GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM: STUNT DOCUMENTARY, CONVERSION NARRATIVE, AND THE LIMITS OF TESTIMONY ON AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION

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INTRODUCTION: THE STUNT

In June 2011 the Australian multicultural public broadcaster SBS television screened the four-part documentary series *Go Back to Where You Came From* (hereafter referred to as *Go Back*).[1] The series centered on the experiences of six "ordinary Australians"—the majority of whom declared conservative beliefs about immigration. These Australians embarked on a month-long "refugee journey in reverse" to "walk in the shoes" of asylum seekers (*Go Back*). The series established a pseudo-game-show format as participants were surprised by a number of adventures mimicking a typical refugee journey to Australia: leaky boats in the Timor Sea, government immigration raids in Malaysia, and refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo.[2] These dangerous and confronting experiences were part of the stated premise of the television program: each of these participants had volunteered to have their views on immigration challenged through firsthand experience.

Broadcast at a moment when debates about asylum seekers featured prominently in the nation's media and parliament, the *Go Back* series was notably timely. Its mandate was to offer something novel in a public sphere crowded with loud opinions—to make a cultural intervention and to start a "public conversation" about Australia's treatment of asylum seekers.[3] *Go Back*'s promotional material successfully created a buzz for the series, provocatively asking viewers "Where Do You Stand?" The series struck a chord with its audience, becoming SBS TV's highest-rated program for 2011, and

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generating a flood of public responses on forums and social networking sites.[4] The program won numerous media awards, the format has been sold internationally, and a second series—this time featuring six celebrity participants—screened in Australia in September 2012.[5]

In this essay we consider the cultural and political work *Go Back* aims to do. More specifically, we explore how personal, first-person narratives are used within a hybrid documentary/reality television format to respond to media and political discourses surrounding the maritime arrival of asylum seekers in early twenty-first century Australia.[6] How do highly mediatized life narratives function in this sociopolitical exercise? A key attraction for reality television viewers is the opportunity to observe "'real' people in ordinary and extraordinary situations" (Ouellette and Murray, Introduction 3). We argue that in its attempt to reach a broad viewing audience, *Go Back* uses a combination of life narrative modes: the stunt memoir, conversion narrative, and human-rights testimonial. We look at how the reality television documentary is framed from its outset in terms of these existing genres, and how the "ordinary Australian" participants' narratives are juxtaposed with the testimonies of refugees and asylum seekers to create drama and contrast, and to drive the participants' conversion from prejudice against refugees to enlightened understanding.

Ultimately, we argue that while *Go Back* has the potential to do significant cultural work with its genre-blending and multiplatform television format, as an example of stunt life narrative, *Go Back* is limited as to what it can achieve in relation to addressing race politics in contemporary Australia. Life narrative's political edge and potential for consciousness-raising has been noted by many scholars (Smith and Watson; Smith and Schaffer; Douglas; Douglas and Whitlock). Across a range of contexts, individual life stories are employed to achieve particular human rights aims. In the legalistic framework of a truth commission, for example, testimony is elicited by the court in order to, as Amnesty International puts it: "clarify as far as possible the facts about past human rights violations." In a very different way, the author of a memoir may choose a particular mode, such as a survivor narrative, to highlight injustice. While documentary is an established genre for social commentary and critique, reality TV is not traditionally a genre that has been employed for consciousness-raising.

In *Go Back*, consistent with the expectations of the reality TV format, particular performances—confession and contrition—are privileged, and asylum seeker testimony is employed to serve a series of conversion narratives. This approach foregrounds sensation and entertainment, and in doing so oversimplifies the complex and political tensions and fraught cultural

relations that exist in contemporary Australia. Further, the premise of the program leaves little room for the acknowledgment of the impact that all kinds of migration have had on Indigenous Australians.[7] These observations suggest how *Go Back* is marked by contradictions, complications, and ideological pitfalls.

CONTEXT: ASYLUM SEEKERS IN EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AUSTRALIA

Historically, Australia—as a former British colony geographically situated in Asia—has long been preoccupied with, and anxious about, issues relating to immigration and citizenship. It is an infamous fact that one of the country's earliest pieces of legislation was the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, colloquially known as the White Australia policy. Its objective was to confine immigration to young, white, British migrants, and exclude all those viewed as "Other" to this racialized cultural identity. As numerous scholars have highlighted, the construction of an Australian national self was entirely dependent on policies of race-based exclusion (see for example Jupp and Perera).

Although the White Australia policy was dismantled in the 1970s, officially giving way to policies of multiculturalism, in recent years—particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States—old, familiar anxieties about immigration have reemerged, with the focus now on asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat.[8] This shift in focus can be traced to a sequence of events that occurred in 2001, which have provided the groundwork for subsequent treatment and representations of asylum seekers in the Australian public sphere. In late August that year, a Norwegian cargo ship, the *MV Tampa*, rescued over four hundred asylum seekers whose stricken fishing boat was sinking near Christmas Island, about 1,200 miles off the North Western coast of Australia.[9] With four hundred extra passengers on board, many who were ill and physically distressed, the *Tampa*, a ship not designed to house more than a small crew, sailed towards Christmas Island, the nearest port. However, when the ship's captain, Arne Rinnan, requested Australian Government permission to land at Christmas Island, it was denied. What followed was a drawn-out saga that included a diplomatic stalemate between Indonesia, Australia, and Norway, eventually ending, days later, with the Australian navy intercepting the *Tampa* and taking the asylum seekers to nearby Pacific Islands, beyond Australian territorial waters. The "*Tampa* incident," as it became known, received worldwide coverage and prompted the Australian Government to amend dramatically and swiftly the laws regarding asylum seeking so as to restrict who could apply for refugee status and from

where they could apply. As Leanne Weber and Sharon Pickering argue: "The Australian Government's refusal to allow the docking of the *MV Tampa* on Christmas Island in August 2001 was a defining moment in the evolution of Australian border control" (181). Numerous islands were immediately excised from "official" Australian territory, and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) was directed to intercept all boats suspected of carrying asylum seekers, and to take the passengers to nearby Pacific Islands, such as Nauru, where they would be held in detention centers while their claims for asylum were processed. The newly passed legislation, which came to be known as the "Pacific Solution," aimed to prohibit asylum seekers from reaching Australian territory, and subsequently seeking asylum.

