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## Theorising narratives of exile and belonging : the importance of Biography and Ethno-mimesis in “understanding” asylum

### **Abstract**

The article explores the use and importance of taking a biographical approach to conducting participatory action research (PAR) with asylum seekers and refugees in order to: better understand lived experiences of exile and belonging; contribute to the important field of Biographical Sociology; provide a safe space for stories to be told; and in turn for these stories to feed in to policy and praxis.

The authors' combined work on the asylum-migration nexus, the politics of representation and participatory action research methodology (PAR) as ethno-mimesis<sup>1</sup> argues for the use of biography to contribute to cultural politics at the level of theory, experience and praxis, and is constitutive of critical theory in praxis. PAR research undertaken with Bosnian refugees in the East Midlands and Afghan refugees in London will be the focus around which our analysis develops.

We develop a case for theory building based upon lived experience using biographical materials, both narrative and visual, as critical theory in practice towards a vision of social justice that challenges the dominant knowledge/power axis embedded in current governance and media policy relating to forced migration.

The dominant power/knowledge axis related to forced migration is embedded in current (New Labour) governance and re-presented in some media texts as identified below. New Labour governance is symbolised in the competing discourses of a) strong centralised control and b) more open systems, network and partnership based governance (Newman, 2003: 17-23; Clarke, 2004; Lewis, 2000). Open systems are made up of partnerships and networks – “joined up government”, “that transcends the vertical, departmental structures of government itself” (Newman, 2003: 20). to develop or foster a consensual style of governing. Progressive governance is defined by Newman (2003:15) as involving a significant shift from governance through hierarchy and competition to governance through networks and partnerships with an emphasis upon inclusion. Progressive governance involves the production of techniques and strategies of responsabilisation of citizens operationalised through the development of

networks, alliances, and partnerships, with a strong focus upon active citizenship. Thus, spreading responsibility for social control to non state agencies and “communities” (Garland, 2001). In relation to forced migration/asylum discourses around the exclusion of the “other” (involving criminalisation, detention and deportation) and the maintenance and control of borders (developing ever more tighter controls on entry and asylum applications) exist in tension with discourses that speak of human rights, responsibilities and possibilities for multi-cultural citizenship especially in the community cohesion literature. There is a conflict at the heart of New Labour’s approach to asylum policy linked to the “alterity” of the asylum seeker that promulgates hegemonic ideologies and discourses around rights to belonging and citizenship, perceived access to resources (redistribution) and misrecognition fostering suspicion of the “stranger”. Alongside discourses of fairness and rights to enter and seek refuge, there exist regressive discourses that water down the vitally important actual and symbolic 1951 UN convention, and foster a split between “bogus” and “genuine” refugees, making it extremely hard to seek asylum in the UK.

### **Keywords**

biography, ethno-mimesis, PAR, asylum, social justice, cultural politics, politics of representation, media

## **Introduction**

How do we come to understand the lived experience of “asylum”, exile and processes of belonging in contemporary western society? Through the mediated images and narratives of mass media institutions; advocacy groups and networks; and academic research.

The media politics of asylum can be interpreted through the weaving together of legal, governance and media narratives/messages for general consumption. As pointed out by the Article 19 (2004) researchers in their recent report on media coverage of asylum seekers, the main problem lies with the relentless repetition and overemphasis of precisely those images that reinforce particular stereotypes and a failure to source more diverse images to illustrate the many other aspects of the asylum issue. A major contributor to this is what has come to be known as “dog whistle journalism” (Bailey and Harindranath, 2005), which, as Ward explains, is “the discussion of policy issues in an outwardly reasonable language, but one using words and phrases that are calculated to carry a different message to the target audience” (Bailey and Harindranath, *ibidem*: 28). The phrases “outwardly reasonable language” and “the target audience” are particularly revealing of the relations between journalistic discourse, social imagination, and immigration policies. In all three spheres the asylum seeker is represented as an undesirable alien, occasionally represented as a possible threat to national sovereignty and security. Ward’s argument that the journalists’ coverage of the infamous “Tampa affair” in Australia in 2001 became “part of a carefully calculated Liberal Party strategy to revive its flagging electoral stocks ahead of an imminent federal election” (Ward, 2002: 22), and similar research in the UK (for example, Kundnani, 2001) likewise prompt two concerns that are relevant to this essay. Firstly, the continual use of terms such as

