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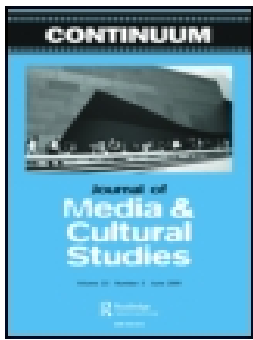
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Continuum

Journal of Media & Cultural Studies

ISSN: 1030-4312 (Print) 1469-3666 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccon20>

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To cite this article: Toby Markham & Rob Cover (2018): Facts of life and liveability: asylum seekers, political narratives, ethics, Continuum, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2018.1458820](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1458820)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1458820>



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Facts of life and liveability: asylum seekers, political narratives, ethics

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has opened up a new cosmopolitan sensibility, putting a strain on traditional concepts of the nation state and its citizenry. With considerable increase in the global flow of bodies seeking asylum due to global conflicts, questions have been raised about the moral capacity for humane response by nations. Certain lives are perceived as grievable and therefore worth offering hospitality and liveability, while others are framed as ungrievable thereby failing in public debate and policy to be accorded the sense that their lives should be saved. While there have been a number of interventions arguing for all lives to be understood as grievable and worthy of refuge, there has been little attention to understanding the cultural role of political discourse in tacitly 'categorising' refugee lives as either grievable or ignored. This paper takes into account recent questions over how narratives that contribute to making distinctions between 'fact' and 'truth' operate to frame refugee and asylum seeker lives, examining some instances of public and political narratives for the ways in which they constitute refugees and asylum seekers as political or not, grievable or not.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the flow of bodies, transactions, goods and communication has accelerated through modern technologies. In light of this, certain bodies are excluded from practices of mobility and re-settlement in ways which are unethical. From a cultural studies perspective, discourse governs how such exclusions are understood, how they are made meaningful and how they are debated in the contemporary mediated public sphere. The denial of safe cohabitation and re-settlement for, particularly, refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Australia makes urgent the critical questions around how narrative mechanisms operating in political speech within the public sphere make such exclusions appear to be acceptable at various times to 'the public'. It is also urgent to understand how such narratives are active in processes that make palatable to a public policies that preclude belonging and cohabitation. These are especially important when such practices were, in historical terms, *previously* unpalatable or unacceptable. An ethical standpoint on refugees and asylum seekers argues for an unconditional hospitality for the vulnerable other (Butler 2009). This implies, in the case of recent Australian practices, safe and speedy assessment of boat arrivals in order to maximize the liveability of vulnerable subjects. However, popular opinion, public policy, social attitude and ways of 'thinking about' refugees and asylum seekers have increasingly been marked by a public unwillingness to take

such an ethical, empathetic, hospitality-oriented perspective and instead to ignore refugees and asylum seekers or assume an attitude that does not value their lives as worthy of welcome (Cover 2013) or, in Judith Butler's (2009) terms, as grievable—that is, lives that *matter* if they live or die. In the context of continuing Australian asylum seeker and refugee debates, then, the key question becomes: *in what ways do public sphere and mass-media engagement participate in converting multiple truths into singular facts to frame their lives as either grievable or ungrievable* and thereby either worthy or unworthy of being accorded hospitality and a liveable life?

While there have been a number of interventions arguing for all lives to be understood as grievable and worthy of refuge, there has been little attention as to the role of political discourse and public processes of narrative and meaning-making in tacitly 'categorising' refugee lives as either *grievable* (worthy of the right to liveable lives and safe cohabitation) or *ignored* (excluded from public attention). Important here—although beyond the scope of the present paper—are questions around how narratives that frame and discuss refugees and asylum seekers enter, are stimulated and are sustained as stories of 'public interest' through political speeches, journalism, opinion-writing, online debate, interactive selection and sharing of stories in social networking, signed and anonymous contributions to online forums, trolling and other everyday cultural practices involved in establishing public know-ingness (Dahlgren 2006). Such practices do not, of course, exclude counterpublic speech and other tacit and explicit practices of cultural responsiveness to others, including migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Hartley and Green 2006, 342), but have different and variable roles in the constitution of policies, including policies of exclusion.

