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Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda

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CHAPTER THREE

During the first two chapters I have argued that many of the rhetorical and discursive practices employed against refugees manifest the project of Orientalism by fixing the refugee Other in time and space; for, as Said reminds us, ‘the Orient is synonymous with stability and unchanging eternity’.¹⁵¹ The use of binaries, carefully constructed representations and other literary and discursive devices assist the Orientalist in his or her efforts to reduce the Oriental Other to the stereotypes that best serve and justify the colonizing process. Any efforts therefore to challenge the Orientalist’s work must begin by challenging the permanence of vision propagated by Orientalism. The most effective way to achieve this is through narrative which ‘asserts the power of men to be born, develop and die, the tendency of institutions and actualities to change...above all, it asserts 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’.¹⁵²

According to Said, narrative by its very nature places its subject in context; it cannot work with reductive stereotypes and must infuse life into its characters, giving them shape, form, a history, presence and a future. If this is so, narrative threatens reductive representations and binaries, forcing the reader to confront the reality of life as a dialogue in which the Oriental Other speaks, projecting his/her voice — a voice shaped by the past — into a future. Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on dialogism in the novel will largely inform the following analysis, states that:

These languages develop out of the tension of conflicting centripetal and centrifugal forces in society: alongside the centripetal forces the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.¹⁵³

Essentially, Bakhtin is asserting the interconnected relationship that exists between dominant ideologies and those literatures that we might term literatures of resistance, albeit in a more convoluted manner than Said. Bakhtin’s work is important because

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.240.

¹⁵² *ibid*

¹⁵³ Gabriele Helms, *Challenging Canada: Dialogism And Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2003, p.22.

he places literature firmly within the historical and sociological context from which it emerges. The relevance of Bakhtin's contestations is apparent when applied to the literature of refugees, for this literature is in both form and content reflective of the contexts from which it emerges. It attempts to challenge the centripetal forces that would oppress these people and to reshape the society that has necessitated their authorship.

Within a Bakhtinian framework, to speak of 'refugees' literatures' or 'language/s of refugees' is to acknowledge not only their historically constitutive origins, but also the reality of metalinguistics, a term coined by Bakhtin to describe the dialogic nature of language.¹⁵⁴ According to Bakhtin if language emerges from historically contested events, then it is necessarily orientated towards the other and as such invites a response. As such, language is innately dialogic. Indeed the term metalinguistics 'implies that the appropriate terms for the study of language are beyond linguistics...[that] linguistics alone is inadequate for analyzing language as a dialogic phenomenon'.¹⁵⁵ To accept this is to accept that in order to understand how language operates we must go beyond the type of systematic linguistics advocated by Saussure and others to consider language at the level of its origin, its utterance and its meaning. According to Bakhtin, a single utterance occurs only once in time and can never be repeated. The meaning or content of a particular utterance can, however, be repeated even reshaped through future utterances. Dialogue then is an exchange of meaning through sequential utterances. It is at the site of this exchange that language is stretched, challenged, even reshaped. It is through dialogue that language is 'pulled in opposite directions: centripetally, towards the unitary centre provided by a notion of a "national language"; and centrifugally, towards the various languages that actually constitute the apparent but false unity of a national language'.¹⁵⁶ Language then, is a highly dynamic and contested phenomenon which, in its dialogic manifestation, acts like a pendulum—swinging from side to side in search of meanings that ring true.

To acknowledge dialogic language as the exchange of competing voices is to acknowledge the reality of the presence of a plurality of voices within society. While

¹⁵⁴ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.33.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.35.

this is hardly a revelation, there are critical implications for the study of language, the most important of which, foreseen by Bakhtin, is heteroglossia: a term of his own invention used to define the multiplicity of actual ‘languages’ which are at any time spoken. Languages of social groups, classes, professionals, or different generations as well as those languages determined by their context are all encompassed within heteroglossia. At one end of the scale the term can refer to large dialectical differences which can produce mutual unintelligibility while at the other, it can allude to the distinguishing slang of one year to the next and even to the slogan of the hour.¹⁵⁷

Heteroglossia is further manifested through the politically charged nature of particular utterances. Not only do utterances emerge from specific circumstances, they respond to these same circumstances and the discourse surrounding them. According to Bakhtin, every utterance participates in the ‘dynamics of a language in tension, so that every utterance involves the taking of sides in all the multiple conflicts and negotiations that constitute the politics of language.’¹⁵⁸ The politics surrounding the representation of refugees has been established in previous chapters. Refugees’ literatures emerge to challenge these representations by contesting the meaning surrounding the discourse that constitutes them. In other words, through the utterances of refugees the dominant discourse surrounding them is challenged and, if successful, so too are the marginalizing effects of this discourse.

To acknowledge this interplay of languages is to simultaneously recognize the dangers of colonizing practices reemerging. It is the task of the one wishing to provide an avenue for the Others’ voices to be heard to acknowledge this risk. It would be wrong, for example, to presume that we in the 21st century have gone beyond attempting to colonise the languages of others, for the birth of postmodern literature in the 20th century was a direct response to this very tendency. There is a continued presence of languages that suffer the effects of the colonising project. The existence, exposure and continued production of refugees’ centrifugal texts is critical therefore if the rolling back of opposing centripetal texts is to occur. The texts chosen for this study have been selected because they attempt to do just this. Prior to commencing an analysis of these texts, however, it needs to be noted that while

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.36.

Bakhtin's work in the area of narrative has almost exclusively evolved from his study of novels, particularly those of Dostoyevsky and Dickens, the importance of his insights is evident through their pliability. Just as I am not the first to discover applications for Bakhtin's theories beyond his own, neither will I be the last to apply his theoretical insights to other narrative forms.

