

Stephen Dobson

Cultures of Exile
and the Experience
of *Refugeeness*

Peter Lang

Refugee research and debate have focused on international agreements, border controls and the legal status of asylum seekers. The lived, daily life of refugees in different phases of their flight has thus been unduly neglected. How have refugees experienced policies of reception and resettlement, and how have they individually and collectively built up their own cultures of exile?

To answer these questions the author of this study has undertaken long-term fieldwork as a community worker in a Norwegian municipality. Refugees from Chile, Iran, Somalia, Bosnia and Vietnam were on occasions subjected to exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Nevertheless, resistance was seen in the form of a Somali women's sewing circle, the organisation of a multi-cultural youth club, running refugee associations and printing their own language newspapers.

Moreover, in activities such as these, refugees addressed and came to terms with a limited number of shared existential concerns: morality, violence, sexuality, family reunion, belonging and not belonging to a second generation. Drawing upon these experiences a general theory of *refugeeness* is proposed. It states that the cultures refugees create in exile are the necessary prerequisite for self-recognition and survival.

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Contents

Preface	7
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Introduction	11
--------------------	----

Part I – Discourses

Chapter 1

The refugee in discourses of law, nation, gender, class, race and mass	27
---	----

Part II – Cultural, existential and corporeal experiences of *refugeeness*

Chapter 2

Cultural ways of Being in exile	57
---------------------------------------	----

Chapter 3

<i>Refugeeness</i> , self and the body	83
--	----

Chapter 4

<i>Refugeeness</i> , self and communication	111
---	-----

Part III – Cultures of exile

Chapter 5

Doing fieldwork in Verum	131
--------------------------------	-----

Chapter 6

Ten narratives of exile – an overview	147
---	-----

Chapter 7	
Growing up in Norway as a refugee of the second generation	151
Chapter 8	
Solidarity, political participation and sexuality	163
Chapter 9	
Reworking oral traditions	181
Chapter 10	
The role of the body and the face	201
Chapter 11	
Home and family lineage	215
Chapter 12	
The problem of violence	233
Chapter 13	
Crime, transgression and morality	253
Chapter 14	
Women refugees: subjectivity and solidarity	271
Chapter 15	
The cultivation of resentment	287
Chapter 16	
Belonging and not belonging	303
Chapter 17	
Closing comments and further discussion	315
Glossary	337
Bibliography	339

Preface

Reading newspapers, following cases in court, searching in learned journals, refugees are again and again encircled by the question of boundaries: border controls, international agreements, the processing of asylum applications, laws granting leave to stay or deportation. In one sense, this betrays a modern fascination with the sequestration of experience, as the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, or belonging and non-belonging, are constructed. Refugees then become one further justification for the nation state and shared European agreements, such as the Schengen Agreement controlling the free movement of people between European countries.

Their applications decided in law, along with media presentations and the concepts devised by researchers provide confirmation of the post-modern view that refugees are defined and determined by different discourses and are not freely formed entities or possess some pre-existing, unchanging essence or self. Accordingly, refugees and their destinies are largely dependent upon decisions made by people not in their presence – in the hidden corridors of power. But, this leaves unanswered how refugees live their experiences of determination and construct forms of resistance – as expressions of oppositional power.

The premise of this book is that it is necessary to develop a set of theoretical tools capable of revealing – in phenomenological fashion – the lived life of refugees. The term *refugeeness* is developed for this purpose. It sounds awkward and cumbersome. But, it has been chosen deliberately to provide an indication of the experiential and existential quality of the experience of refugees, as they make choices in the construction and living of their cultures of exile. Terms such as *émigré* or *migrant* could have been used, but they have in my opinion become

burdened by often contradictory associations and accumulated usages.

The term *refugeeness* is therefore proposed with the intention of widening the scope of refugee research and policy debate. This makes it possible to understand how decisions by politicians and professionals at the boundaries can have long-term effects upon the experiences of refugees on reception and resettlement in host countries. Different groups of professionals use their specialist knowledge and practices to set boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, but sometimes shifting experiences of inclusive exclusion result when these boundaries lose their clarity or have yet to assume it. I shall return to this in due course. Empirically, the main part of this book seeks to document *refugeeness* through the presentation of a limited number of selected narratives of refugees in exile in Norway. These narratives, look at how refugee cultures in exile are constituted and how this entails changing experiences of self. The narratives have been crafted in the third person based upon long-term fieldwork, and are additionally, the testing ground for the concepts developed in the first part of the book.