Distinctions between 'fact' and 'truth' operate to frame refugee and asylum seeker lives in terms that are considered 'political'. In this context, understanding the frameworks that produce political discourse and the politicization of issues, people and events through, on the one hand, the discursive production of information as 'truth' and 'fact' and, on the other, structuration of those facts through narratives that communicate and foster an ethical stance, is of substantial importance given the contemporary polarization of political commentary and, simultaneously, the vast expansion of raw information through interactive processes and digital flows producing identities of belonging and non-belonging (Cover 2016). In order to critically develop an ethical response to contemporary forms of exclusion or denial, and to do so in a way which understands exclusion as a form of social injustice towards refugees and asylum seekers, it is important to unpack relationships between power and information by attempting to understand the specific narrative mechanisms that negatively frame some of the most vulnerable subjects as simultaneously the subjects of politics and, yet, excluded from political representation.

Politics in its broadest form is the intentional exercising of influence in all its occurrences (Dahl and Stinebrickner 2003). How one decides what 'counts' as political is at stake in considering the operation of political discourse. This paper is therefore concerned with unpacking *politicization*, the ontological process in which latent social influence manifests itself as knowledge through communicative practices of political discourse, producing subjects of inclusion and exclusion. In this, the *figure* of practices of political speech, journalism, official debate and public responsiveness continue to perform the most significant roles (Economou and Tanner 2008), even as concepts of truth, fact and opinion are challenged by new modes of content creation, digital dissemination and populist disavowal of political processes, established speech and expertise. While it is beyond the capacity of this paper to offer an exhaustive account of ontological considerations in this process, our focus is instead on the principal process of how contemporary public sphere discourse, represented in journalism and journalistic responses to political utterances, are accountable in 'making political' a subject or ethics.

Reading the history of recent shifts in asylum seeker policy, detention regimes, discourses of exclusion and public attitudes, we work in this paper from a standpoint that critically engages with Judith Butler's concept of grievability. We present an approach to theorizing the truth/fact relationship in the context of political statement, speech and political reporting related to the production of factualities on which exclusions from hospitality of asylum seekers arriving in Australia are politically founded. This is undertaken through a critical investigation of public sphere 'fact' by examining three historical instances in Australia in which the figure of the asylum seeker entered public sphere debate as a

'politicised' figure: visual images that both produce and obscure ethical demands, the role of narrative in giving different 'reasons' for asylum seeker grievability or ungrievability, and the processes by which debate is obscured through government and administrative control of 'fact'. These three challenges will be addressed after a brief introductory discussion of grievability and responsibility as providing ethical perspectives on asylum and hospitality.

Between fact and truth: grievability and responsibility

In her work during the second half of the 2000s, Judith Butler developed the ethical philosophies of both Foucault and Levinas to present an account as to the ethical means by which subjects, states and societies can be understood to have an ethical responsibility towards the vulnerable other. Butler's starting point is the acknowledgement that all subjects are vulnerable on the basis that we are corporeal and dependent on the care of others (society) for survival and liveability from the beginning of life, prior indeed to subjectivity itself (Butler 2004). Such an obligation can include the ethical requirement to welcome and support vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in a spirit of worldwide cohabitation rather than through instruments of detention, deferral and deterrence. In *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), Butler argues that one of the mechanisms by which we *fail* in that ethical obligation is through the interpretative frame that leaves the 'other' as unworthy of ethical recognition and non-violent responsiveness, effectively as de-humanized to the point that their lives cannot be and will not be grieved. As Butler (2004) notes, silence within the public sphere about particular kinds of deaths or risks of deaths de-humanizes lost and at-risk lives; this is the result of a standpoint of *refusal* of a particular kind of ethical discourse 'that produces dehumanization as a result' (36). However, in thinking about some of the ways in which that particular ignoring or ignorance of a discourse that prompts an ethical responsibility can be understood, it is valuable to consider the multi-level complexity of how certain lives are ignored and certain lives that are *known* to be vulnerable in news media narratives are, nevertheless, still framed as lives that are ungrievable.

Butler's concept of grievability is thereby a useful lens here through which to assess the role of media in framing minorities and the marginalized. The concept of grievability opens the possibility of thinking through not only how life is categorized but the forces and frameworks of discourse that produce the kinds of precarity through which some lives are rendered unrecognizable as lives and ungrieved should those lives end (Sharma 2014, 6). For a life to be considered valuable, it must be a life that is objectively understood as one which would be grieved should it be lost. The subject who is grievable is a subject we consider *worthy* of life (where that 'we' is group, a belonging, a nation, a biopolitical process and so on). In Butler's framework, then,

grievability is a condition of a life's emergence and sustenance. . . . Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather there is something living that is other than life. Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed into non-life from the start. (Butler 2009, 15)

It is in the framing of a life as either a life worth grieving or a life that will be relegated to the ungrievable that grievability is produced and through which all subjectivity is constituted. These frames, which can be understood as linguistic, discursive, visual, cultural, media tools, produce ways of seeing.

