thought yet again, how frustrating it would be to be judged only on what I wore. Amran said some people assume she doesn’t speak English because she wears a hijab. These types of stories about discrimination seemed common and were shared around the group.

I reflected on this conversation many times and I wondered how we could build better connections among different communities. Not everyone has the chance, or is interested, in getting to know a person from a refugee background and not every person from a refugee background is interested or knows how to get know black or white Australians. Of course, not everyone from a refugee background wants to keep talking about their journey as a refugee. One friend once asked me: *“*how long do I have to be a refugee in this country? I have lived here most of my life and have an Australian passport*.”* I did not know how to answer. Churches and mosques often have open days, but I wondered how many people from different backgrounds attended. I like to take part in celebrations around Eid, Ramadan and different New Year events, but that is because I have friends who invite me along. I pondered why I never thought of inviting any of my friends from a different cultural background to our Christmas celebrations.

I asked the women how they felt if people stopped them and asked them about their culture or religion. Amran smiled.

“Well first off, Rose, no-one would stop *you* and ask you about your religion or background.”

Why would they? I felt embarrassed that I had asked the question. It seems skin colour and what one wears have become a convenient narrative shortcut and an easy way of making someone “an other”’ who might not fit in. I had just done that myself. However, Amran went on to say as a hijab wearer she welcomed questions about Islam. If someone took time out of their day to say hello and showed an interest in her culture or religion, she felt that would be lovely. But everyone agreed this can be exhausting.

“Why do we have to be a spokesperson for our religion and culture all the time? Sometimes we just want to study and go to work like everyone else.”

“We all get upset about different things in life. On the whole, I don’t think the majority of Australians are purposely racist. Mostly, my experiences have been beautiful and very positive,” Amran commented.

Jamila told us some people approached her and asked to take a photograph of her wearing her hijab.

> I don’t like that. It gives the impression that they see me as just an interesting specimen where they take a photo and continue walking away. I am happy to have a respectful conversation afterwards because when that happens hopefully, we’ll learn something about each other.

Nafiso turned the conversation to the idea of belonging and what this meant in Australia.

> I used to try and hide my Somalian background when I first arrived. I didn’t mind being thought of as an Egyptian, but I did not want to be seen as Somalian. However, as I grew up I realised that I held something wonderful in my hands and I was trying to hide that. There are such negative stereotypes about migrant people of African descent. The image is often one of poor, uneducated people. I wanted to challenge that.

Most of the women felt isolated and different during their high school years. We laughed about some of the trials and tribulations we shared in common. “No matter what one’s background is I find that people are always facing intergenerational issues because our society is so fluid and constantly evolving,” Jamila commented.

“‘It is a process for everyone isn’t it?” asked Nafiso. “Any person of different ethnicity needs to feel comfortable with who they are first, so they can accept where they came from and how that influenced the person they have become.”

Sara told the group she didn’t have to leave her country to live in-between two religions. Her father is Muslim, and her mother is Christian.

> Our family is all mixed up and I think that is a great environment for any child because it helps you understand diversity is a good thing. I am sad when I see people having very heated discussions about different religions and cultures trying to make each other look bad by what they say. It is so pointless. People like me have the background to say – you know, here’s how it can be. I feel obligated to speak up.

These days, Sara describes herself as a spiritual person who is neither Muslim nor Christian. In her family they celebrate any Muslim holy day with the same respect and enthusiasm as any Christian holy day.

Our conversation moved on and we discussed the dynamics of families and the challenges parents must have faced in trying to understand who their daughters were as they grew up. Many refugee and migrant families fear that their children will become part of the new society too quickly and forget or dismiss their cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, refugee and immigrant young people feel few people can really understand what they are going through as they navigate between different cultures while trying to define their own lives, identities and destinies.

“I can’t speak for other communities, but a prominent issue in my Hazara community is that many parents fear acculturation,” Jamila told me.

> Parents seem to think of the worst-case scenarios and assume their children will take up the new dominant culture and completely abandon the culture they were born into. Because this sometimes happens, it often pushes children further away. For example, growing up, my brother and I disliked wearing traditional clothing, but our parents placed an emphasis on us being able to experience our culture in every way. As the years went by, they became more lenient and my brother and I became more appreciative of our heritage. When I was younger, I wanted to be someone different from who my parents wanted me to be.

Jamila is filled with gratitude now for her parent's approach. Their influence, she says, helped shape the person she is today which includes being sure of her identity. She feels much of her confusion was growing out of those turbulent teen years that we all share. To me the cultural issues seem to add another complex layer.

> None of my close friends are Afghan, Rose. I know a variety of people from different places. It's awesome that I can ask different people for advice. For our parents it can be different. Because they are older some lose their life-long connections and they can become closed off in a new country.

Tamkin added:

> I understand how hard it is for them to integrate – especially with the language but I worry it is also limiting for many people. If you don't have language you can't get anywhere in Australia. Sadly, this is the case for many refugees and migrants all around the world, I think. People end up trapped in a life they no longer have and socialise with only people from their own country.

"At the same time, I envy those relationships and those deep roots that my parents have. I don't have memories of family like they do," Nafiso

quietly told me. She was quick to add it would different when she had children in Australia. They would have roots in this country with their grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins in the same place. They would build new and different connections from her parents and they would have a mother who had spent most of her life in Australia.

Like so many refugees and migrants before them, when Tamkin's parents arrived in their new country they had to start at the bottom of the ladder despite previously holding senior positions in their home country. They want her to do well and to give back to her new country. She shares a familiar lament that her parents don't understand her or what she is doing at university. Tamkin has a part-time job in retail, as well as her MYAN position which she fits in around her full-time study.

> My parents want to know why I spend hours studying and go to bed early and sleep so much. I'm tired! I need to get up early so I can continue studying and fit my two jobs at MYAN and the department store in around full-time study. I'm sure they feel I am very self-centred, but I just want to do well so they can be proud of me.

Nafiso shared her father's experience.

> My dad was a respected university lecturer in his late 40s when we fled. We had a good life, but that all got torn down around us. It must have been so hard for him to watch his country collapse into war, and to lose his home and successful career overnight.

She said her father felt like he was treated as a second-class citizen in Australia and that he had to work harder than everyone else to prove he was a well-qualified and educated man. He was proud of his African roots and what he had achieved. When they lived in Egypt Nafiso explained it was very different. "Egypt welcomes people from many different countries and Somalians are regarded as a noble people with a proud African heritage." He wanted to make a new home in Australia but eventually he felt worn down and returned to Kenya. It was there, he told his family, that he was valued

and appreciated. Nafiso surmised it was also more difficult for her father as he was 10-15 years older than her mother and found the challenges in Australia more dramatic. It was different for her mother who had lived much of her life in a refugee camp, where she was often frightened and deprived of an education. Australia gave her a deep sense of safety and security.

Sara's family experienced a better time on their arrival in Australia. She puts this down to the fact that her father previously did a lot of travel with his job so was good at adapting to new environments. Sara thought it would be harder for her mum and was surprised how she embraced her new life so easily.

> Mum undertook nursing courses, started working and made new friends. She's amazing. It is not the same as it was in Eritrea though. She used to be a lot more relaxed. I think I experienced the same sort of issues as my mum. I fitted in quickly and made friends, but for both of us there is always a little something going around in your mind about where you belong. My mum inspires me so much. She did not think twice about putting herself in danger to protect us and to ensure my siblings and I have a better life.

We finished our conversation with a spirited discussion about feminism. I found all of the women disliked the term. It was another label they didn't want. Even when I suggested they were standing up for women and equality they rejected the idea. It seemed Tamkin was speaking for all of them when she said: "I don't like such terms used to describe one group of people. For me it is much more important to be a decent human being."

Amran looked around the group. "We're all just women getting on with our lives trying to help people along the way."

Over the next six months I continued my conversations with the women via email and social media. In September Tamkin and Nafiso met me for a coffee at the Centre for Stories in Northbridge. I enjoyed introducing them to the founder, Caroline Wood, and explaining the Centre's mission of collecting, sharing and preserving stories to expand dialogue about diversity and identity. We gathered in a room that has been made into a welcoming

library and agreed the importance of story-telling in all its forms. Nafiso had graduated from Curtin University since I last saw her and had secured a position in human resources at the Fiona Stanley Hospital. Tamkin was about to enter her final year of study and was exploring career options in journalism. Unfortunately, the rest of our group could not join us because of work or family commitments, but our on-line exchange of ideas continued enthusiastically. Jamila loved the comments by Tamkin, Sara and Nafiso because, on reflection, they really resonated with her. She wrote: 'It helped me understand the strange pull I have towards Pakistan.' Amran expressed her delight at seeing our conversation re-created on the page. "I love all our direct quotes and how you have positioned yourself as a participant and an observer. I watched our conversations and understandings unfold in the writing. It was wonderful."

Over a cup of tea, Nafiso, Tamkin and I pursued the idea of multiple identities and how being torn between cultures complicated even further the notion of what Virginia Woolf calls "our many selves". Woolf wrote of her memory derived from her life experiences which made up the past and present self and then there was her other 'self' which was the way she viewed herself through the eyes of others and in her writing. I asked Nafiso and Tamkin if they could relate to the idea of many selves. Nafiso claimed:

> Definitely. Even though I am very confident about what I think of as my central identity, I present different identities to people. At work, my colleagues would see me as quiet and diligent, as a person who keeps to herself but as you know, I am very out-going and have strong opinions.

Tamkin explained that she felt she had a single identity.

> When I am with a group of people in a discussion, I am always very cautious about putting my two cents in because I don't want to be attacked for something I said because I have a life with different heritage. People wouldn't see me the same way. Maybe that does give me multiple identities.

Nafiso and I laughed at her puzzled face.

I stay in contact with all the women in this group because I enjoy their company. Writer Robert Dessaix commented that*: "*good conversation is more like friendship: it works best between people who share basic values, if not beliefs…and is an exchange that nurtures the soul."[65] I always feel I gain new insights in an enriching experience with this group.

Mothers and Daughters

I am sure that if the mothers of various nations could meet there would be no more wars.

E. M Forster.[66]

Not everyone has a great mum. I am one of the lucky ones. I write of my mother in the present tense sometimes because on some days, it feels as though she is still with me, in the room alongside me about to share a cup of tea. As I have listened to people tell their stories, it has become clear to me that even if you don't have the best relationship with your mother, her influence is telling on your life in ways seen and unseen. But people of a refugee background are forcibly separated from their families and live away from their mothers in different countries. Many women explain the chasm of loss they feel in the circumstances. Assistant Professor of Psychiatry Jacek Debiec at the University of Michigan argues that the loss or separation from parents increases the likelihood of various psychiatric disorders, including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, mood, psychotic or substance use disorders.[67] The person's feelings of safety and the ability to bond with others, can also be damaged. I really don't know how well or how badly the people I have collaborated with cope with separation. I only know it would be traumatic for me if my mother was alive in another country and I couldn't see her due to war and violence or issues with passports and visas. Worse still would be her death in a place I couldn't visit.

Edward Said commented that he felt: "printed and guided by several of my mother's long-standing perspectives and habits." [68] I can identify with that. For me, this includes a propensity to worry about things, an uncomfortable feeling of not fitting in at large social situations, the need to provide moral support and help to as many people as possible, a thirst for knowledge, a love of books and reading, an unconditional love for my family, and a belief that you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it. For my mother this ranged from dealing with my father's illness and subsequent death, to living with the worry of her sons' life in the armed services, to fighting cancer. She never gave up.

We were always close. I was the youngest and the only girl in a family with five brothers. For the first twelve years of my life, I stumbled through primary school with her love and guiding hand. I wasn't a brilliant student – just average. Sometimes good, but not quite excellent. It didn't matter, she praised all my achievements. During my teenage years we moved from the State of Tasmania to the far north-west of Western Australia and made our new home in a desert mining town. I hated it and my concern over not fitting in loomed large. It was not helped by mum insisting I wear the check, blue cotton uniform which I discovered none of the cool kids chose to wear. I went from an all-girl, Catholic college surrounded by green hills in a comfortable Tasmanian suburb to the co-ed public school in a desert. I cried all the way home for weeks. After several torturous months, the school decided I was in the wrong year and moved me up to year 9. The few students I had at least managed to sit with at lunch break were left behind. I started again, this time with more success but I continued to fight an overwhelming home-sickness, as did mum. It felt like the hot Pilbara wind blew me around every which way, as I tried to latch on as I sought to find my place. I didn't know what was going on or how I was ever going to work out who I was in this place. It was dad who had wanted to move. "Now all the boys are grown up, I think it would be good to go somewhere different; to a warmer climate," he had mused for years. No-one agreed with him. When he secured a position with Hamersley Iron, a giant iron ore mining company in Karratha, Western Australia, mum and I consoled ourselves that it was close to Perth and that there wouldn't be much difference from living in Hobart. For two women with a thirst for knowledge, we certainly hadn't drunk in the facts.

Home-sickness, isolation and loneliness can consume you if you let it. At Christmas that first year, as the temperature steadily climbed to its usual daily maximum of 36 degrees, mum insisted on cooking the full turkey roast with gravy and vegetables. The three of us sat under the air-conditioning not saying much. Dad tried to be jolly, passed out the crackers and tried desperately to make us laugh at the corny jokes. Suddenly, about half way through the meal, Mum turned her plate upside down on the festive table with a bang, burst into tears and ran to the bedroom. I can still remember my shock at seeing her do something like that. She was always the calm parent,

the quiet organizer, the one who didn't raise her voice much. Dad and I sat still and looked at the gravy stain spreading across the white linen tablecloth. I tried to capture the little Birdseye peas that rolled around like marbles. Mum eventually came out of the bedroom and spent the rest of the day, red-eyed in her chair, knitting, but not talking. I tried to read and Dad went outside. It was, however, a turning point. The next day the three of us sat at the same table and mum announced we needed to try harder to make our new life work. We couldn't go back, so we had to go forward. She had a list in her head of all the things we would do. She would start a garden and join the bowls club with Dad to meet people. I would be allowed to join the school swimming squad and play more hockey even if it meant travelling 200 hundred kilometres for a game on the weekend. "You'll drive her, of course, Colin - just like you always have," she said. Dad nodded quietly through all this and was also given the task of devising regular outings and trips so we could learn more about the place we had made our home. Bordered by the Indian Ocean to the west and extending across the Great Sandy Desert to the Northern Territory border in the east, the Pilbara is one of the largest regions in Western Australia. That didn't deter us. Dad planned small one day outings and longer trips over weekends. Slowly over time, I discovered a vibrancy and character unique to the Pilbara. Its rugged ranges, gorges, ancient landscapes and waterholes drew me. I wanted to be in it; part of it; experiencing the drama of the place. At school I eventually made new friends. We camped during the holidays at special locations known only to us. I was selected in the country-week hockey team every year, I achieved my bronze medallion in swimming, and I won a state-wide public speaking competition with a presentation about why Australia should be a republic. I found my voice again and with it, the fog of isolation fell away. Mum and I grew closer over the next five years. We supported and encouraged each other to join in so we could "belong" in our new home. I still remember the look on her face when I walked back from the mailbox through our garden, now an oasis of irrigated lawn and plants, into the cool lounge room where I opened the big stiff envelope. I had been accepted into university.

She followed my career in journalism in Perth and in the Pilbara, when I returned. She kept a scrap book with all my by-lined stories to show anyone

she thought would be interested. She recorded parts of my radio show each week and we would play it back together and talk about what worked and what didn't. She encouraged me and always had an idea or two. She suggested regularly that I needed to slow down and annunciate my words more clearly. "Sister Joseph didn't spend all those primary years teaching speech and drama classes, so you could rush through the weather report each hour," she chided me gently.

Mum seemed proud of me as I worked my way up the corporate ladder to management positions in Australia and overseas. "I can't believe my little girl is bossing people around at a bank," she chuckled. We spent a decade apart when Terry and I moved to Hong Kong. She wrote a letter to us every week on her rickety manual typewriter and we did the same on our computer from our apartment in the sky. She visited twice a year and we made frequent, but rushed, long-weekend trips home. I missed her so much but lived by throwing myself into the whirl of business life in Hong Kong. It took my mind off being homesick and kept me from thinking about my own health. Terry and I worked 12-hour days and loved the pace and excitement of being in the middle of the commercial and financial world. We uncovered skills we did not know we had and were regarded highly by our peers. We loved Asia and travelled extensively for both business and holidays. We made deep friendships that have stood the test of time across different continents. But hidden from everyone, I used over-the counter cheap drugs in Hong Kong to battle chronic migraine and anxiety. I kept buying more and more drugs from the pharmacy to avert the migraines which re-bounded every second day. I fought the stress and anxiety by putting on a bigger happy mask and ignored the warnings that the migraines sent. For the first time in my life I kept things from my mother. After many years of seeing specialist doctors thankfully I can now manage my migraines and anxiety.

Dad died from cancer before we moved to Hong Kong. He had never wanted to travel outside Australia after his time in Papua New Guinea during World War II. We invited Mum on her first overseas holiday the year after Dad's death and developed a routine of travelling to different places around the world every Christmas holiday. The first place we chose was London. In an attempt to keep the jet lag at bay Terry bustled us onto a double-decker

red bus that toured the city with regular stops for people to hop on and hop off. We sat in the front row, upstairs in the open-air holding onto to the front rail like teenagers on a carnival ride. The temperature was below zero, but I don't think Mum noticed as she laughed and pointed in her mittened hands to all the landmarks that she had previously only known through books and television. Terry said seeing it through mum's astonished eyes was like visiting London again for the first time. Each year we chose a different place to visit: Paris, Prague, Vienna, New York, the Lake District of England, the countryside of Cornwall and the highlands of Scotland. The planning was half the fun. Mum haunted the library stacks and borrowed all the books she could find on the country and places we planned to visit. We all agreed to read at least three books by authors from our chosen destination and she painted a new canvas of memories every year. It's not every man who can travel with his mother-in-law for over a month, but Terry loved it. The two of them often shared stories about me as if I wasn't there. They laughed about my set ways, my inability to win even one game of scrabble and all my funny habits.

We stopped travelling when cancer took off his coat at her house. The prognosis wasn't good. Advanced stomach cancer meant maybe a year even with a strict chemotherapy regime. Thankfully we had already re-located back to Perth from Hong Kong and I was able to assist my mother who lived with calm dignity and spirit for three years after her diagnosis. Somehow, she smiled and got on with her life, living at home by herself as she wanted. Silver Chain homecare nursing staff visited each day and we came every second day. The boys flew in for visits from other parts of Australia when they could. We talked on the phone once or twice daily. We reviewed the overnight news, talked sport, we worried about injured players in our footy team, we dissected books that we had read, and crime shows that we had watched. I listened to what was happening in the garden and with her neighbours. I lied when I told her I was fine, and everything was going well. Of course, nothing is ever fine when your mother is fighting the waves of pain that come with terminal cancer and you are trying to stop her sinking. Every fortnight for over two years I picked her up and drove her to hospital. My time-clock ran according to her chemotherapy appointments and doctor's

visits. We grew used to waiting in a comfortable silence, reading or knitting, as the medical train that had become our life rolled on. At some stage over those three years our roles reversed. I became the care-giver. I looked after her more and she let me. I became the chief cheerleader and support person in her life and discovered what a gift she had given me. Then she died. My pillar of strength crumbled to dust. I wrapped both my arms tighter around my other pillar - Terry.

When you write and work with people of a refugee background, you hear terrible stories of pain and loss. I see people so damaged by persecution that I wonder how they function each day. I meet women who have watched their mothers and family die in front of them. So, who am I to write about death and loss? I'm someone who watched her mother slowly die. I have stopped apologizing for my sadness because I realize that comparisons of loss and grief make no sense. A mother's love is precious and cannot be measured on any scale.

Each of the women in this book shares her story as well as her insights, as a mother, or a daughter, or as both. They prove that sometimes when your heart is raw you just have to keep going.

Five strong women – Amina's story

"Australia is my home now, not Sudan. Everything is normal here. People don't have guns pointing at you and your family. I feel safe."

I visited Amina Amin, an Australian woman who arrived in the country as a refugee from Sudan in 2004, at her home in Perth's northern suburbs. The light, spacious house seemed to open its arms to visitors and a chorus of chirping birds created a background soundtrack. Amina's seven children, including two-year old Shireen, came over to shake my hand and introduce themselves. The four eldest daughters, Alia, Anan, Ola and Yasrib joined me and their mother at the dining table. The girls told me they wanted to listen and help with Mama's story. They could provide translation if needed, for difficult words or phrases. I explained how I would do a draft of the story after our interview and then return at a later date, so Amina and I could read through it together and have some more conversations about what should be in or out of the story. Everyone seemed intrigued and delighted about this approach. I answered questions from some of the girls about being a writer as I set up my recorder and turned the pages of my notebook, listening to the interplay between the women. They finished each other's sentences and interrupted each other with friendly laughter and banter. The strong connection between these five women was like an invisible elastic that flexed and stretched.

Amina began her story with the family's escape from Sudan to Egypt. They lived in a small village in Darfur in western Sudan which borders Libya, Chad, and the Central African Republic. The approximately six million inhabitants of Darfur are among the poorest in Africa, and are predominantly non-Arab, black African Muslims from several different tribes, who exist largely on either subsistence farming or nomadic herding. However, this was not always the case and in the late 18th and early 19th century Darfur was a well organised and successful empire – a sultanate around seven times the size of England. It was Egypt's biggest trading partner and had rich natural resources of salt, iron, copper and textiles, but, like many states and countries on the African continent, Sudan was invaded, wars followed, and

parts of Sudan were seized by colonising countries. In 1916, the British, who were co-rulers of Sudan with Egypt, took the opportunity to seize control of Darfur, allegedly to stop any French interference. The British refused to invest in Darfur, so in 1956 when the country gained independence, it was an under-developed colony of Sudan's Arab speaking Nile Valley heartland. It became a victim of Pan-Arab nationalism over the following decades, but little attention was paid to it by the rest of the world. Raging conflict engulfed the country, tearing it apart. The ruling Sudanese government ignored reports of rising violence in Darfur and allegations that the local governments were arming Arab tribesmen who were known as "Janjaweed." This literally translates to "devils on horseback." Amina shuddered at the mention of their name. These tribesmen systematically raided and burnt non-Arab villages. It was declared genocide by US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, in September 2004.

