Abstract
This study compares print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers with representations in short stories and poems written by refugees and asylum seekers themselves, within the frames of creative writing workshops. The primary research question guiding the study reads: How do (self-)representations in texts written by refugees and asylum seekers, within the frames of creative writing workshops, differ from representations of refugees and asylum seekers in print media.

As a theoretical foundation for the study serves the social constructionist assumption that language, rather than reflect, constructs reality, and that the way the world is understood affects policies, practices and actions – in this case concerning refugees, asylum seekers, refugee relief, refugee/asylum seeker reception systems, integration etc. Starting out from the notion that print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers follow certain recurring patterns – not only resulting in rather simplistic portrayals, but, also, almost systematically leaving out refugee and asylum seeker voices, views and opinions – the study, following Dorothy Smiths suggestion that individuals somehow excluded from a particular discourse may offer perspectives undermining it, turns to the refugees and asylum seekers’ own texts as a possible source of alternative representations. Using Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory, complemented by semiotic analysis, (self-)representations in three anthologies with refugee and asylum seeker texts are compared to the results of a meta analysis of earlier research of representations of refugees and asylum seekers in print media.

The findings of the study suggests that there are similarities, but also significant differences in how refugees and asylum seekers are represented in their own texts when compared to print media. Consequently, it is argued that there is a potential worth fostering in the creative writing workshops for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as similar initiatives. They may be seen as a step towards increasing refugees and asylum seekers’ opportunities to voice their opinion in matters that concern them; as answering to the post colonial call for bringing in new voices to the (social) development debate; and as contributing to the realisation of an agonistic democracy/pluralism.

Key words: refugees, asylum seekers, representation, print media, creative writing workshops, C4D
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1. Introduction

1.1 Aim and objective

At the beginning of 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2015: 4-5) counted for 11,699,278 people living as refugees or in refugee-like situations worldwide, with another 1,172,824 seeking asylum.\(^1\) This means that right now, a great number of individuals are referred to by either ‘refugee’\(^2\) or ‘asylum seeker’, two signifiers\(^3\) that are rather empty in the sense that they reveal very little about the people they represent. Strictly speaking, ‘refugee’ is a legal term, defined in the first article of the ‘Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees’ (1951) as a person who

> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

‘Asylum seeker’, in turn, is explained by the UNHCR (2014) as ‘someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated’. And even though these definitions might seem as rather precise, they say essentially nothing about the actual people the signifiers stand for (cf. Malkki 1995: 496).

In contrast, the present study examines the products of two practices that serve to provide ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ with additional meaning, by representing the people that are drawn together under the respective signifiers. More precisely, the study compares textual representations of refugees and asylum seekers in print media with representations in texts written by refugees and asylum seekers themselves, within the frames of creative writing workshops. Short stories and poems from three anthologies written by refugees and asylum seekers are analysed, with the aim to investigate whether there are, in these, representations that nuance, or even challenge, those in print media.

Consequently, on account of the important role mass media, in general, play in shaping our understanding of reality, print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers serve as a starting point for the investigation at hand. van Dijk (2000: 36) goes as far as claiming that mass media are ‘the main source of peoples knowledge’, implying that newspapers, together with TV and radio, to a great extent provide many of us what we know – or at least think we know – about, in

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1 The total number of internally displaced persons were 23,925,555.
2 It should, in addition, be noted that people might also be referred to, or refer to themselves, as ‘refugees’ even when they are no longer officially recognized as such.
3 To avoid confusion, the terms ‘sign’ and ‘signifier’ will be used instead of ‘concept’ throughout this study, since this is the term used in the underlying theoretical framework.
this case, refugees and asylum seekers. This is, however, somewhat problematic, since, as will be demonstrated further on in this paper, print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers follow certain recurring patterns, resulting in rather simplistic portrayals. Although these might seem as natural, their one-sidedness still raises the question whether there are not alternative representations to be found elsewhere. And since one of the trends in print media is that refugees and asylum seekers’ own voices, views, and opinions are almost systematically neglected, this study turns to their own texts to look for these.

1.2 Theoretical foundation

A premise for the present investigation is the social constructionist standpoint that language does not simply reflect, but constructs reality by giving it meaning (Hall 1997: 25). That is, what we read, see and hear through mass media about refugees and asylum seekers is not a straightforward reflection of what refugees and asylum seekers are like, but gives us a specific understanding of the subject or, to reconnect to the previous section, provides ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ with a certain meaning (cf. White 2004: 289). This understanding is, in turn, produced within and part of discourses, understood as systems of interconnected ways of talking and thinking, practices, and institutions that regulate and constitute boundaries for our lives and conception of reality (Foucault 1989: 29, 32-34; Laclau 2007: 541). Here, these include, but do not limit themselves to, the ‘organizational procedures and considerations’ (Spencer 2005: 7) that structure news reporting, as well as the policies, practices, authorities and organisations that constitute refugee relief and refugee/asylum seeker reception systems (see Malkki 1995a: 497-503).

Another, connected social constructionist presumption – relying on post-structural theory – vital to this investigation, is that the meaning of signs is arbitrary and, essentially, floating (Hall 1997: 23-24), although within a certain discourse, they often seem as fixed (Hall 1997: 10). Simultaneously, they emerge as evident, in the sense that their contingency eludes us (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 36-37), which implies that the information about refugees and asylum seekers that mass media convey appear to us not as one of many possible representations, but as the true understanding of ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’. To fully grasp this idea, and to make it plausible, it is, however, necessary to recognise that discourses operate exactly at the level of what we take for granted or see as common sense; ‘that which is not problematised – that which one does not even think can be problematised’ (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 188-189; cf. Laclau 1990b: 34). Further, it also has to be emphasised that a discourse does not necessarily restrain the possible

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4 Yet another way of putting it is to say that mass media produces a certain knowledge about refugees and asylum seekers.