Three at first sight politically unfashionable philosophers provide the theoretical background: Heidegger with an anti-Semitic reputation, Merleau-Ponty, who became increasingly disillusioned with Communist politics and Fanon, bridging revolutionary politics with existential philosophy. Heidegger proposed a concept of Being and this can be developed to understand how refugees construct a sense of Being at home, without it necessarily becoming the source of some metaphysical essence or restricted to existence in their homeland. Merleau-Ponty circled his attention around what he called the flesh of the body. When Merleau-Ponty died he was in the process of extending his conceptual apparatus to include more fully the flesh of the body in its desire for a language and form of expression. This book seeks to continue this project using the flesh of the refugee's body as a specific case. Fanon represents an exemplification of Heidegger's views on Being at home and Merleau-Ponty's concept of the flesh of the

body. But, he is additionally important because he illustrates how choosing commitment to both politics and life in exile can give rise to cultures of exile. Not all the refugees in this book are equally committed to politics. They are however, committed to life in exile.

This book has therefore the following goal: If *refugeeness* gives rise to *cultures of exile*, it would be easy to find reference to such cultures in the work of famous exiles, such as Marx, Paz, Brecht, Neruda, Kristeva, Joyce, and Arendt. Cultures of exile have also been described by Holocaust survivors, most famously by Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. But what of those unsung, anonymous refugees in exile [...] what of their exile cultures, in a country such as Norway? Rarely do they receive the critical acclaim of literary works or win the status and recognition given to public testimonies. The narratives presented in this book and their theoretical exposition, are a modest attempt to present a few of these cultures of exile, and in so doing to argue for a notion, *refugeeness*, which can reveal something of the life of anonymous, largely forgotten refugees consigned to lives in exile:

‘who wander through the world.’
(Joyce in *Ulysses*)

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Introduction

The case of K. and some opening questions

For a number of years I knew a Vietnamese refugee, who was like myself, residing in Norway. Let us call him K. He was about 19 years of age and lived in a medium-sized Norwegian town of just over 22000. His parents lived in Vietnam, and he had been sent abroad with his older sister, whom he now lived with in Norway. K. seemed always to be reading and studying for his 'A' levels. His inclination towards an academic life matched my own chosen life-course. We shared an ascetic, Protestant work ethic as a necessary means for reaching our goal. There were other points of similarity to base our friendship upon: we both enjoyed playing table tennis, watching movies. K. wanted to become a doctor – an academically demanding education – and in my family I already had an uncle who was a doctor and a grandfather who had been a surgeon.

Our greatest similarity and the most obvious, was our both being foreigners in Norway. According to Norwegian law, I was an economic migrant, even though my original reason for moving to Norway was my marriage to a Norwegian. I wasn't a political refugee, unlike K. But, it is debatable how politically active the 13–14 year old had been prior to arrival in Norway. At that time, in the late 1980s, virtually all Vietnamese refugees arriving in Norway had had little difficulty in gaining political status. The reason for his journey to Norway was grounded more in his parent's belief that educational opportunities were better abroad, than in an under-funded and openly ideological Vietnamese society.

One day out of the blue, he told me that on the following Saturday he was to sell to other Vietnamese refugees everything,

which he couldn't carry with him his suitcase. He had booked a one-way ticket to Canada. He was leaving for good, and hoped to stay with a distant relative in Toronto. I was shocked.

Let this stand as the first narrative of exile in this book. Note the suddenness. There had been no prior indication of his desire to move again. His action seemed spontaneous and yet absolute: no safety net, no return ticket. At a stroke he corrected, or rather provided a critique of those researchers who look solely for clearly defined motives in the actions of the refugee. Was his motive economic? Canada was known amongst refugees to be less rule-governed than Norway if you wanted to start a business. Did he miss the greater refugee community to be found in a place such as Toronto? Was he upset and even jealous of his sibling who had suddenly decided to marry, leaving him more alone? Each of these motives contained part of the explanation. But how much, was hard to say and in which order?

Could it be that he had failed to reach what some call the 'effective functioning phase'? In an international Red Cross handbook the reader can find the following?