> The crimes that were committed were comparable to that of the 1994 Rwanda genocide. Years of tension and distrust created a chasm between the government and the ethnic-African Darfuri people. The international community was focused on finding a peaceful solution to end the civil war between northern and southern Sudan and paid little attention to Darfur.[69]

The 1990s were a very difficult time for the family and in 2000, Amina's husband explained to his family that they must escape from their country. They could all see the violence was worsening. Amina sighed and quietly told me: "You can't live like that."

> Our family needed to be safe and away from all the fighting. We were locked in our home a lot of the time. Villages, and even people, were being set on fire around us. My husband travelled ahead of us to secure somewhere safe in neighbouring Egypt. I was glad to get out. I was scared by the violence, but I was also scared of what the future would hold for my family.

Everyone settled in Egypt as best they could, and seven months after fleeing the horrors of Darfur and claiming refugee status through the UNHCR the family were accepted by Australia as refugees for re-settlement.

> I didn't know what to expect. This country called Australia seemed so far away and we were leaving my mother, father, brother and other family behind.
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> When we moved into our first rented place in Perth, we had nothing. No furniture – nothing. I couldn't imagine how we were going to manage in this strange country as I spoke no English. I was worried and frightened, but then we met Brother Geoff, who was working with St Vincent de Paul at the time. He became our guardian angel and helped us so much. I don't know what we would have done without him. Gradually I began to feel better. Australia was normal and safe. There was nobody with a gun.

Like the majority of Australians, I take safety as a given. I am not frightened every day. No-one is coming to burn my house down or pointing a gun my way. I was relieved that Brother Geoff, who only recently passed away, had been there to offer support. I met Geoff five years ago at the Edmund Rice Centre, where he volunteered twice a week to teach English classes. He was a popular teacher and one of the most thoughtful and compassionate human beings that I knew. I never came away from a discussion with Brother Geoff without learning something or feeling a better person. Amina pulled out her mobile phone and I felt her warm hand in mine. Tears slipped down her cheeks when she showed me a video of Geoff.

"This was my English class last week…only last week he was here."

Amina attended the free English classes provided by the government through the Adult Migrant English Program. It included 510 hours of free tuition to newly arrived refugees who arrive through the humanitarian program, but like many participants she wanted to continue her language classes after that tuition ended.

So that is how I found myself at the Edmund Rice Centre, taking more English classes and participating in different activities. They opened my eyes to how life could be. Everyone was so friendly. No-one was judgmental, and it didn't matter what country you came from, or what your religion was, everyone was treated equally. It was like a big family. I knew I had found my place. I had a family again. I belonged.

Her husband, Osman, had studied social sciences and development at university in Khartoum which is the capital of Sudan and its largest city. Initially he was the one who was able to find work to support the family because he spoke fluent English. However, like many migrants and refugees he worked his way through poorly paid jobs when he first arrived; security guard, taxi driver, shop assistant and too many other jobs to mention, he told me. Amina grew in confidence and with the help of friends she found a job as a kitchen hand in a local restaurant and then as a housekeeper in a city hotel. At one point she juggled the two jobs as she and Osman struggled to support their family.

It was a hard year for me. I still felt my English wasn't good enough and my working hours were long. Each day I was at the hotel until 3.30pm and then I rushed home to be with my kids for a few hours when they came home from school. From 6-9.30pm I worked in the restaurant. I couldn't keep going like that because I was so tired all the time. I went back to TAFE to study Aged Care and get my certificates.

Amina did a work placement at the Morris Zeffert Home, a Jewish Aged Care facility, and after a few months they offered her a full-time position.

I really enjoyed looking after people and helping them. They were lovely people at the home, and I thought I was doing a good job. It was enjoyable work and my boss was a wonderful woman. She was disappointed after six months when I told her I had to leave to go and work with my husband because he needed me.

During the 1970s in Khartoum, Osman had been convinced by a friend to join him in a retail clothing business. “I thought: OK, why not? We called ourselves *Big Boyz* for fun and went on to run a good business,” Osman told me. When the opportunity to run a similar retail business in Perth presented itself ten years ago, Osman, the true entrepreneur, took a chance and opened *Big Boyz* in Australia. Located in a cul-de-sac, it stands on one side of a carpark that separates two rows of modest looking shops and refugee and migrant support agencies. In the low buildings there are two Halal butchers, a veterinarian, a dentist promising whiter teeth, a money exchanger and the offices of migrant and refugee support agencies such as Mercy Care, the Association for Services to Torture and Trauma, the Multicultural Services Centre and the headquarters of the Edmund Rice Centre. It is a hub of support services for people who need help. The carpark is always busy, and you can’t miss the bright red, yellow and green shop frontage of *Big Boyz* at the end of a row which has become something of a local landmark in Mirrabooka.

The shop draws me like a magnet whenever I am in the area. I convince myself there might be something that I need behind those enticing doors that also feature a smaller sign stating *King of Bling*. Bulging racks of clothing line the store. Walking past the fashion accessories and household items on the tables and shelves reminds me of being in a bazaar facing too many choices. A mini food mart has been added at one end of the store with supplies of rice, noodles, lentils, sauces and other staples stacked on shelves. My first stop, however, is always at the scarf collection near the front of the store. Swathes of vivid material flow down the stand and I look to see if I might find another scarf that I probably don’t need. There seems to be a steady flow of customers and people who have called in for a chat. Alia and Anan tell me their mother knows everyone.

> People from different cultures, different religions and different backgrounds are always stopping mum for a chat at the Mirrabooka Shopping Centre. If you are with her you know it is going to take ages to do what you need to do. There is always so much talking.

I thought back to how Amina described herself when she arrived in Australia as a frightened, lonely woman who knew no-one. Over the years she has studied and worked hard alongside her husband to become a successful business woman with a close knit, loving family. The Deputy Director of the Edmund Rice Centre, Chris Ward, says she is in awe of what Amina and Osman have achieved.

> They came with nothing to Australia. They had a couple of small kids and did not really know where to start – but look at them now. Amina is an extraordinary mother, a business woman and a caring person who is always willing to help someone. I wish we had their recipe for success. Their family has grown. They have adjusted and done different things to cater for everyone and their love for each other seems to only get stronger. It's wonderful to spend time with them.

I smiled knowing exactly what she was describing. Visiting the Amins was like being accepted into a warm embrace.

According to professor Graeme Hugo, a specialist in migration studies from Adelaide University, studies in Australia have found that refugees possess a greater tendency to be self-employed than either the Australia-born or other migrant groups. [70] Refugees entering Australia through the humanitarian intake have been found to be the most entrepreneurial by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).[71]Alongside *Big Boyz,* the family opened a beauty salon called *Black Diamond* which specialised in henna body design, a popular application of inked intricate drawings, that attract a mostly Muslim female clientele. Amina learnt the tradition of henna painting from her mother and she, in turn, taught her daughters the skill. I have seen women's hands painted in the dark ink to create the beautiful temporary henna tattoos. With some help from the girls on iPads and phones, I learnt that Henna is a small flowering shrub *(Lawsonia inermis).* The fragrant flowers are used to create perfume and the leaves are dried and then turned into a fine powder that's used for dying clothes, hair and the temporary dying

of the skin. I wondered if I should have my hands painted with henna, so I could truly appreciate the skill and artistic ability of the women.

Amina and Anan qualified in a beauty course so they could also do make-up, manicures and pedicures. However, it was the henna work that attracted the most customers. They tell me it got “crazy busy.”

> Eid was our busiest time of the year at the salon. Often when we arrived to start our 7am appointments on the weekend there were already other people lining up. It was unbelievable. People argued about who was next. We sometimes kept working until 3am to meet the demand at times like that. It takes at least an hour to do a straightforward design on the hands or feet. You do the first application and then it is layer upon layer to make it look perfect.

I double checked that Anan had said *3am* and every-one chimed in with laughing confirmation. OK. These women know how to work hard. The family decided to close the beauty business in 2018 due to changing market conditions and the impact the business was having on the girls’ study. I shook my head in awe when I learnt that the older girls had helped at *Big Boyz* as well as juggling time to be at the salon with their mother and to study. Alia is studying for a science degree in bio-medicine and pharmacology at university and the other young women are still in high school.

They variously aspire to study veterinary science, pharmacology, midwifery, neurology and cardiology. There was an animated discussion about who was the smartest and the unanimous decision was Yasrib, who is just starting high school. Amina smiles around the table at them as Alia says:

> I want them all to reach their potential and be happy like I am. The University of Western Australia is very multicultural. There are a lot of international students and I can see my future when I am on campus.

As we pass around a bowl of sweets, we talk about different universities. I tell them about Curtin, and the possibility of studying in London

is raised by Ola because from what she could see it was one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Talk turns back to daily life and its challenges. Like all working women with families Amina struggles sometimes.

“My husband does buying trips to China, Dubai, Turkey and Thailand for weeks at a time. That can be difficult because I am on my own, trying to manage all the work and family, but my girls help,” Amina said as she looked around the table. She laments that she has no family in Perth, but her parents were able to visit for three months last year.

> My father is unwell. He has Alzheimer’s. It was very hard to get a visa for him. The people in charge thought we would try and keep him here with us once his visa expired. I kept telling them I am an Australian citizen and I know the rules. Why would they think I would do that?

I couldn’t think of a reasonable answer, but I was pleased that eventually, her parents were able to share time with their daughter and family in Australia. They were also able to ensure her parents received medical check-ups. All the family sighed and looked at each other. Amina went on:

> All the medicine my father had been given in Sudan was wrong. Everything. It was all wrong. We couldn’t believe it. So, we fixed that at the doctor’s and bought a big supply of the right medicine to send back with my father and mother.

I thought about my relative ease in accessing healthcare in Australia; GP’s everywhere, specialists who could be found when needed, hospital beds generally available and a financial support system that subsidised some medical care. I never have to buy a huge supply of medicine to take with me when I visit my relatives.

Before I finished my visit, Amina’s daughters told me about their visit to Sudan with (Baba) their father. After hiring a car in Khartoum, they set off to visit his family’s village. None of them told Amina where they were going

because they knew she would be anxious. They stopped at a cousin's house first and then drove on. Anan takes up the story:

> There were men dressed in soldier's uniforms, but they weren't really soldiers.
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> We had to give them money to get past. I guess me and my sisters didn't really understand what was happening. But the men in the uniforms had guns – really big guns. It was the first time I'd seen anything like that. It was scary, very scary. We travelled past burnt out houses and villages. There were just bits of buildings and charred sticks everywhere. It was so sad. We got to my dad's family place and called Mama to let her know where we were and that we were safe. While she worried about our safety, she knew it was important for us to understand more about where we had come from.

As I am packing up my bag, I ask about the chirping birds in the background.

"That's our budgerigars – we have 25 of them! I love my birds and our pets and our garden. They make me happy," Amina smiles.

One thing that doesn't make the family happy is the current discrimination against Muslim women who wear a head scarf.

"I tell my girls not to wear the hijab when they go out because I am worried for their safety," Amina adds.

She wears her anguish like a heavy cloak. The girls show me a YouTube video that was doing the rounds on social media. It was called "Punish a Muslim Day." Points were awarded for acts of violence: 25 points for pulling off a woman's head scarf, 500 points for murdering a Muslim and 1,000 for bombing a mosque. It was grotesque. Who and why does someone create such hate about one group of people?[72] A study by the University of South Australia, shows evidence of widespread discrimination against Muslims both face-to-face and through employment practices and the criminal justice system.[73] Despite their high levels of education, Muslims are less likely to be granted a job interview than the average Australian. I

thought of another friend who was short-listed for a human resources position. At the final interview, they told her the job was hers if she took off her scarf.

Through the sheer luck of where I was born, travelling is pretty easy for me. I was reminded of the challenges of coming from a country in the Middle East when I next met the family and they described the process they went through to visit the United States to see Amina's two youngest sisters. Australia and the US are part of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) which means Australian citizens can enter the US for less than 90 days as a tourist or for business. Terry and I easily applied for what is known as the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ETSA) when we visited our friends Anne and Bob in June. We sat down with our coffees one Sunday, a month before we left, and filled in a series of questions on-line that took us about 30 minutes. However, when, Alia went on line to apply for ETSA for her mother, her little sister, Shireen, and herself their applications were rejected causing great concern. As I listened I wondered if this was because Sudan had been on Donald Trump's original travel ban decision to bar or restrict entry by people from a list of mainly Muslim-majority countries to the United States, but then I remembered Sudan was removed from this list after intensive lobbying from Saudi Arabia. Since 2015, Sudan has been providing combat soldiers - boots on the ground - in Yemen to support US backed UAE and Saudi Arabia troops. Over several days and complicated phone calls they discovered it was because of the answer they gave to this question in the ETSA process: *Have you travelled to, or been present in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia or Yemen on or after March 1, 2011?*[74] The women had visited their family in Sudan and on this basis had been rejected for a visa despite Sudan's removal from the list of US banned countries.

"I don't understand why the US Government does this to Sudanese people especially as we are Australian citizens. Do they think I am a terrorist? Or that my daughters are terrorists?" Amina asked me.

Once again, I didn't know what to say. Sudan had been removed from the controversial travel ban but remained on a different list of countries that threatened the US. The chess pieces kept moving on the board and it was hard to understand the strategy. After further research I discovered that

these laws were passed after the 2010 Paris attacks by Islamic State members and heightened fear over the heritage of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as potential terrorists. A background hum of anxiety made it easy for populist governments to 'other' any stranger, regardless of the facts. I completely understand that effective border management to combat transnational crimes and terrorism is vitally important, but it would be hard not feel victimised if you were Amina's family. The family were eventually told they could apply for a visa in person at the US Consulate. As I listened to Alia's experience, I wondered how one official at the US Consul managed to make an intelligent young woman in her third year of university so distressed. Anyone who has travelled in the US will know that people who work in border control positions can seem abrupt. I have encountered some who clearly enjoy their position of power and their sole aim seems to be to intimidate people, but for the most part they have seemed polite and respectful towards me. Of course, I am not a 23-year-old black Muslim girl with Sudanese heritage. During her interview at the consulate Alia was made to feel very unwelcome.

> I felt frightened. I kept telling myself not to feel that way. I kept telling myself I was an Australian citizen, in Australia, in the US Consulate office and that this was a safe, normal place to be. When I look back, I realise the woman tried to intimidate me and I wasn't expecting that. When I didn't immediately answer a question, she shouted at me and told me to hurry up. I felt like everyone was looking at me then. I felt different to everyone else.

The women were eventually granted visas to visit the US, but clearly suffered racial profiling. I understand that border and immigration officials are under pressure but reports and studies have identified that people are being stopped from entering a country based on how they look and sound. Since 9/11 racial profiling has become more commonplace, even though it is illegal. I thought back to business trips I made to the United States from Hong Kong. After a gruelling 16-hour long-haul flight I usually made my sleep-deprived way off the plane with the rest of the Asia Pacific team like a storm survivor.

In the confusion of the arrival and immigration halls, we somehow became used to the fact that one of our colleagues, with Malaysian heritage, would always be the one pulled aside for a so-called ‘random security check’ as we came through immigration. In my mind there was nothing random about it, but he used to just smile and tell us to go ahead to our hotel, because he expected to be some time. To me, incidents like that and Alia’s experience go to the heart of our anxieties about “the other”.

I like to believe that Australia is still one of the great multi-cultural societies, built on immigration, and one that welcomes diversity. Amongst the populist noise it is sometimes hard to remain committed to this view. However, a morning with the Amin women reminds me about the joy of being part of Australia, an Australia that hosts many stories that meld together to be a nation’s story. Amina and her family are grateful for the opportunities that Australia provides. They love life and talking about their hopes for the future. The young women are focussed on three things, going to university, graduating and securing a good job. They want to own their own homes and support their family in any way they can. I was reminded of comments by Liberal Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser’s advice about living in a successful and happy multi-cultural society: “To have one’s heritage respected, to be treated with dignity on one’s own terms, to contribute as full and equal participants in Australian society, these are the issues of the most fundamental importance.”[75]

Still Waiting - Rasha's story

Rasha is still waiting for her Australian passport.

She is still waiting to visit her homeland of Palestine from where her father was exiled.

She is still waiting to visit her family who have settled in Sweden.

She is still waiting to be the Australian citizen she so desperately wants to become. Like most Palestinians today, Rasha is both a refugee and a stateless person.

Rasha arrived in Australia six years ago via Iraq, Syria and Turkey as a Palestinian refugee with nothing. She lost her spiritual home in Palestine when her Father and Grandparents were forced from their land in 1948, in what Palestinians describe as Al Nakba ("the catastrophe") during which time they were expelled by Israeli military forces and fled in fear, hoping to return to their homes once hostilities ceased. "Palestine is my country but how can I properly belong to it if I can't visit it and see it?" Rasha asked me. She lost her childhood home in Iraq when Sunni people, including stateless Palestinians who were living there, were forced to flee after the Americans invaded in 2003 and toppled the Sunni government of Saddam Hussein. She then had no home. She lived in temporary accommodation, was imprisoned in detention centres and jails or lived in refugee camps. Australia accepted her and her family as refugees in 2013. Two years ago, Rasha passed her citizenship test and applied for an Australian passport. For reasons I don't understand, this process of applying and approval at the Department of Immigration can take years, so Rasha is still waiting for confirmation that she can officially call Australia home.

I would be frustrated and angry if this was me, and while she shows some annoyance at having to ring the government department every month to check on progress of her application, she also shows such grace and calm. I can't help but think of Emily Dickinson's poem "hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul – and sings the tunes without the words – and never stops at all."[76] Rasha smiles at me and tells me, "it will come." In December 2017, the Commonwealth Ombudsman conducted an investigation in response to many complaints about the long delays in

processing citizenship applications. The judgment showed there had been unreasonable delay by the Department in deciding citizenship applications for some people of a refugee background. The Department had not been able to justify why applications spent so long without any processing being done. The judge estimated that a reasonable time for processing the applications was between six and seven months from the time the citizenship test was taken. [77] Rasha is still waiting two years after she passed the test and she does not know why.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics released a statement on World Refugee Day, 2018 reporting that Palestinians make up the world's largest refugee population, with around 5.9 million Palestinian refugees around the world. Unlike other refugees, Palestinian refugees are defined as "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict."[78] Descendants of Palestinian refugees are also eligible for registration. Palestinian refugees are not protected by the UNHCR, they come under the mandate of a separate agency, the United Nations Refugee Works Agency (UNRWA). When the Agency began operations in 1950, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 Palestine refugees. Today, some 5 million Palestine refugees are eligible for UNRWA services.[79]

Rasha's story is one of survival in the most difficult of circumstances. It is filled with sadness, anguish, despair and fear. She is forever thankful to Australia, because it keeps her and her children safe. She has very definite views that the woman needs to be the strong one in the family.

> The woman is usually the homemaker as well as someone who needs to earn money to live. Without a home, you just must try and keep your family together. We are much stronger than the man. A woman does so many things at the same time to ensure her family can be safe.
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> When I was a child my family lived in a very nice house in Baghdad. My four brothers and sister and I had a good life. We all went to

school and studied hard. My dream was to go to university and my grades were good enough when I graduated high school. But in 2003 it was not safe for us in Baghdad and I wasn't allowed to go. It was a very, very sad day and I cry a lot.

But later that year, she was introduced to a man from her mother's side of the family and they became engaged.

I liked Ahmed straight away. As part of the marriage arrangements, my father asked for assurances that I could go to university after the marriage. Ahmed's family gave these, but I never got to go to university. I lived with his family in a big house inside one of several compounds that Saddam had built for Palestinian refugees.

In 2003, an attack code-named Operation Iraqi Freedom, was instigated by the United States because President Bush and his allies were convinced that Saddam Hussein was building a supply of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that would endanger the world. The United Nations and many European countries were against the attack and refused to participate. After several months of relentless attacks, the so called "coalition of the willing" which included the UK and Australia, alongside the US, defeated Hussein's military defence and the regime collapsed. Weapons of mass destruction were never found.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, at the time, Kofi Annan said: "life was more dangerous than under Saddam Hussein as the country descended into decades of violence and civil war…they had a dictator who was brutal, but they had their streets and their communities…they could go out and their kids could go to school safely."[80] Instead the country was destroyed and Rasha's life would enter a ten-year spiral of homelessness and fear of persecution.

The Bush administration had failed to anticipate post war chaos in Iraq, as factional violence became the new norm after the end of Saddam Hussein's reign. Early in 2005 tensions boiled over when the elected Shi'ite-

dominated, central government started to override the interim constitution in order to take full control of the country and quash all opposition, including the Kurds and the Sunnis. The Shiite's who had taken control had long been oppressed, despite making up 80% of the population of Iraq. Complicating the political struggle, was a bitter territorial dispute over the oil-rich province of Kirkuk involving Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Sunni Turkmen, and Shiite Turkmen. Larry Diamond, from the Council of Foreign Affairs, argues that although Saddam had brutalized plenty of Sunnis, much of the Sunni Arab population either supported him or opposed his ousting, for fear that regime change would cost them their 20 percent historic monopoly over the state and its precious resources.[81] He was right. For Sunni families like Rasha's, it meant being forced from their homes to live in a smaller apartment in another part of the city with other Palestinians. A Shiite neighbour threatened them and told them the government forces would come and kill them. Parts of Baghdad were no longer safe for Sunni Muslims. In fear for their lives, they fled their neighbourhood compound.

> Before the Americans came, I was happy and became pregnant with my first child. After that it was a mess with so much violence between Sunnis and Shiites. I don't understand how we can't all live together. In my religion you learn to respect everyone. I am proud to be a Muslim. Islam has never stopped me from doing anything. I respect other religions and I think we can learn from each other. I don't understand all this fighting in Iraq and around the world.

The situation became so bad that Ahmed and Rasha were forced to flee to Syria.

> It was dangerous. You can't live like that. We were scared all the time. We want a life. We must get out and we must go to Syria. I buy a forged passport and worry maybe they catch me, maybe they don't, but it is worth the risk. We must have a safe life for our children.

I asked Rasha about leaving Iraq and what was the hardest thing. She paused, and, in the silence, tears fell down her cheeks. “The clothes, the toys, the things, they are nothing. It was leaving my parents behind that was hard. I had to leave them all and take only my memories.”