5 One could also say that mass media seem to give us the truth about refugees and asylum seekers.
representations of a subject to only one alternative (cf. Foucault 1989: 36; Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 139), but might, for instance, allow a dichotomised understanding of a particular subject, where two opposite meanings are those proposed.

However, ultimately, no matter how natural our ways of understanding reality might appear, a discourse is never completely fixed (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 29; Mouffe 1988: 91) and strategies for identifying assumptions too hastily taken for granted have been suggested for making it possible to move beyond even the most established ones. One is to look for, turn, and listen to individuals in some sense disregarded by the discourse(s) at hand, thus, possibly, having experiences that make them look at the world in a different way. As Smith (1987: 65; cf. Limbu 2009: 271) puts it,

assumptions and the social organization in which they are grounded are drawn into question when we begin from the experience and actualities of [...] knowers whose perspective is organized by exactly how they are located outside these structures, by how they are excluded from participation, and by their actual situation and its relation to the ruling apparatus [...].

Against the background of the underrepresentation of refugees and asylum seekers voicing their opinions in print media, it is this course of action that, by turning to their own texts, is pursued in this study.

1.3 Research question

In short, the present study strives to reveal, map, and compare how the discourse on refugees and asylum seekers is embodied in two types of texts. However, as hinted already, an underlying question driving the investigation is whether, and possibly how, dominant discourses may be altered and, further, which role access to different means of communication might play in the process. Accordingly, print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers are regarded as part of a dominant and influential discourse. Following the thoughts of Smith quoted above, texts written by refugees and asylum seekers are, in turn, seen as a possible source of alternative descriptions, undermining the former way of representing reality. A necessary condition is, however, that the representations found in the refugee and asylum seeker texts are somehow different from those in print media and, consequently, the primary research question guiding this study reads: How do (self-)representations in texts written by refugees and asylum seekers, within the frames of creative writing workshops, differ from representations of refugees and asylum

6 It should be noted that Smith herself, in this quotation, speaks first of all about women.

7 Claiming that refugees and asylum seekers are excluded from a discourse that revolves exactly around these groups of people might seem as a contradiction, but it is only as (silent) objects they can be said to be in the centre of the discourse that will be unravelled later on in this paper. As (speaking) subjects, refugees and asylum seekers are, indeed, left out.
1.4 Relevance to the field of communication for development and social change

Focusing on the possibility of refugees and asylum seekers to publicly portray themselves, this study concerns ‘representation’ in the meaning of speaking or acting on someone’s behalf and describing or depicting someone/something.

Although many of the efforts aimed at assisting refugees and asylum seekers belong first of all to the field of humanitarian intervention, it is also fair to say that the line separating these activities from those aimed at social development is not necessarily a thick one. Especially if taken into consideration that the sources of refugees and asylum seekers always can be placed in a wider social, political, and/or economic context (cf. Shemak 2011: 10-12). Furthermore, ‘refugee’ refers not only to individuals in the very act of fleeing or living in refugee camps, but also to those moving on to and re-establishing themselves in other countries, where they are incorporated into existing, as well as form new, social constellations, thereby becoming a factor necessary to consider when talking about and/or trying to accomplish social development. And the same goes for asylum seekers as well, not only if their applications are approved.

When it comes to (social) development (studies), the social constructionist approach implies that ‘development’ and ‘social change’ too are signs whose meaning is fluent. Following this line of thought, first of all post-colonial theorists have argued that development discourses are rooted in ethnocentrism as well as unequal power relations (McEwan 2009: 120). Consequently, there has been a call, similar to Smith’s, for bringing in new and differently positioned voices (e.g. McEwan 2009: 147), both to better understand the processes and many aspects of development (McEwan 2009: 155), and to make it possible to move away from worn-out stereotypes (McEwan 2009: 121; cf. Schech and Haggis 2000: 66).

There is, however, an issue that needs to be addressed right away in relation to the formulation of the research question, since social constructionism entails that meaning is always interpreted. Interpretations, in turn, are culturally bound (Hall 1997: 32), implying that any form of communication, including texts, is polysemous. This leads on to the problem put forward by Spivak (1988: 307-308), that is, whether the subaltern – even if speaking – will ever be understood as intended. There is disagreement about whether (all) refugees and asylum seekers should be seen as subalterns in this sense: Limbu (2009: 277) argues this point, as will be shown later on. For concrete examples speaking in favour of this, see Murdocca and Razack (2008: 258) and Malkki (1996: 383-384). Shemak (2011:17) claims that ‘the asylum seeker must be able to speak in the idiom of the host nation to prove his or her “well founded fear”’, while Lo (2013: 49) takes an opposite stand, which will also be discussed further ahead.

However, even without getting deeper into this rather lengthy discussion, it is evident that the concern about whether or not refugees and asylum seekers can be sure to get their message across correctly is a legitimate one here as well. Therefore, the question about whether the texts analysed in this study may serve to nuance print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers is, perhaps, best read as whether they carry such a potential.

If their applications are denied, asylum seekers might still stay in the country in question as undocumented immigrants.

In fact, refugees and asylum seekers serve to illustrate why discussions about (social) development cannot start out from a strict geographical understanding of the global North/South divide (see McEwan 2009: 12-13).
At this stage, one might want to argue that post-colonial theory, as well as the present study, misses the mark by putting too much focus on language. However, discourses, as understood in this study, are not solely about semantics, but, rather, about how speech and action conform. As Goodnow et al. (2008: back page) put it, the way refugees and asylum seekers are represented and, subsequently, perceived, ‘has significant consequences for determining public policy, human rights, international agreement, and the realization of cultural diversity’.

