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Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People:

Tamil Refugee Migration in the Newsprint Media

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MYSTERY SHIPS AND RISKY BOAT PEOPLE: TAMIL REFUGEE MIGRATION IN THE NEWSPRINT MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

On October 17, 2009, seventy-six Tamil refugees arrived off the coast of Victoria, British Columbia. This study examines how the Canadian newsprint media portrayed this event and in which policy context this coverage occurred. We analyze articles published between October 2009 and January 2010 from the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *National Post*. A discourse analysis addresses issues of framing, representation, and identity to understand how the Tamil refugee migration was represented in media debate. Our results show that there was an overall negative representation of the Tamil refugees as the press emphasized issues of criminality and terrorism, and constructed the refugees as risk. The discussion established security—rather than human rights—as a focal point and portrayed the immigration system as both "failing" and "abused" by "bogus claimants." This security-oriented framework provided a discursive background for the refugee reform Bill C-11 to be ushered through parliament later that summer.

> *I can tell you now, there won't even be a quarter of them coming in . . .*
> *—Douglas Kellam, Citizenship and Immigration Canada*

INTRODUCTION

On October 17, 2009, seventy-six Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka were intercepted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) off the coast of British Columbia. Their migration stemmed from an eruption of violence between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elaam (the LTTE or Tamil Tigers). While the civil war had been ongoing for over two decades, the beginning of 2009 marked a particularly bloody time as the government pushed to end the conflict and defeat the LTTE. Human rights agencies and media watchdogs raised concerns over human rights violations, outraged over the displacement, internment, and death of tens of thousands of innocent civilians (Canadian Tamil Congress 2010; Amnesty International 2010; Human Rights Watch 2010). These concerns were also echoed by Canadians—of Tamil ethnicity and otherwise—who took to the streets of Toronto in protest between January and May that year. Thus, one might presume that Canadians were already informed about the Sri Lankan civil war due to its visibility in the media and street protests throughout the summer (Peter 2009). However, the seventy-six "boat migrants" received a cold welcome. The Canadian media was particularly critical, expressing concerns over the migrants' identity and the validity of their refugee claims; this in turn sparked debates in the media over citizenship, refugee policies, state sovereignty, and international relations.

This paper examines the manner in which Canadian newsprint media engaged with this particular event and questions both the framing and representation of the Tamil migrants. In particular, we investigate the dominant narratives and thematic frames used by the media to contextualize and identify the refugees, and ask both how the refugees were understood and why they were understood in this manner (Goffman 1974; Tuchman 1978). In this way,

we seek to understand how the group was racialized, securitized, and situated within a discourse of risk. We also explore the material context in which these discursive representations occurred and what material and political actions they may have enabled. Thus, our paper builds on recent international and Canadian research that examined media discourse to unveil practices of racialization, ethnic subordination, immigrant exclusion, and national identity formation (e.g., van Dijk 1987, 1991; Henry and Tator 1998; Greenberg 2000; Mahtani 2001; Tsoukala 2008; Bauder 2008a, forthcoming).

Our method consists of contents and critical discourse analyses of the coverage in the *Toronto Star*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *National Post* of the arrival of the boat with the Tamil refugees. In line with previous media studies on refugee issues, we found that Canadian newsprint relied heavily on terms of "illegality" to describe the Tamil refugees, which worked to legitimize their detention and established the necessary political environment in which the federal government could quickly usher in Bill C-11 during the summer of 2010. This controversial bill would overhaul Canada's refugee system and deal with the "bogus" refugee claimants who supposedly "abused" Canada's compassion and generosity. The seventy-six Tamil men, despite fleeing a well-documented violent civil war, became a focal point of Canada's flailing refugee system.

In the literature review below, we discuss the 1999 arrival of Fujian refugees to set the stage for the analysis of the current "boat crisis." We also review the concept of risk as our theoretical framework (Beck 1986). This is followed by a description of the methodology used and then an in-depth discussion of our findings. We conclude with a reflection on the relation between discourse and material context, a discussion of emerging events, and policy recommendations.

Literature Review

In recent Canadian history, refugees have reached Canadian shores via boat nearly once every decade. The arrival of "boat people" happens so rarely that by the time a new boat arrives, memories of the previous boat have all but faded from societal memory. The 2009 Tamils were preceded in 1999 by 599 refugees who fled from the Fujian province of China. Twelve years earlier, the eastern shores of Nova Scotia received 174 Sikh refugees. Just one year prior, in 1986, 152 Sri Lankan Tamils reached the same coastline. The numbers are relatively insignificant in comparison to Canada's overall acceptance of refugees per year; in 2008, for example, approximately 36,000 people made refugee claims within Canada or at a Canadian port-of-entry; about 45 percent of these claims received a positive decision (Maytree 2009). Yet, despite these numbers, media spectacle has routinely surrounded each boat and heated public debate has ignited, prompting government officials to critically review refugee policy. Before tackling recent media texts concerning the 2009 Tamil arrival, a review of media coverage of the 1999 case is valuable in exploring the ongoing narratives and reoccurring material contexts that have surrounded "boat people" in Canada in the past. This literature review also has a practical application for our study in assessing how previous discourse analyses on a similar topic were conducted.

The 1999 Fujian "Boat People"

In 1999, 599 migrants from the Fujian province of China arrived off the coast of Vancouver. They came in four separate boats between July 20 and September 9, and if the first arrival was met with skepticism, the last was constructed as a crisis. Debate over state sovereignty, citizenship, and failing immigration and refugee policies erupted in the media. The migrants' presence

appeared to have exposed Canada's growing trepidation with an increasing Chinese population in Vancouver and its suburbs and Canadian immigration policies in general. Similar to the 2009 arrival of Tamils, the 599 Chinese—although highly visible—represented only a small fraction of the overall refugee arrivals. Yet the media, rather than discussing the numbers in context, framed the story within a discourse of risk and the degrading sovereignty of the Canadian nation state (Hier and Greenberg 2002).

