

**TWICE FORGOTTEN:
The 'Lost Girls' of Sudan and
Performative Integration into Australia**

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INTRODUCTION:

The good news is the so-called 'Lost Boys of Sudan' have been found. The bad news is, Sudanese girls and young women are still lost, at least in the eyes of the media and popular imagination. Despite the worldwide attention received by the Lost Boys in media, academia and popular culture, Sudanese young women remain relatively invisible. From their refugee experiences, to their long and arduous process of integration into new cultures, the invisibility of Sudanese young women has been noted by advocates and some aid workers, but it fails to enter the scope of most major aid organisations: although an 'estimated 3,000 [females] arrived in Kakuma in 1992, most have simply vanished from official records.'¹ The blindness of aid organisations cannot be attributed to ignorance of the situation. 'UNHCR officials knew about the girls. In December 2000, Julianne Duncan, an anthropologist specializing in refugee children filed a report explaining in heartbreaking detail how the girls were being shafted.'² UNHCR officials used lists of boys who had been counselled through a 'psycho-social program', but neither they nor the US government looked further.

The US has received 3,276 Sudanese boys from this group since 2000. In this same time period, the US received only 89 girls.³

Officials appear not to have questioned the reasons why boys were more prevalent on the lists than girls, or why the girls' needs weren't as apparent as the boys. While the girls were placed in foster families who were supposedly caring for them, more often it seems they remained available unpaid servants and sexually vulnerable. In addition, there is some evidence that the girls were shielded from UNHCR eyes in order to bring the substantial bride-prices that could provide much-needed financial aid to these most destitute of displaced families. As a result of these multiple factors, says journalist Tara McKelvey, 'the girls simply disappeared.'⁴

"In Sudanese culture, a young woman is not allowed to stay alone, but for the guy it's okay," says Adueli Riak. "So what really happened was the young girls were placed in foster homes, and while they were in foster homes they became mothers and housekeepers and got lost along the way."⁵

While the Lost Girls have begun to organise themselves in the United States, the Lost Boys remain the 'superstars' of refugee spokespersons. Even at a national Lost Boys and Girls conference in Arizona (2004), the girls were allocated only a single session out of the two-day event, and this at seven-thirty in the morning, where few Lost Boys (or others) were present to hear their stories.

In this essay, I use both 'Found Girls' and 'Found Women' to remind readers of the vastly different connotations of the terms 'women' and 'girls'. While most former

¹ Ishbel Matheson, 'The 'Lost Girls' of Sudan', *BBC News*, Friday June 7, 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2031286.stm>

² Tara McKelvey, 'Where are the 'Lost Girls'?' *Slate* <http://www.slate.com/id/2089225/> Friday, Oct. 3, 2003

³ Anne Edgerton: 'What About The Lost Girls of Sudan?', *Refugees International*, <http://www.interaction.org/library/detail.php?id=397> March 11, 2002

⁴ Tara McKelvey, 'Where are the 'Lost Girls'?' *Slate* <http://www.slate.com/id/2089225/> Friday, Oct. 3, 2003

⁵ Adueli Riak, interviewed in Abigail Beshkin, 'The Lost Girls of Sudan Try to Tell Their Story, August 31, 2004. (Voice Of America) *PeaceWomen: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*. <http://www.peacewomen.org/news/Sudan/Aug04/lostgirls.html>

refugees who identify as “Lost Girls and Lost Boys” are no longer children, nor are still in a state of wandering or dislocation, the term is familiar worldwide, and carries with it the kind of ‘brand-recognition’ that can often assist fundraising and cause promotion for the Sudanese diasporic community. Although I am aware that many within the Sudanese diaspora use the title with pride and comfort, it is important to remember that it was an appellation originally coined by UN workers at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, to describe vulnerable children in a state of abandonment and distress.

“The label overlooks the resilience of these young people and is not accurate for those who are now adults, but the Sudanese refugees themselves use the term because of its popular recognition.”⁶

Many films and media coverage of the famous Lost Boys’ victories during integration highlight the considerable gains made by them and their helpers in the relatively few years they have lived in the west.