“illegal” and “bogus” entrenches them as part of the popular media discourse on asylum seekers, thus contributing to the stereotyping referred to in the Article 19 report (see also Mihelj, 2004). Secondly, the nearly complete absence – apart from a few exemplary reports and television documentaries – of an alternative voice from the perspective of the refugee or asylum seeker raises important ethico-political issues relating to the politics of representation, democracy, and immigration.

Much of the knowledge generated by advocacy groups, organisations, self organised groups and services supporting asylum seekers and refugees provides much needed alternative voices, dispelling myths, and promoting better understanding and knowledge. The knowledge generated is also subject to media representation and this tends not to be constituted by the voices of refugees and asylum seekers. Thus asylum seekers and refugees are represented by others, such as NGO’s, advocacy and support groups. Organisations such as Refugee Action, the Refugee Council, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles and the Refugee Council of Australia are exemplars<sup>ii</sup>.

Academic research across a range of disciplines has contributed much to our understanding of “asylum”, exile and processes of belonging. Bauman (1992) has written eloquently about the role of the sociologist as interpreter rather than legislator and, moreover, that this interpretive role takes up the mutual understanding of diverse communities, valuing plurality of cultural traditions, subcultures and fostering tolerance of diversity as well as making the unfamiliar familiar.

This interpretive role includes for us creating spaces for the marginalised to speak for themselves. Our central argument here is that PAR/Ethno-mimesis as a methodology and artistic practice offers the opportunity for such groups to represent themselves, without a cultural or political intermediary talking “on behalf” of them. As an exemplary form of auto-ethnography PAR/Ethno-mimesis transgresses the power relations inherent in traditional ethnography and social research as well as the binaries of subject/object inherent in the research process. For the participants involved in PAR are both objects and subjects (authors) of their own narratives and cultures. Crucially, PAR/ethno-mimesis is reflexive and phenomenological but also looks to praxis. As previously argued such renewed methodologies take us “outside of binary thinking and purposefully challenge identitarian thinking. They deal with the contradictions of oppression and the utter complexity of our lived relations...in ways which counter postemotionalism, valorizing discourses and the reduction of the Other to a cipher of the oppressed/marginalised/exploited” (O’Neill et al, 2005:75-6).

It is within this context that we make a case for the role of biographical research linked to participatory action research (PAR) to develop better “understanding” of the lived experiences, lived cultures of exile, displacement and belonging. Such understanding feeds into cultural politics and praxis and may help processes of integration and social justice.

### **Importance of taking a biographical approach to social justice**

Kearon (2005) writes in the journal *Social Justice* about the need to engage with the everyday lives of the socially excluded and potentially criminalised “other”, “as autonomous actors with their own mundane, ordinary, and unspectacular sensibilities and structures of feeling” (Kearon, ibidem: 16). In the same volume Greer and Jewkes (2005) stress the importance of creating a “theory of the subject” in the context of media images of social exclusion and the constitution of the stigmatised

other. Greer and Jewkes take a psycho-social approach to crime and deviance. Moreover, that “representations of crime, deviance and control illustrate the extent to which sections of the media harbour an apparent obsession with the demonization of ‘others’ and serve as one of the primary sites of social inclusion and exclusion in late modernity” and that this “is constructed and consumed in such a way as to permit the reader, viewer, or listener to sidestep reality rather than confronting or ‘owning up’ to it through a process of alienation and demonization, we establish the ‘otherness’ of those who deviate and (re)assert our own innocence and normality” (Greer and Jewkes, *ibidem*: 29).