The media reporting of the events of 1999 attracted significant academic attention. Studies analyzing the English-language media coverage and public dialogue surrounding the arrival of the boats sampled a range of newspapers (e.g., *National Post, Globe and Mail, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Province, Victoria Times-Colonist, Toronto Star* and *Toronto Sun*) and typically covered the period from the arrival of the first boat on July 20 to mid-October, a month after the last boat had arrived. These studies approached the topic from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Joshua Greenberg and Sean Hier arguably led the field with their theoretically informed work on "soft" and "hard" news about the arrival of the boats (Greenberg 2000; Hier and Greenberg 2002). Minelle Mahtani and Alison Mountz's (2001) government-funded study refrained from degrading poor journalism but rather aimed at practical policy suggestions for municipalities and provincial governments in British Columbia. Their study is also unique in that it covers the time frame from 1995 to 1999 to reveal links between media coverage and policy. Beth Clarkson (2000), on the other hand, offers a reading from a journalism perspective and uncovers poor fact-checking, weak argumentation, and inaccurate reporting, paying particular attending to articles written by *Financial Post* columnist Diane Francis. Marian van der Zon (2000) approaches the topic from a critical race theory and feminist perspective to unveil how gender, age,

and sex influenced modes of representation. She found that "gender was completely lost . . . and the plight of individual women completely disappeared" from media discussion (Van der Zon 2000, 15), enabling a security frame to dominate the debate. With yet a different approach, Mountz (2004) added ethnographic research from government personnel and government documents to her reflection of content analysis. Despite this theoretical and methodological variety, the consensus among these studies is that the Canadian media was heavily biased in its reporting, racializing and criminalizing the migrants.

The studies revealed that the discourses of security and risk were the dominant modes of representation in the media. In all seven studies, these discourses became evident through what Greenberg (2000) calls "lexical selectivity." Terms such as "queue-jumper," "alien," "illegal," "human cargo," "boat people," and "detainees" depersonalized and objectified the migrants and left readers with a distorted understanding of who the migrants were and what the appropriate state response should be. Greenberg (2000, 523) explains: "The general ambiguity where the migrants' identity is concerned was a central feature of the coverage and, not surprisingly, has played and continues to play an integral role in the present state of refugee debates in Canada and elsewhere in the West."

Most notable is the repetitive use of the term "illegal," despite the migrants' legal rights to claim refugee status at the Canadian border (Chow-White 2007, 11). "Illegality" is intertwined with the migrants' mode of transportation, where "the fact that migrants arrived to Canada's shore by boat and not through 'legal channels' criminalized the migrants" immediately in the media's eye (Ibrahim 2005, 175). The media's visual and textual narratives conflated identity with mode of transportation and forged the hyperbolic term "boat people" so heavily used throughout 1999 (Mahtani and Mountz 2001). This discursive association of identity with transportation has had lasting re-

percussions. The "ontological identity" created through "racialized imagery" suggests that any future incoming boats are "ipso facto 'illegal' and Chinese/Asian" (Hier and Greenberg 2002, 500). Hier and Greenberg explain how this "new racism" functions in the everyday:

> The migrants, human beings, are subsumed under codified depersonalizing tropes and homogenized and objectified as "things" subject to packaging, transportation and disposal . . . [This] racialized imagery served to accommodate 'common-sense' ideological rationalizations of migrants as "illegals," infringing on the boundaries of the state and existing outside of the landscape of Canada's imagined community. (501)

The racialized discourse produced within a security frame served as a process of Othering, legitimizing interventionist actions by the state. This process has been observed by all studies we examined, albeit from different perspectives, including critical race theory and whiteness (Van der Zon 2000), new racism (Ibrahim 2004), standpoint feminism (Mountz 2004), and critical media theory (Hier and Greenberg 2002; Mahtani and Mountz 2001).

Additionally, researchers have noted other narratives which existed within this securitization paradigm. Firstly, an economic dimension worked to both delegitimize refugee claims and identify migrants as "economic migrants" seeking "upward socioeconomic mobility" (Greenberg 2000, 523). The state intervened by handcuffing and containing the migrants in isolated military barracks as they waited processing—a discourse that further degraded the migrants as "burdens on the welfare state." Secondly, disease became an important narrative within the security discourse. This narrative suggested that migrants would bring and spread infectious diseases, including HIV and tuberculosis (Ibrahim 2005). Nearly all researchers concluded that health concerns were either unfounded or profoundly exaggerated. Yet, these concerns worked to solidify a crisis in national security. Only Allan and Szafran (2005),

writing from a medical perspective, use terms such as "illegal" to describe the refugees and thus reproduce the bias of media and popular discourse in their academic work—although their study confirms that the majority of migrants were in good health, with only one case of tuberculosis diagnosed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ulrich Beck's influential book *Risk Society* (1992) postulates a change in society's relationship to technology, the environment, corporations, and government, and a shift from a society defined by class to a society defined by risk. Here, Beck states: "in the course of exponentially growing productive forces in the modernization process, hazards and potential threats have been unleashed to an extent previously unknown" (19). Related to these material changes are the cultural politics of risk: risk is potentially everywhere. It carries the weight of possibility, a dark glimmer of chance and the unknown. Of concern then is not so much the present condition but the conditions that can be *expected*. In the introduction to *The Risk Society and Beyond,* Barbara Adam and Joost van Loon (2000, 2) explain that there is

> a need to understand risk construction as a practice of manufacturing particular uncertainties that may have harmful consequences to life and that risks are manufactured, not only through the application of technologies, but also in the making of sense and by the technological sensibility of a potential harm, danger, or threat.

The role of discourse analysis, in this context, is not whether the risk exists in the statistical sense but rather how particular objects become construed as risky and how a "risk" becomes meaningful and shared within a society. Researchers must ask: What symbolic actions took place to construct a risk? What conditions allowed for formerly "safe" objects to become understood as a "risky" object to be feared, controlled, and managed? While traditional risk theory focuses on issues of technology and environment, other studies have

applied risk theory to media representation of issues of migration and the migrant body (e.g., Adeyanju and Neverson 2007; Hier and Greenberg 2002).

