

**Curtin University**

**Rosemary Sayer**

**Identity theft: the missing narrative identity of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia**

Abstract:

More than 65 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide; the highest number since the end of WWII. According to Neumann the response to refugees and asylum seekers is ‘one of the twenty first century’s most controversial and seemingly intractable ethical, political and social issues ...’ (5). Much of the public discourse about refugees and asylum seekers in Australia is de-humanising, negative and politicised. Governments and media have often created untrue narratives by grouping all asylum seekers and refugees together, erasing their individual identities and exploiting people’s anxieties about security, borders and terrorism. I contend that this has resulted in a theft of identity for many individual people from a refugee background and the development of a misleading collective identity. In this paper, I will explore how narrative identity can be re-discovered and developed by refugees through a collaborative process of working with a non-refugee narrator. I will discuss how this collaboration can be empowering for refugees to help them reclaim their stolen identities and dispel misleading narratives being disseminated about them. Schaffer and Smith posit that in the midst of ‘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’ (19).

Biographical note:

Rosemary Sayer is a writer, former journalist and a business communications consultant. She is currently undertaking a PhD in life writing and human rights at Curtin University. Rosemary has written three non-fiction books. The biography of Sir Gordon Wu, chairman of Hopewell Holdings, *The Man who Turned the Lights On*, was published in 2006 and the biography of Trevor Eastwood, *The CEO, the Chairman and the Board*, was published in 2009. Her latest book *More to the story – conversations with refugees* was published in 2015 and focuses on her major research interests of life writing, refugees and human rights.

Key words:

Refugees – narrative identity – collaboration – life writing

Much of the public discourse about refugees and asylum seekers in Australia is de-humanising, negative and politicised. McAdam and Chong argue that the asylum seeker policies developed and implemented by both Liberal and Labor governments have allowed untrue narratives to take hold in the Australian community which has led to a growing number of Australians believing the worst of refugees and asylum seekers who come to the country (184). Halilovich contends that many people of non-refugee background often fail to recognise that ‘being a refugee’ does not equate to a collective identity; rather it defines a temporary, often prolonged state for each person going through an extraordinary ordeal as a result of social and political upheaval (131). In this paper I explore ways in which collaborative life writing between a non-refugee narrator and a person of refugee background can address some of these misleading narratives. These narratives have often been amplified by governments and media who 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 & Chong: 3). I contend that the theft of identity of individual refugees is being circulated through misleading narratives to the broader community. It is this theft that my paper seeks to address.

According to Klaus Neumann the global response to refugees and asylum seekers as ‘one of the twenty first century’s most controversial and seemingly intractable ethical, political and social issues...’ (5). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) stated in its *2016 Global Trends* report that 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2015 as a result of persecution, conflict, generalised violence or human rights violations. Measured against the earth’s 7.349 billion population these numbers mean that 1 in every 113 people globally is now a refugee, an asylum seeker or an internally displaced person (Global trends report, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

My goal as a writer is to help humanise these statistics through collaborative life writing by telling individual and personal stories about people from a refugee background. Smith and Watson 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 (76-79). There are two ‘I’s in the type of collaborative writing this paper explores: the non-refugee ‘I’ narrator; and the refugee ‘I’ story-teller. In *More to the Story—Conversations with Refugees* (Sayer 72) 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 direct quote 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.

Smith and Watson (2010) and Couser (1998) have identified complicated and ethical issues that may arise in this type of complex, collaborative life writing. A key ethical concern is the disparity in power between researchers and the researched/subject. This could leave the disempowered 'subject' open to harm through misrepresentation or misuse of findings through a theft of identity by the researcher/writer. However, reflexive practice along with collaborative and participatory methods may alleviate some of these risks (Block, Warr, Gibbs & Riggs; Ellis, Kia, Keating, Yusuf, Lincoln & Nurr 2007). This paper argues that far from the theft of identity or storytelling, collaborative life writing between a refugee and non-refugee narrator can empower, re-build or even return the true identity of the person. As Rouverol (63) explains collaborative research is based on the premise that authority does not remain in the hands of the researcher.