Ron Baker calls 'resettlement' the period which begins after an initial stay in a reception centre, and refers to the following four phases:

- * the 'honeymoon' phase
- * the disenchantment phase
- * the beginning of the resolution phase
- * the effective functioning phase

Some refugees do not reach the fourth phase at all. With regard to 'post-settlement', 'a point is reached in the refugee experience when the person has his/her own home, a job, can speak the language and is reasonably settled'. This sounds like the ideal situation, and on the surface it may seem to apply to many refugees who have had some time to achieve this. Indeed, refugees are frequently people who are energetic, decisive, resilient and likely to succeed [...] (Horvath-Lindberg and Miserez, 1991: 45)

K. spoke good Norwegian, had many friends in Norway and was well positioned to succeed in this society. So, it would appear that

he met the criteria of post-settlement and effective functioning. But, as with the push-pull framework of motives, often used to understand refugees, these explanations were unable to completely explain, or even come to terms with his narrative, a narrative clearly to do with *refugeeness* and what it means to experience the life of a refugee in exile.

The narrative of K. and of the other refugees presented in this book requires therefore, a different approach, one which grasps the refugee's changing sense of self, the discourses in which they are positioned and also their apprehension of different kinds of sequestration or borders. Accordingly, K. suddenly cut himself adrift, put his self in motion, adopting what I shall later call the self-in-transit. He understood the different Canadian laws and discourses defining the refugee, realising that he could enter and reside in that country and participate in a different culture of exile. And lastly, he sought to cross, rather than be limited by the different politically and spatially enforced national borders separating the two countries.

K. is just one case but an important and by no means untypical one among refugees. He is the source of the three questions about *refugeeness*, which will be explored in this book. The questions seek, in phenomenological fashion, to set the framework to describe, as much as explain, what it means to be a refugee. The guiding premise is that the identification of motives or some achieved phase of effective functioning provide only a partial explanation. In the first instance the three questions posed are the following:

1. How is the refugee defined by the discourses of law, class, gender, nation, race and by mass when in flight, reception and resettlement?
2. When refugees found cultures of exile, in what way are these cultures connected with existential choices, giving rise to ontologically valued meanings and a sense of Being?
3. What characterises the refugee's sense and experience of self, body and communication?

The first question is explored in chapter 1, where the border and different kinds of boundary are central, the second in chapter 2 and the last in chapters 3 and 4. The argument of this book is that together they constitute a theoretical framework to describe and account for the experience of *refugeeness*. A number of narratives are presented in part III in order to exemplify this framework. In the remainder of this introduction the experience of the refugee, as *refugeeness*, will be de-limited from the experiences of others groups. Secondly, a brief outline will be given of how *refugeeness* is to be theoretically approached in subsequent chapters.

Refugeeness, the tourist, economic migrant and indigenous dweller

The experience of *refugeeness* might be understood as an experience of otherness and accordingly compared with the experience of so-called others. Are not the tourist, economic migrant and even the person in their own country closely related to refugees?

The refugee travels through space and time, as does the tourist. They meet new people and like Simmel's tourist they are participants in an 'adventure'. But, Simmel's tourist experiences a break with the repetitive everyday world, a 'dropping out of the continuity of life.' (Simmel, 1976: 187) The refugee doesn't slip back into the everyday, as a tourist does after a package holiday. Instead, they are forced to live their adventurous flight into the new and exotic as a form of everyday life i.e. the difference between the adventure and the everyday disappears for the refugee in the new country.

The experience of *refugeeness* might also be likened to that of the migrant worker who leaves their homeland to become an immigrant in Norway. Objectively speaking, according to Nor-

wegian law, many refugees are viewed as economic migrants leaving their homelands in the search of employment and a higher standard of living. However, classification according to these motives may be inadequate on two counts. Subjectively, refugees may still regard themselves as political refugees, irrespective of how the Norwegian state defines them. Secondly, they may subjectively regard it as unsafe to return home, a restriction not applicable to the economic migrant.

Nevertheless, might not some indigenous dwellers experience something akin to *refugeeness* in the sense that they can be foreigners in their own language and culture? They are foreigners because their colloquial phrases and mannerisms are ignored by the dominant phrases and mannerisms of the language and culture. Kafka experienced this as a Jew in Prague. Refugees might also feel that they are foreigners in the Norwegian language, when their mother language and culture is defined as absolutely other. But, unlike second generation refugees and the indigenous dweller, first generation refugees are more prone to a feeling of resignation; that they will never be able to pass themselves off as linguistically and culturally competent in Norwegian.

Thus, the refugee while sharing some of the experiences of the tourist and the economic migrant and indigenous dweller in Norway, their experience of *refugeeness* is different on a number of counts. They cannot in an analytical and empirical sense be reduced to these figures. *Refugeeness* must embrace something else, a different kind of otherness. The etymology of the word refugee provides further guidance into how to describe and account for this difference.