There are, thus, a practical as well as an ethical imperative for looking into the possibility of refugees and asylum seekers to – still in the double sense – represent themselves. Practically, based on the post-colonial notion, there is a potential for better and more effective policies and practices for social development to evolve if more people, especially all those concerned, may influence the process. Ethically, that people should at least have a say in matters that concern them, seems as an evident standpoint.\footnote{The ethical aspect of the subject of this study is further underlined by Couldry (2010: 1), arguing that ‘[t]reating people as if they lack [the capacity to give an account of themselves] is to treat them as if they were not human’. Consequently, listening to other people is an important step towards recognising them as human beings (Couldry 2009: 580).}

1.5 Scope, the group in focus and material

‘Refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ include in the present study first of all individuals who officially either are or, at some point, have been recognised as such. However, both signs are disputed (see Shemak 2011: 10; O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007: 2) and some of the other studies referred to in this paper use slightly different definitions.\footnote{The meaning of the signs are also blurred by the fact that there are variations between countries when it comes to granting people refugee or asylum seeker status. Another contributing factor is that in less official contexts, including news media, they are sometimes used carelessly (e.g. O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007: 5).}

At the same time, global flows of migration might be seen as a distinct feature of today’s world. The reason for limiting this study to representations of refugees and asylum seekers only, is the fact that the discourse that is to be uncovered is typical to these two groups of people. Occasionally, other (groups of) migrants are included as well, but the discourse cannot, by any means, be extended to cover migrants as such, and, therefore, it is possible, for the purpose of this study, to draw a line between, on the one side, refugees and asylum seekers and, on the other, other groups of migrants.

Regarding the concentration on creative writing workshops for refugees and asylum seekers, it should, firstly, be noted that these might serve many different purposes (see Powles 2004: 1). Here, it is, as mentioned, the (self-)representational aspect that is emphasised. There are, however, specific reasons for putting focus specifically on writing. Although the texts analysed in this study
are likely to have only a limited impact on the broad mass of the people, writing is one of the simplest forms of communication that has the capacity to spread information and messages over great distances. The workshops may, thus, be seen as a chance for the participants to acquire skills in expressing themselves on their own terms, a proficiency that is not only valuable here and now, but might develop into other forms of writing with a greater outreach and more impact, such as a professional authorship, a journalistic career, letters to the press, or blogging. At the same time, there are also reasons for focusing on the outcomes – that is the texts – of the workshops, rather than the activities as such. Investigating facilitators and participants, how they work as well as their thoughts on the projects, media representations, and their own stories would, indeed, be another, interesting approach, but, in the end, it is the texts that the public will meet and, therefore, they constitute the focal point of this particular study.

On the other hand, the concentration on refugee and asylum seeker writing is the reason why the present investigation takes textual representations of refugees and asylum seekers in print media as another point of departure, which, in turn, has some implications for the study outline. The subject has already attracted some academic attention, and since as thorough analysis of a sufficient empirical material lies outside of the scope of this study, the investigation will, instead, rely on a meta analysis of earlier research.

This means, firstly, that the investigation will focus on representations of refugees and asylum seekers that have already entered, or are trying to enter, a new country of residence, since this is where most of the media attention in the preceding studies is put. Secondly, geographically, the studies (in english) on print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers target, in the main, newspapers in North America (USA and Canada), Great Britain and Oceania (Australia and New Zeeland). When it comes to time, emphasis is put on a period that stretches from this date and about fifteen years back. For the creation of an appropriate ground for comparisons, the aim has, thus, been to find text samples from creative writing workshops for refugees and asylum seekers living in the same areas, during the same period of time.

This choice of region(s) is, of course, something that might have an effect on the outcomes of the present study, in the sense that every country comes with it’s own history and power

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13 This should not be understood as an assumption that (all) refugees and asylum seekers automatically lack the ability to represent themselves – in writing or other forms of communication – before taking part in creative writing workshops (see e.g. Malkki 1995b: 151 for an example of the opposite). However, just as any other writer, people with a refugee and/or asylum seeker background may, if not acquire, develop and improve their writing skills by taking part in such activities.

14 For studies on media representations, in general, of refugees and asylum seekers living in refugee camps, see e.g. Fair and Parks (2001) and Wright (2010).

15 Some investigations that cover other areas and date from further back are also included in this study, since their results are in accordance with the prioritised ones. Thus, they both reinforce the conclusions of the latter, and imply that the results are valid for other areas and longer periods of time as well.
dynamics towards other countries and their peoples, which is, possibly, reflected in the discourse(s) on refugees and asylum seekers. England’s history as a colonial power, as well the USA’s as an immigrant nation, might, for example, be something that have an influence on both the way (particular) refugees and asylum seekers are depicted in the national (print) media, and the integration of new arrivals into public life.

Furthermore, the focus on english speaking nations is another factor necessary to take into consideration, not only since every language comes with its own words, connotations, and symbolism. If there is not already some basic knowledge, the incentives for learning an universal language are, probably, higher than for a smaller one, which is also something that might influence refugees and asylum seekers’ possibilities to participate in the public debate.

In any case, since not nearly all workshops result in publication, availability has also been a crucial factor when choosing refugee and asylum seeker texts for this study. In the end, they stem from three different sources: The Story of My Life: Refugees writing in Oxford; Flowers that Grow From Concrete: A collection of poems, thoughts and reflection from brighter futures; and Walking with a fragile heart: Short stories and poems by young refugees in New Zealand. Together, these three anthologies offer a corpus of 82 short stories and poems, by 27/28

16 Since the writer/writers behind two of the texts in Flowers that Grow from Concrete is/are anonymous, it is not possible to decide whether they have the same or different authors.
17 For more information about the anthologies and the creative workshops where they were produced, see Appendix 1.
2. Theoretical framework and methodology

2.1 Theoretical framework

Going into more theoretical detail, (Ernesto) Laclau and (Chantal) Mouffe’s discourse theory (LMDT) serves this study with an explanation to the role representations such as those in print media and the texts written by refugees and asylum seekers play in assigning ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ with meaning, a deepened understanding of the creative writing workshops, and a methodological foundation for the forthcoming analysis.