In undertaking the research my interviews will be largely unstructured with the focus on bringing out the richness of each participant's life story and enabling the participant to help shape the interview and discussion. The snowballing technique will be used to recruit participants from my well-established networks of refugee advocates, refugee support groups, people of a refugee background and contacts that are already known to me. According to Denscome this 'enables the researcher to approach participants with credibility from being sponsored by a named person'. There will be an initial set of framing questions and a closing set of questions that will be the same for each participant, but interviews and discussions will be conducted over an extended period in a conversational, collaborative style. Ghorasi contends that this type of dialogue allows people more time and space to express themselves and explains why, in her life writing, she chooses the position as a visible researcher so she can be part of the conversation (3).

Arnold Zable, writer and human rights advocate, argues that we desperately need to recount more stories to neutralise the divisive politics that has infected the nation since the Tampa crisis during the time of the 2001 Howard government. Australia refused entry to over 400 asylum seekers and this was the start of Australia's conspicuously harsh approach to refugees seeking asylum who came by boat (McAdam & Chong 72). Australians, Zable states, were presented with a 'horde' of people, seen only from a distance by the media and the community because of alleged security concerns. The individual identity of the refugees seeking asylum who were crammed on the steel deck of a freighter next to big shipping containers was repressed and in many ways, stolen from them by the Australian government. According to Zable: 'it is easy to demonise a horde because a horde is a threat. We saw no individual faces. We heard no individual stories' (86). I contend that through collaboration with a non-refugee narrator, the truthful narratives of refugees and asylum seekers can be identified.

In Europe, similar issues concerning a loss of identity for people of a refugee background can be seen through the large numbers of people fleeing many conflicts in the Middle East. The daunting media images showing thousands of mostly anonymous arrivals seems to foster fear and panic in many countries. It took the iconic and distressing photograph shown in the media around the world of three year old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, who drowned and was washed up on a Turkish beach to stir many people's feelings (Bourke, SMH). This could have been our son, our brother, our grandson, or our nephew instead of a faceless statistic, of 'the unknown other'. Kapuscinski discusses the anti-global migration fear about 'the other' that engulfs much of the world and contends that this results in many people feeling

confused:

They 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 (42-43).

Eakin argues that life writing has the potential to ‘reform dehumanizing models of self and life story that society would impose on disempowered groups’ (11). In my collaborative research I hope to break down barriers surrounding ‘the other’. My role as a non-refugee narrator is not to steal or exploit personal stories, rather to help anchor and locate these stories in the present by making them relevant, accessible and desirable to understand in the context of the reader’s own life. Schaffer and Smith posit 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 (3).

The dehumanizing models of self and life story, as described by Eakin, were demonstrated in Australia during the lead up to the 2016 federal election when Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, falsely claimed in media interviews that: ‘Many refugees won’t be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English’. The refugee narrative was further demonised in his conflicting second trope that: ‘They would take Australian jobs, no doubt about that’ (Guardian newspaper May, 2016).

Research from around Australia proves that these claims are untrue and re-enforces a negative group identity for refugees. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that, in the longer term, refugees are more likely than other groups of Australians to be developing small businesses, creating jobs and building economic opportunities for others (ABS 2013). The *Building a New Life in Australia* study found very high rates of engagement in English language classes and other types of study—meaning that while many people of a refugee background may not have a job yet, most were working on language and other skills they would need to get one (Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)). 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’ (Refugee Council of Australia media release May 2016).

By inserting myself as the non-refugee narrator in refugee life stories, asking questions and reacting to circumstances alongside the refugee, I hope to be able to move the reader to expose the personal connections that we share as human beings. According to Behar, ‘the exposure of the self, who is also a spectator, has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to’ (14). This encapsulates my goal as a researcher and writer. However, Behar also cautions researchers and writers of their responsibility when they are entrusted with life stories as important as those from refugees and migrants.

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, 149).

