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Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda

John M. Cartner  
*University of Notre Dame Australia*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**NOTRE DAME**  
A U S T R A L I A

**REPRESENTING THE REFUGEE:  
RHETORIC, DISCOURSE AND THE PUBLIC  
AGENDA**

**This Masters by Research (English Literature) was written by John Martin  
Cartner for the School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Notre Dame  
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## ABSTRACT

The central concern of this dissertation is to examine representation and self-representation as they pertain to this nation's response to asylum seekers between the Tampa affair in August 2001 and the defeat of the Coalition government in the 2007 federal election. The first half of the dissertation examines the representation of refugees in two of the nation's prominent newspapers, *The West Australian* and *The Australian*. Drawing upon the work of Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Michel Foucault and others it is contended that in the Australian government and media's representation of asylum seekers Manichean-based ideologies can be traced, which serve to propagate the Orientalist's project. Furthermore, a close analysis of *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres* and *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire*, shows that it is only through self-representation that the damaging effects of Orientalism can be challenged. As such the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin are central to this analysis of refugees' self-representations. In the final chapter the work of Emmanuel Levinas is also used, of particular interest is his concept of 'face'. Combined with some of the ideas of the aforementioned theorists this demonstrates the centrality of oral discourse and self-representation as sites of life, death and most crucially, hope for those refugees seeking to be accepted into the Australian community.

The analysis of *The West Australian* and *The Australian* conducted in the first two chapters of this dissertation should be read in this context. While there are many factors that contribute to newspaper production such as audience, editorial influences and advertising demands to name but a few, these are not treated by this dissertation. My approach is entirely focussed on the politics of language in terms of its conception, use and effect. Similarly, in my analysis of refugees' self-representations, conducted in the final two chapters of the dissertation, these same concerns are fore-grounded. Furthermore, as the representations and self-representations surrounding refugees considered in this dissertation were produced within specific historical and social conditions these also play an important role in informing my analysis.

I, John Martin Cartner, certify that this dissertation is entirely my own work and contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

John Cartner

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# REPRESENTING THE REFUGEE: RHETORIC, DISCOURSE AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

## INTRODUCTION

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality...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.<sup>1</sup>

These observations made by renowned philosopher and literary theorist Michel Foucault lie at the heart of this dissertation, which aims to consider the battle over discourse and representation within the context of Australia's immigration policies and practices under the Howard Government (1996-2007) as they pertained to refugees and asylum seekers. The former are those who for fear of persecution find themselves stateless, while the latter may be defined as those who having fled their homeland due to fear of persecution seek refuge in another country. The particular scope of the investigation lies between what many consider the turning point in Australia's approach towards asylum seekers, the Tampa affair in August 2001, and the defeat of the Howard Government in the 2007 federal election.

The first two chapters explore the nature of those discourses and representations of asylum seekers and refugees disseminated by some of the leading politicians of the day, as well as those promoted by sections of the Australian media. For the purposes of this dissertation the primary focus is limited to two of our nation's newspapers: *The West Australian* and *The Australian*. As the state's sole daily newspaper, *The West Australian* is the main source of print news for the majority of West Australians; as such, its influence as an agent for dictating and influencing public

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', P. Rice & P. Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (Fourth Edition), Arnold, London, 2001, p.210.

opinion in Western Australia is significant. *The Australian* on the other hand, necessarily aims for a more diverse readership: it claims its 'editorial values focus on leading and shaping public opinions on the issues that affect Australia'.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it is arguably a conservative newspaper, although it will become clear that compared to *The West Australian*, it appears liberal in its editorial views. For this reason, it was chosen as the second print media source to be analysed. It should be noted that the analysis of these two newspapers focuses on the politics of language and representation in the context of historical and social circumstances. This same methodology is employed in the treatment of refugees' self-representations conducted in the second half of the dissertation.

To effectively demonstrate the battle being waged over the representation of refugees and asylum seekers, a comparative methodology is employed. Drawing upon the work of Stuart Hall, among others, the signifying practices operating within chosen texts will be examined: those that cultivate and those that resist dominant representations. At the heart of this methodology is Hall's assertion that signifying practices are central to representation. While in and of themselves images can convey an array of potential meanings, through signifying practices some meanings are privileged over others; the results of such privileging are often highly political and, as Foucault observes, designed 'to ward off' the powers and dangers of discourse and 'to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality'.<sup>3</sup> In terms of the Australian government's response to refugees, there is considerable evidence that determined efforts were made to control the discourse of refugees. It will become apparent that in the media's reporting of refugees the three manifestations of the prohibition identified by Foucault, 'the taboo on the object of speech, and the ritual of the circumstances of speech, and the privileged or exclusive right of the speaking subject'<sup>4</sup> are operating.

