Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda

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CHAPTER TWO

Lessons lost: safe haven still elusive

The analysis of *The West Australian*’s coverage of the Tampa and children overboard incidents conducted in the previous chapter highlights an array of discursive and representational practices employed by the newspaper that resulted in the dissemination of representations of asylum seekers that were unfavourable and arguably highly prejudicial to their cause. Conversely, the nature of *The West Australian*’s coverage was extremely beneficial for the government of the day. The biased nature of Western Australia’s sole daily newspaper, while evident through the procedures analysed in chapter one, is better appreciated when compared to the coverage of the Tampa and the children overboard incidents over the same time period by *The Australian*. As Australia’s only national broadsheet publication *The Australian* necessarily strives to appeal to a broader audience than *The West Australian*, whose readership is the population of a State known for its conservatism. The comparative methodology employed in this chapter will provide the foundations for an exploration of the functioning of what Edward Said has called Orientalism in *The West Australian*’s treatment of asylum seekers. I propose to explore the extent to
which the reporting of *The West Australian* in relation to asylum seekers propagates the mechanisms of Orientalism.

On Tuesday August 28 2001, *The Australian*’s lead story, like *The West Australian*’s, focused on the arrival of the Tampa. *The Australian*’s front page headline read ‘Refugees trapped at sea’ while its byline announced: ‘Canberra sends troops, but the doors stay shut for boatload of sick, starving illegals’. Front and centre of the page is a picture of the Tampa freighter, a head shot of its captain Arne Rinnan and to the right of the Tampa’s picture is a map of the Western Australian coast line. To the north is Indonesia. The map and its accompanying text traces the journey of the Tampa from its departure from Fremantle to its arrival off the Australian island territory of Christmas Island. Remarkably, the layout and choice of images employed by *The West Australian* and *The Australian* are strikingly similar. The manner of representations, however, stand poles apart.

![Figure 2: Front page of *The Australian*, August 28, 2001.](image)

93 ibid
Firstly, the headline of The Australian recognizes the status of those aboard as refugees. The significance of this term is twofold: firstly, at the time of this report the status of the asylum seekers aboard the Tampa had not yet been determined. Therefore, the editor’s decision to use the term ‘refugees’ illustrates a degree of presumptuousness. Refreshingly, the editor’s presumptuousness was of innocence rather than guilt in relation to the asylum seekers. The use of the term permits the reader to consider the possibility that the asylum seekers aboard the Tampa were genuine refugees who fled their countries of origin out of fear of persecution and/or possibly as a result of imminent threats to their lives. The use of the term also serves to resist the marginalizing characterization of asylum seekers as queue jumpers, a term that implies a lack of morality on the part of the would-be asylum seeker. The second point to be made regarding the use of the term ‘refugees’ by The Australian is that such language provides those aboard the Tampa with an international context. As refugees, Australia has an international obligation to secure their safety. Terms such as ‘queue jumpers’, ‘boat people’ or ‘illegals’ provide no such compulsions.

Clearly the consequences of the use of language are more far reaching than victory in a battle of semantics. The language used by our politicians, newspapers or refugee advocates has national and international consequences. Yet even more importantly they have an impact upon the safety of individual men, women and children, whose lives are largely dependant upon the perceptions of them created by the language we use. A ‘refugee’ is internationally recognised as a person who ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted…is outside the country of his nationality’. The ‘illegal’ or ‘queue jumper’ on the other hand is one without rights, one who has broken international law and who according to the court of public opinion and the court of law is a criminal in every sense of the word. The implications then of calling asylum seekers illegals as opposed to refugees could not be more stark. At this juncture, the work of Said is particularly relevant. If, as he suggests, Orientalism is ‘a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought’ applied to the Oriental, then the indiscriminate allocation of terms such as ‘illegals’ and ‘queue jumpers’ to asylum seekers well and truly falls within the scope of the Orientalist’s work, which is always political and designed to promote ‘the difference between the familiar

