

## **READING ALIEN LIPS: ACCENTUATING THE POSITIVE? AN ANALYSIS OF SOME POSITIVE MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF ASYLUM SEEKERS**

RON HOENIG

### **Abstract**

The absence of the racial and cultural Other in mainstream media is noted by many scholars. In this article, a number of newspaper articles about asylum seekers in lip sewing episodes at Woomera in 2002 are examined using critical discourse analysis and drawing on critical race and whiteness studies. While many news articles depict asylum seekers negatively, most of the selected texts provide a positive depiction of asylum seekers. A combination of discourse analysis and literary exegesis demonstrates how journalists draw on existing discourses in the cultural imaginary to shape their depictions of cultural and racial Others. The suggestion is made that different narratives and rhetorical formations are deployed not merely to depict the asylum seeker as an abject Other to be pitied or reviled, but also to construct different versions of Jennifer Rutherford's "good (white) Australian" reader. These constructions of the reader form a subtext beneath the reporting of news and reveal the extent to which the representation of the Other involves white projections, desires and imaginings of the cultural Other. Rather than providing information about and insight into the cultural/racial Other, such texts may be better understood as interventions in an ongoing discourse within the White "mainstream" about Our national identity.

### **Introduction**

As they head off into the city for another encounter with the bureaucracy, they make a weird mob, all shapes and sizes with no apparent dress code. Some educated, some not. But somehow you just know they're going to fit in (Kremmer 2002a).

Hatred for the other has always been located, in the telling of white history, in the wings, off centre-stage, peripheral to the real life of a good white Australia (Rutherford 2000: 18).

The contest of responses to those seeking asylum has been bubbling in the national consciousness and the media since long before the first boats bearing asylum seekers arrived in the mid-1970s. While it is all too easy to find news stories in Australian print media which negatively position asylum seekers, there are also reports which appear to challenge this discourse of negativity. In this article I use critical discourse analysis influenced by Bell (1991, 1997, 1999), van Dijk (1991, 2000b, 2001) and others to analyse some newspaper articles about lip sewing by asylum seekers at Woomera Detention Centre in January 2002 which take a more sympathetic perspective on the asylum seekers. Taking a critical race and whiteness perspective, I suggest that in both "negative" and "positive" reporting, "othering" of asylum seekers takes place. Although some texts draw on an

openly exclusionist narrative and others draw on a liberal progressive human-rights posture, the asylum seeker remains a shadowy and opaque alien figure. In both “negative” and “positive” representations of asylum seekers, media workers and the media system construct the asylum seeker as a raced other in contrast to an “invisible” good white Australian Self.<sup>1</sup>

This article draws on my doctoral work examining the depiction of lip sewing by asylum seekers, particularly in the period 2000-2002, in four Australian newspapers. In that study I have been concentrating on “hard news” articles in two broadsheet and two tabloid newspapers in which lip sewing is mentioned and which demonstrate a range of attitudes to the asylum seekers:

- the *Age* (Fairfax, broadsheet, Melbourne);
- the *Australian* (Murdoch, broadsheet, national);
- the *Adelaide Advertiser* (Murdoch, tabloid, Adelaide, close to Woomera and Baxter), and
- the *Daily Telegraph* (Murdoch, tabloid, Sydney, lowest socio-economic demographic)

In this article, I draw examples from the coverage of lip-sewing at the Woomera Detention Centre in January 2002. I am seeking to explore how a textual analysis of any newspaper article provides an insight into cultural narratives that are processed in “factual” reporting and, in particular, how the structure and text of the news article manifest, maintain and shape attitudes to racial, ethnic and religious others. In the first section below I demonstrate how a news article is shaped to construct a narrative and how two different news articles construct different narratives out of the same event. I then provide a critical race and

whiteness theorisation to explore the larger context of racialised self-definition in which the Australian journalistic project is positioned. Finally I look at three news articles in which the text takes a more positive stance towards the asylum seekers and demonstrate the ways in which these texts construct and define both a different asylum seeker and, more importantly, a different Australian reader, but within the dominant racial and cultural paradigm.

### **Narratives of exclusion and inclusion: barbarous parents and child removal**

In January 2002, detainees at the Woomera Detention Centre, (or Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, as it was formally known) who had been awaiting the resolution of their request for asylum for many months, dramatised their plight using lip-sewing, a hunger strike and lying in graves they dug for themselves in the baking sun. Unlike the first Australian episode of lip sewing at the Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia in February 2000 (Debelle 2000; O'Brien 2000; 'Detainees sew lips in protest' 2000), this event dominated the front pages of the nation's newspapers for about a week. I have selected two news articles to demonstrate how different racial narratives and racialised nation self-definitions drive the construction of print articles. The first article, entitled “Children freed from Woomera ‘barbarism’” (Ahwan 2002), appeared in the News Limited Sydney tabloid the *Daily Telegraph*. The second report entitled “Ruddock removes children” (Taylor 2002) appeared in the Fairfax-owned Melbourne broadsheet the *Age*. Both news stories appeared on January 24 2002, following a press conference in which Federal Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock and South Australian Deputy Premier and Human Services Minister Dean Brown accused asylum seekers of

forcibly sewing the lips of children and promised to remove children from harm's way.

