

Exploring Mediation in Refugee Life Stories

a case study focusing on *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains*



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Written by Sara Meima (2014375/ u595469)

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Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Odile Heynders

Second Reader: Dr. Ellen Dreezens

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Introduction

While writing this, there are about eighty million forcibly displaced persons around the globe, a figure that grows each year (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). A forcibly displaced person is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, as someone who was displaced "as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014, p. 2). Forcibly displaced is an overarching term for people in all stages of being forced away from their homes. It includes people that are internally displaced, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). Eighty million is about one percent of the entire world population, an exceptionally large number. For clarity, all these groups of forcibly displaced people will be referred to as refugees or irregular migrants in the first part of my thesis. In addition, referring to them as refugees seems more suitable, as described by Baz Muhammad (Hoff, 2017, 00:17:15-00:17:50), who himself is or has been a refugee. He was officially recognized with refugee status by the UNHCR after a long time in Indonesia, but he explains that it does not feel any different, because had known he was a refugee since he left home. Like him, there are many other refugees in Indonesia and all over the world.

Most of the narrative surrounding refugees that we can find in current media is negative. Refugees are portrayed as dangerous, lazy, job-stealing, and the likes. For example, Donald Trump jr. compared refugees to a bowl of skittles, with the question "If I had a bowl of skittles, and I told you three would kill you, would you take a handful? [...] That's our Syrian refugee problem!" (BBC News, 2016). Beliefs about refugees that are not true, but are reinforced, can be called social myths. Social myths shine a negative light on refugees and other migrants, but there is a special focus on the irregular migrant as a "criminal" and a "welfare abuser" (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007). However, this is an overgeneralized perspective when talking about eighty million people. As Nobel Prize for Literature laureate J.M. Coetzee (2019) puts it, "Fed by the right-wing media, the public has swallowed the argument that there is an orderly immigration queue that boat people could have joined but chose not to; further, that most boat people are not genuine refugees but "economic migrants"—as

if fleeing persecution and seeking a better life elsewhere were mutually exclusive motives” (Coetzee, 2019). With the queue, Coetzee refers to the asylum procedure of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (or UNHCR), which I will explain later in this thesis. Refugees that come by boat to the country that they want asylum in, skip this procedure and are therefore portrayed as bad. In addition, refugees are accused of only wanting to profit from better economic circumstances in first-world countries. According to Coetzee, people can be leaving a bad situation and moving to a better one in the same move (and I agree). Motives are not mutually exclusive. Faist (2016) argues that migration flows reflect global inequality in a multitude of perspectives. This argument will be further explored in chapter one. In addition, the argument that refugees are only wanting to profit is not completely valid, because most refugees (eighty-five percent) are housed in developing countries with the support from the United Nations (Choose Love, 2021). I will be discussing refugees and the UNHCR further in chapter one.

In this thesis, I will look at two cases - the documentary *The Staging Post* (Hoff, 2017), and the memoir *No Friend but the Mountains* (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019) - of people trying to be relocated to another country. Focusing on these cases, I want to highlight the importance of giving these refugees a voice. There is negativity and fear surrounding refugees, partly because of how they are portrayed in the media. In addition, many people might feel numb to more news about the refugee crisis, among all the other crises going on in the world today. One can get overwhelmed by the relentless pressure and negative information coming their way, or experience so-called crisis fatigue (Martin, 2016, p. 8). However, giving the refugees a face, a story, might be a relief from the anonymous numbers and news stories, and make it less overwhelming. It could add humanity to the perception of refugees. The stories of the refugees could also evoke compassion and empathy. Their life stories could influence the public opinion on border and migration policies positively.

However, it is not always easy for irregular migrants to publish their life narratives. Life story - or life writing - is a general term for a story that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Life narrative, by contrast, is a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital

(Smith and Watson, 2010, p.4). There are many barriers a refugee faces while trying to share their life narrative, such as forms of policies and regulations, language barriers, money and other means, and time, among other limitations. Under such circumstances it is difficult to start a writing project or even just to make and take care of notes. Also, the chances are slim that a person who does not have security in basic needs is able to fully commit to a long-term project such as a book. For the few who can tell their stories, it is often necessary for them to work together with a mediator who can help them make their work accessible to the general public. A mediator mediates the story between the life narrator and the audience. A mediator could be a translator, but also an interpreter, a writer, a publisher, a director, et cetera. We know that it is important that the life narratives of refugees reach a large public, because it has the potential to change public opinion. However, little research about the role of mediation in the life narratives of refugees has been conducted.

A mediator in these cases is someone who facilitates the means for the life narrators to reach their goal, to create their stories. Both life narratives were created with the aim to have an impact on the general public, to change the discourse about refugees and to affect policies. Through the efforts of the mediator, the life narratives of the refugees can be published and reach a wide audience.

In this thesis, I aim to explore the effect of mediation in the life writing of refugees, focusing on two particular case studies. “In life writing, subjects write about their own lives predominantly, even if they write about themselves in the second or third person, or as a member of a community” (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.5). In the cases that will be discussed in this thesis - *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains* - the lives of the narrators and their communities are the subjects. For *The Staging Post* the subjects are Khadim Dai, Muzafar Ali and their community living in Cisarua, Indonesia. For *No Friend but the Mountains*, this is Behrouz Boochani who was detained at the island of Manu. The life narrators go through the stages of irregular migration. They both start with a terrifying journey, fleeing away from their home country, to in both cases Indonesia. The narrators in *The Staging Post* go through the procedures there, first applying for asylum, and then applying for refugee status, to achieve the goal of being relocated in a third country. Boochani, the narrator of *No Friend but the Mountains*, travels by boat from Indonesia to Australia, and ends up in an offshore

processing center on Manus Island. The context in which the refugee life narrators are situated is important because it affects the story as well as the writing/ filming process. This situatedness, in combination with the barriers described before, make creating a life narrative hard. Therefore, someone who could help in the creation (establishing and publishing) of a life narrative could be an important contributor.

The Staging Post is a documentary that was directed by Jolyon Hoff (the mediator). It tells the story of refugees stranded in Cisarua, Indonesia, through the eyes of two refugees - Muzafar Ali and Khadim Dai. The documentary is a collaborative effort between the three men, and the Cisarua refugee community. *No Friend but the Mountains* is a book that was written by Boochani in a detainment camp. It was written in Farsi on a cell phone, in a combined style of poetry and prose, and it was sent to translator Omid Tofghian (the mediator) through WhatsApp, who then helped it get published in the form of the novel we know.

Both Hoff and Tofghian were involved in producing the life narratives of *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains*. Their efforts contributed to the works as we know them. As I have conveyed, the life narratives of refugees are important. However, if they are created with the help of a mediator, does anything change? It is possible that what I would call 'a double voice' is created through the mediation between the narrator and its audience. What would be the effects of such a double voice? In this paper, I will focus on the mediating role in the process of the life narratives. The main question I aim to answer in this thesis is: what is the role of the mediator in refugee life narratives? And more particularly:

How is the mediator intervening in the writing / filming process of *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post* ?

To support answering the research question, I have formulated some sub questions. Chapter one and two will answer the following sub question:

SQ1: What is a refugee in the Australian context?

Both *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains* are life narratives of refugees. A refugee is officially someone who has been recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, hereafter referred to as UNHCR, as being a refugee. When people apply for refugee status, they are referred to as asylum seekers. Before they have done that, they are usually just referred to as irregular migrants. There are many different narratives surrounding refugees, and fully understanding the term will make it easier to understand the stories of *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post*. Therefore, chapter one of this is dedicated to irregular migration and refugees. In chapter two, I will outline the refugee politics that are in place in Australia. The Australian context is important because both life story cases take place in and around (or with the goal of reaching) Australia.

After establishing the context for the life narratives, I will zoom in to answer the following sub question:

SQ2: What are the experiences / narratives of Boochani and Ali and Dai?

In chapter three and four, I will focus on the live narratives of *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains*. In chapter three, *No Friend but the Mountains* will be summarized in short and subjected to a close reading analysis. In chapter four, I will do the same for *The Staging Post*. In both cases, I want to highlight the narrators - in *The Staging Post*, Khadim Dai, Muzafar Ali and the Cisarua community, and in *No Friend but the Mountains* Behrouz Boochani - and their communities. Their experiences are the topic of their life narratives, and therefore I aim to highlight both their individual and communal experiences.

SQ3: Is there a double voice in the life narratives because of the mediator? If yes, how could we give meaning to the double voice in the cases of *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post*?

As established previously, both cases were created with the help of a mediator. In the instance of *The Staging Post*, the director and two refugees collaborated on the documentary. In the case of *No Friend but the Mountains*, the mediator was the person that assembled and translated the book from the WhatsApp messages sent to him by Boochani. In chapter five, I hope to uncover the

influence - the so-called double voice - of the mediator on the life narrative. The concept of the double voice refers to the message the mediator wants to give to the life narrative of the refugees.

The main question and sub questions posed above will be answered through an overview of relevant theory, and an in-depth analysis of the two cases, the documentary *The Staging Post* and the book *No Friend but the Mountains*. The analyses of the life narratives will help me to get insight into the role of mediators and the interconnectedness of mediator and refugee. There is a lot of literature available about refugees and about mediators, but there is limited information linking the two concepts together. With this thesis, I aim to explore the influence of mediators on the life stories of refugees, and to give meaning to the voices of both.

Chapter 1: What is a Refugee?

In this chapter I will discuss several theories on migration, to explain the bigger picture of movements of people all over the globe. This will provide us with a framework in which to discuss the life narrators that I will investigate in the coming chapters. This refugee framework will help us understand why having the help of a mediator is necessary in the process of life narration for refugees.