LMDT\(^{18}\) starts out from the social constructionist standpoints accounted for earlier: That language constructs reality in the sense of giving it and its components meaning, and that this meaning is produced within discourses (Laclau 2007: 541; cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). Further, LMDT also assumes that the meaning of signs is differential, that is, depending on their difference from and relation to each other, and that these relations – and, thus, meaning itself – are, in the end, floating (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 95, 103; Laclau 2007: 543-544; Laclau 1996: 37).

However, as mentioned, central to social constructionism is also the idea that at certain place, at a certain time, the meaning of a sign is, indeed, fixed by a cultural code, making any communication possible at all (see Hall 1997: 21). This is maintained by Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 112) as well, but, ultimately, they see any such fixation as unattainable: Society, as an entity where the meaning of signs is laid down once and for all, is simply impossible. Instead, society is overrun by the constant struggle between different forces striving to fixate the meaning of particular signs, or, in other words, politics (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 107, 122-125; Laclau 1997: 300, 302). In Laclau’s (2007: 545) words, ‘political competition can be seen as attempts by rival political forces to partially fix […] signifiers to particular signifying configurations’\(^{19}\).

According to Mouffe (Evans 2001-2002: 12; Diaz Alvarez 2010), politics may take two forms: that of agonism and antagonism, where in the former there is a rather far-reaching consensus among the parties on the organisation and main principles of society, including the form and rules of the very struggle. Consequently, there is also room for constructive solutions and progress. In the latter, this agreement is lacking, which makes the antagonistic conflict much more profound and, ultimately, doomed to failure. Since conflict in itself is inevitable, Mouffe advocates an agonistic democracy/pluralism, where agonistic relationships and struggles are encouraged at the expense of antagonistic ones (Evans 2001-2002: 11). One thing crucial to this form of democracy, is that collective identities are not essentialised, but allowed to remain multifaceted, thus offering a variety

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\(^{18}\) This reading, as well as the forthcoming methodological application, of Chantal and Mouffe’s discourse theory rely to a great extent, although not entirely, on Jørgensen and Phillips’ (2002: 24-59) interpretation of their thoughts.

\(^{19}\) Politics/political competition should here be understood in a broader sense than only party politics (see Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 36).
of contact points between different social groups (Evans 2001-2002: 12).

However, to give a closer description of the political struggle(s), Laclau and Mouffe make a distinction between *elements*, signs not yet fixed in relation to other signs, and *moments*, signs whose meaning is, although always only temporarily, established (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105), and singles out the former as its starting point with the latter as its goal. Still, since the fixation of signs in relation to each other is never completed, elements turned into moments always have the character of *floating signifiers*, that is, they are open to different interpretations and definitions. Consequently, they are all running the risk of becoming objects of conflict (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 113, 131; Laclau 1990a: 28).

The partial fixation of meaning is, according to LMDT, accomplished through *articulations*: ‘[practices] establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). Articulations work in two ways: by drawing signs together in *chains of equivalence* and, simultaneously, by excluding other signs from these (Laclau and Mouffe 2011: 127; Laclau 1996: 38). Signs are, in other words, given meaning by being equated to some other signs and, in the same process, separated from others, and it is articulations that serve to organise these systems. In the end, it is the results of different articulations that constitute discourses, and characteristic to these are that floating signifiers are primarily connected to *nodal points*, privileged signs fixating their principal meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105, 112).\(^{20}\)

It is, in other words, first of all nodal points that shape discourses and fixate meaning, by emerging as reference points or themes that set limits for the ways certain signifiers can be talked about and understood. If a discourse is successful, a state of *hegemony* presents itself, where the meaning of a sign is so firmly established that its contingency goes unnoticed and it appears as objective (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 134; Laclau 2007: 545). Still, since meaning is fixed partly through the exclusion of signs, this abundance of meaning, or *field of discursivity*, is constantly present as a threat to any prevailing hegemony, possibly to be realised through competing articulations/discourses (Laclau and Mouffe 2011: 111-113; Laclau 1996: 44-46).

Since the present study is focusing primarily on textual products, it is necessary to emphasise that neither Laclau and Mouffe (2011: 107) consider articulations/discourses to be solely linguistic phenomena.\(^ {21}\) However, with this taken into consideration, based on LMDT, ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ can be seen as floating signifiers whose meaning is partially fixed but, at the

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\(^{20}\) To illustrate the latter, Laclau (1988: 254-255) argues that the possible meaning of a signifier such as ‘woman’ is dependent on and regulated by its relation to, for example, ‘family’ and/or ‘subordination to men’.

\(^{21}\) The texts analysed here are also products of journalism and creative writing workshops, practices that are, indeed, material.
same time, also incomplete. Following the same line of thought, print media representations appear as articulations striving to finalise the meaning of ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ – that is, turn them into moments – by, as will be demonstrated, connecting them to specific nodal points, thereby creating certain chains of equivalence.

The creative writing workshops for refugees and asylum seekers can, correspondingly, be regarded as another set of articulations, intended to take an agonistic stance\(^\text{22}\) in relation to print media.\(^\text{23}\) Consequently, it is, also, possible to place them in a larger ethico-political context, that is to see them as an attempted step towards the realisation of an agonistic democracy/pluralism, as prescribed by Mouffe: Firstly, by trying to open a up a channel of communication and debate, adhering to the principles of a democratic society, where refugees and asylum seekers can make their voices heard. Secondly – to the extent by the texts actually offer representations of refugees and asylum seekers that are more various than those in print media – by increasing the opportunities of mutual identification between refugees and asylum seekers and other groups of people in the host society. And by comparing the representations in print media with those in the refugee and asylum seeker short stories and poems, this study should be able to give at least a hint of whether the workshops answer to the minimum requirements of these purposes and aims; that is, whether or not they actually provide ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ with an alternative, more nuanced meaning, by putting signs from the field of discursivity created by print media (back) into play.

