



Article

'My Dad Was, Is a Soldier': Using Collaborative Poetic Inquiry to Explore Intergenerational Trauma, Resilience, and Wellbeing in the Context of Forced Migration

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Abstract: The topics of intergenerational trauma, resilience, and wellbeing as they relate to forced migration are receiving more attention in the arts and health literature. Yet, we know very little about how refugee-background young adults manage their psychosocial wellbeing when they grow up surrounded by stories of conflict, loss, and trauma. Achol has been writing poetry to represent and amplify the narratives of those around her (parents, family, and the South Sudanese community in Sydney, Australia). These stories are central elements of her lived experience and the diverse experiences of her community. Using collaborative poetic inquiry, this paper identifies key themes in one of her poems, *My dad was, is a soldier*, to illustrate how poetry is an important artistic mode of expression that can improve our understanding of intergenerational trauma, resilience, and wellbeing. Rather than conveying interview data through research poems, we place Achol's poem at the centre of our collaborative poetic inquiry to gain new insights into refugee lived experiences. This paper contributes to contemporary debates on how artistic means enrich our knowledge of psychosocial wellbeing through trauma-informed, culturally safe, and decolonial research methods.

Keywords: intergenerational; trauma; resilience; psychosocial; wellbeing; refugees; poetry; conflict; war



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1. Introduction

There has been considerable research focusing on the short and long-term effects of traumatic events on the mental health of refugee-background individuals in the period preceding migration, during migration and post-migration. The loss of dignity, value and identity, along with the inability to recount their experiences, are some of the commonly discussed effects of traumatic events (e.g., Herman 1997; Bracken 2003; Sigona 2014). However, research examining the effects of parental or older generations' trauma on younger generations, or intergenerational trauma, is relatively limited (Flanagan et al. 2020; Miller and Rasco 2004). This concept of intergenerational trauma, referring to how trauma experienced in one generation affects the health and well-being of future generations (Jeyasundaram et al. 2020; Sangalang and Vang 2017; Bezo and Maggi 2015) suggests that the effects of trauma-related events such as political persecution, war, and mass violence are not only experienced first-hand but can also be passed on or inherited (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop 1998). For instance, these effects can include how family functioning is negatively impacted, leading to an increased risk of negative psychological outcomes and vulnerability to psychosocial distress among the younger generation of refugee-background families (Flanagan et al. 2020; Sangalang and Vang 2017).

A pertinent point in this examination of the effects of traumatic events is how younger generations can negotiate these effects and carry on with their lives in meaningful and effective ways. Here, we are referring to resilience. The concept of resilience is much

debated and its meaning in psychosociological contexts is contested (Hart et al. 2016). We adapt an understanding of resilience that takes into consideration the efforts, choices, and actions of those affected by conflict in navigating their way through the impacts of trauma to sustain their wellbeing (Gitau 2022). Through Achol's poetry, so generously offered, we examine this navigation of intergenerational trauma.

Poetic inquiry refers to the use of poetry in research. It belongs to a cluster of methodological approaches referred to as arts-based methodologies, which include storytelling, drawing, video, photography and performance theatre (Manning 2018). Other terms commonly used in poetic inquiry research are 'found poems', 'data poems', 'poetic transcription' or 'research poems' (see van Rooyen et al. 2021). Poetic inquiry is an effective tool to capture contextual, emotional, and psychological worlds that may otherwise be difficult to convey (van Rooyen et al. 2021). This approach is valued for the political potential of poems through imagery, language, and narrative to "deliver powerful, high impact messaging in a way which can attract and hold the audience's attention" (van Rooyen et al. 2021, p. 326) and can contribute to social change. Importantly, poetry has a long history as a mode of expression in many historically colonised countries "both as a form of resistance to colonial power and as a language form that was deeply implicated in the colonial process" (Eshun and Madge 2012, p. 1398), although the method's potential as a decolonial tool is underexplored.

Poetry is a powerful way to represent lived experiences in forced migration research on topics such as seeking asylum and resettlement (e.g., Jaworski and Scott 2019; Reale 2014). Forced migration researchers can engage in poetic representation (Reale 2014), where they draw from fieldwork transcripts and reflexive journals to create poems based on key themes. Prendergast (2009, p. 545) refers to these poems written from interview transcripts as *vox participare* or participant-voiced poems. These poems differ from *vox autobiographia*, which are researcher-voiced poems written from reflective/creative/autobiographical writing as the data source, i.e., the poet's (researcher's) life experience (Prendergast 2009). In this paper, we engage in the latter type of poem, using poetry as data to explore intergenerational trauma, resilience, and psychosocial wellbeing from a refugee-background poet's perspective. We analysed a poem that Achol wrote in 2021 as the starting point rather than an outcome of data collection and analysis (Furman et al. 2007). It is a different form of 'collaborative poetics' (van Rooyen et al. 2021) to help us develop new understandings of these topics.

