



*'My story to be told':  
Explorations in narrative documentation with people  
from refugee backgrounds*

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*Abstract*

This paper explores the use of narrative documentation in work with people from refugee backgrounds, specifically in contexts of responding to trauma. It recounts, through an in-depth case study, work with a man from Sierra Leone in which a number of documents were co-created, including letters, documents of skills and knowledge, and rescued speech poetry. Through the lens of narrative documentation, a number of narrative principles and practices are explored, including eliciting responses to trauma, scaffolding, externalising, re-authoring, and outsider-witnessing. This paper is the outcome of a project of co-research and offers insights into how the practice of narrative documentation might be used across language and culture.

***Key words: co-research, culture, documentation, therapeutic documents, externalising, language, narrative letters, outsider-witness practices, re-authoring, refugee, rescued speech poetry, trauma, narrative therapy, narrative practice***

*I receive the email from my supervisor, and my heart jumps: do I have time to read the letter now, or should I save it for later? I usually open the letter right away, even if I only have time to skim the words. I know I will return to them later, to dive into them and explore their depths. I am there on the paper, my words that have been rescued. It's a funny sensation seeing oneself on paper, though it was not me who wrote or collated the words. It was someone else, listening with care and attention to the words I spoke. The words are sometimes profound and poetic, sometimes deep and inspiring, and sometimes plain and simple. They are my words, though, rescued from drifting off into the universe to maybe be forgotten or spoken again at another point, but never fully remembered in the way that I uttered them in that moment.*

I have been the recipient of narrative therapeutic letters in my personal supervision relationship for some time. I began receiving these letters before I entered the world of narrative therapy as a practitioner. I have experienced first-hand what it is like to see my own words documented in print, to feel a sense of being meaningfully heard by my supervisor. I have been surprised and delighted by these letters. They are not merely a record of our conversations, but an *extension* of our conversations. I have discovered in the reading of them things that I do not recall saying, and yet I can hear myself in the words. These letters have been an integral part of my engagement with supervision and to my developing personal and professional identity. I guess, then, it is not surprising that on entering the world of narrative therapy, I would find myself especially drawn to the practice of narrative documentation<sup>1</sup> or, to put it more poetically, 'rescuing the said from the saying of it' (Newman, 2008; White, 2000a).

My personal experience of therapeutic letters formed the beginning of my interest in the narrative practice of documentation and in early 2014, while studying in Adelaide, I read Newman's (2008) "Rescuing the said from the saying of it": Living documentation in narrative therapy' with interest and delight, and wondered about the many possibilities for this in my practice. This wondering led me to pose a number of questions:

- How do we make decisions about what is and is not recorded?
- How do we use creativity and personal flair while being true to those with whom we meet?
- How do we consult those we meet with to ensure we are appropriately representing them and their stories?
- What kind of document do we create, and what will be most resonant for those with whom we meet?

I have continued to ponder these questions, recognising that there is no 'right' answer – rather, there are many possibilities

depending on who we are working with, where we are working, what our role is, and many other contextual factors. These questions have, since I first reflected on them, become a sort of guiding force in my developing practice of narrative documentation.

A growing body of narrative therapy literature explores the context of working with people from refugee backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> This paper hopes to contribute to this body of knowledge and will explore the practice of narrative documentation in work with people from refugee backgrounds through an in-depth case study.

## *Introducing Rayan: Hearing the trauma, listening for resistance and survival*

Rayan is a man in his late 20s from Sierra Leone. He fled Sierra Leone when he was about 15 years old, settling in Australia when he was about 22.<sup>3</sup> I first met Rayan when he was referred for counselling. During our first session, Rayan shared with me details of his past and his life now. He spoke about 'constantly dreaming war'<sup>4</sup> and experiencing highly-distressing flashbacks of atrocities that had been done to him and those he loved, and were powerfully diminishing of Rayan and his attempts to escape them. Rayan's whole family was taken away when he was a young man, and only discovered in the past few years that his mother and siblings were alive. Rayan said he carried many scars, not only emotional but significant physical scars, that he spoke about as being inescapable and an ever-present reminder of the things that had happened to him. When we first met, Rayan talked about wanting to remove these physical scars so that he might forget how he got them.

In our first couple of sessions, Rayan spoke of being at his 'lowest point ever'. He spoke about not knowing what he believed in anymore, and 'not knowing himself'. In hearing this, I thought of Michael White's (2004) casting of trauma:

When a person has been through recurrent trauma, their 'sense of myself' can be so diminished it can be very hard to discover what it is they give value to. This is because recurrent trauma is corrosive of what people treasure in life. It's a violation of their purpose in life and of their sentiment of living. (p. 46)

In hearing Rayan's story of trauma, something specific stood out to me: Rayan's tenacity and survival in the face of great odds. Rayan was severely injured by rebels, and his family taken, but he fought to survive, managing to make his way across a border and to safety. Alongside his sense of 'not knowing himself' and being at his 'lowest point ever', near the end of our first conversation, Rayan said, 'I don't want to lose myself. I want to fight,' White (2004) states that people who have been subject to trauma often represent their lives

as single-storied. In conceiving of life as multi-storied, I could already see glimmers of alternative stories of Rayan and I had so many questions: What was the history of this fight? Where did this fight come from? What made it possible? Being aware that jumping too quickly to stories of resistance and survival, and not scaffolding (White, 2007) such conversations might diminish Rayan's experiences, I stored some of these questions away but continued to carefully listen for these alternative stories.