**Children freed from Woomera 'barbarism'**

1. EIGHT children are to be removed from the Woomera detention centre to protect them from having their lips sewn together by protesting asylum seekers (Ahwan 2002).

The "barbarism" of the (adult) asylum seekers is emphasised both in the headline and the lead (Sentence 1, S1). The article frames the event as decent Australians, in the person of the minister and authorities, taking action to "free" children from the depredations of protesting asylum seekers. The report reinforces the distinction between the "innocent" children and the "barbarous" asylum seekers by directly reporting that the children need to be rescued from the adults who are about to sew their lips. It is worth noting the "de-othering" or normalisation of the children, who were of course also asylum seekers and detainees. A "bad parent" narrative about the asylum seekers reinforces the way in which the government and the community (and, by implication, the reader) takes on the mantle of the rescuing "good parent".

The Age headline, "Ruddock removes children", constructs the Federal Government less as liberators or good parents than as "removers":

**Ruddock removes children**

1. The Federal Government will remove at least five children from the Woomera detention centre to prevent their involvement in hunger strikes and lip-sewing, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said yesterday.
2. Five children without parents or guardians at the centre will be

removed as soon as possible and placed in community foster care to stop them being coerced into protest actions by adult detainees, Mr Ruddock said. Those being removed are aged under 14, and Mr Ruddock said more may follow.

3. The move came on the eighth day of the protest at the troubled centre in outback South Australia. More than 30 detainees at the Maribyrnong detention centre in Melbourne have begun a hunger strike in solidarity (Taylor 2002).

The Age is meticulous about its attribution, distancing itself from the minister by using his name three times in two paragraphs. It carefully avoids endorsing the minister's claim that asylum seekers were sewing children's lips. Instead, the reason for removing the children is rendered in much more abstract terms: "to prevent their involvement in hunger strikes and lip sewing" (S1). Moreover, S1 depersonalises "their involvement in hunger strikes and lip-sewing" so that the contrast between adult and child asylum seekers is not drawn as strongly as in the *Daily Telegraph* story, nor does the story call on a good parent/bad parent dichotomy to the same extent.

The narratives of the two articles then diverge even further. In order to build the narrative of "us" rescuing the children, the *Daily Telegraph* report focuses in S3-5 on the background of lip sewing:

3. More than 200 detainees have staged a hunger strike at Woomera, including 50 who have stitches in their lips.
4. Mr Ruddock said two children had their lips sewn together by adults, who said they would do it again. One child is recovering in hospital after having stitches removed.

5. The action by immigration authorities follows the poisoning last night of seven Woomera detainees who were rushed to hospital after drinking shampoo or detergent.
6. Detainees' protests have also spread to Melbourne's Maribyrnong Detention Centre, where about 25 detainees were last night refusing to eat or drink (Ahwan 2002).

It is now clear that it is Mr Ruddock who has accused asylum seekers of sewing the children's lips. The next sentence (S4) appears to confirm and elaborate the Minister's claim and link it to the increasing number of asylum seekers who have stitched their lips. S5 links back to the lead (S1) "the (authorities') action", although there is only a hazy link between the (self)-poisoning, the lip-sewing and the removal of the children and a possible suggestion that there were children among the detainees who drank shampoo. In S7 we pick up on the rhetoric of "bad parenting" in the mention of "concern" by the South Australian State Government, which introduces Minister Brown's use of the word "barbaric":

3. The decision to remove the children followed growing concern in the South Australian Government, which said some children had been victims of 'barbaric' mutilation (Ahwan 2002).

This is reinforced in S14 and S15:

14. South Australian Human Services Minister Dean Brown said he was disgusted with the treatment of some children.
15. "Any adult who inflicts that sort of pain and suffering and treatment on a child I think is barbaric and totally unacceptable within our community and [I] would want

to see action taken and further investigation of the people that carried out such offences," he said. (Ahwan 2002)

The description of lip-sewing as "barbaric" and "totally unacceptable within our community" summons a register of condemnation that would not be as readily available to the Minister if those said to be undertaking the act were not racially and culturally other. Thus, while there is no specific reference in this particular article to the ethnic or religious background of these asylum seekers, the article is part of broader coverage that rehearses the opposition of a criminalised and racialised other and a non-racialised, normalised "community" so the contrast between "their" barbaric act and "our" community acts to further distance the reader, assumed to belong to a homogenised "our" community, from the asylum seeker.