The family’s plan was to make their way through Syria to Turkey, where they felt it would be easier to access Cyprus where Rasha had a brother. Northern Cyprus is under the control of Turkey, and the family understood they would be welcomed with their culture, religion and background. They obtained short-term kimlicks (temporary Turkish visas) that could be used as a travel document to enter Northern Cyprus. Cyprus was effectively partitioned in 1974, with the northern third run by a Turkish Cypriot government and the southern two-thirds by the internationally-recognised government led by Greek Cypriots. They travelled to Damascus and then made a six-hour taxi ride to Aleppo on the border with Turkey. Rasha’s dream of a new life, however, was destined to failure. They paid a handler to obtain tourist visas for them, but they were stopped at the border control. They tried twice at different times to travel to Cyprus but were detained on the second attempt and kept in detention at the airport for eight hours before being released and sent back to Istanbul.

Not to be deterred, the family tried again to get to Cyprus, using another handler who helped them with forged Moroccan passports.

> We had to make ourselves look different for the passport photo. So, we un-braided my daughter’s hair and let it all frizz out and I changed my dress style and wore a different style of hijab. It didn’t work we encountered the same immigration officer who recognised us, and they detained us again, for 20 days this time. We were in a small room and they would bring food and water every time asking for our proper ID and passports which we didn’t have. We had hidden our Iraqi identification papers before we tried to cross the border with the Moroccan passports.

The family were distressed and could see no way out of their homeless, stateless position. They could not go back to Iraq for fear of

persecution, Syria was embroiled in a civil war and they were in no-man's land in Turkey. Absolute despair drove the family to their next decision. They arranged a dangerous nine-hour journey of over 100kms across the Mediterranean Sea to Cyprus. Rasha's brother pleaded with them. "It is unsafe. I saw death everywhere when I did it." Rasha replied:

> I am tired. I am scared and sad. My mind, I can't think properly. I just want to get out of this country in any way I can. I can't go on, so we paid for the boat trip. We were taken in the dark by a bus, with about 30 other men women and children and then we walked in the sand for long time before they showed us to the boat. I was expecting a big boat with windows, but it was like a fishing boat. I wondered how we would all fit on for such a long journey, but it didn't matter because we only lasted 10 minutes on the sea before we were caught by the government and taken to detention at the port, for ten days.

Following this the family were taken back to an Istanbul detention centre where men and women with children were separated and kept on two different levels. They stayed locked in separate rooms like this for 35 days. Rasha found a way to look over the balcony to the lower level to see Ahmed. "After some time, I begged for the children to be able to see their father, so the guards allowed us to meet for ten minutes once a week. We were worried. We don't know what will happen to us," Rasha explained.
They were right to worry. They were transferred to a jail in Antakya, in southern Turkey. They were separated once again and crammed into a small room with others.

> The ten days we spent there felt like ten years. I was totally depressed and barely able to function, not knowing what was going to happen to us. I kept thinking my children are stuck and they will have no life. I cried so many tears. I couldn't stop.

But worse was to come. The Syrian government arranged a prisoner swap with 50 prisoners on the border of Turkey. Rasha and her family were

sent back to Syria to another jail. She described it as “a place where people kicked my children.”

> This was the worst experience of my life. Me and my children were crammed in cells with prisoners who had committed murder and violent crimes. The room where my children and I and a group of other women were kept was about two metres by three metres, dark except for one round hole in the ceiling that let in a tiny amount of light. There was one toilet for all of us in the corner.

We paused while Rasha settled, obviously upset remembering the incarceration.

“We don’t need to talk about this if it is too painful,” I explain.

“No, I want to. I need to pull out my memories, so I can appreciate the good things now. I need to see and touch my bad memories from time to time.”

Rasha did not know if her husband was alive or dead as they had been separated again when they arrived.

“I cry, and I cry. You don’t know how much sad is in my heart,” she told me.

No, I can’t know. I can only imagine if it was me in prison with two children, not knowing where Terry was for an indefinite period of time. Rasha showed me how she slept in the cramped conditions by sitting up and pulling her legs into her waist.

“What about the children?” I asked.

“My arms were their pillows for one month as they snuggled into me as best they could,” she said.

Rasha was forced to sell her wedding ring to ensure she could get regular food of bread and jam from the guards to feed her children. I wondered about the cost of freedom. They had experienced so many jails and such hardship to try and make a new life to be safe from persecution. How many times can you keep being beaten back? What would I do?

Over the coming weeks, a group helping Palestinian refugees, who had fled to Syria to escape violence around the region was able to contact

the family in jail. They brought Rasha much needed clothes and supplies and after much hard work, arranged for Rasha, Ahmed and the children to be re-located to a refugee camp in Syria.

They lived in a basic mud brick shelter, comprising one room and a kitchen with plastic sheeting for the roof. Days were dominated by a wearying and unwinnable battle to keep the sand at bay. I went on-line and googled conditions in a Syrian refugee camp on the border with Turkey and learned that the desert sun beats down on the exposed ground for 12 hours a day, food is scarce and there is a lack of proper sanitation. I wondered what you did to stave-off the boredom. Rasha didn't describe any NGO's offering education or activities, but it looked like some tried to help. I knew from what Rasha told me that in the winter, night temperatures would plummet, and the plastic sheeting roof did little to keep out the driving rain and freezing winds. It seemed like it was a constant battle to keep warm or cool in the little mud hut.

But this was "home" for three years as they waited in hope for the UNHCR to accept their application as refugees to be re-settled in another country. Rasha discovered during this time that her parents, brother and sister had made their way to another refugee camp in Syria, where, after a short stay they were accepted by Sweden to be re-settled. At every opportunity, Rasha asked the UNHCR people: "please can I go to Sweden to be with my family. They will support us." This made sense to me, but in the lottery that operates in the global re-settlement program, it is never that easy. Eventually, in 2012 Rasha and her family were accepted by Australia as refugees – a long way from Sweden.

> We were happy we would be out of the refugee camp of course, but we would be so far from my parents and I knew no-one there and nothing about Australia. I was burning inside that I couldn't be with my family. And Oh, what a culture shock! I could find no similarities to my Arabic culture when I arrived. I was lost. I thought my head would explode with everything going on around me, without any English language.

I find it hard enough sometimes in a non-English speaking country, to work out what is going on and I am on holiday or there for business reasons. What if this place, with its cacophony of strange sounds and people everywhere, was imposed upon you? You have limited resources, no money, few clothes or personal items and no way to communicate except to the Arabic speaking case worker who can spend a little time with you over the first few weeks. Many refugees have told me that they were so overwhelmed when they first arrived in Australia that they wished they were back in the refugee camp. But Rasha was determined to make a new life for her family, despite the hurdles.

> I found I had to be mother, aunt, grandmother, uncle, grandfather and everyone else in our family's life. My husband was just the husband, in fact he became a child in many ways because he found life too difficult.

Of course, for any re-settled refugee, there are many adjustments and issues in adapting to a new culture. Research has found that in some instances, men from a refugee background find it more difficult to settle in a new country. This is often exacerbated when their spouse adjusts more quickly than them. Women coming from a patriarchal society are sometimes able to experience new freedom in their new country while men may feel they have lost social status in a country where their skills are not recognised, and language becomes a barrier. One suggestion is that men frequently focus on their lost belongings, status, prospects, the war or violence that they may have lived through and misfortunes they experienced, while women are more focussed on making progress and earning an income to ensure their family's survival. A study of Bosnian refugees settling in Australia, found that men link their identities to their place of origin, their homes and their status in their communities of origin much more than women do. [82] But of course, this is a generalisation and it is impossible to say from the outside what happens in each relationship and in different communities. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues, the single story creates stereo-types and they are incomplete stories[83].

Rasha and her family rented a house in Girrawheen in Perth's northern suburbs and set about making a life. They both enrolled in English classes. Rasha excelled. One of the first things she did was connect the family to the internet, so they could keep in touch with their families.

> I skyped my family in Sweden every day to see my parents and brothers and sisters. It helped, but then my dad got sick, very sick. He got cancer – leukemia they told me. The daily skype calls were sad now. I wanted to be there so badly.

On his last day, Rasha's father asked to see his daughter, so her family set up the computer on his hospital tray-table. She watched her father die in a hospital bed on a screen. I thought back to my own father's death from cancer. I sat with him and held his hand. I stroked his arm and whispered all the things I wished I had said more, hoping that he could hear me in his semi-conscious state. Thinking about it now, that physical contact seems like an important part of letting my father go. I ached for Rasha. They had no money and no passport, so could not visit their family in Sweden, or any other country, for that matter, while they waited to become Australian citizens. In 2014, with contributions from all the family for the airfares, Rasha's mother was able to visit Australia.

> She filled my heart for two months. I hugged her and kissed her so much. I slept with her, unable to believe she was here in Australia with me. My sister was able to come several years after that. Hopefully when I have my passport, I can visit them in Sweden.

Rasha completed the 510 free hours of tuition in English provided by the Australian government through its Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) but like other refugees, she wanted further language classes. People from different backgrounds and cultures with varying language skills face different challenges. Everyone who comes to Australia either as a refugee or migrant, has a different back story. If you are not literate in your own language, it can be very difficult to learn English quickly and even if you

are well educated, disruptions, persecution and trauma such as Rasha faced over many years, can mean it may take longer to become fluent in a new language. Some people learn more slowly than others. Rasha enrolled at TAFE to study English so she could increase her fluency. Finding work proved difficult, but Rasha and her husband agreed they would be able to open a family day care centre in their home. Rasha undertook a Certificate III in childcare at TAFE and they managed home care for a year and a half. They began with two children and gradually increased this to seven. However, they both became very stressed as it usually meant a 12-hour day from 7am -7pm and they found they weren't spending enough time with their own family, so closed the business down. It is obvious from the way Rasha speaks that her husband, Ahmed, has found it more difficult to settle in Australia. He struggled with his English classes but has been able to secure a manual, night-time position which she says has helped him feel like he can contribute to the family. "It's different for everyone isn't it?" she asks me. "The children are doing very well at school and play basketball and soccer at the local community centre. My daughter was recognised at school last year for her leadership skills," she told me. Rasha, too, is active in the community and became a Girl Guide leader to engage in activities with her daughter and to meet other people.

In 2016 Rasha started a catering business and she provides food for many multicultural organisations in the northern suburbs, including the Red Cross and the Edmund Rice Centre. At one stage she had an active Instagram account to advertise the business but the demands on her time were stressful with too many clients seeking her service. Like several of my friends from a refugee background who run catering businesses, Rasha now relies on referrals from friends and the businesses with whom she works, and this is manageable. Rasha's new plan is to attend TAFE in 2019 to undertake an Assistant Nursing Diploma, as she understands there is a shortage of people with these skills. She is hopeful of securing a full-time position that will enable her to participate in the workforce, meet different people and manage her family. "After all the pain and hardship, my life has turned out to be rather wonderful. I am very excited about the opportunities ahead," Rasha smiled.

“For me, Australia is now 100% my home and the best thing about Australia is that it is safe for me and my family,” Rasha told me. Rasha added that she was grateful for the many friends Australia had given her too.

> The worst thing about Australia is that it is so far away from other places…it is a long way to go to Sweden to see my family. But people are so kind and supportive in Australia. My dream for the future is that my children will all have a good education and find jobs. We want a happy family life.

That doesn’t seem too much to ask.

Conclusion

Storytellers take risks. That is the case for the eleven women and three men in this collection, who hope their conversations and actions will bring greater understanding to their lived experience as people from a refugee background. We hope through our collaboration, as Robert Dessaix (2012) argues, that we can push against the dark and bring ordinary lives and issues that have been hidden, into the light. In a world where we are assaulted by a 24/7 news cycle and non-stop social media, it is easy to feel powerless or even apathetic about the lives of people, such as refugees and asylum seekers in our society. Researcher and writer Janie Conway-Herron (2012) argues that storytelling can play an important role in harnessing human rights and of our understanding of the human tragedy and human survival. I hope these stories provide not only insight, but also a call to action. If you would like to become involved in your community with people from a refugee background who need help, or you are looking for further information there is a list of organisations and their contact details at the end. Large numbers of us live within a very small circle of friends and experiences. By writing this collaborative collection of stories our aim has been to share new information, different perceptions and new ways of seeing.

It is four years since I started writing this collection. All the people of a refugee background who collaborated with me continue to live, work and study in different parts of Australia. Some are excelling, some are doing well, others are struggling. These stories of living are the same for us all, but for people from a refugee background the challenges are greater. The very definition of being a refugee means you have experienced persecution, violence or other human rights abuses.

As the narrator and guide through these stories, I have found myself in uncomfortable positions, sometimes not knowing what to say without sounding trite, sometimes feeling the horror and embarrassment at how our society treats people who are different, and sometimes empathizing with the grief and anguish that many people feel over separated families and how they were treated. I will never forget the anguish that Moe Moe felt describing

the torture her grandfather had suffered at the hands of the Burmese military. I wanted her to stop, but she insisted on continuing because she told me, it was important that people listened and understood what happened. Nor will I ever lose the image of Rasha crying, explaining how she watched her father die in a country far away via a computer skype screen. Of course, at other times there has been joy. I have brushed away tears of happiness as well as tears of sadness, as I have discovered the stories woven together by the people in this book. I have watched Amran's success with writing and publishing give her new confidence and authority to become a leader in her community and more broadly. I have seen Shokoofeh recognized for her literary writing by being short-listed for the Stella Prize, standing alongside leading Australian authors such as Helen Garner and I have visited the new home of Farid and Fauzia to share meals and celebrate the success of their children and their own careers.

From all these personal accounts, it is obvious that there is no one typical refugee experience, but a great diversity of lives. Life is always a collection of scattered fragments, but by constructing a narrative, each person has formed a pathway of touch stones to shape their memories. Storytelling has been a way for the people in this manuscript to remember, to bear witness and to restore some sort of continuity and identity.

As Piok stated: "these are our individual personal stories in the book. It is us and we are real people. I think it helps for people to know we are describing the truth of our lives."

Over the last four years it has become clear to me that identity is not static, even for me. I now know identity is a never-ending process that is continually reshaped by the crisscrossing of past and present experiences. Moe Moe explained this eloquently when we first met and she spoke of her four selves: the self in Burma, the self with the Karen rebel fighters, the stateless self and her present self in Australia. Through storytelling we create and organize our identity. By participating in long, open-ended conversations over many hours, new insights that I had not even considered, emerged. It took patience and commitment from all of us to find our way through multiple layers to uncover our stories. In all these situations I was present, and indeed wrote myself into the text, but apart from agreeing three broad

themes – identity, home and belonging – when I first met with each person, I tried not to set the agenda and let the conversation go where it went, unhindered.

I wanted to understand the concept of home and after conversations with my collaborators, I found myself searching for my own home. I know that no one single place is, or ever will be, home for me. While we connect to different physical locations aided by our senses, such as tastes and smells, it is clear from the people in this book it is not a place that makes a home, it is people. As Rasha explained it wasn't losing things like clothes, furniture or toys that was hard, leaving behind her parents was the worst thing. "I had to leave them all one day and take only my memories." Paul talked about the challenges of talking long-distance on the phone to his brother far away in Burma compared to when he was able to visit him in person. "Our shared memories came easily. It was like I had been stitched back into the fabric of my family and my community." Most of us want to be stitched into the fabric of our family and home community. I have decided that my home is with Terry, wherever we are in the world and whatever the circumstances are.

Belonging, it seems to me, is about how people make you feel in the country in which you live. For refugees and asylum seekers, a lot can depend on the welcome and acceptance of a new host country. Language is the other key factor to belonging. So many refugees and migrants have expressed to me that without language, you remain isolated. In this instance language is both a key and a barrier to well-being and success. Language is vital for work and independence, as most of the women in this collection have commented. When I was volunteering at the Edmund Rice Centre, a person said to me: "when I didn't understand what was happening, I lost confidence. I really wanted to participate but I had no language skills, I had no power." With my own small insights from living overseas where English is not the first language spoken, I can empathise with the loss of power and confidence.

In contrast I can choose where I live. Forced migration is part of the definition of being a refugee. Surely that imbues a sense of injustice. It would for me.

As Piok reminds me frequently: “no-one chooses to become a refugee.” However, the resilience of people to make a new home in a new country has been displayed by everyone in this book. They have carried their memories, their sense of identity and hopefully some of their family with them. But it has not been easy, and forced removal brings with it confusion and loss. As Tamkin commented: “I only lived in Afghanistan for the first four years of my life, but when I think about it, I feel like a part of me is missing somehow.” And for Bella who seems to be continually searching, home is not a physical place for her. “It is inside me and these deep feelings help guide me. Home is where my soul and happiness lie.”

In my mind the concept of home is dynamic, and for ever changing and as Al-Ali and Koser suggest, it is the process of “imagining, creating, unmaking, changing, losing and moving” all through our lives.[84] Conversely, belonging is feeling rooted somewhere – sometimes these can be deep roots, grown over time, or shallow roots when you are just beginning. But overall, belonging is being somewhere that makes you welcome, where you feel like you fit in and can be part of a community.

Everyone in this book has revealed moments of uncertainty, bravery and optimism, resilience in the face of trauma and a re-imagining of identity to survive. We have come to understand what it means to leave home and find a place of refuge. But most importantly, we have found ourselves through conversation, through listening and sharing stories. I thank everyone for collaborating and sharing their stories and hope I have honoured you all in the writing of *Stitching the fabric of life*.

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Getting Involved

There are always options to become involved and help some of the world's most vulnerable people. Many of the Australian organisations that provide services for refugees and asylum seekers depend on donations from the public or help from volunteers. Here is a list of some who need help.

Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org.au

Association for Service to Torture and Trauma Survivors. http://www.asetts.org.au

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre https://www.asrc.org.au

Australia for UNHCR. https://www.unrefugees.org.au

Coalition for Asylum Seekers Refugees and Detainees (CARAD). https://www.carad.org.au/

Edmund Rice Centre WA. http://www.ercwa.org.au

Joining the Dots. https://joiningthedots.org

Mercy Care. https://www.mercycare.com.au

Australian Red Cross. https://www.redcross.org.au

Refugee Advocacy Network. http://refugeeadvocacynetwork.org

Refugee Council of Australia. https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Refugee Rights Action Network. WA http://rran.org

Save the Children. https://www.savethechildren.org.au

The Australian Refugee Foundation. https://www.refugeefoundation.org.au

The Humanitarian Group. https://thehumanitariangroup.org.au

Stitching the Fabric of Life:

Refugee stories and the non-refugee narrator

An exegesis

Introduction

> "We tell ourselves stories in order to live"
>
> *Joan Didion, (1979). The White Album, p.185*

Stories are part of our daily lives and, as Didion suggests, they help us make sense of the world around us and the people who live in it. When I started writing stories with refugees six years ago, I thought I was relatively well-informed and connected in the community. I knew people who came as refugees in the immediate post-World War II immigration period and I knew people from a Vietnamese background who had come in the 1980s, but I did not know any recently arrived people of refugee background from countries such as Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran or Burma. Thus, before I could even start work on a book about refugees in 2013, it took me over six months to be accepted and trusted among several communities. As an illustration, I had tea with different members of the Burmese community on many occasions, I spent a lot of time talking and getting to know people and I happily attended community events speaking at the local youth group about writing, celebrating Karen New Year and visiting other communities in country regions. I learnt about the culture and history with one of the Karen leaders. I read a lot of books and I listened. I invited people to my home and over time genuine friendships were built and with those relationships came trust. I have been refining a process of working with people from a refugee background in storytelling over this past six years since *More to the story: conversations with refugees* (Sayer, 2015) was published.

It was during this experience that I became aware of my unique role and responsibility as interviewer and narrator in the stories and developed an interest in undertaking further research to understand how refugee life stories are told by non-refugee narrators. I have maintained an involvement with people from a refugee background through my role as a director of the Edmund Rice Centre WA, an organisation focused on providing essential settlement services for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds; through research and teaching at the Centre for Human Rights Education at Curtin University and through volunteer work and advocacy in the refugee sector.

In this exegesis and the accompanying work of creative non-fiction, I collaborate with people of a refugee background as a non-refugee narrator because, as Behar (1990) proposes, life writing should let us see "the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system" that can sometimes be missed in interviews only (p. 225). By absorbing the life story of another as narrative we can expand our horizons and understand "the relationship between history and story, its textural representation and how life experience is created in re-telling" (Eastmond, 1996, p.234). The process of storytelling and writing has created many different terms. Smith and Watson (2010) have defined over 60 genres of life writing that include: biography, autobiography, memoir, auto-ethnography, testimony, personal essay, diary and trauma narratives. They explain further by stating that "in writing a life, the life narrator incorporates multiple forms of evidence, including historical documents, interviews and family archives which they evaluate for validity alongside the memories they collect" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p.7). In life writing about the self, "subjects write about their own lives predominantly…and they write simultaneously from externalized and internal points of view taking themselves as both subject and object" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p.5).

Creative non-fiction tells a true story using literary devices and techniques. As Gutkind (2012) notes, creative non-fiction uses "the techniques of fiction writers, playwrights and poets to present non-fiction – factually accurate prose about real people and events – in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner" (Gutkind, 2012, n.p). One form of creative non-fiction is life writing.

Collaborative life writing refers to the creation of an auto/biographical text by more than one person. In many cases, "one is the investigator, who does the interviewing and assembles a narrative from the primary materials given; the second is the informant, who tells a story through interviews or informal conversations" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p.67). In some cases, this is an act of testimony.

Testimony is the act of testifying or bearing witness. Felman and Laub (1992) define it as "bearing witness to a crisis or trauma" (p.1). Whitlock (2007) expands the notion further describing it as "a political act that works

on the emotions and as a carrier of affect; it shapes how emotions move and shift relationally" (p.86).

My work is collaborative life writing which I describe as a form of creative non-fiction. This research explores how narrative identity can be developed by people of a refugee background through a collaborative process of working with a non-refugee narrator. At a time when the world is facing an unprecedented crisis with over 68.5 million people forcibly displaced due to persecution, violence or other human rights violations, how we understand each other and make sense of the world is a matter of great importance. Neumann (2015) believes the community response to refugees and asylum seekers is a key issue in Australian history and he declares it "one of the twenty-first century's most controversial and seemingly intractable ethical, political and social issues" (Neumann, 2015, p.5).

