Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda

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Publication Details
CHAPTER ONE

On August 28 2001, with the front page headline, ‘KEEP OUT Boat people not our problem: PM’ 9 The West Australian announced that the Federal Government had denied permission for the Norwegian freighter, the Tampa, to enter Australian waters. It was carrying 438 asylum seekers. The newspaper provided a further two pages coverage and also dedicated its editorial to the issue. Over the subsequent three days the newspaper dedicated its front page and no less than an additional twenty reports and/or features to the issue including two further editorials. The extent of the coverage arguably reflected the importance of the issue to the Australian community and, as history shows, certainly assisted the federal government in its efforts to win a third term in power.

Figure 1: Front page of The West Australian, August 28, 2001

Analysis of *The West Australian*’s coverage of the Tampa affair and the subsequent fall out reveals several points of interest regarding the way the incident and the group of asylum seekers involved were represented. Also of interest are the ways the Tampa incident was contextualised and the manner in which asylum seekers and refugees in general were represented.

Stuart Hall, who has dedicated much of his career to considering the nature and practice of representation, asserts that representations operate as both a concept and a practice.\(^\text{10}\) Furthermore, according to Hall, the purpose of representational practice is to fix meaning. Images potentially offer a variety of meanings and representation acts to intervene ‘in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one.’\(^\text{11}\) In the context of print media, the practice of representation is often performed by captions or headings. According to Roland Barthes, frequently it is the caption which privileges one out of many possible meanings from the image and anchors it with words.\(^\text{12}\) An example of this operation is visible in the previously cited front page of *The West Australian* (28 August, 2001). Beneath the heading ‘KEEP OUT Boat people not our problem: PM’\(^\text{13}\) is an image of the Norwegian freighter the Tampa. On the right hand side of this image is a sketch of the west coast of Australia, labelled “Australia”; slightly above this is Indonesia and the surrounding South East Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo and East Timor. Just south of the southern border of Indonesia, Christmas Island is identified. The reader is informed in the story that ‘the ship was anchored just outside Australian waters off Christmas Island’\(^\text{14}\) and that Prime Minister Howard ‘had refused entry to Australian ports. The matter was for Indonesia and Norway to solve’.\(^\text{15}\) The message relayed to the readers of *The West Australian* through the image was that the Tampa was the responsibility of Indonesia. Its location, as identified through the sketch map, was clearly much closer to the border of Indonesia than mainland Australia. The visual representation failed to convey the proximity of the Tampa to the Australian satellite territory of Christmas Island. That this was the


\(^\text{11}\) *ibid.*, p.228.

\(^\text{12}\) *ibid*


\(^\text{14}\) *ibid*

\(^\text{15}\) *ibid*
representation privileged by *The West Australian* is confirmed by the sub-heading, ‘Boat people not our problem: PM’.

To the left of the image of the Tampa was a photo of the captain of the Tampa, Captain Arne Rinnan. Immediately to the right of this photo, the following words, attributed to him appeared: ‘I’m not sure what would have happened if we took them back but they didn’t want to go and it could have been ugly’. The ‘they’ to whom the captain was referring were the asylum seekers aboard the Tampa. The event to which he was referring was reported in the following manner by *The West Australian*: ‘The rescue took place outside of Australian waters but the Tampa, which was on its way from Fremantle to Singapore, headed for Australia after the boat people used threats to stop the captain taking them to Indonesia on Sunday night.’ The words of Captain Rinnan and those of journalists Mairi Barton and Sean Cowan combine to represent the Asylum seekers as a threat. The inclusion of Captain Rinnan’s predictions that things ‘could have been ugly’ reveals the paper’s willingness to use speculation to represent the issue, and its use certainly reveals a bias in the journalists’ reporting of the incident. While readers are informed of Captain Rinnan’s fears regarding the asylum seekers’ possible actions, they are not informed of the possible fears of the asylum seekers; fears which one may deduce were considerable. The report does quote a member of the company who owned the Tampa, who hints at their desperation when he states that ‘They say they don’t have anything to lose’. However, there is a noticeable lack of investigation into why the asylum seekers were so desperate ‘that a big number had started a hunger strike.’ The lack of focus on what Peter Mares calls the ‘push factors’, the reasons asylum seekers flee from their homeland, portrays asylum seekers as desperate to the point of irrationality. The lack of context in reporting—which is bemusing since the same paper routinely reports on the troubles in the Middle East—can have a considerable impact upon the manner in which asylum seekers are represented and thus perceived by the population:

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16 *ibid*
17 *ibid*
18 *ibid*
19 *ibid*
20 *ibid*
21 *ibid*
Media reports rarely put Australia’s “crisis” in this international context. We seem to be fixated by the pull factors—the attraction that brings people to Australia—rather than the push factors that force them to leave their homes in the first place. There is little analysis of why it is now Afghans and Iraqis seeking to come to Australia, rather than the Vietnamese, or Chinese or Khmer, who made up the previous four peaks on the boat-arrival charts. Could it be that they come here for the same reasons that they seek refuge in other countries? In 1999 more than 50,000 people from Iraq and Afghanistan sought asylum in Europe.²³

*The West Australian*’s reporting on the Tampa incident gave little treatment to these push factors. One article, *Vineyard Heaven for Afghan Group*²⁴ did mention some of the reasons a particular group of Afghans, who had since been accepted as refugees, fled their homeland. The gist of the article, however, focused on their happiness at being accepted into Australia, which was described as heaven.

The reporting of the Tampa incident by *The West Australian* was noticeable for its lack of focus on the human face of the issue. The majority of the reporting related to the way Australia was affected by the issue or conveyed the message that Australia was a country under siege, fighting to protect its sovereignty. This was demonstrated by the front page of *The West Australian*’s August 31 edition which led with the headlines: ‘CALL FOR HELP’ and ‘PM turns to UN in boat crisis’.²⁵ The face of a somber Mr Howard is framed by these headlines as well as quotes from the *Irish Independent*, which calls Australia ‘heartless’, *The Financial Times* and *The Times*, which defend Australia’s right to protect its sovereignty. The reported use of the SAS in the conflict further heightened the sense that Australia was a country under siege. It is a perception that was arguably consolidated by the use of headlines such as ‘Ship Seized’, ‘SAS enforces orders’, ‘Bid to sink boat people’, ‘Troops ready for support’ and ‘Keep Out’,²⁷ all of which appeared in *The West Australian* between Tuesday August 28 and Friday August 31, 2001. Such reporting would appear to fit neatly into the narratives of invasion genre, which according to Mares enjoys a rich history in Australia:

²⁶ ibid
In the late nineteenth century the radical utopian and labour activist William Lane developed a theory of ‘swarming populations’. He believed that nations, like beehives, reached a critical stage of overpopulation, at which point mass emigration became inevitable. According to David Walker, Lane calculated that China had an annual ‘swarming population’ of 65 million and believed there was no land ‘so convenient and so promising, so unoccupied yet so hospitable’ as Australia. There was a rash of invasion narratives around this time, in which a defenseless and morally weak Australia was overrun by more calculating and ruthless Asians. The genre is still with us.\(^{28}\)

Mares goes on to identify narratives such as Eric Willmot’s *Below the Line* (1991) and the popular John Marsden text *Tomorrow When the War Began* as examples of narratives that conform ‘to the key element of William Lane’s nineteenth century beehive analogy’.\(^{29}\) *The West Australian* reporting of the Tampa reveals some elements of this age old fear in its reporting. Its front page story on August 29, the day after the story broke, details fears of more asylum seekers ready to approach Australia’s borders: ‘Fearing 900 more boat people were on their way on three boats as another 2000 others were ready to leave Indonesia, the Government stood firm and refused to let the Tampa into Australian waters. The Tampa rescued 438 boat people from their stricken vessel…’.\(^{30}\) By combining the verb ‘fearing’ with the numbers of estimated arrivals, reportedly in their thousands, the paper successfully creates a sense of Australia as a country under siege. This is reinforced by the picture on the front page of some of the 438 boat people on board the freighter.\(^{31}\) The shot taken from above shows the so-called boat people sitting in rows, approximately 16 in breadth and 12 deep. As they are shown from above, they are significantly anonymous to the reader and, as they are grouped together, are noticeable only by their numbers. The caption beneath the photograph explains that those pictured comprise only ‘some’ of the boat people aboard, leading to the obvious inference that there are more than those pictured. It would be a long bow to draw to say, on the basis of this report alone, that *The West Australian* was consciously buying into the invasion narrative genre. Not so far stretched is the assertion that this story, taken with the total sum of reports on the issue by this paper, creates a regime of