The forms of narrative to be analysed in the following chapters are both varied and 'necessarily embedded in the structures (they) seek to undermine or subvert'.¹⁵⁹ All texts to be analysed find their genesis in the detention centres which have come to embody Australia's attitude towards refugees. In terms of their form, content and purpose the texts are intractably bound to their context. They share the common goal of exposing narratives of those who have experienced the oppressive prohibitions exercised behind the razor wires of Australia's detention centres; narratives which seek to illuminate the human impact of the discursive and practical prohibitions used to justify and uphold Australia's mandatory detention system. As such, these narratives are constructions that operate within fields of power relations and consciously or otherwise act to challenge the dominant forms of ideological and cultural productions. They do this through illumination: voicing their social discontent, imagining and re-imagining, shaping and reshaping their situations through their texts.

*From Nothing to Zero*¹⁶⁰ is a compilation of letters from refugees in Australia's detention centres. Each chapter provides the reader with an individual's experience within the context of the refugees' shared experience, so the individual's story is part of the greater narrative. This culmination of micro-narratives to form a meta-narrative creates a polyphonically conceived world in which each voice adds weight to the other to convey the shared experience of refugees while also challenging the social and ideological hegemony of the dominant society, which in this case is mainstream Australia.

The first chapter 'Life at Home' contains letters that speak of the lives of refugees in the countries from which they subsequently fled. Chapter two 'The Journey'

¹⁵⁹ Gabriele Helms, *Challenging Canada: Dialogism And Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2003, p.9.

¹⁶⁰ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray.

provides details of refugees' often harrowing journeys to Australia, while the third chapter 'Life in Detention' contains letters which look at life in Australia's detention centres. The subsequent chapters are organized according to the authors' experiences and circumstances in detention. Chapter four is entitled 'Children in Detention' and contains those letters written by the children held in the nation's detention centres. Nauru and refugees' experiences of Nauru are included in chapter five, while chapter six focuses on the mental anguish experienced by detainees. The following three chapters are entitled 'The Process', 'Thoughts about Australia' and 'The Letter Writing Campaign', while the final chapter looks at 'The Future' as seen through the eyes of those in detention.

The well established dependence of narrative, rhetorical, or linguistic devices upon the social and cultural practices within which they are embedded is clearly evident in *From Nothing to Zero*, for its pages contain a multitude of independent voices whose utterances originate from the common experience of being refugees within the nation's detention centres. In many respects they share a common past and present and very likely, a common future. They cease to be queue jumpers or simply boat people and are instead placed into the human story, a story they share with thousands of other refugees. Thus, at the level of form and content, *From Nothing to Zero*, is deeply embedded within the shared experience of refugees everywhere.

In order to provide a forum for the voices of refugees to speak the editors of *From Nothing to Zero* have edited sparingly, and where errors in grammar or spelling have not affected clarity, they have been left in. It is a decision which preserves the authenticity of the voices articulated through the text. It is also important to note that all letters included in *From Nothing to Zero* are published anonymously, with all identifying information from the letters removed. As the editors explain, this has been necessary to 'ensure the refugees are not individually targeted...and to preserve their status as asylum seekers'.¹⁶¹

Following the analysis of *From Nothing to Zero*, our attention will turn to *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire*.¹⁶² This text shares similarities with *From Nothing to Zero* insofar as it provides an avenue for the voices of refugees to be heard, while

¹⁶¹ *ibid*

¹⁶² Heather Tyler, *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire*, Lothian Books, South Melbourne.

also presenting itself differently in terms of structure and form. Unlike *From Nothing to Zero*, there is a great deal of authorial intrusion into the refugees' stories. Indeed it is Heather Tyler, a journalist for *The Daily Telegraph*, who speaks for the refugees who have consented to the publication of their stories. This does not, however, preclude the voices of refugees from being heard, for direct quotes and information taken from interviews have been included and act to bind the stories together, giving them their authenticity. Yet it is evident that any grammatical or spelling errors that we might expect from people speaking English as their second language have been edited out. This not only serves to diminish the consciousness in the reader of the refugees' cultural differences which, whether we like to admit it or not, often increases the level of empathy felt for the refugee by the reader, but also demonstrates the mediated nature of the text. In the words of Helm, literatures of resistance are 'produced and reproduced through readers who are situated within their own specific contexts. Resistance is always constituted through multiple ideological relations.'¹⁶³ In the case of many refugees it can hardly be otherwise. In order for non-English speaking refugees to successfully convey their experiences to a largely English speaking audience some mediation is unavoidable; furthermore, in some cases such mediation is desired by those wanting their stories to be told. It is a common phenomenon in the realm of postcolonial literature and much academic work has been carried out investigating the ramifications of this process of mediation.¹⁶⁴

Structurally, *Asylum: Voices Behind the Razor Wire*, is organized into thirteen chapters. The first chapter provides some background into the plight of refugees who find themselves in Australia's detention centres. The following seven chapters each deal with the story of individual asylum seekers. All provide details of the circumstances which led the refugee in question to flee his/her country of birth and all provide insights into the difficulties these people experienced both in their journeys to Australia and during their time inside Australian detention centres. As with *From Nothing to Zero*, this layering of voices across successive chapters emphasizes the shared nature of the experiences being conveyed. Chapter nine looks

¹⁶³ Gabriele Helms, *Challenging Canada: Dialogism And Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2003, p.8.

¹⁶⁴ Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, *Reinventing The Enemy's Language*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 1998; Anne Brewster, *Literary Formations*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1995.

at the visit of the United Nations working group to Australian detention centres, while chapter ten looks at the story of a refugee family. Chapter eleven places the nation's present policy pertaining to refugees in an historical context, while the voices of supporters are heard in the penultimate chapter. The final chapter is only one page in length and is comprised of a poem written by a refugee in detention. As stated earlier, the forms of literature included in Tyler's text are varied: while each chapter is written in prose, diary excerpts, letters and poems are also to be found.