This exegesis contains an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one provides a global and Australian context for refugee life stories and the impact of the populist narrative which contributes to fear of "the Other". I explain the approach I have taken in the development of my own counter-narrative which draws from the work of anthropologist Ruth Behar and historian Dominick La Capra. In Chapter two I discuss my methodology and the ethical issues that writers and researchers face in working with people of a refugee background. Specifically, I address the challenges of power imbalance and how a methodology using a modified Participatory Action Research (PAR) model can assist in mitigating this imbalance. In Chapter three I discuss how narrative identity can be developed in a collaborative text and how key issues such as dislocation, gender, the concept of home and belonging come together to influence a person's identity. In making the decision to collaborate with people of a refugee background to narrate their life stories through conversations, I also recognised I needed to tell some of my own story as a person and as the non-refugee narrator. The non-refugee narrator, like all narrators, makes choices over language and nuance, about what to omit or to include, ethical issues and how to keep the story engaging whilst remaining true to the facts. Through mobile positionalities of the "I" of the refugee narrator and the "I" of

the non-refugee narrator, this chapter examines how collaborative life writing is created with multiple narrators.

In chapter four I examine and compare the position and role of the non-refugee narrator in four Australian contemporary refugee narratives where the positionality of mobile narrators as different 'I's, becomes blurred and raises ethical issues of voice and transparency for the non-refugee narrator and person of refugee background. The textural analysis provides insights into the different approaches non-refugee narrators take in eliciting stories of people from a refugee background and highlight, as Eastmond (2007) demonstrates, that lived experience is not the same as the story we sometimes see on the page.

In presenting this exegesis I provide a context and deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges of writing as a non-refugee narrator. I provide an alternative to writing refugee testimony as part of creative non-fiction and further add to the research into narration.

Chapter one:

A global and Australian context for refugee life narratives

The global refugee crisis

In 2017, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2018) reported that there were 68.5 million people forcibly displaced because of persecution, conflict and generalised violence. This included 25.4 million refugees, 40 million internally displaced people and 3.1 million asylum seekers. There are also an estimated 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. Of the 25.4 million refugees, just over a fifth are Palestinians under the care of The United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA). The United Nations (UN) Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) defines a refugee as any person who:

> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (n.p).

An asylum seeker “is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated” (UNHCR, 2015, n.p). In Australia, surveys of community attitudes over many years have consistently demonstrated that most people don’t know the difference between asylum seekers, refugees and migrants (McAdam & Chong, 2014).

According to the International Crisis Group (2018) the last decade has seen a rise in conflict and political violence, forcing increased numbers of people to flee their homes and their countries. The fact that many more have arrived in Europe than in previous decades, rather than remaining in their region of origin, seems to be driving the impression that western countries

are experiencing an unprecedented crisis (Brookings Institute, 2017). Verkuyten (2004) explains how refugees' arrival to western countries has also become highly politicised. Asylum seekers and refugees are often seen as a threat to national sovereignty, the economy and social cohesion. Yet 85% of the world's displaced people remain in their regions in developing countries. Turkey is hosting more than 2.7 million refugees, while Lebanon and Pakistan each have more than one million living inside their borders (UNHCR, 2017). Broadly, there appears limited understanding of the complexities of the global refugee situation both internationally and in Australia. Neumann (2015) argues that in recent years, commentators and policy makers seem removed from the reality of what is happening on the ground and spend their time in a bubble speaking amongst themselves, apparently unable to communicate adequately the global refugee environment.

But communicating a global situation has challenges. Statistics like "twenty-four people are displaced from their homes every minute" (Global Trends Forced Displacement, 2017) reduce a human crisis to numbers, not individuals, and it becomes easy for society to ignore the problem and for States to consider their own position in isolation. Hartley and Fleay (2017) demonstrate that industrialised countries are applying increasingly restrictive measures to deter those seeking asylum, from crossing their borders and entering their countries. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has lamented the fact that it does not seem to matter what he does to bring human rights violations to the attention of the world, there is always minimal action. There always seems to be another crisis to replace the one before. (United Nations, 2018).

An Australian context

In 2017 there were 102,755 resettlement places offered worldwide through the UNHCR program. This represented just 0.54% of the 19 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate (UNHCR, 2017). There are also millions more people who are yet to be recognised as refugees. Within this small number of resettlement places, Australia offered 15,115 places, which represents less than 15% of permanent global resettlement places. Australia

has resettled 0.076% of all those that require protection (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017). For the millions seeking resettlement every year under the UNHCR program, it is more accurate to say that when a person is eventually granted refugee status "what they actually obtain is a ticket in a lottery" (Glendining, 2015, p.27).

Today, Australia's refugee and humanitarian program has two key components – the onshore protection program and the offshore resettlement program. The offshore component of the program is for people outside Australia who are in need of resettlement including those who have been recognised as refugees by the UNHCR and is the country's voluntary commitment to help refugees (Kenny & Fiske, 2014). Statistics from the Department of Home Affairs (2018) revealed a slight increase in humanitarian arrivals in the year ended 2017 to 24,162 people because of a special intake of Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The Refugee Council of Australia (2017) argues that the additional intake of people from Syria and Iraq in 2016-2017 demonstrates that Australia has the capacity to resettle 22,000 people in one year. However, the intake dropped back to 16,250 places in 2017-18 (Department of Home Affairs, 2018).

The onshore program is for asylum seekers who apply for refugee status after they have arrived in Australia. According to the Refugee Council of Australia (2018), most asylum seekers have entered as visitors or students not by boat, but it is the arrival of people by boat that attracts most attention. Fleay (2018) argues that over the last forty years, a range of senior Federal Government Ministers from major political parties and sections of the media have described the arrival of people seeking asylum by boat as something akin to a "crisis." Coalition governments, in particular, under Prime Ministers John Howard, Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison have made the same pledge: "to stop the boats" (Fleay, 2018; Marr & Wilkinson, 2004). Governments and media have exploited public anxieties about border security to create "a rhetorical - and, ultimately, legislative - divide between the rights of so-called genuine refugees re-settled in Australia from camps and settlements abroad, and those arriving spontaneously by boat" (McAdam and Chong, 2015, p.3). In the Australian narrative about refugee policy the term "genuine refugees" who are "re-settled refugees" are

often compared to “non-genuine refugees” who are positioned as “illegal asylum seekers”. However, under international law it is legal to seek asylum from persecution or human rights violations and is the right of every person (Mc Adam & Chong, 2014, p.52). Despite this the policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers who came by boat was first enshrined in legislation in 1992 in an attempt to deter the arrival of further people by boat and has since been expanded to include indefinite detention (Fleay 2018). Hartley and Pederson (2015) have studied emotional responses, such as fear and anger, by members of the community to asylum seekers and re-settled refugees. “Fear and perceived threat were independent predictors of a more restrictive social policy” for asylum seekers as opposed to the response to refugees who entered Australia through the humanitarian program. (p.142). Challenging these negative attitudes will require a major shift in the political commentary, society norms, media reporting and influencer commentary.

Public officials, the media and other community influencers play a significant role in framing the movement of people fleeing persecution as a crisis and reproducing negative representations of the people themselves (Fleay, 2018). Ideas about what it means to be “Australian” have been used to justify the exclusion of others, fostered initially by a post-European settlement, non-indigenous, white-Anglo idea of nationhood (Booy, Skrbis & Tranter, 2017).

Refugees and asylum seekers are often voiceless in public discourse, and as a consequence, individual identities can be lost. I agree with Doherty (2015) who states that refugees “are defined by the language used by others to describe them…the public’s fundamental understanding of who they are is created not by themselves but by others” (p.9). There has been a very strong xenophobic influence throughout much of Australia’s history in relation to refugees (Fleay, 2010; Neumann, 2015). Even though Australia helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and accepted many refugees post-World War II, Fleay (2010) argues that since the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 was introduced following Federation, Australia has been fixated on tightly controlling who enters the country. This Act set the

foundations for the White Australia Policy and all immigration policies going forward.

Australian policy in relation to refugees and asylum seekers tightened significantly after the confluence of the 9/11 terror attacks in the US in 2001 and in what has become known as “the Tampa incident” when a Norwegian ship rescued 438 asylum seekers off the coast of Australia, ignored an Australian government directive and sailed into the territorial waters of Christmas Island (Triggs, 2018). The Howard government created unprecedented fear that these persecuted refugees, mainly Muslim men from Afghanistan who were seeking asylum, could be terrorists. Klocker and Dunn (2003) argue that the government based this judgement on the fact that the asylum seekers were people perceived to have “strange” identities and from countries not well understood by Australia. Australians were presented with a “horde” of people, seen only from a distance by media and others because of the alleged security concerns. Refugees seeking asylum were crammed on the steel deck of a freighter next to big shipping containers (Marr & Wilkinson, 2004). Zable explains: “it is easy to demonise a horde because a horde is a threat. We saw no individual faces. We heard no individual stories” (Zable, 2013, p.86). In the lead-up to the federal election in 2001 Defence Minister, Peter Reith, went out of his way to draw a link between asylum seekers and terrorism (Henderson, 2001). In four separate interviews on September 13, 2001 he was directly quoted saying "security and border protection go hand in hand," while Prime Minister Howard stated his views about potential terrorists who might be asylum seekers in his 2001 election speech by saying: “We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come” (Howard, 2001). Uncontested fears about “the other” were encouraged (Marr, 2013).

In 2013 Australia’s policies towards refugees and asylum seekers started to be framed in military terms under the auspices of “Operation Sovereign Borders” which continues today and is led by a three-star army general. Briskman (2011) concludes that “we can readily see how fear has been shrouded in a security discourse that positions asylum seekers as potential terrorists...or the other” (p.3). Several sites of immigration detention are operated and funded by the Australian government on the isolated

territories of Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, far from public view. Anyone who arrives in Australia without a visa is subject to mandatory detention and they must remain in detention until they are: granted a visa of some kind, are released into the community if the Minister for Immigration exercises his discretion to do this while refugee claims are being determined, or are deported. Many Australian government policies, particularly in relation to the treatment of asylum seekers, violate Australia's obligations under international law (McAdam & Chong, 2014). Australian society is told there is a border protection crisis and that it is a national emergency. In this context, Australian community attitudes towards asylum seekers have been found to be largely negative (McKay, Thomas and Kneebone 2012). Winton (2015) goes further claiming that Australians have an irrational phobia. "We're afraid of strangers…not rich strangers, but poor strangers, people displaced by war and persecution. We're even scared of their traumatised children" (Winton, 2015, editorial, The Age). In an environment such as this it is hard to develop understanding and empathy.

That said, in 2018, there was a softening of community attitudes towards children being detained on Nauru after prolonged and strong advocacy from organisations like The Refugee Council, Save the Children, the Australian Medical Association and other groups and individuals, under the unifying banner of #KidsoffNauru. The Australian Government reacted to this change by releasing all children and their families into the community in Australia or by transferring them to the United States. A second change in policy came with the passing of the so-called Medivac Bill, which allowed sick refugees to be air-lifted from Nauru and Manus to Australia for urgent medical care. The ruling Coalition government voted against the bill, but it passed with support from Labor, the Greens and a strong block of Independents in the parliament. It will be interesting to examine how campaigning for the Federal Election unfolds. The Coalition has put border protection at the centre of its political messaging since the Howard era, and was building up to a campaign centred around the issue before the mass shooting in Christchurch forced a reset (Murphy, Karp, Chan and Remeikis, 2019).

Fear of the Other

Ignatieff (2017) suggests we do not see people clearly for who they are in a positive sense, but rather that we immediately focus upon the differences and otherness. We make assumptions about whether people are "one of us" or not. Distinguishers such as "clothing, different skin colour, gender, sexual orientation and patterns of speech" guide decisions on otherness (p. 210). Some stories surrounding refugees and asylum seekers go to the heart of our anxieties and fears about "the other". Maley (2016) argues that when groups of people are actively demonised as "the other", "they can be shunned, scorned and pushed to the fringes of society, if not beyond its boundaries" (p.49). This is particularly obvious in the case of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers.

My conversations and resulting creative non-fiction work highlight how fear of "the other" can be mitigated and how understanding can be developed when one is open to the telling and listening of stories. In my creative non-fiction work, Shokoofeh cannot understand why Australians are fascinated by the fact that she came to the country as a political refugee seeking asylum on a boat and is still referred to as "a boat person" seven years after she arrived. "How I got here is not what I'm about. I have stories I want to tell. I had a life before I came, and I have a new life now. Why is it about how different I am?*"* she asked me. Surviving a boat journey should not define a person's identity, but sometimes it does.

Elder (2007) discusses how stories of commonality are often based on exclusion creating a 'them' and 'us' situation. Whitlock (2015) outlines that the dehumanisation of refugees and asylum seekers "binds national imaginaries in terms of some bodies that belong and other bodies that become contaminated and abjected: "things that do not belong" (p.170). As anonymous statistics from countries that are often far away or as people who are locked in detention, away from public view, it is easy to ignore an individual person or to become afraid, particularly, when politicians and media demonise refugees. In this context Whitlock (2015) emphasises what she calls "the more active currency at work in the economy of affect: fear" (p.173).

It is also possible to create a “them” and “us” dualism in relation to religion and culture. Markus (2018) reports that despite between 83 and 86% of respondents agreeing that multiculturalism is good for Australia, the 2018 Scanlon Report highlights that between 2010 and 2018 the level of negative sentiment towards those of a Muslim faith, and by extension to immigrants from Muslim countries, has fluctuated between 22 and 25% (Mapping social cohesion, The Scanlon Foundation Surveys, 2018). The Islamophobia in Australia Report produced by Charles Sturt University analyses community attitudes and behaviour between 2014 and 2016 and reveals that 51.4% of the online harassments about Muslim people were “found to be of a violent nature – expressing, encouraging and facilitating violence.” (*Islamophobia in Australia, 2014-2016,* p.3). The report argues that the threat from far-right groups from different backgrounds needs to be taken more seriously on social media.

Popular Narrative

People often have strong opinions about issues of which they understand little and fear can intensify those feelings (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). For example, Sloman and Fernbach demonstrate that “Americans who most strongly supported military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 were the ones least likely to identify Ukraine on the map” (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017, p.172). Once people feel like an expert, they start talking like an expert and become set in their opinions. Far-right US gun lobbyist and actor, Clint Eastwood, put it more bluntly: “You’ve got your position, and that’s it. It doesn’t take much thought (Schickel, 2005)”. When a group of people don’t know much but share a position, people can reinforce each other’s understanding which leads to everyone feeling their stance is justified (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017, p.173). Untruths about refugees and asylum seekers can spread quickly. It has become easier for politicians to attack “unfavourable news coverage from legitimate sources as fake news, which, in turn, further complicates the ability of citizens to make sense of the ocean of social media messages in which they swim” (Bostdorff, 2017, p.703). The expansion of social media also means people are mostly surrounded by like-minded friends and followers leading to reinforced opinions or the validation

of more extreme views and fear (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). Janis (1983) labelled this “groupthink” and gave the example of how when like-minded people go to dinner with similar views on guns, crime or immigration, everyone’s common feelings are stirred up and by the time they leave the dinner they feel even more supported in their views and feel the right to demand action. To me this is like speaking in an echo chamber hearing only one voice. It is easy to see how the refugee narrative can become de-humanising if like-minded people listen to one perspective and feel strongly negative.

In June 2015, while announcing his candidacy for President of the USA, Donald Trump shocked people worldwide by making a statement about Mexican immigrants. “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best. They're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists and some, I assume there are good people, but I speak to border guards and they're telling us what we're getting” (Young, 2015). As president, he developed his racist anti-immigration trope further when he described African nations, as well as Haiti and El Salvador, as “shitholes” and questioned why so many of their citizens had ever been permitted to enter America (Wintour, Burke & Livsey, Jan 2018, para 1). In Europe, French National Front leader Marine Le Pen in France argued French citizenship should be "either inherited or merited". As for illegal immigrants, they "have no reason to stay in France, these people broke the law the minute they set foot on French soil" (Nowark & Branford, 2017). A similar rhetoric was used in Bulgaria when the government was reported in the media saying, “Syrians who come into the country represent a wave and a threat,” It went on to state: they “carry diseases and hide a danger for Bulgarian citizens” (Kamenova, 2014). Ignatieff (2017) explains that the Hungarian borders were also closed because the Prime Minister said refugees were a threat to Christian civilisation. When politics shapes humanitarian discourse the outcome can be negative for vulnerable human beings. The political consequences of treating refugees as an invasive “other” are immediate: “encampment, detention, forced repatriation, razor wire, desperation and despair” (Ignatieff, 2017, p.224).

On a speaking tour throughout Europe in 2015 former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, lectured the EU about its policies and urged it to take on Australia's border security policies or risk "catastrophic error." He boldly asserted "This crisis can't be managed, it has to be resolved…we stopped illegal boats at sea and escorted them back to Indonesian waters" (Remeikis, 2016, n.p). Chan (2015) wrote how Abbott urged Western nations to "stand up for themselves because the Australian experience proves that the only way to dissuade people seeking to come from afar is not to let them in" (para 3). Fleay (2018) argues that even though he is no longer a government minister, Abbott's statements and those of the current Home Affairs and Immigration Ministers continue to attract substantial media and political coverage in Australia and internationally. These supposed security concerns and fear of the other were demonstrated in the lead up to the 2016 national election in Australia. The Home Affairs Minister, Peter Dutton, falsely claimed in media interviews that: "Many refugees won't be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English". Refugees were further demonised in his conflicting second trope that: "They would take Australian jobs, no doubt about that…or else languish in unemployment queues, on Medicare and the rest of it, so there would be a huge cost" (Karp, 2016).

Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia, responded saying: "Mr Dutton's comments are not only incoherent, they contravene the evidence substantiated by the contributions of hundreds of thousands of refugees who have contributed to our country" (Armstrong, 2016). Research from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015) shows that refugees, people who have proven resilient enough to survive war, famine, and other inconceivable tragedies, are perhaps the most entrepreneurial of all migrants to the country. In their early stages of re-settlement many also access English language classes and pursue further studies as contributing members of the society. Hugo (2011) draws on a wide range of quantitative and qualitative sources to highlight that if a longer-term perspective is taken, humanitarian settlers start to resemble the total employed workforce of Australia. He argues, too, that there is strong evidence of upward mobility between generations. "It needs to be recognised

that humanitarian settlers do make significant economic contributions" (Hugo, 2011, p.22).

In Amina's story, in my creative non-fiction work, I highlight the entrepreneurial approach she and her husband, Osman, have taken after fleeing war-torn Darfur. It provides a counter-narrative to the often-repeated information by politicians and in the media, that refugees, those "others" who have come to the country, are a drag on the economy. While the correction of false information is essential, La Capra (2001) argues that this truth must be considered along with other dimensions such as empathy and responsive understanding to have meaning. I assert that Dutton and his conservative colleagues create fear of the "other" not empathy and understanding, in relation to people of a refugee background.

In 2017, Dutton re-emphasised his position calling asylum seekers who came to Australia by boat "fake refugees". During a media conference he stated: "I wanted to announce today that the Government has taken a decision in relation to those people who are fake refugees…the game is up". (Norman, 2017). His office called them "illegal maritime arrivals", but Dutton preferred "fake refugees" linking it with the widespread populist term "fake news". McGuire (2017) asserts that Dutton's statement reinforces prejudicial tropes that successive governments have used to demonise people seeking asylum in Australia. The subjects of the government's announcement are not "people", "individuals' 'human beings" – or even "asylum seekers". Instead, they are "illegal maritime arrivals" or "fake refugees." They are positioned in people's minds as "others" (McGuire, 2017). Kapuscinski (2008) illustrates what can happen in people's minds when this occurs:

> People feel lost and are increasingly susceptible to suggestions of nationalists and racists who tell them to regard the Other as a threat, an enemy, the cause of all their tiresome frustrations and fears… Each of us creates his own image of the world, unlike any other and for this reason dialogue, though not impossible, demands a serious effort, patience and the will of its participants to understand and communicate (Kapuscinski, 2008, pp.42-43).

Mapping the field of collaborative life writing

When people meet, tell and read stories across cultures and backgrounds, they begin to recognise and bear witness to a range of different experiences, values and ways of imagining a more equal and fairer world (Schaffer & Smith, 2004). Yet there has been limited study of the collaboration between the non-refugee narrators and refugee narrators in life writing. Scholars such as Whitlock (2007, 2015) and Schaffer and Smith (2004) have examined the conjunction of life writing and human rights. My research aims to add to this body of work, specifically the role of the narrator in collaborative life writing. Stories are part of our daily lives and as Didion (1979) suggests, they help us understand who we are and our relationships with each other. In my work, I seek to remove fear of "the other" and fill a void in the way stories from people of a refugee background are narrated. The CEO of World Vision, Tim Costello, states: "we have let ourselves conflate the issues surrounding refugees and asylum seekers with any number of anxieties that we face…this fear mongering sows the seeds of distrust and envy. It is the opposite approach of sitting down with someone and learning their story (Costello, 2013, opinion section)." It is this "sitting down with someone" that I have done to collaborate and share stories.

In examining the current literature in Australia, Freadman (2005) notes that the Jewish post-holocaust life writers have been studied most extensively in Australia and their life writing texts are wide-ranging. However, the non-refugee narrators in Jewish life writing appear to be mainly Jewish people (of second or third generation) writing about their own culture. "There is also a significant body of auto/biographical narratives associated with the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees" published in Australia. (Jacklin, 2011, p.378). *The happiest refugee* (Do, 2010) and *The boat* (Nam, 2008) are two of the most successful and popular of these works. *The boat* is a work of fiction but based heavily on autobiography and family testimony and experience. Like those from the Jewish diaspora, these stories have been written by refugees or their next generation as writers of the same heritage, in this case, Vietnamese.