In the weeks and months after the *Tampa* incident, a number of boats carrying asylum seekers sailed towards the North Western coast of Australia and were intercepted by the Australian navy. Such boats were labelled Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels (SIEV) by the ADF, and in early October, a fourth boat, SIEV-4, reached the coast of Christmas Island. By the time the Australian navy arrived, the SIEV-4 was sinking. The asylum seekers on the boat were rescued by the Australian navy, and in the succeeding days, photographs of the sinking boat began to circulate in national media. The photos showed children in the water, waiting to be rescued by naval ships. At the same time unsubstantiated stories about how the asylum seekers had deliberately thrown their children into the water were repeated in the media by the then Prime Minister, Immigration Minister, and Defence Minister. These stories, combined with photographs of the event, represented asylum seekers in a negative light, despite the fact that it was later proven that the asylum seekers had not thrown their children into the sea. This event came to be known as the "Children Overboard" controversy.[10]

Both the *Tampa* and the "Children Overboard" "affairs" occurred at a significant moment in recent Australian history. First, while the media and government were focusing on what they called the "unauthorised maritime arrival" of asylum seekers, the events of September 11 in the United States occurred, fueling fear of "the other" in Australia. Second, 2001 was an election year in Australia. Numerous commentators have suggested that in the weeks and months leading up to the election, the issue of "unauthorised maritime arrival" of asylum seekers, combined with the panic generated by September 11, played a substantial role in the then conservative government's reelection (Marr and Wilkinson; Perera). Aileen Moreton-Robinson, for example, argues that the conservative government "ran its 2001 election campaign along race lines. The campaign played on the fears held widely among white Australians that the country is under threat of invasion from 'queue jumpers'

and terrorists among the refugees from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan" (27). By playing to these fears, and by implementing policies of so-called "border protection" and detention, the Liberal-National (i.e., conservative) Howard government asserted what Moreton-Robinson calls "white sovereignty"—its right to choose who comes here and who will be deemed an "illegal" trespasser. The figure of the asylum seeker became a useful political tool for a government that wanted to display mastery over issues of immigration and "border control," and the arrival of a relatively low number of asylum seekers in boats along the North coast of Australia was constructed by the Government and the mainstream media as a crisis that needed to be managed.[11]

In the 1970s, in the wake of the war in Vietnam, Australia had been relatively receptive to the arrival of refugees.[12] Yet, in contrast, in the early twenty-first century, asylum seekers were constructed in the public sphere as criminals who threaten national security. This attitude towards asylum seekers has endured, and ten years later debates about these issues remain prevalent in Australian public life. The powerful rhetoric about and imagery of asylum seekers that was established at the start of the twenty-first century continues to be a way for both sides of politics—the right (the conservative Australian Liberal Party) and the left (the liberal Australia Labor Party) to appeal to Australian anxieties about invasion. This context of baleful postcoloniality is the one from which *Go Back* emerges and to which it responds.[13]

SIX ORDINARY AUSTRALIANS "LIVE THE LIFE OF A REFUGEE": *GO BACK* AS STUNT DOCUMENTARY AND CONVERSION NARRATIVE

Go Back screened on Australian television around the tenth anniversary of the *Tampa* and "Children Overboard" incidents, and this timing was not coincidental. Commissioned by SBS TV, the appearance of *Go Back* signaled that the events of 2001 were worth publically remembering and revisiting, rather than dismissing. In doing so, the documentary suggested that its politics were in opposition to the earlier conservative government policies, which presumably would rather not revisit the highly controversial treatment of refugees. Further, the program's title, a parody of the xenophobic exclamation "Go Back to Where You Come From!" suggested that the series aimed to undermine and mock Australian racism.

In various ways, the producers clearly signalled to viewers that *Go Back* was more than a television program aimed at entertainment: it was a television event staging a cultural intervention. As Laurie Ouelette and Susan Murray contend, a recent trend in reality television is the performance of philanthropy: "the TV industry has found that there is money to be made

by taking on the duties of the philanthropist, the social worker, the benefactor, and the 'guardian angel'" (Introduction 2). *Go Back* tapped into this trend, to imply that viewers who watched and participated in the program would be part of an imagined community of good citizens who were concerned enough with humanitarian issues to participate, to watch, and to get involved. In addition, apart from the program's timing, publicity, and packaging, its genre (part social documentary, part reality TV), combined with the use of life narrative modes that have an established tradition of cultural intervention, such as the "stunt memoir," the conversion narrative, and testimony, reinforced the idea that the program was designed to do social good: to respond to prevailing representations of, and debates about, asylum seekers in contemporary Australia.

I. *GO BACK* AS SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

Informed by the work of Bill Nichols, Susan Murray argues in her study of reality television that documentaries promise viewers a "discourse of sobriety" (79). She proposes that when viewers watch documentaries, they expect to be presented with contents that are "educational or informative, authentic, ethical, socially engaged, independently produced and serve the public interest" (68). In contrast, viewers frequently expect reality television programs to be "commercial, sensational, popular, entertaining, and potentially exploitative or manipulative" (68). Murray suggests that in the past decade there has been an increasing overlap between the two genres, with the development of television programs that draw on the apparent sober educational value of social documentary as well as the sensational, designed-for-entertainment mode of reality television. *Go Back* is a clear example of such a program. In many ways it presents itself as a documentary that shows "real life" stories in the service of public good. However, at the same moment, *Go Back* works within the entertaining, sensational mode of reality television.