We first present Achol's poem, followed by a brief description of our methodology, and a literature review on intergenerational trauma, resilience, and psychosocial wellbeing as they relate to forced migration. We then share our analysis and discuss its implications for understanding these three concepts using trauma-informed, culturally safe, and decolonial research methods.

2. The Poem

My Dad was, is a soldier

*Leathered with frayed
Sudanese Army khaki
Arop Matiop
stumbled along
tripping on roots and limbs*

*Gliding through the clouds
The Antonov danced
Dropping crude barrel
Shattering the screeches of the villagers*

*their white flashes turn night into day
the smell of death assaulted his nostrils*

swallowed by earth,

ashes Aweng became

*when the remnants of Antonov perished
huts and livestock's along with it too
hung like rags, skins and limbs
of children, youth and elderly too*

*Blistered and calloused
Arop Matiop loped barefoot
from Aweng to Kapoeta
Balancing a gach full of ammunitions
On his head*

*When traffic at Merrylands intersection comes to a halt
My vision blurs and
I think of my dad
I think of my dad when I see a tall muonyjang
Koc höth with gaarhom
When I see the lines on his onyx skin
I see of all the lives he had taken then*

*As bullets hailed,
the atrocities he'd seen
shackled his voice.
Arop Matiop strummed his thom
birds sang war chants
winds carried names of the fallen,
bodies upon bodies
they were buried by vultures.*

*On the morning before the mourning
with the crow he rose*

*With grace he attended his ngöl
walking through his dom
elated, he roared
"rap aci luök"
when the sun was pardon*

around the fire brothers sat
Arop Matiop inhaled
*air drenched in *nhom lau**
With an Ak-47 beneath his bed
Arop matiop slept wide eyed
Yet, drunken with trauma
the smell of his decaying
body reeked
*the air of *Kapoeta**

I saw the galaxy in my father's eyes before the
War clouded with vision with cataracts
The warmth in his iron gazed diminished
Dazed Arop Matiop spent his days

By the mango tree whispering to the wind
his stories of wins

My dad was, is a soldier

Achol Arop, 2021

Notes by author:

Arop Matiop: my father's name

Aweng: my father's Village in the Bahr el Ghazal, Twic region

Kapoeta: village located in Eastern Equatoria, Southeastern region of South Sudan

gach: basket used to store sorghum once harvest season is over

Muonyjang: Dinka man

koc höth with gaarhom: as a form of identification, six of the bottom teeth are extracted around the age of puberty, and six marks made from the forehead to the back of the head.

thom: traditional guitar

ngöl: cattle camp

rap aci luök: Sorghum crop that is grown in South Sudan

nhom lau: freedom

3. Methodology

We begin by briefly stating our positionalities. Reflexivity is an ongoing process where researchers and collaborators consciously reflect on how their assumptions shape research relationships, processes, and outcomes (Lenette 2022). Here, we position ourselves in relation to the topic of this paper to state how our privileges and identities affect our approach.

Lydia Wanja Gitau

I am a migrant woman from East Africa, living in the land of the Darug first nations people in Western Sydney, and working in the land of Gadigal peoples, both unceded territories. I have been living here since 2012 when I migrated to study at the University of Sydney. I have been very privileged to work amongst people from refugee backgrounds

in Western Sydney, and for a brief time in regional New South Wales. I am continually learning, reflecting, and being challenged to work in ways that are respectful and conscious of our varied experiences. I am committed to decolonising methodologies of working with refugee populations.

Achol Arop

I am a South Sudanese refugee who has been living on the land of the Darug Nation since 2005. As a first-generation Australian, I am living through the second-hand experience of trauma and identity crises as a result of what my family, both extended and immediate, community and the rest of South Sudanese have endured for many years. Through my poetry, I have become the voice and storyteller, unearthing atrocities that have long been buried by my people.

Caroline Lenette

I am an uninvited first-generation migrant-settler living and working on colonised and unceded Aboriginal land since 2005, with English as a second language. I am a woman with brown skin, a 'visible minority' in a white-majority country. I have privileges as an academic in a full-time, ongoing role, living in an affluent suburb and country. My lived experiences differ greatly from that of the people I collaborate with in refugee research projects. I value participatory methodologies because of my commitment to social and gender justice, and because of my moral responsibility as a migrant-settler woman scholar to decolonise research.