In this thesis, refugees' stories are read as texts that challenge the 'objective history' so often written and promoted by those embedded in the dominant ideology. This New Historicist approach challenges the traditional linear reading of history by advocating the inclusion of the stories of marginalized peoples as 'counterhistories'¹⁶⁵ that remind us that history consists of 'a dynamic, unstable interplay of discourses...negotiating exchanges of power'.¹⁶⁶ Stuart Hall in his paper 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies'¹⁶⁷ asserts that the work of cultural studies 'has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death'.¹⁶⁸ Hall reminds us that the battle over representation is keenly fought with consequences that stretch far beyond the political to a battle for the most basic tenet of our existence: life itself. The needless and tragic deaths of 353 asylum seekers in the northern oceans of Australia in October of 2001 are a stark reminder of this. It is doubtful that without the ambivalence of Australian authorities to the plight of asylum seekers such needless loss of life would have occurred. The situation highlights the consequences of misrepresentation and emphasizes the urgent need for self-representation.

Julian Burnside QC, who has waged a long fight against the Australian government's policies pertaining to asylum seekers, is a high profile refugee advocate who has worked to provide forums for refugees' self-representations. In the preface of *From Nothing to Zero*, he notes the purpose of the book is 'to give a face to the faceless; a

¹⁶⁵ Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p.52.

¹⁶⁶ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, New York, p.285.

¹⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies And Its Theoretical Legacies', in Vincent B. Leitch et.al. (eds), *The Norton Anthology: Theory And Criticism*, W. W. Norton Company, New York, 2001, pp.1898-1910.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*,p.1908.

voice to the voiceless. To show the people we hold in indefinite detention are human beings like the rest of us'.¹⁶⁹ Such purposes stand in opposition to the Manichean based representations promoted by the government, which seek always to promote the superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the refugee.¹⁷⁰ It is when refugees' self-representations are read from this perspective that the reductive representations imposed upon them can be challenged.

Former Prime Minister John Howard is on the record as complaining about current revisionist history, calling it a “systematic”, “deliberate” and “insidious” process and “an abuse of the true purpose of history”.¹⁷¹ Stephen Greenblatt, however, views the narratives of the marginalized as necessary intrusions that provide a counterbalance to the traditional dominant histories that have sought to render minorities voiceless. ‘The desired anecdotes would not, as in the old historicism, epitomize epochal truths, but would instead undermine them. The anecdotes would open history, or place it askew, so that literary texts could find new points of insertion.’¹⁷² With this in mind, the self-representations of refugees provide a history from below ‘to counter the history of the victors with that of the vanquished’.¹⁷³ Contrary to the view of history held by Mr. Howard such intellectual activity is, according to Roland Barthes, essential in order to gain a truer understanding of history as the record of competing voices rather than a monolithic narrative:

He (Barthes) defined the discourse of history in modern times as one that constantly tries to efface the difference between the signified and the referent by presenting its own narrative sequence (the signified) as identical to a sequence of past events (the referent). But this elision of signified and referent is exposed when some mere “notation,” often an anecdote incompletely digested by the larger narrative, divulges a different reality, which is behind or beside the narrative surface and

¹⁶⁹ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.V.

¹⁷⁰ Abdul R. JanMohamed, ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature’, in Henry Louis Gates Jr et.al. (ed) *Race Writing And Difference*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, p.82.

¹⁷¹ Graeme Davison, ‘Agenda Setting: The Use and Abuse of Australian History’, in Deborah Gare & David Ritter (eds), *Making Australian History: Perspectives On The Past Since 1788*, Thomson, Victoria, 2008, p.581.

The question needs to be asked, What exactly does Mr Howard mean by the ‘true purposes of history’? Is it to reconfirm the Orientalist’s project all over again, namely to re-assert Anglo-Saxon superiority over Oriental inferiority?

¹⁷² Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000, p.51.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p.53.

composed of things that historians cannot assimilate into typicality or coherent significance.¹⁷⁴

In the context of Australia's recent history pertaining to asylum seekers, refugees' self-representations do indeed divulge a very different reality to that promoted through much of the nation's media and many of its politicians. Consider for example the following excerpt found in the opening chapter of *From Nothing to Zero*:

You want to know about my family it's very sad story. I had a happy family, but the Al-suna religion (Pashtoon and Tajik) killed two of my older brothers.

Before I came here three years ago, one of my younger brothers was missing. I don't know where he is—is he alive or died? One of my sisters with her husband had been missing two years when I came here. I don't know about my parents—are they alive or not? I have had no contact with any family member.

I escaped from Afghanistan and came in your country to seek asylum. Your government have protected me in Jail—what a democratic country?! What a big joke with humanity and human rights. Al-Suna religion was better than this modern and democratic regime—they killed just one time but this regime is killing us every day, day and night, morning and evening. What we'll remember is how they treat us.¹⁷⁵

When placed alongside self-representations such as this, reductive terms like 'illegals', 'boat people' or 'queue jumpers' are disarmed of their power. These referential terms commonly employed against refugees not only label and reduce refugees to their supposed action or mode of transport but also defer meaning to any number of associations the reader might make when confronted with such terms. As JanMohamed notes, the effect of such discourse is to commodify the 'subject into a stereotyped object...by negating his individuality, his subjectivity, so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native (they all look alike, act alike, and so on).'¹⁷⁶ Narrative, however, asserts meaning. In the words of Hall, 'if signification depends on the endless repositioning of its differential terms, meaning, in any specific instance, depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop—the

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.50.

¹⁷⁵ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.4.