However, since print media is given a quite prominent role in the present study, there is a need for some comments on the actual influence of mass media on people’s understanding of the world. As noted, van Dijk stresses the impact media have on our conception of reality. Seu (2003: 159), however, argues that people also have the ability to refute media messages, an opinion that gets at least some support from empirical research on the subject. Kitzinger (1999: 10-12), for example, underlines the role alternative sources of information have in affecting the impact of particular media representations, but maintains, at the same time, that ‘there are limits to the ways in which people routinely use factors such as logic, political perspectives, personal experience, or scepticism in resisting media messages’ (1999: 14; see also Miller and Philo 1999: 30).

Regarding media representations as rather powerful, but not unrestricted, articulations seems, thus, as reasonable. However, as Hanyes et al. (2004) argue, there is often a social distance between refugees and asylum seekers and host populations, which, in this case, would mean an

\(^{22}\) Since the creative writing workshops in many ways work within the same system of politics and publication as print media, there is not talk of an antagonistic relationship here.

\(^{23}\) As Carole Angier (personal communication, April 24, 2014) puts it, one of its aspirations was ‘to counteract the stereotyping and scare-mongering of our political class and most of the media’ when it comes to refugees and asylum seekers.
increased role of (print) media when it comes to the latter group’s knowledge of the former.\textsuperscript{24} Further, it should also be noted that representations such as print media articles do not appear out of thin air, but are constructed upon the opinions of not only the journalist(s), but also people being interviewed and sharing their points of views. In that sense, media representations of refugees and asylum seekers – rather than create – \textit{reproduce} discourses that are already present in the broader society; a fact that stresses even further the need for scrutinisation and, possible, contrasting pictures.

2.2 Methodology
The methods of a scientific study should be subordinated to the question(s) it raises (Deacon et al. 2007: 151). As this study aims to compare how meaning is assigned to ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ through representations in print media and texts written by refugees and asylum seekers themselves, employing a (comparative) discourse analysis comes as a natural choice for method. Since, as Deacon et al. (2007: 158) point out, through discourse analysis, it is possible to reveal – in this case competing – ‘attempts to close meaning down, to fix it in relation to a given position, to make certain conventions self-evidently correct, […] and to make the subject positions of [the discourses] transparently obvious’. However, at this point, little has been said about the actual means of analysis, considering that discourses can be analysed in many different ways (Gillen and Petersen 2005: 146). The concentration on written texts implies that textual analysis will be utilised, but also to this form of inquiry there are a number of different approaches.

In the present study, the method of analysis will, however, continue to build on LMDT, since, as Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 4) underline, ‘[i]n discourse analysis, \textit{theory} and \textit{method} are intertwined and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study’. Although Laclau and Mouffe do not develop any detailed method of analysis themselves, analyses of empirical material can, still, be carried out based on the concepts they introduce (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 49). Their thoughts on the instability of meaning, as well as the subsequent idea of struggling articulations/discourses, offer, as already demonstrated, a background against which conflicts in the material can be understood. However, what is even more important, since discourses are regarded, here, as working on a very fundamental level of understanding, is that LMDT offers a way to locate, identify and map possible meaning differences (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 51). While the introduction of floating signifiers points out sites of potential conflict between competing articulations/discourses (Jørgensen and

\textsuperscript{24} And, of course, vice versa, although this lays outside the scope of this study.
Phillips 2002: 148), the emphasis on nodal points, as keys to the fixation of meaning, provides a method not only for determining, but also describing possible variations. Since ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are regarded, here, as floating signifiers, using LMDT means that to establish whether there are any significant differences in the way refugees and asylum seekers are represented in print media and their self-written texts, the forthcoming analysis will investigate to which extent the nodal points they are connected to in each respective case diverge from each other.

However, while LMDT focus on the role and place of language in political struggle and may be used to construct a practicable method for showing differences between different articulations/discourses, less time is spent on the functions of language and texts when it comes to representation(s). Therefore, semiotic analysis will be used as a complementary method of inquiry in this study.

Neither semiotic analysis constitutes a straightforward method of analysis (Deacon et al. 2007: 148), but a theoretical framework and conceptual toolbox making a deepened understanding of texts possible. Technically, combining LMDT and semiotic analysis is rather convenient, since the two share the same theoretical basis. However, within semiotic analysis, more attention is paid to the production of meaning through the interplay between signifiers and signifieds: the words in a text and the mental concepts they adhere to (see Hall 1997: 17-19). Besides seeing these connections as culturally bound, the meaning of signs is regarded as complex in the sense that the same signifier may simultaneously be linked to several, different signifieds (Hall 1997: 32).

Building on this thought, a distinction is made between the denotation and connotation of texts, where the former refers to its surface and the latter to the level where the intricate relationships between signifiers and signifieds are activated (Hall 1997: 38), producing what Barthes (1957: 223-224) calls myths: the more indirect, but by no means less important, messages that texts mediate. At this level, a totality of signs, for example a passage or an entire text, might turn into a signifier,

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25 To illustrate this point, Jørgensen and Phillips singles out ‘democracy’ and conclude that ‘the floating signifier “democracy” can point to an order of discourse of political discourses […], in which different discourses try to define “democracy” in their own particular way. That a signifier is floating indicates that one discourse has not succeeded in fixing its meaning and that other discourses are struggling to appropriate it’.

26 Like Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, the theoretical framework underlying semiotic analysis understands language, that is, the production of meaning, in a very broad sense (see e.g. Hall 1997: 36; Barthes 1957: 219). Here, due to the subject of the study, it will primarily be understood as, and discussed in relation to, written text.