According to Faist (2016), migration reflects global inequality in terms of well-being, rights, stability, income, prosperity, business and job opportunities, individual and community life opportunities, strength, and prestige. It holds the promise of upward social mobility, offering a relatively fast route for individuals and groups to close the gap between wealthy and poorer regions when compared to other alternatives, such as emigration countries' economic growth or resource redistribution among and within countries. (Faist, 2016, p. 324). This view of migration is quite economic in its take, but the principle that people migrate towards better opportunities holds also when you look at other theoretical accounts on migration. Richmond (1988) already stated that in a situation where relocation occurs because of catastrophic or war events, the boundary between political and economic objectives might be blurred, as is the case for refugees. Richmond (1988) argues for a multivariate approach to migration, which includes socio-political and economic variables. The main argument in the multivariate approach is that it is untenable to make the distinction between voluntary and involuntary migrant movements, because "all human behavior is constrained and enabled by the structuration process, within which degrees of freedom of choice are limited." (Richmond, 1988, p.20) Concretely, this means that people will only determine what they will do in a certain situation within the options that are available to them (or at least seem available). For refugees, the options are often limited, because they are in danger. This leaves them unable to be proactive, they can only respond to a situation when it presents itself. Refugees always move away from a situation, to a scenario they perceive as better. Better can be measured across a multitude of blurred-together variables, as argued in the paragraph above. This is why a multivariate analysis is necessary when talking about international migration, and especially so when talking about refugees.

Massey et al. (1993) found that there was no comprehensible theory that explained international migration well, because it was associated with incoherent and disjointed theories (Massey et al, 1993; Wickramasinghe and Wimalaratana, 2016, p. 14). In response, Massey (1999) created a synthetic theoretical account, considering the multitude of variables that are relevant when talking about migration patterns. According to this synthetical theoretical account, all perspectives on migration hold - at the very least - some value and are not mutually exclusive. Wickramasinghe and Wimalaratana (2016) found in their research that the existing theories on international migration still did not cover all aspects. They uncovered that research done into migration over the years had been influenced by numerous other fields and topics, such as economics, sociology, geography, commerce, management, law, political science, demography, and psychology (Wickramasinghe and Wimalaratana, 2016, p.14). While these all hold value and contribute to our understanding of the concept, these widely varying perspectives on international immigration have made it more and more complex to formulate one exhaustive theory. The concept of refugees only adds to this intangibility. There are many theories and models that try to conceptualize both international migration and refugees in this, however there is no consensus yet as demonstrated by the theorists above. The lack of a complete understanding of the problem makes it difficult to solve. My thesis contributes a contingency factor to the interdisciplinary theories of migration: the mediator in refugee life stories. This contingency factor is crucial for making the voices of refugees heard, so that we cannot only understand the stories and identities of refugees better, but also understand the effect that certain policies regarding refugees have on the individuals.

A refugee is someone who has been recognized under the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees to be a refugee (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011). Refugees are defined as people that are unable to return to their home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or other events that have dramatically affected public order, and who need international protection as a result (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Among the forces that compel them to move are “external and civil wars, political unrest and revolution, terrorism, expulsion of ethnic minorities, ethnoreligious and communal conflict, population

displacement due to technological developments such as mechanization of agriculture and hydroelectric schemes, land reforms, and resettlement” (Richmond, 1988). The status of refugee provides a person with a claim to basic rights and a juridical status that allows them to “gainful employment and welfare, identification papers and travel documents, and right to transfer assets to another country where they have been resettled” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2014).

To become recognized as a refugee, there is a procedure to follow. First, a person has to contact the local field office of the UNHCR, in the country they fled to. The UNHCR considers whether or not this person truly is a refugee, or whether they can return to their home country, or whether it is a possibility to stay in the country they applied for refugee status in. This is a lengthy process, which can take a long time. The refugee mentioned in the introduction (who reflected on the value of refugee status) got his status after nine months, but there is no official time limit so it can take even longer. When a person is recognized as a refugee and staying in the country they applied in or going back are not an option, the UNHCR will start the process of resettlement to a third country.

Of all 80 million forcibly displaced people in the world, 26 million are considered refugees. Besides refugees, there are 4,1 million people that are considered asylum seekers. An asylum seeker is seeking international protection – and thus has applied for political asylum / shelter - but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined. Asylum seekers are often referred to as refugees, despite the fact that they do not meet the legal definition of a refugee, because they are not recognized by the UNHCR yet. This means that they do not possess the claim to basic rights yet.

There are currently more internationally displaced people than the international community can receive (Martin, 2016, p. 10). The international community in this sense are all countries that have the space and the political climate to receive internationally displaced people. The international community is involved in helping each other deal with the large numbers of refugees, in three different ways (Martin, 2016, pp.7-8). First, countries share the financial burden of helping poorer countries to receive refugees (see e.g., Luecke and Schneiderheinze, 2017). Secondly, at the political level countries can work together to address the root and proximate causes of large-scale displacement (see

e.g., United Nations, n.d.). Martin (2016, p. 10-11) pleads for a more ‘human’ and effective approach to the refugee crisis on this level, because durable solutions are needed. In the words of J.M. Coetzee , 2019): “Cross-border migration is a fact of life in today’s world, and numbers will only increase as the earth heats up, former pastures turn to desert, and islands are swallowed by the sea. There are messy but humane—or at least human—ways of reacting to this world-historical phenomenon, just as there are neat but inhuman ways.” The human response, the durable solution, would be to create policies that focus on giving these refugees a place in a society (Coetzee, 2019). That brings us to the third way countries help each other deal with the refugee crisis, countries share the responsibility of physically accepting refugees (see e.g., Bokshi, 2013). However, solidarity between countries with regard to taking in refugees is often lacking (Martin, 2016, p. 8). In many first-world countries, the public discourse about refugees is negative. The refugees are perceived as potential security risks and threats. People feel threatened in their resources because refugees need jobs, healthcare, housing, language training, et cetera. People could also experience a threat to their culture, with regard to values, religion, and identity. In the countries where the refugees are perceived as a threat, constituency support for taking in refugees is lacking, and policies that are harder on refugees are more popular (Esses et al., 2017 pp. 81-82; Martin, 2016, p.8).

There are two types of policies that are often used to deal with immigrants. ‘Neat’ policies underscribe order, often reducing refugees to numbers, putting them in camps or leaving them without a country to go to. In contrast, messy policies have their focus on the refugee as a unique human being, and are often regarded as more humane (Coetzee, 2019). The fact that decades of immigration scholars have been unable to devise an exhaustive framework of international immigration is testimony to the fact that dealing neatly with the phenomenon of refugees is simply impossible. The inhumane situation most refugees are in now comes, among other reasons, from the negative discourse about refugees, unwillingness to take responsibility for refugees, the scarce funds for countries who take in refugees, and the little space and poor circumstances in the refugee camps. International irregular migration (referring to people anywhere in the process of becoming refugees) is something that is difficult to conceptualize and fully grasp. I aim to add to this complicated field of study by introducing a

contingency factor on the refugee level, the role and influence of a mediator in the production of refugee life narratives.

In the context of researching two life narrative cases of refugees who aimed to reach Australia, it is relevant to take a closer look at the country's migration policy. On the one hand, Australia is a massive continent in dire need for more occupants. On the other hand, there is fear among the current population that the Australian culture will be compromised when too many foreigners are let in.

Chapter 2: A Refugee in the Australian Context

Australia started with *Operation Sovereign Borders* in 2013. This is a policy that aims to stop irregular migrants coming by boat. According to the official website “the Australian Government is committed to protecting Australia's borders, combating people smuggling in our region, and preventing people from risking their lives at sea. Operation Sovereign Borders is a military-led border security operation that was established in 2013 to deliver on this commitment. There is only one way to gain entry into Australia — with an Australian visa” (Australian Government, n.d.). In this account, all migration that takes place without a visa is considered illegal, there is no differentiation between kinds of migration. Nobel Prize in Literature laureate J.M. Coetzee wrote for *The New York Review* a piece on Australia’s treatment of asylum-seekers while reviewing *No Friend But the Mountains*, called *Australia’s Shame* (2019). In this, he thoroughly investigates the refugee policies of Australia, the sentiments behind them, and relates these to the experiences of refugees who are subjected to said policies. This text will be used as a main source for this part of my thesis.

In current politics in Australia, it can be witnessed that both main parties have a hostile attitude towards refugees (Coetzee, 2019; Philips, 2017). Hostility towards refugees increased since the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11th, 2001. The perception of refugees became more and more negative, refugees from the middle east were perceived as terrorists and threats to national security (Coetzee, 2019). This was the starting point for *Operation Sovereign Borders*, the moment that “the Australian prime minister announced that backdoor asylum-seekers would from then on be processed not on the mainland but in offshore facilities run by Australia in yet-to-be-decided third countries” (Coetzee, 2019). The uniqueness of the common policy of Australian main parties lies in the harshness towards refugees: “that people are to be punished for seeking asylum, and that the punishment will be and is meant to be as harsh as possible, visible for all the world to see.” (Coetzee, 2019). Its punishment is especially aimed at the so-called boat people. Australia’s quota-based humanitarian system operates with an orderly queue, which is supervised by the UNHCR. People who arrive on Australian shores seeking asylum did not follow the queue, which is unacceptable by the standards of the system. Australia accepts 12,500 resettlement refugees per

year, all of whom followed the process supervised by the UNHCR (described in full detail in chapter 1). Boat people did not follow this process, so they do not have the right to be accepted by Australia (according to Australia's policies).