94 Frank Brennan, Tampering with Asylum: A Universal Humanitarian Problem, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2003, p.15.
(Europe, the West ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).\textsuperscript{96} Doubt about the ongoing veracity of such a claim is surely undermined by the fact that such terms are rarely applied to the largest group of ‘illegals’ in Australia: namely those of White European descent who overstay their visas. Soon after the Tampa affair, \textit{The Sunday Times} took up this issue claiming that at the time of publication 58,700 ‘Overstayers’ were present in Australia:

That’s the benign way the Federal government prefers to refer to the tens of thousands of people who overstay their temporary visas in Australia each year. Overstayers are not tagged in the same way as people who arrive by boat—as queue-jumpers, immigrants by stealth, illegal aliens and criminals. And yet the some 58,700 overstayers now in Australia because they have flouted the conditions of their visas are as illegal, unlawful and—presumably—as unwanted as the people locked up in detention centres. But that’s where the similarity ends. For starters, the origins of the main offenders are vastly different from those who are locked up. And how they are treated if apprehended is in stark contrast to that meted out to boat arrivals. The main group of overstayers come from the UK, mainly England and Ireland…the next largest category are Americans…What happens to these unlawful non-citizens if they are located? They are given bridging visas and remain in the community until they can make their own arrangements to depart…none of them is thrown in detention centres, even the ones who refuse to depart voluntarily.\textsuperscript{97}

Can such contradictions in the application of Australia’s immigration policies be anything other than a clear manifestation of New Racism? If it were not, then surely the same rules would apply to people who are clearly not refugees but tourists or students as apply to those who risk life and limb to make it to Australian shores.

At this point, an anomaly in the newspaper’s attitude to the reporting of the issue must be acknowledged. The byline which appears above the headline, albeit in a smaller font size, uses the word ‘illegals’ to describe the same group of asylum seekers depicted as refugees in the headline of the front page report. I suggest the use of the term is an anomaly because it betrays the tone of the byline: ‘Canberra sends troops, but the doors stay shut for boatload of sick, starving illegals’.\textsuperscript{98} The description of the ‘illegals’ as ‘sick’ and ‘starving’ goes some way to personalizing the asylum seekers and highlighting their plight. The ‘shut door’ metaphor used in

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{ibid.}, p.43.
\textsuperscript{97} Kerry Anne Walsh, ‘Who are really the queue-jumpers?’, \textit{The Sunday Times}, 2 September 2001, p.40.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{ibid}
the byline further emphasizes the dire condition of the asylum seekers and implies a lack of decency on the part of the government in its approach to those aboard the Tampa. Furthermore, when read in the context of The Australian’s coverage of the Tampa incident between August 28-31 2001, the use of the term is peculiar. Headlines such as: ‘A leaky boat to heartbreak’⁹⁹, ‘Cargo of human misery’¹⁰⁰, ‘REFUGEE CRISIS’¹⁰¹ and ‘PM’s refugee bungling defies reason and decency’¹⁰² all comprise a regime of representation more favourable to asylum seekers. They are shown as real people with real fears and challenges rather than as nameless and faceless Muslims ‘jumping the queue’ ahead of ‘genuine refugees’.

The Australian’s determination to present the human face of the asylum seekers is vividly portrayed through its feature article in its August 28 edition titled ‘A leaky boat to heartbreak’.¹⁰³ Far from representing the asylum seekers as threats to Australian sovereignty and security the article paints a picture of people desperate to reach the safety of Australia and enjoy the ‘paradise’ promised to them by Indonesian people smugglers. While Australia is portrayed as paradise, the focus of the article is not so much on the pull factors involved in attracting asylum seekers but on the reasons why these people would risk so much to seek shelter in Australia. This purpose is epitomized by the question: ‘What makes a caring father sell all he has to place his young family in a small leaking boat to cross a dangerous sea to land in a country he knows nothing about?’¹⁰⁴ The imagery created by this question is replicated on numerous occasions throughout the article:

It isn’t that there are more than 170 people on a craft built for 20, or that it is leaking taking more than 100 litres an hour. No it is the children. There are just so many. Sitting almost on top of each other, personal space stopped being a concept ages ago. They have been at sea for several days, living like cattle in a truck journeying to market…Hamil says she is nine months pregnant and has not eaten for four days. Her husband is concerned and, not surprisingly vocal in requesting, then demanding,
assistance. His anguish is tempered by fear and magnified by love. His wife is constantly crying.\textsuperscript{105}

The absence of such narratives in the reporting of \textit{The West Australian} reveals a will to truth that is devoid of truth. In other words, in choosing not to include representations that promote the humanity of asylum seekers \textit{The West Australian} reveals its definite bias towards the issue. This bias is even more revealing when one considers that the author of the feature article ‘A leaky boat to heartbreak’\textsuperscript{106} run by \textit{The Australian} was Keith Saunders, a fisheries officer with the West Australian Department of Fisheries’ international operations section. That the national newspaper included a Western Australian source that was privy to the situation of asylum seekers while Western Australia’s own newspaper chose to ignore not only this source but all sources of its type demonstrates an unwillingness on the part of \textit{The West Australian} to provide a balanced treatment of the issue. It is highly unlikely that such a biased treatment would have been prevalent in the newspaper’s coverage had the origins of the asylum seekers involved been Anglo-Saxon or European rather than Middle Eastern. As it is, the polarized representations promoted by \textit{The West Australian} operate upon binaries which emphasise the differences between asylum seekers and Australians, while ignoring the commonalities shared such as love and sacrifice for their families. This demonstrates the propagation of Orientalism, which according to Said is best understood as ‘a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought, than it is as simply a positive doctrine’.\textsuperscript{107}

One of the best indicators of the operations of Orientalism in \textit{The West Australian}’s reporting of asylum seekers is the absence and avoidance of narrative in the construction of representations of Asylum seekers. It is an absence or, using Said’s terminology, a constraint that is designed to dehumanize asylum seekers. This can only be achieved when the asylum seekers are anonymous, without a human face or characterized as part of a ‘horde’ invading our borders. Demonising and dehumanizing stereotypes such as these fail in the face of narrative. When confronted with an image of an asylum seeker as a father, trying desperately to protect his pregnant wife who has gone four days without food and his child who has spent days on a leaky boat exposed to the harshest elements the Indian Ocean can

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provide, it is much more difficult to dissociate oneself from the reality that precludes the dissemination of stereotypes and misrepresentations:

Narrative asserts the power of men to be born, develop, and die, the tendency of institutions and actualities to change, the likelihood that modernity and contemporaneity will finally overtake classical civilizations; above all, it asserts that the domination of reality by vision is no more than a will to power, a will to truth and interpretation, and not an objective condition of history. Narrative, in short, introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision; it violates the serene Apollonian fictions asserted by vision.\(^{108}\)

As Said states, confronted by narrative the permanence of vision upon which stereotypes rely gives way. Phrases such as ‘people of that type’, representations of asylum seekers as Muslim fanatics, or terrorists are all betrayed as the mechanizations of a system designed to preserve cultural purity through the demonisation of the Other. In the face of narrative the functioning of representations as formations or indeed deformations\(^{109}\) is undermined. The importance of narrative’s work in challenging representations of the Other is not to be understated; indeed the second half of this dissertation will be dedicated to the consideration of its function as a tool of resistance and self-representation.

In his efforts to illustrate the impact of Orientalism, Said looks at historical constructions of the Arab by the West. One of the case studies analysed by Said, taken from an essay by Harold W. Glidden (a retired member of the United States Bureau of Intelligence and Research) published in the February 1972 edition of the American Journal of Psychiatry is well worth revisiting, purely because of the scope of generalities it provides in its representation of the Arab. Much of the representation is still readily recognizable and circulated thirty-five years later.

