
Theses

2009

Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda

John M. Cartner
University of Notre Dame Australia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses>



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969

WARNING

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.
Do not remove this notice.

Publication Details

Cartner, J. M. (2009). Representing the Refugee: Rhetoric, discourse and the public agenda (Master of Arts (MA)). University of Notre Dame Australia. <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/43>

This dissertation/thesis is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



CONCLUSION

Conceived during a period of Australia's history that saw levels of anxiety and hostility towards the refugee Other reach fever pitch, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine questions pertaining to the political nature and impact of the rhetoric employed by some of Australia's leading politicians and sections of the media towards refugees from the Tampa incident in 2001 to the defeat of the Howard-led Coalition Government in 2007. The decision to employ a comparative analysis of *The West Australian* and *The Australian* newspapers is consistent with the intention to focus on the language and representations employed and disseminated by these newspapers and to evaluate their effect on the socio-political climate of the period, as well as on refugees in detention. In order to further highlight the political nature of language and representations surrounding refugees, this same methodology is employed in the analysis of refugees' self-representations conducted in the latter half of the dissertation. Inseparable from this methodology are the historical, social and political conditions that gave birth to the representations and self-representations in the first place.

The Howard Government, through its policies and rhetoric, assured Australians living in a post September 11 world that they would determine who came to their country and the circumstances in which they came.²⁹⁰ Though many saw such an assertion as a reasonable declaration of the nation's sovereign rights, to those with an understanding of Australia's history it was reminiscent of the White Australia Policy and other draconian and racially motivated policies of the nation's not too distant past. The nation's borders were tightened and when the Norwegian freighter Tampa, carrying 438 refugees, sought entry into Australian waters, it was refused permission and told to take its 'cargo' elsewhere. Tampa was a watershed moment for the government of the day, which enjoyed renewed popularity for its hard-lined stance and went on to win an election, the result of which previously was uncertain. The Tampa incident marked a distinct hardening in Australia's approach to refugees. Though mandatory detention was initially introduced in 1992 by the then Keating Labor Government, it was under Prime Minister Howard that its application was

²⁹⁰ Ien Ang, 'From White Australia to Fortress Australia: The Anxious Nation in the New Century', in Laksiri Jayasuria, David Walker & Jan Gothard (eds), *Legacies of White Australia: Race Culture and Nation*, University of Western Australia Press, 2003, p.64.

most severely exercised. As a key component of the government's Pacific Solution, mandatory detention was designed to discourage refugees from fleeing to Australia as a safe haven. Those refugees who did seek entry to the country found themselves detained indefinitely and in a constant state of uncertainty regarding their future. Placed literally on the fringes of Australian society, they found themselves both geographically and emotionally isolated.

To justify its approach and limit criticism of its policies, the government enacted a range of discursive and political procedures. These amounted to the prohibition of refugees' voices in mainstream society, ensuring their cries like their bodies would remain cut off from the nation they had hoped would provide them refuge. When their voices did manage to seep into the realm of public discourse, they met a range of representational procedures that sought to discredit them as inhumane and certainly unworthy of a place in this 'civilized' nation.

During the course of this dissertation I have argued that much of this intolerance demonstrates the determination of sections of the Australian community to Orientalise the Other. Through a comparative analysis of the reporting of *The West Australian* and *The Australian* newspapers it is argued that *The West Australian* bought into, and even promoted, efforts to marginalize the refugee Other based on the threat to Australian culture they allegedly posed. In so doing, the newspaper cooperated with some of Australia's most prominent politicians in promoting what Peter Gale has rightly identified as New Racism, prejudice based on cultural rather than biological indicators.

I maintain that in the culmination of the reductive representational and political procedures enacted against refugees in Australia the project of Orientalism was upheld. Indeed the very motivation for the implementation of these procedures was to maintain the myth of White Anglo-Saxon superiority over the uncivilized, non-white Other. As I suggest in chapter two, it is highly unlikely that such measures would be taken against so called 'illegal immigrants' if they were Anglo-Saxon or European in appearance. In fact, one need not look any further for proof of this than the knowledge that at the time of the Tampa affair the largest group of illegal immigrants, in the true sense of the word, was from the United Kingdom. According

to a report in the *Sunday Times*²⁹¹, written at the height of the Tampa affair, some 58,700 people from the United Kingdom, mainly England and Ireland flouted the conditions of their visas and were in the country without any legal authority.²⁹² However, rather than being called ‘illegals’ or ‘queue jumpers’, the Howard Government referred to these white Anglo-Saxons as unlawful non-citizens.²⁹³ At the levels of both action and rhetoric this clearly contrasts with the rapid response 438 refugees aboard the Tampa approaching our shores drew from the government.