Just as sub-plots in narrative reflect and refract the main plot, so in news, sub-narratives are drawn in to serve a similar purpose (Bell 1991, 1999). In contrast to the *Daily Telegraph's* narrative of the rescuing of children from barbaric "bad parents", the Age article develops a counter narrative (starting at S3) of growing powerful support for the detainees' protest at the "troubled" outback centre:

3. The move came on the eighth day of the protest at the troubled centre in outback South Australia. More than 30 detainees at the Maribyrnong detention centre in Melbourne have begun a hunger strike in solidarity.
4. It also came after Neville Roach, a key adviser to Mr Ruddock, resigned this week in protest at the government's hardline stance on asylum seekers.

5. Mr Roach, chairman of the Council for Multicultural Australia and the Business Advisory Council on Migration, said last night the government needed to process asylum claims more quickly to prevent protests by detainees.
6. The Woomera detainees say they are protesting over the conditions at the centre and visa processing delays (Taylor 2002).

The Age gives the resignation of the Minister's key advisor on multicultural issues, Neville Roach, strong news value, placing it high in the story (S4). This, together with the reference to the Maribyrnong protest as "in solidarity" (S3), helps to build a textured story of a government under attack, as detailed in comments by refugee advocates later in the article. The *Daily Telegraph* only mentions the Roach resignation in a final paragraph, isolated from the article's dominant narrative of the government rescuing asylum seeker children. The Age narrative suggests that ordinary decent Australians are not at ease with "the hardline stance" of the Government and that the government is increasingly embattled over the Woomera situation.

While the asylum seekers are the focus of attention, they are curiously passive. They play no active role in the telling of the narrative. The lip-sewing asylum seeker is marked as radically other. However, as an object of attention, the asylum seekers play a significant role in what we might call the drama of the reader's cultural self-definition. They provide the cultural other against which the text constructs an ideal audience and the reader a moral cultural self. The *Daily Telegraph* story of rescue constructs the reader as a "good Australian" repelled by the "barbarism" of the lip sewing and horrified by the asylum seekers' abuse of children and

therefore supportive of the Minister's attempt to save them. The Age story constructs a "good Australian" reader who is repelled by the barbarism of the treatment of the asylum seekers, suspicious of the government's claims to represent compassion in its hardline stance and uneasy about the regime of mandatory detention. While the latter article presents a more positive view of the plight of the asylum seekers, both use the asylum seeker as an opaque mirror reflecting a different "good Australian" reader. For one, the lip sewer is a touchstone of "barbaric" radical otherness. For the other, the lip-sewer is a touchstone of "our" compassion towards a despairing radical other. In both cases, the asylum seekers remain the *object* of attention – spoken about but unspeaking – the mirror in which the reader defines him or herself as part of an act of national self-definition.

### **National identity and the Muslim other**

Scholars in a range of disciplines adopt a "relational" definition of national identity, arguing that defining an other is an integral part of constructing a national identity. Nasser (2003) holds that:

identities (gender, race, ethnic, national, etc.) do not stem from an intrinsic essence rather they are constructed in difference from others. The sense of who we are develops in relation to an excluded Other ... In many cases, the "Other" is constructed as a negating and differentiated collective from the "We" (Nasser 2003: 1).

Some Australian scholars and commentators (Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales 2003; Manning 2004; Poynting & Noble 2004; Poynting et al. 2004) attribute anti-

asylum seeker media rhetoric to Islamophobia, defined by the Runnymede Trust as the "dread or hatred of Islam [leading] to the fear and dislike of all Muslims, and discrimination against Muslims by excluding them from the economic, social, and public life of the nation" (1997). Some vituperative political and media commentators appear to justify Said's (1992) remark that:

Malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West: what is said about the Muslim mind or character or religion or culture as a whole cannot now be said on mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, Other Orientals and Asians (1992: xii).

Certainly, themes "othering" Muslims abound in the anti-terrorist and citizenship rhetoric of former Howard government ministers. Former Prime Minister John Howard (Duffy 2006), former Education Minister Brendan Nelson ('Minister Tells Muslims' 2005), and former Treasurer Peter Costello (Gordon & Topsfield 2006), for example, all mobilised narratives of threat and distrust about Muslim communities by focusing on Muslims' supposed unique inability and unwillingness to "integrate" with other Australians. In February, 2006, for example, John Howard said of Australia's Muslim community:

there is a fragment which is utterly antagonistic to our kind of society, and that is a difficulty ... You can't find any equivalent in Italian, or Greek, or Lebanese, or Chinese or Baltic immigration to Australia. There is no equivalent of raving on about jihad, but that is the major problem (Megalogenis 2006).

The Howard government skilfully utilised anti-Muslim feeling in its anti-terrorist rhetoric to demonise asylum seekers in 2001, particularly in the post-September 11 climate. Poynting, Noble, Tabar and Collins commented: "We have seen the emergence of we might call 'the Arab Other' as the pre-eminent folk devil in contemporary Australia" (Poynting et al. 2004).