For Butler, racism can be one such framing that operationalizes categories of grievability:

Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce economic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable. The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel political consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference. (Butler 2009, 24)

The ethical requirement for Butler (2015), in this context, is the mutual development of institutions, policies and ways of thinking (discourses) that 'seek to sustain human lives without regarding some part of the population as socially dead, as redundant, or as intrinsically unworthy of life and therefore ungrievable' (115). The potential 'truth' of an ethical perspective on refugees and asylum seekers built on understanding their lives as always grievable can, therefore, only be produced through attitude

changes within the communication sphere of the public where a stance can be politicized and thereby enter the political debate.

What Butler does not theorize (as it was not her intention to do so), however, are some of the mechanisms by which subjects are *made to appear* grievable and ungrievable. Such an undertaking is markedly useful in putting forward a way of making sense of what might constitute the reasons for certain ethical and unethical exclusions and how certain kinds of (unethical) exclusions become and remain palatable to a broader public. In other words, it is a matter of what and who 'counts' as political, and how politicization is used both to make a figure appear in a political frame and, simultaneously, be relegated from an ethical consideration.

One such mechanism involves political speech that actively juxtaposes knowledge of vulnerable lives, on the one hand, and responsibility 'to the state' on the other. We could take the example of the reporting of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard's foundational statement 'we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (<http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2001-john-howard>). This statement was given in a speech during what has come to be known as the Tampa Crisis, in which the Howard government blocked the arrival of Norwegian vessel *MV Tampa*, carrying 430 rescued asylum seekers attempting to get to Australia). This statement was pivotal in the history of Australian migration, primarily because it initiated a discursive framework that justified exclusion by articulating it as an outcome of a certain kind of 'decidability' based on nationalism and nationalistic sovereignty. The response that circulated amongst journalists, other politicians, opinion-makers and public-sphere writers and speakers, however, occurred in two narrative forms: (1) that the decision was harsh given the responsibility of a country towards a global refugee crisis and the lives of those who journey by boat (Marr and Doherty 2011), and (2) on the other hand, that refugee lives *ought* to be overridden by a notion of state responsibility to the liveability and comfort of the extant population, particularly in terms of infrastructure and resource (Levy 2013). This dichotomy of responses is more recently witnessed in journalistic and opinion writing discussions around the cost to Australia of operating the Manus Island detention centre for detaining asylum seekers (e.g. Gartrell 2016), pointing to the dichotomy between concern for 'fair treatment' of asylum seekers on the one hand, but a balancing of costs to the state (or taxpayer) on the other. In this context, grievability of those lives is sometimes understood and communicated, but is *postponed* in light of a neoliberal framing of biopolitics that excludes the vulnerable subject on the basis that the state itself might be made vulnerable by their very liveability. In Butler's perspective, the statement is performative in that it actively re-oriented ethical responsiveness by invoking the concept of *decision*.

While the decision over the migrant in both individual assessment and broader policy terms is typically coded as a civil matter, it involves a decision that depends on factors which can have little to do directly with migration, only with the maintenance of the nation as a neo-liberal state. The decisions involved in migration policy and assessment comprise, then, one of the sites by which governance spreads its objectification through evaluation and determination throughout the social system in ways which are usually not reducible to monetary exchanges but which, nevertheless, are constituted by the neo-liberal perception of the market (Foucault 2008, 243). Although the process of the decision is determined by these factors of governmentality, it becomes a decision that is always an a priori act of violence through its failure to recognize the figure of the migrants, broadly speaking, as subjects worthy of liveability and cohabitation separate from the objectives of neoliberal valuation, financial exchange and labour value. Such policy serves governmentality but is influenced by the views of public sphere debate—which is not necessarily the same as popular attitude—and is responsive to it in an electoral political system.