Whitlock (2007) suggests that since 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan by western forces, there has been a surge of life writing about women under repressive fundamentalist regimes, particularly in Afghanistan. Whitlock traces the large number of books narrated from “behind the veil” appealing to western readers because “the veil is frequently adopted in the west as a sign of Islamic women’s oppression and subordination” (Whitlock, 2007, p.48). Popular examples include: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Nafisi, 2003) and *Lipstick Jihad* (Moaveni, 2006). In Australia, published more recently, *Leila’s secret* (Karimi, 2015) continues the veil trope. Latham (2016) argues that “decades of scholarship challenging the master narrative on Muslim women has not penetrated the public consciousness in the same way as the emotional stories of women’s victim-hoods in Muslim.” (p.225). The veiled images of women in life writing are repeated throughout the Iranian diaspora. Fotouhi (2015) states that “of the 50 or so memoirs published by Iranian women over the last 30 years, nearly half comply with this formula” (p.122). There have however, been attempts to publish a counter narrative to the veiled trope such as *Beyond Veiled Clichés* (Awad, 2017) and *Excellent daughters: the secret lives of young Arab women who are transforming the Arab world (*Zoepf, 2017).

Examples using a collaborative life writing style with a refugee narrator and non-refugee narrator outside the culture of the refugee remain limited. However, I analyse the work of Blixer (2006)**,** Mazari and Hillman (2010) and several others in more detail in Chapter four to highlight differences in approach. The role of the non-refugee narrator varies in each text but demonstrates how these refugee narratives re-position stories from refugees, often living at the margins of society, and give them more mainstream reader appeal. Jacklin (2011) also highlights the increasing number of television reports about these and other refugees, and what he calls **‘**their professional writers**”** as well as the popular appearances at literary festivals by authors writing about refugee issues.

Memoir and biography, including those featuring refugees, continue to be some of the top selling genres for readers. Wild Dingo Press publishes at least two books about people of a refugee background each year. In 2018 these included *Tears for Tarshina (*Olfat, 2018) and *The power of good*

people: surviving Sri Lanka's civil war (Paheer & Corke, 2018). Pan Macmillan Picador published asylum seeker Behrouz Bochani's award winning *No Friend but the Mountains.* Allen & Unwin and Penguin Viking returned to previous best-selling refugee doctor writers for follow-up memoirs in 2018 and 2019: *Going Back* (Munjed Al Muderis, 2019) and *Journey of a thousand storms,* re-printed in 2018, (Karimi, 2018). Several of these books were written by the person of a refugee background while others were written with a non-refugee collaborator/narrator who is unacknowledged in the text.

There are fewer examples in Australian life writing about refugees with a non-refugee narrator being 'acknowledged' in the text. Australian life writing that does feature refugee stories researched and recorded by narrators from non-refugee backgrounds include: *Asylum – Voices behind the razor wire*, (Tyler, 2003); *Lives in limbo,* (Leach and Mansouri, 2004)*; Human cargo: A journey among refugees*, (Moorehead, 2006) *Freeing Ali*, (Gordon, 2005) and *Refugee: The diary of Ali Ismail*, (Sunderland 2006). In addition, *Violin Lessons, Z*able (2011), which I discuss further in Chapter four, and some of the individual essays and contributions to *A country too far – writings on asylum seekers* edited by Scott and Keneally (2013), reflect this style.

My approach to collaborative life writing

I have four main goals in my research and collaborative life writing. First, I want to fill a void by proposing a different approach to writing refugee life stories using testimony and by positioning myself in the text as what Behar (1996) describes as "a vulnerable observer" to help build empathy and understanding among the readers. Secondly, I will demonstrate how a hybrid version of a participatory action research (PAR) model creates an interesting form of collaborative life writing with people of a refugee background. Thirdly I discuss the impact of narrators on the creation of biographical stories about people from a refugee background and fourthly I explore the key themes of identity and belonging and what they mean for the refugee and non-refugee narrator in my work.

My own style of collaborative life writing proposes an alternative to the more typical testimonial narrative that does not always reach public

consciousness because, as Whitlock (2015) argues, life writing about refugees “can languish unremarked and unwitnessed when its public becomes estranged and unsympathetic” (p.169)

My exegesis and creative work help fill a void in understanding collaborative life writing with refugees in relation to the complex issue of narration and identity.

Empathic unsettlement

To do this I explore the life stories of refugees through Dominick La Capra’s (2001) lens of “empathic unsettlement”, that is, being responsive to the traumatic experience of others. La Capra has critiqued both those who adhere strictly to an unemotional, facts-only, approach to writing about trauma and those who immerse themselves in the traumatic event. I examine the practice of life writing and the role of the non-refugee narrator who is immersed in a story, exposing what La Capra calls “the hauntingly possessive ghosts of traumatic events that are not fully owned by anyone, but in various ways affect everyone (La Capra, 2001, p. xxxi).” In my creative non-fiction work I illustrate how collaboration with individual refugees can find new readers by changing the way refugee testimony is presented (La Capra, 2001; Behar, 2003; Eastmond, 2007). As an historian, La Capra has an open mind about the role that non-fiction and other genres, including literary fiction, philosophy and psychoanalysis, can play in understanding trauma and history. He has spent much of his academic life studying stories and testimony from the Holocaust, how they are told and how empathy is created. He argues that the writer should attempt to understand and explain experience and behaviour of others “and as far as possible recognise the unsettling possibility of such behaviour and experience in him or herself…” (La Capra, 2001, p.41). By acting as a guide to my readers I hope to appeal to a wide readership building such empathy. I share aspects of the familiar from my life and theirs coupled with parts of the unfamiliar and challenging from the life of the refugee person. My goal in my creative non-fiction work is for this experience to be unsettling, but at the same time for it to draw feelings of empathy. However, empathy cannot be created by presenting the facts only. Research and facts are important in history but as La Capra

(2001) argues “it’s not all of it.” There are other important dimensions including an emotional response, empathy and responsive understanding. Engagement and understanding involve affects in both the observed and in the observer (La Capra, 2001).

The accompanying creative non-fiction work interprets the lives of 11 women and three men from refugee backgrounds, as they discuss their lives, identity and what it means to belong. Neumann (2015) argues that “readers are likely to be overwhelmed by the dimensions and complexity of the refugee problem and it is therefore necessary to also write about one refugee to highlight many” (p.10).

I adopt the auto-ethnological approach of Behar (1996) to write about refugee and migrant lives; one lived and written in a personal voice. Behar (1996) has created a way to involve herself as a researcher in the story, by becoming part of the story as an observer-participant and by allowing herself vulnerability which often entwines with the vulnerability of the person in her story.

To have empathy we need to be able to identify ourselves with (and so fully comprehend) another person, to move away from seeing “the other”. For these reasons, Whitlock (2015) argues that refugee and asylum seeker testimony must move into “new assemblages of life narrative that begin not to merely record but rethink how these distant strangers come to be rendered human” (p.169). If the reader can see truth in the testimony and narrative, it may be possible to move beyond “the one-dimensional, objectifying, narrow contexts to expose the self to empathic unsettlement” (La Capra, 2001, p.41).

The women and men who have participated in the stories presented in my creative non-fiction work have all expressed satisfaction in being able to share their personal stories, in a safe environment, to explain their lived experience as an Australian person from a refugee background. Amran stated: “I love how we have told my story together and how you have placed yourself in my story to give a sense of time and place for interested Australians. We both have voices and our on-going conversation gives more meaning to the issues I face as a refugee and as a Muslim woman, I think.” Eastmond (2007) argues that it is only from these personal accounts that we

can gain a better understanding of diversity and the other over-used expression of “the refugee experience”.

I have chosen to write as a non-refugee woman with, and about, women from a refugee background in my creative non-fiction work to build a better understanding about the complexity of women from a refugee background and to fill a gap in the literature. Deacon and Sullivan (2009) argue that women’s experiences as refugees have consistently been overlooked in favour of a male dominated narrative or even, as Whitlock (2007) argues, submerged under pressure from the bookselling market to produce one-dimensional narratives such as “the veiled best-seller” about refugee or migrant women from the Middle East (p.88). Dessaix (2011) writes of “pushing back the dark” to expose the truth about individual lives that are not lived in the limelight. I seek to “push back the dark” and go beyond the label of “refugee woman”.

My research and writing contribute to a body of work about narrating refugee life stories and introduces a different approach, to demonstrate how an Australian non-refugee narrator can help anchor and locate the stories of people from a refugee background in the present to make them relevant and accessible. I also propose a way to make the stories more engaging for readers to understand in the context of their own lives.

In the next chapter I will examine the ethical issues of writing collaboratively with a person from a refugee background and the modified style of participatory action research (PAR) that I have employed to help mitigate power imbalances that exist between the refugee narrator and non-refugee narrator.

Chapter Two:

Methodology and Ethical Changes

My research centres on 11 women and three men from a refugee background who have shared conversations and interviews with me over the last four years to create collaborative life stories. The women are aged from 23 to 45 years of age and the three men are in their 30s, 40s and 60s. They come from a diverse range of countries that include Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Eritrea, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan, representing a range of religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Methodology

I implemented a modified (PAR) framework based on a model created by Halilovich (2013) which provides both the person of a refugee background and a non-refugee narrator with a way to express themselves, while at the same time building mutual understanding over an extended period. Participatory action research is not a single research method such as a focus group, interview or survey but rather it has a focus on collaboration in research (Halilovich, 2013). Action research is best thought of as an umbrella term for a family of practices that seek to create participative communities of enquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The focus is on the participants' inclusion in the research process as both subjects and as research collaborators. This combination of research and continuous discussions led to the development of the creative non-fiction text. The Collaborators felt part of the process and that their contribution was valued. A self-reflexive journal enabled me as a researcher to include aspects of memoir as the non-refugee narrator in the creative non-fiction work. According to Watson (2018), common to the different approaches within participatory action research is "the use of cycles or spirals of action and reflection (planning, action, evaluation of the results of action) (p.5)." These cycles and spirals run continuously through the discussion and interview process of creating each story in my creative non-fiction work. The model allows for the necessary degree of self-reflexivity to attempt to understand the complexities of each

person. The resulting narrative explores identity as a process, not as one static thing. It re-enforced my research that the person from a refugee background has agency, voice and the ability to control their own story. As I demonstrate in my creative work, I have produced a narrative about “what we did together” (Wicks & Reason 2009, p.244). As Patton (1990) argues “validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p.169).

I used a snowballing technique to recruit participants from my established networks of people from a refugee background, from refugee advocates and from people known to me in refugee support groups. Denscombe (1997) shows that this allows the researcher to have a credibility and reliability because they are known by a named person. In other words, my collection of stories has been created from a series of referrals made within a group of people who know one another, the cyclic nature permitting loops in which a named contact from one source knows someone from an earlier wave (Platzer and James, 1997).

The importance of building ethical consent processes was addressed at the beginning of my research with the participants. They were given a plain English summary of my research along with a written consent form (See Appendix 1). I also spent time with each prospective participant explaining the research, the process, my experience in refugee communities and my current work with refugees at several not-for-profit agencies. I answered any questions and concerns that participants had before we began the interviews and during the research process. The research was conducted in accordance with the NHMRC National statement on ethical conduct involving humans and with ethics approval from Curtin University.

To research and write each person’s life story in my creative work involved between three and five meetings and interviews. It also included us attending several social occasions together such as a book launch, an art exhibition or a local football match and, with some participants, meeting their family and friends. The interviews and conversations were conducted over an extended period in a conversational style at different locations chosen by

each person with no structured format or set time. Ghorashi (2007) argues that this type of dialogue allows people more room and time and space to express themselves compared to a time imposed, structured interview. I transcribed each interview myself to ensure I captured the nuance and silence in the discussion. Sometimes, as Ghorashi (2007) suggests the memories are too painful and cause great sadness but it is imperative to include moments of silence because it is often during this time that the researcher can discover different and deeper layers within the interview. Once I had written a draft, together we shaped the narrative into a story that includes the direct testimony of the person, conversation, background, context and my own reflections and learnings. Conversations turned on phrases such as: “Oh, we must include more about my mother,” or “ I don’t think I want to say that publicly…it was ok when we were just chatting, but not for our manuscript, let’s take it out,” or “I want to tell you more about this subject” or “This is exactly right.” Sometimes it was a matter of “No, no Rose I didn’t mean that -- you misunderstood.” The other aspect of the stories related to the conversations about, and with, me. Some were very personal and demonstrate the level of trust that developed between me and the women. For example: “So where is home for you, Rose?” “Why doesn’t anyone ask you about your religion or culture?” “Why aren’t you a Catholic anymore?” “How did your mother die?” “Why do Australians put their parents in these places (old people’s homes)? In my country, you look after your old parents in your own home. Why didn’t you look after Terry’s dad at your home…you have this big house?”

All the draft stories were read out loud together, usually over tea or coffee, in a relaxed and informal setting, chosen by the person of a refugee background. Sometimes this meant their home or my home, or a neutral comfortable venue like the Centre for Stories, a library or even a quiet corner in a café. By including some of these conversations and the interplay that resulted, both of us felt that the reader would experience a richer and more honest representation of the person’s life and our relationship on the page. One complication that emerged from these on-going conversations was how to determine an end date. Even when both of us agreed the story was complete, some participants wanted to keep adding to it, especially trying to

add more information about their activities. For example, after one participant and I agreed we had finished her story together, including multiple read throughs, in the months that followed I received numerous Whatsapp messages updating me on recent activities that could be included in the story. I did not want to harm the trust that we had developed but had to be firm that the story as written in the time we spent together was completed. As my supervisor said; “you have to know when to bring things to a close.” Once that was understood, it became easier and our relationship continued outside the collaborative life writing.

Life writing narratives, with this degree of involvement become methodologically more complex, but as Eastmond (2007) argues “they can also open up theoretically more interesting possibilities: for one, they make room for a more dynamic view of the individual as subject, acting in the world and reflecting on that action” (p.250). Like Eastmond’s, my own experience illustrates that by sharing authority, engagement in longer discussions, reviewing what was written together, adjusting or including more information, different viewpoints and discussion topics emerged over the time.

Bergold and Thomas (2012) describes a collaboration similar to mine as one which engages the participants as co-researchers and co-subjects who jointly generate ideas, design the project and construct the conclusions. This joint design and construction are illustrated during my conversations with a group of young Muslim Australian women. There was always a flexible design about how we met and who attended our discussions. Communication was always very fluid, often on social media before-hand. If someone was unable to attend, she would send an email or set of short recordings on What’sApp and this would be fed into the conversation. The methodology allowed me as interviewer, researcher and narrator more time for reflection, the ability to expand and deepen the story and to understand the context of each person’s story. It also allowed the participants’ time to think through the issues and add or delete parts of their story. Contribution and collaboration by all parties means narratives “can emerge spontaneously as part of informal conversations during field work” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 261). Listening to how the women interacted with each other and how they

discussed what it meant to be Muslim in Australia led to new insights for all of us. Jamila commented:

> I really love the quotes by Sara, Tamkin and Nafiso because they really resonate with me, in that the concept of home is deeply rooted with where our loved ones are. It helps me understand the strange pull I have towards Pakistan, all simply because my extended family live there.

The thoughts and conversations of the participants in the chapter were shared with each person in the chapter and the drafts of the story were read and reflected on with ideas, additions or changes being generated. These were then incorporated into the next draft. This demonstrates another way in which the action research model operates. Dick, Stringer and Huxham (2009) describe it this way: “thought guides action, which in turn guides thought” (p.6). Dick et al (2009) describe this process as a way “to make the most of action research’s ability to be responsive to people, their present understanding and their situation” (p.9). From an anthropological point of view Eastmond (1996) notes that some would see what she does in research and writing as a compromise in her field work. She comments that in much anthropology, personal narratives do not stand alone, they have usually been absorbed within a larger body of data and combined into an overall analysis and summary. However, she, like me, has found value in stories as lived experience as a stand-alone field of study. She would always discuss draft versions of text with narrators where possible. “Such joint readings have often provided new dimensions of understanding on both sides, illustrating the processual and open-ended character of interpretation” (Eastmond, 1996, p.261). Far from a compromise, I see this method of collaborative writing as an expansion of a research process and an important addition to understanding the refugee lived experience. I have adopted Reason and Bradbury’s suggestions for those who engage in action research to “delight in and celebrate the sheer exuberance and diversity that is available to you and to be creative in how you use and develop it” (Quoted in Watson (2018) Reason and Bradbury 2008b, p.7).

Personally, I experienced this delight when I invited Shokoofeh to meet several other local writers with me. I was surprised how easily a professional and social bond developed. We then attended each other's writing groups, shared morning teas and supported each other at writing festivals and conferences. Our literary conversations became richer and we found common ground as we learnt more about each other's work. Jackson (2002) reminds us that:

> without stories, without listening to one another's stories there can be no recovery of the social, no overcoming our separateness, no discovery of common ground or common cause (p.102).

The inclusion of each person's testimony directly transcribed from the tape and clearly block indented throughout *Stitching the fabric of life* is an important part of my process. As I have noted it was reaffirming to the participant to hear their voice and realise their agency in the process. There are of course limitations to this process as I will now discuss.

Power imbalance and ethical challenges

There are many complex narrative and ethical issues involved in collaborative life writing. Leading scholars have highlighted the potential vulnerabilities and power differentials that pervade relationships between a researcher and a perceived vulnerable person such as a refugee (Couser, 2004; Block, Riggs & Haslam; 2013, Smith & Watson, 2010). As a white middle-class woman, I am conscious of the ethnically, educationally and socially privileged group to which I belong in Australia. I am highly conscious of the power issues between me and the person of a refugee background, so my work has been focussed on empowering my collaborators. The researcher "is always in the dominant position" (Marmo, 2013, p.94). At the end of the day I am in control of the material and make the decision about the final text. While my co-collaborators have contributed their knowledge and their stories, I am still the researcher and writer with my own motivations (Pillow, 2003). In this context the participatory model and collaborative style of writing can assist in mitigating the power imbalance. As Lawrence et al. (2013) argue, researchers should see themselves as optimising the words,

voices and independence of participants. I believe that the respect and levels of trust that were developed between the refugee collaborator and me as the non-refugee narrator in the PAR model assisted in lessening the power imbalance. One illustration of this trust was noted by Fauzia. “My English is not good enough to write about my own life, so it was better to tell you everything and work with you. Farid and me still felt like we had control over our story.” Amran, too, talked about her joy and trust in our collaborative story-telling. “I love all our direct quotes and how you have positioned yourself as a participant and an observer. I watched our conversations unfold in writing. It was wonderful.”

I am also conscious I carry what McIntosh (1989) identifies as “white privilege in an invisible knapsack” (n.p). I have always had a roof over my head and a place to call home. I don’t know what it feels like to be hungry and thirsty and I don’t know what it is like to be threatened by people wielding guns, forcing me to flee in terror. I don’t wake up every day longing for freedom and safety. In fact, I rarely think about those things. Whiteness, and the luck of where I was born, has protected me from many kinds of violence and distress.

What I do to counter this as much as possible is to work in a vulnerable observer participant role in the creative non-fiction work. I expose my own feelings and frailties using conversation as a method to better understand the circumstances of another person’s life. I do as Anzaldua (2002) explains, I go beyond the researcher/subject divide by engaging people through conversation.

The cross-cultural nature of my research also raised ethical concerns in relation to power. What is ethical in one country and what is embarrassing or difficult in one culture may not be in another place or country. To counter the power imbalance of speaking only in the English language, the dominant language of my country, I invited only fluent English-speaking participants. This avoided the influence of a third-party interpreter and any difficulty in expression by the participant in sharing their story. While it is accepted that this itself is a bias, the participants were selected from a wide diversity of age, country of origin, culture, religion and length of time in Australia.

Another major consideration is the possible re-traumatising of a person, particularly if there might be harm associated with re-telling potentially traumatic experiences. Reflexive practice, such as frequent journal use along with collaborative and participatory methods may alleviate some of risks of re-traumatising people (Block, Warr, Gibbs & Riggs, 2013; Pittaway, Bartolomei & Hugman, 2010). In the event that any participant in this research project experienced distress or discomfort, the following process was applied:

- Participants were made aware of appropriate counselling and support services that they could access, should they experience discomfort or distress through their participation.
- Iterative consent processes were used such that consent of the participant was re-negotiated throughout the interview, in order to maximise the voluntary nature of participation. The iterative process of concurrent data collection and analysis informing interviews and writing through the modified PAR model I used, continuously shaped the on-going qualitative research.
- Participants were reminded throughout the process of the voluntary nature of their participation.

McDowell (2013) when discussing what “refugeeness” means, argues that university ethics committees are unquestionably inclined to treat refugees as vulnerable, and argues that this underestimates the fact that people, even in stressful situations, are more robust than we give them credit for, and capable of making decisions. Block, Riggs et al. (2013) warn that our predominantly Western cultures and values shape the identities of groups like refugees which leads us to want to protect and not harm refugees. However, in doing so, this often results in an erasure of refugee voices. My own research so far, has demonstrated that erasure is unlikely for those agreeing to participate in this type of collective collaborative life writing. The idea of vulnerability is a contested concept in research even though it is almost automatically assumed when considering the ethics of research with disadvantaged groups (Couser, 2004; Block, Riggs et al, 2013). The people from a refugee background participating in my research and sharing their

stories have expressed their appreciation for being given the opportunity to work with a collaborator. Researchers, such as Fleay and Briskman (2013) and Fleay and Hartley (2015), have reported similar positive outcomes, arguing that failing to engage refugees and asylum seekers in research about their conditions may constitute a further assault on identity and agency.

Finally, by allowing myself to become "a vulnerable observer", I was conscious of my own risk of potential harm. I had access to two supervisors with extensive experience in researching and publishing in the traumatic life writing field and in researching and writing about the rights of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. I also had access to a psychologist, who along with my supervisors, provided opportunities for de-briefing after sharing any stressful or traumatic testimony or conversations.

Vulnerability and empathy

By combining the methods of La Capra (2001) and Behar (1996) in my creative non-fiction work I believe a relationality between writer and reader is created. Felman and Laub (1992) contend that the specific task of any literary testimony, such as life writing, must be to "open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capacity of perceiving history – what is happening to others – in one's own body"(p.108). Opening and exposing yourself in a story as a spectator, must take the reader somewhere they could not or would not be able to go otherwise (Behar, 1996).

> You are not just capturing these raw experiences as a writer…you are shaping the narrative and adding your own interpretation and analysis. You're layering the gift of someone else's narrative with your sense of what the narrative is telling you (Behar quoted in Neile, 2009).

