

Refugee Life Writing in Australia: Testimonios by Iranians

Laetitia Nanquette
University of New South Wales

Of the four million Iranians living outside Iran, a mere 35,000 live in Australia. Yet this group is gaining increasing visibility, both within Australia and beyond, in part because of the increasing number of refugee narratives emerging from this community.¹ This article develops an account of this body of work by providing the historical background, giving an overview of the books published, and focusing on two particular case studies that illustrate the different forms testimonio can take. In doing so, it intervenes in two overlapping discourses—the discourse on Iranian diasporic literatures and the discourse on migrant life writing in Australia. Having previously researched the writings of Iranians based in France, the United Kingdom and the United States, I am very familiar with the first conversation. When I arrived in Australia in 2013 I expected to find some of these patterns in the literature written by Iranians, though perhaps not all, and indeed there are similarities. However, there are also some important and major differences, which I elaborate on here. Perhaps the most striking difference is the appearance of the genre of refugee life writing, which is not present in other Iranian literatures in the world. Despite the increasing number of texts, there is almost no research on this very specific subgenre of Iranian life writing.

Australian academic research on testimonies by the latest waves of refugees commenced half-a-decade ago. The most notable piece amongst this emergent field of scholarship, Gillian Whitlock's groundbreaking chapter "Testimony incarnate: read my lips" in her book *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, deals with the genre of testimonies by refugees, including the physical testimony of persons sewing their lips (Whitlock). She examines life writings from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran in the Australian context and argues, "refugee narratives are carefully controlled and contained, like the bodies of refugees and asylum-seekers themselves" (Whitlock 18). Whitlock shows that the voice of the refugee is often constrained by the voice of the activist or journalist who writes the narrative. Whilst this is generally true, I argue that in several cases identified by my research, the agency of the refugee becomes important, although this containment of the refugee's voice needs to be kept in mind. Alongside this discussion with Whitlock, my main point will be to draft the history of the genre in Iranian global literature. I will show that

Iranians started to produce testimonios because the Australian context was conducive to it, and I will demonstrate that focusing on specific national issues within the body of Australian testimonios leads to new insights.

Testimonios, as defined by Thomas Couser, are histories that were not told before and that give voice to a group of subalterns: "A key feature of testimonio is that, in contrast to modern Western memoir, which puts a premium on unique individual identity, testimonio has a collective, communal dimension. ... It is understood to issue from an individual, who testifies to its truthfulness, but also to speak for a larger community to which its author belongs" (Couser 86). *Testimonio*, as texts of subaltern people narrating their stories, is a genre that first came to widespread attention in South America, with the famous text *I, Rigoberta: An Indian Woman of Guatemala* (Menchú and Burgos-Debray). Menchú's narration documented the oppression of indigenous people in Guatemala and gave international publicity to her cause. She was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for human rights activism in 1992. The testimonio is characterised by its political intention and its sense of urgency. However, it differs from ethnographic narrations in that it is not the mere re-enactment of the subaltern native informant's story, and it is not reducible either to life history or to oral history (Beverley 39). Written by two people, it is a dialogical process. As we are dealing with traumatic testimonios, this process has a bearing on what is called *traumatic*, which is not necessarily *what happened*, but how one represents one's experience for an audience.

The specificity of this dialogical process of the genre is why this article will diverge from theories of trauma by scholars like Cathy Caruth, whose model emphasises trauma as an individual experience than can resist narrativisation: "What returns to haunt the victim ... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (Caruth 6). In this article, I will argue that testimonios by Iranians narrate a traumatic collective experience. The individual experience is made collective due to the communication through another voice, the voice of an Australian writer, editor or translator, in another language, English, and for an Australian audience. The Iranian example will show that testimonios by refugees testify to the traumatic history of asylum-seekers in Australia. They are a personal account, but stand for the experience of refugees as a whole, especially on their time in detention centres as a time of trauma. They narrate a story of injustice by the Australian government, and in addition by the country of origin's government, and finally they produce a call for action to the reader. As such, refugees' testimonios fit with the definition used by the main theoreticians of the genre: "While not all *testimonios* have been collaborative, the tripartite combination of a first-person narrative of injustice, an insistence that the subject's experience is representative of a larger class, and an intent to work toward a more just future soon came to define the genre" (Nance 2). The discourse on refugees is prominent in Australian society and, although refugee life writing is not a genre

practiced by other Iranians around the world, it has proved a useful way to express the situation of Iranians in Australia.