Yet capacity for a neo-liberal framing to work alongside an ethical position of unfettered hospitality is not an unbreachable dichotomy, given the experience of refugee policy in Australia's not -distant past. As Neumann (2015) illustrates, the Liberal Fraser government in the 1970s which shepherded a number of neoliberal encroachments into social policy, was *also* able to respond to one of the first waves of boat people through an ethical stance of welcome that saw a large number of boat people settled in Australia. This was accompanied by the introduction of concrete policies and criteria for the management of

refugees, demonstrating the need to integrate the novel introduction of foreign subjects into current neo-liberal social conventions. Yet an affective deployment of 'compassion' operated alongside the governmental discourse of 'managing' irregular arrivals by boat and costs to the state of that management. This affect of 'compassion' is one which emerges today, of course, under the moniker of 'human rights' or 'humanitarianism' and broadly relegated into the separate space of the civil rather than the economic. A review by the department of immigration and Ethnic affairs in 1977/78 demonstrated a position that balanced these two seemingly incompatible frames by suggesting that Australian's would be no different to the Indo-Chinese had similar situations of upheaval befallen them (507). This was done by drawing a comparison between the everyday actions of both groups, and therefore the pre-narrative links of liveability and convention. As Neumann notes, this allowed for a discursive re-negotiation of the competing aspects of the public sphere narrative around asylum-seeking that challenged the notion of a power-relationship in which the strong were helping the weak, by acknowledging that the 'other' was no different than the possibility of an Australian reduced to refugee status (508). While this framing occurred in a political environment different from the present, the point here is that there are past instances in which contingency, multiplicity and complexity marked the public and governmental response to refugees in a way that resulted in an ethical stance of hospitality through understanding refugee and asylum seeker lives as grievable lives.

Paradoxically, this position was largely possible given the relative lack of *politicization* of the figure of the asylum seeker in the media, allowing a stance that went against public anxieties that were simply not strong enough to invoke practical political concern at election time. Therefore, given new discursive arrangements that have emerged in the 2000s to politicize the issue, the question becomes *how do public discourse practices frame the appearance of asylum seekers within national narrative borders, and how do such narrative structures produce particular kinds of factualities that relegate humanitarian concerns to the political outside?* Australia's mediated political community relies on a range of content creation, utterance, debate, opinion and reporting to negotiate between complex narratives for the formulation of a public sphere or popular response to an ethical issue. The difficulty here is that some contemporary brands of journalism and mediated public debate obscure the possibility of developing an ethical stance because they actively reduce the *multiple* approaches needed for ethical decisions to be made, and instead present a singular narrative truth: the asylum seeker is an ungrievable life. As we argue in the next sections, ethical approaches emerge from factual statements that are framed within an *anxiety* over the inability to apprehend the 'other' lead to discursive responses of future responsibility that are simplified and comprehensible only within the logic of state control and management.

Public sphere politicization of the figure of 'asylum seeker'

The asylum seeker debates in Australia offer a useful example of narrative processes at play in the public sphere in the context of their role in framing and producing possibilities for truth and fact in a contemporary communicative society. The clashing of national and global responsibilities—and the inadequate measures in our political institutions to effectively deal with this issue—are embodied in an anxious and ongoing debate in the Australian political community. How the debate is framed, and how the objects of that debate (refugees and asylum seekers) are positioned as lives to be grieved (welcomed, re-settled) or not grieved (detained or turned away) is, we argue, governed by journalistic interventions into the contemporary public sphere. The following sections draw on a disparate range of events that have occurred since the politicization of irregular maritime arrivals in 2001 with focus on three key dynamics of narratability that have an impact on how the figure of the asylum seeker 'appears' (is apprehended) in public sphere discourse: firstly, appearance and subsequent politicization of asylum seekers in the national narrative and the framing of their grievability; secondly, the framing of responsibility through negotiations of synchronic narrative elements that re-enforce government responses of control and management; and, finally, attempts to silence narratability entirely through government censorship as a means of containing the growing anxiety over the failure of the current system to offer an adequate moral response.

Substantial scholarship on the asylum seeker debate has analyzed the 2001 Tampa crisis, focusing particularly on John Howard's infamous phrase, 'we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' as a moment of politicization of forced immigrant arrivals and of forced migrants themselves (Mares 2001; Coghlan, Minns, and Wells 2005; McDonald 2005; Zannettino 2012). Despite this pivotal juncture, the arrival of asylum seekers by boat has a history far beyond the Tampa crisis. The unauthorized arrival of asylum seekers by boat has been occurring as early as the 1960s with west Papuan men appearing on Australian shores and continuing into the 1970s with the arrival of Vietnamese (Neumann 2015, 423). While these events are not historically novel in a material sense, they provide an important argument for discerning the ways in which a topic, issue, concept, personage or figure is re-framed in public sphere debate and mediated political discourse in ways which *politicizes* them; that is, converts them into objects over which there are debates around truth, moral and ethics.