Fugis

Fugee, forming the root of the word refugee comes from the Latin *fugis*, meaning to flee; *re* denotes its occurring again. Thus, the refugee may escape from their homeland and settle elsewhere, but the potential to move again remains, as the case of K. illustrated. Simmel's (1976a) conception of the stranger is relevant, referring to the person who arrives today and stays tomorrow, without ever losing the cloak of strangeness. The refugee as compulsive migrant echoes the life of the nomad, while the refugee as dweller receives Simmel's stamp of sedentary strangeness, with the ever-present potential to move on again.

Refugeeness may thus entail two contrasting poles of experience: the nomadic (to flee again and again) and the sedentary (to reside, to rest, with the potential to move). Medical journals in the 1930s and 1940s investigated certain rare, pathological instances of the fugue state. This was a compulsion to wander experienced periodically for 2–3 days at a time. The person lost all track of time, didn't change clothes, forgot to eat or drink, walking for miles on end. The fugue state was regarded as incurable and pathological. (Stengel, 1941; Hacking, 1999) But, it would be a case of *méconnaissance* to presume that *refugeeness* was necessarily an experience of the fugue compulsion to wander, since many refugees soon take up the sedentary mode of life in their new homeland. Besides, those who move again pay particular attention to their personal belongings and attire, unlike in the fugue state.

Alongside the etymology of the word and the comparison with the tourist, the economic migrant and the indigenous dweller there is a third way of delimiting the experience of *refugeeness*. This involves the theoretical perspective developed in this book to describe and account for *refugeeness*.

Refugeeness and cultures of exile

A central notion in this book is that refugees entering Norway and refugees in general are defined, determined and take their self-identity from a number of overlapping discourses. They are the discourses of law, nation, class, gender, race and the notion of membership of a mass group in flight, reception and resettlement, and will be examined in chapter 1. The relative success of these discourses in determining and defining refugees suggests that they are signifiers of power; to use a term from Foucault (1980), expressions of power-knowledge.

It would however, be a mistake to reduce *refugeeness* to just these discourses, and to thereby neglect how refugees draw upon these discourses, as well upon other experiences and resources to form cultures of exile. In many respects cultures of exile are signifiers of an oppositional power to the one enacted by those attempting to use discourses of law, nation and so on to produce obedient and disciplined refugees. Chapters 2–4 are devoted to refugee cultures and how they can be understood as expressions of power, specifically as a feeling of the will to power and territory as signifiers of exile gain an embodied form.

The question of refugee cultures in exile touches upon the cultural resources and forms of expression, which refugees cultivate. Connected with these resources and forms are norms and values, which are not simply adopted wholesale from the homeland. Refugees in exile cultivate their exile cultures at a distance from the so-called original referents, and this means that new and different signifiers are appropriated. This provides an opportunity for the growth of hybrid refugee cultures drawing upon many possible resources and forms of expression.

While hybrid cultures have perhaps always existed, founded upon experiences of migration, imperialism and conquest, it is perhaps only in recent decades that the actual term – hybrid culture – has received a certain currency in order to understand the

cultural aspects and consequences of globalisation. (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 2000) A hybrid culture refers to the manner in which presumed boundaries between cultures, what Barth (1981) called the 'we-them', are crossed, dissolved, giving rise in some cases to new cultural boundaries or territorialisations. (Brah, 1996).

Refugee cultures of exile – as an integral part of the experience of *refugeeness* – are also founded upon and support the living and making of a number of existential decisions. Expressed differently, refugees in making preparations to leave their homeland, in flight, on reception and afterwards on resettlement become accustomed to making important existential choices, and these leave their mark upon their cultures of exile. How can cultures be explored from an existential point of view? This is one of the topics explored in the second chapter. French existentialists such as Sartre, Camus and de Beauvoir provide a number of illustrative examples in their novels, plays and autobiographies. But, they tend to magnify the role of the individual's existential choices, to such an extent that the cultural frame in which these choices are made recedes into the background. For this main reason the work of a different existentialist provides the main theoretical inspiration.

Heidegger's concept of Being is drawn upon and developed to understand how refugee cultures of exile take place within a cultural framework. Exile cultures then become the source of different ways of Being. The term Being, while referring to a refugee group's view of authentic existence, and therefore suggesting some kind of fixed essence, is a much more open concept according to Heidegger (1962: 105–107). Each refugee group will live its own cultural ways of Being, changing its definition of what they value as existentially authentic according to the context, their experiences, their changing norms and mores and so on. In other words, in making cultural choices as to specific ways of Being, *refugeeness* becomes the experience of an ontology based upon what is considered existentially valuable.