This article will first explore refugee narratives in Australia, which have in the last two decades created a new space in contemporary Australian life writing, where the identity and life story of the writer is used for political purposes and brings visibility to their cases. Testimony becomes a way for refugees to claim political rights, and their story becomes their strongest argument. The paper will then place Iranian refugee narratives in Australia in the context of other Iranian life narratives. Iranians in diaspora are important producers of autobiographical narratives and there is a need to think about the autobiographical genre produced by Iranians at large. It will finally focus on two examples of testimonios by Iranians to illustrate its argument: Rosie Scott and Thomas Keneally's *Another Country* and Emma Stevens's *Moza's Story: An Ashmore Reef Account*.

1. Refugee Narratives in Australia

While asylum seekers have been arriving in Australia from Iran since the late 1990s, there has been an enormous increase in the wake of the 2009 contested presidential elections in Iran and the subsequent turmoil. Over the past five or so years, Iranians have formed the majority of asylum-seekers in Australia.² It is important to remember that in the recent context, there are two targets of Australian moral panic: arrivals by boat and "economic migrants". Most Iranians arrive by boat in Australia, and they are the most targeted nationality when it comes to the flag of "economic migrant,"³ a label that denies that the situation they are fleeing is serious enough to give them refugee status.

This statistic provides a context for my focus on Iranian nationals. It is important to use the example of a particular national group in thinking about refugee writings and testimonies in Australia, as national identities are particularly important for refugees. First, national identity is often contested during the process of being recognised as a refugee (Witteborn 436). External agencies, most of which are based in Sweden, will, for example, run language tests on asylum seekers' taped interviews, to verify his or her background and nationality by testing the accent (Erard). In addition, refugees often reinforce national belonging and pride when other forms of pride are more difficult to enact in a context of detention. Finally, it is almost always along national and/or linguistic lines that asylum-seekers organise themselves on the boat coming to Australia or in the detention centers, rather than along religious lines. Iranian refugee narratives often depict a lack of solidarity between Shia Iranians and Afghans despite their shared religion; conversely, Shia, religious-minority and non-religious Iranians are represented as a unified group despite their religious differences. This prevalence of national belonging is reinforced

by the fact that Iranians tend to use Iranian smugglers, either from the start of the journey in Iran or on the way to Australia, and thus end up on the same boats as their compatriots.⁴ Refugee issues are thus framed along national lines.

In Australia, asylum-seekers are distinguished according to their method of arrival. From 1992, unauthorised migrants arriving by boat were put in detention until they were granted a visa or were deported. Since 1994, there has been no limit to the time they can be incarcerated. The average detention time has varied considerably over the period, from several months to more than a year, and some have been in detention for as long as seven years. Between 1999 and 2008, Temporary Protection Visas were granted to unauthorised asylum-seekers (who had not applied for refugee status in their country of origin or through agencies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, also known as the UN Refugee Agency) found to be refugees, for three years only, with no family reunion rights. Between 2001 and 2007, the Pacific Solution was introduced, which excised some of Australia's offshore territories such as Christmas Island, and introduced offshore processing, including third country processing in the Pacific Island nations, as well as the interception of boats (Crock, Saul and Dastyari).⁵ In 2013, new policies were introduced, but I will not go into their details, because their consequences have not yet appeared in literary texts. I will concentrate on the two decades between 1992 and 2013, which were marked by mandatory detention. Australian consciousness on the subject of refugees and asylum-seekers has risen in recent years, and this has led writers, journalists, and human rights lawyers to become interested in testimonios, and to use them as a political tool to promote asylum-seekers' rights. In the last two decades, dozens of anthologies have been published, containing narratives by refugees on their arrival in Australia after a long journey by boat, and detailing their time in detention centres. The number of accounts by refugees to an Australian writer, which I classify as testimonio, has also exploded and these accounts have become increasingly visible.

Before 2000, testimonios in the Australian literary field derived primarily from Afghanistan and Iraq. Several books were discussed in the public sphere with respect to the stories of Afghan refugees: *Mahboba's Promise: How One Woman Made a World of Difference* (Rawi and Mickan-Gramazio); *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif* (Mazari and Hillman); or *Freeing Ali: The Human Face of the Pacific Solution* (Gordon). In 2006, Debra Dudek also counted more than a dozen books for children and young adults on Australian detention centres, mostly by Afghans (Dudek). Of interest in this context, then, are how and where testimonios are published, how the writers get access to publishers, and what the chances are of their stories being heard. I will attempt to answer these questions through the Iranian example, the latest addition to the genre.