## Document of skills and knowledge

The de-centred position (White, 1997, 2007) central to narrative practice has me negotiating with the person I am working with about what they wish to focus on, and the starting point for our work. This is in contrast to an expert position in which, as the therapist, it is easy and somewhat expected to take responsibility for what is discussed and focused on in the work. The discourse of 'no pain, no gain', well-articulated and critiqued by Yuen (2009), suggests that going directly to the trauma in our work is the primary goal. I resist this notion and connect more with the idea of creating contexts of safety for people to be able to talk about trauma. Yuen (2009) and White (2004) articulate that it is through developing a safer territory of identity that people will be able to more safely give expression to experiences of trauma. Yuen posits the notion of 'less pain, more gain', which I borrow to support me in my work.

While my personal preference is to fully embrace a de-centred position and be directed by the person I am working with, my professional context places certain requirements on me to assess people's eligibility when they first attend the service. I was open<sup>5</sup> with Rayan about the requirements of assessment that are placed on me and in our third session, after having completed the assessment, I asked Rayan what he wanted our work together to start with. He said that he wanted to begin in the territory of talking about decision-making and particularly making 'rational decisions'. He presented a dominant story of being unable to make rational decisions. Taking the position that this is only one story of Rayan, and that life is multistoried, we began to co-research decision-making and the story of Rayan as 'someone who cannot make rational decisions'. Rayan was direct in his request for me to 'teach' him how to make rational decisions. I resisted this invitation to be the expert and instead invited Rayan to share with me the history of making rational decisions in his life. As I was listening to Rayan, and thinking back on our first two sessions, I was hearing a story of him that was different from the story that trauma had told – a story that spoke instead about the unique skills and knowledge that Rayan held. I was excited, but wanted to be careful not to 'point out contradictions', bearing in mind Russell & Carey's (2004) words that 'it isn't the therapist's role to point out the contradiction, but instead to use this as a point of entry for the development of an alternative story' (p. 24).

We continued our conversation, with me trying to carefully articulate and scaffold questions that elicited and more richly described Rayan's skills and knowledge. As we were talking, I was thinking about how we might develop these beginnings of alternative storylines and have Rayan seeing what I was hearing. Before I had given it a lot of thought, I heard myself asking Rayan if it would be okay for me to put some of his skills and knowledge into a document, and he agreed. I remembered the document 'Heckmut's list of prison skills' (Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture, 2014, p. 26) and drew on this to inform how I structured the following document of Rayan's knowledge and skills of rational decisions, formed from Rayan's words and thoughts:

## Rayan's knowledge and skills of rational decisions

Rayan sometimes has trouble making rational decisions. He is hoping to make more rational decisions, and documented here are some of Rayan's knowledge and skills about making rational decisions.

There are some important things that Rayan knows about rational decisions:

- Rayan makes better rational decisions when he uses his thinking, processing, and understanding skills.
- Rayan sees rational decisions as being committed to what you want and leading to a positive outcome.
- When Rayan feels regret after making a decision, it is likely that it is not a rational decision.
- Sometimes, things outside of Rayan will show him that he needs to make a decision, like feeling pain in his knee and going to the hospital, or feeling that he is really low and going to see Doctor. Rayan has learnt that he should listen to these messages.
- Rayan knows that rational decisions involved struggling a lot and thinking about what you want to do.

Some examples of Rayan's rational decisions include:<sup>6</sup>

- Seeing Doctor
- Attending school in first settlement country and in Australia
- Beginning counselling at Foundation House
- Going to hospital about his knee recently.

To make more rational decisions, Rayan will use these steps:

1. Take a day to think about it
2. Do a feasibility study – look at all possible outcomes.

There are times that are more risky for Rayan to try and make rational decisions, like when he is overwhelmed or anxious, or even when he is excited. At these times, Rayan will try to use the steps above.

Rayan experienced a loss in his family that meant that, at our next session, we did not talk about this document. It was at our fifth session that I read the above document to Rayan. Before sharing the document, we had been speaking about some decisions taken by Rayan since our first conversation on the theme of decision-making. Again, I heard threads of a storyline that did not fit with the dominant story of Rayan as someone who could not make rational decisions. Resisting the desire to point this out, I invited Rayan to listen to me read out the document. When I finished, Rayan was silent a moment and then said, 'Wow, I am surprised'. When asked about what Surprise was telling him, he said that it was 'amazing' to see his own words on paper. He said that he was surprised that he had these skills and knowledge, but that he could hear himself in the words. This led to a conversation about what Rayan called his 'struggle with knowing myself' and wondering 'where do I start?' in regard to knowing himself. When I asked what Rayan might know about himself, now, from hearing and seeing his words, he said, 'I know I can make rational decisions now if I make the time. If I can come up with all of that (in the document) with a little bit of patience, I can change things.' This was a significant description of personal agency that did not fit with the dominant story of Rayan. As he was speaking, I wrote these words down and asked if I could read them back to him. He again was surprised. I suggested that we could make an edit to the document and we added, 'Rayan knows that, with patience, he is able to make rational decisions'. With a commitment to collaborative representation, I invited Rayan to make any edits to the document and was transparent about this being a co-created document; I had collated the words, but they were his words.