However the pervasive fear and hatred in negative media constructions of asylum seekers extends far wider than the Muslim other and further back into Australian history. Racial antagonism has traditionally focused on Indigenous Australians and immigrant Chinese and, later, in the late twentieth century, Asian immigration (Gale 2004). Rutland (2003) found parallels between rhetoric describing Muslim asylum seekers in the early twenty-first century and Jewish refugees post-1945. Moreover, the anti-asylum seeker rhetoric of the late twentieth century initially targeted not Muslim but Vietnamese and Cambodian asylum seekers. Goodall and Jakubowicz (1994) show how media use of such rhetoric in depicting Cambodian asylum seekers reinforced hegemonic views of white Australia:

they allow "us" to say what "we" are not: not them; we are not Asian, not refugees not scared to the edge of insanity, not driven to flee through exhaustion into the totally unknown, lost, without location or place ... we are clean uniformed, white, human, ordered, placed, our territory neatly defined (1994: 73).

Critical race and whiteness studies is a useful tool to examine and contest texts across a range of xenophobic and "othering" perspectives, including Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and anti-Asian sentiment. Using this theoretical tool, media constructions of asylum

seekers and their actions can be deconstructed and contextualised.

### **What is whiteness?**

Whiteness is a characteristic both of individuals as embodied subjects and of the economic, social, political, legal and cultural institutions in which power and territory is sought, maintained and defended on the basis of the social construct of race. A constitutive aspect of such a regime is the power to define, represent, include or exclude the other. Whiteness is more about “the power to include and exclude groups and individuals” (Frankenberg 1997: 13) than racial phenotypic characteristics or the practices of excluded groups.

Historically, especially in settler colonies such as Australia, South Africa and the United States, discourses of white racial dominance became a vital technology in the invasion of indigenous peoples and the dispossession from their lands. Frankenberg states “the formation of specifically white subject positions has in fact been key, at times cause and at times as effect, to the socio-political processes inherent in taking land and making nations” (cited in Henderson 2007: 19). Thus Schech and Haggis describe whiteness in the Australian context as “a terrain of structural advantage as well as a standpoint of race privilege” (Schech & Haggis 2004: 180). This spatial metaphor echoes the specific idea of having and holding physical territory and developing a facilitating ideology of possession and governmentality. It can be seen as a strategy of “owning” the nation, described by Ghassan Hage as the right to “worry about the state of the nation and to decide who the strangers are” (cited in Schech & Haggis 2004: 180).

Hostile and unequal relationships between white Australians and

racialised others both within and outside the nation-space have been a significant feature of the construction of the culturally dominant conception of the Australian national identity (Gale 2004, 2006). Moreton-Robinson analyses the white regime of power as driven by “the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty [which] naturalise[s] the nation as a white possession” (Moreton-Robinson 2004a: 1). Political, social, economic and cultural domination has been and is exercised with more or less self-consciousness in order to maintain white hegemony. The practical expression of white hegemony is racial and cultural privilege and the ability of white people, purely because of entrenched race privilege, to create and shape institutions, such as the media, which “circulat[e] a coherent set of meanings about white possession as part of common sense knowledge and socially produced conventions which are in accord with, and operate to maintain and strengthen, white cultural hegemony” (Moreton-Robinson 2004a: 1).

As a regime of power, whiteness operates by its epistemological dominance. For Moreton-Robinson, the ability of whiteness to define itself as the norm and the other not only as different, but as threatening or perverse or transgressive gives whiteness its capacity to construct itself as an ontological and epistemological *a priori*. “[W]hiteness is defined by what it is not (animal or liminal) thereby staking an exclusive claim to the truly human” (Moreton-Robinson 2004b: 77-78). Dyer (1997) focuses on de-mystifying white representations of the “other” by racialising white cultural producers, demonstrating their racial privilege in the power to define the other and naturalise whiteness:

white people create the dominant images in the world

and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail (Dyer 1997: 9).

Beneficiaries of white racial privilege have been able to racialise a diversity of others, but naming whiteness places all Australians – including researchers such as myself and media workers – in the system of racial privilege. “To speak of whiteness ... recognise[s] that all subjects are raced and gendered. Concentrating on whiteness obstructs the potential for people to stand outside of racism” (Wadham 2003: 25).

### **The whiteness of the media**

Media workers and the media system operating within a white regime of cultural power construct the asylum seeker as a raced body in contrast with an “invisible” and normalised white Australian Self. Textual markers of religious, racial or cultural otherness define the asylum seeker as “other”, and equally construct the journalist – and the reader – as belonging to the category of “not-other”. As Elder, Ellis and Pratt comment, citing Widders and Noble (1993):

The effect of discursively positioning non-white people in this way is that “their” inclusion in the nation – in both real and metaphorical terms – is then restricted by the parameters of the white “national will”; that is, they are included but only in the dominant group's terms (2004: 210).