When studying refugee narratives, the academic discussion of their impact and agency always diverts back to the tension between the testimonio as representative of collective issues and the problem of having a person, often unnamed and helped by an Australian writer, representing a whole community. This tension is also particularly relevant to the issue of trauma, which is often analysed as a singular event, although some Holocaust survivors have, for example, situated their own trauma within a larger historical context (Popkin). Michael Jacklin has argued that refugee narratives can negotiate their ways around the problem of the voice and its recuperation and shown that they have played important roles in the public sphere (Jacklin). He insisted that the refugee's empowerment was stronger than the confiscation of his or her voice by the Australian writer. A quantitative study by Jan Zwar complements Jacklin's argument. Zwar studied books on and by asylum-seekers between 2003 and 2008 and the effect they had on political discourse, by counting the number of times they were referenced in major newspapers and quoted in parliamentary debates. The main trends she noted were in the publication of numerous policy-oriented books, as well as life narratives by Muslim women (Zwar 7).⁶ Zwar notes that policy-oriented books, as well as testimonios by refugees, are important in public-sphere discussions over this period: they were discussed in parliament, and therefore they did have a bearing on the political discussions of the time. Some of them, like *Dark Victory*, written by Australian journalists David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, were best-sellers, selling more than 25,000 copies and being quoted twenty times in parliament between 2003 and 2006 (Zwar 21; 55).⁷ How do Iranian testimonios fit into this contemporary Australian genre? To situate them, it is necessary to reflect first on the larger Iranian autobiographical genre, which has exploded in the last thirty years, particularly in the diaspora.

2. Iranian Autobiographical Narratives in the Diaspora

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranians who constituted the first waves of migration to Europe and North America tended to come from upper class and elite backgrounds. As McAuliffe notes, "this first cohort to enter the diaspora has often sought to distinguish itself from later flows through an appeal, both explicit and implicit, to the pre-Revolutionary class differences that existed in Iran" (McAuliffe 67). This appeal has often taken the form of autobiographical narratives, especially memoirs of their years in Iran and/or their adaptation to the new country, such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. Nafisi is a good example: she is a professor at John Hopkins University; she comes from an elite family, and recounts her life story in this memoir (Nafisi).

In Australia, such memoirs narrating life in Iran also exist. However, they tend to come from writers who do not share Nafisi's privileged position. I will mention two of them, to help consider their difference from

testimonios. Indeed, although they resemble Iranian memoirs published in the other sites of the diaspora especially by insisting on a singular life story instead of a collective one, the Australian context influences them and they differ in significant ways. Zahra Ghahramani's memoir, *My Life as a Traitor* (Ghahramani and Hillman), a memoir describing a traumatic arrest and period in prison, is the closest Australian example to Iranian-American memoirs like *Reading Lolita In Tehran*. In 2001, Ghahramani, a young woman belonging to a middle-class family, was kidnapped in the streets of Tehran, imprisoned for one month and tortured in Evin, Tehran's political prison, because of her participation in student protests. She was then barred from attending university and placed under surveillance. In Iran, some months after her imprisonment, she met Australian journalist Robert Hillman, to whom she narrated her story. He offered to help her to get a visa for Australia and she migrated. The book is a memoir of her time in prison, intertwined with her childhood in a loving middle-class family, and of the events that led to her arrest.

Iranian autobiographies produced in North America and Europe are often written by Iranian minorities, especially Baha'i and Jewish minorities, who faced difficulties in Iran after 1979, and this is also the case in Australia. An example of this is Kooshyar Karimi's *I Confess: Revelations in Exile* (2012), which narrates his childhood in a poor marginal Jewish family (Karimi). His Jewish mother married an Iranian Muslim and pretended to convert to Islam while still teaching the Jewish faith to her children. Karimi fled Iran with his family, after having been tortured and forced to co-operate with Iranian intelligence to spy on Iranian Jews. *I Confess* is relatively rare among the canon of Iranian memoir in that it directly addresses issues of poverty. Iranian-American memoirs by Jewish writers, by contrast, insist either on their high status, despite their social marginality, or on their intellectual standing.