From the very first episode of the series, *Go Back* draws on elements traditionally associated with sober social documentary to establish its cultural authority and its position as a politically progressive text. For example, *Go Back* opens with grainy television news footage of a boat crashing onto rocks, presumably off the coast of Australia, as well as images of protests and political leaders making statements to camera about the arrival of asylum seekers. Simultaneously, the voice-of-God narration, with well-known Australian actor Colin Friels providing the voice-over, tells the viewer: "asylum seekers, refugees . . . issues that divide a nation. . . ." This opening sequence immediately signals *Go Back*'s agenda as a sociopolitical intervention.

The narrator serves to provide context and facts throughout the series, and in doing so he reveals the program's apparently progressive political aims: to correct misinformation about asylum seekers and to ask viewers to consider the global processes that displace and force people to seek asylum in Australia. At one point the narrator informs the viewers that despite media scare campaigns about Australia being "overrun by boat people," only 2 percent of Australia's immigration intake is from people who arrive on unauthorized boats. At another point, the narrator contextualizes Australia's present immigration circumstances within Australia's participation in the Iraq war: "Three million Iraqis displaced by US-led invasion; this was an invasion that Australia participated in." These "facts" serve to debunk the invasion narrative myths that contribute to the prevailing national image of refugees and asylum seekers. They also serve to distance the politics of the television program from a conservative political view and to further *Go Back*'s position as a documentary with a "good" social agenda in terms of race relations in contemporary Australia.

II. "STUNT DOCUMENTARY" AND SOCIAL INVESTIGATION

Along with the use of historical footage and voice-of-God narration, *Go Back* also makes use of the interrelated forms of stunt memoir and conversion narrative. A recent (now indeed ubiquitous) trend in life narrative, stunt memoirs, sometimes called "immersion narratives," record "a temporary experiment in behavior or lifestyle" (Couser, *Memoir* 13, 161). In stunt memoirs, a writer metaphorically "walks in the shoes" of another for a set period of time, often in order to expose social inequality. Books such as George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), and more recently Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2001), Norah Vincent's *Self Made Man: My Year Disguised as a Man* (2006), and Timothy Kurek's *The Cross in the Closet* (2012) are indicative of the genre. In many of these texts, as the subject/author participates in the "stunt," he or she will often concurrently undergo some kind of conversion—from ignorance to enlightenment, for example.

Consistent with the way life writing has now migrated into a range of media, in the contemporary era documentary and reality television forms frequently use a stunt memoir framework. Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me,* and shows like *Frontier House, Faking It,* and *Undercover Boss* could all be considered televisual examples of the genre. *Go Back* is another text in this tradition. It draws on the conventions of the stunt memoir, and in doing so

is positioned as a socially progressive text that aims to reveal the racism and prejudice surrounding the issue of asylum seekers in Australia.

The stunt premise of the program is established from the very beginning of episode one. In the first minutes of *Go Back,* the narrator informs the audience that "six Australians with strong views on the subject [of immigration] have accepted an invitation to take part in a life-changing experiment." The viewer learns that the six participants will undertake a "reverse refugee journey," and will travel to a range of locations to walk in the shoes of a refugee. The implication is that along the way the participants, and by default the viewer, will learn more about the global processes that motivate people to seek asylum in Australia.

III. THE "STUNT" AS A CATALYST FOR CONVERSION

The stunt, then, exists as the catalyst for a conversion of the participants, and by implication, the viewing audience. Like the stunt memoir, in English-speaking contexts the conversion narrative is a common form of self-representation. With its generic roots in Christian Protestantism, "where it refers to the sudden conversion of sinner to saint, or unbeliever to believer," contemporary conversion narratives can often take the form of celebrities converting from addiction to sobriety (Couser, *Memoir* 38). In *Go Back,* the conversion is constructed as the transformation of the Australian participants from ignorance and prejudice to understanding and acceptance, as they participate in the stunt of the reverse refugee journey. Therefore, the stunt and the possibility of conversion are positioned as contributing to *Go Back*'s identity as social documentary. These narrative devices serve to indicate the program's role as a social investigation into attitudes towards asylum seekers in Australia.

To facilitate and establish the conversion narrative, the six participants are introduced to the viewing audience via mini-biographies.[14] Each participant is identified by on-screen titles that state his or her first name and age, while the voice-over simultaneously adds the participant's full name, occupation, and geographical location: markers of contemporary Australian citizenship. The participants are filmed with iconic, recognizable Australian landscapes and cityscapes as backdrops (for example, the beach, the bush, and the cricket field), reminding the viewer that *Go Back* is concerned with national identity issues. These introductions also include a short interview with each participant where he or she offers his or her (usually prejudiced) views on asylum seekers. During the production process, participants Raye Colby, Raquel Moore, and Adam Hartup would have likely engaged

in lengthy interviews, offering explanations of their prejudice. Yet in the final documentary, their anti-asylum-seeker admissions appear abruptly—as punchy, provocative sound bites. These biographies, then, are designed to represent these participants as racist, and to set the conditions for their conversion.

All of the biographies manifest these qualities, but there are three that are particularly indicative.[15] Raye Colby, a retired social worker, is filmed riding her horse in a paddock at her farm in rural South Australia. In her auto/biographical direct-to-camera address, Raye is framed by a large eucalyptus tree—a recurring symbol of the Australian landscape—while she stresses how idyllic her home is, describing it as being "just so peaceful . . . you've got your own space and you're sort of like in a little utopia." Yet moments later she refers to the Inverbrackie detention center positioned across the road from her farm. Angrily, she says of the people in the detention center: "I don't think they've got the right to come out here and demand, *demand* all this freedom, all this generosity that the Australian Government just hands them on a golden platter." She also provocatively says of a shipwrecked asylum seeker boat: "When the boat crashed coming into Christmas Island I thought 'serve you bastards right'." This short biography constructs Raye as a foolish racist. She lives in a place she describes as idyllic, with acres of farmland, yet Raye has no space in her "country idyll" for vulnerable people. Raye's prejudice and malice, therefore, signal the start of her conversion narrative.