The following analysis of news articles does not hinge on a psychological view of racism – whether or not an individual media worker or organisation is “racist” in the sense of antipathetic towards

people of another “race”, cultural background, or religion. Rather, it acknowledges the social, political, cultural and institutional reality of race privilege and white dominance in Australia's culture and examines the impact of that institutional reality on the way in which news narratives are constructed. I argue that this structural, ontological racism is a significant factor in both negative and positive representations of asylum seekers in the Australian print media.

### **Speaking for the Other**

Journalists structure their reporting around the main narrative of conflict between specific and easily identifiable social actors (Bell 1991, 1999). Silencing asylum seekers by depriving them of publicity was a matter of policy for both the government and the detention centre operators (Kremmer & Banham 2002). But it was also the result of institutional ways in which non-white minorities tend to be under-represented in the media as an out-group (see, for example, Teo 2000; van Dijk, Teun A. 2000a & 2000b; Garcia 2002; Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales 2003; Dreher 2003). Despite some exceptions I will discuss below, asylum seekers were effectively “de-voiced” (Teo 2000: 41).

Many news stories therefore focus on what might be seen as surrogate conflicts. For example, a number of the stories focus on conflicts between the Howard government and representatives of civil society – opposition politicians, church leaders, doctors and lawyers, and refugee advocates in non-government organisations. Thus, while asylum seekers' discontents are the precipitating factor for the conflict, the most sharply articulated conflict is within “mainstream” white Australia about

managing national identity through the appropriate treatment of asylum seekers. For example, in Rebecca Di Girolamo's story in the *Australian* of January 24 2002, "Pool visit fails to cool desert", the dominant voice is that of the refugee advocate, lawyer Paul Boylan. As a lawyer, Boylan is a sufficiently "authorised" voice to represent the asylum seekers. In fact when the journalist refers to the asylum seekers as the lawyer's "clients", she elevates their status within the article. They are now not defined only by their outsider (racialised) status as "detainees", but as persons worthy to be represented (by one of us).

### **The muted voice of the asylum seekers**

Articles sympathetic to asylum seekers and giving them "voice" appeared in publications at the time. In the *Age*, an article reported a surreptitious telephone conversation with two of the asylum seekers entitled "Woomera strikers accuse guards of beatings, duress and racism" (Kremmer 2002b). The two asylum seekers referred to by pseudonyms "Aziz" and "Jalil" refute accusations of asylum seekers of sewing children's lips, and indeed compare the minister unfavourably to the Taliban:

When I came to Australia I didn't know that Philip Ruddock was our enemy. I prefer the Taliban, who only kill people. Here they torture you (Kremmer 2002b).

However, the asylum seekers' authority to represent their concerns rests only in their own individual experience. Unlike the minister or even the refugee advocates, they have no institutional authority. They are described by their place of origin, the length of time they have spent in Australia and their ability

to speak English (Kremmer & Banham 2002). Kremmer's commentary locates his sympathies with regard to the asylum seekers. For example, he refers to the "torment of detention" (S15) and says that "the ordeal has crushed Jalil's hopes of freedom in Australia" in S16 (Kremmer 2002b). Kremmer is anxious to help the reader towards a very positive view of the experience that Aziz and Jalil describe, but when it comes to a more journalistically credible "authoritative" insight into the situation in Woomera, the journalist is more or less forced to back up the asylum seeker's voice with one of "our" representatives – in this case, Australian Democrats "distressed" leader Natasha Stott Despoja:

14. "There are clearly hundreds of lives on the line in there, people who are lying, some in sun, some in shade, people who are fainting regularly, according to reports to delegates and there are clearly people who have inflicted a degree of self-harm which we have seen. I was shocked" (Kremmer 2002b).

DiGirolamo's article mentioned above also gives some "voice" to asylum seekers. It begins with this lead:

1. WHILE Woomera detention staff invited the media to film happy child detainees at the local swimming pool yesterday, the mood remained tense inside the desert compound (DiGirolamo 2002).

Representing detention staff as involved in minor media manipulation decentres their authority to make pronouncements about the nature of the asylum seekers and problematises the media politics involved in representing the situation. The government and, more particularly, the detention centre management is revealed as one of a number of players in the media construction of the asylum

seekers and their actions. The phrase "happy child detainees" (S1) discursively opens up the fact that the children are indeed detainees (that is, racialised) and are being used as exotic "talent" in a media show. Yet this opening allows a very neat reversal to give the detainees and their children "voice". The asylum seeker children (and their parents) are later represented as wrongfooting attempts by the Woomera guards to control them. The "Iranian children", no longer complicit smiling brown faces, manage, despite attempts by detention centre management to foil communications with the media, to sneak a note out to reporters at the swimming pool:

14. "Every day we are seeing the people who are trying to kill themselves and we are trying to do this also because die is better than staying here. Please help us. Nobody is listening to us. Please, please, please" (DiGirolamo 2002).