27 Just as Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, semiotic analysis starts out from a conception of language as a relational system (Hall 1997: 31) that is made up by signs (Hall 1997: 30-31; Deacon et al. 2007: 141-142). The relations between different signs and, thus, meaning, are neither seen as natural, but as fixated by a shared code or, in other words, cultural conventions (Hall 1997: 32; Deacon et al. 2007: 142).

Similarities between Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and the theoretical basis for semiotic analysis can also be found in relation to the latter’s view of texts as ‘syntagms’: sequences of signs structured in accordance to certain rules, for example grammatical or related to a certain genre. Syntagms are, namely, seen as produced out of ‘paradigms’, a quantity of signs with kindred meaning, available as potential representations of a certain phenomenon (Deacon et al. 2007: 146) and from where, in the production of a text, some are selected while others are refused.
producing meaning by drawing on broader, cultural themes (Hall 1997: 38).

In many ways, applying semiotic analysis to written language entails a rather straightforward approach to the texts in question; focus will be put on how and with what words refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed in the different samples. However, what semiotic analysis has to offer LMDT and the present investigation is a more vivid understanding of language that, in contrast to, for example, content analysis, makes it possible, but also necessary, to take the meaning of larger wholes of text into consideration. In comparison with content analysis, which is more ‘suited to examining manifest or more rapidly apparent meanings’ (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 121), semiotic analysis, by pointing to the need to investigate also the connotative level of language, is, further, better suited for analysing the refugee and asylum seeker texts, considering that a considerable part of them are poems with a more or less symbolic language. That not all of the refugee and asylum seeker texts are written as stories in a classical sense (cf. Gillespie 2006: 81), also speaks in favour of semiotic analysis when compared to other potential methods of textual analysis, first of all narrative analysis.

2.3 Final theoretical and methodological remarks

This study is, obviously, written from a non-refugee/asylum seeker perspective. Whether the texts analysed offer any new information about refugees and asylum seekers is, furthermore, depending on the reader’s own personal experiences and background.

As pointed out by Somekh et al. (2005: 3), ‘social science researchers […] need to consider the possible impact of their reports on the people who have been part of it’. Here, this might be seen as especially important, since examining representations of refugees and asylum seekers means putting people, who are, often, already in a vulnerable position, into the spotlight. Although this study focus on texts already made public, caution is still necessary, since similar investigations also have to be seen as producing meaning that might have consequences for those involved. Since this is inevitable and it is impossible to anticipate and control every possible consequence (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 174-174, 183), it is essential to keep a couple of things in mind.

Firstly, the reason why this study focuses on texts written by refugees and asylum seekers is not because these are seen as providing the truth about themselves and their peers (cf. Clark and Cambell 2000: 29-31). The social constructionist standpoint that we can never reach a neutral conception of reality, is valid also when it comes to people representing themselves.28 Both media representations and the texts written by refugees and asylum seekers are best seen as partial representations.

28 Further, to claim that neither one of us is always in the best position to give an accurate description of ourselves is hardly a controversial statement to make.
descriptions of the world, and if this study, in any sense, can be said to be striving for objective representations, it is by trying to look at its subject from as many viewpoints as possible.

Secondly, on that last note, there is also a need to emphasise that the present study investigates only a selection of media representations and refugee/asylum seeker texts. In addition, when analysing discourses, the researcher is always caught up in the same presuppositions that is the subject of his/her investigation, which suggests that at least some of these remain invisible (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002: 178), even when, as in this case, the method of turning to the views of outsiders is utilised. Therefore, this study should be seen as provisional (see Barker 2008: 166), in the sense that it examines only a limited material as well as some culturally bound, preconceived assumptions. This does not entail that the results of the study are completely negligible; they should, still, cast at least some light on whether refugees and asylum seekers, in their own texts, offer an alternative portrayal of themselves when compared to print media, as long as one remembers that exactly this is the aim of the investigation at hand. Together with similar investigations, the present study should be able to contribute to a ‘widening of our common understanding of the world and knowledge of the social processes and institutions which frame our lives’ (Deacon et al. 2007: 378).
3. Literature review

3.1 Print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers

When it comes to representations of refugees and asylum seekers, Goodnow (2008: 68) maintains that ‘[a]cross countries and across times, asylum seekers and refugees have been represented in a variety of ways’. However, as will be argued throughout this overview, the research so far rather talks in favour of the opposite. As mentioned, the main part of this research covers newspapers in USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, principally from the 2000s and onwards, but independently of space, time, social context, newspaper format etc., the same patterns reappear.

As emphasised earlier, the omission of refugee and asylum seeker voices is a recurring phenomenon in print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers (Sulaiman-Hill et al. 2011: 355; Pickering 2001: 183; Randall 2003; Bradimore and Bauder 2011: 650; Buchanan 2003: 8), meaning not only that their views and opinions are left unheard, but also that refugees and asylum seekers are represented as speech- and voiceless (cf. Malkki 1996: 386).

Another recurrent feature previously mentioned, is, as KhosraviNik (2010: 13; cf. Willis and Fernald 2004: 283) puts it in a study that besides refugees and asylum seekers covers media representations of immigrants in British newspapers, that ‘these groups of people are systematically referred to and constructed as an unanimous group with all sharing similar characteristics, backgrounds, intentions, motivations and economic status’. Although some humanising and individualising tendencies can be distinguished – especially in the case of refugees originating from the Balkan conflict – it is, in the main, a matter of degree and only visible when the newspapers are ‘not involved in discourse of political rivalry’ (KhosraviNik 2010: 22-23). Dehumanising and deindividualising strategies are also identified and criticised by O’Doherty and Lecouteur (2007: 5; Klocker and Dunn 2003: 82) in a study focusing on Australia, and accomplished by referring to diverse groups of people by simply using signs as ‘refugees’, ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘boat people’. Another way to bring about the same effect is to refer to refugees and asylum seekers by using numbers of arrivals, concepts like ‘applicants’ ‘new arrivals’, ‘levels’, and ‘foreign arrivals’ (KhosraviNik 2010: 13-14) or metaphors such as ‘influx’, ‘wave’, ‘flood’, and ‘flock’ (Baker et al. 2008: 287; Speers 2001: 28; McLaughlin 1999: 198-199). Further, the omission of names or even pseudonyms and other personal characteristics, such as the refugee/asylum seeker’s ethnic group, play an important role in this respect (Speers 2001: 26; Vicsek et al. 2008: 102). These tendencies