Boat people usually come through Indonesia, with boats provided by smugglers. The boats are often leaking and barely seaworthy. There are no official statistics, but it was estimated in 2019 that since the year 2000 around two thousand people have died at sea between Indonesia and Australia (Coetzee, 2019). However, since *Operation Sovereign Borders* launched, the number of people who die at sea yearly possibly has declined. The Australian navy's precautionary measures to prevent asylum seekers are hidden from the public, so we don't know how many of them have continued with embarking for Australia since the harsh new policy of interning and processing them offshore (*Operation Sovereign Borders*) was implemented in 2013. However, there is every reason to believe that the number has dropped dramatically (Coetzee, 2019). A possible explanation for this can be found in the policies of the navy. When the navy intercepts a refugee boat, it appears that they transfer the refugees to a throwaway boat with little fuel. The navy then tows it back into Indonesian seas, and casts it off (Coetzee, 2019).

It is possible for the Australian navy to act like this because of two loopholes in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This convention confirms the right of every survivor of persecution to obtain and enjoy asylum. It also requires signatories not to return asylum seekers to the places they fled, a requirement known as non-refoulement. (Coetzee, 2019). The first loophole in Australia's interpretation of the convention is that it does not give an asylum-seeker the lawful right to access the country where asylum is requested, nor does it obligate the country where asylum is sought to grant asylum. As a result, successive Australian governments have taken the view, which has been validated by Australian courts, that anyone who enters Australian territorial waters without the required documents is in Australia unlawfully, whether that individual has come to seek asylum or not (Coetzee, 2019).

The second loophole in the convention is Christmas Island. As Coetzee (2019) explains:

“Christmas Island, a sparsely populated island south of Java, was incorporated into Australia in 1958 despite being some nine hundred miles from the Australian mainland. It is to Christmas Island that most boat people seeking Australian asylum steer. To forestall them, the Australian parliament legislated in 2001 that for the purposes of the Refugee Convention, Christmas Island will be deemed to be not part of Australia. Once a refugee vessel has entered the waters of Christmas Island, its occupants are thus both illegally in Australia and not yet in Australia. The Australian navy is empowered to detain such “illegal non-citizens” and remove them to a location outside Australia, where they may be held indefinitely, without recourse to judicial review.” (Coetzee, 2019).

Removing refugees to a location outside of Australia is what happened to Behrouz Boochani, the writer of *No Friend but the Mountains*. Within *Operation Sovereign Borders* an agreement was reached with Papua New Guinea and Nauru. These two countries would process asylum applications for people arriving in Australia by sea and resettle them either on their own territories or in a third country, leaving Australia non-responsible for the refugees. Boochani was locked up in a camp on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, as part of Australia’s policy. *Operation Sovereign Borders* was the direct reason narrator Boochani was locked up in a detainment camp, under terrible circumstances. He paints a very negative picture of Australia’s policies.

Coetzee (2019), on the other hand, is critical of Boochani's political viewpoints and of translator Tofighian's claim that the book offers a critical study of modern Australian society, culture, and politics. Coetzee (2019) contends that one must know far more about the divisions inside Australian culture and the maneuverings of Australia's political parties than Boochani has been able to investigate while alone on the island. Coetzee (2019) himself informs the reader extensively on these themes in the early half of the review, demonstrating how convoluted colonial history is and how it affects world politics now (Heynders, 2020). However, since the operation of the detainment camps was wrapped in concealment from the start, we must rely on detainees like Boochani for information about the camps.

In *The Staging Post*, Australian policies are less apparent than in *No Friends but The Mountains*. The documentary starts as follows: “Between 2008 and 2013, 51,798 asylum seekers

arrived in Australia by boat. Cisarua, Indonesia was the staging post for most of them. On the 19th of July 2013, the Australian Government instigated mandatory offshore detention for all asylum seekers arriving by boat, with no possibility for resettlement in Australia.”(Hoff, 2017, 00:00 - 00:27). The director, Jolyon Hoff, went to Cisarua after the Australian government stopped the boats to meet the refugees. “Unsure of what he would find, Hoff discovered photographers, filmmakers, musicians, artists, teachers and families.”(Marriner, 2017). Through the stories of Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali, one learns what the effect is of the policy changes in Australia. For example, the relief Khadim experienced when his sister called him with the information, right before he got into a boat. The stress of applying for refugee status in Indonesia, and the long waiting before resettlement into a third country. Trying to maintain the minimum income to not be placed into a camp (80 Australian dollars a month) is stressful too. There is also the positive experience of support from all the volunteers from Australia that come to help the refugees there in Indonesia. The focus of the documentary is on the lives and experiences of the life narrators, how positive and qualified they are. They make the most of their situation, but do not really comment on Australian politics.

The two cases that I will be focusing on are fascinating because they show very different effects – results of different paths taken – of the same policy, *Operation Sovereign Borders*. Both life narratives are by refugees, and needed mediation to be published, which makes it interesting to analyze them side by side.

Chapter 3: *No Friend but the Mountains* Analysis

Plot of the story:

Before I start my analysis, it is important to have an understanding of the story that will be focused on. *No Friend but the Mountains* (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019) tells the story of the life of Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian journalist who fled from Iran because he was targeted by the Iranian government for his advocacy of Kurdish independence (Coetzee, 2019). He aimed to reach Australia, through his first stop in Indonesia. From there, he tried to make his way to Australia by boat. However, the boat turned out to be barely seaworthy, and he and the other refugees ended up in need of rescuing after a terrible journey. However, as soon as they were rescued from the sea, they were arrested by the Australian navy and taken to Christmas Island.

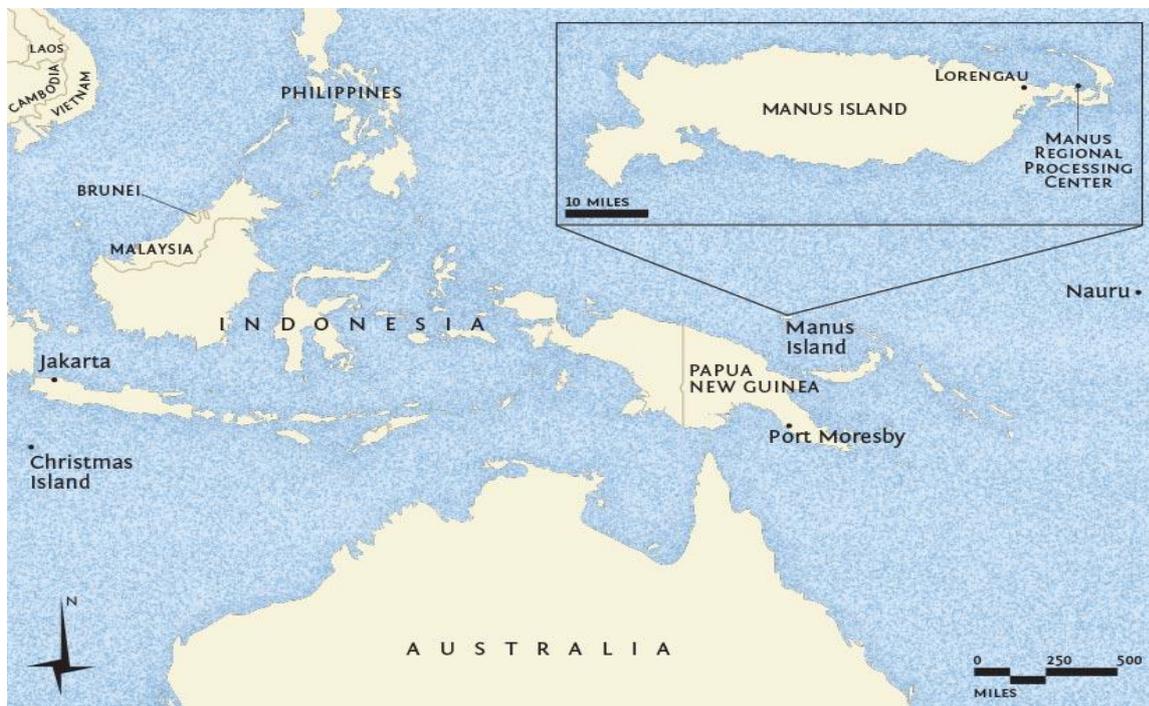


Figure 1: Map of where *No Friend but the Mountains* is situated (Dolmarva Design LLC, n.d.)

Here a first glimpse is given into what will happen to the refugees. They are stripped and searched and forced to wear terribly fitting yellow polyester t-shirts and flip-flops. These ill-fitting clothes symbolize the beginning of the dehumanization of the prisoners. They lose their agency, their

control over their identity. They all wear the same, and from there on they are barely more than numbers to the guards. The concept of identity construction is substantial in *No Friend but the Mountains*, as we will see later in this chapter.

From Christmas Island, Boochani is flown to the detention camp on Manus Island. The rest of the novel plays out in this detention camp, where Boochani spends five years as a prisoner. The small camp is overcrowded, it is inexplicably dirty, and overall offers little relief for those who need it. This causes Boochani to draw further into himself, as he becomes more and more surrounded by strangers. In the camp live about four hundred refugees, from all over the world: Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Lebanon, Iran, Somalia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Iraq, and Kurdistan (Coetzee, 2019). For Boochani this meant that there were at least some people who spoke his language, but others were completely alone and alienated.

Due to Boochani wanting to protect the other refugees, most of his fellow inmates are not named. The only exceptions are made for those who died in the camp: Reza Barati (the Gentle Giant) and Hamid Khazaei (the Smiling Youth). All other characters in the book are manufactured, not individuals who are disguised, i.e., they are composite characters (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. xv). The characters in the novel symbolize events, certain traits found in refugees, among other reasons. For example, we meet Maysam the Whore entertains and rebels with dancing, the Cow is bold and rude and therefore thrives in the prison. Others are the Toothless Fool, the Man with the Bowed Leg, the Man with the Thick Moustache, the Cadaver, the Irascible Iranian, the Insomniac, the Prime Minister, and many others who all have a function in Boochani's autobiography.