According to the article the inner workings of Arab behavior which, from our point of view is ‘aberrant’, for Arabs is ‘normal’. The reader is told that Arabs operate from a shame culture from which prestige is gained through the acquisition of followers. Therefore Arabs can only function in conflict situations. Furthermore while Arab value systems demand absolute conformity, rivalry among members, which is destructive of this conformity, is encouraged. They therefore operate from

\(^{108}\) Ibid., p.240.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., p.273.
an internally illogical and destabilizing value system. According to Gidden, in Arab society only success counts and in the attainment of success, the end justifies the means. Arabs live naturally in a world characterized by anxiety expressed in generalized suspicion and distrust. Subterfuge is a highly developed art in Arab life, as well as in Islam itself. The Arab need for vengeance overrides everything, otherwise the Arab would feel ego-destroying shame. So synonymous is conflict with Arab society that is can be traced to Arab tribal society (where Arab values originated), where strife, not peace, was the normal state of affairs because raiding was one of the two main supports of the economy.

In response to this, Said writes:

This is the apogee of Orientalist confidence. No merely asserted generality is denied the dignity of truth; no theoretical list of Oriental attributes is without application to the behaviour of Orientals in the real world. On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things.¹¹⁰

Several of the representations cited by Said continue to gain circulation today. Some of our politicians and sections of the media would have us believe the Middle Eastern Arabs and/or Muslims normally act in a manner which is aberrant to the Western mindset. The most obvious recent example of this orientalising process is its application to the children overboard incident. As noted in chapter one, Mr Howard was more than willing to characterise the Middle Eastern asylum seekers involved as devoid of the basic values that ‘we Australian’s’ take for granted. Through his characterization he revived two hundred years of Orientalising stereotypes and representations used to denigrate the Oriental and elevate the Westerner. Significantly, the foundation of his achievement was a fictional assertion based on a will to truth.

The West Australian, without verifying the accuracy of the reports that children had been thrown overboard, willingly spread Mr Howard’s message that Australians would not be intimidated by their own goodness: “We are not going to be intimidated out of our policy by this kind of behaviour…I want to make that very

¹¹⁰ ibid., pp.48-49.
clear. We are a humane nation but we are not a nation that is going to be intimidated by this kind of behaviour.”

In the same article, published under the heading, ‘Howard firm as boat people dive branded a stunt’, Mr. Ruddock was reported as joining in on the attack upon the asylum seekers:

Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock said people wearing life jackets threw children and themselves overboard when crew of the frigate HMAS Adelaide boarded the boat. They were pulled out of the water and returned to the boat, which was flying an Indonesian flag…Mr Ruddock said the stunt was designed to pressure the government. “I regard these as some of the most disturbing practices I have come across in the time that I have been involved in public life—clearly planned and premeditated,” he said. “People wouldn’t come wearing lifejackets unless they intended some action of this sort”.

Like Mr. Howard’s comments, Mr Ruddock’s representations of the asylum seekers—and by extension, asylum seekers in general—were based, not on empirical evidence, but upon fictional assumptions. To this extent, the representations comply perfectly with the closed system of Orientalism. All their actions are made to conform to the expectations placed upon them by the Westerner. In this system ‘Truth…becomes a function of learned judgement, not of the material itself, which in time seems to owe even its existence to the Orientalist’.

Another element of the comments of both Mr Howard and Mr Ruddock worth noting is their binary structure: both politicians compare Western decency to Eastern corruptness. Mr Howard calls Australia a humane nation while representing the asylum seeking Other as the opposite. Once again the Westerner proclaims himself as morally upright while disparaging the Other as morally bankrupt. Mr Ruddock expresses his disbelief at the actions of the asylum seekers. He does not consider the possibility that the allegations are untrue and elevates himself above such behaviour by expressing his unfamiliarity with such immoral actions.