It might be objected that this reading discounts the extent to which the article itself makes use of the "innocence" of the detainee Iranian children to present a counter narrative to that being offered by the Woomera authorities. It is certainly extraordinarily affecting and effective that the note implores the reader and does so with just a hint of an "accent". However, the children's ruse is also an indication of some intelligent and deliberate organisation behind the events. Too often, the asylum seekers are represented as barbaric and unthinking or merely abject and deserving of compassion. It is only rarely in the reporting of the Woomera events that we see indications of the intelligent planning that was necessary to develop a successful campaign by asylum seekers to achieve the resumption of assessments for visas.

In general, however, articles tend to focus on the politics of immigration detention, in which the fate of the detainees appears secondary. The dominant white culture arrogates to itself the sense of "owning" and defining the nation and takes upon itself the right to "worry" about the state of the nation and to decide who the strangers are. From the perspective of the press, the news issues are about the white subject, and the expression of, and the limits to, white generosity. Elder, Ellis and Pratt suggest that:

the management of non-white people in the white nation-space is ordered in terms of a relationship where white people assume that their place is at the centre or core of the nation, defined in relation to both internal non-white others and external non-white margins or periphery (2004: 209).

### **They're a weird mob**

Positive articles, too, reflect this management of national identity. For example, Christopher Kremmer's colour piece "Asylum seekers encounter new world outside fences" (Age, January 22, 2002) about asylum seekers' first days of liberation from Woomera turns on the theme of belonging and "fitting in" as an Australian.

The article begins with a metaphorical re-birth moment:

1. They emerged yesterday into the blinding glare of an Adelaide summer's day, a handful of Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians, after being released on Wednesday from Woomera detention centre on three-year temporary protection visas (Kremmer 2002a).

Kremmer is a compassionate observer, inviting the reader to see the Australian world through the gaze of the asylum seeker. The polarities of difference are marked in the contrast between “Adelaide” and the “Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians” (S1). Summarising the asylum seeker’s “voyage” into the welfare bureaucracy as “the drip feed, just enough to keep people going”, Kremmer provides an insight into the way “we” treat the asylum seekers. The response of the “ordinary Australian” is provided in comments, both harsh and kind, by “Brett Heath, 30, a long-term guest from Port Pirie”, a regional industrial city in South Australia. Kremmer describes his “matey praise mixed with dour reserve” as “very Australian”:

9. “We can’t have a flood of refugees breaking down the walls and getting into Australia. It’ll put too much pressure on our infrastructure,” he says.
10. But in the next breath he informs us that “from what I’ve seen these people would make ideal migrants. They’re intelligent, well-dressed and unfailingly polite and considerate” (Kremmer 2002a).

The discourse of appraisal and judgment that permeates the text is not one way. Kremmer gives us brief glimpses of the asylum seekers also making judgments of their new land, the drunks and garishness of the street, assessing the possibilities in their future. Constructing asylum seekers through a lens of domestic life, Kremmer portrays them as “ordinary”, cooking and eating, coping with money – the same as “us”.

Yet their marginality is manifest. They are confronted by a capricious and all-powerful “we” – an entire Australian nation – the bureaucracy, Woomera, the narrator and the reader – perhaps in uneasy, unwilling alliance. Kremmer’s

use, then, of the expression “weird mob” in S17, his last paragraph, is surprising:

17. As they head off into the city for another encounter with the bureaucracy, they make a weird mob, all shapes and sizes with no apparent dress code. Some educated, some not. But somehow you just know they’re going to fit in (Kremmer 2002a).

The term may be an ironic reference to the iconic book *They’re a weird mob* (Culotta 1958) produced by Irish-Australian John O’Grady under the *nom de plume* of Nino Culotta, a northern Italian journalist. Culotta praises Australians as a “weird mob” into which it is right and appropriate that immigrants should assimilate. The words “they”, “them” and “their” are prominent in Kremmer’s article. The repetitions of the third person plural tend stylistically to distance the asylum seekers from the reader. The sudden use of the word “you” in the informal sense to mean “I” or “one” draws the reader into a semantic alliance with the narrator in defining the group as an acceptable other and assuring us that they will “fit in”.

bell hooks underlines the attachment of white people to the normativity of whiteness. She cites the “deep emotional investment in the myth of sameness even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign of who they are and what they think” (cited in Dyer 1997: 2). Kremmer’s intention appears as advocacy. But in effect, he invites the reader into exercising the decision Prime Minister Howard proposed. The article offers “them” to “us” for compassion and judgment. “We” too are deciding “who comes here and the circumstances in which they come”. The decision Kremmer prefers may be different, but implicit in the context is a reinforcement

of the white reader's privileged position of being able to make the choice about national belonging.

In Kremmer's article, asylum seekers become exemplars in the national debate about the nature of an Australia produced by those positioned as being able to make those choices. While the focus is on "sameness", the significant difference is overlooked. The question *not* posed is what will they "fit in" to and how. As "Third-World looking" immigrants, they may be compelled to join us as what Hage describes as "the tame and domesticated animal whose will has been subjugated as the very condition of belonging to the domesticated space of the Australian national will" (Hage 1996). Will they "fit in" in the sense that they too will become a minority on the margins like the "internal non-white others and external non-white margins or periphery" (Elder, Ellis & Pratt 2004: 209)?