Discourses of 'no pain, no gain' and ideas of what trauma counselling should be, might have invited me to think that the problem of decision-making is not the 'real work' of a trauma counsellor. As Denborough (2005) states, 'There are [...] influential conventions within the therapy world in general, and the trauma field more particularly, that regularly invite people to recount their experiences in ways that re-traumatise, or that contribute to identity conclusions of damage, pathology or fragility p. 39). However, in connecting with the ideas of White (2004) and Yuen (2009) articulated previously, and by working in the territory that Rayan invited me into, we had a conversation and created a document that allowed Rayan to come closer to a sense of knowing himself. White (2005) refers to repositioning to a safe territory that does not lead to re-traumatisation or reinforcing the idea of a 'damaged' or vulnerable sense of self. Decision-making was a kind of safe territory from which Rayan could connect to a stronger

sense of himself, and central to this was the document of his knowledge and skills. Importantly, though, talking and documenting about decision-making was not only about repositioning to a safer territory of identity. This conversation and document also enabled Rayan to reclaim a sense of identity that was purposeful and knowledgeable, creating a context in which he could connect with a sense of personal agency. These are important effects of this practice that risk being diminished if they are only viewed as conversations that serve to reposition.

## Externalising Hope, meeting 'Second Rayan'

The loss in Rayan's family led to plans to return to Guinea where his family live. Significant systemic barriers presented Rayan with a challenge in terms of this travel so, for a time, our conversations were focused on these issues. In one session, Rayan spoke about being determined to travel back to Guinea and how not knowing whether he could travel or not was very difficult. I asked Rayan how he was keeping going in the face of not knowing and he said that he was just focusing on going, even though he did not know, and he was using this time of not knowing to prepare rather than just go 'blindly'. What a profound new story to add to the alternative storyline of Rayan as someone who knows that with patience he can make rational decisions! He went on to reflect that he was trying to 'believe in myself' and that he often returned to the document about rational decisions. He said that when he read it, he often wondered, 'Did I say all of this?' but found reading it helped him to believe in himself.

Rayan spoke of Hope being what kept him going in Sierra Leone when he was a teenager, what kept him going now, and what had him coming to meet with me, even though Hopelessness is trying to tell him not to. Hope sounded like a pretty important part of Rayan's life, so I wondered about getting to know Hope a bit more through an externalising conversation (Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2007). When I asked about Hope, Rayan said that Hope is his 'second person' and then he clarified saying that Hope is his 'Second Rayan'. This struck me as a poetic and unique description of the Hope in Rayan's life. I continued to ask about 'Second Rayan':

- Can you tell me more about 'Second Rayan'?
- How long has 'Second Rayan' been in your life?
- What does it mean to have 'Second Rayan' in your life?
- What makes 'Second Rayan' weak/strong?
- What does 'Second Rayan' tell you?
- Is 'Second Rayan' helpful or not helpful in your life?



This was a wonderfully playful conversation that had Rayan carefully considering and sharing with me his personal and, in narrative terms, experience-near (White, 2007) description of 'Second Rayan'. We wondered whether Rayan might be able to draw 'Second Rayan' and Rayan laughed and said he would think about this. At the end of the session, I felt like I knew

'Second Rayan' and I wondered about what it might mean for 'Second Rayan' to be with Rayan throughout his planning for, and on his travel to, Guinea. After this conversation, I decided to write a letter to Rayan. I felt that a letter would support an externalised picture of 'Second Rayan' and also convey some of my delight in getting to know 'Second Rayan'.

Dear Rayan,

I spoke with you a little while ago about how I might write you a letter or some sort of document after our sessions. In the past, I have written up documents of your skills and knowledge, but after our meeting today, I thought I'd write you a short letter about some of our conversation.

We spoke about many things today... travelling back to Guinea and how this 'plays on me heavily' and that 'deep inside can't wait', but also that you are 'terrified' of the realities of Guinea – the mosquitos and snakes, poor access to water and food, the other animals in the bush such as monkeys and baboons. We also spoke about your determination to go back to Guinea and the steps you are taking to make this possible, such as getting documents and meeting with your community.

I mostly wanted to write to you, though, about our conversation about Hope. You shared with me that your Hope is 'my second person', actually a 'Second Rayan'. This 'Second Rayan' is like a spiritual character that can 'carry burden for me'. You shared with me that 'Second Rayan' first spoke to you the day you got shot. You remembered being under the table, ready to give up, thirsty, eyes closed, and you heard the voice of 'Second Rayan' that said, 'Don't give up; you'll be okay'. This same voice encouraged you to keep going through the pain of your injuries, and the green leaves that helped heal your injuries but also brought on intense pain. 'Second Rayan' said, 'You have to walk'.

When I heard this story, you had me wondering about whether determination is a friend of 'Second Rayan', and you shared that you are 'determined to be alive', and you have held on to 'hope to live'. You shared that 'Second Rayan' is weaker when Blame and Regret are around. But you know that 'Hope comes knocking' when you lose focus of light at the end of the tunnel. 'Second Rayan' is a strong character and sometimes he is a bit over-confident and will come early, encouraging you to do things without thinking. But, mostly, 'Second Rayan' keeps you going and when he is around you are calm. The colour you think of when you think of 'Second Rayan' is green. You wondered about drawing 'Second Rayan', but didn't have an image for him when we met. I wonder if any images have come to you since our conversation?

I really enjoyed getting to know 'Second Rayan'. How did you find getting to know 'Second Rayan'? I wonder what other stories you have of 'Second Rayan'? I wonder what makes 'Second Rayan' stronger? How might knowing 'Second Rayan' better support you in your travels to Guinea? What else is made possible by getting to know 'Second Rayan'? I look forward to more conversations!