For many people who have been displaced and find themselves in a new country, identity is a key issue and it is one that is constructed in relation to the new culture and society in which they find themselves living. Gullestad, a Norwegian social anthropologist, discussed the never-ending attempt at creating what she calls ‘a sustainable self-image, a concept that implies the possession of self-respect and dignity over time’ (quoted in Eakin, 218). This need for dignity and self-respect resonates deeply among all refugees I have met and collaborative story-telling can be one very important way in which people can find old identities or claim new ones in the countries that have become their homes. Seal (2005) notes that in some examples of Indigenous life writing, the non-Indigenous interviewer/ narrator can illuminate another’s life story. ‘The relationship can be one of support, fleshing out context and reflection on the white person’s side of things’. This paper supports that concept in relation to the non-refugee narrator who can illuminate the refugee’s life story through the same support, fleshing out the context and opportunity for reflection.

For many refugees and asylum seekers their acceptance in Australia, and sometimes their fate, depends on having their stories heard, understood and believed. Eastmond writes, sometimes ‘refugee stories are either not deemed relevant or credible, or increasingly not heard at all’ (259). Life writing and other forms of creative non-fiction can find new readers by changing the way refugee testimony is presented. Freeman in his life history research expands on this point arguing that the researcher’s role in the creation of a story is not ‘interference with data, but rather an integral part of it’ (432-433). This role and that of the narrator must never-the-less be as transparent as possible.

A major ethical concern to be considered is ‘retraumatising’ a person from a refugee background, particularly if there might be harm associated with ‘re-telling’ potentially traumatic experiences. My involvement with refugee support groups and NGO’s alongside my research with people from a refugee background has demonstrated to me that it is unlikely that those agreeing to participate in *this* type of collaborative life writing project will experience harm. For example, several refugees participating in my past research and life writing project (Sayer, Rosemary. Personal Interview, July, 2016) expressed their appreciation for being given the opportunity to share their stories with a wider audience and to help them understand their own life journeys. Other researchers, such as Fleay & Briskman and Fleay & Hartley, have reported similar positive outcomes when interviewing refugees and asylum seekers. Block, Riggs & Haslam explore how our predominantly western cultures and values shape the identities of groups of people like refugees, leading us to want to protect and not harm refugees (41). However, in doing this I contend, it often results in an erasure or ‘theft’ of refugee voices and a loss of individual identity.

In finalising my first collection of life writing about refugees, *More to the Story—Conversations with Refugees* I wanted to be sure each person heard me read to them the final version of their story. After I had collaborated with one particular young man over many months of interviews and discussions we read and edited his final story together. He was moved to tears. He had been separated from his family in southern Sudan by civil war, forced to serve as a child soldier and spent over ten years in various African refugee camps before being accepted as a refugee in Australia. He told me: ‘Now I know who I am. You have allowed me to reconcile my past in my present and put the parts of me together at last’. Turmoil, violence and dislocation had fractured this man’s sense of identity. Schaffer & Smith (18) explore how the unsettling of old identities and understandings of the past,

presage the imagination of a possible future.

Freadman (55) explores this question of identity among the Jewish post holocaust life writers and the children or relatives of those holocaust survivors. The non-refugee narrators in Jewish life writing appear to be mainly Jewish people writing about their own culture, particularly children and grand-children of refugees and migrants. As Jacklin notes: ‘There is also a significant body of auto/biographical narratives associated with the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees’ published in Australia (378). *The happiest refugee* (Do, 2010) and *The boat* (Nam, 2008) are two of the most successful and popular of these works. Like those from the Jewish diaspora, these stories have been written by refugees or the children and relatives of the same heritage, in this case, Vietnamese. There has been an increase in life writing texts from refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran published in Australia but few with non-refugee narrators. Jacklin identifies two important publications written with the help of what he calls a non-refugee professional writer before 2009: *Mahboba’s Promise* by Rawi and Mickan-Gramzio (2005) and *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* by Mazari and Hillman (2008). Jacklin refers to this work as ‘collaborative textual production’ (379).

