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Freedom to lead: narrative and advocacy among Burmese women refugees on the Thai/Burma border

Abstract:

The role narrative plays in leading people out of subjection into a life where they can exercise their human rights freely is often unseen. In November 2010, I travelled for the fourth time to the Thai/Burma Border to lead creative writing workshops with Burmese women refugees. Narrative and advocacy are closely aligned to the kind of capacity building on human rights that addresses the human resources and strategic needs of Burmese organizations and supports them to establish a free and democratic Burma. The workshops I run are designed to assist refugee women to write about their experiences under the military junta. The stories are then published in anthologies that are distributed internationally, making the power of story central to the role that advocacy plays in preparing new leaders for a democratic future in Burma. Facilitating the writing of these refugee women is advocacy in action, a process where the gap between writing about a situation and the experience of activism itself is diminished. In writing about their experiences these women express a distinct identity, one that has the potential to play a huge part in the future restoration of a genuine democracy in their country.

Biographical note:

Dr Janie Conway-Herron is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Southern Cross University. She regularly conducts writing workshops with Burmese refugees on the Thai/Burma border and her own work reflects this passion for human rights and exploring landscapes of identity in an historical and contemporary context. Her novel *Beneath The Grace of Clouds* was published in July 2010.

Keywords:

Narrative – Advocacy – Leadership

Prologue: On leadership

Leadership, narrative and advocacy work together in both overt and covert ways. The connection between narrative and advocacy makes the work of taking a leadership role in facilitating personal narratives around human rights important both at a political and personal level. It also illuminates an ethics of recognition as an essential consideration in human rights discourses and points to the importance of giving voice to the silences of oppression as a strategy in achieving genuine democracy. The workshops I have been conducting with Burmese women refugees on the Thai/Burma border is advocacy in action where the gap between writing about a situation and the experience of activism itself is diminished. In writing about their experiences these women express a distinct identity, one that will play a leadership role in the future restoration of genuine democracy in Burma, while the anthologies that have come out of the workshops have played an intrinsic part in disseminating their stories internationally.

In writing about my experiences of running the workshops with refugees my own story also becomes part of this advocacy for democracy and human rights, both in terms of writing about the experiences of the Burmese women I have taught, but also in showing that as teachers of the creative arts we can contribute to positive cultural and political changes that extend beyond the confines of our own classrooms and into the wider world.

Introduction

Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (2004: 15) write of the way that the last decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a focus on human rights fuelled by: 'Post World War II struggles for national determination and equality for women, Indigenous peoples, and minorities within nation states (that have) led to the rise of local and transnational movements'. They discuss how storytelling has been at the forefront of these movements helping to clarify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and assisting to reinterpret rights frameworks and consolidate international laws dealing with discrimination of marginalized peoples. In this context, storytelling is linked to a human rights agenda that pivots on freedom of speech as the right of all individuals. What Schaffer and Smith refer to as 'narrative acts' contribute to a 'critical self locating through which they assert their cultural difference and right to self-determination' (2004: 17). The role of narrative in enabling people to exercise their human rights freely is often unseen. Storytelling can constitute a way that individuals who have been subject to human rights abuses can take control of their lives through gaining authority over their stories in an environment where the very act of having your voice heard can be life-changing.

Over the past seven years my work with Burmese women refugees has been all about what Rosie Scott, editor of the PEN anthology, *Another Country*, describes as making 'these writers' voices heard for their self-respect and affirmation,' (ctd. Mares & Newman 2007: 177). This affirmation and self-respect is an essential part of a collective sense of community and identity where telling one's own story is a pivotal force in creating leadership and capacity building on human rights and concomitantly

addresses the strategic needs of organisations involved in the struggle for genuine democracy. For Altsean Burma (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma), the NGO that I work with on the Thai/Burma border, capacity building, advocacy and leadership skills are central to the work they do. Formed in 1996 after a gathering at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Altsean's mission statement focuses on being 'a regional network engaged in advocacy, campaigns and capacity building to establish a free and democratic Burma' (Altsean Burma: online). Narrative and advocacy are closely aligned to this kind of capacity building and the workshops I run for them in facilitating storytelling and the resulting publications of women's stories are part of a much larger vision for a democratic Burma. This paper describes how narrative and advocacy work hand-in-hand to develop leadership skills among the Burmese women refugees. Here, I also write into the space between the rightful euphoria that celebrated Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom in 2010 and the extensive work that is required to free the people of Burma from the repression of a prolonged civil war.