Rather than being understood as a politicization in reaction to Tampa or for partisan gain, the Howard response of political decidability can be understood as both symptom and cause of politicization: latent political influence manifested through a narrative of encroaching political production of the figure of the asylum seeker emerged at this point with a new level of focus on the issue in the Australian political community. Politicization of asylum seekers occurs, in part, through the implementation of the 'pacific solution' policy, which excised certain areas from Australia's migration zone to prevent a boat arrival from being legally an arrival, granted the Australian navy jurisdiction to apprehend vessels attempting to land in Australia, and established off-shore processing of refugees and asylum seekers in Nauru and Papua New Guinea detention centres. These acts *politicize* the figure of 'asylum seeker' by making those subjects appear within the political rather than the humanitarian frame, separating the two through claims of expediency and making a welcome seem incompatible with the needs of contemporary politics. So the figure of the migrant is politicized, but not as a political subject. Rather the asylum seeker is made abject. In Judith Butler's framework the act of making a life abject is one which occurs through making it 'unwanted' and thus ungrievable or unliveable. Extending Butler's ethical position to the question of forced migrants arriving in Australia, the migrant life is made abject by being seen as unpalatable and unwelcome not only within the 'space' of the country, or the 'space' of the existing population, but in the act of *arriving at all*. An arrival is prevented by changing the context of how one can arrive to seek asylum, and in articulating this change through narratives that circulate in public discourse, the figure of the forced migrant who attempts to arrive (and fails) is positioned as a life that not only is unwanted or unworthy of hospitality but as a life that made itself unliveable by attempting to 'arrive'.

In the case of the re-framing that occurred subsequent to the Tampa incident, new immigration measures were taken to the 2001 election held six weeks after the Tampa crisis. Immigrant—and more precisely, the figure of the forced immigrant—became the dominant election issue that saw a re-elected Howard government (Boulos et al. 2013). By capitalizing on attitudes to 'otherness', global fears of terrorism sparked by the 9/11 attacks, and the production of the figure of the abject asylum seeker, the incumbent government conducted a successful media campaign which characterized asylum seekers as 'illegal' 'boat people' who could be criminals or terrorists (Klocker and Dunn 2003). The *mechanism* for this is the production of a (journalistic) narrative of the Australian population as vulnerable to external threat. This politicization of a figure that, for decades, had not been part of public sphere immigration discourse, acted to relegate an ethics of hospitality to the margins, and produce a moral impetus to 'exclude' that marked from this point forward policy and Australian electoral politics.

The politicization of the issue and appearance of asylum seekers in the mediated polity as a group of people requiring recognition and response of some kind illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of the Australian political community to respond *ethically* to the 'other'. The narratability of asylum seekers' origin, intent or status as a 'fact' is restrained by an unknown context of pre-narrative actions. To be within narrative borders is to be a grievable subject as a citizen whose facts of liveability remain consistent and controllable within a robust interplay of action and narratability; to be outside narrative borders is to be part of a categorization that is apprehended entirely through discursive narratability. While there have been various challenges to the more simplistic frames in academic literature (Gelber 2003), the inability of journalism to overcome dependence on narratability continues to frame asylum

seekers as a categorical 'other' rather than as complete individuals, reduced to a categorical uncertainty *as a fact*, that on the outskirts of narrative borders could not be framed as completely grievable and therefore human.

This dynamic that began in the post-Tampa era leads to a number of challenges in apprehending the asylum seeker ethically. Firstly, questions of the role of visuals in producing 'fact' and 'facts' about reports, evidence and debates on asylum seeker arrivals that produces public sphere demands to take an ethical position. Secondly, the role of multiple discursive interpretations of 'responsibility' for being either a grievable or ungrievable subject. Finally, the question as to what kinds of ethical positions are possible in the most recent phase of asylum seeker debates in which government administration obtains the greatest 'control' over what constitutes asylum seeker 'facts' within the public sphere by preventing certain kinds of reportage on the topic. This is the silence that, for Butler (2004, 36), permits an unethical stance to solidify in the public sphere imagination, thus re-framing how the migrant life is to be understood as *not* a life. We will address these three historical challenges before assessing them through an approach built on the relationship between the political narrative and the communicative networking of information as the setting in which politicization and public ethical opinion are produced.