\(^{29}\) *ibid.* p.29.
\(^{31}\) *ibid*
representation that promotes the fear of invasion and contributes to the marginalization of the asylum seekers. According to Hall,

…images do not carry meaning or ‘signify’ on their own. They accumulate meanings or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media. Each image carries its own, specific meaning. But at the broader level of how ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ is being represented in a particular culture at a particular moment, we see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another…We may describe the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment as a regime of representation.32

The West Australian’s coverage between the 28th and 31st of August, 2001 included not one, but eight images of the Tampa and five images related to the deployment of Australia’s SAS troops to deter the Tampa. These images, taken together over four days of coverage, anchored as they were by captions that reinforced the perception of a country under siege, can be read as a regime of representation, which, in this case, helped to create the impression that Australia was indeed a nation under attack. This regime of representation was all the more powerful when one considers the range of print and television media across the nation actively employing the rhetoric of the invasion narrative:

The arrival of refugees by boat in 2001 was constructed as a crisis through the use of headlines such as “Island awaits human flood” and “5000 new illegals heading this way.” Other front page headlines such as “People-smugglers push Howard’s limits” and “Boatpeople turn hostile in ocean standoff” reflect the negative stereotypes that are commonly used to represent refugees and the means by which they arrive in Australia.33

Language, and the manner of its use, is essential to the process of representation. As Hall observed, an image can convey an array of possible meanings. Language, however, serves to privilege particular meanings over others. In the case of The West Australian’s coverage during the Tampa incident, the language used can at best be described as impersonal and, at worst, as hostile towards asylum seekers. Both of these characteristics are identifiable in The West Australian’s headlines on the first

day of the paper’s coverage of the Tampa affair. ‘Keep Out’ is stretched across the paper’s front page in large, thick, bold, black letters. The heading is fully capitalized as if to add further emphasis to the message. As the two word headline was not attributed to another author, it could easily be interpreted as conveying the newspaper’s own stance towards the asylum seekers aboard the Tampa. The subheading on the other hand ‘Boat people not our problem’ is attributed to the Prime Minister, Mr John Howard. The statement is clearly paraphrased by the editor and reflects the tone of Mr Howard’s own statements, contained in the front page report. The impersonal and dismissive nature of the statement is reflected through its subject, ‘boat people’. This reduces the asylum seekers to the mode of transport used to seek refuge, and its predicate, ‘not our problem’, similarly serves reductive purposes by portraying those aboard the Tampa as problems rather than as humans in distress, who, given the opportunity, could develop into valuable contributors to the Australian community. Given that the front page image accompanying this subheading is one of the Tampa, and is completely lacking in any personal representation of the asylum seekers in question, it is fair to assess The West Australian’s representation of the issue as favourable to the Government’s hard-lined stance. David Marr and Marian Wilkinson’s expose of the Tampa affair, Dark Victory, supports this conclusion by noting that ‘no “personalising or humanising images” were to be taken of asylum seekers.’ According to Marr and Wilkinson, this directive came straight from Canberra to the military and ensured that just as ‘Australians had only the haziest picture of what life was like behind the wire in Port Hedland and Woomera’, their grasp of events aboard the Tampa would be similarly obscure. The extent to which The West Australian was complicit in these representations is evident when comparing its coverage to that of The Australian. Although the latter is renowned for its conservatism it nevertheless made an effort to highlight the human face of the issue, despite the obstacles enacted by Canberra.

Another adjective often prominent in reporting on refugee related issues is ‘illegals’. It is a term that is ‘employed in a construction of a binary between deserving and undeserving refugees—those who warrant rights under the international covenant on

35 ibid.
37 ibid., p.181.
refugees and those who jump the “queue” and are not seen to be deserving of a humanitarian response’. The determinants of who falls into which category are often extremely arbitrary and based upon the mode of transport used by would-be asylum seekers. In an Australian context, those who have tried to make their way to our shores by boat have often been labeled as ‘illegals’, or ‘queue-jumpers’, while those who follow approved procedures are seen as legitimate refugees. Such categorizations are curiously ironic when considering the definition of the term refugee as defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as a person who:

Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

While it is foreseeable that in some situations refugees may be able to arrange an orderly departure from a country which presents to them ‘a well founded fear of being persecuted’, it is just as plausible that equally genuine refugees may find themselves in less favourable circumstances: situations that do not permit them the luxury of time to gather the necessary visas and other documents that the Australian government deems necessary for legal entry into its borders. History is littered with documented occasions in which refugees have been forced to flee their country of origin amid situations of immediate danger. To label refugees, who find themselves literally running for their lives as a result of persecution, as ‘illegals’ because they don’t possess the correct documentation or because they arrive by boat is a practice that is both arbitrary, discriminatory, and in breach of both the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

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39 Frank Brennan, *Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p.15.
40 *ibid*
41 Frank Brennan, *Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p.15.
In his text, *Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem*, Frank Brennan addresses the rationale behind the Australian government’s attitude toward the illegality of the asylum seekers reaching Australian territory. In general terms the government argues that refugees ‘have not come directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened. In the government’s opinion, most (if not all) the refugees have had protection available to them in some other place en route’. 42 It is true that many asylum seekers coming from the Middle East do find themselves in Indonesia en route to Australia. However, Brennan asks, ‘given that Indonesia is not a signatory to the Convention (cited previously) and given that the country is not governed by the rule of law, how can it credibly be argued that boat people should stop their journey in Indonesia and enjoy sufficient protection?’ 43 Brennan goes on to observe that ‘under Indonesian law, all unlawful foreigners who are detected are subjected to quarantine detention awaiting deportation’. 44

Brennan’s observations are important because they call into question the accuracy of the government’s long held practice of labeling refugees, particularly those who arrive by boat, as ‘illegals’. The United Nations definition of the term ‘refugee’ takes no account of the mode of transport they use to flee persecution. Since Australia is a signatory to this Convention one must question why the Australian Government has chosen to discriminate in such a way? In answer to this question, Mr Howard might cite Australia’s sovereign rights in repeating his election winning proclamation: ‘We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances under which they enter’. 45 Gale, however, believes the term is utilized as part of a representational theme that ‘seeks to reconcile the apparent incompatibility of Australia being perceived as a humanitarian nation and the policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers, including children.’ 46

In Foucauldian terms, refugees are primarily the objects of speech. This is a position that has led to their status as one of the most disenfranchised minorities in

42 Ibid., p.95.
43 Ibid
44 Ibid., p.96.
contemporary Australian society. The taboo on their speech has been enforced by a grid of procedures that have served to not only silence their voices, but remove the opportunity for their voices to be articulated to anyone outside the razor wire fences that imprison them. The ‘tyranny of distance’ long romanticized in Australian literature has been utilized by our nation’s politicians to enforce a prohibition on the speech of refugees. By placing the detention centres on the geographical fringes of our country, the voices of those refugees currently held in detention are isolated, cut off from Australia’s major population centres. Australian detention centres thus provide a stark geographical signifier of successive governments’ determination to place the voices of refugees on the fringes of our society.

This procedure of geographical isolation is further supported by an array of other procedures designed to deny refugees the opportunity of self-representation, making them reliant upon the representations disseminated by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) formerly known as DIMIA (Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs). According to Peter Mares, ‘No journalists are allowed into Australia’s six immigration detention centres except on occasional guided tours, during which detainees are kept at a distance’. Indeed the taboo on the speech of the refugee is revealed through the government’s determination to deny detainees access to almost all channels of communication:

In late May 2000…a pay-phone was installed at Woomera. Detainees with the money to buy a phone card could at least make direct contact with their families overseas; visitors described long queues as detainees waited their turn to speak to anxious relatives. However at first the pay-phone could only be used to make international calls. A Woomera detainee was not at liberty to call people in Australia, such as members of their own ethnic community, lawyers or, of course, journalists. Although they now had a television in the camp the detainees were only allowed to watch sport and movies, not news programs. There was still no access to newspapers nor to radio.

48 DIMIA was alternatively known, and criticised by many, as *the department of the Other*. The removal of Indigenous affairs from the department’s jurisdiction was undoubtedly a response to such criticism and perhaps recognition of the need to leave behind the marginalising practices of successive Australian governments towards Australia’s Indigenous peoples.
Historically speaking, the denial of access to the media is characteristic of autocratic despots, not something one normally associates with democratic societies. The fact that refugees were denied access to the media suggests that the Australian government was fearful of the impact of refugees’ discourses upon their border protection policies. The chance that refugees may be represented as humans, people with real concerns for their safety and well being, people experiencing duress due to their past and present experiences in detention, is one the Government was seemingly unwilling to take. In literary terms it verifies Foucault’s observation:

> The prohibitions that surround it (discourse) very soon reveal its link with desire and with power. There is nothing surprising about that, since, as psychoanalysis has shown, discourse is not simply that which manifests (or hides) desire—it is also the object of desire; and since, as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is a struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.  

