

Going Public with Our True Colours:

A Storytelling Project by Women from Refugee Backgrounds

By Nina Woodrow

The *Our True Colours Storytelling (OTC) Project* was part of my PhD fieldwork - research which I completed in 2016. This research, and the [thesis](#) that eventuated, were born out of my work in education and community arts over the previous two decades. In this context I had witnessed at close quarters the struggle that refugees and asylum seekers experience as they negotiate the resettlement process in Australia. Over time questions about why it had to be so hard had persisted. I wanted to better understand the place of arts and culture - and the place of storytelling in particular - in mediating empathy and a better approach to social inclusion

I knew as I was planning this project that I would encounter creative and ethical challenges along the way. I started with questions about what could be gained by undertaking this work in participatory and mindful ways and foregrounding these challenges. Conducting an arts project as research would allow me to track some of the creative and ethical ways that storytelling capacity could be inspired and cultivated in others, and shared with audiences, with the aim of starting conversations about refugee resettlement and hospitality. I also planned to connect with, and define more clearly, the communities and publics we are working with—be they local, or national, or global. To this end I convened a multidisciplinary team of practitioners – artists, community development workers, settlement support workers and professional peace builders - and together we designed a program of socially engaged storytelling work based on the life narratives shared by young people from refugee [backgrounds](#).

As a project team, what we found in the process of designing this project work was that engaging with the ethics of hospitality and welcome the way we did led us into an inventive and challenging field of practice. It led to having conversations with people we would not normally talk to; about things we would not normally talk about. It precipitated an intense burst of creativity across multiple, embodied art forms, and it also led to ethical quandaries and experiences that pushed us, as practitioners, into reflective, and at times uncomfortable spaces. In the process of making these discoveries we were required to consider what community means, what being Australian means and to consider these questions in a global context. It led ultimately to grappling anew with some timeless questions about how we learn to tolerate differences, address injustices and cohabitate peacefully in spaces defined locally, nationally and globally.

The Ethics of Representing Others

In the OTC project “going public” was an important part of enacting our collective intention, but we all gained a deeper understanding of the nature of the personal risk this creation of publicness posed to the storytellers as the project progressed. Nonetheless, it was this movement into the public sphere that we came to see as a meaningful and critical part of the project, and the only way to ethically follow through on the responsibilities we were charged with the storytelling facilitators, who had been gifted with the life stories these women shared.

Given the language, cultural and citizenship status barriers, and inequalities, storytelling facilitation here assumed a whole extra layer of creative and ethical complexity. As I have written about [elsewhere](#), shepherding these women’s stories safely through the labyrinth-like route, with storytelling and art workshops at one end and public performance at the other, was a consciously inventive, way-finding process, with many paradoxes and dilemmas to be negotiated along the way.

My field notes from the early phase of art workshops document some of the insights that I stumbled upon in this wayfinding journey. Here I refer to the other field project that was also part of my research. The Brave New Welcome Project (which also produced a collaboratively produced [mini film](#)) targeted young people and aimed to bring newly arrived young people - unaccompanied minors from refugee backgrounds - into contact with Australian born youth. This project is documented in the [thesis](#) and also in a [journal article](#). My notes here reflect on the tenuous art of balancing risk, trust and possibilities.

OTC field note Week 4

Week four of a six week workshop program and this project has found some legs. Engaging with participants in these workshops, similar to the workshop program for youth earlier in the year, feels like a tenuous, stuttering, wobbly process. It has ended up being a six week program like this last one was, which wasn't necessarily the original intention. This just seems to be the time frame that is manageable; without dedicated funding it is a stretch to resources them beyond a kind of pilot phase. The six week timeframe seems to work for the participants too, as they are busy and not sure what they are committing to. The youth project, however, has now developed into a second, much more substantial phase, and we are trying to secure funding, and discussions about sustainability are part of the way this idea is being developed.