Our approach: Collaborative poetic inquiry

While there is much value in developing poems from interview transcripts and reflexive journals (i.e., poems 'found' in data), we used a different process whereby we began our analysis with Achol's existing poem to engage in our collaborative poetic inquiry. Our collaborative process began in early 2021 in an informal community engagement setting with Achol sharing with Gitau some of her poems. This led to several conversations between Gitau and Acholon using poetry to recount the refugee background people's lived experiences of trauma, while Achol continued writing poetry, including the poem at the centre of this research. Achol then shared this poem with Gitau and Lenette, who then met to analyse the poem using critical discourse analysis (CDA). Gitau and Lenette then met online with Achol to share their analysis. Meanwhile, Achol wrote her individual reflection on the poem and shared it with Gitau and Lenette. All three authors then met to put the analysis and reflections together.

This collaborative process 'challenges traditional relationships between researchers and participants, claiming that participants are just as entitled to shape the representation of their experience within the wider work, and indeed are partners in the poetic process' (Manning 2018, p. 745), or more accurately, co-researchers. The approach is well suited for researchers who work with people from historically marginalised communities and who are committed to doing transformative research that promotes social justice. In practice, this process meant blurring the gap between researcher and participant to collectively reflect on the marginalised aspects of identity (Attias and Reeves 2021).

Our approach to collaborative poetic inquiry is trauma-informed, which implies showing sensitivity, empathy, and understanding to the possibility that trauma may be part of people's experiences and may shape their present context (Knight 2015). This means that participants or co-researchers may choose to narrate traumatic experiences if they wish to do so. They can choose what stories to bring into the research context on their own terms and in their own time (Lenette 2019). Our approach is culturally safe, which means that it "challenges detrimental 'top-down' research paradigms that can diminish rich narratives and worldviews, as a strategy to decolonise methodologies" (Lenette 2022, p. 3).

4. Literature Review

4.1. Intergenerational Trauma

Increasingly, research shows that the trauma experienced in one generation could affect the mental health and wellbeing of succeeding generations, that is, as intergenerational

trauma (Bezo and Maggi 2015; Jeyasundaram et al. 2020; Sangalang and Vang 2017). For people from refugee backgrounds, this means that the effects of traumatic events such as war, mass violence, persecution, torture, and separation from loved ones, are not only experienced first-hand but can also be passed on to subsequent generations (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop 1998) across time and locations. Studies suggest that intergenerational trauma manifests in various ways among people from refugee backgrounds, including family dynamics such as parent-child detachment, role reversal, greater family conflict, and reduced family cohesion (Field et al. 2013; Davidson and Mellor 2001; Westerink and Giarratano 1999). Children from refugee backgrounds are also said to demonstrate high levels of depressive symptoms, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, attention deficits, low self-esteem, general fear and distrust of people, and antisocial behaviour (Daud et al. 2005; Lev-Wiesel 2007; Sangalang and Vang 2017). However, these studies fail to account for culturally specific expressions of distress (Pedersen 2002), which could greatly influence the way intergenerational trauma is experienced and expressed among refugee communities.

Drawing from Danish databases, Fazel (2019) found that, out of 100,000 refugees examined over 20 years (1995–2015), refugee children with parents with PTSD had more psychiatric diagnoses, particularly nervous disorders, than those whose parents did not have a diagnosis. However, most of the existing data are derived from Holocaust survivors, and survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia (Fazel 2019). In fact, 14 of the 20 studies examined in a systematic review on intergenerational trauma were conducted with the children of Holocaust survivors, four studies examined survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide, while two studies drew from the traumatic events encountered by refugees in Sweden from the Middle East (Sangalang and Vang 2017). This systematic review also established that there is a need for the development of an evidence-base regarding what element/s of trauma is/are transmitted across generations, and how transmission occurs among specific groups. This evidence could inform the development of culturally safe and supportive policies and programs for refugee families. Further, the review identified the meaning of trauma, the psychological impact of parents' experiences, and losses, and what these meant for the next generation, as pertinent themes. Kronick et al. (2021) also identified substantial gaps in mental health research on refugees and asylum seekers, including the need to adopt decolonising, participatory methods; further development of frameworks for studying the broad impacts of forced migration that go beyond PTSD and the need for longitudinal studies on refugee adaptation.