The prison develops its own culture throughout the chapters. Central to this culture is the absolute randomness of provisions. There is no pattern for the moments in which food, cigarettes, paracetamol's, et cetera, are provided. The prisoners become obsessed with standing in queues due to this randomness. In addition, there is no telling when the fans are turned on and off. In the heat and scorching sun of the island, the inmates are slowly driven mad. There is no one who takes responsibility - or who is to blame - for the lack of patterns. When asked, the guards respond by saying that they had orders. Boochani calls this the *Kyriarchal System*.

Another part of the prison culture expresses itself through self-harm. The filthy (as in, overflowing and rarely cleaned) toilets and showers are the only places the refugees have some degree of privacy. This is the scene for many prisoners to harm themselves with razor blades. The blood and cuts are a sign of bravery, of self-determination, and respectable in the eyes of the other prisoners.

The aim of the prison's *Kyriarchal System* according to Boochani is to alienate the refugees, to make sure they will become lonelier and more isolated (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p.126, p.148). The hopelessness created is designed to break the prisoners. One of the events that illustrates this aim is described in Chapter Nine *Father's Day/ The Magnificent Mango Tree and The Gentle Giant*, about an instance that happened in the phone queue. The Father Of The Months-Old Child had received a message that his father- i.e., the grandfather - was dying back home. He wanted to call him one last time, but he was way back in the phone queue. The Man With The Thick Moustache helps The Father Of The Months-Old Child negotiate his way up to the head of the queue. However, an upward series of Australian guards in the hierarchy - all the way up to The Boss (the unreachable order-giver) - refuses to modify their regulations, and the phone call to the dying man cannot be made.

This is just one of the many instances described about life in Manus Prison, but I feel that it describes the circumstances of the prisoners clearly. All events described by Boochani taking place in the prison remind the reader of things we did not think possible in a Westernized nation such as Australia anymore. One analyst compares the camp to Auschwitz (Sparrow, 2018), another compares the book to Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Polya, 2019).

After years in the system of the prison, the hopelessness of the refugees comes to a point that they just cannot cope anymore. At first, the prisoners protested peacefully. However, the existence of the camp ends with a bloody battle between the refugees and the guards. In one of the last sentences of the book Boochani describes this climax for the refugees: "For the first time the prisoners did not feel oppressed by the fences. For the first time the rules and regulations meant nothing... A bond of brotherhood emerged among the prisoners in this fierce movement, performed in the theatre of war for all to see." (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. 342).

No Friend but the Mountains as life writing:

Sidonie Smith is a professor of English and women's studies at the University of Michigan. Julia Watson is a professor of comparative studies at Ohio State University. Together they wrote *Reading Autobiography: A Guide For Interpreting Life Narratives* (Smith and Watson, 2010). I will be using this guide for my analysis.

No Friend but the Mountains is a life narrative, which according to Smith and Watson (2010) is a general, inclusive term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.4). A life story is simply a story that takes the author's life as subject. The concept of autobiography is included in the umbrella term life narrative, as a retrospective narrative. It is used to describe more heterogeneous self-referential writing (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.4).

No Friend but the Mountains should not be read as a factual overview of things that happened to Behrouz. As Smith and Watson convey, "The life writer confronts not one life but two. One is the self that others see – the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships. These are "real" attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get "outside of." The "inside," or personally experienced, self has a history. While it may not be as meaningful as an objective "history of the times," it is a record of self-observation, not a history observed by others." (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.6). We can see this record of self-observation throughout Boochani's life story. He combines anecdotes and memories of events that he finds significant or interesting and reflects on their meaning with his educational and cultural background. In addition, the poems included in the book help the reader think about how Boochani felt during his experiences.

According to Smith and Watson (2010), memory is elicited by the senses — smell, touch, sight, and sound – and encoded in items or experiences that have special importance to the narrator (p.27). In *No Friend but the Mountains*, Boochani pays a lot of attention to colors, smells, how things look and feel. For example, "The ocean is something else. When it descends into insanity its noise charges through the fences; it is heard in even the furthest rooms. A prisoner lying alone on his bed is

taken away into an imaginary realm by the haunting music of the waves. But when the sea is silent, its magnitude can be sensed in the smell of its breathing, the pungent smell of the ocean.” (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p.300). In this way, the narrator recreates the scene of the island and the prison for his audience. He describes many details this way, allowing the reader to form a mental image of life in Manus’ prison.

Boochani has written his life story to communicate how systematic torture still exists, and to inspire self-reflection, deep investigation, and direct action (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. xxxiv; p. 362). He expressed why he chose to write the way he did: “I think that the realities of this place can be better exposed through the language of art and literature” (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p.360). His story reflects the reality of the prison, but it is not an overview of happenings. *No Friend but the Mountains*, as any life narrative or other autobiographical account, should be read for what it does, not what it is (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.19). Based on the premise that words may somehow reflect the world, this life narrative alters reality in the writing while confronting the reader with truth and accountability on one side and imagination and narrative (or focalization) on the other (Heynders, 2020).

No Friend but the Mountains - and life narratives in general - struggle with perceived authenticity and truth. Life writing and fiction are often confused for each other (Smith and Watson, 2010). Since they share characteristics such as a plot, dialogue, setting, among others, and the creation of characters, this is understandable. However, the difference between fiction and life writing lies in the different relationship they have to the referential world (Smith and Watson, 2010, pp. 9-10). Fiction does not have any limits when it comes to creating an environment for the characters, even when referring to existing places and times. In life writing, the narrator is bound to the referential world of the time and space in which their story takes place. A life narrative interprets memories and events through the narrator, who is inextricably linked to the events they remember (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.30).

In autobiography, the identity of the narrator as well of the others described is constructed in language and discourse (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.39). Boochani creates composite characters to symbolize events that happened, anecdotes, inspired by the logic of allegory (Boochani and Tofighian,

2019, p. xv). His desire to shield his fellow captives from retribution is understandable. While it would have added to the perceived authenticity of the story if we had known more about the fellow prisoners, his created identities express much about the nature of the prison and the prisoners. And the observations made about the other refugees tell us a lot about who Boochani is as well.

Boochani's Kyriarchal system:

Boochani describes the *Kyriarchal System* and subsequent prison culture in chapter six and seven of his book. The system is designed to create alienation, distrust, and loneliness. Sociologists characterize it as a social structure built for dominance, oppression, and submission, with the term derived from the Greek *kyrios*, which means "lord" or "master" (Polya, 2019). Manne (2018) describes the system as a concept where several types of oppression cross; persecution is not random but deliberate, aiming to isolate and cause friction among inmates, resulting in despair and shattered souls. Paranoia is created with simple means. The energy that powers the fans - that give comfort from the unbearable heat - is turned on and off for no apparent reason. There is water available, but it is constantly lukewarm. Occasionally, cooled fruit juice comes, but on no discernible schedule. Inmates who have nothing else to do get preoccupied with discovering patterns in these random happenings (Coetzee, 2019). The kyriarchal system is "A twisted system governs the prison, a deranged logic that confines the mind of the prisoner, an extremely oppressive form of governance that the prisoner internalizes." (Manne, 2018). The inmates get obsessed with queuing, because of the lack of patterns. They line up for meals, the toilets, medication, telephone access, and cigarettes, among others. New regulations are introduced randomly, for which no one will accept responsibility. The guards are always following orders from the Boss (who is never available). People like the Cow - aggressive and rude - get on well in the system, while the softer people are fed last and most poorly. "This is the objective of the prison's Kyriarchal System, to drive prisoners to extreme distrust so that they become lonelier and more isolated, until the prison's Kyriarchal Logic triumphs with their collapse and demise" (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. 126). "The atmosphere in the prison is

constituted by micro-level and macro-level disciplinary measures designed to create animosity between the prisoners. Hatred runs through every prisoner” (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. 165).

At first, the refugees protested against the system. Maysam the Whore and his companions rebelled by entertaining the prisoners, bringing them together and making them laugh. However, even they succumb to the system over time. “Over the following months, the pretend celebrations and partying prove to be no match for the oppression of the prison, for loneliness and hopelessness. As days go by in Manus Prison, even Maysam the Whore becomes more secluded and starts to deteriorate. We must find another way to cope with exile” (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. 148).

The electrical generator continues to fail due to a malfunction or design flaw, resulting in a lack of water for the outhouses and a general stink.: “Those in charge of the generator are acutely aware of how easy it is to dominate the prisoners, simply by pressing a switch” (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. 175). This also reflects the *Kyriarchal System* of the prison camp.

Poetry, prose, and the effect of the story:

In his narrative, Behrouz Boochani combines observation and personal recollection with reportages and political commentary. These sections are linked together with poetic lines referencing Kurdish poetry and cultural traditions. His way of writing has elements of “prison literature, philosophical fiction, clandestine philosophical literature, prison narratives, Australian dissident writing, Iranian political art, transnational literature, decolonial writing and the Kurdish literary tradition.” (Tofighian, 2018). The combination of genres that come together, I would argue, makes the reader think about the situation Boochani is in, because he guides the reader through his philosophical and poetic thoughts. It is not a story that just recollects events, it accounts for how events were experienced by the life narrator. As Tofighian (2018), his translator, put it: [He] “incorporates features of the author’s journalism and political commentary, which he is recognized for. But he also fuses his writing with psychological analysis, philosophical interpretation, sentimental observation, myth, epic and folklore. In his effort to bring these genres together, he creates a cacophony that evokes the harsh physical reality, uncertainty and the incessant abuses practiced in Manus Island prison – he

deconstructs the established principles of genres as he employs them, thus positioning his book as an anti-genre.” (Tofighian, 2018). This cacophony Boochani creates is on the one hand a representation of the - pointless - chaos of Manus prison. On the other hand, the style can be explained when we look at the writing process of Boochani, who had to compose a life narrative through text messages in an environment that did not allow him to keep a structured overview of his work. Boochani did not have a private place to write, where he could create the book for himself. He could only type on his phone, which did not allow him to check and reread as part of his process. This resulted in the fragmented composition of the novel. However, I would argue that this fragmented composition adds an extra dimension to our understanding of the life of a refugee.