“This success, however, has not been matched by an equally determined effort to resettle their female counterparts. The “Lost Girls” have been neglected by the United States and by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and the time has come to redress this injustice.”⁷

The absence of girls on the UNHCR list for humanitarian relocation to the US was best explained to *Refugees International* by a young “lost girl”: “We girls were not put into groups like the boys. If we had been put into groups, we might have been attacked. We are now in the community, and no one knows where we are.” The girls endured the same traumatic experiences as the boys, but culturally could not be grouped to live by themselves. Like the boys, these girls had also lost their parents, siblings, and homes.

The reality is that these lost girls have been forgotten twice: upon arrival in Kakuma Refugee Camp, and again when the US refugee resettlement program was started.⁸

Veronica Abbas, a Sudanese young woman now living in the United States and active in the Southern Sudanese Women’s Association, has this to say about the girls back in Kakuma: “...the girls at home need help. They need education. You know, they don’t want to be in the kitchen, they don’t want to get married when they are 14, they don’t want to have 10 kids ...and they’re not educated.”⁹

The girls and young women of the Sudanese diaspora, while benefiting from enduring strong cultural and familial connections, bear additional gender renegotiations which men do not, which further complicate their integration, and which frequently go unacknowledged.

Cross-Marked: Sudanese Women Talk Education

Research on Sudanese documentaries reveals more than 25 films on the Sudanese refugee experience made predominantly in the last five years – and only two of these significantly feature the stories of girls or women. Documentary film is increasingly

⁶ Laura DeLuca, ‘Lost Girls of Sudan’ . <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/ex/021508.html> , February 15, 2008.

⁷ “Do Not Forget the Lost Girls of Sudan.” (02/11/2002) Refugees International, A Powerful Voice for Lifesaving Action. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/788/?PHPSESSID=5c...fliegen%3C/a>

⁸ Anne Edgerton: ‘What About The Lost Girls of Sudan?’ , Refugees International, <http://www.interaction.org/library/detail.php?id=397> March 11, 2002

⁹ Veronica Abbas, interviewed by Toyin Adeyemi, Women’s eNews, ‘Lost Girls’ in US Struggle to Find Their Way, 12/24/06. <http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3014/context/archive>

accessible, mobile and highly regarded as a means of disseminating the stories of previously unheard and unseen populations. This popular appeal is one reason why terms such as “Lost Boys and Lost Girls” are so hard to abandon: name recognition, with funders and public sympathy, is powerful. I argue that documentary film, however, also has increasing pedagogical applications, both within and outside of the classroom.

Cross-Marked: Sudanese-Australian Young Women Talk Education is a short film project which seeks to explore the multi-layered issues facing Sudanese young women in their own voices, through their own films telling stories that have for too long gone unheard. *Cross-Marked* is ethnographic research conducted through Victoria University’s School of Education, and as such focuses on the educational experiences of Sudanese young women in Australia. I have chosen to focus on participants between ages 18-25 years expressly because inhabit the liminal space of girls/women, which impacts on the difficulty of their integration.

In Sudan there is no concept of “adolescence” as children over 12 years are regarded as adults, whereas in Australia adolescence is a distinct category. These problems often result in low self-esteem, confusion of identity and experiences of social isolation..¹⁰

Cross-Marked provides Sudanese young women with video cameras, training in film techniques and the opportunity to reconsider their experiences in schools. The multiple stressors working against Sudanese young women remaining and thriving in schools is compounded by a sometimes hostile socio-political context in which both micro- and macrocosmic factors may inhibit these young women from expressing the extent of their hopes, fears, and lived experiences. The Refugee Council of Australia, the peak government body on refugee resettlement issues, identifies ‘...discrimination and racism both within and beyond the school environment’¹¹ as major obstacles to refugee young people persisting with education. The goal of these films is to create an alternative space in which these young women may share with other young people, educationalists, and the general public issues including racism, transitioning from language centres to mainstream schools, ‘performing’ their student roles, and their own and others’ expectations of them. The project uses an arts-based methodology to create an affirming space in which the silent or silenced voices of Sudanese young women might be liberated from school experiences of invisibility or hyper-visibility, and it seeks to re-empower these young women in response to, or *in spite of* their current educational contexts, and to recognise the skills they have developed navigating the largely traditional, hierarchical educative systems into which they are expected to fit successfully.