Visual facts and ethical demands

The over-reliance of narratability leads to a demand that the frame carries the extra weight of the unseen context. For example, with the arrival of the first 'boat people' in the 1970s, doubt was raised over how in 'need' these individuals really were given there were no visual indications of suffering and there were even reports of wealth amongst the arrivals (Neumann 2015, 473–474). Reporting and debate on asylum seeker arrivals from 2001 onwards has been marked by both the presence and absence of visual images in relation to the veracity of reports, such as in the Children Overboard affair in late 2001.

Current journalistic reporting has moved away from the critique of information on asylum seekers not accompanied by visual evidence, although debates around visibility return periodically into concerns around refuge and asylum. For example, when images circulated on social media of Syrian refugees using mobile phones, an apparent 'luxury' that displaced people should not be able to afford (O'Malley 2015), the politicization of the figure of the asylum seeker as one over which debates as to their worthiness and grievability re-emerge. Not all visibility of asylum seekers and refugees, however, produce a negative framing that relegates them to ungrievability. Rather, a re-framing as grievable and the production of an ethical obligation amongst the populace to provide hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers can emerge in salient visual instances of visceral suffering, as the recent images of a drowned Syrian boy demonstrated (Parkinson and George-Cosh 2015). Important here is that visibility provides a sense of 'fact' that places a demand on those who engage in public sphere to 'decide' on an ethical stance.

Radical demonization of asylum seekers emerged after the Tampa crisis (Fiske 2006), and asylum seekers were figured as ungrievable subjects because narratively framed as 'dishonest' subjects 'jumping the queue' or as 'economic migrants' motivated by opportunity instead of persecution (Coghlan, Minns, and Wells 2005, 127; Crowe 2014). However, unanticipated visual images accompanying journalistic reports, for example, convert the 'issue' of refugee and asylum seeker ethics from one in which there are 'multiple truths' to one that *solidifies* around a 'fact'—in this case, that suffering is great and that there is an obligation to provide refuge and hospitality. The disjuncture between visual image in reporting and discursive positioning is a topic that requires further, broader analysis to understand the cultural conditions of belonging and exclusion and the aporias by which intervention can be made.

Narrating grievability differentially

While visual images that circulate in public sphere debate and as accompaniment to political discourse that enters the public sphere through journalistic reporting, opinion and editorial have the capacity to re-frame the figure of the asylum seeker as either grievable or ungrievable by politicizing the issue in a

way which demands 'choice' of ethical position, other narrative functions compete with that visibility to produce other imaginings and re-framings over what kinds of grievability might be significant. For example, the narrative surrounding asylum seekers and the narratability of Australia's response remained alive within the political community. The oft-characterized 'race to the bottom' that saw the Rudd/Gillard labour government (successor to the Howard government from 2007), reinforce a securitization approach to the issue demonstrated two key characteristics in the framing of the narrative: Firstly, a re-enforcing of national narrative borders that could not engage with synchronic narrative events to relate the 'fact' of either asylum seekers or people smugglers outside those borders; secondly, a focus upon visceral government responses given the dominance of government narratability of asylum seeker 'facts' through the logic of factual reporting.

After Kevin Rudd's dismantling of Howard's pacific solution, for example, growing reports of boat arrivals were accompanied by journalistic reporting of the navy's growing criticism of Kevin Rudd's Operation Resolute, with reports of widespread traumatic stress disorders experienced by border control personnel due to witnessing first hand deaths at sea (Stewart and Taylor 2013; Wroe 2013). The focus of the narrative centred upon the visceral moment of contact between state and asylum seekers in which immediate assistance was necessary and therefore grievability was understood parochially as the danger of attempting to get to Australia by boat, *as a fact*. While this is clearly a central point in considering questions of responsibility and grievability in the lives of asylum seekers, it overshadowed and dominated the national narrative: the asylum seeker as a figure could not be grievable, but the responsibility for coming into the frame of public sphere politics was placed on them as figures of risk to themselves (for undertaking the journey) rather than risk to Australia (if permitted to stay). In that sense, now, a figure of grief but also one that remains ungrievable because they are positioned as being seen to have made the 'wrong choice'.