In my work I also explore Felman and Laub's (1992) notion that any sort of testimony must be "literary" to engage readers. I use creative non-fiction to tell a true story by using literary devices such as scene setting and interesting dialogue to engage my reader. I agree with Felman and Laub (1992) who argue this literary approach and context can provide a clearer understanding of history – what is happening to others – in one's own body

through imaginative acts. For testimony to be heard though, Smith and Watson (2010) remind us that it needs a sympathetic listener. I act as that sympathetic listener for the reader because of my position as an involved "vulnerable observer". Behar (1996) comments that it is far from easy to locate oneself in one's own text. "It requires a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world, and, more importantly, the topic being studied" (Behar,1996, p.13). At Moe Moe's house when we were reading through her descriptions of her grandfather's torture by the Burmese military the following situation unfolded. After several very difficult passages there was a long pause. I closed my eyes briefly absorbing the silence, not worrying about my tape recorder and this dialogue ensued:

Rose: We don't have to continue if you want to stop. I can see it is upsetting.

Moe Moe: But we must.

More silence

Rose: Only if you want to, this just seems too hard. We could leave this part out if you would like.

Moe Moe: Thank you. But, no. I want to tell you, I want to tell someone my story.

Rose: OK

Moe Moe: You can help me tell this story. I want people to understand.

It is important.

Rose: Yes, it is.

I became what Smith and Watson (2010) describe as a "second-hand witness" who responds to the trauma of the person explaining what they witnessed. Ghorashi (2007) explains she sometimes had to stop her interviews with Iranian women from a refugee background and cry along with them because I immediately thought about my own loved ones and people who I had lost" (p.125). This has been my experience with all the women I have interviewed. Empathic unsettlement is uncomfortable. But a willingness to engage in acts of empathic imagination alongside the unsettlement can highlight a sense of similarity with other human beings, regardless of their

background (Lawrence et al, 2013). With this recognition I contend a better understanding of the refugee lived experience can emerge.

As I listened to Shokoofeh talk about her job as a journalist, I was able to recall my own time as a journalist and use this imaginative capacity and vulnerability to perceive her history alongside my own. I was able to highlight Shokoofeh's story by comparing her experience to my relative safety writing political stories in a city office surrounded by supportive writers and editors. Unlike Shokoofeh, I didn't have to think about censorship, jail or freedom.

Whitlock (2015) argues, however, that testimony from asylum seekers and refugees rarely "crosses the threshold of public discourse to engage a witnessing public" (p.169). My goal as a researcher and writer is to assist more testimony, that is turned into stories, to cross the threshold and reach this broader audience. I believe creative non-fiction can find new readers in this way. The use of life stories as a method has been crucial for this project because the central role of collaborative storytelling has enabled me as a researcher to shift between the positions of interviewer, listener, "vulnerable observer" and participant, collaborator and writer. In this way life writing can raise consciousness about human rights and contribute to activism. (Smith & Watson 2001; Whitlock 2007, 2015).

As discussed, La Capra (2001) and Ghorashi (2007) suggest that at least in certain forms of literature or art, a more "expansive space" can be created for discussion about traumatic experiences and their impact. In the expansive space, formed by creative non-fiction, my intention is to challenge common perceptions about refugees and asylum seekers. Ghorashi (2007) asserts that by creating enough space, the researcher can go beyond the assumptions prior to research and incorporate the dynamics and inter-play of conversation to gain new insights. In psychoanalytic terms, La Capra (2001) calls this expansive space a relatively safe haven for the reflection of difficult issues. He notes that it allows the writer of modern literature to work in a largely non-conventional narrative style. In my case, that has meant working with an open-ended discussion and interview style. Ghorashi (2007) has noted that in order to capture refugees' experiences and narratives it is necessary to create "a space within research" to see and understand "the untold within interviews." I implement techniques of creative non-fiction which

include an authorial presence in the text where the writer features as a teller or character (Hesse, 2009). My role as a social commentator allows me to dig deeply for more facts and context to provide the reader with a three-dimensional approach to an issue (Gutkind, 1997) to challenge common perceptions about refugees and asylum seekers. My research supports the premise of Schaffer and Smith (2004) who claim that through acts of memory both individuals and groups of people can “narrate alternative or counter histories coming from the margins” particularly if they have suffered torture, persecution or displacement (p.16).

Having demonstrated how I implemented a version of PAR in the development of collaborative life stories and managed the ethical and narrative complexities of this work, I will now illustrate how identity is related to story and place in these instances.

Chapter Three:

How we create identity in narrative

> "I recognise that I am made up of several persons and that the person that at the moment has the upper hand will inevitably give place to another. But which one is the real one? All of them or none of them?"
>
> *Somerset Maugham. A writer's notebook. UK: Random House (2011) p.19*

The purpose of this chapter is to examine what factors influence people of a refugee background as they negotiate their identity, sense of belonging and home in the context of their displacement. Sacks (1985) claims that "each of us constructs and lives a narrative and that this narrative is us, our identities" (p.110). Eakin (2008) contends that narrative is not only literary, but part of the fabric of our lived experience suggesting our life stories are not "merely *about* us but in a profound and inescapable way *are* us…" (Eakin, 2008, preface, p.*x*). Narrative is the fabric and stitching of our lives but for many people of a refugee background, the fabric of their lived experience is unstitched or torn apart. Schaffer and Smith (2004) state that during "dislocations and relocations, personal and collective storytelling can become one way in which people claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere" (p.8).Throughout my conversations with participants, having a place to call home and having a clear identity appeared to be closely connected.

According to Al-Ali and Koser (2002) transnational theory recognizes "that the concepts of home are not static but dynamic processes involving acts of imagining, creating, unmaking, changing, losing and moving homes" (p.6). This "imagining, creating, unmaking and changing" replicates the process of identity making that I am exploring. I have adopted an approach to identity that recognises it as fluid, constructed and relational. "Identities are in language. They are discursive. They are not essential – born, inherited or natural – though much in social organisation leads us to regard identity as given and fixed" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p.39). Belonging, however, for the participants in my creative non-fiction work appears different. While there is a

connection to home and identity, belonging appears a more intimate state. It is “feeling ‘rooted’ somewhere, like you belong…like you feel part of something that is secure” (Mason, 2007, p.274). My research serves as a reminder that not all notions regarding “the refugee experience” and identity are the same or uniform. As Eastmond (2007) suggests, and as I emphasise in *Stitching the fabric of life*, refugees are not necessarily helpless victims, but rather likely to be people with agency and voice. Accepting this, it can be understood that identities are fluid or as Ghorashi (2007) states they are “not static”. Identity is “a process and life story becomes one of the few methods that can grasp the process”(p.119). Based on my observations, the participants in my creative non-fiction work support an understanding that home, identity and belonging are intrinsically linked.

Stories are never transparent renditions of reality, only selected parts. But through listening and the development of trust in the process of storytelling and honest conversation, I illustrate how people can come to recreate a more fully formed identity and a place in the world that may have been lost in the process of dislocation.

For Virginia Woolf, writing acts as a mirror through which she reflects on the subtlety and variability of identity (Howard, 2007). Events and ideas become whole and manageable for her once they are put into language. The unity of language creates the insight where “behind the cotton wool is a hidden pattern” (Woolf, 1976, p.72). Feedback from refugee collaborators in *Stitching the fabric of life* has indicated that writing their story has enabled them to see their lives more clearly after they have discussed all the different parts. Like Woolf, I am convinced about the fragmentary nature of the private self and the impossibility of selfhood being confined to a single narrative (Gordon, 1995). Smith and Watson (2010) critique what readers of a biographical and autobiographical work expect such a work to tell, and that is, unified stories of lives, or at least to create and locate coherent selves. However, they argue the unified story and coherent self are myths of identity (Smith & Watson, 2010). Narrative truth means we must accept the imperfect and fluid work of memory, organisation and meaning (Eastmond, 2007). Working with people of a refugee background, I have concluded that the concept of identity – who the person is in their day to day life – can be

fragmented due to violence, persecution and being forced to flee his or her home.

We tell stories about ourselves every day and Eakin (2008) contends that even when we can't get other people to listen to them, at any given moment, this process of self-narration is constantly unfolding in our heads in some sort of manner. My creative non-fiction work has enabled people from a refugee background to work collaboratively with me to "constantly unfold", explore and narrate their lives. Just like Maugham (2011), who wrote of the struggle to identify which person he was, there were challenges for my collaborators as my conversation with Moe Moe demonstrates:

> I have been thinking about things, so I can tell you my story. There is my life in Rangoon, Burma, my life living in the jungles on the Thai-Burma border, where my parents were rebel fighters, my time spent living in Thailand in a refugee camp and Bangkok and, of course, my life now in Australia. So, you see, there are four of me.

When Rasha shared her story of attempting to flee persecution and being imprisoned in detention centres in Iran and Turkey, she spoke of "being without control for years." She told me she got depressed and didn't know who she was anymore. When Amina and her family became embroiled in a civil war that threatened their lives and home in Sudan, they were jolted into another life which included fear and sadness caused by war and dislocation. "You can't live like that," Amina told me of her life in Sudan. "You have to start again. You have to stay strong even though parts of you are terrified." These women have multiple stories, and multiple selves, both negative and positive, that make up who they are. As Rasha now insists: "I want people to understand all of me. I am strong. I survived many things and I am making a new life in Australia. I want people to understand that isn't easy." Rasha exhibited a different concept of self in the complicated situations she found herself in – time in prison, running from persecution, taking on a false identity to evade detection and pass through border security, living in a refugee camp before finally finding safety in Australia, building a new home for her family, gaining work and seeking citizenship. Adichie (2009) speaks about the danger of a single story. "To insist on only

the negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the other stories that formed me." (Ted talk. 2009.12 mins 45 sec). Story-telling is elucidatory for people such as Amina and Rasha. Amina observed: "it's been good talking about my life and experiences. I can put it all together now."

Searching for identity

Gullestad (quoted in Eakin, 2004, p.218) discusses the never-ending attempt by refugees she interviewed to create what she calls "a sustainable self-image, a concept that implies the possession of self-respect and dignity over time". Throughout my interviews and research with people who have been displaced and find themselves in a new country, identity has been a key issue. The forced removal of a person from "a socially- constructed time, space and people that constitute a home may challenge the refugees' understanding of their place in the world" (Taylor, 2013, p.142). Identity is a multi-faceted and complex construct for all of us, but in the context of forced migration Taylor (2013) suggests complexity and contradiction go hand in hand and must be accepted if we are to achieve any understanding of the lived experience in exile and find any common ground.

Throughout her research, Eastmond (2007) notes that people of a refugee background "create a sense of continuity in who they are by linking selves in different ways to time and place" (Eastmond, 2007, p.254). By the time Moe Moe's story was completed, she felt she had a better understanding of "how her life fitted together." When I was reading through one young man's story with him several years ago, he was moved to tears. He had been separated from his family in southern Sudan by civil war, forced to serve as child soldier and spent over ten years in various African refugee camps before being accepted as a refugee in Australia. He told me: "I know who I am now. You have allowed me to reconcile my past in my present and put the parts of me together at last" (Sayer, R. personal interview, November 2015). Turmoil, violence and dislocation had fractured this man's sense of identity. As Schaffer and Smith note:

> Such dislocations of identity unsettle psychically experienced understandings of time (the before, the now, the possible future), space (the old place, the new place), subjectivity (the me I used to be

and the me I am becoming), and the community (the ones to which I used to belong and the ones of which I am now a member) (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p.4).

Many of us may suffer dislocation of identities throughout our lives, but as I have discussed, for people of a refugee background, this can be more severe. In conversations with a young woman from Pakistan, I saw this fracturing of identity once again through the process of story-telling. She escaped persecution in Pakistan and came to Australia as an asylum seeker on a boat and was detained in offshore detention for several years. A year after her release she is still trying to find her identity. “The people who locked me up stole my soul and who I was,” she told me. She explains she “still feels confused and lost for much of the time without family support as she struggles to make a new life in Australia.” Through our collaboration, she commented she felt she has been given a chance to re-establish her identity in an Australian context. “I could not have told my story without our discussions and your interviews. I was so confused I could not put my own ideas together, plus my English writing skills are no good” (Sayer, R. Personal interview, 18 July 2016). I observed in this conversation that the participant was able to pull together the fragmentary nature of her life to come to a better understanding of her identity and her home, but she has not yet found a sense of belonging.

The “refugee woman” label and identity

As I have discussed, refugees are not a homogenous collective of people “that somehow have to do more with ‘them’ than with ‘us’” (Halilovich, 2013, p.129). As I have highlighted the word “refugee” often has negative connotations, but when we talk about “a woman refugee”, these assumptions grow. Lenette and Cleland (2016) have demonstrated there are recurring themes in how women from a refugee background are portrayed in the media and by some NGOs. According to Johnson (2011) who conducted a detailed analysis of UNHCR publication images, the image of the refugee has been reframed in the last 60 years from “the heroic, political (mainly male) individual to a nameless flood of poverty-stricken women and children” (p.1033). This familiar framing is now associated with images of children

staring at the camera looking lost and dirty wearing torn clothing (Lenette & Cleland, 2016). Refugees are often depicted as vulnerable mothers with children or babies that echo the religious image of the Madonna and child. Johnson (2011) argues that this imagery supports the representation of a vulnerable mother with no political agency or voice and it is often used by NGOs and the media to elicit sympathy. In these circumstances, one can often underestimate the fact that people, even in stressful situations, are more robust and are capable of making decisions. Block, Riggs et al (2013) explore how our predominantly Western cultures and values shape the identities of groups like refugees, making us want to protect and not harm refugees, but in doing so it often results in an erasure of refugee voices.

Deacon and Sullivan (2009) discuss how refugee women's experiences are qualitatively different from those of men. Women have been long overlooked in favour of a male centred paradigm that governs the response to survivors of warfare (Comas-Diaz & Jansen, 1995). Given refugees often experience war, Adie (2013) reminds us that "the history of the war has been almost entirely written by men…and many general histories have no female names in the index" (Adie, 2013. para 10). She argues women, including those from a refugee background, have views on war and peace because both touch everyone in some way and women should not be written out of history. I support the notion that the "narrative threads are more complexly woven by women" (Gergen, 1992, p.140). Their stories are about individuals who are embedded in a variety of relationships each affecting identity. Rasha eloquently described to me how being alone in a strange country with her husband who was struggling to settle impacted her. "I found I had to be mother, aunty, uncle, grandma and grandfather…my husband could only be the husband." This admission came after several conversations and meetings and support Ghorashi's (2007) findings that life story as a qualitative method is particularly helpful for marginalised groups such as women, because it provides more room and time for reflection enabling women to express themselves more freely. It is also a way for women to counter the implications of the popular narrative that positions them as a female victim (Johnson, 2011, p.1033).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding why some groups, most often minority women, experience greater social marginalization, discrimination and violence than others (Bedolla, 2007). In the context of my work with women of a refugee background this framework is useful because subjectivities and identities are many rather than singular, diverse rather than insular. Abeysekara (2002) explains that an intersectional analysis involves understanding circumstances from the perspective that we all have shifting multiple identities, and, as I have demonstrated in my work, how different identities become relevant at different times and in different situations. Pittaway and Pittaway (2004) contend that "the label refugee woman carries with it multiple intersecting and compounding layers of oppression" (p.119), but they suggest that it should be possible to separate the layers and address each one by one. A woman's identity must be considered in the context of cultural, ethical, national and gender identity which all have their own dynamics and shift according to who does the story-telling (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004).

A woman from a refugee background could be viewed as "an object of pity, but she may also be a person of great bravery who has taken part in her own political struggles, alongside or ahead of men; within her ethnic group she may be a leader or she may be a skilled healer; on her own she may have protected and nurtured her family in the worst of conditions" (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004, p.123). My research confirmed my view that women often remain the gatekeeper of the cultural, religious and historical memories as well as being what I call "the glue" of the family. In *Stitching the fabric of life* this is clearly illustrated by Bella's mother and grandmother. Bella's mother took her child alone, to walk hundreds of miles to find safety at a refugee camp skirting fighting and soldiers, alongside dead bodies on the way to ensure she and her child got to safety. Bella's grandmother, the matriarch of the family, stayed behind with those members of the extended family who could not, or chose not, to leave. She was the respected leader of the family and held her family together, while directing actions in their village. My research contests the view that women from a refugee background are only

oppressed, limited, powerless, religious, veiled, burdened or conservative. Without understanding the complexity of the layers that are present in a woman's identity, it is easy for a discussion about identity to become one about labels. Amran told me: "I have more identities and labels than I know what to do with. First, I am a woman. Secondly, I am black, thirdly I wear a head scarf and fourthly I wear the refugee label, but don't forget I am a teacher, a writer, a mother, a daughter and a sister too." Ghorashi (2007) argues that an identity is not a complete whole, but is in fact "unsettled, ambiguous, mostly elusive and subject to change in a new context" (p.119). Amran's story confirms the importance of understanding identity through the lens of intersectionality and as Eakin (2004) argues "life writing has the potential to reform dehumanising models of self and life story that society would impose on disempowered groups" (p.11).

My own narrative identity

I have collaborated with women from diverse cultures and backgrounds from countries that include Afghanistan, Burma, Burundi, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan, Somalia and Palestine. I wondered whether we would share anything in common. If I could empathise and understand their lives, would they empathise and understand mine? The answer is yes; but the writing challenged me ethically and it often unsettled me. As well, our on-going conversations over a three- and half--year period seemed to produce as many questions as answers. McFadzean (1999) contends that "the demand for meaning is the basis of the human experience" (p.36). The collaborative story-telling also helped me as a narrator make sense of who I am as our lives criss-crossed and enriched each other during the shaping of the narrative. I support Behar's (2017) position "that for many of us who are doing academic work…it is ethically necessary that we write in the first person. To be absent from the text would be a betrayal" (Behar, 2017, Scholars talk writing, para 10). Behar notes that when readers take the voyage through the pages it is themselves they must be able to see in the vulnerable observer who is serving as a guide. In chapter one of my creative non-fiction work, I position myself as the "vulnerable observer" in the story to discuss notions of what home means to me, anticipating that the reader will

be drawn to their own reflections of home: a childhood home, a place where they have roots, a family home or other different places that fill their memories of home. I travel back to Middleton, a small village in Tasmania where I spent my childhood, that has always seemed “home” to me, but as I discover, like many of the people in my creative non-fiction work “my sense of belonging there is more imagined than real.”

Acculturation

As I discovered in my interviews with the group of Muslim women of a refugee background, often a younger person can be living in the “borderlands” between origin and host societies, and childhood and adulthood’ (Sirriyeh, 2010, p. 214). Jamila, a young woman from Afghanistan, describes her life as “being stuck between two cultures and places.” Other young refugees have used the term “in-betweeners” to me. Acculturation can be defined as the cultural change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous systems (Rudmin, 2003). Jamila’s family fled from Afghanistan, via Pakistan to Australia. Many of her extended family remain in Pakistan. She explains:

> I have been back to Pakistan heaps of times to see them. When I am there, I always want to come back here. From here in my home in Australia I want to be there in Pakistan with my loved ones “back home” …but I miss Perth very much and want to pack my bags and come “back home”.

For Tamkin, Australia is now a home she loves very much, but many of her extended family remains in Afghanistan. She misses them. “Afghanistan gave me roots – it was my first home. I think when you are surrounded by your loved ones it feels like home.”

At the same time as adjusting to a new country, learning English and understanding a new culture, there is often parental pressure to conform and remain true to their traditional culture and behaviour. Koh and Walker (2013) claim that “refugees experience parental role expectations to a higher degree compared to their non-refugee counterparts” (p.297). The young story collaborators reported that this often led them to question themselves and

where they belonged as they suffered a fractured sense of identity. They agreed it was easier for them to learn a new language in their new home than for their parents. They consequently developed a communication and inclusion link, a sense of belonging, to the culture of the new country before their parents (Koh & Walker, 2013). Amina noted this in our conversations, highlighting the isolation she felt for so long because she had no English skills. She relied on her husband who spoke English and the children who learnt it quickly. I believe this impacted on her confidence and her ability to forge an identity in Australia.

Taylor (2013) concludes that it is only by enhancing our understanding about the diversity, differences, complexities and contradictions of home that we can begin to empathise with people of a refugee background. This has also been my own experience as I have researched and written about the contradictions in my sense of home and who I am. By exposing my own feelings and position as the non-refugee narrator, my aim has been to become a bridge for the reader, a way to make a deeper connection and to help them empathise with people of a refugee background.

Eakin (2008) concludes that as far as narrative identity is concerned, we should not think of identity "on the plane of theory but in the lived experience of ordinary individuals telling stories about themselves" (p.xi).

Mobile positionalities of "I" narrators

Smith and Watson (2010) define different types of people who write a story and explore identity through the mobile positionalities of the "I" in a story told to us (pp.76-79). There are two "I"s in my collaborative research and writing: the non-refugee "I" narrator; and the refugee "I" storyteller. I first became aware of these mobile positionalities In *More to the story: conversations with refugees* (Sayer, 2015). There is a conversation between me as the narrator and John Nazary, a Hazara refugee fleeing from Afghanistan, about his arrival in Australia. This demonstrates the type of collaboration I am researching with people from a refugee background and highlights the impact of these two "I's". Nazary's testimony is indented.

He would be held behind barbed wire, in a prison like place called a detention centre, all because he had arrived seeking help on a small wooden boat.

Alarm bells started to ring in my head when the Australian immigration Authorities stuck a sticky bandage around my wrist and wrote the big numbers and letters IJK54 in black felt pen on it. I wondered why they didn't write my name.

I wondered too. Then the shocking realisation hit me. He had ceased to be John Nazary. The Australian government, *my government,* had turned John Nazary into a number in *my country,* where he was seeking asylum as a refugee. (Sayer, 2015, p.72).

In this example, I consciously evoked images of Jewish prisoners incarcerated during World War II under Nazi Germany to create La Capra's (2001) "empathic unsettlement". I want the reader to question how this type of activity could be happening today under an Australian government, 75 years since the holocaust. Memory, after all, connects what we've seen in the past with what we are being asked to witness in the present. To deny our own human reactions makes it easier to deny the humanity of those whose stories we seek to share.

In *Stitching the fabric of life,* the two "I" narrators are exposed in the following examples. In the first, Amina is trying to understand why she is treated like she does not belong in Australia. Amina's testimony is indented.

Amina laments that she has no family in Perth, but her parents were able to visit for three months last year.