These Manichean representations were upheld by The West Australian through the use of symbolic markers to distinguish Western uprightness from Eastern immorality. The paper informs its readers that the asylum seekers ‘were pulled out of

112 ibid
114 ibid.,p.63.
115 ibid.,p.67.
the water and returned to the boat, which was flying an Indonesian flag’. Though not explicitly stated, the reader is left to assume that the crew of the HMAS Adelaide, who we are told were present, rescued the asylum seekers from their ‘self imposed’ danger and placed them back aboard the boat from which they had allegedly jumped. Thus the Australian crewmen are cast into the role of rescuers. Conversely the asylum seekers are aligned to the Indonesian flag. The implications of such symbolic marking hardly needs to be spelt out. What does require articulation is the impact of such representations upon the Other and the relative benefit of such representations for their disseminator.

At this point, the observations of Abdul JanMohamed are well worth considering. While JanMohamed speaks in relation to the Colonist’s treatment of the native, his observations are equally applicable and relevant to the Orientalist’s representations of the Eastern Other:

If such literature can demonstrate that the barbarism of the native is irrevocable, or at least very deeply ingrained, then the European’s attempt to civilize him can continue indefinitely, the exploitation of his resources can proceed without hindrance, and the European can persist in enjoying a position of moral superiority.117

What is at stake in the case of the portrayal of asylum seekers as morally bankrupt is the justification of governmental policies and the re-establishment of Western moral superiority. If the Oriental Other can be shown to be morally inept and incompatible with Australians, then the Australian government can more easily justify policies that would exclude them from Australian society. As JanMohamed notes the government requires only the flimsiest evidence to propagate the myth of the Oriental’s inferiority: ‘the colonizer’s (or Orientalist’s) invariable assumptions about his moral superiority means he will rarely question the validity of his own or his society’s formation’.118

In contrast to the comments made by Mr. Howard and Mr. Ruddock opposition leader Mr. Kim Beazley, Democrats Senator Andrew Bartlett and Greens Senator

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118 ibid.,p.84.
Bob Brown were also quoted. While Mr. Beazley was reported as saying only his coastguard proposal would solve the problem, Mr. Bartlett and Brown were critical of the accusations of the government and, in defending the asylum seekers involved, claimed that ‘only desperate people would throw their children into the sea’. The inclusion of Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Brown’s comments did provide some balance to the story, insofar as an alternative perception of the incident to that propagated by the government’s rhetoric was included. The nature of the comments by Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Brown encouraged empathy with the asylum seekers and the situation in which they found themselves. However, despite the resemblance of balanced and responsible reporting by the newspaper, it is important to note that, at no stage, was the allegation that children had been thrown overboard questioned; both the headline and the language used within the report presumed the asylum seekers were guilty of the allegations made against them.

Figure 3: Front page of *The Australian*, October 8, 2001.

120 ibid
On the same day *The West Australian* published its account of the children overboard incident, *The Australian* ran its report of the incident as its front page story. There are many similarities in the reporting of the two papers as well as some intriguing differences. Much of the content of *The Australian*’s report was similar. The comments of Mr. Howard, Mr. Ruddock, Mr. Beazley and Mr. Brown were all reported in a similar manner to that of *The West Australian*. The intriguing difference in the two reports pertains to the manner in which the asylum seekers involved were represented. The headline of *The Australian*’s report read ‘Boat children overboard’121 beneath it the byline stated, ‘Howard hard line becomes poll focus’.122 Noticeably, the headline is lacking in any of the value judgments contained in *The West Australian*’s headline. The editor has chosen to state the facts as he knew them, namely that children of asylum seekers were overboard but has refused to use the headline to marginalize the asylum seekers involved. Instead, through the byline, it is suggested that the incident and Mr. Howard’s ‘hard line’ stance is politically motivated. This is reiterated in the opening paragraph of the report: ‘A BOATLOAD of asylum seekers throwing children overboard 150 nautical miles from Australian territory as the navy fired over their heads became pawns in the election campaign yesterday’.123 While the reporter has stated that asylum seekers were throwing their children overboard, the inclusion of the details regarding the navy firing over their heads places their actions in a completely different context. The inclusion of this information, which is absent from *The West Australian*’s initial report, suggests the parents were acting to save their children rather than place them in danger. While the navy knew they were firing above the boat holding the asylum seekers, was this made clear to those aboard? Was it possible that the parents considered their children to be in danger and acted to increase their chances of safety? These questions may not be answered. It is, however, important to note that the reporting of *The Australian*’s journalists facilitated the asking of such questions. In Said’s terms, the report of *The West Australian* was an enclosed system insofar as the incident was reported without question, as if the way it had been reported by our nation’s leader reflected exactly the way it unfolded. As we have seen, the binaries upheld by the report in *The West Australian*, were challenged by *The Australian*. Oriental guilt and