While the above examples of censorship demonstrate the prohibition on the speech of the refugee, which limit the possibility of self-representation, they are not denied representation completely. Mares cites instances whereby the Australian government has permitted refugee representations to be leaked to the media for circulation amongst the Australian community. Notably, these representations have not been contextualized, and, consequently, have proved highly prejudicial to the cause of refugees in detention. The fact that only representations of this type have been released for circulation and public comment reveals the prohibition on ‘the ritual of the circumstances of speech’ in operation. As Mares notes, due to the restrictions on access to detention centres ‘news reports…relied heavily on the official version of events as supplied by DIMA in Canberra’. 

In early February of 2000, detainees at the Curtin Detention Centre held a protest over their treatment in detention. At the time the number of refugees held at Curtin who had come by boat to seek asylum in Australia was 1147; most of them were fleeing persecution in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Mares their treatment at

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54 ibid., p.9.
Curtin made them question whether they could really be in Australia at all, a country they had been led to believe was tolerant and a defender of human rights. They had expected to be treated with dignity. The protest was well organized, with protestors chanting “Where are human rights? Where is freedom? We want freedom!” There was also a large professionally drawn banner, which depicted the dictator Saddam Hussein expressing gratitude to DIMA for its cooperation in locking up his critics. Mares goes on to explain that detainees were refusing food and water while a core group of between a dozen to twenty men had sewn up their lips. He notes that while now lip stitching has become a quite frequent form of protest in detention centres at the time of this protest it was unprecedented:

…the image would not leave me. I found the act both appalling and compelling. People who render themselves dumb, I reasoned, must surely have a pressing need to be heard. An urgent story to tell…symbolically the act of sewing your mouth partly shut is, in itself, eloquent. It communicates the frustration and anger of those made mute and impotent…it shows what people may do when the only power they have is over their own bodies.

While the detainees may have hoped that this would be the way their actions would be interpreted by broader Australia, neither the representations disseminated to the media or the reporting of the lip-stitches were anywhere near as favourable. The West Australian and Sunday Times used adjectives such as ‘bizarre’ and ‘gruesome’ to describe the protesters, while The West Australian ‘followed up with reports on a subsequent joint visit to Curtin by Mr Ruddock and Mr Court’ during which they reportedly spent an hour listening to detainees’ concerns. Afterwards Mr Court was reported as saying the detainees “had a nerve to be complaining” and should show “a little bit of gratitude”. The premier proceeded to chastise the asylum seekers for their ‘irresponsibility’ in bringing children to Australia. He admitted that seeing the children ‘sort of tugs on the heartstrings’, but said that the detainees ‘should have had the decency not to subject the children to that “illegal activity”’. The effect of this reporting, and other similar reporting around the country, was to marginalize the

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55 ibid., p.10.
56 ibid.
57 ibid.
58 ibid., p.11.
59 ibid.
60 ibid.
61 ibid.
refugee by portraying them as culturally foreign and alien. In Foucauldian terms, such representations operate as a principle of exclusion, ‘not another prohibition, but a division and a rejection…the opposition between reason and madness’. 

Foucault traces the treatment of the madman’s speech from the middle ages and observes that ‘whether excluded or secretly invested with reason, the madman’s speech, strictly, did not exist. It was through his words that his madness was recognized…but they were never recorded or listened to.’

The representations disseminated by DIMA through the media, representation without context, ensured the refugees’ actions were deemed as akin to that of a madman, or, at best, of one who shares nothing in common with the people of the land in which they seek asylum. It is highly ironic that detainees who stitch their lips together to demonstrate their voicelessness find themselves further marginalized by the eloquent, albeit misrepresented, articulation of their voicelessness.

The representation of refugees as alien and Other to the values of Australian society extends beyond the Curtin protests of 2000. A remarkable misrepresentation of refugees was disseminated through the media on October 7 2001—the first week of election campaigning, little more than a month after the Tampa incident:

Phillip Ruddock announced that a group of asylum seekers trying to reach Australia had thrown children overboard “in a clearly planned and premeditated attempt” to force their way into Australia. The story made immediate headlines and two days later, on 9 October, Prime Minister John Howard famously declared on radio, “I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia, I really don’t.” On 10 October the Defence Minister, Peter Reith, released photographs of children in the sea wearing life-jackets, which he presented as documentary proof of what had happened.