Adeyanju and Neverson (2007) adopted Beck's concept of risk to interpret the media coverage of a Congolese Canadian visitor who was suspected of carrying the Ebola virus. They argued that the case was used to create public panic by "cross-articulating immigration and racial identity with health risks" (Adeyanju and Neverson 2007, 79). Applying the "displacement model" of risk—which suggests that risks are so all-encompassing, so ever-present, that they come to inscribe additional meanings onto unrelated objects, events, or people—Adeyanju and Neverson view this case as an example of "risk society as a 'scapegoat society'" (2007, 80). The Congolese woman's body came to be of particular significance. Her outsider position as a non-citizen and African enabled the representation of her body as sickly, messy, and disordered, legitimizing fears of those outside the state as diseased, infectious, and risky. The migrant enraptured the media not simply because her body potentially posed a health risk, but because it metaphorically represented the public's growing anxiety over changing demographics and increasing racial and cultural diversity (Adeyanju and Neverson 2007, 80).

In their study of the Fujian "boat migrants," Hier and Greenberg (2002) make an interesting connection between health, crime, and national security. For example, a *Victoria Times Colonist* article from September 3, 1999, quotes Reform Party leader Preston Manning: "immigration law should ensure would-be refugees are properly screened, but if people [i.e., the Fujian migrants] can't get around all those provisions, then you expose yourselves to all those dangers . . . criminal elements and people with violent political habits and communicable diseases" (quoted in Hier and Greenberg 2002, 504). By linking

health threats with immigration and refugee policy, Manning evokes a sense of crisis that requires screening and regulating the migrants' movement.

The layering of threats is a common discursive practice in the risk framework. Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998, 7), for example, note five major sectors in the migrant-as-threat narrative: political, military, social, environmental, and economic. The total effect is a national crisis so well structured and encompassing that it leaves little room for oppositional views. Moreover, as migration is a global phenomenon, the securitization of migration is not merely a national problem but has become a *global* risk (Ibrahim 2004). Adeyunju and Neverson (2005, 83) offer numerous examples of modern human-made global risks, some of the most relevant being, "the threat of ecological catastrophe, the collapse of global economic systems, and the rapid spread of new viruses across the world via travel." Anti-immigrant discourses have attached these risks to the migrant body. As global risks become personified in the immigrant, the state attempts to manage this risk by increased security and management of human movement. The age of "the securitization of migration" (Ibrahim 2004) has spawned unique technologies for the purpose of regulating human movement, including interdiction, visa requirements, fences and walls, armed border patrols, and the seizure of boats at sea. Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde (1998, 7) explain:

> identifying something as a threat justifies implementing extraordinary measures to alleviate the threat. Consequently, identifying asylum seekers as a threat to some sector or element of the state calls for the implementation of measures to prevent the actualization of that threat.

In a Canadian context, danger and fear have been the dominant aspect of the debate leading up to immigration policy reform (Bauder 2008b).

Approaching migration from a risk perspective exposes practices of problematizing and reframing public debate, state intervention, and legal reforms not as "normal" responses, but rather, as acts of risk management. Media debate is deeply implicated in these practices. Discourse analysis as methodology and risk theory as theoretical framework are thus complementary in gaining insights into the production of knowledge and risk in a migration context (Adam and Van Loon 2000, 4).

METHODOLOGY

Our study follows the tradition of critical discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough 1992; Wodak 2001; Wodak and Myer 2001; Wodak and Menz 1990; Van Dijk 1987, 1991, 1997), which has been concerned with questions such as: "'How do (more) powerful groups control public discourse?' and 'How does such discourse control the mind and action of (less) powerful groups, and what are the social consequences of such control, such as social inequality?'" (Van Dijk 2001, 355, cited in Baker and McEnery 2005, 198). In this manner, discourse analysis examines language use to address questions of power, knowledge, social structure, and inequality (Baker and McEnery 2005).

There is no single method for discourse analysis (Cheek 2004; Fairclough 1992). For example, one approach, developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), focuses on deconstructing metaphorical concepts which have become normalized in everyday discourse (e.g., Hardy 2003; Santa Ana 1999). Another approach considers modes of production and reception of texts, linking metaphor with agency, nominalization, and pronoun use (Fairclough 2003). Yet other approaches have used large bodies of texts to determine repetitive patterns of language and decipher the latent meanings in a larger social context (Van Dijk 1988; Baker and McEnery 2005).

What connects these various approaches in the context of critical discourse analysis is attention to material context (e.g., Wodak 2001; Wodak and Menz 1990). Socio-historical information and geographical and economic contexts in which events occur are vital in understanding the conditions which make media stories possible and which influence how these stories are framed, interpreted, and managed. In turn, the use of language has material consequences. "[M]ost of humans' conceptual system is actually metaphorical in nature—that is, language, thought, and action are all inextricably linked" (Hardy 2003, 19). In addition to shaping action subliminally, language can also be deployed deliberately and strategically to achieve a certain aim, such as influencing policies (Fairclough 2000).

We chose to examine the case of the arrival of the seventy-six Tamil refugees for several reasons. First, it is a fairly recent event and thus of relevance to understanding contemporary politics. Second, the event mirrored earlier occurrences, in particular the 1999 arrival of refugees, which has received considerable scholarly attention using similar methods. Third, the coverage of the event by the media was followed by legislative reform, thus situating media discourse in a material context and a particular political action.

Our sample focuses on articles concerned with the seventy-six Tamil migrants. We did not include articles reporting on the Sri Lankan civil war, Tamil refugees in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan federal elections, or the Sri Lankan civil war protests (which were examined elsewhere; see Peter 2009), although many of our sampled articles referenced these events. Adopting Kamala Kempadoo's (2005, 6) argument for identifying the "transnational subaltern subject," we focus on migrant representation and the discussions surrounding their identity, movement, and regulation.