These two examples show that, even when they use the insistence of the narrator's singularity and the conventional memoir genre established by Iranians in the European and American diasporas, Iranians in Australia give it a different twist. There are two possible explanations for these variations. Firstly, class difference can be accounted for: the wave of migration to Australia is more recent than waves to Europe and North America, as it started in earnest after 2000, and increased dramatically after 2009. It is primarily composed of middle-class and working-class Iranians, the later arriving as refugees. It does not mean that Iranian refugees around the world necessarily belong to lower classes whereas Iranian migrants would be from middle or upper classes. The difference is in the history of migration. At the beginning of the mass migration of Iranians in 1979, many middle-class and upper-class people moved as asylum-seekers due to the political situation and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. Today, in contrast to the early waves of migration, middle- and upper-class Iranians tend to move as migrants when they can, while lower-class Iranians often have to move as asylum-seekers. This class difference partly explains the variation in the use of autobiographical narratives and

the dominant use of the testimonio over the memoir, as the narrators behind the testimonios are less educated and thus less inclined to write their memoirs as middle- and upper-class Iranians. Asylum-seekers tend to rely on Australian writers to help tell their stories. However I would argue that the main explanation is that, because testimonios and various forms of testimonies by refugees are dominant in the Australian literary context, which is not the case in North America and Europe, Iranians have preferred this genre to tell their stories, over more classical forms of memoirs.⁸

For many in the Iranian community there is a taboo associated with being a refugee. Therefore, even in Australia where Iranian asylum-seekers are numerous, and where the milieu is conducive to their narrations because it is a constant topic of debate, Iranians in Australia are going against the global Iranian tendency to reject this reality. Mammad Aidani has interviewed Iranian migrants in Australia, and most say they find the term 'refugee' derogatory and call themselves migrants, travelers, or *koly* (gypsy) in Persian. Aidani would probably have found the same result had he also interviewed Iranian migrants in North America and Europe. Aidani adds: "I would argue that the reason the identity of a *panahandeh* (refugee) elicits such strong responses of disassociation is that it asserts a set of profound social and political dispositions which are viewed as narrowing the scope of identity" (Aidani 132). In the Iranian context, this political disposition specifically refers to the members and supporters of the Shah's regime, who often migrated to the USA, and to supporters of the People's Mujahideen, who migrated to Europe. Iranians in Australia do not want to situate themselves along such clear political lines and thus often reject the term of 'refugee', which is associated with these two political tendencies. In addition, *panahandeh* also refers for Iranians to the numerous Afghan refugees who came to Iran after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. While they were first welcomed as *mohajerin*, involuntary religious migrants, policies changed in 1993. Afghans "were no longer categorized as *mohajerin*, but simply as *panahandegan* (refugees), a term which 'was considered to have a pejorative nuance, even connoting impoverishment (Abbasi-Shavazi 13)'" (Langford 164). Accordingly, the term "refugee" is heavily tainted by this history of migration to Iran, where Afghans possess an inferior status in society.

Despite such reluctance, testimonies by Iranian refugees have been published in Australia in the last decade, along with journalistic narratives recounting stories of Iranian asylum-seekers. One example is *The Bitter Shore* (Everitt), the story of an Iranian family belonging to the persecuted Ahl-e Haqq religion, narrated by the journalist and human rights lawyer Jacquie Everitt. As a result of the family's long incarceration in Australian detention centres, their son, Shayan, experienced deep trauma. The narrator tells of their family story, the conditions of their detention, the trauma suffered by the son and the winning of their case when they were given a permanent visa and compensation of \$400,000 for the damages

caused to Shayan—the first time such compensation was awarded in Australia. The narration is intertwined with the political agenda of the Australian narrator, who uses their case in her work for refugee rights. This book has been discussed in major Australian newspapers and was mentioned in parliamentary debates in 2010 (Zwar 63).

Building on such journalistic narratives, testimonios by Iranian refugees have made their way onto the Australian literary scene. I would like to focus on two examples: *Moza's Story. An Ashmore Reef Account*, which describes an Iranian refugee's imprisonment in Iran and his traumatic journey to Australia, written with the help of an Australian writer (Stevens); and the anthology edited by the novelists and human rights advocates Thomas Keneally and Rosie Scott, *Another Country: Writers in Detention* (Scott and Keneally). This anthology, supported by Sydney PEN, is a collection of letters, diaries, drama, drawings, essays, manifestos and stories, some by seasoned writers in their country of origin. Both examples show that testimonio by asylum-seekers is a collective genre that testifies to their history in Australia. They are personal accounts, but they stand for the experience of refugees as a whole. They testify to the trauma of the Iranian community, both as a national constituency fleeing violence and as a group of asylum-seekers experiencing detention in Australia.