One such photograph appeared on the front page of The West Australian on October 11. It shows a member of the Australian navy in the ocean holding on to ‘one of the boat people’. The caption beneath the photo reads: ‘Safe hands: A crewman from HMAS Adelaide holds on to one of the boat people who jumped overboard after the

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63 ibid
boat was intercepted. Children also were thrown overboard’.66 The story’s headline conveys the message, ‘Camera snaps boat jumps’.67 Hall’s assertion that ‘images do not carry meaning or “signify” on their own’68 is never more clearly demonstrated than in the reporting of this incident. By itself, the photograph shows some people in a body of water; one person of Caucasian appearance is wearing a life jacket. The image’s many possible meanings are reduced to one privileged meaning by the work of the caption, heading and report. Significantly, the refugee is once again the object of the government’s speech; the result is the refugees find themselves marginalized, represented as culturally Other and unworthy of participation in Australian culture.

There is an important subtext in this report which serves to reinforce the often used Manichean allegory that equates whites with civilization and non-whites with all things uncivilized and savage. This binary is established through the regime of representation constructed by the accumulated messages conveyed through the story’s caption, heading and report. Firstly, the reader is informed that the Caucasian person in the photograph is a ‘crewman of the HMAS Adelaide’.69 This information, prefaced by the words ‘safe hands’70, serves to construct the ‘white’ crewman as the saviour of the uncivilized other who have willingly put themselves, and the crewman, in a situation of danger. This representation attributes heroic qualities to the white crewman while attributing recklessness and a disdain for life to the ‘boat people who jumped overboard’.71 This binary is reinforced by the final sentence of the caption: ‘Children also were thrown overboard’.72 Such information was clearly disseminated to portray the refugees involved as culturally Other. The Prime Minister articulated this belief to the media: ‘I don’t want people like that in Australia. Genuine refugees don’t do that…they hang onto their children…I don’t want in this country people who are prepared, if reports are true, to throw their own children overboard’.73

66 ibid
67 ibid
70 ibid
71 ibid
72 ibid
Mr Howard’s qualifying phrase, ‘if reports are true’, reveals his willingness to construct the non-white other as savage and uncivilized on the basis of hearsay and innuendo. In Foucauldian terms, Mr Howard’s construction of the refugee Other constitutes a ‘will to truth’ that conforms to the historically constituted constructions of non-whites by White-Europeans. Veronica Brady traces the causes of this tendency to Australia’s imperial origins:

Like most settler societies, in the nineteenth century especially, Australia is the product of the history of empire, a history, Karl Jaspers suggests which has arrogated to itself a ‘grandeur…stolen from God’ and has presented itself as fate, a ‘grand triumphal march’ through the world of certain people, who as the spearhead of civilization are destined to rule the world. As Luiz Carlos Susin points out, it thus becomes a ‘form of critical understanding which identifies and distinguishes good and evil in a very particular way, based on itself, on its glorious position as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out at its feet’. This helps to explain our present government’s self-confidence and apparent lack of self-interrogation in its dealings not only with asylum seekers, Aboriginal Australians and those less successful in economic, social or intellectual terms but also with our Asian neighbours.

According to Brady, Australia continues to operate from a mentality founded on the assumption of the ‘ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority’. Brady suggests that until the Australian Government stops living out of its imperial past and begins to engage with its actual situation of a multi-cultural society it will continue to marginalise those who do not conform to the imagined White Anglo-Saxon community.

Further complicating this state of affairs are the efforts of the Howard Government to establish Australia’s sovereignty in conformance with its ideological alignment with the myth of statecraft, which at its most basic level subscribes to imagined notions of centrality, stability and coherence. It is also ‘represented as the sole facilitator of the historically contingent expressions of that coherence, that way of living’. Phrases and terms like those used by the Howard government serve to reinforce the central

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74 ibid
77 Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.36.
authority which they claim: ‘meanings of words like territory, sovereignty, country, homeland, democracy, citizen, refugee and state are constantly negotiated, differentiated, and heirarchized to affirm the state-centric imagination of the world’. The impact of this process—a process controlled by the state—upon refugees who by their very definition, are synonymous with instability, movement and statelessness, is often to characterise them as a threat to the central authority of the state. This is a phenomenon certainly evident in the Howard government’s treatment of their own ‘refugee problem’. One needs only to consider the manner in which refugees were pushed to the boundaries and then expelled beyond the boundaries of the country for evidence of the way they were perceived, or portrayed, as a threat to state security. In light of the nation’s history of fear of the Other, not to mention the events of September 11, it was an easy fiction to sell.