Memories, current events, and observations are carefully woven together into the life story, balancing thoughts, and experiences. On the one hand, the reader learns what happened to the narrator. On the other hand, the reader is invited to experience the vulnerability of the narrator. For life narrators, personal memories are an important source in their story (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.7). Boochani has dreams, based on memories, that he describes. For example, he talks about the mountains of Kurdistan, and his mother, when he is dreaming, on the verge of waking up, on the boat from Indonesia to Australian waters. “ ... The mountains transform into waves/ Transform into aggressive waves/ No, this place isn’t Kurdistan/ So why is my mother here?/ Why is a war going on in that place?/ [...] / Mountains and waves/ Waves and Mountains/ Where is this place?/ Why is my mother dancing? [end of poem, and he continues his recollection of events] ... I awake in a panic”(Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, pp. 31-32).

While poetry is usually regarded as being fictitious, it does refer to the world as Boochani experiences it, which is very real. Life writers generally connect their stories to the world outside the text, the world that is the foundation of the world the lived experience of the narrator describes. Even if this ground is partly made up of cultural myths, dreams, fantasies, and subjective recollections, or is complicated by the form in which it is told, it still connects to the world outside the text (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.12).

Boochani describes his small world – his lived experience - in and around the prison camp vividly. The people, the colors, the smell, everything that could be observed with his senses. In addition, he comments on the contrast between inside and outside the gates of the camp, on the systems, and he invites the reader into his experience. While the events described in an autobiographical account appear to be entirely personal, they are anything but. “Experience,” as it is mediated by memory and language, is already an interpretation of the past and our place in a culturally and historically distinct present. (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.31). Boochani’s experiences are situated interpretations of events that he lived through. For instance, when there is a self-harm in the prison. “The faces of those who have self-harmed show peace, a profound peace akin to ecstasy, akin to euphoria. I base this observation on my rigorous investigation of faces, a detailed examination of the marks and wrinkles rippling across them. When a prisoner spills his blood, he appears to enter a state of ecstasy and euphoria for some minutes, an existential moment emitting the scent of death. The face, the face goes white like chalk.” (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p.318). This quote is representative of how Boochani describes events and the behavior of his fellow prisoners throughout his life narrative.

Boochani seems to bring the incomprehensible hardships of Manus prison island closer to the reader through the combination of the prose and poetry in *No Friend but the Mountains*. While a reader might never be able to fully capture the pain of the life narrator, Boochani tries to affect his audience. The elements of prison literature, combined with the softness of poetry, in addition to the experiences that are characteristic for life narratives, allow for an intersectional understanding of what it might be like to be a refugee that is wrongfully imprisoned.

Summary:

No Friend but the Mountains is meaningful in many ways, but the author's authenticity is outstanding. While an autobiographical narrative may appear to be purely personal, it is far from it. Experience as mediated by memory and language, is already an interpretation of the past and our place in a culturally and historically distinct present. Boochani’s experience is subjective, but that is what

makes it so special as a life narrative. Our concept of meaningful experience is socially constructed. Subjectivity is formed via the process of experience. Through that process, one sets oneself or is placed in social reality, and as a result experiences and comprehends as a subjective those material, economic, and interpersonal ties that are, in fact, social and, in a broader sense, historical (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.31). Boochani's narrative shares the lived experience of the cruelty towards refugees. Through his story, he shows a different face of both refugees, and migration policies.

Chapter 4: *The Staging Post* Analysis

Plot of the story:

The Staging Post is a documentary about the experiences of a community of refugees in Cisarua, Indonesia. A documentary film, generally speaking, is a film that tells a facts-based narrative (i.e., referring to a real someone or something) (Slugan and Terrone, 2021). These films have a range of goals, including recording specific events and ideas, informing viewers, conveying perspectives, and generating public interest. The title, *the Staging Post*, refers to a place used by ships to rest and recharge on their way to their final destination. Cisarua, a small town south of Jakarta, used to be a staging post for ships on their way to Australia. The title of the documentary refers to the people waiting in Cisarua for their refugee status, waiting to be relocated to a third country. It's a suitable title, because the refugee community is actively trying to make the most of their stop in Cisarua.



Figure 2: *Cisarua, Indonesia* (The Guardian, 2014)

The documentary is the life narrative of Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali, and the other refugees living in Cisarua, Indonesia. They created the documentary in collaboration with director Jolyon Hoff. The director of *The Staging Post*, Jolyon Hoff, explains the situation of Cisarua in the documentary by

voice over. Living there costs about 80 dollars a month. If the refugees living there don't have that or if they run out, they will be put in detention camps (with no way out until resettlement). Many refugees are reliant on family and friends.

The documentary starts with the mention of the Australian instigated mandatory offshore detention for all asylum seekers by boat, with no possibility for resettlement in Australia, which passed on July 19th, 2013. You hear Hoff as a voice over talking about his desire to meet the refugees of Cisarua. He introduces his two partners for the film, Muzafar and Khadim. Muzafar tells about his journey with the UN and how he got into photography. Khadim tells us that he had filmed his journey to Cisarua, but his camera was confiscated. Khadim tried to reach Australia by boat four times through smugglers. He decided to stay in Cisarua when he learned about *Operation Sovereign Borders*. He started filming in Cisarua again, with his phone, to show his life to people in other countries. His short films feature his friends, just going on about their lives as usual in Cisarua. Through them, he tries to convey his story.

About 16 months later, in 2014, Hoff and Ali and Dai start their story telling on a community feast, Eid day. During this day, gatherings are being held to make improvements, and to resolve issues within the community. This was a special moment since refugees did not have the right to gather. A problem many in the community faced was the lack of education for their children. Refugees were not allowed to work or study at that moment, so starting a school was illegal (and very scary to many). It took a lot of persuasion for many refugees to want to be involved in the starting of one. In the narrative, they touch upon the fact that a lot of refugees impose regulations on themselves, out of fear. Slowly but surely however, the community started chipping in with whatever they could. In the back of their minds was the risk they were taking with the starting of the school: the only thing left for many of these people, the hope of being resettled in a third country. Yet, as we see in the documentary, the building of community around the school helped people be less fearful. During this process, there was a sense of kinship as more and more refugees helped to contribute for the school's materials and rent.

The school started receiving support as soon as they opened. The first bit of international support the community received for the school was from mainland Australia, visitors brought fifty kilos of books for the school. A few weeks after the school opened, teachers and students were invited to Jakarta to represent Afghanistan in the international week of the Australian International School. This invitation was seen as an opportunity to show themselves not as hopeless, but as people who are proud of their heritage. The refugees chose to present themselves with music and dance (Hoff, 2017, 00:20:00 - 00:23:50). In addition, they answered difficult questions about their heritage and lives as refugees openly. After the celebrations, the documentary shows that the refugees felt like valuable, wanted, seen people, and like they have something to teach the world. Over time, more and more visitors come to the school. Among these people are educators, university students, and others who want to help and learn. Khadim tells a story about a girl who was told refugees were dangerous by her mother, and how this made him laugh. Refugees are wonderful and skillful, nothing scary. The school shows that.

In time, the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre outgrew the two-classroom building it was in. The students (who came from a variety of countries) in the school had different teaching backgrounds, different curricula, and systems. In addition, the students were in different age groups and levels. With more and more students joining the school, there was need for a new building. The contract for the bigger building was signed by the director of the documentary, Jolyon Hoff, because the refugees were not allowed to. The building needed a lot of fixing up, and many refugees living in Cisarua came together to contribute with their skills, such as carpentry and sewing. To finance the building, they could depend on some international support. Khadim's films about the community had reached a wide audience on social media, which made a lot of people impressed with what the refugees had achieved. Restoring the building for the school created team spirit and fueled hope among the refugees. The building of the school happened secretly, at night and on the downlow. However, the footage from the documentary shows it as a victory, with upbeat music and laughter. The community recognized the importance and privilege of an education. Even with the bigger building, there was soon a waiting list for students to enroll in the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre. Refugees came from all over the

Indonesian island to be in the school, which was the only school for refugee children in Indonesia at the moment of the documentary.

The life story ends with the resettlement of the two life narrators. Muzafar gets resettled in Australia. Everyone is happy for him and his family, but the goodbye is bittersweet since they realize that it will be a challenge to live in Australia as a refugee. At the airport in Australia, Hoff and his wife collect Muzafar and his family. A year after Muzafar, Khadim gets resettled in the United States of America, so Hoff goes back to Cisarua to say goodbye. In addition, the documentary includes one less happy ending, to show that it does not end in resettlement for all refugees. A friend of Khadim was deported back to Afghanistan and was kidnapped by the Taliban.

The final update in *The Staging Post* is a written slide, which announces the UNHCR policy change on activities for refugees – i.e., the legalization for refugee children to have an education.

The Staging Post as life writing:

The Staging Post is the life narrative of Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali. Through the story of the Cisarua refugee community, they tell their life stories. The Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre is like a thread through the documentary. The life narrative was created in collaboration with director Jolyon Hoff. One of the things that makes the documentary special, is that it successfully ensures that its subjects' voices remain paramount (Gibson, 2018). *The Staging Post* is a documentary in a participatory mode. The connection between documentary filmmakers and their subjects characterizes participatory documentaries (Burns and MasterClass staff, 2020). The documentary film makers are Hoff, the director, and Ali and Dai, the life narrators. Hoff's style of filming adopts a refugee's point of view and supports what Khadim and Muzafar want to convey to the audience. The short films of Khadim (about his friends and refugee life) are included in the documentary. This inclusiveness and collaboration are characteristic for participatory mode documentaries. *The Staging Post* as a life narrative is the story of Dai and Ali, through the voices of their friends and community and the camera of Hoff. The documentary has some performative elements too. Performative documentaries center on the filmmaker's connection with their topic, utilizing his or her personal experience or relationship

with the subject as a springboard for delving into bigger, subjective realities about politics, history, or groups of people (Burns and MasterClass staff, 2020). While Hoff, Dai, and Ali do not fully dive into the bigger realities of politics, they do show an understanding of the forces behind their experiences. The documentary shows the situation of refugees waiting on the UNHCR, and the effect of the policies of Australia and the UNHCR on their lives.