Articles were gathered from three Canadian daily newspapers chosen not only for their large circulation but also for their location, audience, and idiomatic positions. The *National Post* is a national paper with one of the largest circulations in Canada, catering to a right-wing "highbrow" readership and corporate elite. The left-leaning *Toronto Star* has the largest circulation in Canada and sells to an economically and socially diverse readership. Toronto is one of the largest recipients of immigrants, with a substantial and active Tamil community. The *Vancouver Sun* has the largest circulation in British Columbia and is viewed as a family or middlebrow paper. It may offer a more localized perspective as both the journalists and the readership are situated near the event geographically. These papers provide a combination of perspectives.

Only "hard" news articles were considered. Opinion pieces, such as letters to the editor and guest columnists, were excluded. This decision was justified based upon the work of Hier and Greenberg (2002, 495), who exclude opinion pieces "on the basis that they are not bound by the conventional journalistic standards of objectivity, fairness and balance." Hard news, conversely, "has been subjected to the normal journalistic routines of sourcing objective data, interviewing non-partisan sources and testing for bias and validity."

The search engine Lexis/Nexis was used to identify articles in the *Toronto Star*. The key word "Tamil" was used to retrieve articles between October 17, 2009 and January 31, 2010. This period extends from the migrants' arrival to when the story faded from media interest. The *Toronto Star* search collected a total of forty-seven articles. To ensure articles were not overlooked, a secondary search was conducted using the key word "migrant" within sixty words of the key word "boat." This procedure identified ten articles, including a few articles the initial search had missed. The final *Toronto Star* sample, after excluding "soft" articles and those not pertaining to the seventy-six Tamil

migrants, consisted of six articles. A similar method was used to identify articles in the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun* but using the search engine ProQuest rather than Lexis/Nexis. The *National Post* search resulted in twenty-nine articles, which was further reduced to twelve articles after an initial reading. A search for articles produced by the *Vancouver Sun* resulted in twenty-three articles and was reduced to fourteen articles. The total sample for all three newspapers was thirty-two articles with an average word count of 509. The shortest article consisted of 75 words and the longest of 1167.

The relatively small sample size permitted an in-depth, rigorous, and detailed examination of the texts. The first component of this analysis examined headlines, which are the most prominent element of news discourse, functioning as "retrieval cues" and establishing the framework in which readers come to understand or interpret articles (Van Dijk 1988). For example, a headline can frame a situation differently by using the terms "illegal," "migrant," "refugee," or "victim." In the second component, the bodies of the articles were analyzed. For example, we examined when the Tamil's voices were heard, if they were able to speak for themselves, or if they were spoken on behalf of. In addition, we explore how the event was positioned and framed. Articles were printed and manually coded by hand, highlighting themes of refugee identity terms, terrorism and Tamil Tigers, ship/travel, and government responses and actions. The compiled data was then entered and organized into excel spreadsheets according to coded themes and publishing date.

RESULTS

Media reporting on the Tamil migrants echoed the debate of the 1999 Fujian boat arrivals. While gender was less a factor in the Tamil event—as all were men—themes of illegality, security, economics, and a notable obsession with the migrants' boat were all major topics for debate.

Headlines

The initial headlines of the arrival of the Tamil migrants have been important in presenting a discursive point of departure to interpret the event. Initial headlines in all three newspapers met the arrival of the Tamils with some skepticism, as little was known about the ship or its passengers. The first reports of the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun* on October 19, 2009, printed similar headlines expressing concerns of "human smuggling":

> Human smuggling suspected: 76 men aboard ship seized off Vancouver Island (Petrescu 2009).

> Mystery ship suspected of human smuggling: Officials question 76 passengers as rights, Tamil groups call for compassion" (Tebrake 2009)

These headlines presented the event as a matter of security rather than discussing migrant welfare and contextualizing human smuggling as a human rights issue. Particular words worked to frame both the event and the people involved within this discourse of security and crime. For example, using language indicative of actions which take place between criminals and police, the Tamils are "seized" and "found" within a "mysterious" environment. The Tamils are placed in a passive position in comparison to the authorities who actively capture and "question" their suspects. This framing echoes Van Dijk's

(1988) analysis of Tamils in Dutch media, where he noted that headlines typically depict Tamils in passive roles and rarely as active agents.

In the same vein, our study revealed that seventeen headlines out of the total thirty-two articles from the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun* focused primarily on the Tamils. Within these seventeen headlines, eight focused negatively on the Tamils' possible connections to crime and/or terrorism. For example:

> Sri Lankan migrant wanted for smuggling: Accused of working for Tamil Tigers (Bell 2009c)

> A not so secret identity: Tamil boat man seeking asylum in Australia was Toronto gangster (Bell 2009f)

> Migrants' ship may be linked to people-smuggler held in Australia: Man under arrest has previous convictions (Sinoski 2009a)

These headlines focused heavily on the actions of the state and the authorities. The few headlines which focused on the Tamil migrants themselves did so mostly in a negative way. Only one headline published in the *Vancouver Sun* offered a positive tone of compassion and sympathy—albeit in a secondary headline, allowing the negative component to take the lead (e.g., as cited above, Tebrake 2009).

Placing the state's authority and its responses and interactions with the Tamil refugees at the heart of public discourse moved the discussion away from a refugee or human rights perspective to one focused on the state and security management. This placement can influence public dialogue, knowledge, and debate: when migrants are discursively silenced through patterns of passive positioning, it is the state which becomes the story. This has the double-barreled effect of losing the "small voices of history" (Kempadoo 2005,

6) while defining the Tamil refugee identity as one wrapped within—and inherently tied to—the government security response system. Intertwining Tamil refugee identities with matters of security inscribes the notion that this particular population is one that is both risky and problematic.

The *Toronto Star* began its coverage of the Tamils' arrival with the most negative tone of the three newspapers and included descriptive imagery of the men:

> 76 illegal migrants found on ship seized off B.C.: Barefoot, bare-chested individuals on board say destination was Canada (Fong 2009a; italics added)

The headline identified the Tamils as "illegal" even before full details of the men's identity and personal stories were heard or known. It is the only headline to describe the men as "barefoot" and "bare-chested," projecting long-discredited Orientalist images (Said 1979).