Wijeyasuriyar (2018) examined intergenerational trauma in the Tamil Canadian community and discussed the complex interplay of inherited fears that can be traced back to the conflict of the Sri Lankan civil war, and the arduous process of refugee determination the Tamils must endure to prove their identity and need for protection. This interplay is further compounded by the absence of open discourse about emotions that appears to persist within Tamil families. Dalgaard and Montgomery (2017) also referred to this complexity in their qualitative study on the transmission of trauma among refugees from the Middle East in Denmark. Referring to a 'stressor pile-up', the authors described how the everyday problems of physical illness, financial problems, worries about family in their country of origin, worries about residency permits, children with disabilities, and family housing situations compounded the traumatic past and post-traumatic symptoms. In addition, Dalgaard and Montgomery (2017, pp. 290–291) discussed a phenomenon known as the 'parentification of children' within refugee families, referring to the role reversal whereby children take up caregiving roles towards their parents and serve as 'cultural brokers' or mediators between their families and established communities in their countries of refuge.

4.2. Understanding Resilience and Trauma

In the same way, trauma may affect subsequent generations, and psychosocial healing processes can impact countless generations of refugees (Fazel 2019). Sangalang and Vang's (2017, p. 753) review supports this point and recommends that 'future research should consider the inclusion of positive outcomes, such as forms of resilience and post-traumatic

growth, in order to bolster protective factors and account for strengths with refugee families across generations'. This is, however, controversial given how the meaning of resilience itself has been contested (Hart et al. 2016), that is, the criticism that this notion appears to serve a neoliberal agenda by accommodating adversity. The neoliberal subject is 'a resilient, humble, and disempowered' individual who cannot change or resist the conditions they find themselves in in the world, but bears the responsibility to accept, accommodate and adapt to these conditions to grow and prosper (Chandler and Reid 2016, p. 3). van Breda (2018, p. 3) points out that 'resilience to chronic adversity draws for extended periods on a well of resources that is not limitless', which eventually dries out. Bottrell (2009, p. 335) calls for limits in these contexts, asking, 'to what extent will adversity be tolerated on the assumption that resilient individuals can and do cope? How much adversity should resilient individuals endure before social arrangements rather than individuals are targeted for intervention?'. In light of this criticism, it is important to consider creative ways that people from refugee backgrounds navigate the effects of traumatic events to sustain their wellbeing, including resistance to conforming to descriptions of trauma and resilience. Further, inconsistency in how trauma is conceptualised and assessed among refugee families limits the reliability of research findings. As Sangalang and Vang (2017, p. 752) point out, the oft-applied "[m]edicalized conceptualization of trauma (...) may not account for culturally specific expressions of distress or the broader social, political, and historical context in refugees' countries of origin (e.g., colonialism, natural disaster, social oppression)".

The construct of PTSD for instance has been given much weight in refugee research, but PTSD as a diagnostic category does not tell us much about refugee experiences, meaning that there is a need to widen established understandings and look at other dimensions of distress (Kronick et al. 2021, p. 151). An example of these other dimensions is Bruck et al.'s (2021) survey of sleep disturbances among South Sudanese refugees in Australia and its underlying mechanisms, and how different factors interact to create those disturbances. Hocking (2021, p. 151) similarly noted that asylum seekers' "social suffering" resists a psychiatric framing and requires what she calls a "psycho-social-political lens".

4.3. Psychosocial Wellbeing

Psychosocial wellbeing, broadly defined, refers to the emotional or psychological wellbeing of a person, as well as social and collective well-being (Eiroa-Orosa 2020). Psychosocial wellbeing seems to define the quality of life and is a core concept in mental health debates. As Eiroa-Orosa (2020) further notes, people live in complex environments where the determinants of psychosocial wellbeing are multivariate, and as such, researchers need to consider the different contexts of their studies and the complexity of various interactions within these contexts. This underlines the importance of a culturally sensitive understanding of mental health, as refugees' understandings of mental health differ within and across cultures and refugees are not a homogeneous group (Gitau et al. 2022).

The medical approach used for mental health and the search for cultural equivalence of emotional terms to describe a person's mental state has been problematic in refugee research. Some studies have found that refugees may not appreciate the medical framing of their mental health state and may prefer support that addresses their social and practical needs (Fozdar 2009; Savic et al. 2016; Sullivan et al. 2020). For instance, while violence and trauma may have an ongoing impact on many individuals and communities from refugee backgrounds, individuals and communities may not self-identify as trauma 'victims' or survivors, and may prioritise other areas of their lives that need attention, or may have strategies in place for self-management (Gitau et al. 2022). This calls for taking what Sullivan et al. (2020, p. 22) call a "culturally responsive" or "critically conscious" approach to intervention and the identification and mobilisation of resources that are based on different cultural approaches to mental health.