What then of the consequences of Australia’s historical tendency to racially construct the non-European Other, thus continuing the Orientalist’s project? In his exposition of interracial relations between white-Europeans and African Americans, Frantz Fanon observes the impact of being racially constructed:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin.’

As Fanon felt the weight of the history of European constructions of the African American in the stares of the whites, so too is the middle-eastern refugee burdened by the historically constituted construction of the Arab by the West. Indeed, I propose that Mr Howard’s construction of the refugees involved in the children overboard affair, far from being an isolated, uncontextualised construction of a single group of refugees, had behind it the full weight of the history of western constructions of the Arab as culturally Other. It is a proposition that will be analysed in greater detail in the following chapters of this thesis.

It is now a matter of public record that the photos released by Peter Reith were actually taken the following day, on 8th October, when the children were rescued

78 ibid., p.35.
after their boat sank and almost everyone from the vessel ended up in the water.\footnote{David Marr & Marian Wilkinson, \textit{Dark Victory}, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, p.251} Significantly, this information was only revealed after the Howard Government’s victory in the election.

When confronted with such representations, the repulsion of the nation might be understood. What is less comprehensible is why so few questioned the representations spread through the media. The absence of questions from nearly all sections of Australian society about the manner of these representations was particularly disturbing. It highlights the marginalization of the refugees. Had the people of Australia become so used to dehumanizing images of refugees that when the nation’s politicians suggested this group were less than human, so few were willing to question them? What was even more disturbing was the manner in which such conscientious efforts to mislead the Australian people and malign the refugee Other was allowed to go unaccounted for. How is it that Australians, who cringed at the idea that children could be abandoned by their parents and supported Mr Howard’s cry to repel ‘people of that type’ from our shores, could be so morally apathetic when it came to their response to the government’s deliberate misrepresentation of these refugees? Neither the Prime Minister, Mr Peter Reith nor Mr Phillip Ruddock were called to account for their misrepresentations of the refugees. It would be hard to imagine the above situation being replicated if the refugees had originated from a predominantly White-European country such as England, Scotland or New Zealand. This would seem to suggest that beneath the rhetoric of border security lies the historically ongoing fear of the non-White European Other:

The government seized on the ‘children overboard’ story and kept it going long after they knew it was untrue—because it appeared to confirm the view that these people were unworthy of our compassion. How otherwise could they throw their children overboard? The subtext encouraged for the entire episode was that ‘people like that are not people like us’ and ‘if they are capable of treating their own children so callously, what other horrors might they perpetuate if let loose in our country?\footnote{Carmen Lawrence, \textit{Fear And Politics}, Scribe Publications, Carlton North, 2006, p.45.}
Such fear manifested itself in the White Australia Policy and, I suggest, has both motivated and drives the Pacific Solution. The work of Peter Gale and Carmen Lawrence verifies this fact. In their respective expositions, *The Politics of Fear* and *Fear and Politics* both authors trace the use of fear-based politics in relation to Indigenous affairs and the Pacific Solution. Gale’s work is convincing due to the sheer weight of research upholding his analysis; Lawrence’s text attains much of its authority from its author, a woman whose involvement in Australian politics stretches back to 1986. Lawrence’s insights into the political machine serve to verify the work of Gale and other social commentators and theorists in this area.

Lawrence notes the importance of the White Australia Policy to the newly formed Commonwealth, evidenced by its legislation as the first act of the new federal parliament. Citing the rhetoric of J.T. Laing who suggested ‘that Chinese immigrants would ‘swamp the whole European community of these colonies’ and ‘obliterate every trace of British progress and civilization.’ Lawrence goes on to note the same racial overtones and invasion anxiety in the discourse and policies of governments from both sides of the political fence. ‘Invasion anxiety’ has also informed the imposition of a brutal detention regime upon those seeking asylum on our shores. As well, changes to the assessment system for migrants have resulted in a noticeable increase in those from white, English-speaking nations.