As a procedure of exclusion the work of representation is not complete with the assignment of meaning to a single image. Rather the power in representation is found

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Australian', News Limited, [www.theaustralian.news.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au), [22 Jul. 07]

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', P. Rice & P. Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (Fourth Edition), Arnold, London, 2001, p.210.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', P. Rice & P. Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (Fourth Edition), Arnold, London, 2001, p.211.

in its cumulative nature. Representation occurs when the same meaning is fixed to an accumulation of various images and texts. When a particular meaning is applied intertextually a regime of representation is created. The representation of refugees therefore, occurs when meanings are fixed to them across a variety of texts and/or images, which suggests the existence of a correlation between representation and power. Since the effectiveness of representation lies in the breadth of its coverage its success is contingent upon access to the tools of its dissemination. Those, such as newspaper editors and politicians, who have the means to create and disseminate representations widely, will determine how not only they but also others are represented. This is why the media and governments are such powerful conductors of representation. It is also why minorities tend to struggle to combat these representations; it is not the case that their self-representations have less power in and of themselves—in fact the opposite is often true—but that they have less access to mainstream society. Indeed, it is this reality that largely informs the comparative methodology employed for this dissertation. By comparing the representations of two newspapers, the similarities, differences and representational possibilities become evident, as do the editorial choices and values that influenced these representations. These representations are further challenged through the examination of refugees' self-representations. Furthermore, while the thesis examines the procedures of exclusion applied to the refugee minority in Australia, this is done within the broader context of white-black relations and Australia's treatment of its Other throughout its history as a colonised country. Richard Dyer's *White*, Henry Louis Gates Jr's, "*Race, Writing, and Difference*", Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon will inform this aspect of the analysis.

It is further contested that the representational and discursive procedures of exclusion employed by the Australian government and sections of the Australian media against refugees have comprised part of the Orientalist's project: the propagation of the 'ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority'.<sup>5</sup> The relevance of Said's work to this thesis lies in the largely Oriental origins of the majority of current asylum seekers in Australia and the corresponding historically constituted fear of these people entrenched in the Australian psyche and many

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London, p.42.

policies. An important footnote to this analysis is that the author, while acknowledging the work Said's *Orientalism* does in showing how the Oriental has been eroticised by the West, will focus largely on the marginalising effects of Orientalism upon the Orient and its inhabitants.

The second half of this dissertation focuses on self-representation. Despite the obstacles, largely through advocates refugees have begun to represent themselves to the wider Australian community using the written word. Examples of such texts are to be found in Heather Tyler's *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire* and *From Nothing to Zero: Letters from Refugees in Australia's Detention Centres*, a Lonely Planet publication. The significance of such texts is revealed not only through the efforts of those who would repress them, but also through the form and content of the narratives. The key term here is narrative, for as Said notes, the power of narrative lies in its ability to introduce 'an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision'<sup>6</sup> to that promoted by stereotypes and binaries. To this end, many of the stories emerging from adult detainees rely upon recollections of past traumas and reminders to the reader of their humanity; detained children on the other hand employ more imaginative and anthropomorphic techniques in their narratives to convey their suffering and fears. A detailed examination of such devices comprises much of chapters three and four. Drawing upon the work of Edward Said and Mikhail Bakhtin, refugee self-representations will be shown to challenge the 'permanence of vision' upon which many representations of refugees rely. Indeed the main work of these chapters is to discuss how refugee self-representations achieve this by applying Bakhtinian principles to a close reading of a selection of the narratives found in the two aforementioned texts.

Thereafter, the work of Emmanuel Levinas is applied to a discussion of the ethics surrounding representations and self-representations of the refugee Other. His ontological philosophies inform the discussion found in the latter parts of the final chapter. Furthermore, from an examination of these same philosophies, several questions pertaining to the nature and importance of oral literatures emerge. It is within this context that one of Levinas' key insights, namely the encounter with the face, will be explored. Drawing upon some of his ideas, I will suggest that it is in the

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London, p.240.

omission of the face in representations of refugees and its subsequent inclusion in refugee self-representations that the power of both lies.

During the course of this dissertation, a critical change occurred in the Australian political landscape. After a decade in power, the Howard Government lost office to the Labor Party, led by Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Within the first year of the Rudd Government taking power in 2007 a raft of changes was introduced which markedly altered the nation's approach to immigration, refugees and detainees. Temporary Protection Visas were abolished, and with them, so too was the sense of uncertainty they promoted amongst detainees. In addition the Rudd government placed a moratorium on indefinite mandatory detention insisting that asylum seekers be processed as quickly as possible upon their arrival.<sup>7</sup> The Pacific Solution, which saw refugees processed on Christmas Island and Nauru has been abolished, and a more humanitarian approach towards asylum seekers adopted. Such was the extent of the changes to Australia's policies towards refugees, that in his address to the Refugee Council of Australia, Senator Chris Evans, the new Minister for Immigration and Citizenship announced that 'At this year's meeting of the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees the High Commissioner, Antonio Guterres, described Australia as a model asylum country'.<sup>8</sup> Considering Australia under the Howard government was a constant target of the United Nations for its immigration policies, the statement by its High Commissioner marks a significant turnaround in both the nation's treatment of refugees and the way it is perceived by the global community.

A detailed consideration of the impact of these changes in policy upon detainees' stories is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Based, however, on the findings revealed through the following chapters it is safe to assume that the degree of despair characteristic of many of the narratives written by detainees during the Howard years may have lessened. While such news would be welcomed by refugee advocates and those who adhere to humanitarian principles, it remains to be seen whether Australians have become less susceptible to the fear-based politics that drove the

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 'Refugee Policy Under The Rudd Government—The First Year', Senator Chris Evans, 21 November 2008, [www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/speeches/2008/ce081117.htm](http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/speeches/2008/ce081117.htm), [22 December 2008].

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

Pacific Solution and other ethnocentric policies that have marked our nation's history. What, however, is certain is the role the stories of detainees have played in rewriting Australia's history. Just as *The Diary of Anne Frank* stands as a warning from history and testament to the excesses of Nazi Germany, so too will the narratives of detainees join those of Indigenous Australians in writing another chapter into the annals of our own nation's history of prejudice. This connection between narrative and history and the role stories play in re-imagining and rewriting history will be the subject of thorough discussion in the second half of this dissertation.