Warm wishes,  
Chanelle Burns

White's (1995) reflections on taking care with the receipt of these sorts of documents were in mind when I finished writing this letter. While Rayan had agreed that I might write documents about our work, this was our first letter and I had only decided after our session to write it, so I decided to give it to him in person. When we next met, I gave the letter to Rayan and let him read it himself rather than me reading it out. Acknowledging the power of the spoken word and particularly its place in the re-telling and performance of stories, I have also been reflecting on what it might mean to read a letter to oneself. In reflecting on this, there is something about a letter being an experience between 'the letter itself' and the receiver,

and rarely is the letter-writer present. In saying this, though, I have been also thinking on how I bring the use of documents into my work with people who do not speak English and, recently, I wrote a letter to another person that I read to him through an interpreter. Despite it not being written or spoken in his language, the recipient associated significant value to it. These reflections have me thinking about how the different ways of receiving these documents can be part of what is negotiated with the people with whom we are meeting.

Rayan again heard himself in this letter and commented on the 'beautiful words'. It was in writing this letter that I began to connect with the re-authoring (Russell & Carey, 2004;

White, 2007) quality of documents and how they offer a further thickening of alternative stories. In the conversation about 'Second Rayan', Rayan shared a story of when he was injured in Sierra Leone, and how 'Second Rayan' had kept him going and fighting. This was a very different story about trauma than those Rayan had told me in our first couple of sessions. While Rayan did not use the language of resistance when we spoke of this story, I was drawn to think of Wade (1997) who states that, 'in the context of violence or oppression [...] any act of resistance in such circumstances is inherently and profoundly significant, regardless of what it may appear to have accomplished' (p. 32). 'Second Rayan' did not prevent the injuries Rayan sustained, nor did 'Second Rayan' prevent his family being harmed and taken, but 'Second Rayan' is something that connected Rayan to his will to fight and live. This externalising conversation and document about 'Second Rayan' opened a pathway into further re-authoring conversations that could contribute to alternative stories of Rayan.

### Double-storied poetry

It was in our eighth session that we had a conversation about Rayan's scars and past experiences and memories of Sierra Leone. This conversation began with an exploration of 'good luck and bad luck'. This was a long conversation and I will not replicate it here, as the details of it will be clear from the document penned after the session.

I sat down to write Rayan a letter after this session and in the process of writing up my notes, I was moved by the power of Rayan's words – the sureness of his knowing about himself that I could hear, but that I did not think he could hear. I was looking at his words on the screen and could not bring myself to put my words around his – this felt like an injustice to his words, which were powerful and poetic. As I considered the poetics of his words, I wondered about creating a poem of them. I was not sure how this might fit for Rayan, and was also aware of my personal interest in poetry and hopeful that I was not serving myself before Rayan, but I remained sure that his words needed to be honoured and that a poem would do this best. Through Behan (n.d.), I discovered the term, 'rescued speech poem' for what I was composing. Behan (n.d.) states that 'poetry has "space between" to describe multiplicity, tentativeness, and ambiguity and is perhaps better suited to render visible these subtle stories from therapy conversations'. The poem I composed was made up only of Rayan's words that I had rescued during our conversation. I felt a great sense of responsibility in holding Rayan's words and doing justice to them. I recall carefully organising his words on the screen and slowly reading them back to myself, feeling great emotion. The first version of the poem did not have a title, and an additional verse about Hope was added in the second version, but I include the poem here in its entirety.

### My story to be told

*when something meant to happen will happen  
you gotta push, don't give up  
look forward to the future  
don't worry man*

*believe in destiny  
but steps need to be taken  
either you are lucky or not lucky  
test of man's belief  
test of how much you are faithful  
being in Australia, lucky  
being able to stay here, lucky  
finding and speaking to my family, lucky  
having someone to talk, lucky  
stupid offenses, not lucky  
being broke everyday, not lucky  
know people would want my life,  
even through my complaints  
when you live in the bubble of luckiness  
you won't know the value of it  
you don't have to have a classroom to learn it*

*always an average person  
if luck comes to me, know someone more lucky  
when action happens not lucky,  
thinking after could have been worse  
my broke finger, somewhere someone lost a finger  
when I was shot, I was unlucky  
but I was not in prison – did not live in sort of fear  
like my mother  
learnt to understand by accepting  
come to realisation in no man's land  
passing dead people, no body, no burial,  
somebody's loved-one*

*Hope  
that was something to hold onto  
even though hope is gonna be screaming –  
never believe, don't listen  
one door closes, look around there is another one  
believe when losing hope that there is another hope  
to lift you up  
we can look forward to hope when we're down*

*I don't want to be a negative person  
so many scars show how unlucky I was  
not helpful in any ways  
can't escape from them  
you can be looking at those scars,  
but know someone else is in trouble*

*if scars inside maybe times I don't remember every time  
scars are visible  
brain start working rapidly  
biggest fight*

*scars tell path you've travelled, scars are history  
unlucky scars and lucky scars  
scars are my story  
every single day I live with the scars  
it is what it is  
be thankful for having scars to talk about  
I remember when that happen  
I'm alive*

This poem is so clearly multi-storied: lucky and unlucky, the scars are inescapable yet tell Rayan's story. There is the story of trauma of things that happened to Rayan but there is also a story of resistance and survival, about Rayan's responses to trauma. Double-listening, as a principle of narrative practice, is the practice of listening to not only the story of trauma but also the story of responses to trauma (Wade 1997; White, 2004; Yuen, 2007, 2009). White (2004) states that:

No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps to try to prevent the trauma, and, even if preventing the trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it in some small way or to modify its effects on their life, or they take steps in efforts to preserve what is precious to them. (p. 47)

I also find connection between poetry and song. Denborough (2008) reflects that songs can be double-storied in how they 'convey in words and melody both the effects of hardship and an alternative storyline of dignity, skills, values and local knowledge' (p. 167).