Twenty-one-year-old Raquel Moore is unemployed and lives near Blacktown, an outer suburb of Western Sydney, touted by its local government as "multicultural" ("Multicultural Community"). Raquel is filmed feeding her pet dogs in the backyard of her house, and tentatively walking down the main street of Blacktown, observing many African people and commenting on how immigrants are "taking over." "I am a proud Australian," Raquel says: "I was born here. . . . I guess I am a bit racist. I just don't like Africans." Raquel's biography positions her as the person with most to gain through participation in the stunt. Unlike her fellow participants, Raquel does not have an occupation or profession—she "left school at 14" and is unemployed. As a welfare recipient and non-tax payer, Raquel is positioned on the margins of "good citizenship." She has neither social nor economic capital, and therefore has very little authority. The vision of Raquel feeding her many pet dogs, while refusing to care about "Africans," invites the viewer to interpret her beliefs as ignorant, unfounded, extreme, and in need of revision. Raquel, like Raye, is represented as a racist, ripe for conversion through participation in the stunt.[16]

Twenty-six-year-old Adam Hartup is introduced emerging from the ocean surf. Represented as a stereotypical "bronzed Aussie," Adam indignantly refers to asylum seekers: "we're spending millions of dollars on housing these criminals." In suggesting that asylum seekers who arrive by boat are "criminals," Adam reveals that he clearly subscribes to the current prevailing view on the issue, and that he, like Raquel, is ready for conversion to a more enlightened, educated position. Adam is filmed working as a lifeguard at Cronulla Beach, close to where he spent his childhood. In terms of national identity and race relations in Australia, this location is highly significant. Cronulla is a beachside suburb of Sydney, and is referred to on a local government website as "the birthplace of modern Australia" and the site where Captain Cook "first set foot on the Australian continent."[17] However, in recent years the area has been troubled by ongoing cultural tensions, and in 2005 Cronulla Beach was the scene of race riots, sparked when a lifeguard was involved in an altercation with—as the media reported it—"three youths of Middle-Eastern appearance."[18] So, the location of Adam at this site, and his professional status as a lifeguard, render him guilty by association in the events of 2005 and establish the basis for his conversion.[19]

The mini-biographies set the scene for the conversion narrative, but also prescribe the rules of the narrative transaction that will occur between the viewer and *Go Back*. A key aspect of the conversion narrative is the way the reader is invited to be a higher authority sitting in judgment of the author/narrator (Couser, *Memoir* 39). In *Go Back*, it is the television viewer who plays this role, and the mini-biographies establish this dynamic.

THE ROLE OF ASYLUM SEEKER TESTIMONY AND PARTICIPANT WITNESSING IN *GO BACK*

As part of the stunt documentary format, the six participants are brought into personal contact with asylum seekers, and are called to listen to their testimonies.[20] In a text that aspires to cultural intervention, this format is not surprising. Asylum seeker testimony is commonly employed in activist campaigns in a variety of media, with the aim of redressing negative media images and activating dialogue between the person giving testimony (the asylum seeker) and the person receiving the narrative (the witness).[21] As Gillian Whitlock argues, life narratives have the potential to do important cultural work; they have a "distinctive role to play in the struggle to shape dialogues across cultures. . . . [Life narratives] can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard" (*Soft Weapons* 2–3).[22]

Testimonies also play an important role in the politics of visibility. Including testimonies in *Go Back* challenges the exclusionary practices that render asylum seekers with "unlivable lives," to use Butler's term (xv). Testimonies insert the asylum seekers into Australian public life—we hear their voices and see their faces. As Whitlock contends, "autobiographical representations are deeply implicated in negotiating the limits of the human" ("Embridry" 86). *Go Back* brings the faces of asylum seekers into view in moments of personal contact with the Australian participants, and in doing so attempts to humanize a broader public debate, where personal stories are often overlooked. From this perspective, the inclusion of asylum seeker testimony reinforces the program's identity as a politically progressive social documentary.

However, the key function of testimony in *Go Back* is not simply to make asylum seekers visible, but to educate the participants and viewers and to facilitate conversion. In a documentary that aims to correct misinformation, this use of testimony is understandable, but it complicates *Go Back*'s status as a text that aims to do social good. A close reading of a number of key testimonial scenes demonstrates this paradox. For example, the participants initially meet asylum seekers and immigrants living in Australia: Gleny, Darren, and Adam stay with Iraqi men living in Western Sydney, while Raye, Raquel, and Roderick are housed with the Masudi family living in Albury in rural New South Wales. The participants learn that Bahati and Maisara Masudi fled their home countries of Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) during periods of civil war. After spending nine years in the notorious Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwest Kenya, Bahati and Maisara arrived in Australia in 2009. During their stay at the Masudis' home, the participants listen to Bahati and Maisara speak of their experiences of persecution and displacement. In these moments, the participants act as interviewers; the questions that they ask, and their interpretations of the answers, are often revealed to be naive. While this highlights the participants' ignorance and thus aids the conversion narrative, it also shifts the focus from the Masudis to the participants. Because the viewer is implicated as a judge in the conversion narrative, he or she watches the participant, rather than primarily focusing on the Masudis' testimony.

Another scene in the documentary further illustrates how this works. The scene shows Bahati on his return to university at age forty-two because his qualifications are not recognized in Australia. We watch as participant Roderick, who in his introductory biography identifies as a twenty-nine year old aspiring conservative politician, joins Bahati at university. As they sit quietly, sharing a coffee in the sunshine and tranquillity of the college campus,

discussing their common interest in politics, Bahati offers his testimony. He tells Roderick that he was a politician in Burundi, and explains how that led to his incarceration as a political prisoner, where he was tortured and was subsequently hospitalized. Roderick stammers uncomfortably before asking: "do you feel comfortable telling me what they did?" Bahati says he is not comfortable, and the men sit together in silence as Roderick glances sideways, as if looking to the documentary's director to intervene. Bahati takes the lead and continues his testimony, explaining how the perpetrators came looking for him. Roderick offers a statement of comprehension, "that's why you fled [Burundi]." As an acknowledgment of his admiration, Roderick says, "that's something else!" In this scene, Roderick's amateur interviewing technique contrasts with Bahati's presence and authority as a person who has survived violence and persecution. In the face of Bahati's traumatic testimony, Roderick's responses are fumbling and inadequate, with Bahati's firsthand testimony starkly contrasting with Roderick's naive understanding of the complexities of life as an asylum seeker.[23] However, while Bahati may appear authoritative, the episode is designed to prompt Roderick's conversion to a more empathic stance towards asylum seekers. In other words, Roderick's "journey" is the ultimate focus of the narrative; his witnessing of Bahati's narrative and his conversion narrative are primary, and Bahati's testimony is secondary.