3. The Writers' Testimonio, an Oddity? *Another Country: Writers in Detention*

The PEN anthology was first published as a special edition of the journal *Southerly*, then republished a year later before going through a third augmented edition in 2007, including correspondence with Amanda Vanstone, then Minister for Immigration. *Another Country* includes writing in many literary genres by thirty detainees and former asylum-seekers of different nationalities. Out of this collection, almost half of the narratives are from Iranian writers; the other writers are from Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and the Ivory Coast, plus the editors from Australia and New Zealand. Both editors are prominent writers on the Australian literary scene, especially Thomas Keneally, who is best known for writing *Schindler's Ark* (released in the US as *Schindler's List*), the Booker-Prize winning novel of 1982.

The collection gives an immediate feeling of a collective by including manifestos or letters to the Prime Minister, written collectively. It also contains anonymous pieces. Even in the cases where writers were professional writers in their country of origin, the individual story never dominates. This collection is particularly successful at showing the collective story behind compelling individual ones. In addition to this immediate sense of collectivity, this collection stands out for its insistence on literariness. In contrast to many books featuring stories by refugees, it

shows not only their human face, but also their literary abilities and the importance refugee writings can take in the Australian context of multiculturalism. Indeed, they aim to bring something new and original to Australian writing. There is, for example, the renowned Iraqi poet Yahia al-Samawy, who has published fifteen collections of poetry in Iraq and in Australia. There is also Shahin Shafaei, an Iranian playwright whose plays were banned in Iran. His writing for the collection is entitled *Refugitive*. *Refugitive*, a one-man play, is a conversation between a man on hunger strike and his hungry stomach. They converse on his escape from Iran by boat, his detention and the reasons for his hunger strike. It is humorous and satirical, especially when the man embodies other characters, like the Department of Immigration official and other detainees, for example in this scene:

DIMIA Manager: You people are not welcome in Australia, I am saying this on behalf of all Australian people.

The Man: But we are refugees!

DIMIA Manager: From now on don't forget that you are queue jumpers, illegal immigrants... would you please pass me my Australian Oxford dictionary edited by Howard University, oh thanks... there we are, you are boat people...

The Man: But according to the convention we have the right to seek asylum in Australia, and Australia has already signed the convention?!

DIMIA Manager: Unfortunately we don't have that dictionary, that convention one here. (Scott and Keneally 16)

The play responds to the debate surrounding the hunger strike that took place in 2000 at the Curtin detention center. It inscribes itself into a larger trend of political theatre. Rand Hazou contends:

Challenging the government's policies of exclusion, Australian theatre emerged as an important socio-political practice geared towards the inclusion of those who have been excluded by the state. In contrast to the government's policies of media censorship and information control, Australian theatre responding to the plight of asylum seekers has attempted in various ways to return the theatre to its etymological and radical associations as 'a place of seeing' where audiences can contend with the experiences and stories of those hidden and silenced by the state. (Hazou)

Refugitive premiered in Sydney in January 2003, was presented at the Sydney Writers festival and then toured throughout the country, including a total of 300 performances, with the assistance of activists from various refugee organisations (Wake 2010, 22).

How did these stories come into being? Translation into English is important when it comes to the issues of voice, resistance and agency. Emma Cox says on this point: "As a single-language collection, *Another Country* consists of a series of minority deterritorialisations of the internationally dominant language of its publication. Of the work

submitted by non-English speakers, Scott explains that in some cases Australian advocates organised translations, while in others, an asylum seeker with a better understanding of English would translate for their fellow detainee (Scott, personal correspondence, 6 Feb. 2008). Several contributions to *Another Country* are not translated, but written in English as second language. Of these, the most prominent mode of writing is the group letter by detainees in the form of a request or plea to Australians” (Cox 2010, 289). As many writers in the collection are intellectuals and writers who have been forced to flee because of free speech, the re-enactment of this power through a new language is liberating, as they find their voice through the English word. In *Refugitive*, The Man says: “In my home, whenever I would feel alone I would start writing. I wish I had a pen here, that dangerous tool, for the people who escape from reality, in my homeland or even here” (Scott and Keneally 20). The collection answers this call to resistance from the protagonist, as the introduction by Rosie Scott states: “These are journalists, playwrights, fiction writers, poets and cartoonists whose escape from tyranny in their own countries has made them strong enough to speak out eloquently against injustice here as well” (Scott and Keneally 5).

