

## **Refugee experience, subalternity, and the politics of representation**

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### **Abstract**

As I write this the Australian media are replete with reports on the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers whose current and future status as refugees and citizens is still undecided. Current discussions on whether or not they should be sent to Nauru or Christmas Island while their applications are being processed are predicated upon certain concerns regarding migration that are shared across Europe, North America, and Australia. Intrinsic to estimations of the validity of their claims for asylum are issues pertaining to the veracity of their reports of their experiences in Sri Lanka. The discourse on 'illegal' and 'bogus' refugees has become prevalent in the West and often underlies policies aimed at controlling the acceptance of refugees. I have elsewhere (with Bailey, 2005) traced how journalistic practice contributes to a process of 'othering of refugees, the role that labels such as 'illegal' and 'bogus' play in the politics of immigration control, and the challenges facing journalists reporting on asylum seekers in the context of globalisation. This paper shifts the focus a little, to argue that exploring the role that such representations play in the politics of immigration and refugee identity involves bringing to the fore the episodes that variously characterise refugee experience. Examining the politics of representation regarding refugees and asylum seekers therefore includes the sometimes fraught and often debated notion of the centrality of experience to the concept of the subaltern and the disenfranchisement of refugees. This is in important ways a continuing project that builds on my argument in the earlier (2005) essay. As such this paper explores the *conceptual* issues underlying the ways in which existing discursive regimes involving refugees can be redressed by enabling the voices of the refugees to be heard in the media and elsewhere.

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A particular aspect of the 'anthropological war' between dominant and marginalised cultures, the 'naming and leaving unnamed' (Derrida 1976) is central to understanding the state's response to immigration in many Western societies, especially regarding asylum seekers and refugees, an instance of this 'politics of naming'. As Hage (2003) argues, anxiety and paranoia about race and religion have played a more significant role in state policies since 9/11. In the contemporary manifestation of what he refers to as 'paranoid nationalism', a national imaginary characterised by fear, the main threat to the security and well being of a nation is conceived along the lines of a racial and/or religious 'other', the construction of which it can be argued, involves the complex process of 'naming'.

Intrinsic to the politics of representation of 'naming and leaving unnamed' is the role of the media. It is crucial therefore, that we understand the practice of journalism in terms of its compliance with or resistance to political discourses on issues of immigration and asylum. How far are journalistic accounts of debates on immigration constitutive of and constituted by state discourses? It would seem that in the case of migration issues, there is a contradiction between Anglo-American journalistic values of objectivity, independence and public relevance, and journalism as an 'ideological construction' of the reality of asylum seekers and refugees when they are represented mainly as the 'Other'. This contradiction raises the question of journalistic responsibility to have a voice independent of governments, political parties and other outraged views against immigration. In an article on global journalism and the representation of the 'other', Forsich (2002) discusses the problematic nature of the production processes that contribute to such representations, and the complex epistemological dilemmas that confront journalists covering news involving the 'other'. 'Journalists', she recommends, 'have to adopt new professional routines to defuse the complex situation of representing others' (p.58), a reflexive practice that includes challenging professional routines. She suggests a set of professional strategies that include multiple representations and the provision of contexts.

The argument can be pushed further, and in a slightly different direction. The political and epistemological issues underlying potential journalistic challenges to dominant discourses on immigration and asylum, it seems to us, are closely linked to the politics and practice of rescuing dominant versions of colonial history that, in narrating the role of elite groups in nationalist struggles, overlooked the participation of subordinate communities. A majority of the media reports on asylum seekers have defined and name them as a homogeneous alien 'Other', thus simplifying complex histories, contexts and situations. This politics of 'naming' in journalism is not new but rather brings back a new form of 'colonialist' discourse, establishing and perpetuating old stereotypes. In the post-September 11 political culture the question of 'othering' in terms of ethnic and/or national identity assumes great significance in various parts of the world. The racialised 'other' as a designation given to non-westerns, to those at the 'fringe' of national as well as global geopolitics, brings with it a constellation of meanings that are fundamental to the reinforcement of preferred discourses based on 'difference'. In other words, contemporary forms of paranoid nationalism, working alongside discourses of 'the war on terror', often invoke the racialised 'other' in terms of religious and/or ethnic difference and its negative web of signification as threat, hostility and antagonism towards the 'Other'. In the context of the politics of naming the Other, in this instance refugees and asylum seekers, journalistic representations are seen as important in the cultural and political sphere mainly because they actively construct meaning, not merely reflect social reality (Hall, 1982).