122 ibid
123 ibid
immorality was not assumed and events were contextualized. The work of challenging the assumptions of Orientalism continued through *The Australian*’s editorial of the same edition, half of which was dedicated to Mr. Howard’s treatment of asylum seekers. It is worth quoting extensively as it demonstrates the vast difference in approaches of the two papers:

John Howard analyses the thought of children being thrown overboard by their boatpeople parents as “a sorry reflection on their attitude of mind”. He is right to condemn in the strongest terms anyone who would put the lives of children at risk, for any cause. But the Prime Minister is also as blind as he who cannot see beyond political self interest—blind, if you will, to the sense of desperation that would drive a parent to this sort of behaviour. If these stranded people were simply selfish enough to buy a better life, or rort our immigration system, or in a conspiracy to intimidate Australia, would they throw their children overboard? Surely not, for to believe they would is to demean not only them as humans but to believe they would risk their lives so strangers who follow in their wake could find it easier. The Howard Government, with opposition support, has a refugee policy based on treating indecently those it catches in the forlorn hope that this will deter others, most of whom have genuine claims for asylum. It is blind to the global refugee crisis, makes no allowances for human despair, and holds little time for coordinated regional solutions. Yet deterrence has not worked. Rather, the laws on which it is based are now forcing boatpeople to take even more risks with their lives and those of their children. No matter how great the spectre of Australian troops using force, no matter how dreaded the fear of being locked up in detention centres or on naval vessels or Pacific islands, these people are desperate to flee despots…Thankfully those who jumped overboard yesterday were rescued and placed back on deck. But Australia has sent them back towards international waters, with HMAS Adelaide shadowing their vessel until “it looks like its not going to come back”. Another successful mission for the Howard Government. Another success in exporting our problems and our decency.\(^{124}\)

The editor’s criticisms of the Howard Government’s response to asylum seekers is founded on an appeal to basic humanitarian principles. Asylum seekers are characterised as *people* (my emphasis) fleeing despots. The representations of asylum seekers often utilized by the Howard Government are identified and rejected as unreasonable and based on a lack of decency rather than rationality. *The Australian*’s editor places the issue within a broader international context, ‘the global

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refugee crisis’\textsuperscript{125} and accuses the government of showing a lack of willingness to cooperate with other nations in responding to the international crisis.

Regardless of whether or not one agrees with the opinions expressed by the editor of \textit{The Australian}, it is a significant treatment of the issue based purely on its resistance to the Orientalising project. The Manichean structure upholding much of \textit{The West Australian}’s coverage is absent: the old binaries of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, Western morality versus Eastern immorality, ‘our’ rationality versus ‘their’ irrationality are all challenged, as are those of our politicians that attempt to preserve them.