Background

In November 2010, I travelled for the fourth time since 2004 to the Thai/Burma Border. It was during the so-called democratic elections in Burma[1], a time of huge paradox. The euphoria around Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom after many years of incarceration was being undercut by thousands of refugees fleeing across the border after a military crackdown carried out as the elections were taking place. There is a network of organisations outside of Burma who, along with those working within the country, are building the kind of leadership designed to ensure a democratic future.

There are eight major ethnic groups in Burma who, along with many smaller minority groups, have faced ongoing repression from a succession of governments since Burmese independence was gained from Britain in 1948. From 1962 until now, a succession of military dictatorships have ruled Burma with the so-called general elections of 2010 doing little but disguise the ongoing dictatorship of those who assumed power in 1988 following the uprisings in which over 10,000 people were killed and many others fled the country. During this same period, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded and over half a million people gathered to hear Aung San Suu Kyi speak. In 1990 the NLD won the election with a landslide victory of 82% of seats, but this victory was blocked when Burma's military refused the result and Aung San Suu Kyi was imprisoned. The Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) Report of 2010 states that:

> the dictatorship has fiercely suppressed all opposition, arresting, torturing and imprisoning democracy activists and launching large scale military offensives against ethnic people which has resulted in millions of internally displaced people and refugees. It is estimated that more than ten percent of Burma's population has been forced to flee the country (2010: 4).

The hopes and longings for peace in Burma reached a euphoric fever pitch around the release of Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2010 fuelled by the possibility of being part of a process where democracy would finally be achieved. The women I work with on the border are part of a large network of refugees who are being trained for

leadership roles through NGOs such as Altsean Burma; groups such as the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and overseas support groups such as Burma Campaign UK and Burma Campaign Australia. These organisations are actively campaigning alongside other pro-democracy movements inside and outside Burma. An essential part of their campaign is the connection between narrative and advocacy, the way in which giving voice to the experiences of exile and oppression gives strength and empowerment and brings 'attention to an issue that has failed to draw any real attention from global political economic entities' (Conway-Herron 2007a: 72).

On the wall of my office, I have a framed poster of Aung San Suu Kyi by American artist Shephard Fairey that the women of Altsean Burma gave me. Fairey is well known for his poster of Barack Obama titled 'Hope', which has been credited as assisting Obama win the 2008 elections. The poster of Aung San Suu Kyi was part of an exhibition called 'May Day' where all the people portrayed are revolutionaries (Randol 2010: online). A heading at the top of the poster of Aung San Suu Kyi reads 'Freedom to Lead' and the bottom two banners read 'Support Human Rights' and 'Democracy in Burma'. The heroic graphic design and the wording of the banner epitomise something essential about the struggle in Burma not only for Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy but also the struggle for democratic leadership itself.

Facilitating the writing of refugee women is advocacy in action where the gap between writing about a situation and the experience of activism itself is diminished. In writing about their experiences these women express a distinct identity, one that will play an important part in the future restoration of genuine democracy in their country. The writing workshops are designed to assist women to write about their experiences under the military junta. The resulting stories are published in anthologies that are distributed internationally. There have been seven anthologies to date, all of them containing stories that reveal how the authors 'personally grapple with the daily consequences of the regime's crimes against humanity, war crimes and gross economic mismanagement' (Stothard 2010: v).

> All I know is, I will keep talking about this until rape is stopped, until violence against women does not take place anymore, until the women have laws that will protect them, until the women have political freedom to take part in the political solution. I believe that when the women are given political freedom, when we have rule of law and the protection of law, when women are safe from any form of violence, our country will be peaceful and prosperous (Zahau 2007: 7).