In contrast to the coverage of *The West Australian* and other sections of the media, *The Australian* played an important role in challenging the prejudicial assumptions disseminated by the government regarding asylum seekers, achieving this largely by refusing to concede to age old assumptions of non-white inferiority. While *The Australian* played an important role in challenging the assumptions of Orientalism, the most vital players in challenging the Orientalist’s project are refugees themselves. Though the government constructed a matrix of reductive procedures to prevent the dissemination of refugee discourses, the time came when the voices of detainees, through texts such as *From Nothing to Zero* and *Asylum: Voices behind the razor wire*, started to reach the Australian public; the importance of these texts lies in their ability to introduce diachrony: terms such as ‘illegals’ and ‘boat people’ are dispelled with and replaced by ‘Mother’, ‘Father’, ‘Brother’, ‘Sister’, ‘Daughter’, ‘Son’, ‘Grandmother’, ‘Grandfather’, ‘Granddaughter’, ‘Grandson’, words which remind the reader of the common humanity they share with the authors of the stories they read.

The power of these narratives is revealed not only through the efforts to suppress them, but also through their ability to demand a response. They are politically

²⁹¹ According to the most recent figures taken from the Department of Immigration website, as of June 2004, 51,000 unlawful non-citizens had overstayed their visa, down from an estimate of 59,800. Those who had overstayed their visas by more than 10 years made up 10% of this number. The largest number of overstayers, approximately 5,500 came from the United Kingdom with an approximate number of 5,200 coming from the United States constituting the second largest group. The 2006 figures indicate another drop in the number of overstayers, with the USA making up the largest group with 4,840 overstayers followed by the United Kingdom with 3820. Indications suggest that the figures provided by the Sunday Times were the most accurate available for the period of publication of the cited article. Australian Government, ‘Appendix C Estimate of Unlawful Non-Citizens’, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/popflows2003-4/ch5_pt4.pdf, [29 March 2009].

²⁹² Kerry Anne Walsh, ‘Who are really the queue-jumpers?’, *The Sunday Times*, 2 September 2001, p.40.

²⁹³ *ibid*

charged because they emerge from a particular set of socio-historical circumstances and respond to these same circumstances. They challenge the reductive procedures which gave birth to them, and by incorporating the impact of these same procedures into their story they recreate, reinterpret and dare to re-imagine a future that incorporates their story. In a very real sense the narratives of refugees are working to recreate the identity of the nation state to which they speak. Perhaps more than any other reason, this is why they are met with such resistance. ‘As the German novelist Gunter Grass points out, refugees become “irritants to the rigid orders of the self”, constantly reminding others of the arbitrariness and contingency of identity borders and boundaries. In this way, refugees help remake the conventional language in which tales of the so-called citizenry, national community, and territorial state are told.’²⁹⁴ It is perhaps a reflection of our relative immaturity as a nation²⁹⁵ that we have yet to learn how to let go of the myth of centrality which lies at the heart of statecraft, and truly embrace our multiculturalism. For Australia to remain viable in a constantly changing world, it is essential the nation continually re-appropriates its meta-narratives to incorporate the constant social and political shifts with which it is faced.²⁹⁶

While this was a task which proved beyond the Howard Government’s capabilities or willingness, it remains the challenge that lies ahead of our country if we are to emerge as a genuinely mature global resident. In this post-Howard era, our nation has the opportunity to embrace the stories of refugees. Their narratives will mark a moment in the nation’s history and if we are to learn from our past it is essential that we listen to the voices of all of those who contribute to this country. The Rudd Government’s apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples in February of 2008 gives one cause for optimism that the voices of refugees will also be recognised and heard.

History demonstrates that Australia has continued to find ways to abrogate its responsibilities towards those who do not look or sound ‘Australian’. Our First

²⁹⁴ Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.15.

²⁹⁵ I acknowledge that Australia is an ancient land with a rich cultural heritage. Recent evidence suggests Australia’s indigenous peoples have inhabited the land for up to 60, 000 years, making them one of the world’s oldest cultures.

²⁹⁶ Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.46.

Nations, immigrants, and most recently, refugees have borne the consequences of this tendency. Voices from history, such as Levinas, warn us that while it is important the voice of the Other be listened to, a full appreciation of the experiences of the Other can only ever be fully gained when an encounter with the face occurs. Only in encountering embodied stories does one come close to walking in the Other's shoes and sharing his/her humanity:

One is moved to alleviate the pain of others because as an embodied being, the self enjoys the elements, is happy through them, and is thereby also able to appreciate viscerally the pain of physical suffering, deprivation, disease and ageing in others...in a moral vulnerability to the other's vulnerability, suffering for other's suffering, man lives for a future beyond his own death, whether in the immediacy of the face of the other person whose needs are one's responsibilities—'unto death,' if need be—or in consideration of an unredeemed humanity and its future generations, for whom one is bound by the demand of justice.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2006, p.xxxiii.