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29 For a full list of named newspapers in the analyses, see Appendix 2.
30 Other studies referred to in this paper include print media in Hungary, Slovenia, Malaysia and the Netherlands.
31 The more sympathetic attitude towards refugees from former Yugoslavia in print media is also recognized by Spoonley and Trlin (2004: 32) and Speers (2001: 39).
can be found in articles independently of whether they, otherwise, put refugees and asylum seekers in a negative or a positive light (KhosraviNik 2010: 21).

However, in general, print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers are negative or even hostile (Barclay et al. 2003: 93; Randall 2003; Kauar 2007: 10; ARTICLE 19 2003: 15; Klocker and Dunn 2003: 80). Here, metaphors like ‘wave’ and ‘flood’ function to represent refugees and asylum seekers as a threat, by drawing on the language of natural disasters (Haynes et al. 2004; Baker et al. 2008: 287; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008: 22; McLaughlin 1999: 208). This is, furthermore, accomplished by the use of imagery of warfare and violence, such as ‘invasion’, ‘assault’, ‘legions’, and ‘army’ when referring to refugees and asylum seekers trying to or having entered a specific country (ICAR 2004: 35; Erjavec 2010: 96; Buchanan 2003: 13; Pickering 2001: 173). However, the image of threat is also evoked by assigning certain characteristics to refugees and asylum seekers, where criminality is the most common. Besides straightforwardly describing refugees and asylum seekers as criminal (Clarkson 2000; Kauar 2007: 10), giving prominence to articles where involvement in criminal activities is the subject (ICAR 2004: 35; Vicsek et al. 2008: 104; Greenslade 2005: 22) or insinuating connections to war crimes and terrorism (Hanyes et al. 2004; Randall 2003; Spoonley and Trlin 2004: 30; Bradimore and Bauder 2011: 653), the term ‘illegal immigrants’ – although, by definition, incorrect – is often used to refer both to refugees and asylum seekers (Hanyes et al. 2004; Bradimore and Bauder 2011: 646; Gilbert 2013: 834; ARTICLE 19 2003: 15), suggesting that their very entry to and presence in the country in question is an illegal act (Pickering 2001: 172; Innes 2010: 466).

Another cluster of characteristics attributed to refugees and asylum seekers, serving to depict them as a form of threat, is taken from the language of medicine and hygiene. Refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed as dirty (Erjavec 2010: 96) and carriers and spreaders of diseases (Kauar 2007:10; Pickering 2001: 181; Hanyes et al. 2004; Speers 2001: 93), consequently posing a hazard to public health (Clarkson 2000; Greenberg 2000). Further, by describing refugees and asylum seekers, their customs and habits as essentially deviant (Hanyes et al. 2004), they are represented as endangering the local, national culture (Innes 2010: 472; Klocker and Dunn 2003: 81; Clark and Cambell 2000: 34).

The term ‘illegal immigrant’, together with ‘bogus refugees’, ‘bogus asylum seekers’, ‘asylum cheats’, and ‘illegals’ (Barclay et al. 2003: 90; Buchanan 2003: 12; ARTICLE 19: 15), also serves the purpose of depicting refugees and asylum seekers’ request for protection as unfounded and, simultaneously, themselves as dishonest (Erjavec 2010: 96). If not represented as blunt

32 In relation to this, it is noteworthy that Innes (2010: 461) argues that collectivization is, in itself, a prerequisite for the portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers as a threat.
criminals, refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed as opportunists, trying to cheat themselves in to exploit the host countries' welfare systems (Gilbert 2013: 832-833; Bradimore and Bauder 2011: 648; Spoonley and Trlin 2004: 29; White 2004: 295). In their study of the print media coverage of a group of Czech and Slovak Romani asylum seekers in Great Britain in 1997, Clark and Campbell (2000: 38) observe that ‘in a matter of days, readers were able to position the Czech and Slovak Romanies […] as “bogus asylum seekers”; […] as “undeserving” of assistance, and “grasping” and “unrestrained” in their request for help; [and] as harbouring “exploitative” intentions’.

It is also possible to discern a somewhat milder form of the refugees and asylum seekers as a threat-theme, namely representations of refugees and asylum seekers as a burden on the national economy, social security systems, and taxpayers. Descriptions of refugees and asylum seekers as a drain on financial resources (Clarkson 2000), a hindrance to economic growth (Greenberg 2000), or as putting a strain on health systems (Innes 2010: 468) and numbers, describing alleged costs (Gilbert 2013: 831; Erjavec 2010: 96), play an important role here, together with detailed information about services made available for refugees and asylum seekers (Clark and Cambell 2000: 35). As Speers (2001: 39) notes, in a study on Welsh local media, ‘[the] costs and logistics of accommodating asylum seekers in local Welsh communities dominate the coverage of the issue in Welsh newspapers’.