By the subsequent week, the *National Post* moved from a somewhat neutral position to an increasingly negative tone. By now, the headlines framed the refugees within a discourse of crime:

> Canada tipped off to migrant ship: "Foreign intelligence" tracked migrants (Bell and Hutchinson 2009)

> Passenger wanted in Sri Lanka (Bell 2009a)

> Illegal migrants paid US$45,000 each: Report; One of four ships (Dawson 2009)

These headlines warn of "illegal migrants" and wanted criminals—migrants risky enough to be tracked and monitored by cooperative efforts of international intelligence agencies. Indeed, Bell's article (2009a) identifies one refugee with an Interpol notice issued by the Sri Lankan government. The notice was based on

the Sri Lankan authorities' allegations that the man had possible connections to the Tamil Tigers and supported them through an electronic smuggling ring. The allegations against this person facilitated the descriptions of all the refugees on board as criminals based on the logic that if there is one criminal, there are likely others. The press continued this practice despite warnings from the Canadian Tamil Congress of a long history of false accusations against ethnic Tamils, which was also acknowledged by the press (e.g., Bell 2009b and Hanson 2009a).

The headline of the second *National Post* article by Dawson (2009) highlights two arguments commonly used against refugees. Firstly, a numbers game as a "rhetorical device to suggest precision and objectivity, and hence credibility" (Van Dijk 2000, 46): the supposed ticket price of US$45,000 carries the latent suggestion that the refugee claim is bogus. The idea that refugees could pay such a hefty sum goes against the common stereotype of refugees, what they look like, and what they can afford. Headlines proclaiming a US$45,000 payment latently imply that the Tamils are migrants in an economic capacity, merely seeking the benefits of the Canadian economy and taxpayer. In a denotative reading of the text, the headline establishes an "illegal" identity for the Tamil refugees. That the large sum of money is paid by "illegals" operates as proof of the migrants' criminality. The second argument presented in this headline refers to the pending arrival of three more ships, which represents a well-known rhetorical device fostering public anxiety over the idea that the nation could be "flooded" by "waves" of poor refugees (e.g., Baker and McEnery 2005; Hardy 2003; Hart 2006; Santa Ana 1999, 2002). The body of the associated article reveals that this headline is misleading: the three ships reached Australia's shores and none were en route to Canada as the headline implies.

The *Vancouver Sun*—which opened with a tone of compassion—also adopted a more critical perspective in the week after the Tamils' arrival:

Migrants' ship may be linked to people-smuggler held in Australia: Man under arrest has previous convictions (Sinoski 2009a)

Australia may have played role in seizure of ship (Manthorpe 2009)

Rather than shifting towards the plight of the refugees, the headlines now focus on the ship's possible criminal connections. The Tamils are invisible within these headlines, and it is the shipping container, rather, which became the focal point of debate. Thus, the context moved away from understanding the Tamils in relation to the civil war in Sri Lanka to understanding "human smuggling" in relation to organized crime on an international stage. Sri Lanka's civil war and the root causes of the refugee exodus were muted in these headlines.

Conversely, the headlines in the *Toronto Star* used a variety of terms to identify the migrants during the week following the Tamils' arrival:

Migrants said to be Tamils: 76 men on merchant ship seized off coast of B.C. are asylum-seekers, Canadian Tamil group says (Fong 2009b)

Agency keeps tight rein on illegal boat migrants: Lawyer refused access to group of detainees (Fong 2009c; italics added)

Boat migrants' plight rekindles memories: 76 Tamils might flee if released, hearing told (Fong 2009d)

The first headline listed above uses neutral terms such as "migrant," "Tamils," and "men" and is the first article to identify the Tamils as "asylum-seekers." The second headline, however, uses negative descriptions such as "illegal boat migrants" and "detainees," terms operating within a crime discourse. As in the media reporting of the 1999 Chinese "boat people," this type of "lexical

selectivity" dehumanizes the migrants and distorts public perception of who the refugees are and what the appropriate government response should be (Greenberg and Hier 2002).

Who gets heard?

After the initial examination of headlines, we conducted an analysis of the bodies of the articles. The first point of interest was whose voices are represented in the dominant narratives (Kempadoo 2005). In the analysis, it became clear that certain subjects are privileged. In the *National Post,* for example, the dominant source consulted was governmental agencies, departments, and/or officials. These authorities were typically the first source quoted or paraphrased, and their opinions occupied the most space within the text. This preference in reporting reproduced the security-driven state perspective. Two examples illustrate this effect:

The *National Post*'s first article, published on October 19 (Petrescu 2009) under the headline "Human smuggling suspected," sourced the following people in this order: Rob Johnston, Director of Enforcement with the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA); Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan; and David Poopalapillai, national spokesman for the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC). The article is fairly short with 390 words and twelve paragraphs. Readers are first introduced to the refugees via a brief description provided by the reporter: "Two busloads of young migrant men—thought to be from Sri Lanka and possibly including boys—waved their bound hands as they left the Vancouver Island Correctional Centre" (Petrescu 2009). From this criminalized image of young Tamil men, the article flows into a statement given by the CBSA's director of enforcement, who speaks outside the jail's gate. Paragraphs 3–5 mention Johnston in regard to the "examination process" which "the irregular

migrants" would be undergoing. The article then describes the young men as those "whose hands were bound in plastic straps" as they were transferred from "buses with tinted windows" to ferries taking them to processing on the mainland. Paragraphs 7 and 8 quoted the Public Safety Minister, who is concerned with the "non-conventional fashion" in which the migrants arrived, followed by a brief description of how the RCMP seized and escorted the migrants' "rusty freighter" into Victoria. Advocates for the Tamil refugees were not heard until the end of the article, with Poopalapillai of the CTC sourced in paragraphs 10–12. The first two of these paragraphs focus on Poopalapillai's belief that the migrants are indeed young Tamil males, who "are the most targeted group" in Sri Lanka, persecuted, jailed, and abducted simply for being Tamil youth.   His call for the government to respect due process and humanitarian concerns was briefly paraphrased in the very last sentence.