The Staging Post touches upon some themes that are central to the life narrators' identities and experiences, which I will describe and analyze the same way as I did *No Friend but the Mountains*. For life narrators, personal memories are an important source in their story (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.7). Khadim remembers his sister calling about the policy changing in Australia, preventing him from ending up in an offshore detention camp (like Boochani). Both Ali and Dai recollect events from home in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with their families, the persecution, et cetera. Life narratives, through the recollections of events, are recordings of acts of interpretation by people who are inextricably linked to historical time and their own ever-changing pasts (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.30) In life narratives, people describe events as they experienced them. They were part of the events that happened, and they give meaning to these events based on how they experienced them. These events might have happened differently if the life narrators had not been a part of them or might have been described differently if someone else had recollected the event. The importance or value attached to the events and experiences changes over time too (i.e., the ever-changing past). Take for example Khadim, who heard from his sister about the policy change in Australia and decided not to get on the boat because of her. Before he learned about the atrocities taking place in the offshore detention camps in Papua New Guinea, he might have regretted choosing for Cisarua. However, knowing how bad he would have been treated makes him remember the event more positive.

According to Smith and Watson (2010), memory in a life narrative is elicited by the senses — smell, touch, sight, and sound — and encoded in items or experiences that have special importance to the narrator (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.27). Continuing on the example of Khadim and the boat, the documentary shows him recollecting the events when looking at the ocean, which has a very specific way of stimulating the senses (salty air, feeling of wind and sand, water). Remembering through

sensory experience and encoded items is repeatedly shown throughout *The Staging Post*. The community celebrates traditional holidays such as Eid day, and through i.e., food, clothing, music, dancing, and language they remember events and their identity from back home. Belongings help the community recollect and tell their stories too. Khadim shows his belongings at the end of the documentary, and through that he tells his story in short. There was a hat his mother made for him, which helps him reflect on his family, his mother, and sisters. He also kept a flyer for *Operation Sovereign Borders*, that was handed to him by someone strongly against refugees. Using these objects, he has a guideline for telling his story.

Through the process of the documentary, the audience learns about the importance of education for the refugee community, and how important it is for them to come together. Life narratives such as *The Staging Post* should be valued not just for being a documentary, but for their effect (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.19). The documentary makers both focus on informing the audience more about refugees, and on making life for these refugees better. Therefore, the documentary could also be classified as a social practice (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.18). Social practice aims to establish the relationship between practice and context in cultural circumstances and is emphasized as a commitment to change. While documenting the community, the life narrators and director actively take part in the activities and relationships of this community. They are, for example, involved in the development of the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre – showing how qualified and skilled the refugees are i.e., in carpentry and teaching - while discussing the importance of education for refugee children.

For the refugee life narrators and the other subjects of *The Staging Post*, identity is found in their heritage, and in their being a refugee. Identities, according to Smith and Watson (2010), are constructed in language, and conversation with others (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.39). Identity is part of the consciousness of an individual, and in all social exchange processes this identity is implicated. Identity itself is also a process; it is never completed. In the conversations the refugees of *The Staging Post* have, the audience is given a glimpse into the identities of these individuals and the identity of the community. In the documentary, the life narrators and refugee children visit the Australian

International School in Jakarta. Through the conversations and performance, the identity of the refugees becomes more and more clear. Part of their identity is in their heritage as Hazara. Hazara are an ethnic group from Afghanistan and neighboring countries, who have been subjected to persecution and discrimination from i.e., the Taliban. *The Staging Post* describes the Hazara being targeted by the Taliban. At one instance they receive news of a bomb attack killing fourteen people being killed by a bomb back in Afghanistan, which causes great worry for the refugees who still have family back there (Hoff, 2017, 00:17:50). Hazara are known for their typical facial features, which set them apart from other societal groups. In addition, most Hazara are Shi'a Muslims. Within Islam, it is estimated that about 93% of Muslims are part of the Sunni denomination, and only 6% are Shi'a (Marshall Cavendish Reference, 2010, p.130). "Historically, the minority Shi'a, regardless of ethnicity, have faced long-term persecution from the majority Sunni population. From the 1880s onwards, and especially during the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman (1880-1901), they suffered severe political, social, and economic repression, as Jihad was declared by Sunni leaders on all Shias of Afghanistan." (Minority Rights Group, 2021). The identity of Hazara comes with such hardships that it caused the life narrators to take on the perilous journey to Australia and caused them to strand in Cisarua. However, Khadim and Muzafar – and the other Cisarua refugees – show in *The Staging Post* that they are proud of their heritage.

This pride of their heritage is for example clear when we look at how they choose to portray themselves in the documentary, as strong and creative. An instance that depicts their view of their Hazara heritage is a visit to International Week at the Australian International School. As a means of representing themselves, life narrators include and replicate patterns of identity in their narratives. The material for autobiographical narrative is collected from various, divergent, and discontinuous experiences, as well as the numerous identities that emerge from and constitute those experiences (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.40). In the performance in the Australian International School, the heritage of the refugees is depicted through storytelling, clothing, acting, and music and dance. Throughout *The Staging Post*, there are fragments of the importance of music for the Hazara refugees, filmed by Khadim. The music helps them feel connected to their heritage. Hazaras are well-known in

Afghan culture for their music and poetry, as well as the proverbs from which their poetry is derived. The poetry and songs are mostly folkloric, passed down verbally through the centuries (Minority Rights Group, 2021). Identity exists within the dialogues of history and culture, which means that it is situated in and marked by a time and a place (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.40). The identity of Hazara depicted in the documentary, might differ from the identity of Hazara for those who are not refugees. In the social exchange processes among the refugees, and between the refugees and other people, the identity as Hazara becomes more defined.

Another part of the identity of the narrators lies in the being of refugees. The documentary depicts the story of a roommate of Khadim, who was recognized as a refugee by the UNHCR after a long period. However, they explain that they had always known that they were refugees, and that it does not feel any different to have the status of a refugee. However, it is a step in the process, and they celebrate. The refugee-identity in the documentary is most clearly visible in the women who are the subject of Khadim's short films. Khadim's short films tell his story, through the lives of his friends. He wanted to show that these women are not oppressed. Being a refugee means experimenting with new ways of living, and the women are embracing that more than anyone else. Women took the lead in founding the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre. Women didn't play sports where Khadim was from, but in Cisarua they play football. Everyone is equal here, there is less judgement and gossip. Men and women are more equal in Cisarua than back in Afghanistan. Their identity is more in their position as refugees than in gender. Women are leaders and initiators; this becomes all the more visible in the starting up and functioning of the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre.

A less positive aspect of the identity as refugee is fear. Refugees live in fear, first of the Taliban in the Middle East, then during their perilous journey, and now they live in fear of the UNHCR. Many people were afraid to lose their right of resettlement in a third country if they broke any of the rules of the UNHCR, which included getting an education or a job. Also, smugglers told them lies and rumors about their rights and situation. This resulted in strong individualism among the refugees because people were afraid gather and get to know and help each other. Muzafar and some other members of the community wanted to change that, to create a better situation for the refugees

and their children. With the start of the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre, the effect of fear on the identity of the refugees is reduced. This is testimony to identity being an ever-changing concept.

Right to education for refugees:

The status of refugee is a recurring theme in the documentary. At the time of the documentary, people could not work or study until they received their official refugee status from the UNHCR. Since the UNCHR procedures are lengthy, people did not have access to education or an income for long periods of time. This created extra disadvantages for refugees, but especially for their children. When they would receive their status as refugees, they would be far behind compared to their peers. *The Staging Post* focuses on the developments around the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre, which was founded when it was still not allowed by the UNHCR. Muzafar and Khadim reflect in the documentary on the value of education for the community, and also on the impact of the school on the community. The learning centre is not only a game changer for children (who now do not fall behind in their education), but also for the people around them. The processes in and around the school helped the parents to contribute and exercise their skills, and to be more open. This way, the community came closer together. The life narrators pay a lot of attention to the right to education, and the importance of being a community, because they wanted to change the circumstances for refugees in different stages of their process. Also, because they want to affect the opinion about refugees that non-refugees (the target audience of *The Staging Post*) might have.

Effect of the Story:

The documentary is given affect through the involvement of Khadim and Muzafar in the community. They tell their life stories through the lives of their friends in Cisarua. By actively documenting the refugee life and the developments in the community, they allow the audience of the documentary to experience the versatility of refugee life. The goal of life narrators Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali, in collaboration with Jolyon Hoff, had for *The Staging Post* was to provide a better understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by people who were forced to leave their homes

to seek asylum elsewhere, especially with regard to human rights issues. In addition, they wanted to depict the strength, courage, hope, and dignity that refugees display in the midst of their difficulties.

This depiction of the refugees is supposed to make the audience feel a connection to the people of Cisarua, to create sympathy and empathy, and maybe even long-term change in the way that the international community treats refugees. The narrative surrounding refugees is largely negative, as established in the introduction of my paper. Documentary life narratives such as *The Staging Post* have the potential for a shift in the public discourse.