A cultural way of Being is not therefore, merely the expression of a group's view of the authentic. It highlights how cultural re-

sources are experienced as 'ready-to-hand' and the source of ontologically valued meanings when expressed through valued ways of Being. To be a member of a culture of exile is thus to choose to enter into particular culturally engendered ways of Being a refugee and experiencing *refugeeness*, where familiarity, intimacy and *Being at home* with cultural resources are important. Heidegger talks of authenticity, familiarity and intimacy, while *Being at home* entails a further refinement on my part of Heidegger's term Being.

Thus, when a Vietnamese refugee or a Norwegian member of the indigenous population claims that they have a feeling of *Being at home* with their respective cultures, they are alluding to what is often a pre-rational, corporeal sense of familiarity and intimacy with the associated cultural resources and how they are lived as a source of authentic and valued ontological meanings. Alternatively, to lack this feeling of *Being at home* will be either, not to feel such familiarity and intimacy, or, to deny it, with the result that a feeling of *alienation* or *not belonging* takes its place.

Refugeeness as a corporeal experience of the flesh

Another strand of argumentation in this book is that *refugeeness* entails not only refugees forming cultures of exile as existential choices and ontological ways of Being, and not only their determination and definition by a number of overlapping discourses, it is also rooted in corporeal experiences. Put differently, it is the question of the corporeal entity that carries these experiences through the time and space of the flight, reception and resettlement.

On the one hand, this involves the issue of the refugee self. When the discussion raises concepts such as Being and ontological truth there is a danger of the belief that the refugee self is based

upon some inner, fixed, pre-existing kernel. But, when the refugee is defined and determined by different discourses, any potential self as essence with an inner kernel is de-constructed and perpetually postponed. But, such a radical constructionist view of the self side-steps the manner in which the refugee self makes choices, not necessarily on the basis of a fixed essence, but as a constructed entity having learnt from experience, enduring over time and in space and choosing to modify itself in moments of choice

Chapter 3 presents *refugeeness* through a typology of the refugee self as an agent experiencing flight, reception and resettlement. To begin with the refugee self is explored as an entity determined by discourses. The refugee self is then viewed as an inner-determined existential entity acting in free volition and seeming to form itself anew at every moment as an autonomous entity. These perspectives are then combined to arrive at an understanding of the refugee self as the following: an autonomous self making choices and acting, but always upon the basis of existing conditions and discourses.

The issue of the refugee self raises in turn the question of the corporeality and body connected with this self. On occasions, such as in torture, the body of the refugee is intensely felt, but it is felt to be alien and dissociated from an authentic self. The body is then just a container for the self or a surface to hold and take the imprint of outer experiences. Such an approach might make the body of the refugee into a passive object and accordingly, make the self dependent upon outer stimuli in order to react – rather than act – in a largely predictable fashion. But, there are also occasions when the body of the refugee is experienced as an integral part of the self, an embodied self participating in both the reception and making of existential choices on the basis of the concrete situation and the discourses and cultures, which support and form the situation.

This makes the body of the refugee not some passive entity, it becomes part of the self, existing as more than the site for experiences, existential choices and supporting forms of expression.

The inspiration for the theoretical approach developed is taken from Merleau-Ponty in particular, and also from Fanon, a fellow existentialist. The former suggests the concept of the flesh of the body. In his later work he talks of a sublimation, not in Freudian terms involving the unconscious, but as a sublimation of the flesh of the body into a different kind of flesh, such as the flesh of language. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968, 1993a)

Chapter 3 argues that the body of the refugee, as a corporeal entity and integral part of the experience of *refugeeness* can usefully be regarded as a flesh participating actively in refugee forms of expression and cultural ways of Being. In other words, the flesh of the refugee's body is sublimated into not only the flesh of different languages, but also into the flesh of different cultural ways of Being.

Fanon's work is important because he provides concrete cases exemplifying these themes. So, for Fanon, the flesh of the body is both a repository for experience and also the spring-board for future oriented actions. Put simply, the body is at once subject and object. Of objecthood he recalled an early experience in a colonial setting:

'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!' I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood. (Fanon, 1986: 109)

Emerging from 'crushing objecthood' moves the discussion to the issue of different forms of expression, to what Merleau-Ponty (1968) called sublimations into a different kind of flesh, the flesh of language. Chapter 4 develops a theoretical understanding of this, so that the refugee self and communication become a further aspect of *refugeeness*. A central notion is that the flesh of language and cultural ways of Being can be understood as a system of metaphors and metonyms. Moreover, these metaphors and metonyms circulate in specific communication channels, some of which are

more exclusively peopled by refugees, while others are more mixed, with a greater or dominant number of indigenous participants. Refugee expression as the flesh of language and culture is explored in different forms, or more correctly arenas, such as those in which torture takes place.