The residual aspects of a colonial discourse seem to have survived beyond the classic colonial era and continue to colour perceptions of the non-western world through the politics of naming, thus establishing the ideological difference from the West. Said's (1978) analysis of the construction of a distorted image of the 'Other' is often referred to as the progenitor of subsequent examinations of the links between the complex network of representations of the 'Other' and the degree to which Western systems of knowledge have been involved in the long history of the West's material and political subordination of the non-Western world. The Foucauldian couplet of 'knowledge/power' is thus closely associated with the politics of representation, and its relation to media and public discourses.

The cognitive authority of certain representations underlines their power, and in terms of asylum seekers and refugees, representations constitute and are in turn constituted by debates in the public domain, and inform state policy. Spivak's (1988) query 'Can the subaltern speak?' underlined the power of representation, arguing that the subaltern remained in that position because of the lack of a significant enunciatory power, that is, the subaltern is subaltern precisely because it cannot speak in such a way as to be heard and acknowledged. While Spivak's concern was mainly with the production of academic knowledge, particularly with the ways in which academic disciplines continue to produce and maintain subalternity, we can usefully import the concept for the analysis of journalistic representations of refugee communities, which is characterised by a noticeable absence of a careful delineation of the experiences, hopes, and fears of such communities. As Beverly (1999) argues, 'as Spivak also reminds us, representation is not only a matter of "speaking about" but also "speaking for"'. That is, it concerns politics and hegemony (and the limits of politics and hegemony)'. (p.3). As he points out, 'speaking for' is an 'act of political delegation', and 'speaking about' constitutes 'mimetic representation or representing as an object of disciplinary object.' (p.171. note:3). Much has been written and debated about this issue, but it is generally agreed that the position underlines the silence of and about the subaltern – silence, non-representation and misrepresentation define subalternity. The invisibility and silence of the subaltern continue their marginalization from mainstream culture, unheard and

unrepresented, and consequently remaining the subordinated 'Other', open to be named and unnamed, ignored or vilified in the public arena. Refugee and asylum seeker communities are 'spoken about' in journalistic representations, and are objects of representation in journalistic practice. The power relations inherent in this exercise require to be addressed through change of focus, to one of 'speaking up for' (Shohat, 1995) the refugee and the asylum seeker.

Part of the debates concerning the status of the subaltern and its reinstatement in academic and public discourse has been related to debates on the emancipatory claims of postmodernism. Beverley (1999) for instance, sees subaltern studies as 'connected to that "incredulity to metanarratives" Jean-Francois Lyotard offers as a definition of the postmodern: that is, the crisis or erosion of notions of modernity based on a Eurocentric historicism and a positivist epistemology,' (p.15). However, he qualifies this by maintaining that, unlike Lyotard's project 'that can and must take place within the space of globalization...subaltern studies might be seen instead as an effort to articulate against that which is hegemonic in globalization.' (ibid). It can be argued that the constitutive elements of the politics of naming the 'other', which contributes to the demonization of refugees and asylum seekers in sections of the media which, paradoxically, goes hand in hand with the celebration of diversity in the name of multiculturalism, so long as it does not threaten the alleged cohesiveness of national culture and identity.

Akin to the debates around multiculturalism, disputes on the conceptual validity of 'diaspora' testify to significant aspects of minority politics. As Gilroy (1994) has observed, '[Diaspora is] more than a voguish synonym for peregrination or nomadism.' In terms that recall Doreen Massey's reference to the 'power-geometry' that informs migration, Gilroy declares that '[I]f life itself is at stake in a way the word suggests flight or coerced rather than freely chosen experiences of displacement. Slavery, pogroms, indenture, genocide and other unnameable terrors have all figured in the constitution of diasporas and the reproduction of diaspora-consciousness.' (p.204). Besides the light it throws on the constitution of diasporas, Gilroy's comment is relevant in the context of on-going debates in the media and in the political sphere on the status of refugees, and the recent escalation of fears of terrorism that inform protective measures being adopted in Western countries.

Building on Malkki's (1995) ethnographic study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania it is possible to engage with the notions of 'experience', subalternity, and the intricate politics of cultural expression and identity in relation to refugee experience. It can be argued that conceiving refugee communities as diaspora includes exploring the validity of the politics of the subaltern's appeal to experience. Intrinsic to this, as stated earlier, is the politics of representation and recognition. For our present purposes, the principal and most relevant aspect of Malkki's study is her argument concerning the efficacy of the experience of exile in the formation of identities, in particular, the divergence in the experience of Hutu groups who had settled in 'a carefully planned, physically isolated refugee camp' (Mishamo Refugee Settlement) as against the Hutu refugees living in 'the less regimented setting of Kigoma township on Lake Tanganyika' (p.2). Crucially, her analysis reveals important differences between these two settlements in terms of ideas of home and of exile as a collective, identity-forming experience, and of significance given to national history and identity. The refugees in the Mishamo camp invoked autochthonous origins of Burundi as a "nation" to narrate their history as "a people", a move that simultaneously constructed a historical account of themselves as the natives of Burundi, and identified the Tutsis as the foreign aggressors. The construction of Burundi nationhood underpinned the camp refugees' conception of

themselves as a nation in exile, and consequently to the value placed on their refugee status – a celebration of it as temporary exile, which accompanied a refusal to be naturalised as Tanzanian citizens.