A critically conscious and reflexive approach to mental health in turn calls for decolonising methodologies in research with people from refugee backgrounds. Kronick

et al. (2021, pp. 149, 151) aptly point out that research in the field has been mostly *about* refugees and migrants rather than *with* refugee communities. They conclude that participatory community-based psychosocial support is needed to understand “displacement as a context-laden human experience”. To address this issue, Lenette (2022, pp. 47, 51) advocates for a decolonial approach to research that involves the participation of refugee background people as co-researchers, thus addressing the “unequal power relationships and structures that silence and ignore [their] perspectives”. This approach calls for researchers to be humble, honest, curious, and reflexive, taking the position of co-learners with the group they wish to collaborate with. This approach aligns with the ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ research framework, which Bartlett et al. (2012) outline for research in collaboration with Indigenous communities, based on their personal experiences in research with the First Nations community of Ewipkek in Canada. The ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ framework is a collaboration between researchers and the community that privileges the community’s ways of knowing over researchers’ agenda.

5. The Analysis

Achol, as the author of the poem, wrote a short reflection focussing on what motivated her to write the poem, and what stories she wanted to share through these words. Gitau and Lenette analysed Achol’s poem using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a way of taking a deeper look at the text or discourse, to try and understand how language connects to social, cultural, and political power structures. CDA involves looking at the social problems embedded in the subject material (such as a text or poem) and aims to actively intervene in, or challenge power relations that shape these social issues.

This method of analysis was first developed by Fairclough (2010), who lamented that contemporary linguistic theories paid insufficient attention to the applications of language in perpetrating and perpetuating injustices. He called for linguistics with a social conscience using a three-dimensional framework for studying discourse: analysis of spoken or written language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution, and consumption), and analysis of discursive events as instances of socio-cultural practice. CDA considers the social aspect of utterances in terms of the political situation on the ground, paying attention to the relationships between all the parties of the discourse and to the political, social, and economic conditions that affect the language used (Chilton 2004). As outlined below, we adopted CDA to: (i) establish the context of the poem; (ii) explore the process of writing the poem; (iii) identify the key themes; (iv) examine the structure of the text; (v) identify the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms and (vi) identify cultural references. This process informed our reflections on the implications of collaborative poetic inquiry for arts and health research, refugee studies, and trauma-informed methods.

5.1. Achol’s Reflection

One of the longest wars recorded in history is the Sudan civil war which lasted 22 years and claimed millions of innocent lives. Fortunately, my father Arop Matiop was one of the soldiers who is still alive today, but his innocence died the day he picked up an AK-47. The poem *My Dad was, is a Soldier* tells the tale of many if not all, both fallen and living soldiers. When I first wrote this poem, it was a dedication to my father but as I completed the poem, the mental health aspect and consequences of trauma that I had woven in became very apparent. Trauma then became the bigger focus of the poem. Although the war had ended in 2005, my father was and is still fighting a battle with himself like many traumatised soldiers. I wrote this piece with pride and joy in my heart knowing my father fought for a land we call our home today, a land which claimed millions of lives and yet my father is still standing. However, upon realising the aftermath and the mental state of my father, I was very saddened about the way he was robbed of his innocence, his future, childhood, robbed of family members. The anger I felt surpassed the sadness as I realised our (South Sudan) government has little to no regard when it comes to veterans. Completing and

reflecting on this poem has been an emotional rollercoaster. I am grateful to have a hero as a father but saddened by all the loss around him.

5.2. First Part: The Reality of Conflict and War

The title of the poem makes it explicit who the poet is referring to, her Dad, Arop Matiop. The poet names him with a sense of pride and attachment. He is very much recognisable in his South Sudanese Army uniform, the Khaki. Right from the start, we see the South Sudanese resistance theme. The South Sudan conflict is among the longest violent conflicts in Africa, as Achol points out in her reflection, comprising three civil wars (Young 2019). The Second Civil War, which is the context of this poem, began in 1983 between the central Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) when then-president Gaafar Nimeiry imposed Sharia Law across the nation and abolished the mostly Christian Southern Sudan Autonomous Region. In response, rebels from South Sudan formed the Southern Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang, to fight the central government in Khartoum. Roughly two million people died because of the war, famine and disease caused by the conflict. The poet's Dad, Arop Matiop, fought in this war.

The poet refers to her Dad's uniform as "frayed", indicating its tired and worn-out state. She refers to her Dad as "stumbling along", which indicates he has been doing this for a long time, "tripping on roots and limbs", suggesting that he is having to step over dead bodies. The poet reveals the horrific nature of what her father and fellow soldiers had to encounter as soldiers. She does not just glorify his being a soldier but shows the traumatic reality of conflict.