When we next met, I shared with Rayan that I had created a poem from his words and I hoped that this was okay. I explained that I had been moved by his words and wanted to do justice to them. I nervously and with emotion read it to him, looking up at the end to Rayan who was teary and speechless for a moment before saying, 'Wow'. He said, 'I can visualise me reading my story' and 'that's my identity'. He said that the poem 'brings tears in my eyes; I felt it, I feel power from the inside'. We were both moved at this point, and Freedman & Combs (1996) articulate well my sense of the shared experience of our work:

Every day that we go to work, people entrust us with stories of heartfelt pain, life-and-death struggle, and finding courage to fight back. What an honor it is to be let in, not just on another's life, but as a partner in another's struggle. As we, through this work, redefine

the roles and relationships of people in therapeutic endeavors, we find that their voices, their pain, and their wisdom penetrate more deeply into our lives. (p. 287)

After this first reading, I invited Rayan to make any changes but he wanted it to stay as it was. I suggested that it needed a title and encouraged him to think about this, and he encouraged me to think about this as well! I asked some questions about what Rayan might know about himself from hearing this poem. Rayan was still speechless and I asked a different question. I asked what 'Second Rayan' might think about the poem, and this led to further thickening of the place of 'Second Rayan' and Hope in Rayan's life. It was from this conversation that the verse about Hope was added to the poem.

I wondered whether Rayan might let me hold onto a copy of the poem to share with other people who might find it helpful and he emphatically agreed, saying that, 'as long as its going to help someone, you can use it'. He added, 'You can have pain and scars, but the only way to benefit is by giving and helping someone'. He spoke about how it's important for 'my stories to be told'. It was after our session, when reflecting on our conversation, that I alit on this as a possible title. After this conversation, I again realised that our work had further enabled Rayan to reclaim a sense of identity that was purposeful and knowledgeable, and also a sense that he could contribute to the lives of others.

### *Outsider-witness practice*

Throughout our work, I was wondering about ways of 'enabling contribution' and of connecting Rayan's life to others. I have a strong appreciation of the importance of practices of outsider-witnessing (Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2004, 2007) in the development of preferred identities. Torture and trauma disconnect and isolate people, letting only the dominant stories of disconnection, suffering, and hardship be heard. Practices of witnessing create opportunities for subjugated stories of survival, resistance, and hope to be heard. It felt important for Rayan to have an experience of resonance, and not simply praise for surviving. Denborough (2011) describes resonance as 'a sensory and even artistic experience. The use of participants' exact words and phrases, experience-near imagery, metaphor and sensory description, are therefore likely to increase the possibilities of resonance and reverberation (p. 35).

While knowing the value of outsider-witness practices, I was nervous and had a keen sense of the responsibility as the practitioner. White (2007) states that 'therapists have an ethical responsibility for the consequences of the audience participation in the therapeutic context' (p. 188) and Freedman (2014) states that it is 'our job as therapists to help them

stay in position' (p. 16). I wanted to be sure that I could maintain enough safety<sup>7</sup> for Rayan. So I proceeded, with some reassurance that 'it is relevant to note that a sense of awkwardness and some personal discomfort is often experienced by therapists at the beginning of their explorations of definitional ceremony practice' (White, 2007, p. 218).

It was only once we had co-created the poem that I thought to use it to seek an outsider-witness response. Given my newness to this practice and my desire to maintain enough safety for Rayan, I decided to seek a response outside of

our sessions, with the view to bringing the responses back to Rayan afterwards. I approached two of my colleagues, Danni and Leesl, who accepted the invitation to take part. Both had familiarity with the narrative practice of outsider-witnessing, but I reminded them of the importance of resonance and transport rather than responses of praise. I explained that I would ask questions using the outsider-witness categories of enquiry (Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2004, 2007). I read the poem out loud to them and then interviewed them, with their responses below.<sup>8</sup>

### Danni

The things that stood out for me were: Hope – when hope is low, there will be another hope; 'test of faith'; the concepts of lucky and unlucky and that a lot of us can be both; 'Coming to terms with scars'; and 'I'm alive'. Hearing this had me thinking of my cousin who died 20 years ago. The anniversary was a couple of weeks ago and he is very present for me at the moment. This loss was a lesson in life around choices of how to look at an event. What connected for me was not being overcome with a sense of hopelessness. Hearing this had me remembering that there are 'small bits of lucky'. I was also thinking about acceptance and scars not defining who you are, but accepting them. I am now wondering about what are my scars to accept? Hearing this poem, for me, was a valuing and honouring moment of my cousin and lessons about events in life. It reminded me that being alive means there's pain and joy – this is helpful to remember when I'm feeling crap. Feeling crap means I'm alive because I'm feeling.

When I met with Rayan, I read out Danni and Leesl's responses to his poem. Rayan's response to Leesl and Danni is best seen in a part of the letter that I wrote to him after our conversation.

### Leesl

The things that stood out for me were: Lucky, scars, and looking around; Hope; and 'don't give up, there are steps to take'. I was particularly drawn to the idea of looking around. Hearing this had me thinking of my cousin who is now living with me, and some things that I want to do that will take some bravery. It made me think of how I talked with my cousin about pathways to playing music with other people and seeing this as an opportunity to grow and be challenged. Hearing this had me thinking about how you can create new things in your life; the key is you have to look around. If you don't look around, you will just travel on the same path and not see that there are other paths. You have to create different things, take a step. You don't just walk into the life you want – you need to take steps. I was taken to think about how everyone's life is different and we all have

different circumstances, but there really are other possibilities there all the time. It's about looking around and having eyes to see. I am reminded that we are presented with opportunities to be different all the time. This is a really 'hopeful way of living'. I am also reminded that if you talk to someone, you're more likely to take action.