My father is unwell. He has Alzheimer's. It was very hard to get a visa for him. The people in charge thought we would try and keep him here with us once his visa expired. I kept telling them I am an Australian citizen and I know the rules. Why would they think I would do that?

I couldn't think of a reasonable answer, but I was pleased that eventually her parents were able to share time with their daughter and family in Australia. They were also able to ensure her parents received medical check-ups. All the family sighed and looked at each other. Amina went on:

> All the medicine my father had been given in Sudan was wrong. Everything. It was all wrong. We couldn't believe it. So, I fixed that at the doctor's and bought a big supply of the right medicine to send back with my father and mother.

I thought about my relative ease of accessing healthcare in Australia; GP's everywhere, specialists who could be found when needed, hospital beds generally available and a financial support system that subsidised some medical care. I never have to buy a huge supply of medicine to take with me when I visit my relatives.

In the next example I draw on my own experience as a former journalist with relative freedom of expression in Australia to amplify the different experience of journalists writing in countries where freedom of speech is limited under harsh authoritarian regimes. Shokoofeh was a journalist in Iran persecuted by the government over her writing. She was forced to flee her country in 2010. This example also enables the reader to hear my voice as the non-refugee "I" narrator; alongside Shokoofeh's "I" story-teller voice. Her testimony is indented.

We discussed our passion for the craft and why writing the news mattered so much to each of us. We talked about how we approached investigative journalism.

> I wanted to write the truth, about what was really happening on the street and in Iranian politics. Many of my interviews were conducted in secret or under surveillance from the government. Every few months they would come and close a newspaper and arrest many journalists. I was jailed three times. I was interrogated and kept in isolation. I was frightened and feared for my life, but I don't want to make a big deal out of it because twice it was only a few weeks; the last time was two months. That was the worst but many of my colleagues spent years behind bars.

I felt distressed imagining this vibrant woman who had become my friend locked in isolation and in the dark by herself for weeks. I gazed up at a

clear blue sky and reflected that I never have to think about having freedom; it just is. Spending 'a few weeks behind bars' sounded like a big deal to me.

These examples highlight the place of the two "I's in my collaborative research and writing: the non-refugee "I" narrator; and the refugee "I" story-teller. It might be argued that there is a third narrative voice: the voice of the overall text. In some texts, this can become a new form of "I" which is a mixture of all the voices within the text. However, in my work, the narrator "I" is one and the same as the textural narrative voice. That is, my voice as narrator is the consistent framing and decision-making voice of the text. This allows me to make very clear that the second "I" used in the dialogue and inserted quotes is from people who spoke to me, the refugee storytellers. I believe that the combination of the two positions in one story adds a richness to the dialogue and context to the story. The interplay and exploration of my own interpretations and responses to the stories, brings a fresh dimension to the refugee life story.

The vexed issue of "home"

We make our home in a variety of ways. One way is by telling stories about ourselves; our families and our communities (Eastmond, 2007). In discussions with all the people of a refugee background in my creative non-fiction, home remains a vexed issue. Is home where they live now or is it where they came from? This is the same question for all of us, but as Taylor (2013) argues that refugees are in the crudest sense defined by the loss of home. While there are many prescriptive aspects of the definition, it remains true "that all refugees have been forced to leave their home and find another one either temporarily or permanently" (Taylor, 2013, p.130).

Iyer (2013) asks: "How do refugees understand home? How do I even understand home? How do we combine the many different homes each of us has built physically and in our minds?" (Ted Talk, 2013, 7.24mins) Studies of transnationalism in refugee studies and elsewhere in recent years challenge the assumption that refugees must choose between their former and current homes to belong in a society. Taylor (2013) suggests there is the potential for multiple homes and allegiances, and, like some people from a non-refugee background, many refugees hold ties to more than one place. In my

interview with Paul Kyaw in chapter one of *Stitching the fabric of life* he explained

> Honestly, deep down I will always consider Burma my true home, but it is not really safe for me and my family to return there permanently. I am not even sure that it would be possible as we have built a new life here. Australia is now my home."

I certainly can't label one single place as my "home." I was born and lived in Tasmania (home – I think so); went to high school and worked in journalism in the Pilbara (definitely home); went to university in suburban Perth (didn't feel like home) worked and lived in China for 10 years (definitely home) and now live comfortably in suburban Perth again (not sure if it's home). Eastmond (2007) argues that to create a sense of belonging and home, it is a matter of constructing a coherent narrative about oneself and one's experience. For some people whether of refugee background or non-refugee background, cohesion remains elusive. For example, we can see this in my conversation with Bella.

> I am trying to understand myself and where I come from. I don't know much about Burundi, but I want to meet the aunties and uncles and others who celebrated my life when I was born. I definitely think there is a part of me that is not fulfilled. I hope I can find that spiritual self and the home that I was forced to leave behind, when I return. I want to hear the stories that will help me put those pieces of my life that are missing into the puzzle of who I am.

Taylor (2013) contends that it is only by examining the diversity, complexity and contradiction of home that we can begin to understand what has been endured by those who lose their home and the resilience displayed by many who are able to make a new home – sometimes more than once. On a return to his village in South Sudan Piok told me in Chapter one of my creative non-fiction: "I could walk the land, *my land,* and listen to stories and traditional songs from my people. It seemed like I was connected in a way that is not possible in Australia." Taylor (2013) reflects this experience because home, she states, is:

> absorbed through the senses, in tastes and scents, in plants, food and landscapes…and while these preoccupations are universal, they are expected to have particular resonance for those whose relationship with home is disrupted by exile (p.138).

For Palestinian refugee Rasha, Australia is “100 percent her home”, yet she feels she is missing something by not knowing the country to which she “belongs.” She wonders how she can understand “her homeland” and “her heritage” when it is not possible to visit a country that has become invisible on the map. Memories of villages and towns and constant imaginings of return, imbued with a rich cultural heritage, are the central theme for many Palestinian stories (Eastmond, 2007). Some of the common narratives that Palestinian refugees use to balance and counter the political crisis and violence that “Al Nakba” (which translates as the “the disaster” of the 1948 invasion and forced exile) are as Siddiq (1995) explains “one sustained epic quest for return to home(land), self(hood) and nation(hood)” (p.88). Being Palestinian usually means you are stateless and a refugee. It is argued that the uncertainty and urgency around being stateless are not recognised as often as they should be. Gibney (2014) explores this omission and sees stateless people as legal ghosts and citizens of nowhere. I wonder if an individual in these circumstances can ever build a sustainable identity, home and sense of belonging.

The combined direct testimony of the refugee collaborators alongside my own interpretative narrative in *Stitching the fabric of life,* uncovers insights into identity, home and belonging that were not previously recognised by the refugee storyteller or me as the non-refugee narrator.

In the next chapter I expand on the different roles of the narrator, how identity and empathic unsettlement is created through close analysis of four well-known contemporary Australian texts about people of a refugee background.

Chapter four:

Whose voice is it anyway?

In this chapter I will examine four Australian texts of creative non-fiction written by non-refugee narrators with people of a refugee background. I will explore the different approaches each narrator has taken in the following works: *The lost boys of Sudan* (2006) by Mark Blixer, *Violin lessons* (2011) by Arnold Zable, *The rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* (2010) by Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman and *The people smuggler* (2012) by Robin De Crespigny. The narrators, like me, have used forms of empathic unsettlement to connect with their readers. Blixer has positioned himself in the text as an observer reporting what he sees in the third person. Zable, too, has positioned himself in the text but involves himself more to take the position of a participant "vulnerable observer". Hillman is acknowledged as an author, alongside Mazari but he is largely hidden from view behind the singular "I" narrative voice of Nazari. De Crespigny is also hidden from view, but her collaborator Ali Al Jenabi, receives no author credits, yet the story is told in his singular "I" narrative voice.

The non-refugee narrator, like all narrators, makes a choice about position and voice, language and nuance, about what to omit or to include, and other ethical issues and, of course, how to keep the story engaging whilst remaining true to the facts. Narrative is demonstrably more than just a matter of depicting actions, it is about time, space, social relations and what was not depicted (Cobley 2010). Let me first discuss Blixer's role in *The lost boys of Sudan.*

An American Odyssey

> I have tried to move beyond the common, simplistic depiction of the refugee as a noble soul who survives suffering to triumphantly surmount obstacles in a new world. The young men in this book clearly have traits of victim and hero, but I have portrayed them as no more no less than complex human beings. (Blixer. 2006, p xiiii)

This is how Mark Blixer describes his book, *The lost boys of Sudan* in his preface. First published in 2006, the book tells the story of the many thousands of boys and young men who became separated from their families following the devastating civil wars in the 1980s and 90s between southern and northern Sudan, through the eyes of Peter, Jacob, Daniel and Marko, four of the "lost boys" who came to America in the early 2000s. UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report (2006) estimated that between 1983 and 2005 around 20,000 children, mostly boys, between seven and 17 years of age were separated from their families. They trekked enormous distances through an unforgiving wilderness, seeking refuge from the civil war and famine (UNICEF, 1996). Hungry, frightened and weakened by lack of sleep and disease, they crossed from Sudan into Ethiopia and back, with many dying along the way. The survivors ended up in refugee camps in Kenya, Sudan and Uganda. The United States was one of many Western countries that accepted the boys as refugees.

Blixer met several of the young men as a newspaper reporter after they arrived in the United States city of Atlanta. Following publication of his feature stories in the media, he decided to follow the lives of four young men and write a more in-depth creative non-fiction book. His work became part of a genre that is often referred to in terms of two tropes: "the child soldier" or "lost boys" narratives about refugees from Africa (Whitlock, 2015, p.190). The complicated history of conflict and movement of refugees in Sudan required an explanation for people around the world and refugee life stories developed as a popular way to explain the wartime experience (Kindersley,2015). Kindersley attributes the development of these books to the rise of journalists working in African war zones, the opening up of refugee camps to outside scrutiny, the work of aid agencies and the rise in witness style humanitarian activism. This corresponded to "the rise of the life story economy" in which difficult human stories of trauma and violence were presented through creative non-fiction (Kindersley, 2015, p.209). Blixer became part of this phenomenon with the publication of his book in 2006. His story-telling is linked to a human rights agenda. He not only features "the lost boys" trope but also exposes the unfair treatment of refugees and how they are left to fend for themselves by the government after their arrival in a host

country. He also highlights the importance of single advocates and service agencies who fill that gap in support. Blixer uses commentary and conversations with advocates and supporters to strengthen his desire for better human rights for people of a refugee background. The explicit idea that these stories about boys and young men should give agency to their speakers, rose to prominence from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s (Malkki,1996). Blixer was able to tap into the narrative of a moral war between the north and the southern Sudan, thus framing the innocent refugees' victimhood. He wrote:

> Against this backdrop of bloodshed, this maelstrom of killing and rape, thousands of young boys began streaming from southern Sudan…and so relief workers reported seeing columns of wasted youth, apparitions of boys once alive with youthful hope…' (pp. 57-60).

The book explores US refugee policy at the time and Blixer provides background about Sudan and the civil wars while exploring the boys' lives as they navigate their way in their new country. His work is based on the interviews he conducted and the hundreds of scenes that he witnessed over three years. He interviewed refugees, volunteers, re-settlement agency workers, authors, historians and political figures to build the narrative. According to Blixer "the stories are emblematic of the experience of so many other refugees re-settled around the world" (p.xvi). I agree he has successfully used the personal stories of several to expose the lives of many.

Blixer takes the approach of literary journalism or as Gutkind (2012) calls it the "big ideas stories". Writers focus on something other than themselves and although telling a story, focus on fact to try to tap into universal themes. This style developed from the New Journalism literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s exemplified by Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and Gay Talese and illustrated in the essay length articles in the *New Yorker Magazine* and *Vanity Fair* publications of the time (Gutkind, 1997). The literary New Journalism techniques often utilise a third person point of view, contain well-constructed and developed characters, sustained dialogue, vivid scenes, and strong plotlines which build dramatic

tension throughout the book. This approach became popular and gave birth to creative non- fiction which has become one of the most popular genres in the literary and publishing landscape (Gutkind, 2012).

The lost boys of Sudan begins with the four boys in a plane circling over Atlanta as they arrive from Africa. Blixer imaginatively describes what they saw: “The city of Atlanta appeared through the airplane window like a distant island in a sea of green, a cluster of buildings surrounded by trees” (p.1). He goes back to the boy’s first time on an airplane three days earlier as they left their refugee camp and gives context to the migration coordinated and financed by the US government to airlift 3,800 teenagers and young men from Sudan who had been separated from their families. The “lost boys” captured the imagination of people around the world and Blixer was following his “big idea” to tell their stories in a book in the USA. Publishers wanted exceptional accounts of extraordinary stories about “the lost boys” and Blixer’s work met that demand.

He spent months in the field, gathering facts through research, interviews and conversations. Apart from the introduction, where Blixer lays out his approach and explains the background and context in the first person, for most of the book he is the third person narrator. He is not a character in the story, rather the omniscient narrator as he shares all the characters’ thoughts and motivations and past events leading up to the story. For example, in generalising about the thousands of refugees who arrived in a city without education support services and infrastructure, Blixer asserts: “As the realization grew that the 156 southern Sudanese in Atlanta had completed different levels of education, a fog of confusion descended over the entire group about what to do next…” (p.152).

Blixer uses the narrative device of creating interconnected scenes about his four characters. He builds suspense and interest in each boy’s story through chronological chapters which start from the moment they arrive in the US, while at the same time providing context to their back story from Sudan. They progress to finding accommodation and work, while adjusting to a completely different life in America. Chapters titled “Landing”, “Bread in the dishwasher”, “Selective compassion”, “Body language in the workplace”’, “Driving” and “September 11, 2001” in *The lost boys of Sudan* all build the

reader's understanding of each young man as he navigates a life in a new country, trying to fit in and find a home.

Blixer encourages the reader to reflect on issues often taken for granted in a privileged western world and builds an essential relationship with his reader. As Behar (1996) identifies "readers need to see a connection back to themselves" in order to empathise (p.16). Blixer describes Jacob in the sitting of a literature exam and through the use of rhetorical devices, he makes that an unsettling experience for the reader when he describes Jacob struggling to understand colloquialisms and American slang, used in some of the articles he needs to analyse. Blixer asks: "how was Jacob supposed to know about Rocky Balboa and the Karate Kid…not to mention Frank Cappa movies?" (p. 227). Jacob is being asked questions that must seem inexplicable to a person whose first language is not English and who was not born in the United States. I found Blixer's technique successful, as his words took me back to my own exams and experiences. What was expected of Jacob made me uncomfortable.

In another moving example Blixer builds tension amongst his readers as Daniel undertakes a search for his mother from whom he was separated during the violent attacks on his village. After months of work by contacts in refugee camps and aid agencies he finds his mother and they speak by phone. Blixer describes their heartbreaking first conversation and the reader is drawn to empathise with both mother and son over their tragic story of separation.

> "Why have you forgotten me?" she asked.
> "Where have you been all this time?" She started to cry, and Daniel let her talk and asked her to be patient while he found a way to help.
>
> "After the bombing I just ran away alone. I was alone. You cannot blame me," he told her (p.165).

Blixer also asks the reader to think about everyday tasks and items that are taken for granted. The reader can easily imagine themselves as shoppers in a supermarket when a new arrival from an African refugee camp talks to a local person. Describing a grocery store in Fargo North Dakota,

Blixer enables the reader to listen in on a conversation with a refugee who had spent the previous nine years eating only mushed up grain, strolling down the aisle of tins in a supermarket.

> The newcomer plucked a can from the shelves. “Can you tell me what this is?”
> “Um, that’s food for our dogs.” The young man paused. Many such cans lined the shelves. “Tell me,” he said. “What is the work of dogs in this country?” (p.22).

Throughout the book Blixer and the young men about whom he writes pose questions to other characters in the book, which I find a very successful way to make the reader question themselves in turn. The reader can draw deeper connections with his or her personal experience and life. In describing a visit to a pizza outlet, Blixer illustrates his point of the challenges of learning about new culture, when the boys are confronted with what most westerners would assume is simple and normal at a fast food venue. “They were stymied by the options at the soft drink fountain machine. Would it be Pepsi or Mountain Dew? Orange Slice or Dr Pepper? What were these anyway?” (p.116). In another example Blixer describes the boys trying to understand the basics of a western apartment. “Matthew stood in front of the stove, Jacob, Peter, Daniel and Marko around him and twisted one of the knobs. He held his hand above one of the four coils and kept it there until he felt something.” (p.21). Blixer explores the wonder and confusion of the boys as they began to learn about heat from an electric stove, cold from the refrigerator and the power of electric lights. What is new in the boy’s home is rendered strange and alien encouraging the reader to consider the material belongings that they take for granted.

Blixer’s research into the history and political upheaval in Sudan, alongside the politics and policies of the United States, is interwoven throughout his book. He has also chosen to devote several chapters to research only. In Chapter five, Blixer outlines the way refugees are treated around the world and how those seeking re-settlement in a new country are “chosen” from the millions of people living in refugee camps (pp. 75-80). In another chapter, “The spoiling of the world”, he demonstrates extensive

research into, and critical awareness of the history and politics of southern Sudan without his usual scene by scene development of each character (Blixer, 2006, pp.36 – 55). Blixer's narrative development about country and policy context is compelling and a contrast to my own. I write shorter contextual summaries about countries, history or culture braided into each chapter alongside the life story. Blixer has written several dense chapters of fact and detail to provide context and insight into a major refugee crisis. Blixer takes on a "a big idea" about what happened to "the lost boys" and successfully creates empathic unsettlement by drawing deep emotional responses from his readers and encouraging more considered thought about the issues, using questions and dialogue. He successfully guides his reader through an interconnected series of stories about the four young men escaping violence and persecution in southern Sudan in their quest to find safety and freedom.

The Ancient Mariner

Reflecting the approach taken by Blixer, Zable's short story about Iraqi asylum seeker Amal Basry introduces the reader to Zable as a narrator of a traumatic life. The Ancient Mariner, the longest story in his collection *Violin Lessons,* describes Amal's journey to Australia by boat and the trauma that she suffered as she struggled to stay alive after her boat capsized and she was forced to hang onto a dead body to stay afloat waiting for help. Zable also confronts more trauma in Amal's life when she is diagnosed with terminal cancer. As a trusted friend he promises to write her story.

Zable explains that "empathy has always been important – past, present and without doubt, in the future. There will always be a struggle to come to terms with what it is to be human" (McLaren, 2016, para 9). Zable's oeuvre explores displacement and exile in different times and settings including stories from the Jewish refugee experience through to the Greek and other European immigrant experience. He has also explored journeys of contemporary asylum seekers. I found his approach in The Ancient Mariner interesting because of the way it mirrors my own approach. Zable explains: "A lot of my stories emerge out of conversations; they emerge out of actively engaging with immigrants and refugees from many backgrounds *(*Jennings-

Edquist, 2013*).* Freadman (2005) suggests Zable addresses challenges that confront all of us writing as non-refugee narrators in much of his work, including “how to bear witness to what cannot be imagined if you were not there and how to chronicle the inwardness of the other…” (p.124). Zable often does this by describing the sensory experiences of a childhood that was left behind and how culturally, one can be cut adrift because of the very different life and community that was left behind. He uses a person’s memories of home and of trauma suffered to amplify the inward story of self. In Amal’s case he sometimes describes the music from her homeland and what it meant to her. In doing so he invokes a sense of nostalgia with Amal, as his writing echoes the lyrical sound of the music from her homeland. He includes an explanation of Amal’s dreams explaining how she dreams of sleeping on water, alone and unable to breathe, with people shouting at her that she is going to drown. I believe Zable has written in such a way that it moves his reader emotionally and brings them along on the journey of the story.

In *The Ancient Mariner*, Zable recounts a very personal friendship with Amal and is clearly present in the text as a vulnerable observer. “Amal’s voice takes hold and works its way into my consciousness. It is with me as I go about my business and returns with greater force when I resume writing” (p.163). I consider hearing the voice of the person about whom you are writing essential in writing a life. It is one of the reasons I choose to transcribe my own tapes, as I suspect Zable does, to keep hearing the voice of a person with its rhythm, cadence and silences. The story is a work where structure and subject matter embody vulnerability. Zable met Amal recovering from the trauma of nearly drowning at sea and was with her at the time of her traumatic death from cancer. He writes of documenting her story. “Five years after her death I am fulfilling my promise. Yet each time I sit down to write, anxiety rises for fear I will not do the story justice, will not find the words to convey the terror and beauty of Amal’s telling…” (p.147). His vulnerability as observer and witness to a life is raw. I share the same sense of responsibility that Zable describes when I write stories about people from a refugee background. “I cannot fathom how Amal re-surfaced and how for years ahead willed herself with each telling that she did to return through the

gates of hell." I, too, was humbled when I collaborated with the people in *Stitching the fabric of life.*

In presenting Amal's testimony, which he taped and recorded in his notebooks as their friendship developed, Zable uses a different approach in the presentation of testimony to me. I insert regular short extracts of testimony and then weave conversations, my own thoughts and commentary throughout the story. Zable opens the quotation marks on page 149 and lets Amal's direct testimony run for the next eight pages uninterrupted. In a direct transcript Amal describes her fear and anguish as she watched members of her family drown and saved herself by using the dead body of another woman as floatation for several days before being rescued. Zable adopts this method of quoting direct testimony for several pages again later in the story. At other times he becomes a narrator reporting what was happening in Amal's life. "Years later, while under anaesthetic in a Melbourne hospital, as doctor's operated to remove her cancer, Amal dreamed she was sitting in a cave in the northern Iraqi mountains" (p.161).

Like Blixer, (2006) Zable creates a web of connected scenes to produce an engaging text for the reader. Both authors refuse neat resolutions to their stories. The "lost boys" do not live happily ever after in Blixer's story. Some achieve a good education and make a life in the US, but others do not. Amal has asked Zable to keep telling her story after she dies and Zable remains committed to human rights and better treatment of asylum seekers today (Jennings-Edquist, 2013).) After her death he finds himself reflecting on her life and wondering how he will keep going and realises he will be inspired by her powerful advocate's voice. "I see the fire in her eyes. She is haunted by what she endured on the ocean" (p.191) and he hears her voice: "I must wake up. I must tell everyone what happened. My brother, this is what my life is for. To tell what happened" (p.191). Zable has honoured Amal's life and I propose that he has written a story that bears witness to her suffering and her life through a beautifully crafted piece of creative non-fiction that also works as a form of advocacy.