Roderick listens to Bahati's testimony. *Go Back to Where You Came From. Series 1.* Dir. Ivan O'Mahoney. SBS Television. © Copyright Cordell Jigsaw Productions, 2011. Reproduced by permission.

Raquel and Raye listen to Maisara's testimony. From *Go Back to Where You Came From. Series 1.* Dir. Ivan O'Mahoney. SBS Television. © Copyright Cordell Jigsaw Productions, 2011. Reproduced by permission.

A similar process can be observed in a scene that includes Raye, Raquel, and Maisara. The trio are filmed in a moment of female bonding, sitting together on the most intimate of spaces, Maisara's bed, as she gives testimony of her experience of fleeing the Congo. Maisara talks about the rape of her eight and twelve year old sisters and of the ongoing violence affecting her family. She says that only four of her seven siblings survived the war, and that her family was eventually forced to leave the Congo and move to Burundi, where she met and married Bahati. She explains that Burundi too was in a state of civil unrest, and they could not "get peace" there. "Only in Australia," she says, "when I came here, I never hear the guns." There are close up shots of Raye and Raquel attempting to comprehend what they are hearing, and eventually Raye asks "Is it hard for you to talk like this?" at which point, Maisara becomes emotionally overwhelmed and cannot continue speaking. As powerful as Maisara's narrative is, the documentary's focus is Raye and Raquel's response and their ongoing journey towards conversion. As previously mentioned, Raquel is the most openly prejudiced of the *Go Back* participants, and the viewers are positioned throughout the documentary to question: will this most extreme participant change her views on asylum seekers? As a consequence, in this scene, it is almost impossible to focus on anything but Raquel and her reactions to Maisara's testimony. *Go Back*'s controversial, "self-proclaimed racist" "star" ultimately draws attention away from the asylum seeker testimony.

THE PITFALLS OF TESTIMONY AND CONVERSION IN *GO BACK* AS REALITY TELEVISION

While the use of testimony in *Go Back* is certainly powerful and serves to raise awareness of asylum seekers, and to make people like Maisara and Bahati visible in Australian public life, the use of such traumatic personal narratives is nevertheless clearly problematic. Placed within the context of a stunt documentary where the primary goal is the conversion of six relatively privileged Australians, individual testimonies are consistently engulfed by the presence of the "stars" of the program: the participants. The Australian narratives take center stage, while the asylum seeker testimony arguably recedes into the background amidst the sensation of the stunt.

The inclusion of testimony also raises a number of other issues. First, the program makers run the risk of exploiting and re-traumatizing the asylum seekers who appear in *Go Back.* Second, the program makers cannot control how the asylum seekers' testimonies will be received. There is the risk that these testimonies will be read as representative of a universal "asylum seeker situation," rather than as describing a specific set of circumstances at one particular time and place. For example, despite the fact that the narrator and Bahati and Maisara provide specific information about the push factors that prompted the family to flee the DRC and Burundi, viewers may overlook the specifics of the family's case in favor of a more simplistic reading that could leave viewers with the impression that "Africa," a diverse continent, is universally dysfunctional and unlivable. There is also no guarantee that the asylum seekers' testimonies will be received sensitively by the viewing audience. As Whitlock argues, "The infrastructure can elicit testimony but it cannot guarantee the ethical and political conditions that secure an appropriate response: empathic witnessing" (*Soft Weapons* 77).

There are a number of reasons why *Go Back* might structure the narrative this way, the most obvious being that the participants' narratives make for more sensational, entertaining viewing as they are shown struggling to meet the demands of the stunt. Filmmakers and television producers, among others, have had to consider new ways to present testimonies of trauma as audiences have become resistant to these narratives and compassion fatigue has taken hold (Douglas, *"Ayen's"*). Viewers can only take so much trauma before they switch off, and the documentary cannot achieve social action without viewers. So, wanting to retain audiences, producers employ strategies to diffuse the trauma's impact. In its decentering of asylum seeker testimony, *Go Back* may be responding to the requirements of commissioning editors and the perceived needs of audiences.

According to the program's narrative, personal contact with asylum seekers does prompt conversion by some of the participants. In episode two, for example, the participants experience life as "refugees in transit." The six Australians travel to Malaysia, to live in a cramped four-room apartment with a group of fifty Chin refugees, a persecuted Burmese minority who are awaiting resettlement to a safe country. The participants witness the daily lives of the Chin people, who live in what the narrator describes as a "neverland," a "shadow world" where they have no status as official Malaysian residents. Over the course of a few days the participants develop personal relationships with the refugees. So by the time their stay ends, most of the participants are sympathetic to the refugees' position. Adam, for example, says "I just hope that every one of these guys gets resettled very, very shortly because they're just awesome people." The personal contact with refugees—being able to put a "human face" to the issue—prompts emotional investment on the part of the participants, and has instigated a more empathic response. But again, the Australian participants are the "known" among a group of largely nameless asylum seekers (many of whom are children). The Australians dominate the screen time, it is their stories that are most pervasive in the narrative, and their apparent conversion that is the primary narrative thread.