Similar sequencing of sources reoccurred in other articles. Such sequencing develops meaning through a "hierarchy of credibility" (Becker 1967). An "inverted pyramid style" of sources deemed most newsworthy lead, followed by less newsworthy sources in descending order of significance (Allan 2004). This hierarchy or pyramid buries oppositional views at the bottom of the narrative and influences the audience's overall reading of the event. Furthermore, it allows the primary sources to define the situation, determine which terminologies are applicable, and establish the overall tone of the discussion. If the hierarchy of sources is inverted, the narrative changes correspondingly.

Our second example is the exception, an article that defies the normative order established in the previous example. The first report by the *Vancouver Sun* was titled "Mystery ship suspected of human smuggling: Officials question 76 passengers as rights, Tamil group calls for compassion" and published on October 19, 2009, on the inside spread of page A3. The entire article consisted

of 706 words. Of all the articles we examined, it was the most positive in tone. In the following order, it quoted or paraphrased "Canadian advocacy groups": Todd Ross, Director of Canadian Human Rights Voice; Rob Johnston of the CBSA; Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan; David Poopalapillai of the CTC; and Todd Ross again. The two voices and opinions of Ross and Poopalapillai occupy paragraphs 1–2 and 12–23, a total of 14 out of 23 paragraphs. They not only set the tone for the article but their perspectives dominate the narrative. Statements from the government officials were referenced in paragraphs 7, 9, 10, and 11 and integrated into this narrative, following the terminology set forth by advocates. Readers were introduced to the migrants via the following sentence: "Canadian advocacy groups are asking the government for compassion after a boat carrying 76 people was intercepted off the coast of Vancouver Island in what officials suspect is a case of human smuggling" (Tebrake 2009). The article used neutral terminology such as "76 people," "passengers," and "people from Sri Lanka" (when referencing government sources), and positive terminology such as "newcomers" and "asylum-seekers" (when referencing advocacy groups). Within the article, the word "compassion" occurred four times, "hope" five times. Furthermore, the event was contextualized with statements concerning the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), which grants "refugee protection to people displaced, persecuted, or in danger," the history of Tamil migration to Canada since 1983, the current refugee crisis in Sri Lanka where 280,000 people were internally displaced in refugee camps, and Canada's acceptance of Tamil "boat people" in the 1980s.

The positive tone and terminology of this article was unique in our sample. Only two days later, on October 21, reporting in the *Vancouver Sun* relied entirely on government resources, including Immigration Minister Jason Kenney; Martin Collacott, former ambassador to Sri Lanka; Opposition Liberal and New

Democrat MPs; Olivia Chow, NDP immigration critic; and Liberal immigration critic MP Maurizio Bevilacqua (Greenaway 2009). Following the "hierarchy of credibility," Minister Kenney was presented as the most newsworthy source and quoted or paraphrased expressing great skepticism and displeasure over the Tamils' arrival:

> Immigration Minister Jason Kenney has signaled there should be no rush to unconditionally embrace as refugees the 76 men, believed to be from Sri Lanka, who arrived on the rusting boat . . . (paragraph 1)
>
> "We obviously don't want to encourage people to get into rickety boats, pay thousands of dollars, cross the oceans and come to Canada illegally." (paragraph 3)
>
> "Without prejudice to this particular group of people, all I can say is that as a country we need to make sure we are not creating a kind of perverse incentive for people to try to come to the country through these really dangerous circumstances." (paragraph 4)
>
> Kenney, who has long complained bogus refugee claimants are abusing Canada's system, says he plans to bring in legislation to overhaul the system before Christmas. (paragraph 7)
>
> He used the latest group of potential refugees to restate his unhappiness with the existing system. (paragraph 8)
>
> "We want to ensure that we don't end up with a two-tier immigration system, one tier for legal law-abiding immigrants who wait patiently to come to Canada the legal way, and another that [encourages] false refugee claimants to come through the back door," he said. (paragraph 9)

These quotes are taken from Minister Kenney's first statement about the Tamil's arrival. This statement played a significant role in changing the *Vancouver Sun*'s initial position. It worked to discredit the language of "compassion" set forth by advocates only two days prior and urges readers to

be more skeptical in accepting "this particular group of people." In addition, Kenney is the first source to use the word "illegal" to define the migrants.

Authorship likely played a role in the tone of article and the sequencing of sources. The initial article in the *Vancouver Sun* was written by Rebecca Tebrake. This atypical piece, with its positive tone and terminology, was Tebrake's only article covering this event. Conversely, Stewart Bell published a total of ten articles between the *Vancouver Sun* and *National Post* respectively. Bell's articles were consistently focused on the role of the government and were critical of the Tamils' refugee claims, shifting the entire debate towards narratives of crime, terrorism, and human smuggling.

The Spectacle of the "Mystery Ship"

An important theme within the press was the spectacle which surrounded the Tamils' boat. Similar to the 1999 arrival of Fujian migrants, the boat comes to symbolically embody illegality and crime, a meaning transposed upon the passengers it carried (Ibrahim 2004, 175). In our sample, some articles focused entirely on the possible names, origins, ownership, and cargo of the ship. Press coverage implied that figuring out the "identity" of the boat would reveal whether the Tamil passengers were "genuine" refugees or "bogus" claimants and escaping terrorists. Suspicions surrounding the boat increased once it was established that the name "Ocean Lady" painted across the flank of the ship covered up an older name. The press interpreted this as an attempt by the crew to hide the ship's transportation history and true origins. Journalists who tried to contact the ship's operator—Sunship Maritime Services in Cebu—reached a dead end, as phone calls and emails went unanswered. The "intensive investigation into the vessel" led to reports that the ship was owned by a "ghost company" and was "identified as the Cambodian-flagged Princess Easwary" (Bell 2009d).

Furthermore, journalists consulted "experts" for their knowledgeable opinion. A popular source was Rohan Gunaratna, described as a Singapore-based terrorism expert, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, witness to the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) hearings, and author of several books on the Tamil Tigers (Bell 2009b). Gunaratna was quoted in several articles by the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun* (Bell 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009e). In one example, he suggested that the Tamils' ship "appeared to have been a rebel vessel." This quote was followed by a fact which seemed to connect the ship to the Tamil Tigers: "During the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil Tigers owned a fleet of ships that they used for smuggling weapons and supplies" (Bell 2009b). The logic of the argument is that if the ship is a rebel vessel owned by the Tamil Tigers, then there are Tamil Tiger terrorists on board the ship. Ipso facto, the would-be asylum-seekers are terrorists.