The quote above is from a story in one of the anthologies describing rape by military forces as a common experience for women from Burma. This is well known amongst those working on Burma but the international community knows little about the dreadful situation many of the ethnic villagers find themselves in and this ignorance allows the military junta to continue to perpetrate such crimes with impunity. Many countries also turn a blind eye to what is happening, particularly when their economic interests will be affected by their acknowledgement of the brutality of the Burmese military.

> I'm still feeling homesick for the dinner table. I often ask myself why my family is in this situation. Why can't we live together, why have we been separated? How many homes have a deserted dinner table? If Burma's political situation will change and guarantee peace, liberty and justice, I will go home and work in a small business. And my father will come home and work for our family. Then we will be so happy and the dinner table will come to life for us forever (Kon Chan, 2010: 43).

This second quote, where the metaphor of the dinner table stands in for a family united in peacetime, describes how the stability of many families has been upended by living under the rule of the current military junta. While the military has been making a show to the outside world that Burma now has democracy, the actuality is a long way from this. My visit to the Thai/Burma border in November 2010 enabled me to experience first hand the enormous amount of work that is needed to fill the spaces between the hopes for peace and genuine democracy harboured by those working towards it and the way the recent sham elections have done little to change the status quo in Burma. What follows is a story about the writing of stories via a description of my time on the border. Thus my own story becomes a form of advocacy in itself, both in writing about the Burmese women I have taught, but also in showing that as teachers of the creative arts we can contribute to positive cultural and political change in a way that extends beyond the confines of our own classrooms.

Day one of the advanced workshop: sharing a moment in history

It was a relatively cool November evening when I made my way from the hotel on one of the main streets of Chiang Mai, that tourist Mecca of Thailand, down the curling lanes behind it, past backpacker lodges and late night supermarkets to a small oasis of Italian cooking. This restaurant offers one of those marvellously incongruous multilayered South-East Asian experiences where, beneath swaying palm trees and a starless night sky, saronged waitresses serve you your choice of gnocchi, cannelloni, fettuccine and salads along with whatever wine you want. I was happy, having just completed the first day of our advanced creative writing workshops and feeling proud that the students and I had come this far. It was great to have had women returning from the previous workshops eager to learn more about telling their stories. The first workshops had comprised the same material as any beginner's class in creative writing; the basics of point-of-view, developing character, senses of landscape and belonging, and using dialogue, only on the Thai/Burma border the workshops had been completed in a three-day intensive rather than over a three-month university semester. Now these students were moving on to more advanced areas. The first day of the advanced workshop focussed on revision of the skills they had learned previously and I was pleased with how much they'd learned. This shouldn't have surprised me though. Coming from a country where the education many take for granted in Australia is a struggle to receive at the best of times and restricted to a myopic party line, the women know that the training they get from NGOs is worth a lot. In a hopeful future, the skills they learn will enable them to go back and help the people on the 'inside' (as they refer to it), or even lead their people into a democratised system of government. They have been hoping for this for a long time.

Generations have come and gone over the sixty years that the fight for democratic freedom has been going on in Burma, making it one of the longest running civil wars in the world.

I had arranged to meet up with my good friend Debbie Stothard in this Italo-Asian oasis. In the past, we had both been student activists, the only two 'lefties', on a conservative student council at the University of Technology, Sydney, in a short period, post-Whitlam and pre-Dawkins reforms, when tertiary education in Australia was free. When Debbie appeared out of the shadows of the darkened lane and sat down beside me we hugged enthusiastically. This was a rare opportunity to meet. The activism that Debbie and I continue to share is concerned with what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares as, 'the right to life, liberty and security of person' (United Nations 1948: online). Now, Debbie, along with her colleagues, has built the organization into an alternative source of information on Burma that provides, in particular, a watchdog capacity to keep ASEAN on its toes. But like many other NGOs, Altsean Burma is so much more than that, providing economic training and support, advocacy and life skills training to refugees up and down the western border of Thailand where more than half a million refugees currently reside. The global network of people working towards democracy in Burma is huge and once true democracy is established, many of these people will be willing to give their lives over to rebuilding the country. In the meantime, they work on the borders both literally and metaphorically waiting for a time when they can come in from the shadows and take up a central position in a fully democratised Burma. Debbie and I ordered our pasta and started catching up on family and friends, and then our talk shifted to the workshops in Mae Sot where I had been just before I came to Chiang Mai.