Narratives of exile

Chapters 1–4 explore *refugeeness* from a predominantly theoretically perspective. Some empirical examples are used, but it is in the third part of the book, from chapter 6 onwards, that the theory developed in the first two parts is applied to describe and account for ten refugee narratives. These narratives show how refugee cultures of exile gain an actual content. Chapter 5 is devoted to the question of methodology.

The narratives are crafted on the basis of participant observation, while employed as a refugee community worker in a middle-sized Norwegian town over a period of six years in the late 1990s. Each of the narratives take up a different aspect of *refugeeness*, and the characters in one narrative may well appear in one or more of the other narratives.

Presenting the empirical data in the form of narratives is based upon the premise that this is the best method for revealing the often unstated connections between events and that *refugeeness* is based upon living and making these connections, such that cultures of exile are founded in the process. (Berger and Mohr, 1989: 284; Polkingthorne, 1988) The narratives have been written in the third person and are not therefore narrated in the words used by the refugees themselves. They are biographical, rather than autobiographical. However, having said this, some of the narratives contain dialogues with refugee participants.

The ten narratives cover the following aspects of *refugeeness*: growing up in Norway as a refugee of the second generation, communication and translation, women refugees in positions of leadership, the refugee and their family in exile, violence, petty theft, solidarity among refugee women, resentment, belonging and not belonging, and how solidarity, sexuality and political participation can be important elements in the life of the committed, political refugee.

The focus of these narratives is upon the phase of refugee resettlement. But, the theoretical framework developed could also be used to present and understand narratives of flight and reception. In the final chapter, selected issues in these narratives are reviewed and raised for further discussion.

Summary and goals

One of the main premises of this book is that it is a mistake to regard the refugee as merely the product of and constrained by overlapping discourses in law (e.g. on the definition and rights to asylum of the refugee), on the nation, race, class, gender, and as a member of a mass group in flight, reception and resettlement. While they are obviously influenced by such discourses, what is interesting is how they are chosen, denied and reworked into hybrid refugee cultures. A second premise is that the refugee, while having much in common with the economic migrant, the tourist or the indigenous dweller who feels a foreigner in their own country, they are *other* than them and coloured by their own particular experiences.

To explore this experience of *otherness* and how the above mentioned discourses are lived and resisted a concept is developed in the course of this book. It is given the name *refugeeness* and describes how refugees in exile are the source of hybrid exile cul-

tures, founded existentially, through ontologically valued choices, which give rise to different ways of Being. Moreover, the argument is made that *refugeeness* entails changing conceptions of self, boundary experiences and an active use the flesh of the body, which sublimates into a different kind of flesh, the flesh of language and culture.

Part I

Discourses

Chapter 1

The refugee in discourses of law, nation, gender, class, race and the mass

¿“no pesa el aire, aquí siempre es octubre”,
o se lo dijo a otro que he perdido,
o yo lo invento y nadie me lo ha dicho?

Piedra de Sol, Octavio Paz

(“the air’s so crisp here, it’s always October,”
or was she speaking to another I’ve forgotten,
or did I invent it and no one said it?)

Refugees entering Norway, applying for asylum and desiring permission to reside, are defined and determined by a number of different, often overlapping discourses. These discourses are important in the constitution of their self-identity as refugees and in their experience of refugeeness. In post-modern fashion it might be argued that they constitute the refugee. A working definition of the discourse is required, and I shall adopt Foucault’s:

[...] sometimes using it to mean the general domain of all statements (*énoncés*), sometimes as an indivisible group of statements (*énoncés*), and sometimes as an ordered practice which takes account of a certain number of statements (*énoncés*). (Foucault, 1972: 20)

The statements comprising the discourse are groups of signifiers and signified, and above all, they are active and performative – discourse, in the French *discours*, means to talk or converse. The discourses on refugees can be ‘not an expression of subjectivity, but rather the agency that produces subjectivity by positioning human beings as subjects.’ (Macey, 2000: 100)

Accordingly, the second strand of argument in this chapter is that as these discourses construct the refugee, founding their self-

identity as a number of boundary or threshold experiences are produced. They found a politics of inclusion and exclusion for those concerned, with the refugee developing an accompanying sense of belonging and not belonging. These boundary experiences and classifications in discourse rarely produce a simple dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion. There are degrees of inclusion, exclusion, and at times simultaneous inclusionary exclusions, all depending on the particular discourse and its relation to other discourses. The important point is that the discourses provide the opportunity to delimit refugees from each other (the Vietnamese refugee from the Iranian and so on) and from different others, such as economic migrants, the Sami, gypsies and the indigenous population.