Still, it is certainly not all bad news for Sudanese young women attempting to forge new identities, voices and lives in Western cultures. The first film in my series of six, *Neir Chi Puj (Educated Girls)*, was co-created with 21-year old Lina Deng who recently completed her VCE. In her film Lina discusses some of these emergent possibilities: the option of becoming a police officer, which would have been impossible in her home country; the many young Sudanese who are successfully navigating university and vocational courses; the new freedoms presented by western cultures. Even within the limited scope of ethnographic documentary film, we can recognise that the costs and benefits of acculturation compete: the stripping away of

¹⁰ Malual (2004), op cit, p 33 cited in *Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program: Community Views on Current Challenges and Future Directions (2008)* p 95.

¹¹ *Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program: Community Views on Current Challenges and Future Directions (2008)* p 43

difference demanded by assimilation/integration, and the currency afforded by difference as the always already 'old' and 'new' selves e/merge. As anthropologist James Clifford reminds us:

“Indeed, modern ethnographic histories are perhaps condemned to oscillate between two metanarratives: one of homogenization, the other of emergence; one of loss, the other of invention.”¹²

While these changed conditions in new countries partially represent increased opportunities for Sudanese young women, they do not come without a price. Many of my participants have gone to great lengths to counter perceptions of Sudanese women as disempowered and subjugated in male-female relationships even within Australia. And while they defend the cultural practice of 'bride price' (paid for young women by the men's families) to non-Sudanese, they simultaneously defend their new freedoms to concerned Sudanese family members who fear they are becoming too westernised and free. The double-bind is clear: integrate and flourish, but not too quickly. For some young Sudanese women, these role tensions are constant and crippling. These ethnographic documentary films which reflect, interpret and educate others draw from the conceptual framework of McLaren's performativity of identity and Moreno's role theory, which likens 'masks' or roles in theatre to the various roles played by individuals in society, in their everyday lives. Moreno's framework acknowledges that these participants have been required to perform roles in their schooling which is both different from their peers (as African young women), and at the same time divergent from their 'lived experience' or home identities (as culturally Sudanese). These multiple roles foreground the interplay of invisibility/hypervisibility, and linguistic/silent; of new Australian and of African young woman. These layers of identity(ies) are enacted within a context of micro-inequities, which serve to remind them of their marginal status as gendered, raced and linguistic minorities. While these young women already experience belonging within strong familial, cultural and linguistic groups, this new role as African-Australian is the most recent layer in complex and emerging diasporic identities. The *Cross-Marked* films provide the participants with the 'powers of observing self' (Blatner, 2002) as a process of considering different and potentially liberating alternatives. It therefore follows that the re-empowerment of being (through film representation), the re-assertion of 'voice' (through storytelling), and the validation through doing (of filmmaking) of these participants can go some way to 'unmasking' them, even to their own new and emergent selves. *Cross-Marked* interrogates the degree to which 'enactments of identity' (Moreno, 1997) can be examined and reversed, to the advantage of the participants (or similar others who may follow) and the non-African 'performers' within the school communities (teachers, peers, administrators). This extends an educational paradigm embedded in a tradition of critical pedagogy (Giroux 1992, McLaren 1996), which encourages students to question dominant systems and theories, and to develop a critical consciousness about their circumstances.

PERFORMATIVE SCHOOLING: Arts Opportunities as a Transitional Tool in Refugee Education

Film theorist and documentarian Ilisa Barbash suggests cultural differences are 'being ceaselessly de-formed and re-formed on your doorstep wherever you are.'¹³ While the

¹² James Clifford. (1988) *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. p 16.