If we accept the need for a theory of the subject that engages with the mundane sensibilities and structures of feeling as a counter to the processes of meaning making described above, then taking a biographical approach linked to PAR is a useful way forward. Biographical research and participatory action research methodologies are involved in the production of social justice through knowledge production that is “authentic” or “typical” revealing “social actors’ own way of knowing the field” (Fowler, 1996: 12). Drawing upon Bourdieu we can say that PAR produces a “socioanalysis” facilitating “the return of the socially repressed” and thus creates an “archive which contains a genuine popular culture” (Fowler, *ibidem*: 14-15). For Bourdieu (1996) “understanding” involves

Attempting to situate oneself in the place the interviewee occupies in the social space in order to understand them as *necessarily what they are... [T]o take their part...is not to effect that ‘projection of oneself into the other’ of which the phenomenologists speak. It is to give oneself a general and genetic comprehension of who the person is, based on the (theoretical or practical) command of the social conditions of existence and the social mechanisms which exert their effects on the whole ensemble of the category to which the person belongs. (p. 22-23)*

There is a growing interest in narrative theorising and Bruner referenced in Horrocks et al. (2003) defines the self, in part, as a “library of stories” and what matters is “that we try to characterise people’s lives...there is an acceptance of the need to look at how people actually live and make sense of their lives” (Horrocks et al, *ibidem*: xv). For Ian Craib (2003: xvi) emotional life is complex and contradictory and too disruptive to be grasped in a coherent way, thus we tell ourselves stories to ease our anxieties”. Moreover, as Roberts (2003) has shown the narratives we construct are subject to “repetition and revision”. Individuals are constantly engaged in rewriting the self. For Roberts, telling our stories through narrative practices is an “artistic endeavour” that enables us to “do” coherence. Some narratives can help us; others as Craib documents, can keep us passive and “separate people from the authenticity of their lives” (Craib, 2003: 1).

Key aspects to consider in life history/biography research (as explored by these authors) include: the importance of memory and forgetting; life as a psycho-social project; recurrence, time and space, and the fact that micrology can throw light on broader structures and processes. Svensson (1997) writes about the power of biography as a way to order “life and time just as a map orders the world and space...We live in a biographical era...Both life and time are biographically ordered in modernity...we shape the present against the background of our earlier life history and with our sights set on the future” (Svensson, *ibidem*: 99-100). Moreover, that biography has a therapeutic power, creating forms of subjectivity within particular discourses linked to what Giddens has called “the project of self”. For Svensson, the

power of memory and the ability and opportunity to document life in narrative form combine to produce the conditions for making one's biography.

Biographical research is involved in the production of meaning, and offers resistance to the dominant power/knowledge axis related to asylum and refuge in the current politics of representation we find in some media messages and images. Biographical research can do this in the production of alternative and renewed narratives that generate social knowledge to inform, raise awareness and empower. Ultimately biographical research counters the sanitized, demonized or hidden aspects of the lived cultures of exile and belonging as well as the normative, stereotyped stories we access through some mass media institutions. In so doing biography research helps to produce knowledge as a form of social justice.

Examining the relevance of biography to social justice involves engaging with the question of what constitutes social justice. As suggested in O'Neill et al. (2005: 75-76), the concept of social justice is neatly summarised by Cribb and Gewirtz (2003), drawing upon but extending models developed by Nancy Fraser (1997) and Iris Marion Young (1990):

- distributive justice, which includes concerns about what Fraser calls economic justice and is defined as the absence of exploitation, economic marginalisation and deprivation;
- cultural justice, defined (by Fraser) as the absence of cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect;
- associational justice, defined as the absence of "patterns of association amongst individuals and amongst groups which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which affect the conditions within which they live and act" (Power and Gewirtz, quoted in Cribb and Gewirtz, 2003:19).