The Weaver of rugs

The rug maker of Mazar-e-Sharif by Najaf Mazari and Robert Hillman remains one of the highest selling books in Australia about a person from a refugee background. Over ten years since it was published in 2008 the book has sold 40,000 copies and only recently dropped from 1,500 copies a year to 500 a year, according to publishing house Wild Dingo Press (C. Lewis, personal communication February 3, 2019). Ms Lewis, the publisher, explained that she felt there were many people in the community who wanted to understand the inside story of an asylum seeker in Australia. She was looking for a counter narrative to the political slogans around illegal boat people and queue jumpers and to present the facts about what was happening in detention centres like Woomera at the time (C. Lewis, personal communication, February 3, 2019).

The book is the first-person narrative of Najaf Mazari, a man from the persecuted Hazara minority in Afghanistan. It traces his childhood in a country first occupied by the Russians, then torn apart by civil war with the Mujahedin and later under another occupier, the Taliban. Mazar-e-Sharif, his city of origin, was the site of a massacre of the Hazara people in 1998. As historian and journalist Ahmed Rashid (2009) describes, the attack was one of "genocidal ferocity" where thousands of people were killed and left in the streets or locked in metal containers in the sun and left to die (p.93-97).

Mazari spent 15 days hiding in a cupboard before he was captured and tortured by the Taliban (Mazari & Hillman, pp.196-202). The Hazara became the target of Taliban attacks and persecution, so Mazari's family hatched an escape plan for their son with the help of people smugglers. Their logic was: "If the family tribe cannot survive, then only by the mercy of God, let one male member of the tribe find safety…and rebuild" (p.221). Mazari arrived in Australia but was detained at Woomera detention centre because he came by boat, seeking asylum. Eventually he received a Temporary Protection Visa, permanent residency and citizenship.

The rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif by Mazari and Hillman (2008) is collaboration about a traumatic and ultimately triumphant journey of a shepherd boy from the mountains of northern Afghanistan to the rug shops of

Melbourne's Prahan suburbs. The book is structured in alternating chapters between life in Afghanistan and life in Australia. The book begins with Mazari describing singing with sadness and nostalgia about his homeland in the detention camp in Australia where he has been held for three months. It is followed by a chapter set in Afghanistan before his escape when his home was bombed. Using the same creative non-fiction approach as Blixer (2006), Hillman constructs different scenes, heavy with metaphor, in each country, to build Mazari's story. For example: "The second rocket exploded with an even more violent roar than the first. My ears ached as if scalded…I saw the fingers (of my mother) hanging loose in a stream of blood" (p.15). And in another example: "death was approaching like a visitor who would take up residence in my body and dull my pain and take away all my memories "(p.15).

Mazari and Hillman share author credits, but it is unclear how much exact text is directly from Mazari. By invoking the "I" of first-person language for Mazari, Hillman was one of the early pioneers in Australia of working with people from a refugee background, to tell their story in the first person. By doing this, however, we can only wonder how close to its original meaning the language attributed to Mazari is. Consider:

> I did not know that I could feel this much sorrow without a body to bury. How heartsick can I become before I break down and weep in front of everyone? I wander about the camp with the blanket from my bed around my shoulders, searching for a spot where I can't be seen or heard. (Mazari & Hillman 2008, p.1).

Is this exactly what Mazari said or meant? According to the publisher, Hillman interviewed Mazari with tape recordings and notes for over a year. He would then write one or two chapters, send them to Mazari as both a taped version and a written version because Mazari could understand spoken English better. He would then write notes in Dari for Hillman which would be translated by a translator hired by the publisher. They would then meet again and go through it all again. They conducted the interviews in English and used a translator only when certain phrases or ideas could not be sorted out (C. Lewis, personal communication, February 2019). Using a

translator adds an extra layer of complexity to the process (Alvstad, 2014; Wolpe, 2017; Remnick, 2005). The story is told three times by different people: the original storyteller (Mazari), the translator, and the unacknowledged narrator (Hillman). The storyteller narrator in this sense is not Hillman, yet he becomes an unacknowledged narrator in the text with Mazari. Does the story change through three layers of telling? Has the translator and/or Hillman smoothed out some of Mazari's sentences to improve the English or make it more readable? In doing so, did Hillman or the translator change the meaning of what was being said? Did Hillman really understand the full impact of what Mazari was saying or not saying? Hillman spoke some Farsi, a similar dialect to Dari, and the publisher believes this has produced the lyrical almost arcane style of writing that truly represents Mazari according to native Dari speakers (C. Lewis, personal communication, February 2019).

Publication of the work coincided with the introduction of Australia's harsh border security measures. Hillman is quoted in media reports to have been "fuming about the Howard Government's policies at the time in relation to refugees and asylum seekers" (Elder, 2008). I wonder how much of Hillman's emotion has been included in some of Mazari's first person story? Creative non-fiction uses realistic dialogue to establish characters so in that sense Hillman never strays from Mazari's voice, thus the story sounds like a monologue, written verbatim so we can only assume that Hillman captured the emotion that was Mazari's. There is a seamless blend of content and voice which makes it very engaging for the reader as we follow one man's quest for freedom and safety. Like many refugees I have met, Mazari does not express overt anger over his detention. His views may have been tempered by the fact that he did eventually receive a permanent visa from Australia. I don't know. However, Jacklin (2011) notes that Mazari's narrative is characterised by reasonableness, one that is influenced "by Afghan song, parable and traditional story that draws the reader gently along" (p.381). I agree that the lyrical style of writing used by Hillman is particularly emotive for the reader as they experience and feel the sincerity of the highs and lows of Mazari's life.

As previously illustrated, Smith and Watson (2010) have defined different types of people who write a story and explore identity through the mobile positionalities of the "I" in a story told to us. Through use of a single, but combined "I" narrator, Hillman and Mazari's book does not clearly demonstrate separate voices or insights. The reader cannot distinguish between the voice of Hillman's non-refugee "I" narrator or the "I" story-teller voice of Mazari. It might be possible to read this text through the lens of a third narrative voice, that of the voice of the overall text. However, this is not how the text is presented and a more reasonable interpretation, as I have shown below, is that the two voices are merged into one which is *authored* by Hillman but purports to *be* Mazari. The merging of the two voices implies that the storyteller, Mazari, is the speaker. For example, the book contains many criticisms of the war in Afghanistan and the treatment of refugees. Mazari is quoted in the acknowledgements of the book saying: "I never dreamt that I would publish my story…this is all very amazing for someone who could only go to school for three and a half years" (p. 255). Mazari learnt English at the detention centre but Couser (1998) has raised the issue of domination in collaboration because often the subjects of the story are likely to be "those who do not write" and this may apply to Mazari. However, as sales and awards have shown, without such collaboration, texts about people from a refugee background may not reach a wider readership. It will always remain a balance for the reader to consider and decide whose voice they are reading and which "I" is the true representation of the narrator.

There is also critique of both Russia and the United States in Afghanistan, heavy with understated sarcasm. I wonder whether this language reflects Hillman's position more than Mazari's. The book states: "We Afghans had the undesired honour of being among the first human beings on earth to be blown to pieces by this state-of-the-art Russian weaponry." (Nazari & Hillman, 2008, p.128). At a public town hall talk about the book Hillman revealed how he had inserted his own views: "Mr Mazari says he has seen enough bloodshed to turn him away from war forever. In my writing, I try to show how peace calls for more imagination than war. Once you can imagine peace, war seems very primitive" **(**Casey Weekly Cranbourne, Dandenong, Vic. 25 July 2011, p. 12). Hillman describes

himself as an “I narrator” but as readers of the book we hear only Mazari as the “I narrator”.

Without Hillman’s efforts, it could be argued that Australians may never have understood anything of the Afghan refugee experience and why people were fleeing persecution in Afghanistan in their thousands. This was an early successful collaboration with a person from a refugee background from Afghanistan. At the time of the book’s publishing, Australia had committed military support with the United States and its allies to fight the Taliban. Masters (2013) claims that Australians had little understanding of the war in Afghanistan or its people and that it is Australia’s worst reported war. I do wonder how Hillman addressed the power dynamic between himself and Mazari and I remain uncomfortable with Hillman’s lack of transparency about his role. Never-the-less, he has crafted a popular and beautiful story that brought the refugee lived experience to a broad reading audience.

The true story of Ali Al Jenabi

Another of the biggest selling refugee narratives with a non-refuge narrator released in Australia is Robin De Crespigny’s (2012) *The people smuggler.* De Crespigny identified herself as the narrator but chose to write in the first-person voice of asylum seeker, refugee and people smuggler, Ali Al Jenabi, who is not identified directly as a collaborator. The book has been recognised with multiple awards including the Queensland Literary Award in 2012, the Ned Kelly Award for best non-fiction in 2013 and the 25th Human Rights Award for Literature. It was also the highest selling Australian book at the 2012 Sydney Writers Festival.

This is another example of what Jacklin (2011) identifies as a publication written with the help of what he calls, a non-refugee professional writer in “collaborative textual production”. These refugee narratives, he argues, have re-positioned stories from refugees at the margins of society in Australia to give them more mainstream appeal and to impact on public consciousness. There has recently been a boom in the life writing/memoir genre. A three-year survey of readers around Australia by Macquarie University (2017) found that the autobiography/biography/memoir genre was

the most commonly enjoyed non-fiction category read by 45% of Australian readers. Jacklin (2011) also highlights the increasing number of television reports about refugees and their professional writers. He notes, too, the well-attended popular appearances at literary festivals by authors writing about refugee issues (Jacklin, 2011).

However, I believe there are ethical issues to be considered in books like *The people smuggler.* As (Dunn, 2012) notes in her review, "Robin chose to write this book in Ali Al Jenabi's first person to give his story immediacy and intimacy." However, the question of power imbalance is again raised. How much has De Crespigny influenced the voice of Jenabi in the book? De Crespigny and Jenabi bring different skills and abilities to the book and as Couser (1998) asserts, when discussing collaborative autobiography like *The people smuggler* "most of the final wording of the final text is attributable to the 'writer'" (p.335).The front cover of *The people smuggler* describes the book as "the true story of Ali Al Jenabi, the Oskar Schindler of Asia" with De Crespigny's name as the only authorial credit. Couser (1998) also contends that: "the single narrative voice - a single simulation by one person of another - is always in danger of breaking, exposing conflicts of interest that are not present in solo autobiography" (p.335). In *The people smuggler* the collaborator's contributions are different – lived experience explained and told through memory compared to the listening, recording, transcribing, and organising of research and writing up the material in Jenabi's name. De Crespigny is reported to have shared conversations and interviews over three years with Jenabi working through an interpreter. As I have previously discussed, interpretation adds another layer of understanding. This is added to the final version of the story, and like Hillman, De Crespigny presents one narrative written in the first person "I" voice of Jenabi, her subject. De Crespigny takes on the persona of Jenabi so his life as a refugee and people smuggler can be explained. In a similar way to Hillman, De Crespigny addresses political policy issues and we can't know how much can be attributed to Jenabi and how much, if any, has come from De Crespigny. For example, in Jenabi's voice she writes about how complicit Western allies were in the rise of Saddam: "it would appear other nations are prepared to spend up big to be rid of Saddam, even though we were once friends and

supplied him his arms. However, what looks like a lot of money to us is probably small fry to the major powers" (p.72).

My own collaborative creative work produces a narrative of different people's voices in one story. The testimony of each person from a refugee background is clearly highlighted alongside my own. Neither approach is right or wrong and I recognise that without De Crespigny's highly readable narrative style, Jenabi's story and other works of creative non-fiction about Australia's treatment of asylum seekers may not have made it to the public domain. According to Conway-Herron (2012), who worked with persecuted ethnic minority women refugees in camps on the Thai-Burmese border, collaboration like De Crespigny's and Hillman's opens many possibilities. She explores the connection between human rights and storytelling as "the powerful and ultimately hopeful act of giving voice" (p.87). McKee (2003) reminds us, we interpret various texts "to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them" (p.1). These four books help us do that.

Vulnerability and empathic unsettlement in the books

All four books discussed build empathic unsettlement among their readers by guiding them through the lives of people from a refugee background. Montaigne (1958) wrote: "on me imagination makes an intense impression…the sight of another's anguish gives me real pain and my body has often taken over the sensation of some person I am with" (p.36). By using the devices of creative non-fiction that I have previously described, all the writers make it easy for us to imagine a life different from our own. At the same time, they create an empathic unsettlement as we read about the traumas that the participants have experienced. In reading about the death of family members in violent attacks, persecution for religious and cultural beliefs, treatment as asylum seekers or the harsh reality of life in refugee camps, it is hard for the reader not to reflect on their own life and, as Montaigne writes, to feel their anguish.

Implementing Behar's (1996) approach, Blixer (2006) and Zable (2011) narrate their stories in open collaboration, with their participants acting as observers with varying degrees of vulnerability. They expose their

positions as I do in my work and I believe both have taken the reader somewhere they could not have gone without a visible guide in the story. Their presence allows the reader to empathise with the narrator and storyteller in an interactive manner making it easier, I believe, to place themselves in the same situation. My approach has been influenced by these works and I have seen how my own voice becomes a form of advocacy. Mazari and Hillman work together without transparent collaboration in the text but share authorial credits in a highly readable and engaging book that also strongly advocates for better treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia.

The text that causes me concern from an ethical point of view is De Crespigny's, as it seems to me that her work can be read as an appropriation of Jenabi's experience and voice. Questions about the authenticity of testimony, voice and story are raised when the named writer positions themselves as the only "I" telling the story. Whitlock (2007) recognises these works of creative non-fiction as "stories told to" or ones "shepherded through" to publication by advocates. As previously discussed, early examples of this kind of collaboration can be seen in the books described as being about "veiled women" about persecuted and oppressed women in Muslim countries. *My forbidden face* (2003) by Latifa written with Chekeba Hachemi, and *Behind the burqa*, (2002) the story of sisters Salima and Hala, as told to Batya Swift Yasgur are other such examples.

Putting authorship aside, it is possible to argue that all the narrators in these books bring together two significant concepts; the vocabulary of human rights and the technique of personal storytelling to raise human rights issues and to counter fear of "the other". Schaffer and Smith (2004) mount a strong argument about how to "treat life narratives and human rights campaigns as multicultural domains that merge (and) often produce social justice outcomes" (p.2). In this way all four creative non-fiction books have been successful in reaching a wider audience and encouraging advocacy. Apart from Zable's (2011) work the other three texts do not include self-reflective text about the role of non-refugee narrator in the story. They also differ from my own approach of linking short extracts of testimony with conversations and collaboration to encourage engagement. This is the gap in

creative non-fiction about people from a refugee background that my work seeks to fill.

Conclusion

> "Storytellers take risks. They hope for an audience willing to acknowledge the truthfulness of a story and to accept an ethical responsibility to both story and teller"
>
> *(Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p.6).*

This thesis is presented as a work of creative non-fiction and an accompanying exegesis. Together they address how narrative identity can be developed by people of a refugee background through a collaborative process of working with a non-refugee narrator.

I have provided a global and Australian context for refugee life stories and the impact of the populist narrative which has contributed to fear of "the other". I demonstrated how communicating a global situation has challenges. When the framing of the movement of people is seen as a crisis and a security threat, refugees and asylum seekers can be reduced to statistics. They can remain voiceless in the debate about forced migration. My creative non-fiction work provides a counter- narrative demonstrating how fear of "the other" can be mitigated and how understanding can be developed through collaborative life writing. My work adds to the body of work by scholars such as Whitlock (2007, 2015) and Schaffer and Smith (2004) who have examined the conjunction of life writing and human rights.

I have then shown how I aim to fill a void by proposing a different approach to writing refugee life stories. I demonstrated how the combination of biography, testimony, memoir and history can expose new ideas about who we are and where we belong. I implemented a modified (PAR) model to address power imbalances between the person of a refugee background and me as the non-refugee narrator. The participants became collaborators and storytellers and jointly we generated ideas and story lines over an extended period of time. As Felman and Laub (1992) conclude, any sort of testimony must be literary to engage readers because a literary context provides an understanding and framework of history as well as allowing the reader to know what is happening to others through the imaginative process of creative non-fiction. I have also illustrated how positioning myself in the text as "a vulnerable observer" can help build empathic unsettlement and

understanding among readers (Behar, 1996; La Capra 2001). I exposed my own vulnerability as a narrator and shared the vulnerabilities of people living on the margins of society. I chose this approach because I needed to understand my own position before I embarked on trying to understand anyone else's. In doing so, I became a guide for my reader providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their own lives, their views of home and who they are. I believe this approach also provided more opportunities to build a counter-narrative to the negative and de-humanising one that is often heard about people of a refugee background.

I explored refugee narrative identity to observe its connection to home (and homeland) and to belonging in a society. Many of us suffer dislocation of identities throughout our lives, but I explained how for people of a refugee background this can be more severe. As *Stitching the fabric of life* focuses mainly on women I have addressed how "the refugee woman label" can impact on a woman's life and how their stories have been long overlooked in favour of a male-centric paradigm. My thesis proposed that the label of "refugee woman" carries with it multiple and intersectional layers that need to be understood. I unfolded some of these layers with the collaborators in my creative work.

Finally, I concluded with an analysis of other contemporary Australian refugee narratives and discussed similarities and differences between the non-refugee narrators. Two writers acted as guides for their readers by placing themselves in the story with varying degrees of vulnerability, and two took the role of the unacknowledged narrator. All four books worked to build empathic unsettlement and exposed a need for the reader to reflect on their own lives and feel what the refugee story-tellers felt. It is the work of Zable (2011) and Blixer (2006) that has influenced my approach most. I learnt from Zable (2011) the benefit of being open and vulnerable in the text of the story and saw how he built empathic unsettlement supporting Behar's (1996) theory that more academics doing field research should write in the first person. Blixer's (2006) approach resonated with me. We share a similar journalistic style in the way we write creative non-fiction. While none of these books provided me with the perfect model, my analysis of them strengthened

the writing of *Stitching the fabric of life: refugee stories and the non-refugee narrator.*

I believe that my approach of collaborating and writing with people from a refugee background as a non-refugee narrator makes an important contribution to the fields of life writing and human rights. This research has shown me some of the complexities and issues around the ethics of narration. I hope it contributes to the growing body of literature surrounding the telling of other people's stories. I consider we have yet to develop in Australia, the best way to tell and to share refugee life stories. I see myself in a small way as an advocate and champion for women of a refugee background wanting to be heard. In the future, my role as a non-refugee narrator may be unnecessary if there is a change in the approach to publishing which is open to welcoming more diverse voices with strong, rich stories that will interest people. While not all the people in my research want to become writers, I know some, such as Amran and Bella, who would welcome this opportunity.

APPENDIX 1

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Now I know who I am - A non-refugee narrator writing refugee life stories

[Working title]

I invite you to participate in a research project about how the life stories of people from a refugee background are being written. This work is part of my doctoral research and is funded by Curtin University in Western Australia.

The aim of the research is to interview eight people from a refugee background who now live in Australia and are willing to share their refugee life stories. In particular, the research will examine how people who are not from a refugee background collaborate with those who are to develop their life stories. Participating in this research will involve a series of face-to-face interviews and discussions with me at a mutually convenient location. These interviews and discussions will be used to produce a series of short biographical stories that I will also help narrate.

Your participation will be extremely valuable for the research, but it is your choice whether or not you would like to be involved. If you agree you would be asked to participate in 2-4 interviews of approximately 2 hours each time. There will be no costs to you, and you will not be paid for participating in this project.

During the discussion, if you are uncomfortable at any stage you can stop the interview or discussion and you can tell me if you would prefer not to talk about certain matters. You can also ask that something you mentioned previously be removed from the record or for your contribution to be considered off the record. Your participation in these interviews and discussions is completely voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time without any negative consequences and I will destroy any information I have collected from you.

The material in the discussion will be used in the writing of a short story about you. Any information from your interviews and discussions with me included in any publications that result from this project will be acknowledged as information from your interviews or discussions with me. The information collected in this research will be identifiable, but if the research is used for publication you can choose if you would like your real name used or an unidentifiable name of your choosing.

All the interviews and discussions will be recorded for accuracy. The recordings will be transcribed and they along with the audio files will be kept securely on the university's hard drive and access to this, the interview tapes, transcripts and notes will be password – protected and restricted to me during the research. If you would like your audio file and transcript to be destroyed at the end of the research, please let me know. You have the right to access, and request correction of your information in accordance with relevant privacy laws.

For your information, my contact details are:

Rosemary Sayer
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Curtin University of Technology
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Australia
Phone: +61 407 144 060
Email: rosemary.sayer@postgraduate.curtin.edu.au

The Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this project (HREC number **RDHU-41-16.**). Should you wish to discuss the project with someone not directly involved, in particular, any matters concerning the conduct of the research or your rights as a participant, or you wish to make a confidential complaint, you may contact:

Ethics Officer
Tel: +61 92669233
Manager Research Integrity
Tel: +61 892662784
Curtin University
Email: hrec@curtin.edu.au.

I hope that the work that results from our collaboration will add to a deeper understanding about the complexities of being a refugee and the challenges of developing a new life in Australia. I very much appreciate your participation in this research.

Yours sincerely,

Rosemary Sayer

CONSENT FORM

HREC Project Number:	**RDHU-41-16.**
Project Title:	*"Now I know who I am" – A non-refugee writing refugee life stories [Working title]*
Principal Investigator:	*Dr Rachel Robertson, senior lecturer, communication and cultural studies*
Student researcher:	*Rosemary Sayer*
Version Number:	*1*
Version Date:	*22/01/16*

- I have read the information statement version and I understand its contents.
- I believe I understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of my involvement in this project.
- I voluntarily consent to take part in this research project.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.
- I understand that this project has been approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and will be carried out in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – updated March 2014.
- I understand I will receive a copy of this Information Statement and Consent Form.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Declaration by researcher: I have supplied an Information Letter and Consent Form to the participant who has signed above, and believe that they understand the purpose, extent and possible risks of their involvement in this project.

Researcher Name	
Researcher Signature	
Date	

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