Lawrence cites the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines, The Stolen Generation, debates and policies pertaining to Native Title, the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the rise of hansonism and the Cronulla Riots as occurrences which manifest Australia’s historically constituted and ongoing fear of the Other. Lawrence is particularly critical of the Howard government’s. She traces these events and others like them to a psychology, which is easily manipulated by the media and politicians alike:

Australian political figures have often portrayed Australia as vulnerable to loss of sovereignty and have used this to generate levels of fear and anxiety that are disproportionate to the actual threats. It is no accident that Philip Ruddock chose to represent the arrival of an increased number of asylum seekers during 2001 as an ‘urgent threat to Australia’s very

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82 *ibid.*, p.43.
83 *ibid.*, p.43.
84 *ibid.*, pp.23-49.
integrity’, and to invoke the phrase ‘national emergency’ as a way of describing the increase in numbers. The government began with the assumption—no doubt carefully tested in publicly funded opinion polling—that simply to mention ‘illegal migrants’ to some Australians would cause them to lose their grip on reality.\(^{85}\)

The politics of fear that has operated within Australia over the past decade finds its support in what Peter Gale calls New Racism. First employed by Martin Baker, the term refers to a new, more subtle form of racism ‘founded on symbolic markers of national identity…placing an emphasis on what is perceived as a threat to Australian culture’.\(^{86}\) Gale asserts that such discourse argues for the reduction of immigration levels or that migrants be selected from countries that are seen to be culturally similar, preserving what is identified as cultural heritage and traditional values.\(^{87}\)

The defining feature of this new politics of race is the replacement of biological models of inferiority and superiority, as a racial hierarchy, with a discourse in which one’s own group or culture (or country) is believed to be superior to others, with separation from and suspicion of the Other as natural. Within this racial discourse, immigrants, especially non-whites, are not identified as being racially inferior. Nonetheless, their cultures and values are regarded as alien and a threat to what is identified as implicitly western, in particular, core values associated with whiteness, including democracy itself.\(^{88}\)

A more explicit demonstration of New Racism was reported in *The West Australian* under the headline, ‘Migrant race policy defied’.\(^{89}\) The story by Anne Burns reports the comments made by One Nation senate candidate Graeme Campbell who reportedly called for a ban on immigrants from Islamic countries entering Australia:

> Mr. Campbell a British migrant said Australia’s immigration program should not accept people from cultures foreign to the Australian way of life. ‘Our immigration policy should be to promote assimilation’ he said. Some cultures were too foreign to be assimilated readily…He cites the Dayaks from Borneo, pygmies, and people from most African nations as too foreign to fit into Australia.’\(^{90}\)

\(^{85}\) *ibid.*, p.41.  
\(^{87}\) *ibid.*  
\(^{88}\) *ibid.*,p.8.  
\(^{90}\) *ibid*
Mr. Campbell’s comments clearly reveal a concern about the possible dilution of White culture. In naming people from ‘most African nations’ as ‘too foreign to fit in’ Mr. Campbell clearly draws a line between white Europeans and the African Other. According to Ghassan Hage such comments ‘are conservative forms of “White cultural politics”, part of a broader discourse of Anglo decline suggesting there is a threat to perceived core values within contemporary Australia’. Mr Campbell’s comments, based on the problematic assumption that Australia is a culturally homogeneous nation with culturally homogeneous values, operate upon the binary that distinguishes Australian values and culture from the culture and values of the Other. By constructing African nations as a threat, his comments re-establish the hierarchy that presumes Anglo superiority over the inferiority of the Other. The Darwinian theories that were once used to substantiate such claims have been replaced by the assumption of cultural superiority.

Jacques Derrida observes that binary oppositions such as the one underlying Mr Campbell’s comments are rarely neutral. One pole of the binary is usually the dominant one and includes the other within its field of operations, establishing a power relation. In the case of Mr Campbell’s comments it is African culture that threatens Anglo-Australian culture, it is African values threatening Anglo-Australian values, it is African Islam that threatens Anglo-Australian Christianity. The effect of the revival of such binary oppositions is the creation of an atmosphere of fear. Mr Campbell’s comments operate from a politics of fear which, taken together with other marginalizing discourses disseminated through the media, assist in the creation of a regime of representation that encourages an apartheid spirit and the perpetuation of the fear of the Other that has driven much of Australia’s policy during its first two centuries as a European nation.