Multiple assertions made by Gunaratna directly or indirectly criminalize the refugees: the ship was previously owned by terrorists; it has a history of criminal activity; Canada is an ideal location for the Tamil Tigers to "reconstitute"; Tamils are not in danger if returned to Sri Lanka (he considers this idea "laughable"); and the ship's captain is "a well- known Tamil Tiger" involved in smuggling arms, ammunition, and explosives from North Korea to Sri Lanka. Headlines such as "Officials allege Ocean Lady was used to smuggle explosives" (Bell 2009e) and "Tamils' ship alleged to have traces of explosives: Suspected gunboat" (Bell 2009d) illustrate the impact of these assertions on media reporting. Yet the news media failed to account for issues surrounding Gunaratna credibility. Investigating Gunaratna publications, Peter Cronau (2003) warns the media that Gunaratna is "rarely critical of intelligence services, unless it is of the West's" (205) and makes "extravagant claims . . . without offering any evidence" (206). In response to Gunaratna's references

in *Indonesia's Terrorist Network: How Jemaah Islamiyah Works* (Jones 2002), Cronau (2003, 205) reveals "a remarkably narrow selection of sources, a profound lack of knowledge, and a flawed understanding, of the [country's armed forces] history." Similarly, IRB member Otto Nupponen was reluctant to accept Gunaratna's accusations. Reflecting on Gunaratna's role as an advisor to the Sri Lankan president between 1984 and 1994 (Riegler 2009, 7), Nupponen states that "when the good doctor [i.e., Gunaratna] says that the Princess Easwary is an LTTE ship without revealing any sources, one needs to put some thought into that. Who, in fact, are those sources? How credible and trustworthy are those unknown secret sources?" (Armstrong 2009).

Despite Gunaratna's questionable credibility, the press used him as a source to construct a circular argument conflating the identities of the refugees, the boat, and terrorism. For example, the *National Post*'s article "Passenger Wanted in Sri Lanka" (Bell 2009a) breaks down basic fundamental facts as follows: one passenger is wanted for terrorism and involvement with the Tamil Tigers; all passengers arrived by a mysterious migrant ship; the Tamil Tigers are a recognized violent terrorist organization; the ship might be a rebel vessel; and rebel vessels were owned by the Tamil Tigers. Alykhan Velshi, the Federal Minister's Director of Communications and Parliamentary Affairs, reproduces this line of argument in the following statement:

> We won't allow Canada to become a place of refuge for terrorists, thugs, snakeheads and other violent foreign criminals. Nor will we support those who want to create a two-tier immigration system: one tier for law-abiding immigrants who wait patiently in the queue, and a second, for-profit tier for criminals and terrorists who pay human smugglers to help them jump the queue. (Bell 2009a)

Political and media discourses on the arrival of the boat and its passengers have become intricately connected and tell a similar story.

Evolving Narratives

A number of statements were made during the first month of reporting which, by the time the migrants were released, were eventually proven false. For example, accusations against the Tamils' lack of or false identification in the Vancouver Sun reveal how a story changes and evolves overtime. When the Tamil refugees first arrived, the paper reported that the majority of them arrived without any identity documents or had illegally forged them: "passengers . . . arrived with either fraudulent documentation or none at all" (Bell 2009b). As the event unfolded, this statement began to change, and reporters eventually acknowledged that indeed, some migrants had valid documentation:

> Several of the men arrived with no authentic documents to prove who they are . . . [migrants] without a passport or other form of ID were [detained]. Those with valid passports will have their cases heard later this week. (Hansen 2009b)

By the end of the sample period, the situation was explained differently: "Of the 76 men on board, many came with passports, but others were unable to prove who they are" (Hansen 2010). While the first reports depicted the Tamils as migrants without proper identity documents, four months later, the press reported that the majority of migrants did come with valid passports.

Another example regards the amount of money paid by the migrants to board the ship. Shortly after the Tamil refugees arrived, headlines proclaimed

that they had paid up to US$45,000, suggesting—as we explained above—that the migrants were not legitimate refugees (Dawson 2009). Articles printed after October 20 indicate that this figure was inaccurate:

> [Vancouver lawyer Lee Rakin] said reports [migrants] had paid up to $45,000 to come to Canada were incorrect . . . some had indicated they paid 45,000 Sri Lankan rupees, or about $400 CDN. Others mentioned paying in Malaysian currency. (Bell 2009c)

The correction of this inaccuracy never reached headlines. Instead, it was buried twenty-one paragraphs down within the article. Furthermore, Minister Kenney continued to reference the initial figure to hype security concerns and the criminal connections to human smuggling: "'We obviously don't want to encourage people to get into rickety boats, pay thousands of dollars, cross the oceans and come to Canada illegally,' Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said" (Hansen 2009a).

Confirming our earlier assessment, the initial reports published by the press are vital in shaping media and political narratives relating to the event and the people involved. Inaccurate statements or poor fact-checking can have lasting repercussions; mistakes remain embedded in narratives that slowly change as more information becomes available. In this case, government officials have continued to err and use false reports enabling them to push their political agendas.

Material Connections

By the end of the sampling period, nearly all the migrants had been released from detention. Seeking to prevent the releases, government lawyers unsuccessfully tried to invoke the rarely used Section 86 of the Immigration Act, which would have permitted government lawyers and IRB tribunal members to hold

secret hearings in absence of the last twenty-five refugees in detention. However, the request for Section 86 was denied, and all refugees were finally released. The story dissipated from the news soon after the new year began. Politically, however, the debate continued well into the summer of 2010. It is here, in the field of politics, that interesting discursive-material connections unfolded.

When Immigration Minister Kenney used the Tamils' arrival as an example of "a failing immigration system," it was evident that he desired a major overhaul of this system (Sinoski 2009b). Indeed, Kenney seemed to make an example of the Tamil migrants: these bogus, false, and criminal would-be refugees should be the last to enter Canada so easily. Bill C-11 would amend the refugee system and protect Canada from similar events in the future.