¹³ Ilisa Barbash & Lucien Taylor, (1997) *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos*. Univ of California Press: Berkeley. p 5.

good ethnographic documentarian must be transparent in her place and agency in the filmmaking process, the films will emerge inevitably as records of encounter. 'Subcultures, cultures, and supercultures merge and emerge anew, ceaselessly. In the rough-and-tumble of transnational migration and capitalism, what was exotic yesterday may be domestic today. And what is domestic today may be exotic tomorrow.' (Barbash, p 5). The story of Lina Deng and other Sudanese young women navigating the Australian education system is, simultaneously, the story of the Australian education system navigating its Sudanese students. This complexity comes through in the films. Bochner and Ellis (1996) remind us that autoethnography provides a paradigm through which we can use "another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on [our] own." (1996:22)¹⁴. As Lina's former teacher, this presented opportunities for me to reflect upon the implications of this research for my own teaching practice:

A nice teacher is someone... who gives you chances. A teacher who understands you, who you are, your limitations, your capability... How come whenever I talk she doesn't listen?¹⁵

Lina's commentary indicates the complexity of needs of refugee students, and highlights some reasons why many teachers and refugee students simply avoid each other altogether – for both, it can simply become too hard to listen.

Most documentary film projects can be considered generative research in that they 'listen' to the stories of the participants and 'remain open to emerging notions'¹⁶ of how or why conditions are as they are – and how the conditions and processes of visual ethnographies might generate new opportunities for both engagement and marginalisation (for both students *and* teachers). But life in a new country is hard for former refugees, particularly for Sudanese women who aren't accustomed to speaking their truth publicly.

"In our culture, freedom is not for girls," says Abbas. "Girls are polite and keep quiet. It is hard to have a good life when you think you don't have a voice."¹⁷

After arriving in Australia, Lina Deng was within three months enrolled in fulltime mainstream school. Asked if her three months at language centre was enough, she remained optimistic despite continuing language difficulties:

It was more than enough. I was ready to get out there, just to go to high school because I was excited.¹⁸

Lina's eagerness to get on with the business of education is common among her peers. But the enthusiasm quickly fades when the rigours of school life – and the lack of adequate academic support--begin to register. These shifts in expectations highlight the power of the media for pre-settlement refugees, and the need for additional (and ongoing) educational support in resettlement. These young people arrive with imaginings of what it will be like when they finally, hopefully, get here. What they

¹⁴ A.P. Bochner and C Ellis. (Eds.) 1996. *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. Walnut Creek, Ca: Altamira Press.

¹⁵ Lina Deng, 2008 *Neir Chi Puj (Educated Girls)*, video.

¹⁶ McKenna, Tarquam. Heteronormativity and Rituals of Difference for Gay and Lesbian Educators. University of Western Australia (unpublished), 2004.

¹⁷ Veronica Abbas, interviewed by Toyin Adeyemi, Women's eNews, 'Lost Girls' in US Struggle to Find Their Way, 12/24/06. <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3014/context/archive>

¹⁸ Lina Deng, dir. *My Name Is Silence*. Australia: in production, 2008.

find, though, seldom matches what they saw on television or read about in magazines – particularly for girls.

The dearth of documentation bearing witness to the experiences of Sudanese refugee girls and young women, including *Finding the Lost Girls of Sudan* (2004), a 10-minute university student production, and *A Great Wonder: Lost Children of Sudan*, (2004) (which features two young men and one young woman in their journey of acculturation into American society), act as a stark reminder of the need for tools through which Sudanese young women can make their voices heard.

In Egypt I didn't go to school for almost four years. I don't have that vision of how [Australian] schools work...when I came here it's totally different so I was scared, confused, and not trusting what I'm getting.¹⁹

Despite considerable ambition – sometimes also a source of frustration for teachers – these students often do not show the foundational aptitude or conceptual knowledge to achieve as highly as they--or their teachers--might wish. Dreams of becoming doctors and lawyers often come crashing down as the refugee student realises the many impediments to achieving her goal. Often the hardest part of settlement comes in the second or third year after arrival. This is the beginning of the realisation of how daunting the process of achieving tertiary qualifications is for many – particularly one who has negotiated the kinds of uprootedness and interruption the Sudanese have.