White and Epston (1990) suggest that narrative documents 'have the potential of incorporating a wide readership and of recruiting an audience to the performance of new stories' (p. 191). This poem was part of the performance of new stories about Rayan. This performance echoed these new stories, reinforcing a sense of self that is knowledgeable and able to contribute to others.

### *Documenting towards alternative storylines*

There is no doubt that our conversations, informed by narrative ideas, were generative of alternative storylines of Rayan.

I see this talk, though, like Speedy (2005), as 'ephemeral and transitory' (p. 285). I believe that the documents, regardless of which type of document, were essential to new storylines being made visible, developed, and sustained as parts of Rayan's preferred identity. White (2004) wonderfully and potently states:

Practices of the written word, which have for a long time been a theme of narrative therapy, contribute significantly to the visibility, substantiation, and



endurance of the sparkling events that are identified in narrative conversations – these practices of the written word document the more sparkling events of people's lives and in so doing contribute to 'rescuing the said from the saying of it', the 'told from the telling of it'. (p. 4)

When I first met Rayan, he carried a strong sense of not knowing himself. Through our work, I believe that we began to uncover alternative storylines of Rayan and to develop Rayan's sense of knowing himself as knowledgeable, purposeful, having agency, and being able to contribute to the lives of others. I have chosen to focus on the use of documents in my work with Rayan, because I believe it has been a central component of my practice and to Rayan's growing sense of self and development of a preferred identity. There have been many lessons in this work and I will articulate some of them now.

### *Poetic expressive listening and rescuing*

An important factor in the power of these documents was the use of Rayan's own words, rescued as closely to how I heard them as possible. In this, I am not only double-listening, but I am listening to poetic speech – certain metaphors and expressions, and ways of speaking that are unique and particular to the person I am meeting with. I agree with Behan (n.d) when he says that, 'co-writing therapy poems has altered the quality of my listening in consultations with people. I find I am more keenly attuned to the particular expressions of my clients'. After reading the document of Rayan's knowledge and skills of rational decision-making to him, he said that he could hear himself in the words. At another time, when asked about a document, he said, 'That's me in there'. Newman (n.d.) reflects that when we use people's own language, they 'have a sense of recognition of themselves in these documents'.

Speedy (2005) poignantly states that 'the power of this work evaporates in the instant that other words or phrases seep in, as if from "out of the blue", to the documents produced' (p. 295). Unless one has a super-human memory, rescuing words in this way requires note-taking, in most cases during the conversations with those with whom we are meeting. In the context of my practice with people from refugee backgrounds, an important consideration has been the impact of note-taking on the person with whom I am meeting. Many of the people I meet with have had very negative experiences of documentation – they have experienced documents that have ascribed certain negative or untrue statuses upon them, have been completed without their involvement, and often in languages other than their own. Many of the people I work with have been forced to sign documents with content that is unknown to them, or that are simply untrue. These practices can often continue even when they have settled in Australia. With all of this in mind, I am very careful in seeking

permission to take notes and to outline how I will use them. It is my experience that people I work with seem to be more comfortable with my note-taking when they can see what it is contributing to. Noticing this has me thinking about how I introduce practices of documentation early in work with people.

### *Language and ways of writing*

Language is a significant factor that has influenced how I work narratively in my context. I mostly work with people who do not speak English or, for those who do, it is rarely their first language. Polanco and Epston (2009) state that 'English has a legitimate monopoly over narrative therapy since, in a manner of speaking, it "grew up" there' (p. 64). In this context, it is interesting to think about what happens when the work and documentation is navigated through the territory of my monolinguality and the (often) multilinguality of those I work with.

I regularly work with interpreters and therefore language, culture, and ways of speaking are being interpreted through a third meaning-maker. I connect with Lee's (2013) idea of 'scaffolding for three' and I would suggest that it is often the interpreter and the person I am meeting with who are providing me with the scaffolding that supports our conversations, a sort of co-scaffolding. Working across language and with interpreters has extended the importance of seeking out experience-near language that fits for the person with whom I am meeting. This means that long conversations are often had between myself, the interpreter, and the person consulting me to find the language that fits. If the power of these documents is to be found in rescuing words, expressions, and ways of speaking, then these are important conversations.

Some considerations of the ability of the person to receive, read, and understand these documents has been important for me. In a context where English is not likely to be a first language or spoken at all, it has been important to compose documents in ways that will be resonant and accessible to those for whom I am writing them. Rayan is quite adept at English and has reflected that he likes the detail of the letters and the questions in them, and these factors have informed the way that I write to him. For some people, too many questions might be confronting so I might just include one or two – or none if someone is particularly confronted. In some situations, I will write shorter documents with less detail.

An important aspect, particularly of my narrative letters, has been the use of questions. Even when I am using the letter to offer a summary of our conversation, I will offer a few questions that extend our conversations. I have found the letters I have written to Rayan have been enormously generative of my narrative skills. They provide the opportunity to offer

further insight and to ask questions, both of which I may not have thought of or had the chance to do in the session. For example, in one letter, I asked some questions about anger that I had not articulated in our conversation: 'This sounded to me like a specific kind of anger. What kind of anger do you think it is? What does this anger say about what is important to you?' On reading the letter, Rayan particularly noticed these questions, which were asked to elicit what was implicit in his expressions of anger (Carey, Walther & Russell, 2009; White, 2000b). This led to a further conversation where Rayan spoke about Anger being about belief in his right to make decisions about his own life, a right that had been violated, leading to significant distress.