A holistic understanding of social justice combines "distributive, cultural and associational justice, and ways of stranding these together - through, for example, the combined effects of *affective change* and compassion; *new cosmopolitanism* and inter-cultural bridging; and practical steps towards *redistribution*, *recognition* and facilitating the voices of marginalized to be listened to" (Cribb and Gewirtz, *ibidem*). Social justice is re-produced through participatory democracy.

## **Communicative ethics and participatory democracy**

In his influential essay on "the politics of recognition", Taylor (1994) combines two different meanings of the term "recognition": that of equal recognition, in terms of equal rights and dignity for all citizens in a multicultural society, and recognition of difference that discerns and acknowledges the distinctiveness of cultures. Central to his argument is that both types of recognition are crucial to a multicultural liberal democracy. For our present purposes, his insistence on a dialogic model of identity as formed through intersubjective "webs of interlocution" is particularly pertinent, as misrecognition, in the form of unequal power relations in the dialogue, has severe psychological and social consequences. The sameness-difference dialectic intrinsic to his notion of recognition and the centrality of "locution" to it asserts the significance of the politics of representation. Representational failures and injustices inherent in the status quo largely stem from the marginalisation of subaltern voices and alternative biographies and histories. Crucially therefore, the politics of recognition has to be informed by and premised on the politics of subalternity, in the form of

recuperating biographies and experiences that provide alternative narratives. In the present case, those biographies refer to the life-histories of refugees and asylum seekers that challenge the stereotypical images of them as “undesirable” “bogus”, or “scroungers” in dominant discourse.

Benhabib (2002) too, insists on a dialogic relationship between different perspectives inspired by diverse cultural formations and value systems in her vision of a genuine participatory democracy. This underpins her argument against what she sees as the unproductive dichotomy between universalism and relativism. A genuine participatory democracy includes a constant renegotiation of “universal” rights. In the place of alleged incommensurability and untranslatability between cultures – in other words, relativism – she pleads for an inter-cultural dialogue in which cultures are “polyvocal” instead of being complete or coherent wholes. Representation is therefore crucial in her vision of participatory democracy too, as the dialogue is founded on an ethics of communication in which participants have equal voice. “Politically, the right to cultural expression needs to be grounded upon, rather than considered alternative to, universally recognised citizenship rights” (Benhabib, *ibidem*: 26). Benhabib’s formulation of the ethics of dialogue that is central to the functioning of a participatory democracy once again necessitates the presence in the public sphere of the narratives of marginal communities, narratives whose very exclusion constitutes marginality – in our case refugee groups – as alternatives to mainstream or dominant representations. Implicated in both Taylor’s conception of the politics of recognition and Benhabib’s promotion of inter-group dialogue is social and political justice in a democracy.

Intrinsic to this formulation of justice and democracy is the issue of narrative as cultural politics. Deborah Battaglia’s (1995) argument about narratives of self-making is useful in linking Taylor’s discussion of “misrecognition” with Benhabib’s social justice and democratic participation, and also underlines the need for refugee communities to express or represent their stories in opposition to the media representations mentioned above, as the latter can potentially be damaging to the formation of their selves. For Battaglia “there is no selfhood apart from the collaborative practice of figuration. The ‘self’ is a representational economy: a reification continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects’ histories, experiences, self-representations; with their texts, conduct, gestures, objectifications” (Battaglia, *ibidem*: 2).

The right to speak, be heard and recognised are central aspects of “social justice” and feed in to cultural politics. Narrative as cultural politics can challenge exclusionary tendencies, promote resistances and transformations by creating spaces for voices and alternative discourses. A paper by Helia Lopez provides a good example of biographical narrative as cultural politics. Helia (1998) writes powerfully on the experiences of marginalisation, internal exile and the politics of return.