The pattern for both these projects is that the initial six week pilot with a new group of storytellers has an awkward, tentative flavour. For the first few weeks the whole concept is uncertain. Membership of the group is unstable to some extent (more so with the youth project). For the facilitators this is a risky time, a storytelling space has been delineated, ideas are offered, storytelling processes suggested, a dialogue initiated, but the participants seem to reserve judgment for a while,

perhaps gathering more information before making an investment, of time and effort and emotion. Trust is certainly something that needs to be established before any stories can be explored and shared. At this stage it seems quite possible that the whole idea will not work, and time is short.

Working cross culturally is part of the challenge here, both in terms of language and the lack of a shared expectation about what creative and learning contexts look like. The ways in which this context is like, and not like, a formal learning environment are perhaps part of what needs to be established. There are layers of communication and negotiation occurring simultaneously: relationships, expectations, conventions all need to be scoped. And so there is a hiatus while all this is percolated and filtered and everyone finds their place in this unfamiliar context. It seems to be necessary to hold the space for long enough, through all this uncertainty, for a rhythm to be found, for voices to emerge. The task seems to be to balance offering a structured set of storytelling activities (in this case, collage activities) while allowing silences and spaces to open up. It requires an act of faith. There are things that have brought us all together. For these women it is a desire to find their way in a new culture. They want English language, they want access to education, they want to find their voice. As facilitators we want to capture stories, we want to bridge the distance, we want to work with these women to effect change. The process starts with a willingness to share stories, it starts with good will, but there is no formula for making this kind of space work; it has to be invented, and re-invented each time.

So I am thinking that we may be looking at a developmental process, a model for how new projects could develop, how storytelling capacities, processes, motivations can be scoped, how the relationships that support the storytelling in a co-creative model can be tested. The starting point is understanding that there is no magic tool for engaging participants, dissolving barriers and inspiring stories. While the inclination is to be non-directive, to wait for input, to share power, in these early stages some version of leadership is necessary. Whatever process you choose to start the workshops with, is an offering that needs to be presented with some commitment and confidence. In a short timeframe, where the idea is to germinate a co-creative media project, a structured process is needed to set the ball rolling and allow participants to find their way into a story sharing space. The vital issues, the stories, the moments of creativity, emerge in their own unpredictable way, in their own time, and it's quite possible the most meaningful work will happen in a kind of left of field way, in a peripheral activity, or even after the workshops have finished. This then is the time to loosen control and become observant, to listen. The creative phase of this kind of project, when the aim is to make a digital story to share, is a time when the link between private stories and public dialogue are held in suspension. There are possibilities.

Am I an Activist or Scholar?

One of the first challenges for me was to define my role in relation to the storytelling work we were initiating with project participants and to negotiate the tensions between activist and researcher. In the end, I conceptualised two zones of practice. In the context of the fieldwork I defined my role as a practitioner-scholar, and the intellectual, academic outcomes I produced were about reporting on a program of applied research. In writing up the research I drew on ethnographic observations that documented the co-creative process of the challenges we faced and the learning we experienced. The other zone of practice contained the creative outcomes produced through a collaborative process (the short film, the artwork, the exhibitions and screening events). I defined these as a parallel, collective form of reporting on the research, and it was here that I learned a lot about the how research data can be packaged and shared with audiences in different ways.

The catalyst, and the lifeblood, for the OTC Project was the life stories that the young women from refugee backgrounds were willing to share. It was clear from the start, however, that research engaging with these stories and these storytellers would need to be based on an inventive and collaborative form of communication, and it would need to be reciprocal in its operations. Going public with these women's stories was a way to both share research data and fulfil the activist intentions of the storytellers. Stories generated in intimate, creative workshop contexts were conveyed from this provide context to a public forum, packaged in a conscious, collective intention of sensitising audiences to the need for compassion, respect and social action.

In 2013 and 2014 the *Our True Colours* (OTC) storytelling project brought together more than a dozen women from refugee backgrounds to explore life narratives via facilitated workshops and visual arts. Four of these women decided that they wanted to share their stories with the world. For all the women who participated the workshops generated a multi-model form of storytelling using their artwork. For the four storytellers who moved to the second phase, we went on to craft stories using [ekphrastic](#) and [collective narrative practices](#). We went on to co-create a script and enlist the support of professionals such as a visual designer/video artist and website designer to translate the stories into a film and create a [hosting platform](#). We went on to stage a live, performative storytelling event, design an installation of the artwork, and construct opportunities for ongoing audience interaction. In all of these stages we attempted to move mindfully through the ethical and creative challenges we encountered. Inevitably our solutions were, at times, partial and imperfect, while at other times our collaboration clearly made something new possible. At the centre of our process was always a concern with the social and political purpose that underscored the collaboration.