### Conclusions

Taking a critical race and whiteness perspective, this article argues that a structural, ontological racism operates in Australian culture, including its print media. I have suggested that the figure of the asylum seeker functions as a device through which news texts celebrate particular kinds of Australian-ness. In both the positive and the negative narratives, the opaque asylum seeker reflects another character: the constructed "good white Australian" reader reflected and refracted through these different constructions. The depictions of asylum seekers are an exchange of white projections and imaginings about the racialised other. These depictions give the imagined white reader the opportunity to be reflected as compassionate and decent in either supporting or opposing the stance of the government. What the

reader sees in the asylum seeker other is what we/they desire and fear in them/ourselves. Readers may construct them/ourselves as tough and unwilling to be "suckered" into offering succour to "barbarians" – generous to those who deserve out generosity but firm in their stand against those who would invade "our" territory. Or readers may construct them/ourselves as cosmopolitan and appalled at the bureaucratic insensitivity and ruthlessness of the government's stand.

Only fleetingly is the voice of asylum seekers heard in these texts. And never is that voice unmediated. Marginal even among the most marginal, the voice of the asylum seeker other plays a secondary role in a mediated national conversation about ways of being "good" Australians. The implicit definition of this Australian reader lies within a narrow range permitted in the hegemonic narrative. In fact, many actual readers – Indigenous, non-white, culturally diverse, in other ways marginal – may find themselves interpellated by these texts only obliquely, as when a stranger hails us mistakenly as a friend. "Who, me?" For the hegemonic narrative only prevails over multiple silencings. The asylum seekers' act in sewing their lips was disruptive and unsettling not only because it symbolised the truth of the silencing they experienced, but also because it was a token of other equally violent silencings necessary to maintain the dominant white song.

### Author Note

Ron Hoenig is a PhD student in journalism and cultural studies at the University of South Australia. His doctoral research focuses on the Australian print media's depiction of asylum seekers. Ron has a background in the arts and multiculturalism, is involved in interfaith

activity and has worked as an editor and journalist in the South Australian education department.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the organisers of the Re-orienting Whiteness Conference, and especially the Post Graduate Symposium for the opportunity to present the first version of this paper. In particular, I would like to thank Aileen Moreton-Robinson for her sympathetic reading and even more sympathetic questioning and an anonymous referee who helped me to structure a sharper and I hope more incisive final paper. I would also like to acknowledge the work of Susan Annetay Henderson, whose Masters thesis, entitled "Terror in the Streets?: Whiteness and Media Reporting on Aboriginal Crime in Adelaide", has helped me to solidify my thinking on whiteness theory and Othering in the media.

### References

- Ahwan, L. 2002. 'Children Freed From Woomera "Barbarism"', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 January, 9.
- Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales. 2003. *Race for the Headlines- Racism and Media Discourse Full Report*, Sydney: Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales.
- Bell, A. 1991, *The Language of News Media*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- 1997. The Discourse Structure of News Stories, in A. Bell and P. Garrett (eds.) *Approaches to Media Discourse*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 64-104.
- 1999. News Stories as Narratives, in A. Jaworski and N. Coupland (eds.) *The Discourse Reader*, London: Routledge, 236-251.
- Culotta, N. 1958. *They're a Weird Mob*, London: Kaye.
- Debelle, P. 2000, 'Behind the Wire at Curtin', *Age*, 3 May, 3.
- 'Detainees Sew Lips in Protest'. 2000. *Sunday Times*, February 6, 305.
- DiGirolamo, R. 2002. 'Pool Visit Fails to Cool Desert Protest - THE REFUGEE HUNGER STRIKE', *Australian*, January 24, 4.
- Dreher, T. 2003. 'Speaking Up and Talking Back: News Media Interventions in Sydney's "Othered" Communities', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, 109, 121-137.
- Duffy, C. 2006. 'PM Stands by Muslim Integration Comments', *ABC News Online*, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200609/s1730918.htm>>, accessed 11 November 2008.
- Dyer, R. 1997. *White*, New York: Routledge.
- Elder, C., Ellis, C. & Pratt, A. 2004. Whiteness in Constructions of Australian Nationhood: Indigenes, Immigrants and Governmentality, in A. Moreton-Robinson (ed.) *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 208-221.
- Frankenberg, R. 1997. *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gale, P. 2004. 'The Refugee Crisis and Fear: Populist Politics and Media Discourse', *Journal of Sociology*, 40(4), 321-340.
- 2006. 'Fear, Race and National Identity', *Dialogue*, 25(3), 36-42.
- Garcia, A. 2002. 'Anti-immigrant Racism and the Media', *Media Alliance*, <<http://mediaalliance2.live.radicaldesigns.org/article.php?id=433>>, accessed 11 June 2009.
- Goodall, H. and Jakubowicz, A. 1994. *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Gordon, J. and Topsfield, J. 2006. 'Our Values or Go Home: Costello', *Age*,