Their narration is nonetheless mediated by editors and translators, and sometimes writers, as the refugee becomes the narrator of his or her story. Jacklin reflects on this mediation to qualify his argument that refugee narratives have moved into the mainstream, that they “can negotiate their way into the public sphere. In doing so, however, dissent almost necessarily gives way to conciliation and integration as former refugee subjects attempt to realign their lives in terms that will provide the best outcomes for themselves and their families” (Jacklin 382). Emma Cox also insists on this mediation when she says that “these contributions are underpinned by immediate, practical imperatives; they confront the Australian reader and confirm the need for listeners to bear witness to the voices of detainees. They crystallise the collection’s necessary dialogism: written *because* of Australian policy (a political context of production), *to* Australian people (the body politic for which policy stands)” (Cox 2010, 289). It is important to remember that several things frame the refugees’ resistance: the use of the English language; mediation through an Australian voice; and the address to an Australian audience.

The collection, quite possibly because of this translation for a specific readership, was extremely well circulated and distributed. It featured at a panel session at the 2004 Sydney Writers’ Festival and at the Melbourne Writers’ Festival. It attracted coverage in all three major Australian newspapers (*The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*), as well as in smaller regional media (Cox 2009, 113). It is interesting that such “a circulation and reception typically surrounds established, profit-generating authors, and in this respect, *Another Country* deterritorialises the milieu of its high-profile Australian supporters” (Cox 2009, 113). This circulation was helped by the fact that the book was conceived from the start as a direct response to the treatment of asylum-seekers, in which

Australian activists and artists started to become interested at the end of the 1990s: “Among intellectual and artistic elites, condemnation of the government’s policies and practices in relation to refugees has been almost unanimous, activism on behalf of asylum-seekers is wide-spread, and the output of literary, artistic, journalistic and academic works which engage with these issues, generally from a highly critical perspective, has grown to massive proportions” (Ommundsen 23-24). Such massive proportions can be assessed by the book’s effect on the political scene. *Another Country* was mentioned in parliament in 2005 by Anna Burke (ALP) (Zwar 65) and it has had an impact on the asylum process of some of the writers, who have been granted permanent visas since the first edition. The epilogue of the third edition insists on this aspect, mentioning all the writers who have been freed since, and one who was still in detention. It also created a precedent to attract politicians’ interest in certain cases.

Another Country, with its collection of writings by both experienced writers and ‘ordinary’ refugees, is an exception to the conventions of *testimonio* in that there is an Australian writer who mediates the narration, not only a translator and an editor. A more conventional model of *testimonio* is the case of *Moza’s Story: An Ashmore Reef Account*, narrated by Emma Stevens, which recalls the traumatic story of an Iranian asylum-seeker and which is representative of many testimonios by refugees in Australia. I would now like to focus on this more traditional form of the genre.

4. A Testimonio par Excellence: *Moza’s Story: An Ashmore Reef Account. Based on a True Story*

Moza’s Story is doubly a *testimonio*, in that it testifies to the process of seeking asylum as well as to the trauma of violence suffered in the native country, Iran. The editorial preface to *Moza’s Story* mentions that the author is anonymous “due to the controversial nature of the work” (Stevens 1), and the political intention of the book is made clear: “I hope that this text will allow you greater insight and knowledge into Islamic countries, the life of refugees and people smugglers, but also Australia and our detention centres. It is good for us to know what we do not know” (Stevens 1). As such, it is a *testimonio* both on Iran’s injustices and on Australia’s. It is interesting that the “editor” acknowledges herself as editor only, and that the author is acknowledged as being Moza, although, due to the anonymous status of the author, the editor’s name has to go on the cover.⁹ In many testimonios the two share authorship, and the person who testifies is sometimes not acknowledged as the author. This characteristic can be explained by the debates that have surrounded testimonios in the last three decades, as well as by the protest against the use of their stories by the persons testifying. The editor in *Moza’s Story*,

on the contrary, makes sure that she does not privilege herself and gives all the credit for the story to Moza. She has edited the grammatical mistakes of the author, yet some expressions look as if they have been directly loan-translated from the Persian. This gives a sense of authenticity to the voice of Moza, who is apparently unable to express himself perfectly in English after just a short time in Australia, but at the same time does not greatly interfere with the book's readability. This is conceivably where the difference lies with South American testimonios. Australian testimonios reflect a tangible dialogic process in which the asylum-seeker is given a sense of empowerment.¹⁰