¹⁷⁶ Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', in Henry Louis Gates Jr et.al. (ed) *Race Writing And Difference*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, p.83.

necessary and temporary break in the infinite semiosis of language.’¹⁷⁷ Drawing upon Derrida’s insights into the relationship between signification and the deference of meaning, Hall demonstrates the critical role of narratives in making meaning as opposed to labels and binaries that empty reality of its meaning. History has shown that those wishing to marginalize others begin by first dehumanising them, denying them their identity. A critical step in the process is the removal of dissenting voices. Hence, as was the case with Nazi Germany’s Final Solution where books were burnt and names replaced by numbers, Howard’s Pacific Solution placed opposing voices on the fringes of society. Detained refugees were also identified by assigned number. This of course reinforces the indelible link between knowledge and power and highlights the desire of the Howard government to govern our ‘will to know’.¹⁷⁸

We are part of an oppressed and deprived ethnic group in Afghanistan. Instead of taking part at schools and learning centres, we were forced into hard labour. Ethnic cleansing was pursued. Yes, these were the seeds which produced thousands of orphans, widows and homeless peoples to rush towards neighbouring countries in the hope of asylum. We are part of those homeless and oppressed people fleeing persecution and fear and the threat of execution who arrived at the door of Australia and humanitarian people. We touched the handle of the door and knocked it requesting refuge but unfortunately the owner of the house refused us entry and instead of protection he sent us as exiles to Nauru.¹⁷⁹

A common experience appearing through the aforementioned narratives is the movement from persecution to persecution. The tone of each utterance can be best described as melancholic, with the first utterance moving from sorrow and melancholy to anger, anger directed towards the Australian authorities. The respective tones of these narratives both reflect upon and respond to the contexts from which they are born, for as Simon Dentith observes ‘language always occurs in situations, so the force of an utterance can never be decided by a mere account of its formal meaning’.¹⁸⁰ This is a critical point when considering narratives; their power lies not only in what they say, but how they say it. The pathos of any narrative is

¹⁷⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ in Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Pearson Education Limited, Essex, 1994, p.397.

¹⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, ‘The Order of Discourse’, in P. Rice & P. Waugh (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (Fourth Edition), Arnold, London, 2001, p.212

¹⁷⁹ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.10.

¹⁸⁰ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.29.

conveyed largely through its intonation and this is clearly evident in the narratives of refugees.

The following utterance is a good example of the role of content and intonation in the conveyance of meaning. The majority of the following account is expressed quite methodically and when read appears devoid of emotion. This is as revealing as strong overtones of emotions, such as anger, as it reflects the power context has exercised over its subject:

I am an Iranian man, 35 years old and single. I came here with a boat about 18 months ago. I was in water about one week. My family is on blacklist in Iran because my brothers were members of opposition parties. One of them was detained and when he was released he lost his mental health. Another one was detained and then lost his job. My nephew was executed in 1988. I am not muslim but I was obliged to say I was a muslim when I went to school. I didn't pray and my teacher hit me. One time I was arrested by police in Iran. They kept me in a solitary cell for four days without food and water. In my country I and my family didn't have the right to work (many works are in government's hands). They used persecution and discrimination against us. I lived in this situation in my land, and when I couldn't endure this I decided to flee here. Why your country, I don't know. Maybe the reason is what you said in your letter— 'multicultural'. I have been persecuted in my home and everybody knows my country is in third world with dictator regime. But your government also persecutes me and other people. Why!?'¹⁸¹

Interestingly, and appropriately, the utterance is framed as an exclamation and a question. As an exclamation the 'Why!' expresses the writer's utter confusion over the manner of his treatment at the hands of Australian authorities. As he states 'everybody knows my country is third world with dictator regime. But your government also persecutes me and other people. Why!?'¹⁸² At the level of the question the writer's words demand a response from the reader. It is the climatic moment of the narrative and the point which most powerfully reveals the dialogic nature of the narrative.

The question with which the writer concludes his narrative draws the reader to respond. The instigator of the dialogue awaits his response and the tone of his utterance demands that such a response is given. In the words of V.N. Voloshinov,

¹⁸¹ *ibid*

¹⁸² Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.11.

‘Life begins only at the point where utterance crosses utterance, i.e., where verbal interaction begins, be it not even “face-to-face” verbal interaction, but the mediated, literary variety’.¹⁸³ Voloshinov’s point is an important one for, as is the case with all the narratives examined through this dissertation, no face-to-face dialogue ever takes place. Rather the dialogue is always mediated by the author or editors of the published texts in which they are found. It is enough, however, that the utterances are verbalized, for in the literary space they occupy these narratives operate on the dialogic level as they instigate the speech act and simultaneously demand a response. The following narrative expressed in understated prose operates in a different manner to the previous account. The lack of questioning or intonation combines with the harrowing and detailed content to convey the heroic strength of the writer, which simultaneously invites reflection and questioning on the part of the reader:

I am an only child, born in the Indian sector of Kashmir. I fled India because the authorities wanted to prosecute me and they killed my father. I received news that my father had died while I was studying. I was subsequently advised that my father had been tortured and killed by security forces that claimed he had weapons hidden.

I returned immediately to my home town and went with my mother to see my father’s body on which the injuries as a consequence of torture were clearly visible. My mother became extremely distressed, collapsed into coma and was taken to hospital. She never came out of the coma and three months later she died. I remained at her side in the hospital throughout this period. Following my mother’s death I became deeply distressed as I felt I had no one else in the world and little reason to live. One of my uncles had been looking after the family home and my father’s business affairs. He tried to console me and told me I should put the death of my parents behind me. He also said that he would look after me like a son and persuaded me to return to my studies, which I did.

A friend came to me and advised me that my uncle had been arranging for my family’s property to be transferred into his own name by bribing officials (which is very easy to do). I obtained support and assistance from my best friend and his family who took me in whilst I continued with my course. During this period, partly as a result of my anger about my parent’s deaths, I participated in protests and obtained anti-government literature that emanated from Pakistan. I was at a house with friends one night when security forces raided the house and took us to an interrogation centre, where we were questioned and tortured. The security forces accused us of assisting the militants and helping in border

¹⁸³ Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.31.

crossings. They had searched the house for ammunition but only found literature.