There had been trouble over the border from Mae Sot between the Burmese military and ethnic border groups just after the elections had taken place. More than thirty thousand refugees had fled into Mae Sot within a couple of days. We expected no one would turn up to the workshops as most of the participants had family fleeing the fighting on the other side of the Moei River boundary between Thailand and Burma. There was a full roll up to the workshops, but the atmosphere was tense as people waited on news of relatives fleeing across the border or caught inside the post election crack down on ethnic groups who had contested the legitimacy of the elections. Mae Sot is often referred to as 'Little Burma' because of the number of Burmese already living there and the effect they have had on the culture of the town. Late in the evening after the first day of workshops there, we rode down to the border to see where the refugees were being housed. I stood up on the back of the motorbike as we drove past the oval and peered over the high white-plastered walls topped with barbed wire that separated those of us on the highway game enough to risk police checks, from the refugees camped on the other side. Flickering campfires and the shadows of those who had fled with whatever they could grab before crossing the bridge just a few metres away from us was all I could see beside the uniformed figures of the Thai police. "We'd better turn round we're almost at the border and one bomb has already exploded on the Thai side this afternoon", my companion warned and we sped back down the highway to the safety of our motel rooms and television newscasts.

As I was telling Debbie this story her phone rang and she nodded as she took in the news then answered quietly: "That's great, I'll pass the news on", then hung up and, grinning from ear to ear, announced: "She's free." It was Aung San Suu Kyi who was free and her long-anticipated and internationally fought for release had finally happened. As I gushed my recognition, the phone rang again. This time it was CNN wanting to interview Debbie. They asked many questions and she answered in an implacably calm and even voice giving facts, figures and political opinions that would add veracity to each journalist's story. For the rest of the meal I sat opposite her while she answered call after call feeling strangely displaced and ridiculously protective of my time with her. Later, back in my hotel room, I realised what an important moment in history I had just been witness to and how privileged I had been to share the moment the women I had been working with on the border had been hoping for, for so many years.

Day two of the advanced workshop: between euphoria and despair

The second day of the advanced workshops involves a full day of workshopping ten women's stories and each person's story has to be translated into English for me. As they arrived the next morning I sensed the excitement about Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom. When I asked how the women felt after hearing the news, enthusiasm rose on a wave of optimism for a future in which Aung San Suu Kyi would once again lead the National League for Democracy. Then we started workshopping. These women had all learned basic skills in the beginners' three-day workshop. At the end of the beginners' workshops each woman had shared their favourite or best paragraph with the rest of the class. They had then gone home to write the stories that they submitted for the anthologies. I had often wondered why there were so few tears at these exposés. During the Advanced Workshop I was shown why. When asked to select a paragraph in the beginners' workshops the women had chosen the safest parts of their stories to tell where neither they, as they read, or their fellow participants, as they listened, would be made vulnerable. But reading a whole story was a different matter. One woman (let's call her Mie Mie) began her story of fleeing to the border with her family as a young girl. She managed to get through the part where the military junta burned her village to the ground and they had to flee with little but the clothes they stood up in. She described travelling by foot with only rice and bamboo shoots to share amongst the many villagers, then got to the part about reaching the border and stopped, suddenly, trying several times to read the next paragraph. The words refused to come and tears streamed down her cheeks as she struggled to voice her memories. Eventually, she pulled herself together and read the moment of watching as a young mother died beside her ailing baby. She was just a child of ten years at the time. By the time she had finished everyone in the room was too upset to continue and so we took a break.