Moza spent a year in prison in Iran for protesting against the closure of a reformist journal, and when released, he was blacklisted and pursued by the police with a price put on his head. He escaped through Pakistan, encountered many problems with people-smugglers in Indonesia, and finally embarked for Australia on a leaky boat. The boat drifted in the ocean for ten days before being wrecked on an Australian reef, while Moza had to survive without drinking water. The voyage by boat is often the common traumatic experience of asylum-seekers before detention, with the fear of drowning, and the witnessing of people dying at sea, culminating in arrest by Australian forces. This is also the case in *Moza's Story*. Moza then spent several months in a detention camp in the desert and went through numerous interviews, before being granted a permanent visa. Here is what he says about his time in Curtin detention centre:

During the day it was extremely hot, hotter than I had ever experienced before. When I left my dorm in the morning, the heat instantly attacked and clung onto me like a vicious and rabid dog. ...

This place was strange, indeed. Never before had I believed that such heat could exist in the world, even in the hot places of Iran. At night times, it became schizophrenic and cold. We needed blankets, but by the morning, we would need an ice bucket. I did not understand this land, or this weather. It was a confusing person to me. (Stevens 77)

In both cases—*Another Country* and *Moza's Story*—it is important to remember that such testimonios should be looked at in parallel with the legal testimonial process that refugees have to perform when they are seeking asylum in Australia.

5. Testimonio Versus Testimony: More Agency?

The first chapter of *Moza's Story* opens with these lines: "I am a legal refugee living in Australia on a temporary visa. In three months I will face the immigration courts again, to prove why I still have to live here and cannot return to my country. I will tell them a story similar to the one I am about to tell you. Please listen, for I say to you, I cannot go home" (Stevens 5). The author here reinforces the proximity between the legal

testimony asked of refugees and his literary testimonio. This background should not be forgotten when reading the stories and treating them as testimonios. It is from this perspective that Caroline Wake analyses the interview that happens before the determination process, and which decides if the asylum-seeker is to be returned to his/her country of origin immediately. This determines the veracity of their narratives in the eyes of the state. She convincingly argues that Australia is creating “a testimonial culture in which asylum-seekers are asked to testify repeatedly and on cue” (Wake 2013, 338). The legal testimony helps to create an economy of speech as asylum-seekers are asked to perform the role of an asylum-seeker and to testify about their trauma.

Whilst the refugee determination process imposes a subaltern status on asylum-seekers by defining when they may speak and what to speak (some words have to be pronounced for the claim to be processed, like “I seek asylum”), testimonios liberate the writer from the legal testimony, although they are inspired by it. *Moza's Story* might be seen at first as the expression of a subaltern, both in dominant Australian society and in his native Iranian society. In Iran, Moza was relegated to a subaltern status by his stay in prison, and in Australia by his detention. However, although the conditions of its enunciation and circulation should not be forgotten, his testimonio is primarily empowering. His voice is one which “both challenges dominant representation and provides an alternative world-view” (Harindranath 138). His testimonio bears witness to his traumatic journey and to his resilience, with the purpose of challenging the negative representation of asylum-seekers in Australian debates, and of offering a humane view of the process of seeking asylum. The representation at stake in his testimonio cannot be denied agency on the sole basis that it is mediated by an Australian writer. Moza's experience is what gives his voice agency. As Ramaswami Harindranath argues, “Counter-hegemonic resistance therefore, requires the impetus arising from authentic subaltern experience, which provides the ethical foundations for such struggles” (Harindranath 140). This primacy of the experience is also essential when thinking about the question of truth. Readers confronted with testimonios will ask themselves how truthful they are and will try to authenticate their meaning through negotiation of applicable codes perceived as present or absent in the text. Reflecting on the accusations of lying proffered against Rigoberta Menchú, Bill Ashcroft argues that “in the oral discourse of a communal memory such ‘lying’ could represent a higher truth because it is not an account of oppression, it is an account of the *experience of oppression*” (Ashcroft 115-6). He adds: “The problem of the truth of *testimonio* is a problem of memory and of narrative and these are already lies” (Ashcroft 117). As the testimonio relies on present memory, and on the other hand has gone through legal testimony and its reliance on truthfulness and veracity in the most minute details, it has to be assessed not against truth but against experience, against the experience of the traumatic migration of a whole group of people and their detention in Australian centres. It is not about a “strict autobiographical veracity”, but