The poet refers to the Antonov, a Russian plane used to bomb the villages, in the second stanza. We see the imposition of power and destruction from the sky and the relative helplessness of the villagers down below on the receiving end of violence. In talking about the destruction resulting from the Antonov bombing, the poet mixes livestock and humans, painting a picture of the remnants—bits and pieces of animals, humans and houses scattered all over the place. She is not afraid to name and paint a picture of horror and destruction to the level of scattered limbs.

The poet goes back to her Dad, as she keeps doing throughout the poem. She refers to his blisters and callouses, indicating that he has been walking for a long time, over a long journey. She mentions the weight he must carry, a basket full of ammunition. This signifies the physical weight and scars he carries and the emotional weight and scars he bears.

The poet then depicts the never-ending nature of war. Her father may be breathing freedom, but the gun, AK-47, is always there. And he sleeps 'wide-eyed', which is reminiscent of soldiers not being able to sleep, being on edge, and always ready for attack.

5.3. Second Part: Intergenerational Trauma and Identity

From the scene of war and destruction and its effects, the poet brings us to Merrylands, Sydney. And here, she brings herself in, halfway through the poem. She describes her reaction to her dad, and what he has gone through. We sense her affection for him. She sees him in every Dinka man in Merrylands. She states her identity—identifying herself with her father, her race, her community. She situates her community in Merrylands, a specific place in Sydney where many South Sudanese community members and other refugee background people live. She refers to her father's six extracted teeth, as well as the marks on his forehead that identify his origins and age group. She refers to her dad's 'onyx skin', identifying his, and her race as black. This connection with her dad indicates that what has happened to him continues to affect her and her generation. He has passed on trauma to the children in the same way he would pass on family values and traditions.

We sense her sadness at seeing the lines on her dad's skin, indicating the lives he has taken. The lines are external markers of brutality, harsh reminders of the realities of war. She is visual in her depiction of death, destruction and decay. The shackled voice indicates that her dad is not free to say what he'd like to say. He is limited. But he can express himself using the *thom*, the traditional guitar.

She continues with this theme of trauma. Her Dad's stargaze, his dreams and fantasies, are clouded, his strong iron-gaze diminished to a dazed appearance. Her dad appears to be stuck in the past.

*...whispering to the wind
his stories of wins*

The phrase "was, is" in the title ('My Dad was, is a soldier') suggests the ongoing nature of her father's entanglement in conflict and trauma. He never leaves the role of soldier, and it never leaves him.

For Arop Matio to be alive, he has had to take lives. Here, the poet makes us see things from her dad's perspective. By describing what her father did, the poet evokes what he saw:

*... the atrocities he'd seen
shackled his voice*

It is almost as if he is not part of the action. He is a mere witness now. Perhaps the poet is trying to make us, the readers, empathise with her dad.

The poet uses a play of words:

*On the morning before the mourning
with the crow he rose*

She depicts positive qualities of her Dad. She wants us to understand how she sees her Dad—even though he has taken lives, he also attends to his tasks, rises early, and attends to mundane everyday activities. Despite his past actions, he is also full of grace, integrity, commitment and responsibility. In the line:

when the sun was pardon

the poet gives the role of forgiveness to the sun, as though it does not matter if others have not forgiven him. Nature has.

5.4. Stylistic Choices

5.4.1. Juxtaposition and Contrast

In the first two lines, the poet paints a picture of the planes "gliding" through the clouds, and performing a dance, and the following lines refer to war, destruction and suffering. This is an example of how she juxtaposes something poetic, lyrical and evocative, with something brutal and violent.

By painting a picture of the effects of war, the poet uses contrast to describe the physical weight versus the emotional weight her dad carries, as the basket that traditionally carried food (*gach*) now carries ammunition. It was used to sustain life, but it is now used to destroy life. She uses stark contrast in bringing us from the scene of the war to Merrylands in Sydney. The reference to traffic contrasts with the walking she just described in the lines:

*When traffic at Merrylands intersection comes to a halt
My vision blurs and
I think of my dad*

Referring to music, she contrasts the hailing of bullets and atrocities to the strumming of the traditional guitar, birds singing, and the wind blowing. But the birds are singing war chants and the winds are carrying names of the dead. She contrasts beauty with death, and the poetics of life, with destruction.

5.4.2. The Senses

When she describes destruction, the poet uses the senses of hearing, sight and smell—"screeches of the villagers", "white flashes", and "smell of death". She helps us engage our senses so we can hear, see and smell, to imagine what it was like to be there. The poet's words are evocative, particularly of the sense of smell. The "air drenched in freedom",

“decaying body”, “reeked the air of Kapoeta”. But she goes back to her Dad because the story is about him. We can imagine the smell, but it is actually “his nostrils” that smelt death.