We do not know whether they achieved their goal yet, however we do know that the UNHCR policy on refugee education changed. There are still many refugees around the world, in inhumane circumstances, and this will probably take a long time to resolve. However, *The Staging Post* did contribute to creating more and more support for refugees. To illustrate, the film has reached at least 30,000 people worldwide through hundreds of community and school screenings, almost every university student in Australia has seen it, and it has been played on Kanopy (an online library for documentaries and films) 1,720 times, with 47 school license purchases. According to student response, the video had an influence on raising awareness, learning, and motivation to better the condition of refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, it obtained media attention in Australian newspapers, Indonesian television, and BBC World. The continuous impact is also visible in financial support for the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre, nearly \$500,000 has been raised, allowing it to evolve into a center for both psychological assistance and education. It has grown considerably to over 300 pupils and 20 volunteer refugee instructors, with ongoing curricular improvements and greater sustainability. (The Staging Post Case Study, 2020).

Summary:

The Staging Post - the life narrative of Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali - recounts the vital early years of the formation of the refugee-led community, schools, and self-determination during a period when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees prohibited refugee group activities. It shows the effect that policies have on the lives of refugees. While depicting the hardships they and the

other refugees encounter, *The Staging Post* also focusses on the resilience and hope that thrives among the community.

Chapter 5: Mediation in Refugee Life Narratives

In this chapter, I want to further explore the role and influence of the mediators in both *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post*. Since both cases came into existence with the help of mediators, this type of inquiry is especially salient. In *No Friend but the Mountains*, the mediator was translator Omid Tofighian, whereas in *The Staging Post*, the mediator was director Jolyon Hoff. I aim to uncover the role and influence of the mediator in the life narratives. To do so, I will first provide a general overview of the advantages and disadvantages a mediator contributes to a life narrative.

A way the involvement of the mediator in the relation between life narrator and audience can make the relationship stronger, is the opportunities. The mediator comes with a means beyond the reach of the refugee life narrators described in this thesis; financially, timewise, contact-wise, equipment- and skill-wise, among others. This can really positively affect the quality of the life narrative, which helps it serve its purpose.

A way the involvement of the mediator can weaken the relationship between the audience and the life narrator is the impairment of authenticity. The mediators involved in the cases were non-refugees, and they were not describing their own lives. A life narrative that came to be with the help of a mediator might lose some of its authenticity. 'Authenticity' tries to express a genuine historical narrative as faithfully delivered and accurately nuanced inside an analytic session, rather than objective accuracy of historical truth in reconstruction. Because its validity is embedded in the analytic connection itself, a genuine reconstruction is immediately available for evaluation in terms of trustworthiness and dependability (Collins, 2011). The mediator is not a refugee themselves, so maybe they are not qualified to capture the exact experience of the refugees.

To further investigate the role and influence of the mediators in both *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post*, we will focus on the concept of a double voice. I will be using the term double voice to refer to the duality in the message of the life narratives, which results when the mediator has a different idea about the story than the life narrator. The life narrator and the mediator are not the same person: they have their own voices, stakes, and reasons for being involved in the life narratives.

Firstly, I want to note that I could find very little scientific literature about the topic of mediation in life stories, and no literature about a double voice.

Therefore, I want to give meaning to the concept of a double voice in a life narrative by establishing it as a consequence of the (much needed) mediation in the case of a refugee life story. A mediator in conceptual models is the variable that affects the strength and the direction of the relationship between other variables. This is similar for the mediator in the life narratives that were discussed in this thesis. Their role allowed the refugee life narrators to share their story, more effectively and with a bigger reach than could have been accomplished without them. We could even question whether the two life narrative cases in this thesis would have been created if not for a mediator. Either way, both of the cases discussed in this thesis came to be with the involvement of the mediators we discussed.

These mediators are not refugees, so we can assume that they have a different experience of life than the life narrators they lend their help to. Their own embodied and embedded situations might be reflected in their mediation. The voice of the mediator is in general situated in a different context than the voice of the original life narrator. This situatedness has in theory the opportunity and power to change the tone of the narrative to suit the cultural framework of the target audience, both by accident and maybe on purpose.

The life narrator and the mediator both have their reasons for contributing to the life narrative. For the double voice, it is important to consider that both the narrators and the mediators want to achieve something by participating in the life narrative, and that these goals might differ. However, they do not have to be mutually exclusive. The goals can even be complementary when the life narratives are created in close collaboration. If the goal for the life narrator is to tell their story, and the mediator wants to facilitate this because it suits their own interests (such as a number of publications), this is a beneficiary project for both parties. If the goals of the mediator and the life narrator do not complement each other, the double voice can be considered an uncomfortable side effect that has a negative effect on the authenticity of , and with this the effect on, the life narrative in question. If the goals of the mediator and the life narrator do align, the double voice allows the audience to experience

both voices and effects intended. The collaboration between the life narrator and the mediator is of essence to make sure the intended message of the life narrator stays authentic.

Role of the Mediator

Now the concept of the double voice is established, the role and importance of the mediators in the cases of *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post* will be analyzed.

No Friend but the Mountains

No Friend but the Mountains, as covered in chapter three, is the life narrative of Behrouz Boochani. As Boochani was confined in a camp, he was not at liberty to write his life story. Because of his limited means we can assume that without a mediator, *No Friend but the Mountains* would not have existed. This mediator was found in lecturer, researcher, and Professor Omid Tofighian. His role was needed to create an English novel out of the fragmented texts messages that were sent to him via mobile phone, in Farsi. This role as translator and composer of the book leaves him in a position of power and affluence. To fully grasp this position, I want to shortly describe the influence a translator has on a story.

Translation is the process of translating a written text from one language to another. (Hatim and Munday, 2004). Translation encompasses all dimensions of the source text, including linguistic organization, culture, intents, sentiments, style, and time, and the goal is to recreate the full text organically, seamlessly, and as similar to the original as feasible in the target text (Zhonggang, 2006). In other words, a translator has to be aware of the cultural connotations, the circumstances, the background of the translator, et cetera, to make sure that they translate not only the words, but also the meaning behind the text. i.e., The translator also has to make sure the interpretation of the source language text and the target language text are the same. Understanding statements is more than just knowing the meaning of the words stated. Translating the implicit meanings of statements between two languages is one of the most challenging scenarios that translators may face (Aresta, 2018).

In the *Translator's Tale: a Window to the Mountains* (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, pp. 375-398) Tofighian describes the collaboration and consultations between himself and the life narrator. In this chapter, Tofighian describes his motivation for contributing to the life narrative. He

had practiced translating, refiguring, and incorporating myth, legend, and poetry for his father's funeral a few years prior. When he and Boochani discussed style and details of the life story, they realized that "we both approach storytelling, philosophy, memory and performance in very similar ways. The realization was uncanny. For me, translating Behrouz's book was a continuation of the festival previously inaugurated for Manouchehr [his father]. The opportunity to translate Behrouz's book was an unexpected blessing. He offered me the role after I'd spent six months translating a collection of his journalism. ... [This project] has been a source of many inspirational and auspicious encounters and discoveries." (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p. 377). The motivation Tofighian gives here for wanting to contribute to the life narrative of Boochani is not in conflict with what Boochani hopes to achieve with *No Friend but the Mountains*. Therefore, the risk that Tofighian would alter the message is highly reduced. His role as a mediator is making sure that the story of the life narrator is conveyed as authentically as possible to the target audience. Therefore, we can assume that the double voice aligns with both the mediator and the life narrator. This assumption is seemingly confirmed in the *Translator's Reflections* (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, pp. 359-374), in which Tofighian presents an essay with philosophical ideas, arguments, and collaborative interpretations from both him and Behrouz Boochani. Tofighian describes here that "One major concern for Behrouz [Boochani] is reception [of *No Friend but the Mountains*], and the interpretative frameworks and criteria employed to evaluate and engage with the book. In this essay I [Tofighian] will suggest possible ways to interpret the book that stem from Behrouz's own thinking, culture and lived experience." (Boochani and Tofighian, 2019, p.362). He does so by i.e., emphasizing the text's relationship to contemporary and traditional customs from Iran and (particularly) Kurdistan (Sparrow, 2019).

The collaborative effort for *No Friend but the Mountains* was disclosed by Tofighian in an article in *the Guardian* (2018) "He [Boochani] spent almost five years typing passages of various chapters into his mobile phone and using WhatsApp to text message them to Moones Mansoubi who filed the writings. She then arranged the text messages into chapters based on Boochani's instructions and subsequently sent them to me for translation. Early in the writing process, Boochani had his phone confiscated during one of the brutal early morning raids and for a period of time was forced to write on

paper and dictate to Moones using voice messaging (who obviously had to transcribe the new sections)” (Tofighian, 2018). This description mostly regards the process of Boochani, but it is clear that even though his circumstances were very difficult, he was able to communicate and direct how he wanted his life narrative to turn out. While the mediator had the opportunity to communicate their own agenda through *No Friend but the Mountains*, the described collaborative efforts make this unlikely. Besides this transparency about the process described in *the Guardian*, Tofighian disclosed more about the creation of - and possible ways to interpret - the life narrative, the life narrator, in the last two chapters of the book as discussed above.

In sum, the role of the mediator in *No Friend but the Mountains* comes into its own in the collaboration with the life narrator. Besides providing the life narrator with the opportunity to publish the story, the importance of his role is visible when we look at the responsibility to translate the life narrative and convey its message as well as possible.