While their status as refugees and as displaced citizens of Burundi enabled the camp refugees to construct a form of categorical purity as a nation, and consequently not as an immigrant community in Tanzania, with the notion of ‘home’ not so much a geographical territory as a moral destination, this was markedly different from the social imaginary of the town refugees. According to Malkki, the latter, negotiating a collective identity within Tanzanian national culture, inhabited identities constructed and ‘borrowed’ from their experience of life in the township, creating a lively mixture of creolised, changeable identities and a marked cosmopolitanism. Unlike the camp refugees, for those living in Kigoma the notion of ‘home’ was a distinct territorial entity and not a moral category, which allowed them to challenge notions of purity as well as the authenticity of the Burundi ‘nation’. This is a crucial point that carries a particular resonance in terms of the current policies on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia and Europe. Malkki’s insight on the township refugees is pertinent in this context, as it alerts us to the politics inherent in the construction and mediation of identities among refugee communities around the globe. While the camp refugees, ironically, utilised their status as exiles to protect the idea of a “nation” by way of negotiating displacement and deterritorialisation, the town refugees, by circumventing the call of authentic nationhood through the creation of a more cosmopolitan forms of identity through everyday practice, can be seen, Malkki argues, as subverting attempts at being categorised as refugees.

Embedded in Malkki’s argument is the claim to constructions of identity that are based on experience and mediation. Two inter-related issues arise from this: the as yet unresolved debate regarding the validity of the appeal to experience, particularly from subaltern communities, that often underpins and provides an ethical-political justification for struggles for recognition; and secondly the continuing contestation over subaltern discursive practice, that is, the question of what forms the subaltern speech can and has to take in order to be heard in their calls for recognition in a climate in which the trope of ‘illegal immigration’ often informs official positions and policies on asylum seekers and refugee communities. In the current atmosphere in which attitudes to potential refugees are characterised by a politics of suspicion, what forms of communicative practice, informed by an imagined collective identity, can such communities adopt in order to negotiate what Taylor (1994) has called ‘the politics of recognition’?

With regard to the subaltern, the issue of representation becomes particularly tricky: in essence, if the subalternity is characterised by the denial of a voice, as Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously asked, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’. If not how justified are intellectuals and cultural producers in their attempts to speak *for* the subaltern? San Juan presents the predicament succinctly: ‘the issue of subaltern speech as an artificial construction precipitates the urgent dilemma of whether we can truly speak for others.... If these others (usually the alien, foreigner, pariah) cannot speak for themselves, dare we speak for them?’ (p.101). It is possible to discuss this difficulty in terms of the intellectual’s or artist’s responsibility to present the voice of the subaltern transparently, to perform the role of a conduit for subaltern interests and representations. Nevertheless, the danger of denying the agency to the subaltern persists when it is represented by others, a practice that could well extend the process of producing the subaltern. If subalternity is produced through representation, Beverley (1999) asks, ‘how can one claim to represent the subaltern from the standpoint of academic

knowledge, then, when that knowledge is itself involved in the “othering” of the subaltern?’ (p.2).

Spivak’s question needs to be considered in this context, as the speaking subaltern is no longer a subaltern, in her view, and subalternity is in addition defined by it not being *adequately* represented either in academic knowledge production or in artistic practice. Representing the subaltern entails the risk of assuming a vanguard stance in the place of subaltern agency, even in the case of activists acting on behalf of the marginalised. Spivak (1988) is concerned about the precariousness of what she calls ‘paradoxical subject privileging’, whereby those who ‘act and speak’ silence those others who ‘act and struggle’ (p.275). The question of ‘who represents the subaltern?’ here merges and confuses the two ideas of representation in the practice of speaking of and for the subaltern. The crucial question for Spivak and those critics in the field of postcolonial studies is about the politics and boundaries of representation – in particular, how one can know and represent the other. Embedded in this is the issue of experience and its role in the formation of subaltern consciousness and the politics of representing such experience as a corrective to dominant depictions of subaltern communities. In the case of refugee groups, this question becomes even more crucial, as mainstream (mis)representations of them reveal and are informed by particular political agendas. As Rotas (2004) notes, ‘Like “black”, the term “refugee” smoothes over difference within the group it designates at the same time as reifying the boundary that defines its otherness and the notions that constitute that boundary.’ (p.52). Challenging such bureaucratic designations involves recourse to the actual experience of refugee communities.