Torture is used to extract information, to punish detainees and try to force detainees to become informers or to join counter-militant organizations. I was kept in the interrogation centre and was tortured frequently and asked a lot of questions about the Mujahidin, but I could not tell them anything because I knew nothing about them. They tied me up and removed the nail from my left thumb then they put chilli into the open wound. The pain was excruciating. They used a roller to apply excruciating pressure to my legs. The roller is rotated over my legs, and one of the security people was standing on it. I was often denied water during interrogation and frequently became dehydrated. The whole night they kept pouring water onto my face and blinding me in a powerful light beam. I was tortured relentlessly for ten days.

After ten days my friends and me were being moved to the central prison, along with the commander/section leader of a military group. Associates of this man attacked the vehicle in which we traveled. This gave my friends and me an opportunity to escape, which we took, as we believed we were being taken to be executed.

We hid in various parts of Kashmir for the next nine months, sometimes in the forest and sometimes in safe houses in towns, staying for only short periods in any one place. We went from Kashmir to Punjab via a circuitous route, traveling mostly at night. In Punjab security forces were looking for us. We obtained false travel documents through our contact in Punjab and flew to Singapore. There in desperation I stowed away on a container ship.

I had no idea where it was going. The ship docked in Port Moresby (PNG), which is not a signatory of the convention of the United Nations. I sought asylum (refugee) but unfortunately PNG immigration laws were unable to help me because there are no asylums in PNG. This left me no alternative but to seek refugee asylum in another country. A friend told me a boat was leaving for Australia that day and there was no time to consider the opportunity (I did not pay a single cent to the people smugglers). It was a terrifying journey as I had never learnt to swim and several times we were caught in storms out of sight of land.

Eventually we landed on an Island and immigration officers later interviewed me. More than three years later I find myself in limbo in this detention centre.¹⁸⁴

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¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p.18.

What each of these stories demonstrates is that textuality is indeed a site of life and death. This is true not only of the content of these narratives, all of which tell the tale of torture, execution and genocide, but also at the site of their prohibition, which has resulted in the loss of hope in many detainees who have subsequently ended their lives behind the razor wire of Australia's detention centres.

In his paper 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'¹⁸⁵ Stuart Hall questions traditional concepts of identity as something inherent to the individual and forever fixed and suggests that identity possesses fluidity, that it is 'a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation'.¹⁸⁶ He bases this conception of identity on the underlying premise that 'practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the position of enunciation'.¹⁸⁷ Hall then goes on to outline two ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first definition he gives is that of a shared culture, which he defines as a collective 'one true self' that is assumed to be part of the fabric of those people with a shared history and ancestry.¹⁸⁸ The second dimension of identity Hall identifies is that formed through rupture. By rupture he refers to those historical incidents which give new meaning to a people's identity. This is best explained using Hall's own example:

We might think of black Caribbean identities as 'framed' by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity; and continuity and the vector of difference and rupture. Caribbean identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives us some grounding in, some continuity with, the past. The second reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of profound discontinuity... The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that unified these people across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past¹⁸⁹

Like the disenfranchised Caribbean, the refugee languishing in detention shares a common fate with his/her fellow detainees which has both cut them off not only from

¹⁸⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Pearson Education Limited, Essex, 1994, pp.392-403.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p.392.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.393.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp.395-396.

their past but also from their future. While it is true that the Caribbean Diaspora was a result of colonizing activities of the west, it is equally true that the colonizing activities of groups such as the Taliban, Indian security forces and the Iranian government have forced refugees into detention. Of course, I speak here of discursive colonization; attempts to crush dissenting voices, to ban literature that does not conform to the dominant discourse, to execute those suspected of being subversive. As is demonstrated through the self-representations so far cited, it was so often this form of colonization that forced refugees to flee their homes and seek refuge in Australia. The great irony of their fate was that in seeking refuge in Australia they found their discourses oppressed regardless.

How then are Hall's understandings of culture manifested in the stories emerging from detainees? If we turn to the first of the most three recently cited representations, we hear the writer speak of a common past. A past experienced as a minority: 'We are part of an oppressed and deprived ethnic group in Afghanistan'.¹⁹⁰ Through the collective pronoun, the writer speaks of a shared history, a history of marginalization, a history of persecution attributed to a history of belonging to a minority ethnic group from Afghanistan. The reader can, with a degree of certainty, assume that the writer is a member of the Hazara ethnic group for, as Phil Sparrow notes, the large majority of those (Afghani) seeking asylum in Australia since 1998 belong to this group. Furthermore, Hazaras are largely adherents of the Shia branch of Islam, which is the minority in Afghanistan and worldwide.¹⁹¹ According to Sparrow, their status as the persecuted minority stretches back across centuries. For hundreds of years they have had little status and are certainly regarded as the most deprived ethnic group in Afghanistan. Their villages have been considered unworthy of development, and the development of infrastructure in the Hazarajat (the high, remote and mountainous region defined by the Hindu Kush mountain range) has scarcely progressed in over a century.¹⁹² There has never been a Hazara as president, *amir* or king in over three hundred years of recorded history. Rarely has a Hazara

¹⁹⁰ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.10.