Going Public and Cultural Translation

“Going public” meant thinking deeply about the practice of cultural translation. Good practice in mediating refugee life stories involves at a minimum, a mindfulness about the ethics of representation and an exploration of form and content in ways that disrupt the “victim” and “rescuer” binary. Careful consideration of the terms of the engagement, with individuals and communities, and with the publics who are potential audiences for co-created life narrative compositions also figures in an ethical practice for mediating refugee stories. We needed to frame the stories so that audiences were provided with some insight about what they were hearing/viewing. We proposed the idea of the public art exhibition, designed the interactive elements in this installation. The purpose of these strategies was to construct “interpretive frames” by supplying paratexts (Smith & Watson, 2010) and in this way to orchestrate the process of scaling up the conversation about refugee resettlement, women’s rights and access to education.

Below is an account from my research notes about the screening of the film. This experience was one of many challenging and complex moments that peppered my year of fieldwork and action research, designing storytelling and participatory art and media projects. It happened near the end of my collaboration with a project partner - the [NGO](#) providing support and advocacy for refugees and asylum seekers in Brisbane Australia. Reflecting on this experience, I can see that it holds and illustrates tensions that I came to understand as critical in this practice.

OTC Field Note: The Screening

Maki (Machemeh), the fourth storyteller, was late. Madelaine had been trying to call and text her but we suspected she had run out of credit for her phone. Eventually Madelaine messaged her on Facebook and we found out that she was still at a bus stop, marooned in the suburbs, waiting for a bus that never came.

At the State Library, the International Women's Day event was about to start and I was knotted up with tension. Madelaine, my colleague and friend, looked rigid with stress.

Madelaine and I made the final adjustments to the art exhibition featuring the four intricately decorated collages created by each of the storytellers. The collages were three panelled and doubled sided - triptychs. Each work was threaded with strands of jewellery wire and suspended in solid black, open frames, so you could see both sides of the three dimensional pieces. The frames were standing on plinths which were arranged so they framed a square. A paper mache “post box” held the space in the centre of the square. Postcards were printed and arranged on a nearby bench with coloured pens. Viewers would be able to respond to the women's stories by writing on a postcard and “posting” it in the box.

We had spent months visualising this small, interactive installation, working to eke maximum aesthetic and design value from our minuscule budget, and hoping to create a catalyst for a public "conversation" with the International Women's Day Event audience that attending this evening. The mini film that was to be screened tonight, the art installation, the postcards and the project website, were linking elements in our strategy.

The three other storytellers emerged finally from the bathroom in full traditional Hazara costume. They looked spectacular. Looking at their faces I got a sense of what it meant for these women, still finding their feet in a new land, to be about to assume centre stage, albeit briefly, to present their stories to a public audience. They were nervous. The event was being held in the auditorium and terrace space at the State Library, riverside in the centre of Brisbane. It was a rather grand space. The program this evening would start with a panel of speakers, then some dancing, then the screening of our sixteen minute film, then the audience would move to the foyer to view the art exhibition, and onto the terrace for a multi-cultural fashion parade.

Staff at the refugee and asylum seeker support service in Brisbane hosting this event, had been working hard for months planning and bringing this program together.

Earlier this week, as a small project group, we had got together to view the final version of the film that was to be screened this evening, the outcome of nine months' worth of talking, sharing stories and making art. The reaction from the storytellers at this time was subdued. Madelaine and I were stumped, surprised by this response, and then we were apprehensive.

They were positive about the look of the work - their beautiful collages, artfully animated and brought to life - but each of them struggled hearing their narrative recorded in her own voice, in not perfect English. For these smart, aspiring young women, the English was not good enough. They had made a decision to be here this evening, and to share their stories in this way, but at this moment while we all paced and wondered if Maki would arrive in time, I felt the weight of my share of the responsibility for all that was suspended in this moment before this film went public.