Mie Mie came over to apologise for her tears. Now thirty years old and a community leader from the Karenni National Woman's Organization (KNWO) based in Mae Hong Son in the northern mountains of Thailand, she lives in the refugee camp not far from where I had run workshops in 2009. She handed me a small publication titled

Tales of Terror and Grief: A Documentation Report (2010) that she had been involved in producing. It documents cases of violations against Karenni women by the military and is a result of conducting interviews in Mae Hong Son. Like many of the women in the workshop, Mie Mie often crosses the border gathering statistics and stories of human rights abuses. Able to tell other people's stories, she has difficulty in telling her own. My brief from Altsean Burma is to help these women tell their stories in a more effective way by moving them out of the reportage mode they are used to using into a more personalised and descriptive mode of telling. The report she gave me describes how: 'Forced relocation, displacement, eviction and land confiscation top the list of underlying reasons why people (have) fled to the border' (KNOW 2010: 21) while sexual abuse, rape, torture, forced arrest, human portering, poverty and starvation are by-products of the first reasons but no less impactful. These facts were part of Mie Mie's daily life, something she was able to write into a report, but when she tried to describe the ways she has been affected by them, these facts had become too painful to tell.

We continued workshopping, stopping when it became too difficult and then resuming until, at the end of the day, each woman had read her story and taken on comments about how to improve their writing from myself and the other participants. When breaking up stories like these into component parts, the contingent sense of abstraction can feel so inappropriate and yet it is part of what these women come to the workshops for. Nonetheless, it was a difficult task to maintain a sense of equilibrium and give the kind of objective comments about choice of point-of-view, sense of character and showing-not-telling in the face of such emotional and violent content. But, by the end, everyone seemed happy to have learned how to improve their stories and share them with others in the group.

That night, I watched Aung San Suu Kyi addressing the crowds that flocked to see her at the gate of her villa in the city of Rangoon where she had been under arrest for fifteen of the last 21 years. 'If we work in unity, we will achieve our goal. We have a lot of things to do' she told the people that crowded around her (CTV 2010: online). With a conservative estimate of more than 2,000 political activists still in prison and a growing refugee population worldwide, this was an understatement. I thought of the women I had met, the amazing mix of gentleness and strength combined with extraordinary courage they all have. There was so much hope in Aung San Suu Kyi's speech, and this hope is one of the core factors to Burmese resilience in the face of so much adversity.

Sangkhlaburi: a town on the brink of possibility

The next day I flew with to Bangkok, then travelled west to Sangkhlaburi for the third of the beginners' workshops to be held in the Mon Women's Organisation headquarters, a small enclave of wood and cement buildings, where the women live as well as attend training sessions. Close to Mon State on the southern Thai/Burma border, Sangkhlaburi is very peaceful, but only twenty-four kilometres away, at Three Pagodas Pass, there was fighting between the ethnic armies just over the border and the military junta. Traditionally, Sangkhlaburi is populated by the Mon, but Karen

also live in the area. Now both groups are political refugees, accepted by neither the Burmese nor the Thai governments. I sat on the balcony outside my room with the view across the lake of the gold-leafed pagoda glowing in the sunset and found it hard to believe there was fighting so close. I gazed across the rose-hued waters of the lake and listened to the swish of long boats as people returned home to their floating houses and sensed the planning for a future peacetime that had gone into the building of this guesthouse. Karen and Mon peoples have set up a number of businesses in Sangkhlaburi like the guesthouse where I was staying. Next door there's an orphanage for displaced children and a shop selling traditional clothing to raise money for the children run by the same people as the guesthouse. Across the road, a Karenni man sells coffee and hand-made photos he has taken of the area for tourists. Once the fighting on the border stops people will flock to this peaceful tourist haven.

Back in Australia: advocacy in action

Six months after I returned to Australia, I met up with Debbie again at a forum in Canberra hosted by Australian Parliamentarians for Democracy in Burma and co-convened by Federal MPs. My local MP, Janelle Saffin, a long-time supporter of democracy in Burma, had invited me to the forum. Three speakers were giving presentations that focused on 100 days of parliament in Burma and the ways that government had been conducted since the elections: Mrs Eva Kusuma Sundari, Indonesian MP and president of the ASEAN Inter Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus; Associate Professor Sean Turnell, a former senior analyst at the Reserve Bank of Australia and specialist on Burma's economy; and K'Naw Paw, coordinator of the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO).