Similarly, the final episode perpetuates the idea that conversion from prejudice to understanding rests on personal contact with the asylum seekers. As part of their reverse refugee journey, Raye, Raquel, and Roderick stay at the Kakuma Refugee camp in Kenya. While there, they trace some other members of the Masudi family. Bahati's brother, Deo, his wife, Innocence, and their six children, as well as Maisara's sister Amenata, live in a makeshift shelter in the camp, awaiting resettlement. The Australians listen as Deo gives testimony about how he was tortured in the Congo, while the narrator explains that Deo's first wife and daughter were "taken, believed killed." The participants then deliver news about Bahati and Maisara's life in Australia, including a video message from them and their children. There are emotional scenes as Deo's family watches the video.

Meanwhile, the narrator points out that Deo and his family have lived at Kakuma, "in limbo," for three years. Deo then explains the hopelessness of living at the camp. He says that "when you cannot enjoy your citizenship, you are limited," and that while his children may have aspirations to go to university and train as professionals, they will not be able to. Basic education for Deo's family is "not possible, it is a dream," eclipsed by the reality of surviving day-to-day. Deo suggests that the only way to stimulate political change is through emotional engagement and human empathy. "If I touch your heart," he says, "immediately you are able to understand me . . . because

we are not animals." This scene's appeal to humanist sentimentality reveals *Go Back*'s modus operandi: the idea that conversion from racism to antiracism can be achieved through the reception of affecting personal narratives.

From the outset *Go Back* has two goals: to covert the participants and to get viewers talking. Arguably, it achieves both: by the end of the series not all of the participants agree on the best way for Australia to deal with the maritime arrival of asylum seekers. Yet all admit that the month-long journey has had some impact on them, and has prompted some transformation of their views. In particular, it is personal interaction with refugees and asylum seekers that has proved the most effective. As Raye says in the closing moments of episode three, "getting to know people personally" changes things. Witnessing the lived conditions of refugees and hearing testimonial life narratives humanizes asylum seekers and "touches the hearts" of the participants. By episode three, after witnessing the difficulties of refugee life for an Iraqi family in Jordan, Adam says: "of course I'd get on a boat. If it meant getting out of this hole . . . I won't say it's illegal. That's too harsh." After her experience with the Masudi family in Kenya, Raquel says: "I think people should give people a chance before judging a book by its cover. For sure. . . . Like when you've seen what we've seen, we all have hearts and I have a heart. . . . So yeah." These statements become "evidence" of the participants' conversion.

While this conversion seems aimed at social good, it is nevertheless problematic. In a conversion narrative framework, the participants are expected to transform their behavior: in this case to show newfound compassion for asylum seekers. Yet, as Lauren Berlant proposes, compassionate emotions are a cultural script, and "derive from social training, emerge at historical moments, are shaped by aesthetic conventions, and take place in scenes that are anxious, volatile, surprising and contradictory" (7). The participants who are represented as having converted to an antiracist position may simply, on the one hand, be meeting the demands of the conversion narrative template, and on the other, following an expected cultural script.

Further, the conversion narrative presented here is a simplistic model that provides only two positions: pre-conversion (racist) and post-conversion (antiracist). This binary model can lead more liberal viewers to assume that because they already occupy the "antiracist" position they do not need to consider how they may be implicated in racism or racist behaviors. The role of these viewers in the narrative transaction is to sit in moral judgment of overt racists, such as Raquel, rather than to reflect on how they themselves may perpetuate racism, however much they may identify as "antiracist." In this way, the conversion narrative structure inhibits a consideration of the complexity and subtleties of contemporary forms of racism, and therefore works to limit rather than advance the cultural work of *Go Back.*

CONCLUSION

Making a cultural product, especially one that is as mediated as a reality TV show, that can truly intervene in a social debate is notoriously difficult, particularly in the context of Australia where race and immigration remain highly fraught topics of debate. On the one hand, presenting a dry, didactic text will not attract a wide audience. On the other hand, using a novel format to raise awareness of serious social issues can be seen to be trivializing them.

Go Back attempted to circumvent these problems by drawing on elements of social documentary and reality TV that mobilized powerful life narratives. The stunt documentary, the conversion narrative form, and the testimonies featured in *Go Back* serve to position the program as socially progressive. The six participants are clearly framed as prejudiced from the outset, and their racism is something to be addressed and transformed through their participation in the stunt. The testimonies of asylum seekers and refugees provide representations so often omitted from public discourse, and work to reimagine power relations by destabilizing narratives of prejudice and lending authority to testimony.

However, the stunt documentary, the conversion narrative form, and the testimonies also serve the reality television aspects of the program, and reveal the problems with *Go Back* as a text of social activism. The conversion of explicitly prejudiced participants from racism to compassion makes for sensational television. While to some extent asylum seeker testimonies further *Go Back*'s cultural aims, they also serve to supply the program with drama and sensation, facilitating the conversion of the six participants. The entertaining shock value of the Australian narratives of prejudice thus overshadows the asylum seeker testimonies.

In addition, in its position as a social documentary, and in the way the conversion narrative invites viewers to sit in judgment of the participants, *Go Back* provides SBS's liberal, metropolitan viewing audience with a way to feel as if they are participating in a public debate and "doing good" in the face of racism. While to some extent, in the context of antiracist politics, this is positive, it does not guarantee change. As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, merely saying that you are antiracist does not make you one. Deeper consideration from all viewers (including those who identify as liberal and "antiracist") is required to instigate change, yet the conversion narrative framework encourages judgment rather than reflection.

When it comes to the broader cultural work of life narrative, it is often difficult for cultural texts to do much more than simply preach to the converted. Ultimately these genres must attract an audience, most of whom expect to be educated and/or entertained. Therefore, the program makers'

progressive political aims are hindered by the demands of television production. All of these elements reveal the limits and tensions of life narrative in contemporary Australia. We are left to reflect on how future documentaries and television programs might use their form and reach to engage more radically and forcefully with media and political representations of asylum seekers and refugees.

NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. We would like to thank David Álvarez, Salah D. Hassan, and the participants in the Baleful Postcoloniality seminar for their insightful comments on this paper. Thanks to Tully Barnett for reading a draft of this paper and offering helpful feedback, and thanks to our Life Narrative Research Group colleagues for their comments on our work in progress presentation.