The idea of decay is very strong. No matter where one is, the smell of death follows. One cannot get rid of it, even after moving to safety. It seems that, although he is physically alive, part of Arop Matiop is dead.

5.4.3. Use of Dinka Language

The poet intersperses the use of English with words and phrases in her Dinka language. This underlines her sense of identity as a Dinka and highlights the depth of meaning present in these expressions. It seems this depth of meaning would not be captured in full if she relied only on the English language in a poem that is so personal. We can grasp the impact of the *gach* being used to carry ammunition instead of sorghum, the distinctiveness of a *muonyjang* (tall Dinka man) in the streets of Merrylands. We also sense the importance of the *Koc höth with gaarhom* as a mark of rites of passage and a form of identification for adult Dinka men, and the meaning of freedom in the phrase *nhom lau*.

6. Discussion

6.1. Poetry as an Accurate Depiction of Reality

A key aspect of our analysis is how poetry depicts war and conflict for what it is, in all its ugly details, acknowledging its gruesomeness and recognising its intense and continuing impact on those who were caught up in it. Referring to understandings of suicide using poetry, [Jaworski and Scott \(2019, p. 210\)](#) highlight that “poetry. . . will not produce concrete truths or certainties” in the way other methods might, and argue that human experiences “cannot be entirely contained by the logic of language”. However, here we see that there is an element of creative licence to name the un-nameable, in a more direct way than if a question-answer research model was used. Achol’s poetry conveys reminders of death that pervade every aspect of the life of survivors, for example, when the poet refers to how destroyed livestock, people, livelihoods, and lives combine to make the communal debris in their land. This depiction of the destruction of land and livelihoods is suggestive of geopoetics, a process of ‘rewriting, reordering, refreshing the world through poetry’ ([de Leeuw and Magrane 2019, p. 146](#)), while recognising the significance of land, place, landscape, and nature, as well as the cultural and social situatedness from which a poet writes ([Magrane 2021](#)).

With this depiction of the reality of war, poetry offers the opportunity for culturally relevant expressions of distress ([Pedersen 2002](#)) that, as we stated above, are lacking in studies on refugee trauma ([Daud et al. 2005](#); [Lev-Wiesel 2007](#); [Sangalang and Vang 2017](#)). In instances where South Sudanese people (or many others from refugee backgrounds) may not appreciate the medical framing of their mental health state ([Fozdar 2009](#); [Savic et al. 2016](#); [Sullivan et al. 2020](#)), the poem offers an alternative artistic expression of distress. This constitutes a culturally safer strategy than what medical settings and assessments prioritise in a question-answer environment.

The depiction of reality is made possible because poetry allows us to approach happenings from the edge, deftly, safely, but accurately. Poetry is an effective method to explain how the picture of death is what one sees when they close their eyes to sleep, and the smell of death is what reaches their nostrils every time they take a breath. Death is always present even once someone lives in a different, faraway location (in this case, Merrylands in Sydney, Australia), and despite the passing of time.

Rather than use mere words, the poet ‘performs’ a dance for us with the words, with planes “Gliding through the clouds” and “dancing” towards the utter destruction of the villages and the inhabitants. She engages our senses, and we *hear* the “screeches of the villagers” as the destruction takes place, *see* the “white flashes turn night into day”, and have “the *smell* of death’ in our nostrils. She *paints a picture* of “huts and livestock”, “rags,

skins and limbs”, “children, youth and elderly”, “bullets”, and “bodies” buried in the destruction, and we can almost *hear* the “birds” singing “war chants”.

6.2. Poetry to Express Identity

Identity is a major casualty of trauma. In this poem, the poet identifies and fortifies aspects of her father’s identity, her own identity and that of her South Sudanese community. Even in the pain and frailty her dad suffers because of war, the poet points to aspects of his identity that remain intact. For example, she focuses on her Dad’s feet, referring to the blisters and callouses he has from walking for long distances barefoot. The image of feet, of walking, and the long journey that Arop Matioop took, is a common imagery reminiscent of many who fled conflict. A well-known example is the journey of the ‘The Lost Boys’, a group of about 20,000 young boys who fled South Sudan via Ethiopia and walked for more than 1000 km, arriving in Kakuma Refugee Camp in 1992 (Luster et al. 2008). The walking became a strong symbol of their identity.

Parts of her Dad’s identity that remain intact include his ‘onyx skin’ (black race) and his connection with his South Sudanese culture evident in the ‘*Koc höth with gaarhom*’, a connection that the poet relates with pride and connects to herself. Despite the pain these elements are associated with, she relates these aspects of her culture with pride. Her father has passed on the pride of their South Sudanese identity alongside the pain, suffering, loss, and trauma he experienced. This pride is further depicted in the use of the poet’s native language, Dinka. Language is a fundamental aspect of one’s identity and is the means by which the innermost aspects of self are conveyed from generation to generation.