While my analysis of \textit{The Australian}’s coverage has thus far been limited in its scope, a broader consideration of the newspaper’s coverage demonstrates that the observations made thus far are reflected in its wider coverage of issues pertaining to asylum seekers. There is, for instance, a consistent effort to portray the human face of the issue, which is reflected through the number of stories focusing on the human impact of the Howard Government’s immigration policies as they relate to asylum seekers and refugees. \textit{The Australian}’s coverage between August 17 and October 26, 2001—a period of seventy days—illustrates the point. During this period no less than 35 articles focusing on the human impact of the government’s policies were published, a rate of one article every two days. In terms of overall coverage, no less than 234 articles on issues pertaining to asylum seekers appeared in \textit{The Australian}, which equates to more than three reports per day.

To appreciate the tone of these articles consider the following headlines which appeared within the cited seventy days of coverage: ‘A leaking boat’s cargo of humanity’,\textsuperscript{126} ‘The human face of our rising tide of refugees’,\textsuperscript{127} ‘Refugees trapped at sea’,\textsuperscript{128} ‘A leaky boat to heartbreak’,\textsuperscript{129} ‘Cargo of human misery’,\textsuperscript{130} ‘REFUGEE CRISIS’,\textsuperscript{131} ‘PM’s refugee bungling defies reason and decency’,\textsuperscript{132} ‘Those who come

\textsuperscript{125} ibid
\textsuperscript{132} Editorial, PM’s refugee bungling defies reason and decency, \textit{The Australian}, 30 August 2001, p.10.
across the seas now face troops’, ‘Much pain, no gain in taking a tough stand’, ‘Let the refugees land’, ‘Inflammatory denial of human dignity’, ‘‘We needed blankets…but we got guns’’, ‘Four weeks at sea for a future in limbo behind a fence’, ‘Costly refugee laws offend decency, duty’, ‘Afghans tell of pain and persecution’, ‘Governments must comply with the rule of law’, ‘5 million Afghans at risk’, ‘Forsaken refugees don’t know what fate awaits them’, ‘Children the victims in refugee exodus’, ‘Forced on to death boat’ and ‘Life and death, relief and grief’.

Headlines such as these demonstrate a willingness on the part of The Australian to challenge the Orientalising work of many of the nation’s leaders who were determined not to release ‘personalising or humanising images’. By employing terms such as ‘refugees’ ‘children’ ‘humanity’ ‘human dignity’ and ‘decency’ the newspaper reminds its readers that the government’s actions are affecting living, breathing people rather than reductive impersonalized stereotypes. Headlines and accompanying images of asylum seekers challenge the government’s dehumanising rhetoric by highlighting the humanity of asylum seekers and the commonalities ‘we’ all share. This is further challenged by the efforts of The Australian to provide a platform for the voices of actual refugees and asylum seekers to be heard. This is not to say that the coverage of The Australian was void of marginalising rhetoric.

Reductive terms such as ‘illegals’ and ‘boat people’ are occasionally used. Articles

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supporting the Howard Government’s actions are also published. (To fail to include such content would open the newspaper up to allegations of unbalanced journalism.) There is, however, a definite trend to resist polarized, binary-based coverage that would dehumanize asylum seekers and refugees. No such efforts are made by the editor of *The West Australian*. To this extent, *The West Australian* has upheld the assumptions of Orientalism. Said has observed, ‘What the Orientalist does is to confirm the Orient in his readers’ eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions’. 148 To this extent Orientalism is not a positive knowledge of the Orient but a matrix of knowledge imposed upon the Orient by the West: ‘Orientalism…is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline or governing’. 149 In Foucauldian terms it could be classified as a will to truth insofar as it is a ‘science’ based not on empirical evidence but on Western assumptions: the Orientalist’s knowledge of the Orient is true because he or she wills it so.

Even when faced with evidence that may challenge its assumptions, Orientalism functions to manufacture and maintain Western superiority over the perceived inferiority and backwardness of the East. It is upon this flexible positional superiority that Orientalism depends, for it consistently places the Westener in a whole series of possible relationships without losing the relative upper hand. 150 It is the efforts of *The Australian* to resist this tendency that most markedly distinguishes its coverage from that of *The West Australian*.

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149 *ibid.*, p.41.

150 *ibid.*, p.7.