The first draft of the bill was strongly opposed by refugee advocate groups such as the Canadian Council for Refugees, Amnesty International Canada, and the Refugee Lawyers' Association of Ontario. In a joint public statement, advocates voiced major concerns with the "ill-considered haste" of the proposed refugee review process, which would deny refugees the necessary time to find an appropriate lawyer, gather enough evidence, and share experiences of violence, torture, or sexual discrimination. The advocates also criticized the denial of equitable access to the refugee decision process based on their nationality and the Safe Country of Origin Clause. Advocates further feared a politicization of the refugee system, designating diplomatic allies and formal democracies as Safe while overlooking the human rights violations that had been documented in places such as Mexico, Colombia, and Israel. Moreover, the amendment would deny failed claimants the right to seek acceptance on humanitarian grounds or to apply for a pre-removal risk assessment, which takes into account deteriorating conditions in a country to which it would no longer be safe for the claimant to return. The joint

statement further suggested that Bill C-11 violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and international treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Canadian Council for Refugees et al. 2010).

Although—with a backlog of a sixty thousand claimants awaiting decisions—reform of Canada's refugee system had some merit (Maytree 2009), the Conservative government was able to table controversial legislation without extensive consultation of refugee advocates and stakeholders. After considerable advocacy and mobilization efforts, refugee rights groups were able to have their concerns heard, and parliament made some alterations. However, the major clauses remained in the legislation. The spectacle which surrounded the Tamil boat arrival had created the necessary discursive environment and sense of urgency to push Bill-C11 through parliament relatively quickly. This spectacle fostered a sense of anxiety around a multitude of issues like crime, terrorism, and national security, in connection to the refugee system that was supposedly failing. As in previous cases, a small group of "boat people" became a symbolic catalyst for political action and legislative reform.

CONCLUSION

In 1986 and 1987, Canada was shocked at the arrival of boats carrying Tamil and Sikh refugees, respectively. A year later, in 1988, government began working on new legislation to overhaul the system. On New Year's Day of 1989, Bill C-55 officially amended the Immigration Act, creating the "quasi" independent Immigration and Refugee Board, with the intention to reduce "bogus" refugee claimants. The next major amendments occurred on June 28, 2002, with the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which was implemented after the 1999 arrival of boats carrying Fujian migrants. Our study

has examined the third case in a sequence of discursive constructions of risk emanating from "boat people" and subsequent policy responses.

A pattern has indeed emerged regarding Canada's reluctant acceptance of "boat people." Their unexpected arrival sends waves of anxiety through public discourse and the state's response is immediately one of risk management: the boat is seized, refugees are detained, terrorism experts are consulted, policies are scrutinized, and new legislation is drafted. These actions aim not only to contain the immediate risk but also to minimize future risks. Yet throughout the process, the voices of the migrants are silenced; if the public learns about the migrants at all, it is only through advocacy groups speaking on their behalf. With remarkable consistency between the 1999 and 2009 boat arrivals, the media contributes "to a reified image of the migrants as exhausted, weakened, unkempt criminals" (Hier and Greenberg 2002, 493). Ironically, the people most in need of humanitarian compassion and protection are dehumanized and framed as a risk to be managed.

The 2009 arrival of Tamil migrants was not the end of this sequence. Shortly after we completed our empirical investigation, a second boat arrived off the coast of Victoria on August 13, 2010. This boat carried approximately five hundred Tamil refugees, this time with a number of women on board. Although this is a new event, with new people and new circumstances, a discourse has unfolded along old lines. Stewart Bell (2010) again voiced immediate concerns about fleeing terrorists, economic migrants, abuses of Canada's generosity, and "highly infectious diseases such as tuberculosis" in the *National Post*. The state remains central to the storyline, including its first actions towards risk management: the Victoria General Hospital will "absorb" sick passengers and "deploy its pandemic and disaster protocols"; the state will protect the hospital with armed security services from border services of-

ficials; and refugee policies will again reviewed (Carlson and Spencer 2010). As Public Safety Minister Vic Toews explains in the *National Post*: "abuses of Canada's immigration system cannot and will not be tolerated. As we deal with this current situation under Canadian law, Canadian officials will look at all available options to strengthen our laws in order to address this unacceptable abuse of international law and Canadian generosity" (Bell 2010). By September 2010, federal law makers were tinkering with the idea to create a new "mass arrival" refugee class (Smith 2010). Little seems to have changed in this discourse—only that the material fallout of the prior event in the form of legislative reform now enables authorities to keep most migrants in detention, including two pregnant women (*Toronto Star* 2010). Moreover, in search of new ways to manage the risks associated with the arrival of refugees by boat, Minister Kenney has recently traveled to Australia and dispatched the former director of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other countries in order to coordinate policing efforts internationally (*Globe and Mail* 2010; Scoffield and Bronskill 2010). And again, the media is relying on information from Rohan Gunaratna to discursively link an arrest of Sri Lankan migrants by authorities in Thailand to "pre-emptive" action taken by the Canadian government against "Tamil smugglers" (Cohen 2010).

Important policy recommendations emerge from our analysis and the most recent events. The media are inseparable from the political process. If media and political debates rely mostly on each other for information and knowledge, they then establish a closed discursive circle that silences dissent and stifles oppositional intervention. This is particularly problematic when discourses are based on information and knowledge that is obviously biased, selectively sequenced, and prioritised, as well as when important facts are omitted and

critical voices are silenced. To break this circle, the media needs to source information more widely and represent a plurality of voices beyond government. By the same token, the political process must not opportunistically respond to discursively constructed risks based on relatively minor but sensationalized events. Refugee migration is by definition unpredictable and often "irregular" or "illegal," and ergo, can always be constructed as risky. Using a handful of refugees as scapegoats to reform refugee policy does not address the perception permeating Canadian society that refugees are a risk to be "managed." Instead, refugee policy should respond to people's material need of protection from injustice.

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