The goal of this chapter is therefore to present the different discourses, which constitute the refugee in contemporary Norway. A historical synopsis of each discourse is presented, and although it is brief salient factors are highlighted, giving the reader unfamiliar with Norway and its history an overall insight into the country encountered by refugees. Different professional groups and politicians have been instrumental in the development of the discourses, 'fixing roles for speakers'. (Foucault, 1970: 19) Some of these discourses appear more important than others, for example the discourse defining the rights of the refugee in national and international law. Some, for periods of Norwegian history appear to have played no role. All the discourses are imbued with differing degrees of power, or what Foucault would call power-knowledge. As some have suggested:

Discourses empower by creating active subjects with certain capacities. But these very capacities also 'disempower' by objectifying subjects, making them subject to power. (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 97–98)

I. Discourses of law

There has been a constant attempt to define the refugee as a political entity in law, but as the history of the discourse shows there has been far from agreement about the boundary defining and separating them from other kinds of migrant and those refugees considered not to be so-called “bogos” or less than full-worthy refugees.

The political refugee was defined in Norwegian Law in 1956:

A political refugee is considered [...] a foreigner who with justification fears for political persecution. With political persecution it is understood that somebody because of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, membership of a special social group or other political reasons is exposed to persecution [...] (Section 2, Fremmedloven, 1956. My translation)

This closely follows the 1951 Geneva Convention’s definition, except that the latter makes no direct reference to the category political refugee. Common to both definitions is the manner in which no economic criteria are used.

Some have spoken of a wider definition of the refugee, to include those who have taken to flight because of the economic situation in their homeland following the collapse of the economy during civil war or revolution, with a subsequent loss of employment. The 1969 OAU Convention in Africa defined refugees as people leaving their country of origin because of outer aggression, occupation, foreign domination or domestic events, which have seriously disrupted the security and stability of the country. While the OAU Convention’s definition didn’t mention loss of work in one’s homeland as the economy collapses in the case of civil war for example, such an eventuality has not gone unnoticed. The Norwegian Committee on the New Foreigner’s Law was explicit on this point:

If one widens the concept of refugee too much, a significant danger will arise that authorities in using it will not be able to make a meaningful distinction between refugees and immigrants (i.e. economic migrants)

[...] (it) might also lead to such a large stream of refugees that Norway can no longer offer the same assistance as is the case now. (N.O.U. 1983: 47, 292. My translation)

In this sense, to restrict the refugee to a purely political definition disguises an inherent tension in the discourses in law over the boundary between the 'true' refugee and what is a "bogus" refugee, so-called economic migrant.

This definition of the refugee in law has permitted a filtering in the processing of asylum applications. For example in 1994, 22 persons were awarded asylum as political refugees, 2963 were refused permission to reside and 1353 were allowed to stay as 'immigrants because of humanitarian reasons'. The last mentioned status is a further boundary making process purifying still further the category of political refugee. It entails fewer rights to Norwegian services, such as state education loans, a blue passport and is applied to cases where 'strong humane considerations argue for it, or when the foreigner has a special connection with the country.' (Utlendingsloven, 1988, Section 8) These considerations refer to the risk of persecution an individual faces on returning home, poor health or the presence of an accompanying family member in Norway. (St. Melding no. 17, 1994: 71)

This tension between the boundary separating the refugee from other groups has its historical precedence in Norwegian laws developed to deal with the Jews in the 17th century and with the threat of spies in the First World War.

In the 17th century, Jews along with gypsies required travel documents to enter and move around Norway. The intention was to control vagrancy, and to organize it into a predictable, containable form. In a law of 1683, Jews were prohibited from trading at markets or selling supplies to the army. They were feared more for their economic activities than for their political activities. Even when the religious argument was used to objectify and exclude the Jew in the Constitution of 1814, many argued that fear of their economic activities was the ulterior motive. (Mendelson, 1969: 489–490) Here is the Constitution's second paragraph:

The Evangelical-Lutheran religion is to remain the official State religion.
– Immigrants who become familiar with it are obligated to raise their children likewise. – Jesuits and monk orders are not to be allowed. – Jews are still refused admission to the kingdom. (Reproduced in Mendelson, 1969: 490. My translation)

Henrik Wergeland, a famous Norwegian poet prominent in the fight for Norwegian independence, campaigned for the removal of this paragraph in the 1830s. It wasn't until 1851 that the campaign was successful.