...the main idea (our parents) came here (for) is to educate their children... And for ladies, for girls like me, education is really important...now I realise how important it is.²⁰

Arts-based projects and classroom practice in mainstream schools offer students like Lina performative and non text-based pathways into the core curriculum. At the secondary all-girls school where I teach in Melbourne's western suburbs, we have run a number of arts programs for refugee students including drama, visual art, dance and film projects. Our Beaut Buddies program, which uses peer mentoring to assist transition into the school, has offered hip hop dance classes, where many Sudanese students can excel and teach others – thereby increasing their cultural capital in the school community, and reversing the often continuous cycle of failures they experience in the classroom.

Many of the participants in my film project have identified music and friends as their primary sites of language acquisition. With this in mind, arts programs allow students to optimise their considerable skills beyond limited written and oral language.

These programs allow students from refugee backgrounds informal means of acquiring language, while working with peers and teacher-advisors. They work with community artists and draw from each other's artistic experience. They become teachers rather than lagging students. They can meaningfully incorporate their prior knowledge and experiences into their emerging school experience, thereby bridging the home-school gap and performance of their currently alienated identities. In this way, the 'enactment' of their school identities can be effectively examined – and possibly reversed – to construct critically conscious, empowered students. Most importantly, they have opportunities which – when valued by the school – validate them as equal stakeholders in their educational experiences, and contextualise this process in a more democratic and authentic learning environment for all.

¹⁹ Lina Deng, dir. *My Name Is Silence*. Australia: in production, 2008.

²⁰ Lina Deng in *Neir Chi Puj*. Australia: 2008.

Conclusion

Refugees International²¹ continues to monitor, publicise and advocate on behalf of Sudanese girls and young women, during their refugee experience and after. More research and media attention must be focused on the separate and distinct needs of the 'Found Women of Sudan', both in resettlement and before. These very capable young women must be encouraged to speak their stories, perform their identities in new and changing contexts, must be supported to explore non-traditional areas of self-improvement including education and employment. Refugees International continues to call on other agencies and governments to assist in these daunting tasks, which must become a shared responsibility across our increasingly interconnected communities.

Sudanese artistic and educational projects like *Cross-Marked: Sudanese Women Talk Education* are beginning to take root in Australia, but slowly. A growing number of music, theatre and film projects by young Sudanese men in recent years highlights gender inequities in Sudan and into contemporary African-Australian culture:

Since relatively conservative social standards in Sudan consider education beyond the primary level a male opportunity and prioritize marriage for girls...Male refugees are backed by the cultural expectation that they can, and will, survive any hardship. Female refugees are left with the cultural legacy of dedicating their lives to their families.²²

Role models are crucial in allowing Sudanese young women to begin to envision possible futures for themselves which go beyond traditional female roles back home, and they find them where they can. Lina reminds us that films like *Neir Chi Puj* can provide necessary role models for encouraging young Sudanese women to speak their minds, and that finding voice is a powerful step in navigating the process of true integration.

...Giv[e] opportunities to black young women to explore their ideas...to let [their] minds out there...it could work in many ways.²³

Arts-based pedagogy has radical transformative potential for all those involved with Sudanese-Australian youth in their journey from girls to women, invisible to visible, 'lost' to 'found.' The stronger their own agency can be in reforming and representing themselves as Africans, African-Australians, as women and as former refugees, the better off they - and we - will be.

²¹ Refugees International (no author listed) "Do Not Forget the Lost Girls of Sudan." (02/11/2002) Refugees International, A Powerful Voice for Lifesaving Action.
<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/788/?PHPSESSID=5c...fliegen%3C/a>

²² Toyin Adeyemi, Women's eNews, 'Lost Girls' in US Struggle to Find Their Way', 12/24/06.
<http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3014/context/archive>

²³ Lina Deng, *Neir Chi Puj (Educated Girls)*, Australia, 2008. (video)

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