As this work continues, I will keep reflecting on how these practices of documentation can be brought into my work with people who do not speak English. Early in this exploration, I was unsure about whether these practices were possible across language and working with interpreters. I am now convinced that they are possible, but that they often look different. For example, in work with one young person who has developing English but chooses not to use an interpreter, she often uses her iPhone to find words in English, and this has me wondering about what role technology might play in these practices. I also often think of the reflection of a close colleague who shared a story of writing narrative letters with a person who was seeking asylum. This person could not read a word of the letters but, for him, the fact that she would create these documents for him was enormously meaningful. These letters documented his survival through the process of seeking asylum, and to him it did not matter that he could not read them; it mattered that he had them. This reminds me that these documents have value beyond just the words that they rescue.

## *Collaborative representation*

A distinguishing feature of narrative documentation is that it is underpinned by notions of collaboration and co-creation. Narrative practitioners, such as Mann (2002) and Andrews, Clark, & Baird (1998), have taken a particular focus on issues of relational and collaborative representation in documentation; the former exploring case notes, and latter exploring letters. I continue to reflect on what collaborative representation looks like in the context of working with people from refugee backgrounds. In work with people who have been oppressed and marginalised, operations of power are ever-present in the work. Taking account of the movement and effect of power in my work is an ongoing, moment-by-moment project. I often experience deference to my position as an 'expert'. While I resist the 'expert' position, this position is often grounded in ideas about where I work being a place of 'torture and trauma experts' and further perpetuated by discourses of trauma counselling that position me as an 'expert'. The position

of 'expert' can also be found in the ideas and expectations placed upon me by those with whom I work. It is with all of this in mind that I make efforts to articulate to those I work with my preferred ways of working and how this might fit with what they are hoping for from meeting with me.

In my work with Rayan, I endeavoured to, as closely as possible, represent his words and ways of speaking. In sharing the documents, I would seek his input on whether I had captured things in ways that fit for him. Rayan did not change anything in the documents that I have written in the course of our work. At times, this has had me questioning whether I had been collaborative enough. Rayan often expressed awe at the different ways of engaging in therapy that I was introducing to him. He reflected on the notion that my practice is 'outside the box'. Rayan's respect for me and my ways of working might have prevented him from changing the documents, or maybe he really did not believe any changes were necessary. I think the important factor is how I continued to present this work as a co-creation where Rayan had a say as to how he was represented.

While holding true to narrative documentation being a co-created practice, it is also important to acknowledge the parts where the practitioner is influential. In my work with Rayan, I made the decisions about which kinds of document to create, and what parts of our conversation I included and those I did not. I negotiated with Rayan throughout the work that I might document our conversations in a variety of ways, and he agreed to me having space for creativity with my decisions about these documents. In other work, it might be that those I consult with choose to direct me more as to what kind of document is going to be best for them. Again, the important part is that this is negotiated and that I always offer these documents back as a co-creation.

When I critically reflect on how I made decisions about the types of documents I might write to Rayan, I made them with thought for what might be most resonant and appropriate in the context of the type of conversation we were having. When Rayan was speaking about skills and knowledge of rational decisions, a document of knowledge seemed most resonant. As reflected upon earlier, I also called on poetry to honour Rayan's words and story. I commented when presenting the poem to Rayan that it could just as easily be lyrics that could be put to music or rap, which he thought was very amusing. I think this is an example of where we can draw on our creativity alongside incorporating practices that ensure collaborative representation. There is a growing array of narrative documents being explored in the literature<sup>9</sup> and I am excited about what else might be co-created in this work. In acknowledging that there might be some instances where the written word is not resonant, or even faced with trepidation, we are offered the opportunity to consider what other creative medium might be used to rescue people's words.

As practitioners, we often also make choices about what is included in documents. We are not writing documents of exactly what we hear in our conversations; we are making choices to tell stories in specific ways. For me, it has been important to think about why I am including certain details and not others. As works of collaboration, Rayan might have changed these documents, but I have found it important to be able to articulate where I am making decisions and to try to do this with accountability. Ultimately, I am endeavouring to document in ways that will lead to richer descriptions of people's skills, knowledge, values, commitments, and preferred identities.

## Flowing with the practice

If I had been asked when I first met with Rayan what our work might look like, I would not have known. If I had been told that I would have dived into practices of documentation with Rayan and would be writing about our work here, I would have been surprised. In writing this, I have noticed many other pathways I could have taken at different points in our work, highlighting that narrative practice is rarely linear, nor is there a 'right' way of doing it. The initial suggestion of writing a document about Rayan's knowledge and skills of rational decisions came out unplanned and in the moment. In fact, all of the documents, to some extent, grew out of our conversations and what I thought could be of value to Rayan. I did not plan to write certain documents at certain times. Newman (n.d.) talks about giving 'consideration to the most resonant form of the written word'. My practices of documentation have often been moment-by-moment practices that have involved flowing with the practice and being connected to where we are and what might be most helpful. In thinking back over this work and to the earlier guiding questions I posed, I have added two additional questions to further orient myself in practices of documentation across language and culture:

- How am I taking account of the language and culture of those with whom I am co-creating documents?
- What adaptations might be needed to ensure this is resonant and appropriate?