One can become an exile even while remaining on ones own soil...After 11 September 1973, I became part of the defeated sector of Chilean society. Our politics creeds, ideologies, values, ways of life, everything we believed in were devalued and stigmatized...I was left deprived of any social value.  
(p. 189)

Her experiences are charted in relation to her particular gendered experiences involving the discursive production of her “self” in exile. Helia’s husband was sent to

Puchuncavi concentration camp and she lost her post at the University of Chile. She describes her life as straddling two Chile's – the old and new order.

This was exile without moving. Almost all that I identified with was destroyed. Even space ceased to have the same meaning for me as it became *their* domain for their repressive practices. I was scared of the 'soil' (streets beautiful countryside, rivers and sea) as there were always people being arrested, tortured or even killed there. Chile was my country of origin but ceased to be my home. Internal exile constituted a rift between past and present within myself and as a social actor in my own physical environment. Home was being destroyed. My private sphere belonged to the marginalized society and became dominated by the horrors of brutality that followed the coup. Imprisonment, disappearance, harassment and torture became the new experiences in my family's life. (p.190)

When her husband was released from prison they left Chile under a programme that helped Chilean men (political prisoners) find scholarships and visas. The gendered dynamics of heteronormativity meant that Helia could only apply for a visa and scholarship on the basis of her husband's political status as the aid agencies oriented their programmes to rescuing "heads of families", thus the "indirect repression women endured was ignored" but also, women have less chance of obtaining refugee status in their own right (Helia, 1998: 191). The gender specific experiences had huge impact upon Helia's life in exile. Internal and external exile involved a form of bereavement including political defeat and abandonment. "Overqualified" for most jobs she applied for and by now a single parent, social problems such as isolation, lack of support and lack of extended family impacted upon her and she decided to return. Writing the article as a now "failed returnee" she writes about the collective silence in a country stricken with the horrors of military dictatorship and her attempts to assimilate "and not disturb the fragile democracy by remembering the past" indeed, she had to "conceal and sometimes renounce her hard won gender identity" (Helia, *ibidem*: 196-7).

This short account of Helia's biographical journey is strongly indicative of the constructions and articulation of self identity in exile (internal and external), the psychosocial meanings and experiences of exile, and gender politics and dynamics. In the short article we access a rich account of loss, exile, power relations – familial, political, gendered - and the becoming of the "self" in the context of a life and search for both expressing and transcending the pain of exile through narrative; and this "recuperating narrative" becomes a political tool – raising awareness, producing knowledge and recognition.

## **Biography and PAR/Ethno-mimesis – towards social justice**

Research methodologies that create spaces for the voices and images of the subaltern - refugees and asylum seekers - through narrative methods can serve not only to raise awareness, challenge stereotypes and hegemonic practices, but can produce critical texts that may mobilize and create "real" change.

In this paper we develop further our work in progress on renewed methodologies for writing/doing ethnography in the 21st century. To date this work has sought to develop hybrid texts, by drawing upon the inter-relation/inter-textuality between art (the "outside of language") and ethnography - as ethno-mimesis. Representing life-history research through art forms can create multivocal, dialogical

texts, and can make visible “emotional structures and inner experiences” (Kuzmics, 1994: 9) which may “move” audiences through what can be described as “sensuous knowing” or mimesis (Taussig, 1993). This method privileges the voices of those involved and triangulates these voices with cultural texts re-presenting and imagining lived experience through “feeling forms” (Witkin, 1974). Thus, interpretive ethnography grounded in the stories of the co-creators of the research (participatory action research - PAR) rooted in critical theory is pivotal to the methodology and a politics of representation.

Fals Borda defines PAR as anticipating postmodernism for PAR drew on a range of conceptual elements to guide fieldwork “Marxism, phenomenology, and classical theories of participation, including action” (Fals Borda, 1999: 1) and yet went beyond them. Fals Borda defines PAR as *vivencia* (life experience akin to Husserl’s “Erfahrung”) “necessary for the achievement of progress and democracy and as a complex of attitudes and values to give meaning to our praxis in the field” (Fals Borda, *ibidem*: 17).