about “gathering the identities and experiences of a trauma community” (Cox 2008, 196). While formal and legally sanctioned testifying is oriented to bringing about closure, testimonio discloses personal experience to a public. As long as it circulates and is open to interpretation, it brings agency to its narrator.

Australia is the only place in the world where a significant number of Iranians write numerous testimonios as refugees, as opposed to memoirs of individual life stories. Their testimonios express the collective plight and trauma of a group which, while fleeing violence and persecution in Iran, also faces hardships on their way to and upon arrival in Australia. They have been successful in mediating this experience via the traditional form of the testimonio, recounting the collective experience of those seeking asylum in Australia, as well as in the more original form of writers’ testimonios. Their testimonios are constituted as both testimony of trauma and mode of resistance: they ask for political and ethical action, and express a degree of agency—despite the mediation by Australian editors, translators or writers—which is the reason for Iranians taking up such an unlikely genre, entirely new to Iranian literature. Because they go against the trend of global Iranian literature, Iranian testimonios appeared later than those by other Middle-Eastern refugees, but they are now catching up and participate actively in the booming genre of refugee testimonio in the Australian literary field.

Notes

1. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, to which Australia is a signatory, defines a refugee as: “Any person who owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.” An asylum seeker is a person who is seeking protection as a refugee and is waiting to have his/her claim assessed.

2. “As at 30 April 2014, there were 4258 people held in immigration detention facilities. Of these 4258 people, around 27% were from Iran, 16% were from Vietnam, 12% were from Sri Lanka, 11% were Stateless and 5% were from Afghanistan.” Australian Government. 30 April 2014, 7. Immigration Detention Statistics Summary edited by Department of Immigration and Citizenship. http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/_pdf/immigration-detention-statistics-apr2014.pdf, accessed 20/06/14

3. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/bob-carr-fights-back-on-asylum-policy/story-e6frgd0x-1226675071454#>, accessed 20/06/14

4. This issue of the reinforcing of national lines in detention centres and during the voyage has not been explored in academic articles. My argument is based on the literary texts explored, as well as on informal discussions with volunteers who worked with Iranians in Australian detention centres.

5. To learn the details about the complexities of the system of refugee law and policy in Australia, see Crock, Mary, Ben Saul, and Azadeh Dastyari. *Future Seekers II: Refugees and Irregular Migration in Australia*. Annandale, N.S.W.: Federation P, 2006.

6. Gillian Whitlock has studied the phenomenon of autobiographies by Muslim women whose purpose is to “lift the veil” and autobiographies by Muslim refugee women sometimes blend in this category (Whitlock 2007).

7. As the trail on “Asylum Seeker Narratives” on the website that records Australian literatures *AusLit* suggests, there is a lot of material, both primary and secondary sources, in all media, on refugees (Keates). There are also research projects on the subject at major Australian universities, especially at the University of Queensland and at the University of New South Wales.

8. I have found one example only of a book featuring Iranian refugee writers outside of Australia. This is an anthology of short writings by refugees from various countries in Britain, which includes two texts by Iranian refugees. None of them describes the experience of seeking asylum; one is about the difficulties of adaptation in the new country and the other is a love poem to Britain and its democracy (Arbabzadah).

9. I use “editor” rather than terms such as “ghost-writer” or “amenuensis” as neither of the latter reflect Emma Stevens' important editing role, rewriting parts of the story as well as sentences to improve the narrating for an English-speaking audience. “Editor” is also the term used for classical testimonios like those by Rigoberta Menchú for the transcriber of the story.

10. There is much that could be said about the trajectory of the genre from indigenous South Americans to asylum-seekers in Australia, and to other contexts for that matter. For an excellent study of testimonial discourses by refugees in the Caribbean, Central America, and the United States, see *Asylum Speakers: Caribbean Refugees and Testimonial Discourse* (Shemak).

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