¹⁹¹ *ibid*

¹⁹² *ibid.*, p.28.

held government positions of any significance. They have consistently been deprived of an education.¹⁹³

With such clear historical evidence of persecution of the Hazara ethnic group available, the case against their claims for refugee status is unclear. What is clear is that their shared history, which clearly defines their self-representation and identity as a marginalized people, has not prevented their further isolation from the mainstream population of Australia, the country in which many have sought refuge. Despite the fact that the narrative of this particular writer conforms perfectly to the well documented history of his/her people, the writer finds him/herself exiled to Nauru facing a future as uncertain as the past. This disregard for the marginalized Other's history, according to Franz Fanon typifies the Colonialist's approach to its Other: 'Colonisation is not merely satisfied with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.'¹⁹⁴

The power of self-representation lies in its ability to remember what was forgotten, to recreate what was destroyed. Hall explains the process well, again in regards to the Caribbean experience when in speaking about the photographic works of Jamaican and Rastafarian artists seeking to visually reconstruct the underlying unity of the black people affected by slavery he states that 'no one who looks at these textual images now, in the light of the history of transportation, slavery and migration, can fail to understand how the rift of separation, the 'loss of identity', which has been integral to the Caribbean experience only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place.'¹⁹⁵ What is true of the Caribbean experience is just as true of refugees whose narratives play a significant role in the recreation of the histories that inform so much of their identity. Their narratives now encompass not only their experiences in the country of origin, but also their experiences in and of the country that detains them. Thus their narratives both recreate their past and identity in a simultaneous process. Furthermore, their articulation challenges and reshapes the society to which and in which they speak.

¹⁹³ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Pearson Education Limited, Essex, 1994, p.393.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p.394.

The third chapter of *From Nothing to Zero* is entitled ‘Life in Detention’:

Since the moment we arrived in the detention centre, we have forgotten what happiness and laughter means, and scenes of suicides, death and terror make us more depressed. I think the world has forgotten me. When I come across the detainees who are weeping with pain, I am unable to control myself and tears start rolling down from my eyes because we can understand each other and the pain there is common to us all. I compare the people in detention with a small baby who has just started to walk and even a slight push will tumble him down—it’s the same case with us. Even if the weather cools down a bit, we catch a cold and the slightest hot weather gives us dehydration.

I am talking about a true prison, where thoughts are killed and death is always knocking at the door. The look of the security guards towards a detainee can be exactly compared with the look of a master to a slave, and when a detainee fighting for his self respect opposes the guard, there is very cruel treatment. The result is always the same—mental and physical hurt.

The most awful thing we come across is mothers with their children—one can clearly witness the fascism and racism at this moment. Because there are more restrictions for everyone, it becomes intolerable. In my country, a female has got many restrictions—but I would like to know has a female got any right here? Can a female in detention centre care for her baby as an outside woman? I think no.

The children always want to play, laugh, listen to stories, etc. If a mother wants to tell a story to her child, who is the hero—the people who attempt suicide? Or the people who are slowly heading towards death? Or who are mentally retarded or paralyzed? I would like to ask if children witness those suicides, death, fear etc. What effect does it have on their developing minds? Won’t their gentle soft spirits be killed?

We feel like all the world is unaware of us. Hail Australians! You should open your eyes and be aware of what is being done in your name. I have a request for Australians to spend a few months to think about us and be aware of the criminal action being done on behalf of Australians. Certainly, this injustice done to innocent people will form a dark spot in Australian history and Australians cannot escape from it.¹⁹⁶

The distinct uncertainty of the detainees’ existence is expressed by the writer of this story as existing on several levels. There is the individual writer’s uncertainty about his/her present situation, which is volatile and makes him/her susceptible to a violence and persecution from which there is no escape, unless through suicide: ‘I

¹⁹⁶ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.38.

am talking about a true prison, where thoughts are killed and death is always knocking at the door.’ The detainee also exists in a state of uncertainty about his/her future which is a consequence of detention and largely exacerbated by the temporary protection visas which ensure refugees remain in a state of limbo regarding their future. Alongside the individual’s uncertainty is his/her concern for those who share the circumstances: ‘when I come across the detainees who are weeping with pain, I am unable to control myself and tears start rolling down from my eyes because we can understand each other and the pain there is common to us all’.¹⁹⁷ On another level is a concern for the future of the children in detention. Considering that children are universally regarded as the embodiment of the family, culture, nation and world’s future it must be particularly difficult for detained refugees when their own children’s future remains in limbo.

The narratives in *From Nothing to Zero* mirror the lives of their authors, whose existential meaning is constantly deferred by the uncertainty of their destination in the light of the certitude of their present suffering, an account of which follows:

Curtin on 19.04.02 (Friday)

Women and children and other people were having dinner in the mess of camp. Suddenly 12 ACM’s guards arrived in the mess and closed the doors. And turned over the tables and beat the people. Everybody was terrified and women and children were screaming loudly, and other people who were standing outside the mess saw the fighting through the windows. They got very angry and when the doors of the mess were opened the wounded got out and guard’s party attacked other guys with their shields and batons. They left camp’s area and didn’t come to camp for 5 days. During the 5 days the phone area was closed and they didn’t serve food to people.

People were using the foods which were in the kitchen of the mess. After 5 days police and ACM’s party arrived in detention centre and collected the woods and knives which were on the floor of the kitchen, and they were serving just one meal in the day.

And it was really awful. They arrested 20 persons of us and took them to the penitentiary and all of the fights were tragic scenes.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁹⁸ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.42.

The suffering of the refugees conveyed through this account occurred as a direct result of their treatment at the hands of the Australian authorities. As we have seen, images of refugees fighting against such treatment were used by the Australian government to reinforce its representation of refugees as ungrateful and unworthy of a place in 'our civilized nation'. Yet when such fights are contextualised in the manner of this account the refugees' response could easily be interpreted as reasonable. It is certainly difficult to envisage mainstream Australia putting up with such conditions without responding similarly, particularly when faced with ongoing mistreatment of themselves and their loved ones:

I don't know how much you know about me and my children and our life in the camp. We have been 20 months in the detention centre and we are living in a small room. Six months ago my son started stammering when he had started speaking. He is afraid and shocked by things happening in the camp and he became stammering. My daughter must go to school and play with children but now she is like a bird in the cage. We have seen two christmas in the camp,. She has watched the christmas ceremony on T.V. When children with their parents go to the shop, when they dance in the streets, she must look at your world from inside of the prison. Is this fair? A few days ago someone on the news said about saving a dog from the valley but I don't know why nobody can say anything about saving children in the camp. Why are you quiet?¹⁹⁹

An analogy often used by refugees in their accounts of detention is to describe their treatment with the treatment animals receive in Australia. In the narrative above the unidentified mother compares her daughter's life to that of a caged bird. It's a powerful analogy due to the obvious images it brings to mind. Like a caged bird, this mother's daughter has had her wings well and truly clipped. The possibility that this child will be able to develop normally is severely hindered by the situation in which she has been placed. While the animal analogy highlights the suffering of the young girl it also turns the reader's focus to those who place children in such damaging situations. Written by both detained adults and children many narratives involve analogies with animals:

One night a kangaroo came near the fences and watched detainees who walked in the yard of the detention. He wondered and said to himself: unbelievable, who is animal, me or them? Then he thought that night and repeatedly asked himself, who is animal, me or them?