PAR is a social research methodology, which includes the stereotypical subjects of research as co-creators of the research. It creates a space for the subaltern to become involved actively in change or transformation. PAR is rooted in principles of inclusion (engaging people in the research design, process and outcomes); participation; valuing all local voices; and community driven sustainable outcomes. PAR is a process and a practice directed towards social change with the participants; it is interventionist, action-oriented and interpretive. It involves a commitment to research that develops partnership responses to developing purposeful knowledge (praxis); includes all those involved where possible, thus facilitating shared ownership of the development and outcomes of the research; uses innovative ways of consulting and working with people and facilitates change with communities and groups.

Thus PAR provides safe spaces for dialogue; in Benhabib’s terms an “ethics of communication”, fostering polyvocality and involvement in producing knowledge as well as action and in so doing can contribute to social justice.

Biographical narratives can heal, empower, challenge and transform our relationship to the past and the future. They are also important psycho-socially, as we have documented, as narratives of self making, fostering ethical communication, producing counter hegemonic discourses and critical texts that may mobilize change.

The process of memory making is important to how we produce biography. Winter and Sivan (1999) document the process of recollection in relation to memory traces. Most experiences, we are told, leave “long term memory traces, recorded in our *episodic memory* system – the system which encodes ‘what happened’”. Furthermore, “*autobiographical memory* appears to be the most enduring kind of memory...combat experience is particularly dense because it is personal and dramatic. Harrowing moments are denser still” (Winter and Sivan, *ibidem*: 12). Khun (2000) discussing memory work in *Memory and Methodology* suggests that memory work involves an active staging of memory; a questioning attitude to the past and its reconstruction through memory; and questions the transparency of what is remembered. And, takes what is remembered as material for interpretation.

In acknowledging the performative nature of remembering, memory work takes on board productivity and encourages the practitioner to use the pretexts of memory, the traces of the past that remain in the present, as raw material in the production of new stories about the past. These stories may



heal the wounds of the past. They may also transform the ways individuals and communities live in and relate to the present and the future...how we use these relics to make memories, and how we then make use of the stories they generate to give deeper meanings to, and if necessary to change, our lives now. (Kuhn, *ibidem*: 186-7)

Below we provide two examples of biographical narrative produced (in earlier PAR/ethno-mimetic research by one of the authors<sup>iii</sup>) through sharing memories of exile, displacement and belonging and then re-producing these memories artistically, creatively in firstly poetic form and in the second example an installation was digitally photographed and anchored with two short pieces of biography from the maker. The pieces were part of an exhibition that brought together work by an Afghan micro-community in London and a Bosnian community in the Midlands, and which toured community centres, community galleries and two universities in the Midlands. The exhibition was launched at an arts centre in London where both communities of participants came together to speak and celebrate the public launch of their work. The examples, we propose, raise awareness and “understanding” (in Bourdieu’s sense) that take us some way towards fostering a holistic sense of social justice. Conducting PAR/ethno-mimesis that includes the telling of biographical narratives with the participation of refugee groups, micro communities, and asylum seekers can be transformative across many levels of praxis. For example, the work with the Bosnian community was transformative across three levels of praxis.

First level – *textually* – through: documenting lifestories as testimony to the suffering, exile, and forced displacement they experienced at the hands of soldiers, civic officials, friends (for some family members) and neighbours; and the experience of exile – both internal and external. Second level – *visually* - through producing art forms to re-present their life story narratives, saying the “unsayable”, challenging normative media representations and producing auto/biographical visual and poetic texts to re-present their lives and experiences as lived. Third level — *practically* - together the combination of the visual and textual elements supports and fosters practical (real) processes of intervention and transformation for both the producers/creators and audiences. Presenting their work in community venues in their neighbourhoods (and others), inviting local communities to attend and share food and music involved what Hussain has called “inter-cultural bridging”.