These elements of the poem indicate the nuanced nature of intergenerational trauma and how the effects of war are not only experienced first-hand but can also be passed on to subsequent generations, across time and locations (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop 1998). In the mixture of pain and pride that the poet describes, we see a negotiation that enables her, and other refugee background people of her generation, to navigate their way through the impacts of trauma and sustain their wellbeing, which is what Gitau (2022) refers to as resilience.

6.3. Poetry to Connect with the Audience

Our response as the audience or witnesses of the poet’s expressions is important to her. She appeals to our appreciation and empathy. She wants us to see things from her Dad’s perspective, to understand why he did what he did, to acknowledge his pain and the pain of those he represents, to see “the atrocities he’d seen”, and hear his “shackled voice”. Through this poetry, we are invited to take on a ‘prosthetic memory’, which Griffiths (2014, p. 454) defines as a memory of a past through which we did not live, but which helps shape our attitudes and responses.

Our engagement with the story and our response inform the meaning-making of all these experiences, so deep they call for telling. She wants us to listen and hear her (Dad’s) side of the story. This involves what Lenette (2019, p. 70) has elsewhere referred to as “listening with intent” to the narratives and strategies that refugee-background people as knowledge holders convey. It is an exercise in power diffusion, where “those in positions of power need to listen to the experiences of others who do not typically experience the same power”. In this example, we listen to what Arop Matioop and the poet say about their experiences and recollections of the war, to what trauma means to them, to what parts of the war remain with them still, and to the strategies they use to navigate their way through trauma. As Prendergast (2009, p. 550) puts it,

Poetry and inquiry ask us to listen deeply. We must put ourselves in the context: we must feel, taste, hear what someone is saying. Sometimes we must learn to listen under the words, to hear what is not being said. We must be empathetic, aware, non-judgemental, and cautious.

This intent listening is part of a decolonial turn, a critically conscious and reflexive approach in which refugee-background people are active participants in the process rather

than simply subjects of the research (Kronick et al. 2021; Lenette 2019). Intent listening disrupts the ‘unequal power relationships’ that Lenette (2022, p. 47) notes tend to either silence or ignore refugees’ perspectives. To engage meaningfully with such a poem as an important counter-narrative to dominant outsider gazes into refugee lived experiences, audiences must pay attention to who leads the storytelling, and what aspects of their life they are willing to share. It requires a conscious decision to move away from perspectives that do not reflect the experiences of people from refugee backgrounds but misappropriates them.

6.4. Poetry as a Political Tool

Another aspect that the analysis highlights is how powerful and wealthy nations can take advantage of countries experiencing conflict, and the capitalist urge to explore instability and fragility for their benefit. Specifically, the poet mentions the use of Antonovs, Russian planes used to bomb Southern Sudan villages during the war. The casualties in these instances were villages, families, communities, and all their livelihoods, as we see in the poet’s descriptions. Subtly, the poem shows the continued legacy of colonialism, with the poet’s Dad being a victim of a war that he did not choose to fight, and civilians suffering the impact of a war they are powerless to stop. In this way, the poem serves as a form of resistance to those who misuse power, in the same way, poems have previously been used “as a form of resistance to colonial power” in many historically colonised countries (Eshun and Madge 2012, p. 1398). Indeed, many researchers who use poetic inquiry do so “in the hope that resonance with the poem and engagement of the emotions can inspire and encourage at least some readers toward social action” (Manning 2018, p. 743).

While the “resilient person”, according to the critique of resilience described above, is seen as a “humble and disempowered” individual who cannot change or resist the conditions they find themselves in (Chandler and Reid 2016, p. 3), here we see the poet creatively navigating the effects of traumatic events. She resists conforming to conventional descriptions of trauma and instead describes her Dad’s strength, his “wins”, the “grace” with which he attends his duties, and the fact that he “was”, and still “is” a soldier, still fighting. This depiction is possible because of the creative space poetry has given her.

7. Conclusions

Our collaborative analysis suggests the potential of poems and poetic inquiry in broadening the understanding of intergenerational trauma. We recognise that mere words are sometimes not enough to bear witness to the intensity of the trauma experienced in war. Further research could explore creative, generative engagements led by refugee background co-researchers to widen the understanding of intergenerational trauma, resilience and psychosocial wellbeing, and to inform the development of culturally safe and supportive policies and programs for refugee communities.

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