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.62.

Kangaroo came with his friend the next night and showed detainees to his friend. The second kangaroo said to the first one, I know these. They are criminals and very dangerous. They must be kept in detention. You must not love them, and now we must go. But the question remained in the kangaroo's mind: who is animal?²⁰⁰

The frequent use of such analogies provides an insight into the writers' psychological and physical state. In some narratives analogy combines with anthropomorphic utterances, as is the case with the kangaroo narrative. In this particular narrative, nature itself is portrayed as rejecting refugees: 'The second kangaroo said to the first one, I know these. They are criminals and very dangerous. They must be kept in detention. You must not love them, and now we must go.'²⁰¹ Psychoanalytic criticism may suggest that this portrayal reflects on some level a fear of abandonment which according to Tyson is 'the unshakeable belief that our friends and loved ones are going to desert us (physical abandonment) or don't really care about us (emotional abandonment)'.²⁰²

While the narratives of refugees cited thus far largely reflect close filial bonds, refugees are defined according to their ostracism from their homeland. At the national level therefore, refugees have a well founded reason to feel abandoned. In the case of Australian refugees, their sense of abandonment is surely exacerbated by their rejection, perceived or otherwise, by the nation to which they entrusted their fragile future. It is worth quoting at some length the self-representation of an Afghani girl:

I am from Afghanistan, a girl full of pain, a disappointed girl. I live with my family in detention centre. We want to see you, we want to be free like you, but not as a poor bird in the cage like we are in. We are in a very bad situation in here. I am very tired and gloomy. I am always crying because of my mother, she is old. She cannot tolerate this treatment in this cage any more. Also I am sad about people who are here, poor children, when they see a person outside detention centre, even in an airplane in the sky, they cry and they take the chains with a disappointed and broken heart, shout, We want freedom, we want freedom freedom. Women are crying because of their children. Also I want to say about the young hopeless boys and girls that there is no wish and hope in their hearts. We think we are not alive. It is better to die. Many young men and women want to kill their selves.

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.37.

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.37

²⁰² Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p.16.

Please say to government of Australia we are human. We are not animal. We are not criminal to tolerate this much treatment. We escape from war, pain until we have human right in here, so where is human right? We want freedom, we want life, we want to be free like other human.

Also children, old people, young people in here become hopeless and disappointed in this long time in jail, some of them become mad or crazy.

We are here about seven months. Every day is like one year, because we have just one dark room. The whole day I am sitting in the dark room, so here is nothing to make me happy.

I learned English in Afghanistan, before Taliban had come there. When Taliban had come, they had not let us study, work. They treated people so much, especially women. So I could not study any more. I like to study English and I would like to be a designer in future, but unfortunately I am despair and desolate in here. Nothing to have just gloomy heart!

Please say to Australian public we need help of them, we love them, we wish them to know about us. We need freedom, we hope to see people in Australia, flowers, sky, shiny sun, stars, moon...in freedom life.²⁰³

* * *

...The government policy treat us in awful way. They put us in cages and put us in something like zoo area. I suggest to call the detention centres human zoo, that is correct name for this situation. There are fences, bars, razor wire same thing like jail or zoo. I cried a lot when I saw the two year old child behind the fence. What did he do? What is his fault and offence to keep him in this way. I am ashamed and feel lowly and humble. We feel we are in bottom levels of humans and we are less from other peoples.

Please forgive me if I write some hard words that is arising from hopeless and lifeless. Most people think about suicide, little of them do that because maybe aren't brave or they are thinking about their kids and family. They want to be released from this human zoo even if they die.²⁰⁴

As mentioned earlier, the narratives of Australia's detained refugees are often characterised by a lack of hope. It is an attribute that largely reflects the impact of the immigration policies of the Australian government which have subjected these people to intolerable circumstances; circumstances they liken to living in a zoo. Ironically, however, with the design of contemporary zoos reflecting a more

²⁰³ *ibid.*, p.69.

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.41.

humanitarian approach to the way animals are kept in captivity, the animals' existence is undoubtedly better than that experienced by detained refugees.

The Howard government introduced Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), a measure initially suggested by Pauline Hanson²⁰⁵ and designed, in the words of a spokesman for the former immigration minister Mr. Ruddock 'to reduce the attractiveness of Australia for those seeking to enter illegally and claim asylum'.²⁰⁶ According to Burnside TPV's are characterised by five things:

Self evidently, they are temporary. This makes it difficult for the holder to do much more than subsist in Australia. Once the initial term of three years is up, the holder will have to apply for a further visa.

They carry very few entitlements. A TPV holder is ineligible for most government programs, including federally funded employment programs and services such as English-language tuition.

The holder cannot leave the country and re-enter it. If a refugee leaves Australia whilst holding a TPV they will not be eligible for a further TPV or permanent protection visa. At present, there are TPV holders whose husbands or wives or children have been taken to Nauru; they cannot visit them there, because they would not then be allowed back into Australia.

The holder cannot sponsor members of their family to migrate to Australia, or apply for family reunion visas.