In response to this new mechanism for the demonization and framing of asylum seekers as ungrievable and unworthy of hospitality, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard produced a change in public sphere rhetoric that instead focused to demonize the figure of 'people smuggler' as opposed to 'asylum seeker'. This was achieved by characterizing people smugglers as 'evil', preying on desperate people and making a profit from human suffering (McKenzie and Hasmath 2013, 4). What this demonstrates is the way in which the political narrative can be re-negotiated. The overall diachronic sequencing of events in this instance allows for a coherency of what exactly was in debate, but it was the focus on contingent questions of cause and effect in the web of causal links that could be overturned and contested.

There are of course a number of counter-interpretations of the figure of 'people smuggler' that circulate in the public sphere, including those that acknowledge the harsh economic realities of Indonesian fishermen who participate in the movement of asylum seeker bodies (Richardson 2010; Missbach and McNevin 2014). However, the point here is not to decide on the 'correct' frame or the 'truthfulness' of agency and responsibility in this situation, but to demonstrate that despite the ambiguities within the synchronic sequences of narratives around asylum seekers and refugees, the deployment of 'factual' reports by the then government produce a frame in which the asylum seeker (but not the people smuggler) could be figured as grievable and therefore worthy of life. The narrative simplification of the figure of the people smuggler is, then, essential in disguising the ambiguity and complexity of both regional politics and socio-economic differences in the region. The grievability involved, then, supports the counter-argument to stop boat arrivals in order to 'save lives' rather than to 'take risks'. This is a means for the production of an inequality and a disavowal of ethical responsibility which, as Butler following Arendt has noted, involves a public embracing institutions that appear to support and sustain life but that do so only by cutting other lives dead (Butler 2015, 114–115). The asylum seeker is cut dead, here, for the precise reason of failing to follow institutional norms that anticipate a disposition of anti-risk (i.e. by not attempting a boat journey).

Obscuring debate on 'fact'

Despite the manoeuvring of the government to manipulate and control the narrative, the continual face of asylum seekers in the mediated public sphere and the pressure it has produced both in moral critique over deterrence strategies and the growing condemnation of the international community has motivated a policy stance of censorship through the current government's *Operation Sovereign Borders* that includes the shutting down and control of reporting on state involvement. The Liberal Party remodelled the narrative by describing it as a 'national emergency' that required a military-led response against both illegal arrivals and people smugglers. The policy measure involving the turning-back of boats in order to deny people smugglers 'a product to sell' (Dechent 2014) is one which builds on the previous government's focus on people smugglers rather than asylum seekers, reinforced by the fact that, the day new Prime Minister Tony Abbott was sworn into office, the department of Immigration and Citizenship became the department of Immigration and Border Protection, militarizing the action as a 'war' on people smugglers. The militarized rhetoric framed the censorship of the boat turn back policy as a matter of 'national security'.

Given the history of linking border policy causally with the number of boat arrivals, and in particular the negative press Kevin Rudd received for the influx of boats after he ended the Pacific solution, it can be argued that the present government utilizes this narrative approach to control the narrative in terms of debate over this causal link. The fact that six months into the new government, a press conference was given to confirm that they had managed to 'stop the boats' (Reilly 2014), indicates how the focus moves from active policy to the control of narrative in the public sphere. By demonstrating the effectiveness of their policy to the Australian public as 'fact' (a singular truth), key stakeholders were able to frame asylum seekers yet again as ungrievable and unworthy of hospitality. The narrative discourse turns attention away from discussion of asylum seekers in public sphere debate at all, relegating them to the non-visual, non-political setting of ungrievability.

Narrative and politicization towards ethics

We have discussed above the three challenges to public sphere narratability of asylum seeker issues, with a view to understanding how asylum seekers and refugees are positioned as either grievable or ungrievable subjects—and therefore worthy or unworthy of hospitality and refugee—in public sphere discourse. Key to each of the three challenges in the question of the distinction between 'truth' (which in a postmodern era is widely and publicly acknowledged as multiple, competing and polysemic) and 'fact' (which relies on visibility, evidence, or the shutting down of alternatives). Journalism has traditionally had a role different from other sites that enable the utterance to enter public sphere discourse, because it has been seen as a site for both the dissemination of fact and, conversely, as a setting where truth is understood to be framed. Discussions about forced migrants and asylum seekers presents an important example of the kinds of challenge that emerges in the public sphere by virtue of both obscured facts and the public knowledge of the problematic constitution of truth statements. We would like to end this paper by putting these truth/fact challenges into the framework of conceptual processes of narrative as a necessary first step towards developing understandings in which an ethics built on the primary grievability of *all* subjects can be achieved.