I recognised K'Naw Paw as a student from the first workshops I had run in 2004. She was a shy girl then and I couldn't imagine her being able to talk at such a gathering of politicians, but her biography told how she had started working for the KWO as a leadership trainer and was now an executive member and coordinator of their Emerging Leader's School. As a member of the of the KWO advocacy team she had travelled to many different countries attending meetings with UN Human Rights Councils and the Commission on the Status of Women, meeting parliamentarians and congress men and women to discuss cross-border humanitarian aid issues as well as refugees and internally displaced persons.

The meeting began with a video from Aung San Suu Kyi outlining her views on the first one hundred days of Burma's road to democracy:

> A hundred days is a very long time or a very short time depending on how you look at it. A Hundred days is sufficient for change if there is a will to change, but a hundred days is too short a time for change if there is no real will towards change (ASSK 2010).

She thanked the Australian Parliament for their support and went on to deplore these one hundred days as not comprising 'any positive, definitive, definite move towards a truly democratic process'. This, she elaborated, would only be indicated by the release of prisoners as an 'observable step towards national reconciliation' and she appealed to leaders the world over 'to look carefully at how the elections of 2010 were

conducted and what the elected members of the national assembly are allowed to do, or able to do at present' (ASSK 2010).

The three speakers also gave tangible testimony to Burma's first Parliament sitting in twenty-two years being a long way from any definition of true democracy. As Debbie pointed out, had a meeting like this forum on 100 days of Burma's new parliament been convened during the actual Burmese parliamentary sitting, we would all have been given mandatory prison sentences. Eva Sundari discussed the ways in which the ASEAN Inter Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus had sought to assist the parliamentary process and deliver aid to the people of Burma caught up in the crossfire between ethnic resistance to the elections and the military junta and expressed little hope in the parliamentary process there. Professor Turnell described the economic policies of the government and pointed out that the regime published the national budget for the next two financial years before the Parliament had even convened. Such a move deprived the Parliament of its prerogative to debate the budget. As a result, the current year's budget, which allocated 51% to military expenditure and only 3% to healthcare, was not subjected to parliamentary scrutiny (Altsean 2010: online). There was a significant gap between an ideal democratic state and the situation in Burma. The military-appointed government blocked 87% of the proposals put forward to it with only five out of thirty nine proposals approved. It had taken less than three weeks for the parliament to convene and it was not due to reconvene for another twelve months. In the meantime, committees hand-picked by President Thein Sein would carry out legislative groundwork until Parliament reconvenes for its yearly session in 2012.

In the break before K'Naw Paw was due to present, I picked up a publication by the Karen Women's Organisation titled *Walking Amongst Sharp Knives: The unsung courage of Karen women village chiefs in conflict areas of Eastern Burma* (2010). The title drew me back to the first workshop I had conducted in Mae Sot in 2004. As a person relatively uninformed then about what was going on in Burma, my life was irrevocably changed by a group of Karen women who had outlined a narrative they wanted to write about a village head who was forced to make a terrible choice. The junta had set up a military base near a village and come to the village saying they had decided to hold a beauty quest. They asked the village head to choose the most beautiful young girls and send them to military headquarters for training to become beauty queens. The village head knew they would be forced into sexual and domestic subservience. Once they went to the barracks their lives would never be the same. In the story the women outlined, the village head had sent a girl to the barracks who later, after she was sent home, had committed suicide. The story was to be told from the village head's point of view, at a point of regret after the young girl had died. When discussing the story in the workshop I had assumed that the village head was a man. The group presenting promptly corrected me, letting me know that the village head was a woman as most of the male village heads had been killed or joined the resistance forces in the jungle. The women have to do everything, they had told me; they make all the decisions. If you are an older sister and you decide to run away from this terrible destiny you know your younger sister will have to go in your stead or else the whole village could be annihilated. I didn't ask if the story had come from personal experience, but I understood at a deep level from that moment on, the

intensity of the project I was undertaking. This story has now entered my own collection of Burma stories and I have told it many times to make a point about the horrendous and deliberate abuses the military have inflicted on their own people (see Conway-Herron 2007b and 2011). K'Naw Paw had been part of that first workshop; now this previously shy girl was speaking to members of the Australian Parliament.