Had it been the right thing to do to shine a spotlight on these women in this way? This was not a testimony of trauma; it dodged that trope of the injured and suffering refugee. This was a participatory art project, and "a celebration of their strength, tenacity and grace" as the publicity material asserted, but it was based on their personal life stories, mapped in beads and fabric and paper, in words and symbols and colours, discovered through weeks of intimate women's workshops space. The sound of these women's voices, including the faltering moments, seemed to us to epitomize courage, but I too have had times, in other situations, when fear of the judgements of

others has weighed heavily on my mind. How would I feel if it was my life being shown to a 200 strong audience of strangers?

I was experiencing first hand the sickening slippage of a shifting “positionality” as they say in the ethnographic literature I have been reading - how the ethics of participatory research in this project, as in others of this ilk, can become tangled and murky. Suddenly it seemed like so much to ask of these generous women, who had lost so much. These women's life stories were being mined to answer my research questions. Although we had each defined our personal interest in this project, and this was not the first time I had considered the ethics of conducting research this way, at this moment I was plunged into a state of crisis, infused with doubt.

Was this the right way to further our collective desire to build a better public understanding of what it means to resettle in a country like Australia after a refugee experience? If the project was not clearly serving their personal interests, as well as mine and my colleague's, then all these ideals about counteracting the insidious and dehumanizing political campaign being waged against refugees and asylum seekers in Australia over the past decade, the mission that seems so crucial in these times, were meaningless now. At this moment I was suffused with the conviction that if this experience right now, tonight, was not a beneficial one, not a genuinely empowering one for these particular women, these brave storytellers, then the whole project was just wrong.

I was hanging around the back entrance to the auditorium, staring down the cavernous stairwell from the third level of the state library, to the ground floor, my eyes trained on the entrance where Maki would arrive. The dancing was almost finished and I was bordering on despair, when she appeared, breathless, running in a full-length dress. She emerged from the lift with a laughing, shining face; she looked beautiful as usual and we hugged briefly. I escorted her through the back door of the auditorium, and we found a seat a few rows back from Madelaine and the other storytellers, just as the MC finished introducing the film, and the lights went down. The familiar music started and words appear white on a [black screen](#).

Our True Colours: A Collage of Four Women's Stories

*We are women who
came to Australia in
search of a better life,
with more rights and
more opportunities*

*We have come together
to explore our pasts, to
share our present, and
to hope and dream for the future*

These are our true colours....

This critical episode holds and illustrates tensions that I came to understand often accompanied the shifts between scales of practice in co-performative storytelling. The tension between our perception of what it meant to “do good” at a micro scale (i.e. facilitate storytelling practices in a way that empowered these women as individual storytellers) and what it meant to “do good” at a macro scale (i.e. facilitate storytelling practices in a way that propelled these stories into circulation in the hope that they would find an audience and have a broader impact on public attitudes to asylum seekers) was at this point brought sharply into focus.

Was it Worth Going Public?

The performance of the OTC stories, including the art exhibition of the collages, certainly evoked powerful responses. Viewers of the OTC video and the art exhibition were invited to write responses on postcards and “post” these in the postbox that was part of the installation. This invitation was announced during the introduction to the film screening at International Women Day event at the state library in Brisbane, and signalled as part of the signage for the art exhibition installed in the foyer. Some of these responses are archived on the Our True Colours [website](#).

Although these responses are unreservedly supportive and appreciative, and often emotional in tone, what was not clear is whether they would convert directly into political activism. And even if they did translate in this instance, the audience for this International Women’s Day event was only two hundred strong, and composed of a public who are, arguably, already supportive of a humanitarian response to refugees, particularly to women. What’s more, the OTC exhibition was ephemeral, in the same way as a theatre production is, and therefore it is difficult to imagine the impact being sustained beyond the short-term afterglow of the event.