Thus, contributing to social justice distributively, culturally and associationally. Distributively, the avoidance of exploitation, and economic marginalisation was facilitated by the research grant funding. The funding enabled community members to take part by paying for resources, time, transport, community centre venues, materials, fees for a community co-researcher and artists to work on the project. Culturally, recognition was fostered through the sharing of the Bosnian narratives and the visual and poetic re-presentations with a broad audience – students and academics, local neighbours and neighbourhoods – city centre community gallery spaces. Associationally, in the process of conducting this work important community development outcomes were achieved such as raising the community’s profile in the city and indeed region, building bridges with local people in their neighbourhood, thus overcoming “patterns of association which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which affect the conditions within which they live and act”. The combined effects included *affective change* (compassion); *inter-cultural bridging* (cosmopolitanism); and practical steps towards *redistribution, recognition*.

Two examples of this work are presented below. Key themes emerging in the narratives include memories of the deterioration of one’s lifestyle and culture – similar

to the internal exile documented by Helios Lopez Zarzosa, and overwhelmingly themes of loss, death, destruction. "Losing one's country means losing everything". Losing self-esteem, status – who you are is based on what you have now (often very little), not on what you once were or where you have come from. Significant too is the importance: of family – being a family, traditions and rituals, and losing family members in flight or because of war, and imprisonment, including torture; of language and communication to feeling safe and experiencing a sense of belonging; of peace and reconciliation and of community networks and support, settling and building communities in the host community/country; and of safe spaces and the opportunity to re-build lives.

#### **IN THE NAME OF KABUL<sup>iv</sup>**

*My presence is here but  
My heart is in the alley-ways of Kabul  
My tongue utters its name  
My lips sing a song of Kabul  
The trees are shrouded in inky-blue,  
Years, months, weeks, days, mourning Kabul  
Oh traveller! Traverse my town silently  
For in mourning is Kabul  
He who is cognisant with its streets, its palaces  
Murmurs 'Where am I?' Kabul*

#### **WAR AND REMEMBERING**

Fahira - on the theme of good neighbours:<sup>v</sup>

Our life was like hell. On one occasion they just picked up my husband and took him away and it was for seven days that I did not know where he was. After the seven days that he was missing one day they just chuck him out like a bag of potatoes. He was all covered with the bruises. We thought he is not breathing he's dead... Then the convoy started and we had to sign in if we wanted to leave the country. People were very scared, sometimes it would happen that people were leaving with the convoy and sometimes the whole convoy would disappear. No one would know where it had gone... We very lucky because our building was locked. There were lots of Serbs in the building but in the end they were on our side. We were very good friends with the people who lived in our building and I must say that they saved us. Even nowadays we are still in touch... There were some Serbian people who were killed because they were hiding Muslim and Croatian people. They were against the war. I think it was so tragic that ordinary people were not able to do anything about the whole situation.



This image was developed by Fahira Hasedic with the support of Karen Fraser, City Arts, as part of the Global refugees: exile, displacement and belonging research project, funded by the AHRB.

## Conclusion

Taking a biographical approach when conducting PAR with asylum seekers and refugees contributes to the field of biographical sociology by providing a safe space for stories to be told and by fostering social justice – associational, cultural and distributive. PAR as ethno-mimesis is both a practice and a process aimed at illuminating inequalities and injustice through socio-cultural research and analysis. In addition, it also seeks to envision and imagine a better future based upon a dialectic of mutual recognition, ethical communication, respect for human rights, cultural citizenship and democratic participatory processes.

The sharing of collective responsibilities is a moral imperative in current times. Clearly there is an urgent need to develop interventionary strategies based upon collective responsibility and what Benhabib (1992) has called a “civic culture of public participation and the moral quality of enlarged thought” (Benhabib, *ibidem*: 140) in response to what has been called the global refugee crisis.