1. SBS, an acronym for Special Broadcasting Service, is an Australian federal government-funded multicultural broadcaster. *Go Back* is produced by Australia's largest independent television production company, Cordell Jigsaw. Their latest program, *Deaf, Dumb and Racist*, screened in Australia in 2012. Cordell Jigsaw makes television that capitalizes on social issues relating to legacies of colonialism: as the *Go Back* introductory narration puts it,"Issues that divide a nation."
2. For a discussion of Australia's recent history and relationship to asylum seekers, see Gregory 258; and Whitlock, "Embridry" 86–87.
3. SBS often commissions documentaries on Australian multicultural life. SBS has a relatively small viewing population (compared to the larger commercial stations), which is conventionally thought to be made up of left-wing, educated, middle-class, and multicultural viewers. However, SBS has a reputation for being "provocative" and "poking the beast" with its hard-hitting, controversial documentaries (Byrnes).
4. According to the 2010–11 SBS Annual Report: "Broadcast over three nights in Refugee Week, *Go Back* received critical acclaim, blanket domestic media coverage and made news headlines around the world. . . . [It] generated unprecedented online debate and #GoBackSBS trended number one on Twitter when the first episode went to air" (30).
5. The program has won a Logie (a popular Australian television award) for "Most Outstanding Documentary," has been nominated for a Rose d'Or (Best Factual Entertainment), Banff World Media Award (Social and Humanitarian Documentary), and a Walkley (Australian journalism industry award for "Best Documentary"). The production company, Cordell Jigsaw, and SBS TV have signed format deals with BBC America and TV2 Denmark. According to the Cordell Jigsaw website, "Tuvalu Media (Sony Pictures Entertainment), Studio Hamburg DocLights, Snowman Productions and Curious Pictures have all signed on having the option to produce local versions of *Go Back* in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and South Africa respectively."

   The "celebrity" participants for the second series included an outspoken journalist, a radio "shock jock," a former fashion model, a rock singer, and the former Howard (conservative) Government Defence Minister Peter Reith, who featured prominently in the "Children Overboard" affair in 2001.

6. We follow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's definition of life writing narratives as "acts of self-presentation . . . that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital" (4).
7. Moreton-Robinson reminds us that in Australia "the sense of belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject—the colonizer/migrant—is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land and the denial of our rights under international customary law" (23).
8. Although the prevailing view is that policies of multiculturalism are an advance on the exclusionary policies of the Immigration Restriction Act, numerous scholars have argued that in terms of race politics, multiculturalism brings with it its own set of problems (see, for example, Hage 204–208).
9. For an account of the *Tampa* incident, see Weber and Pickering 182.
10. For detailed information about this event, see reports from the Australian Government's "Select Committee for an inquiry into a certain maritime incident" (2002). October 2001 also saw what Weber and Pickering call the "the single greatest tragedy in the recent history of Australian border control—the sinking of the SIEV X on 19 October 2001. It is believed that 146 children, 142 women and 65 men died on that day, although many bodies have never been recovered. The boat foundered before reaching Australian waters and no official inquiry into the sinking has ever been conducted" (41).
11. For statistics on the number of unauthorized boats arriving in Australia in recent years, see Weber and Pickering 35.
12. For a discussion of this, see Jupp 38–39.
13. We use the term "baleful postcoloniality" here as a useful concept to examine the cultural conditions from which *Go Back* emerges. However, while we use this term, we acknowledge that for many people Australia is not a postcolonial place. See, for example, Moreton-Robinson, who argues that for Aboriginal people Australia is not postcolonial. Rather, she prefers the term "postcolonizing" because it implies an "ongoing process" (28).
14. The six participants were cast in *Go Back* after an "exhaustive search" across Australia. The program's production team scoured shopping centers, attended community meetings, went doorknocking, and conducted online research to find participants (McPhee).
15. The three remaining participants are Roderick Schneider, twenty-nine years old and "an aspiring politician from Brisbane." He says "my biggest concern is being painted as a giant leftie." Roderick's statement speaks to a concern often linked to a dominant trait of Australian national identity: a fear of being perceived as "weak" or "soft" and thus being vulnerable to exploitation. Roderick, a "Young Liberal" (conservative), is pictured campaigning in his suburban electorate, and playing cricket. As a participant in *Go Back*, Roderick's character symbolizes the young conservative, and as the documentary goes to some lengths to try to distance itself from this political position, the viewer is invited to view Roderick's politics as in need of revision.

    Darren Hassan, "a businessman from Adelaide," is pictured walking along a suburban street with his Taiwanese-born wife and two small children, as he suggests: "People who come here without any documentation by boat should be immediately expatriated." Darren, an ex-military serviceman, is descended from nineteenth century Muslim

cameleers who were brought to Australia by British imperial authorities to construct central railways and townships throughout Central Australia. Darren therefore does not fit the stereotype of a white Anglo-Australian, and so confounds a simplistic, universal understanding of the anti-immigration position. Darren is anti-asylum seekers despite his family's "non-white" heritage, and despite being married to a Tawainese wife. Many viewers would be aware that in a pre-1970s Australia, Darren and his wife would have been subjected to the White Australia Policy laws, and would probably have been denied entry to the country. Therefore, the logic of Darren's position is contradictory and the viewer is invited to view him as foolish and confused.

Gleny Raye is a thirty-three year old singer from Newcastle, presented as a stereotypical hippy, wearing a straw hat, holding a guitar, and writing songs in her garden shed. Gleny suggests: "I think that we have the capacity to take perhaps more refugees." In contrast to her fellow participants, Gleny is presented as being sympathetic and informed about the asylum seeker debate. Although she has agreed to participate in the stunt, she does not require conversion; rather, her character functions as an indicator of the end point of the story: transformation to a "good," considerate Australian.