- 24 February, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/our-values-or-go-home-costello/2006/02/23/1140670207642.html>>, accessed 7 June 2008.
- Hage, G. 1996. 'Ethnic Caging in a Multicultural Nation', Boat People Symposium, Centre for Research in Culture and Communication, Murdoch University, <<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/boat/Hage.html>>, accessed 13 June 2009.
- Henderson, S.A. 2007. 'Whiteness and Media Reporting on Aboriginal Crime in Adelaide', Masters Thesis, Department of Women's Studies, Flinders University.
- Kremmer, C. 2002a. 'Asylum Seekers Encounter New World Outside Fences – WOOMERA', *Age*, 26 January, 5.
- 2002b. 'Woomera Strikers Accuse Guards of Beatings, Duress and Racism', *Age*, 25 January, 6.
- Kremmer, C. and Banham, C. 2002. 'Hunger Strikers Deny Stitching Children's Mouths', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January, 4.
- Manning, P. 2004. *Dog Whistle Politics and Journalism: Reporting Arabic and Muslim People in Sydney Newspapers*, Broadway: Australian Centre for Independent Journalism.
- Megalogenis, G. 2006. 'PM Hits at "Jihad" Muslims', *Australian*, 20 February, 1.
- 'Minister Tells Muslims: Accept Aussie Values or "Clear Off"'. 2005. ABC News Online, <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200508/s1445181.htm>>, accessed 11 November 2008.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. 2004a. 'The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta Decision', *Borderlands*, 3(2), <[http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2\\_2004/moreton\\_possessive.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/moreton_possessive.htm)>, accessed 11 June 2009.
- 2004b. Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation, in A. Moreton-Robinson (ed.) *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 75-88.
- Nasser, R. 2003. *Othering and Identity: Exclusion Practices in Israeli and Jordanian School Textbooks*, Atlanta: Atlanta Hill Hotel.
- O'Brien, N. 2000. 'Court Hits Out at "Nerve" of Protesting Detainees', *Australian*, 8 February, 7.
- Poynting, S. and Noble, G. 2004. *Living with Racism: The Experience and Reporting by Arab and Muslim Australians of Discrimination, Abuse and Violence since 11 September 2001*, Canberra: The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
- Poynting, S., Noble, G., Tabar, P., Collins, J. & Sydney Institute of Criminology. 2004. *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*, Sydney: Sydney Institute of Criminology.
- Runnymede Trust. 1997. *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All: Summary*, <<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf>>, accessed 11 June 2009.
- Rutherford, J. 2000. *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press.
- 2003. 'Cutting Ordinary: An ABC True Story', *Australian Humanities Review*, 28, <<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-Jan-2003/rutherford1.html>>, accessed May 30 2009.
- Rutland, S.D. 2003. 'Postwar Anti-Jewish Refugee Hysteria: A Case of Racial or Religious Bigotry?' *Journal of Australian Studies*, 77, 69-79.
- Said, E.W. 1992. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine*

- How We See the Rest of the World*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Schech, S. & Haggis, J. 2004. Terrains of Migrancy and Whiteness: How British Migrants Locate Themselves in Australia, in A. Moreton-Robinson (ed.) *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 176-191.
- Taylor, K. 2002. 'Ruddock Removes Children', *Age*, 24 January, 1.
- Teo, P. 2000. 'Racism in the News: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reporting in Two Australian newspapers', *Discourse and Society*, 11(1), 7-49.
- van Dijk, T.A. 1991. *Racism and the Press*, London: Routledge.
- 2000a. Ideologies, Racism, Discourse: Debates on Immigration and Ethnic Issues, in J. ter Wal and M. Verkuyten (eds.) *Comparative Perspectives on Racism*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 91-115.
- 2000b. New(s) Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach, in S. Cottle (ed.) *'Race', Racism and the Mass Media*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 33-49.
- 2004. 'Knowledge and News', *Revista Canaria e Estudios Ingleses*, 49, 71-86.
- Wadham, B. 2003. 'What is Whiteness? Authenticity, Dominance, Identity', Paper presented at the Placing Race and Localising Whiteness Conference, Flinders University, Adelaide.

### Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term "good (White) Australian" as Rutherford has to describe the way highly valued moral qualities in the (white) Australian sense of self – a fair go, egalitarianism, the democratic refusal of visible hierarchies, the cult of the battler, of everyman – have been "the constant accompaniment to acts of aggression in Australian history: the genocide, the White Australia policy, the Stolen Generation and now the desubjectivisation and incarceration of refugees". Influenced by Lacan and Freud, Rutherford argues that "we cannot understand these acts of aggression and restore them to cultural memory unless we recognise the central role that morality plays in their perpetuation" (Rutherford, 2003).