How can biographical research and ethno-mimesis address this? Recovering and re-telling people's subjectivities, lives and experiences is central to attempts to better understand our social worlds with a view to transforming these worlds. Such work reveals the daily struggles, resistances, strengths, humour of people seeking asylum as well as knowledge and better understanding of the legitimisation and rationalisation of Power, Domination and Oppression.

Biographical work re-presented poetically, visually as well as textually can help to illuminate the necessary mediation of autonomous individuality and collective responsibility. Drawing upon Sherry Nicholsen's work the photograph and poetic text presented here have the capacity to arouse our compassion whilst not letting us forget that what we are seeing is socially constructed meaning. Through re-presenting the “unsayable” the image/poetry help to “pierce us”, bringing us into

contact with reality in ways that we cannot forget. Ways that counter the instrumental thinking that underpin the hegemonic anti-asylum discourses represented through dominant power/knowledge axis and re-presented in some media discourses.

Biographies help us to understand the processes, structures and lived experiences of citizenship and lack of citizenship; and the experiences of humiliation and abandonment (dominant experiences for some asylum seekers/refugees). They highlight the importance of engaging with the subaltern other, creating spaces for voices and narratives to make sense of lived experience, trauma, loss, but also the productive dimension of rewriting the self. This productive dimension is articulated well by Roberts as “the return to nodal points in life where significant meanings are sought as the individual tries to uncover and decipher the coherence of their lives... Life historical knowledge is reformulated in the re-creation of the self, as both an interpretive and recollective process” (Roberts, 2003 : 21). Thus, a politics of representation informed by a politics of subalternity and Biographical Sociology can provide alternative narratives and praxis (purposeful knowledge) that may feed into public policy and ultimately help to shift the dominant knowledge/power axis embedded in current governance.

## Note

The Image and poem were produced with permission from the artists as part of the AHRB “Global Refugees: exile, displacement and belonging” project led by Maggie O'Neill. The poem was published in the exhibition booklet '*Global Refugees: Exile, Displacement and Belonging: Afghans in London*'. Exiled Writers Ink! facilitated the creative writing workshops and translation of the poem. City Arts Nottingham facilitated the production of art works.

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## Endnotes

- i Ethno-mimesis is the combination of socio-cultural research (life history interviews) and the re-presentation of the life history narratives in artforms (photography, poetry, and creative-writing) to produce alternative ways of re-presenting the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. ( see O'Neill, 2001, 2004).
- ii See [www.refugee-action.org.uk](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk); [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk); [www.refugeecouncil.org.au](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au); [www.ecre.org](http://www.ecre.org)
- iii The PAR/ethno-mimetic research involved telling biographical narratives and for some re-presenting these narratives in visual artistic and poetic form. The research was conducted with an Afghan micro- community in London and a Bosnian community in the East Midlands (1999-2002) funded by the Arts and Humanities Board (AHRB). Biographical narratives were documented with the support of community co-researchers using the principles of PAR
- iv Baring Kohdamani was a professor at Kabul University before his exile to the UK. This excerpt from his epic poem was translated by community co-researcher Suhaila Ismat and Jennifer Langer (Director of exiled writers ink). Reprinted here from the exhibition booklet. The AHRB funded the research.

- v Fahira decided to document the life saving gesture from her Serbian neighbour, told in her biographical narrative, and produce an installation to thank her neighbour - a box full of good things to send back to say thank you - a reminder of a humanity larger than the war machine and anti humanitarian processes implemented during war and genocide in Bosnia. The text underneath the images describes a) her neighbour giving her the key to her flat so she could hide when soldiers came looking for Muslims (her family needed the key for three years); b) her taking a loaf of bread she had baked with UN produce (denied Serbs under sanction "because they started the war") and being faced with a soldier with a gun asking her who she was - she replied "you know who am I I would not be here if I were Muslim" and her neighbour did not challenge this.

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