The Staging Post

The documentary *The Staging Post* is the life narrative of Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali, in collaboration with director Jolyon Hoff. Hoff is the mediator between the life narrators, and their target audience. A director is in charge of the creative and dramatic components of a film, as well as visualizing the screenplay (or script) and directing the technical staff and performers in carrying out that vision (Mackendrick and Cronin, 2005). The director in this sense has quite some influence in how the life narrative is portrayed. Filmmakers highlighted a possible ethical issue in the relationship with the spectators of the documentary, namely, how to keep the viewer's confidence in the work's truthfulness and integrity (Aufderheide et al., 2009). Like Tofighian, Hoff chose to disclose his motivation for wanting to help with the life narrative. For reasons of authenticity and believability, there can be no conflicts of interest between the parties possibly (Aufderheide et al., 2009). We can assume that there is no conflict of interest between the life narrators and the director, based on the directors statement Hoff wrote, in the study guide accompanying *The Staging Post*: “I wanted my Australian teenage school friends to meet him [Khadim]. I knew the constant yelling across the political spectrum was turning them off. They were just trying to get their kids to school and soccer

training and manage their households. They weren't uncaring, but they didn't want the endless yelling and political posturing. They couldn't work out what the truth was [regarding refugees] any more anyway. The left and the right were rabid and it was easier to just turn off." (Marriner, 2017, pp.24-25). Through the documentary, people get the opportunity to know Khadim and the other refugees on a personal level rather than political. Gibson (2018) finds in her cinematic analysis of *The Staging Post* Hoff's point of view is presented indirectly through what he shoots. She concludes that Hoff's cinematography technique is unusually direct and honest: it is clear that he has formed great friendships with many individuals (he does not hide his personal efforts to advocate on their behalf, i.e., by signing the lease for the school building). She also finds that the relationship between Hoff and the refugees depicts the welcoming attitude of the Hazara community (Gibson, 2018). While Gibson (2018) does not analyze *The Staging Post* as being a life narrative, her insight into the dynamics between the director and the in my paper described life narrators depicts what I have classified as mediator.

It is clear that Hoff is very fond of his collaboration with Khadim and Muzafar. He wrote in his directors statement about the start of this collaboration: "Muzafar showed me some of his photographs from central Afghanistan; they were stunning. I wasn't expecting the photographs to be anything much, perhaps just interesting because of the content, but these were gallery-worthy landscape and people photos. I was impressed. Muzafar's friend, Khadim, was 17 and had been filming his friends and flatmates on his mobile phone. He showed me some of his footage. It was remarkable too. Intimate and authentic footage of refugee life in Indonesia. I'm a documentary filmmaker and we are always trying to represent the real, to capture un-manipulated images of life. The images that Khadim showed me were exactly that. I was exhilarated. Later Khadim told me that his flatmates would laugh at him, and think he was silly with his mobile phone. No doubt that's why the footage was so authentic and intimate – the subjects thought he was just being a silly kid. I don't know exactly what I'd been expecting to find when I visited Cisarua, but I'm sure I'd expected to be the one who was there to help. To give. To help come up with some solutions. Yet here I was looking at the holy grail of documentary making, something I'd been trying to capture my whole life, and it was sitting right there on a 17-year-old refugee's mobile phone. This creative connection formed the

basis for our connection from then on. In a cultural sense we were equals. We liked each other and decided to start a project together. We started with Khadim's footage. We wrote a script, selected the images and posted a short film online." (Marriner, 2017, pp.23-24).

The life narrative in documentary format comes with two realistic limitations: framing and language. Framing is an issue that comes with all stories that are told through a third party, in this case the mediator. This person has the power to frame the story according to their vision and goals for the story. The language of the mediator and the refugees differs too. Since director Hoff is Australian (and speaks the English language), people speak English when they are talking to the camera or with other English-speaking people (such as at the Australian International School). Since English is not the first language of the refugees it could very much influence who speaks in the documentary, and what they say. However, scenes of and about the community are often in their native languages, such as the Hazaragi dialect. There is little translation, and no translation by non-refugees, so we can assume that language does not create a double voice. The way Muzafar Ali and Khadim Dai are involved in *The Staging Post* testifies of the authenticity of the story.

It could be argued that *The Staging Post* has a double mediation, in a sense. The director Jolyon Hoff was the mediator between Ali and Dai, and their audience. However, Ali and Dai themselves were mediators too, in the sense that they mediated between their community and the documentary. In the directors statement, Hoff explains that he came to Cisarua looking for the story of the refugees who got stuck there when Australia started *Operation Sovereign Borders* (Marriner, 2017, pp.23-24). In the quote above he describes how he found the story through the talents of Muzafar and Khadim, and how impressed he was by their ability to capture the Cisarua community. He regards them as equals and collaborates with them. *The Staging Post* is the life story of Khadim Dai and Muzafar Ali, through which the story of the Cisarua refugee community is told, with the help of Jolyon Hoff. For all documentaries, but especially for a life narrative, trust—from both the audience and the subject—is crucial. (Aufderheide et al., 2009). The collaborative efforts to tell the life stories of the refugees radiates trust between all parties, which is why I want to argue that the documentary keeps its authenticity as life narrative.

Muzafar Ali and Khadim Dai are both involved in the telling of the story of the refugees living in Cisarua. In the documentary, the viewer's relationship with the stranded community in Cisarua is mediated through Khadim and Muzafar.

Conclusion of Cases:

The help of a mediator in the creation of a life story has both advantages and disadvantages. In the refugee life narratives investigated in this paper, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The separateness of the mediator and life narrator makes that close collaboration is needed, so both voices align with each other, reducing the risk of an unreliable double voice. Both mediators, translator Tofighian and director Hoff, disclosed their motivation and role in the life narratives overtly. Hoff explained his partnership in the study guide that was created alongside the documentary, Tofighian does this in the translator's reflections and tale at the end of the book. The transparency about the role of the mediator in these cases discloses the double voice for the audience. In *No Friend but the Mountains* the translator successfully explains the life story, the process and possible interpretation of the life narrative. For *The Staging Post* a study guide was made to accompany the documentary, which included the director's statement that describes the process and collaboration of him with the life narrators, and the other Cisarua refugees. Through this transparency, the audiences of both cases are made aware of the role of the mediator, which should restore the trust and faith of the audience in the truthfulness of the life narratives.

Discussion

Research into refugee life stories is more relevant now than ever. As covered in the introduction and chapter one of this paper, the refugee crisis is an overwhelming and ever-growing problem for the international community. Discourse in media and politics provides a negative image of refugees. Refugee life stories such as *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains* shed a positive light on refugees, adding more beneficial perspectives to the public discourse. So far, there has been little scientific research into the role and impact of a mediator on a refugee life story, and this paper is only just a small step in the right direction.

The life narratives presented in this paper provide a different perspective on refugees. Boochani's work focusses on the effect of policies on his life, while Ali and Dai focus on presenting refugees as dignified, qualified, and deserving human beings. These two cases complement each other in that sense. The cases both had impact on the audience of their life stories, and I would argue that that might have been different had a mediator not intervened.

The observations of the case studies suggest that the best-case scenario for a life narrative is when the life narrator and the mediator have a mutually beneficial collaboration. Because the mediator and life narrator are separate persons, with a different background, there is always a risk that the messages of the two clashes, resulting in an unbeneficial double voice. In both *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post*, the positive experiences with the collaboration process are disclosed. While both director Hoff and translator Tofighian had their own motives for contributing to the life narratives, we can observe that these did suit the motives disclosed by the life narrators.

The impact of the two discussed life stories can partly be explained by the positive and enabling viewpoint of the mediator, which adds to the empowerment of the refugee life narrators. The life narratives have an impact on the discourse about refugees through the way the refugees present themselves and their situations to the audience, which shows a different side of refugees than media and politics.

While this study has tried to be as thorough and scientifically rigorous as possible, it is subject to several limitations. One limitation of my study can be found when looking at the life narrators in the cases presented. The life narrators in my cases might not have been completely representative of refugees in general since they enjoyed some form of (theoretical) education or wealth before they became refugees. In the documentary, Dai and Ali and the rest of the Cisarua refugees could only live there because they could pay 80 Australian dollars a month. Ali had worked for the United Nations before. In the book, Boochani had enjoyed an education in political philosophy and was a journalist. However, their stories are as important of those who could not afford to live in Cisarua or did not have an education.

Another limitation could be that a mediator in a life narrative is quite paradoxical in nature. The autobiographical aspect of a life story implies that it is someone who tells about their own lives, and a mediator interrupts that process. However, since this paper concerns the life narratives of refugees, this might be considered a necessary evil. The process of creating a life narrative is different when one does not have security.

I would argue that the value of my paper lies in its explorative nature. There has been limited research on mediators in life narratives like *The Staging Post* and *No Friend but the Mountains*, and there is still a lot to uncover. For future studies, one could look into the causal relationship between refugee life stories and how the general public perceives refugees. An additional topic of research would be to measure the effect of a mediator in a life story on a larger scale. One could do this by for example designing a with vs. without mediator comparative study on a larger scale, to test the findings of this case study.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the intervention of the mediator in the writing / filming process of *No Friend but the Mountains* and *The Staging Post*. While the refugee life narrators are capable individuals, their circumstances did not allow them to create their life narrations by themselves, they needed a mediator. Boochani was imprisoned in a detention camp on Manus island, while Ali and Dai learned about the implementation of *Operation Sovereign Borders* just in time to stay in Indonesia indefinitely. Their life stories cover the life of a refugee on these locations, on the hardships and the influence of their circumstances on their identities. The role and impact of the mediator in and on the life stories differed for both cases, but they did both show the importance of collaboration between the translator/director and the life narrators.

In the cases discussed, we could observe the role and the influence the mediator had on the life narratives. The life narrators were provided with the means they needed to achieve their goal: to impact the audience. The mediators strengthened this connection to the audience, through their intervention in the process. *No Friend but the Mountains* successfully captured a broad audience, which would have been less likely had it not been translated and composed by a mediator. *The Staging Post* also captured a wide audience, through the involvement of the mediator in both the documentary but also in the improvement of the lives of Cisarua refugees.

For me, the emphasis of the life stories is on the goal of creating more positive discourse about refugees and creating sympathy and empathy for their situations. There need to come better systems to deal with all 80 million displaced peoples on the earth, and a first step to get there is to show the refugees as individuals who are capable and deserving.

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