My research so far has revealed some examples of published articles and books using a collaborative approach with a present non-refugee narrator from outside the culture of the refugee as opposed to a non-refugee professional writer who is largely absent. Heather Tyler’s *Asylum—Voices Behind the Razor Wire* (2003) and Michael Leach and Feith Mansouri’s *Lives in Limbo* (2004) narrate the life stories of many refugees to help them and the reader establish identity and place. Both texts contain the words of refugees who tell their stories, but the narrators locate these experiences with historical, political and legal context. In some of his short stories Arnold Zable (2011) also takes the role of the non-refugee narrator and draws parallels between holocaust survivors and recently arrived refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan. In his 2011 short story, *The Ancient Mariner*, Zable is present as the non-refugee narrator collaborating with an asylum seeker, Amal Basry, who survived when her boat sank en-route to Australia. Based on Zable’s many conversations and interviews with Basry, he writes about his journey of meeting Amal for the first time in 2002, getting to know her personally over a number of years and writing her life story. In doing this he creates a powerful human story about the challenges and fears that refugees and those seeking asylum face. Conway-Herron, who worked with persecuted ethnic women refugees in camps on the Thai-Burmese border, explained that collaboration such as this opens up many possibilities. She saw the connection between human rights and storytelling as ‘the powerful and ultimately hopeful act of giving voice’ (79-88).

Mark Blixer and Ben Rawlence offer variants of the approach described above. Blixer *The Lost Boys of Sudan* (2006) and Rawlence *City of Thorns* (2016) interweave history, testimony and commentary into their texts framing the real life stories of refugees through their own personal lens. In these texts, the narrators are often an ‘absent presence’ but they nonetheless control the narrative. Blixer follows the lives of four refugees from southern Sudan during their first years in the United States as they struggle to find their place and identity. He also researches and narrates the history of Sudan and explores the evolution and politics of refugee policy and international aid and the impact this had on the lives of the four refugees he came to know. Rawlence first visited Dadaab in Kenya, the largest refugee camp in the world in 2010 while working for Human Rights Watch. Over the next few years he spent extended periods in the camp, observing, interviewing and recording. The book tells its story

through the lives of nine individual refugees and their families, weaving in, simultaneously, an account of regional politics and international humanitarian aid. Blixer followed what he called ‘a journalistic approach of documentary narrative struggling to balance the detachment and objectivity expected of journalists and authors’(xv).He based the stories on hundreds of scenes witnessed and interviews conducted over three years with refugees, volunteers, historians and political figures. Blixer and Rawlence explain their positions quite clearly in their prefaces and prologues, but only situate themselves directly in the narrative of one or two chapters. They explore these positions through research, interviews and personal commentary. Smith and Watson explore the narrator’s investment in the story and how and why this affects the reader (248). This paper contends that my own approach of implicitly placing myself, my views and other commentary throughout the entire narrative alongside the refugee’s story is a more transparent and straightforward approach to collaborative writing, and ultimately more engaging for the reader. Because as Whitlock posits, testimony from asylum seekers and refugees rarely crosses the threshold of public discourse to engage a witnessing public and engender compassion ... (168). I believe it creates a sense of relationality between writer and reader and therefore also between subject/refugee and reader.

I am currently working with a young man who escaped persecution in Pakistan and came to Australia as an asylum seeker on a boat. He was detained for a year at Yongan Hills Detention centre in Northam, Western Australia. A year after his release he is still trying to find his identity. ‘They stole my soul and who I was,’ he told me. He explains that he still feels confused and lost for much of the time without family support as he struggles to make a new life in Australia. Through our collaboration, he commented that he is being given a chance to re-establish his 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, Rosemary. Personal interview, 18 July 2016).

So while there are complex challenges and ethical implications in writing refugee life stories, I would argue that collaboration with a non-refugee narrator can provide additional insights, context and a richness to the text for the reader that would otherwise be missing. Eastmond contends ‘that these stories may illuminate the reaffirmation of self, in order to contest the over-generalised and de-individualising images that are promoted’ (254). To contest these over-generalised and de-individualising stories which take away the individual identity of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, we need to continue to seek new ways of listening and narrating individual life stories to broader audiences in the hope of fostering a greater understanding. Perhaps one way to do this is through collaboration between refugees and non-refugee narrators.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

In contrast to this, an asylum seeker "is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated" (UNHCR: 2015). The term migrant is usually understood to cover "all cases where the decision to migrate was taken freely and is concerned with personal convenience without the intervention of external compelling factors" (The International Organization for Migration: 2011).