The holder cannot gain permanent residency in Australia.²⁰⁷

The impact of TPV's on detained refugees effectively increased their already high levels of anxiety, extinguishing any faint hope that their futures could be secured. This is powerfully conveyed through the narratives found in chapter ten of *From Nothing to Zero*.

In the following narratives, the writer conveys his/her decision to return home indicating a preference for possible persecution, even death, over the continued state of uncertainty and mental anguish brought about by detention. These are shocking

²⁰⁵ Pauline Hanson first rose to prominence when thrown out of the Liberal Party after advocating the removal of welfare for Australia's Indigenous peoples. In 1997, Hanson formed her own 'One Nation' party. After a period of relative success, the Pauline Hanson's 'One Nation' party began to lose popularity. Hanson most recently contested the 2009 Queensland Elections as an independent nominee for the seat of Beaudesert.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.170.

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.169.

admissions, indicating the degradation they have experienced. They are admissions which reflect appallingly upon the nation's treatment of these already vulnerable people.

My hope to make life in your country really is finished. And when I leave here I don't know what will happen to me in Iran but I know death in my land is much better than dying in this detention or this hell. I lost everything. I lost my life, my love, my family and now I think maybe if I stay here I lose my mind.²⁰⁸

The sense of loss expressed by the writer is replaced by uncertainty, resignation and a desire to reunite with family:

I have signed to go back to my country. I don't know what will happen to me in Iran. Maybe they will capture me at airport and put me in jail. I will be happy even if I be in jail if I can meet with my family. I left my country and during my absence my father has died, I will never see him again. Now my mother is sick. I want to see her at any cost even if I will face plenty of death. I will never forget the hospitality of Australians in all my life. I'm too much thankful for people like you who helped us during hard and difficult conditions.²⁰⁹

This narrative is remarkable not only because it powerfully portrays the anguish and loss of hope experienced by the writer as a result of detention, but also because of the utterance that expresses gratitude to those Australians who have lent assistance to the writer. The sentiments expressed here are not of a person who is vindictive, wanting a free ride or a threat to national security. Rather they reveal a person who is rational, able to distinguish between good and evil, and someone who longs to reestablish filial ties, risking persecution and death to do so. The loss of hope felt by Australia's detained refugees permeates their accounts. Their narratives, which speak unanimously of uncertain futures, fears of persecution or even death reflect the writers' psychological states, 'If I stay more I may go mad.'²¹⁰

The following narrative's writer expresses similar sorrow at his own degradation. Yet undoubtedly the starkest statement in this writer's account is his opening one in which he expresses happiness at his decision to return home. Even though it will

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p.171.

²⁰⁹ *ibid*

²¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.172.

likely result in his persecution and possible death he at least now knows what the future holds for him:

I would like to inform you that I have been in detention two years and now I have decided to go back to my own country even though I will be persecuted or I will face death but I am much happy and ready for everything because these things are better than detention. During two years I have lost everything—my feeling, myself.

When I came to this country my feeling was the same as human but now I don't think so. Even I don't know who I am. Here in Woomera I have learnt how to be a bad person. How to lie and how to treat people badly. I am very sorry and concerned about the way your government treats people who seek asylum in their country. I wish someone would tell me what I have been guilty of in jail for two years.²¹¹

At the heart of the confusion and uncertainty in these narratives is the question, “What have I done to deserve this treatment?” It is a recurring question in so many of the narratives and a question that has been met with stony silence by those responsible for their continued incarceration. Assuming Helm is correct in her assertion that as writers give voice to social discontent and often expose social injustice, they continually imagine and reimagine the site of their critique²¹² one wonders how this country is being reimagined by its refugees? Whatever the answer might be, according to Helm, ‘we have a responsibility to discriminate among the versions circulating around us. Not all versions will be equal; some may indeed be dangerous.’²¹³

In the epilogue of *From Nothing to Zero*, Julian Burnside observes:

Under section 196 of the Migration Act, refugees are the only group in our community who can be imprisoned indefinitely, by order of parliament, regardless of the fact that they have not committed any offence. No court can say that the person's detention is unnecessary, or cruel, or damaging, or pointless. No other group is treated in this way. Imagine the public reaction if the victim of this legislation was a member of any other innocent minority—all blind people, all journalists, all Jews or all children with green eyes—most Australians would respond with outrage. How is it that the arbitrary imprisonment of refugees has not caused similar outrage? I believe it is because the government has

²¹¹ *ibid*

²¹² Gabriele Helms, *Challenging Canada: Dialogism And Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2003, p.4.

²¹³ *ibid.*, p.6.

deliberately contrived to prevent the public from seeing refugees as human beings at all.²¹⁴

The human impact of Australia's immigration policies as they pertain to refugees is powerfully conveyed through their narratives. On one level they document years of emotional and physical abuse brought about through mandatory detention of innocent men, women and children. On another level these narratives remind their readers that they share the same hopes, dreams and desires as mainstream Australians. They desire a life free from fear and persecution so that they and their children may live and grow to lead fulfilling and productive lives. These narratives undermine the efforts of Mr. Ruddock and his contemporaries, who choose to refer to detained and suffering children as 'it'²¹⁵, thus depriving them of their gender and humanity. They remind us that behind the razor wire of our detention centres live human beings whose only real difference to 'us' lies in the levels of epidermis in their skin. This is powerfully expressed by the writer of the following poem, written from behind the razor wire of one of Australia's detention centres:

The night is as dark as tar.
The sky is without a star.
I'm looking at the distance
My destination is very far
I wish I could fly
as light as the top of the sky
to see my beloved with freedom and joy²¹⁶

²¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.184.

²¹⁵ Mungo MacCallum, 'Girt By Sea: Australia, The Refugees And The Politics Of Fear' in *Quarterly Essay*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2002, p.6.

²¹⁶ Meaghan Amor & Janet Austin (eds.), *From Nothing to Zero*, Lonely Planet Publications, Footscray, p.179.