Just before she began there was a flurry of activity as the Minister for Foreign affairs, Kevin Rudd, arrived. Calmly and confidently K'Naw Paw began outlining the plight of refugees and displaced people along the border. 'Rape as a weapon of war continues with impunity in ethnic areas' she said, and urged the Australian Parliamentarians to continue sending cross-border aid to assist those communities along the Thai/Burma border (Altsean Burma 2010: online). She would not have been able to present like this to her own parliament but her presence here in Australia was a tremendous triumph. As she finished her presentation and took questions from all sides I felt a combination of tremendous pride and renewed hope that true democratic government in Burma was possible.

Freedom to lead

As I was leaving the forum, Debbie handed me a present of a black T-shirt with Shephard Fairey's image of Suu Kyi on the front and Free Burma written in eighteen languages on the back. It was from a campaign that the interns at Altsean Burma had put together as part of their leadership training. I smiled and thought of Kevin Rudd's inference that the Burma democracy movement should not simply rely on the charisma of this amazing woman. Freedom to lead was indeed about much more than that and if Aung San Suu Kyi had the freedom to lead Burma, democracy there would be a reality rather than a hope. As the editorial collective of *Tales of Terror and Grief* state:

> The Burma crisis is complex and tough, it needs strategic solutions and sustainable interventions to restore democracy and build lives. Like the displaced ethnic populations who continue to hope and wait until they return to the safety of their land and reclaim what was once their own (KNOW 2010: 76).

And as Zoya Phan, Karen activist, whose mother who was a former guerrilla fighter and father a leader of the Karen resistance writes from exile in the UK:

> Our struggle isn't just against the dictatorship and oppression. It is also one for a better Burma, a better place for us to live, and I hope one day Burma will be a shining beacon of freedom and peace. My country is one of the most ethnically diverse in the world. We want to live in a Federal Burma. Regardless of our ethnicity we are one people and we are engaged in one struggle for our country to be free. … If every one of us takes action, no matter how small or how big we are, then together we will be an unstoppable force and we will win our freedom. United our will and determination are stronger than guns and bullets (2009: 327).

The Burmese women's stories engage with the type of storytelling that articulates that in-between space between the opposition of right and wrong that forces us to look at humanity itself. Kim Cheng Boey writes in *TEXT* (2010: 5) of the 'dialogic dynamism

that a transnational creative writing program can foster' and the ways this type of program 'can accommodate diversity, ethnic pluralism and promote inclusivism'. While the creative writing workshops conducted on the Thai/Burma border do not constitute a Creative Writing program in the sense that Boey is discussing here, they nonetheless accommodate exactly these types of considerations while mediating stories that are particular to the refugee women from Burma. They also articulate the complex cultural negotiations necessary to articulating a cross-border existence, both literally and metaphorically, while tapping into human dilemmas that are common for all displaced peoples. These women and their stories are ambassadors for a possible Burma that will come close to what Ma Lo dreams for when she writes:

> I believe that one day I will go back to our state and help improve the lives of our people. If I can continue my education I hope that one day I'll be able to help my community and my country. I know our state is a poor state now, but out state and my life must improve for the better one day (Lo 2010: 17).

The workshops I give on the Thai/Burma border play just a small part in redressing the dreadful imbalance of power in Burma through the simple act of giving voice. In spite of the ongoing military oppression in Burma, these workshops show the many positive ways that narrative and advocacy can go hand in hand to create reconciliation, healing, education and freedom of information. Being a part of this process has been one of the most rewarding and empowering experiences of my writing life. Like the people of Burma, I look forward to the day when they will be able to live in a peaceful and democratic country as leaders of their communities. Leadership plays an integral part in the future hopes of Burma. The role narrative plays in leading people out of subjection into a life where they can exercise their human rights is an important one for the people of Burma who hope for a time when their stories can be told freely and will come from a place where a sense of joy imbues a peaceful future.

Endnote

1. I use the name Burma rather than Myanmar herein, in order to refuse the legitimacy of the Burmese military's renaming of the country and to acknowledge the long history of the peoples of that country.

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