From the 1860s onwards, Norway experienced economic growth in the fishing, timber and shipping sectors. Between 1850 and 1890 the population grew rapidly from 1.5 to 2.0 million, and liberalism gained support among politicians and civil servants. These factors explain why the need for travel documents and restrictions on permitted economic activity fell away. It was not until the turn of the century that there was talk of re-introducing controls on foreigners.

Norway's neutral stance in World War I did not stop their boats being sunk by German forces. The number torpedoed and missing was 199 in 1916 and 424 in 1917. The police were held responsible for not locating the whereabouts of German spies. These events led to a law in 1917 stipulating that foreigners should report to the police within 3 days of arrival. It became obligatory for foreigners to possess a passport, and as a result a central passport office was established. It was the police commissioners in each district who had responsibility for the law's implementation. Jews selling their wares in towns throughout Norway were suspected of being spies.

In today's law on refugees, there is a clause echoing this fear of the foreigner as a security threat, 'A foreigner can be expelled... when consideration of national security deems it necessary.' (Utlendingsloven, 1988: 5 § 29. My translation) The point is that the discourses on the refugee in Norwegian law have been concerned with different boundary making arguments to control the entry and also refusal of refugees. At times they have been classified as

a security threat, economic migrants or migrant based upon humanitarian considerations. Far more rarely are they defined as so-called authentic and deserving political refugees. Not gaining this status in Norwegian law or any of the 'lesser' ones may entail consequences, as illustrated by an Afghan writer's declaration on being refused refugee status in Norway, 'I am a political refugee. If I return I may be kidnapped'. (Maryan Azimi, Norwegian television, 11.6.95)

II. Discourses of nation

Overlapping with the refugee defined in discourses of law, is their definition in discourses of nation. Take the following example. At the turn of the century, the 1901 Fremmedloven (Foreigner's Law) made it possible to expel foreigners. Its main motivation was to control the number of Swedish immigrants working in Norway. At the turn of the century the influx reached a peak of about 50000. Norwegian workers and unions saw them as an undesirable competitive element, but there were more than purely economic, labour-based reasons for trying to exclude them. Norway was fighting for its independence from a union with Sweden. Accordingly, this 1901 law can be interpreted as a political action in the ongoing struggle to define a concept of Norwegian identity and nationhood in opposition to its Swedish counterpart. Furthermore, the Swedish presence had other non-economic consequences:

Swedish immigrants were additionally to an increasing degree regarded as more or less asocial, criminals and a threat to the stability of society [...] A certain local Swedish participation in Norwegian domestic politics, in Hoire, created according to Larsson a greater wavering in popular opinion, than direct competition for employment. (Thorud, 1989: 43)

In other words, an economic fear of Swedes was placed alongside an awareness of the political threat to the 'stability of society',

which they might represent if politically active. 3700 were expelled between 1901 and 1914. They were mostly Swedes, but some were Danes and Finns, and 110 Armenians were expelled for attempting to collect money for their political cause in Armenia.

What is important in this context is the manner in which the nationality of the refugee or migrant played an important role in the creation of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Another instance of this can be found in the 1908 Extradition Law, revised in 1915:

Expulsion isn't to take place for any political crime, nor for any general crime, committed in connection with a political crime and with the intention of advancing such a cause. (Birkeland, 1987: 38)

The background for this law was the Norwegian state's desire to follow the lead of other nations in adopting the so-called Belgium Clause (1833) on political crimes. This clause reflected a change in conceptualisation and practice with regard to the granting of asylum. As Birkeland notes, asylum was originally used to denote a religious place or sanctuary where protection would be given. As states began to take shape refuge was guaranteed less by the Church and more by the State. By the 1800s asylum was connected increasingly with politically motivated actions. (Birkeland, 1987: 22–23) These developments reflected the interest in nation building throughout Europe. Norway passed its constitution in 1814, gaining independence from Denmark, but it was then forced into a union with Sweden until 1905.

It is therefore not without precedence that the nationality of certain refugees entering Norway more recently, such as those from Vietnam in the 1980s – to the chagrin of other refugee groups – found it easier to gain permission to reside and were awarded the more inclusive status of political refugee, with an accompanying red passport. The reasons for this have often been political, such as supporting refugees seeking to leave Communist countries.

The 1975 *Innvandringsstopp* (Restriction on Immigration), while not explicitly meant to stop the flow of refugees into Norway and not explicitly mentioning the nationality of possible en-