The concept of “experience” has had a chequered history, in particular in relation to how it informs agency, identity, and resistance, which has been debated and has ‘has persistently preoccupied certain strands in cultural, subaltern, and aesthetic inquiry. . . Polemical critiques of the subaltern appeal to experience continue to regard such appeals as dubious theoretical warrant for historical populism.’ (Ireland 2004, p.xiii). For scholars preoccupied with the notion of subaltern history and agency however, the primary focus is on the validity of the experience of subaltern communities, which remain subaltern precisely due to the neglect of their experience and histories by dominant groups. For them, subordination entails maintaining the invisibility of the subaltern, and the marginalisation of their voices, be it indigenous communities or refugee groups. Counter-hegemonic resistance therefore, requires the impetus arising from authentic subaltern experience, which provides the ethical foundations for such struggles.

The crux of the debate is around the relevance and validity of “immediate”, that is, not mediated experience, whether or not that constitutes the basis for subaltern resistance, or whether, on the contrary, emphasising lived experience portends essentialist constructions of identity, which approximate forms of ethno-nationalism and tribalism.

Strongly implicated in the attempt to resuscitate subjugated knowledges are the issues of representation and identity formation. This raises several epistemological issues. Firstly, with regard to the status of experience in relation to formations of cultural identity and representativeness, identity politics has been conceived differently by different frames of reference that either privilege the notion of inherited essences or the constructivist critique of essentialism. Secondly, the potential for disagreement between dominant and subaltern representations of experience and the consequent incommensurability between them prompts the subject of relativism that damages mutual recognition. Thirdly, examining the value of

enunciative practice involves, as Frow (1998) avers, both positionality and the set of 'ethical and political questions: Who speaks? Who speaks for Whom? Whose voice is listened to, whose voice is spoken for, who has no voice? Whose claim to be powerless is a ruse of power?' (p.63). This clearly echoes Spivak's concern about the representational politics of the subaltern.

Building on the Alcoff's (1991-92) attempt at suggesting an ethics of enunciation, Frow (1998) underscores the importance of appraising the 'enunciative modalities' of subaltern representation. Critical in this context, for him, is Alcoff's concern that the practice of being spoken for compounds the marginalisation of subaltern groups by denying them their own voice. Her linking of 'social position and the semantics of utterance' by way of examining the politics of speaking is for him a way around the complexity of subaltern representation, although he concedes that the relationship between position and meaning is complicated. The essential problem of 'positionality' underlying the ethico-politics of enunciation is that 'whereas the act of speaking for others denies those others the right to be the subjects of their own speech, the refusal to speak on behalf of the oppressed, conversely, assumes that they are in a position to act as such fully empowered subjects.' (p.65).

If the struggle for enunciative authority is one problematic issue with regard to subaltern agency, the other is with regard to the political legitimisation of this authority, in particular, questions of essentialism and inclusion. How legitimate is it for the refugee to speak on the basis of an exclusive experience or history that provides the essence of subaltern identity? Likewise, how does refugee representation include or exclude issues such as gender and sexuality? Given that essentialism is anathema to cultural theorists, especially but not only because of its suspect epistemology as well as its potential to lead to political and cultural fundamentalism, these issues are central to the exploration of subaltern agency. Spivak's solution to this dilemma is to call for 'strategic essentialism', an invitation to cultural and academic practitioners repeated by Stuart Hall in the context of ethnic minorities in the West. The 'strategic' element is to be interpreted in political terms, as a pragmatic approach to destabilising dominant, authoritative discourse with the intention of achieving political and social change. Representations by refugee communities of their experience of exile and repression encapsulates this move, as it simultaneously attempts to undermine the inadequacies of being represented in the dominant media, while selectively (how could it be otherwise?) portraying experience that synecdochically stands for exile and 'refugeeness'.

Enabling refugee representation is a profoundly political act, which requires extensive methodological and ethical considerations. With Maggie O'Neill I have developed elsewhere (2006, 2007) the methodological aspects of such interventions, borrowing from educational research the concept of Participatory Action Research with all its ethical and political deliberation, in order to better understand refugee experience, and provide an enabling platform and a safe place for the articulation of such experiences, and in turn for these stories to contribute to policy and praxis. Building on the notion of *ethnomimesis*, we have outlined a case for theory-building based on biographical material, both narrative and visual as critical theory in practice towards a vision of social justice that challenges the dominant knowledge/power axis embedded in current governance and media policy relating to forced migration, particularly in Europe and Australia. These are but preliminary steps towards intervening much more effectively in the realm of representation, towards the relatively unmediated portrayals of refugee experience, both positive and problematic, and towards the inclusion of such voices on mainstream accounts media, thereby engaging critically with debates that affect the everyday lives of refugee communities.

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