How we conceive of what is 'political' is inevitably tied up with our understanding of responsibility, and this latter concept for ethics manifests through narratives that allows us to apprehend the significance of an subject's action in its causality. In our context here, the subject's grievability in terms of responsibility towards that subject. As Whitebrook (2001) has noted, however, the question of *how* narration occurs remains particularly underdeveloped in narrative theory. In particular, what is the reach of 'narratability' through its interplaying as both being lived and told and what are these effects on conceptualizing the political?

The practice of journalism is thus a central mechanism in which narratability of a political community is articulated, through the politicization of common and contested causal links. Arguably, causal

narratability is given its 'factual' constitution through the mythical but practical formation of 'objectivity'; journalism's capacity to remain 'objective' has been a central point of debate throughout its history (Burrowes 2011) and it is instructive here to consider briefly the historical shifts in role. Nascent journalism was undertaken as an extension of government operations through reporting of future government action to the citizenry (Iedema 2009) and, simultaneously, through the production of partisan publications openly disseminating party views (Meyers 2010, 139). However, 17th Century English newspapers began referring to an ethical commitment to impartiality and relations of truth based upon fact (90), opening the new journalistic public sphere to the possibilities of multiple truths contributing to a broader narrative. The doctrine of objectivity reached a pinnacle in the early Twentieth Century in North America, in which a normative standard that followed the basic rule of keeping oneself 'out of the story' emerged (215). Journalism's history of debating objectivity cannot be attributed to a public focus on the philosophical question of finding truth; rather, *growing public awareness of journalism's centrality in constituting the political community and empowering it to act morally, stressed the importance of impartiality and accuracy for citizens to properly engage in the partisan political process.*

It is within this practical reason that an ethical framework focusing on 'accuracy' and 'fairness' emerged in Australia's journalism practices (Breit 2008). In mediating the political community within the public sphere, journalism carries out the full spectrum of narrative elements in its practices of reporting on asylum seeker issues, policies, stories of arrival, international trends and international policy. As an *act*, however, factual reporting becomes part of the network of pre-significations that both constitute and reinforce social conventions. In that context, journalism negotiates the contestation of synchronic narrative links while offering a larger diachronic 'flow-ability' through the factual reporting of temporal events within a perception of linear causality that gives the report its 'truth'; an alternative truth might be produced by an alternative narrative of causality, such as the reason an asylum seeker chose to take a boat rather than a plane. In that context, an ethical journalism on this issue requires a return to narrative *multiplicity*, to competing truths and to practices that convey those multiplicities to the readership that remains influential in electoral terms and thus in policy production. Such multiplicity permits the possibility of an ethical (welcome) as well as a political (expediency) frame, and the communication between the two. In Butler's terms, this is to make the asylum seeker or forced migrant apprehendable within public sphere discourse in a specific, ethical way: as a grievable subject, worthy of hospitality without detention.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has not been to advocate specific policy solutions for government, nor to critique the political stance of securitization. Fringe political perspectives aside, a two-sided debate founded in a dichotomous approach to 'attitudes' towards refugees and asylum seekers (Cover 2013) as *either* requiring welcome *or* demanding exclusion/detention is produced through mechanisms that justify the positions based on 'factuality' produced through narrative processes. Normative narratives that position asylum seekers as 'ungrievable' lives are challenged by the circulation of visuals and images entering the public sphere, by the possibility of potential and counter-narrative utterances, and by administrative limitations on reporting. The *fact* of public sphere narrative providing authority to a position in a networked, digital era obliges us to critique the role of political discourse and the range of mediated and discursive mechanisms that politicize a subject in ways which either produce or obscure an ethical responsiveness to refugees in an era of increasing forced human mobility. All sides of politics draw upon the narrative constructed through journalistic reporting in order to manoeuvre questions of truth and fact. Practices in political debate, journalistic reporting, opinion-writing, public utterances on forums and the sharing of stories need, therefore, to be re-figured in order to respond better to these inefficiencies. One option involves the re-constitution of a political grievability by stepping outside the ethical practicality of political usefulness to consider frames of narrative that *complexify* questions of responsibility and thereby humanize the 'other'. Otherwise, the pressure for an ethics of grievability and shared liveability will continue to be made difficult by ongoing and sustained narrativization that makes

subjects politicized and by the allegedly reasoned 'pragmatism' that is built upon the narratability of singular 'truths' about asylum seekers and refugees.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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