Scholars have pointed out however, that a sentimental response that does not translate readily or directly into widespread action, is at least a potential precursor to action. Theatre scholar Emma Cox (2012), for example, draws attention to the dialectical relationship between local and global contexts in contemporary theatricalized refugee narratives, a tension between the immediacy of emotion at a micro scale and an understanding of the intractability of suffering caused by forced migration at a global scale. She claims that, “the implications of these affects are at once problematic, as far as location-specific political and emotional

ends are concerned, and essential to the storytelling purpose in any performance context” (Cox, 2012, p.130). A certain kind of tenacity is enacted in the performance of refugee stories, however, in that it traces and retraces an affective link between the two scales — between the lived experiences of real people and the global “power-geometry” (Massey, 1993) shaping these conditions. The possibilities for engagement, the hopefulness, therefore, can be found in the tenacity of the art form.

Two months after the initial screening at the International Women’s Day event, the OTC film was screened again at the 2014 Refugee Film Festival, to an audience numbering about the same, and who would have been very likely, also, to have a pre-existing sympathy for the idea of welcoming refugees. Surveyed after viewing these films, a sample of this audience reported that they were motivated, as a result of seeing the films, to talk about the experience. This would suggest that there is a kind of cultural work being done by performing refugee stories in a public space. The importance of the work the OTC film may have been accomplishing is not necessarily to convert audience members or win them over to “the cause”. The impact of such screenings in motivating and supporting audience members to process difficult emotions (such as shame and despair) and instigate further dialogue within their communities of family, friends and colleagues. Theatre scholars Gilbert and Lo (2007) argue that cumulatively, performances such as these do a kind of “communal and cultural work in their treatment of the wounds of asylum” (p.204). In this sense going public with the film could be seen to be doing the relational work of providing a public cultural forum for emotional responses to the brutality of asylum seeker experiences, of inciting dialogue and building a sense of solidarity, or at least contributing to this project.

The International Women’s Day event, and the Refugee Film Festival, both held in 2014 in Brisbane, staged at the State Library, were events with relatively humble dimensions. The OTC film itself has an aesthetic characteristic of participatory video projects, and modest production values. Nonetheless, co-performing these life narratives, in this public site, allowed us to bring the multi-scalar dimensions of our practice into focus, to stage an interruption and make a bid for a collectively re-imagined cosmopolitan sensibility.

[A website](#) was constructed for the project and the site was populated with the story of the project as a whole along with all the visual material that was produced. Audience responses inscribed on postcards, which were collected from the postbox incorporated into the art installation, were later uploaded here and the website became a place where audience interaction could continue beyond the first public screening and the exhibition. The film and the artwork live permanently on the OurTrueColours website and have become resources taken up by high school and universities and by community organisations in their ongoing community education and advocacy work. In this sense the audience for the Our True Colours stories continues to grow.

We collectively made the decision to scale up our storytelling work, to go public with the film and share this “research data” because we wanted (non-refugee) participants and publics to care about refugee lives. Ultimately, however, we learned that this was less about making an appeal to their conscience or their empathy, or “teaching” them something, and more about developing creative narrative practices, staging stories as an intervention in imaginary national geographies, and making a claim for public space, one with opportunities to keep the conversation going built in to the project design.

Last Word

In the final stage of the project my colleague attended a meeting with the women and as a final debriefing, it had a holistic, evaluative flavour. Later Madeleine reported to me that three women had attended this final meeting to discuss what the project had meant for them. The consensus was that yes, although they were nervous about the standard of their English language skills evident in the video, the process had ultimately been worthwhile for them. The experience of having their stories screened in a public forum, and the responses from the audience was a positive one for them. The audience at the International Women’s Day event had been clearly impressed, and they had been offered a rush of positive feedback for the video—praise for the stories shared and for courage of the telling. These responses were personal, with audience members approaching them after the screening and asking them about the project, the video and the life stories the women had shared. Audience members had spent time interacting with the exhibition and had asked the women about the process of making the artworks. The responses recorded on postcards were universally respectful, emotional and often personal. On the night Madeleine and I had observed this with relief, and we had uploaded the postcards to the website and directed the women to this site so they could view them. We could see that the four women had been surprised and buoyed by the audience’s reaction. At this meeting a month later, Madeleine had learned that this experience had been significant for all of them. The all felt that they had gained more confidence in speaking about who they are and where they had come from through this experience.

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