## Embodying co-research

'Co-research', a term coined by David Epston (1999), is a concept that those in the narrative world will be very familiar with. At the start of this year, this was a new and exciting concept that had me wondering how I might undertake co-research and where it might lead. Epston says that, 'co-research implies, firstly, that the answer is unknown but, secondly, that it can only be discovered by an experimental

attitude on a day-to-day basis' (1999, p. 143). The work that I have discussed here was truly a project of co-research. This work was, in many ways, a practice of narrative 'firsts' for me: my first document of skills and knowledge, my first narrative poem, my first use of outsider-witness practices, and so many others. It has been a journey that was only possible through Rayan's willingness to journey with me, to discover and explore. I am reminded of the 'spirit of adventure' engendered by Michael White and David Epston (Beels, 2009; White, 2009), which speaks to me of playfulness, and inherently makes reference to exploration and discovery.

Somewhere in one of our conversations in the middle of our work together, Rayan expressed gratitude and acknowledgement of my work. In an effort to be de-centred, I responded by drawing his attention back to his skills and knowledge and all that he knows. I remember Rayan looking me in the eye and saying, 'Yes, but you're not just some person on the street, Chanelle'. Rayan then went on to say that:

You know when you see a small man getting into a big truck, and you think, 'Man, he cannot lift the truck up or make it move on its own. It needs its own motor to move. But the small man can steer it'.

Rayan suggested that I was the small man steering the big truck! It was only upon taking time after our conversation to reflect that I saw the lesson that Rayan had given me. He had reminded me that this work is a co-creation. I am not the expert or the centre of the work, but I am influential and important to it. Resisting this does not serve those I work with any more than taking up an expert position does. I am grateful to Rayan for this important lesson.

## Being transformed

This work has been an adventure and exploration for Rayan and myself. This has been transformational work for me and I find connection to the words of Mary Pentecost (2008) who said to her client, Robyn, 'I know that the work we embarked on was transformational for you; now I have a fuller appreciation of some of the ways it was also transformational for me' (p. 18). To conclude, I reflect on my hopes in writing this, which are twofold. First, I hope this writing does justice to the many storylines of Rayan's life – stories of survival and tenacity, and stories of someone with an adventurous and generous spirit. Second, I hope that this work might support others in their narrative practices with people from refugee backgrounds and inspire creativity and delight in narrative journeys across language and culture. I look forward to my continued journey with Rayan and the many others I meet along the way.



## Acknowledgement

I want to acknowledge Rayan's generosity in allowing me to write about his story and our work together. Rayan's willingness to share and be part of this paper is informed by a hope that we share – that this paper might encourage other practitioners to use some of the ideas and practices that Rayan says 'worked for me'.

## Notes

1. Narrative documentation is a particular kind of therapeutic documentation. Among a wide array of literature, I have been most informed on this practice by White & Epston (1990), Newman, (n.d.; 2008, 2013), Fox (2003), and Pentecost (2008).
2. Blackburn (2005, 2010) explores her work in the UK with people from refugee backgrounds and considers how we can create contexts for restorative stories to be told, create preferred identities in the face of refugee trauma, and deconstruct discourses, particularly gendered discourse, while respecting culture. A range of folk methodologies have been used in work with people from refugee backgrounds, such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2007; Schweitzer, Vromans, Ranke, & Griffin, 2014), Team of Life (Denborough, 2012b), Kite of Life (Denborough, 2010a; Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture, 2014), and Seasons of Life (Abu-Rayyan, 2009). There is much written about collective narrative practices with people from refugee backgrounds, with collective documents being one outcome of such practices. Examples include: 'Finding resiliency, standing tall: Exploring trauma, hardship, and healing with refugees' (Boucher, 2009); 'Unforgettable voices: Australia we are here! Stories from Hazara and Iraqi communities of Brisbane' (MacLeod, Olsen, Ghulam & Al Ansari, 2011); and 'Responding to survivors of torture & suffering: Survival skills and stories of Kurdish families' (Denborough, 2012a). The work of Lee (2013) who writes about her work on Christmas Island offers a unique insight into working with people seeking asylum in Australia. Though not refugee-specific, the work of the Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture (2014) and the Ibuka trauma counsellors in Rwanda (Denborough, 2010b) has been particularly insightful in regard to situating narrative practices in specific cultural and social contexts.
3. Australia was Rayan's second country of settlement. His first country of settlement as a refugee does not bear relevance to the work discussed here and therefore is not stated.
4. Where I quote Rayan or myself in the context of our therapeutic conversations, it is to the best of my memory and notes.
5. When I use the notion of 'being public' I am particularly drawing on Reynolds' (2013) conceptualisation of this notion as something more accountable than transparency.
6. Some identifying details that were not necessary have been removed.
7. I use the notion of 'enough safety' that I take from my learnings from Reynolds (2010, 2012, 2013) who speaks of structuring safety and that in this work it is never possible to be completely safe.
8. These responses were documented from my memory and notes and, though part of a conversation in their original form, have been formed into a first person narrative for the purpose of this paper. Danni and Leesi gave permission for their responses to be included and reviewed them prior to completion.
9. Some of the creative developments in narrative documentation include the co-creation of cards (Hahs, 2008), poetry (Behan, n.d.;

Crocket, 2010; Pentecost, 2008; Speedy, 2005), certificates and declarations (Fox, 2003; White & Epston, 1990), community songs (Denborough, 2002, 2008), collective documents (Denborough, 2008), living documents (Newman, 2008), documents of knowledge and circulation (Fox, 2003), and non-criminal records (Hurley, 2007).

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