16. The construction of Raquel's character provides drama for *Go Back*, allowing for a vivid contrast between racist attitudes and traumatic testimonies. This clear strategic tool on the part of the program's producers, however, was not without problems. Raquel's candid and naive self-representation provoked vilification from viewers. Raquel was heavily derided on Twitter and forum discussions of *Go Back*, and in a follow-up "Q&A"-style episode broadcast a week after the three initial episodes aired, Raquel appeared shaken by the public response to her representation. As abhorrent as her views might seem to most viewers, there are clear ethical issues involved in allowing a formally uneducated and relatively economically disadvantaged young woman to be involved in a media event that was designed to intervene in an inflammatory debate. While Raquel's life narrative is extremely useful to the political aims of *Go Back*, in this context she is nevertheless, in Couser's phrase, a "vulnerable subject."
17. Perera (143) notes that on its website, Sutherland Shire, in which Cronulla beach is located, lays "claim to our Shire being 'the birthplace of modern Australia,'" "because Captain James Cook . . . first set foot on the Australian continent at Kurnell."
18. For a detailed cultural analysis of these riots, see Perera (148–49), who discusses how nationalistic appeals to "homeland" fueled much of this violence:

    > Recruited into the Australian "culture wars," *homeland* becomes the ground where multiple forms of racial terror meet, reinforce, and refract one another. Particular racialized bodies are figured not only as threatening Anglo-Australian identity and interests by their presence in the homeland but also as threatening *national security*. White Australian interests are thus reinforced as the national interest even as the native-ized claims of homeland as a secure and settled space of home are once again threateningly put into question by the hypervisibility of those other bodies uncovered by the very practices of racial surveillance intended to ensure the security of the homeland. On the ground of the headland, homeland culture war becomes race war becomes war on terror." (149)

19. Further, Perera reminds us, the Australian beach has long been a site of colonial trauma and politics:

> in contrast to the asocial world of the European beach fantasy, in Australia the beach is a site that cannot be sequestered from the political life of the state. It encompasses the full weight of politico-historical experience as an arena where vital contests for power, possession, and sovereignty are staged. The beach is both the original scene of invasion and the ultimate border, a site of ongoing racial demarcation and exclusion, as of endless vigilance and fear. . . .
>
> From the re-enactments of Captain Cook's landing on Australia Day to advertising images designed to entice British migrants, the beach stands as the signal achievement of Anglo-Australia. It is the supreme stage for the performance of the national type, the scene where "our way of life" is boldly put on display, even as the unspoken fears and apprehensions that contour the island-nation silently lap around its edges and slowly seep into its waiting sands. (138–40)

20. In using the term "testimony" we follow the work of scholars Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who define it as "bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma" (1), and of Gillian Whitlock, who writes: "Testimony is a political act that works on the emotions, and as a carrier of affect; it shapes how emotions move and shift relationally; it produces and conducts what moves us and makes us feel; it travels on ripples of emotion" (*Soft Weapons* 86). We understand that "witness" can refer to someone who experiences or observes an event and gives testimony, or the second person who witnesses the trauma narrative of another (Douglas and Whitlock). As Smith and Watson observe, "For traumatic testimony to be heard, a sympathetic listener is required to serve as a witness and help redress the psychic isolation that traumatic experience produces" (286).

21. See Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 75. Australia in recent years has seen a plethora of cultural and artistic representations aimed at intervening into the national immigration debate. Novels and fictional films have been produced, such as the 2007 feature film *Lucky Miles*, Shaun Tan's internationally bestselling graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006), and Alan Sunderland's 2006 young adult novel *Refugee: The Diary of Ali Ismail*. Arguably the most influential texts, however, are ones that use forms of life narrative to draw public attention to the topic. Autobiographies, documentaries, websites, public art and letter-writing projects, and other forms of testimony have played a significant role in raising awareness (Douglas, "Lost and Found" 45; Whitlock, "Letters" 203). Such texts form part of a global, historical corpus of life writing and life narrative that has responded to imperial and colonial conditions across a range of contexts. From the "Black Atlantic" (to use Paul Gilroy's term), to post-apartheid South Africa and 1950s India, life narratives have been employed to do important cultural work. For a discussion of how autobiographical representation has played a significant role in forming subjectivity and raising awareness of the realities of life across a variety of colonial contexts see, for example, Gillian Whitlock's *The Intimate Empire* and Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Life Writing*.

22. Whitlock discusses some of the consequences when asylum seekers are denied a voice in the Australian public sphere:

> What happens to testimonial utterance when it struggles to command response as its witnesses move away, to shamelessness, estrangement, and resistance? Some asylum seekers now resort to body language and wound culture. They write graffiti in blood, carve words on skin, and speak with sutured lips. This is a language of desperation and last resort. (*Soft Weapons* 83)

23. Smith and Watson define trauma narrative as "an experience of extreme horror or shock that cannot be incorporated unproblematically within memory" (283). They suggest the pervasiveness of trauma stories within contemporary culture:

> With the intensified recording, archiving, and analysis of traumatic experience during the past two decades, trauma stories of many kinds have come to the fore: of personal experience of violation or abuse; of experience in the Holocaust and other genocidal wars, some told as truth commission hearings or in the memoirs of child soldiers; of dislocation for the children of the "stolen generations" in Australia and the Native people in Alaska and throughout the Americas; and in the testimonies to atrocity of antiwar activists around the world. (284)

Drawing on the work of Cathy Caruth, Leigh Gilmore, and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Smith and Watson discuss the difficulties that narrators may have articulating traumatic experience, its resistance to representation, and the psychological issues that narrators may have accessing and telling stories post-trauma. In their theoretical summary, Smith and Watson discuss psychoanalytic models for thinking about trauma: the possibility that telling stories about trauma might be therapeutic for the teller. Conversely, some theories posit the possibility that a retelling—or being expected to speak—might open old wounds and retraumatize the narrator. Contemporary trauma theorists such as Rosanne Kennedy and Gillian Whitlock consider "social suffering" and "communal" ways in which trauma is experienced, emphasizing the diversity of that experience. Theorists of trauma narratives have also considered how readers who come to "witness" trauma stories may experience forms of transference: coming to know or to feel something of the trauma themselves (Smith and Watson 283–84).

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