Although rather an exception than the rule, there are, also, more positive representations of refugees and asylum seekers to be found in print media, as well as articles aimed at arousing sympathy. However, another crucial notion is that these can be placed more or less in a direct state of opposition to the negative depictions described above. The portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers as a threat is countered by representations of them as child-like (Robins 2003: 35), soft and crying (Jenicek et al. 2009: 642), or helpless and powerless victims (KhosraviNik 2009: 484), that is, as non-threatening. Together with concepts like ‘genuine refugees’ and ‘real refugees’ (ICAR 2004: 35), the victimization of refugees and asylum seekers also serves the purpose of depicting certain refugees and asylum seekers as genuine (see Sulaiman-Hill et al. 2011: 355) – a contrast to representations of them as bogus and opportunististic (Pickering 2001: 175). Finally, depictions of refugees and asylum seekers as a burden stand against articles where refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed as skilful people (Sulaiman-Hill et al. 2011: 354) that can contribute, or in other ways be useful, to the host country (Barclay et al. 2003: 93; Baker et al. 2008: 287; Innes 2010: 469; Current 2008: 55; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008: 25).

To conclude, besides portraying them as a homogenous group of people, print media’s coverage of refugees and asylum seekers can be said to circle around, and connect ‘refugee’ and
'asylum seeker' to, three nodal points, that can be named ‘threat’, ‘genuineness’, and ‘utility’.\textsuperscript{33} What at first glance can be seen as conflicting representations, is, in other words and on a closer examination, rather print media telling the myth of refugees and asylum seekers as subjects only of these. Consequently, through this simplification of refugee and asylum seeker identities, print media can be seen as contributing to the essentialisation of collective identities that Mouffe – on account of the subsequent reinforcement of boundaries between different social groups – as noted, is warning against.

3.2 Research based on refugee and asylum seeker narratives

Turning to refugees and asylum seekers for their experiences, opinions and points of view is, of curse, not a course of action unique to this study (cf. Tete 2012: 106-107). It has earlier been practiced within the fields of humanitarian aid, refugee and asylum seeker assistance and academic disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, where refugees and asylum seekers have been assigned the somewhat self-contradictory role of native informants (cf. Shemak 2011: 23-24).\textsuperscript{34}

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this kind of enquiries and research has offered insights into the situations that refugees and asylums seekers find themselves in, their needs, thoughts, and actions, both when it comes to individuals living in refugee camps and those resettled in, or trying to enter, a new country of residence. In a research project initiated by Oxfam GB, where Sri Lankan internally displaced persons were given the opportunity to speak out about their situation and needs, it is noted that one important outcome was information that ‘can help NGOs to design more appropriate programs, but equally it serves as a foundation for advocacy’ (Demusz 2000: 46), since through the project, ‘the participants have made it clear which issues they feel are most important’ (Demusz 2000: 47). Focusing on the mental health of female Vietnamese refugees living in refugee camps in Hong Kong and refugee children in Gaza City, Loughry (2008) concludes that asking the refugees for their opinions revealed their actual concerns, making it easier to develop culture and gender sensitive responses.\textsuperscript{35}

In her much quoted study on Burundian Hutu refugees living in western Tanzania, Malkki (1995b: 16) states that ‘understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people’ and moves on to show, through interviews and observations, that to many of the informants, the refugee status was in fact very valuable, since to them, ‘exile represented a period of

\textsuperscript{33} In practice, these are, obviously, not as distinct, but rather blend into each other.

\textsuperscript{34} It should be noted that the aim of the following discussion is not necessarily to cover all the research done along these lines, but to be sufficient enough to bring forth a couple of important points.

\textsuperscript{35} A similar conclusion is drawn by Hayward et al. (2008), in a study of Sudanese refugee women living in Canada.
tests and lessons, a process of purification, which would make the Hutu as “a people” worthy of regaining the homeland’ (Malkki 1995b: 222: cf. Malkki 1992: 35).

In a similar study of Somalis living in Dadaab refugee camp in the north-eastern part of Kenya – an investigation that also takes media representations of refugees as a point of departure – Horst (2006a) explores the ways refugees cope with different types of insecurities they are faced with, as a result of their situation. Elsewhere, Horst (2006b) uses Somali refugee informants to uncover the reasons behind their wish for resettlement. Sayigh (2007: 104), studying self-representations of Palestinian women living in a refugee camp in Lebanon, argues, in turn, that their ‘life stories are an indispensable enrichment of national history’.

In yet another study that takes media representations – in this case of HIV-positive refugees in New Zealand – as a starting point, Worth (2002: 64) concludes that the refugees’ own apprehensions diverge significantly from media’s projections, both when it comes to their diagnosis and their self-images. Säävälä (2010: 1144), in an interview based investigation of Kosso Albanian refugee women living in Finland and their reasons for migrating, demonstrates that despite being given official refugee status, many of the women rather gave economic, health-related, or educational motivations for leaving their former homeland.

Important to note about these studies, is that research based on refugee and asylum seeker narratives might not only offer deepened insights into a number of themes related to refugeeeness and asylum seeking, but also challenge assumptions and what has been taken as common and established knowledge. This is emphasised by Malkki (1992: 25) as well as Horst (2006a: 11), claiming that her research shows that the images of refugees that much of humanitarian aid is based on, ‘do no justice to the multifaceted and fluid humanness that characterise individual refugees, or to the agency that I found so striking in their attempts to deal with life’. In a similar way, Hayward et al. (2008: 212) point out that their dialogue with the refugee women forced her and her colleagues to rethink concepts such as ‘mental health’ and ‘coping strategies’.

However, on the other hand, it is just as vital to recognise the researcher’s role and its implications in this type of research. As Horst (2006a: 25) notes, no matter how participatory the approach is, it is, in the end, the researcher that initiates specific projects; a fact that, obviously, affects their direction and design on a very fundamental level. Malkki (1995: 56-58), in turn, addresses the problem of choosing among and editing narratives, other activities where the researcher influences the knowledge that is produced in his/her research. Considering that humanitarian aid workers and academic researchers hardly can be seen as subordinated in or

36 Simultaneously, it is demonstrated that there were also ‘marked divergences’ (Malkki 1995b: 16) to be found among the refugees in relation to this issue.
excluded from the structures that provide ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ with meaning, this leads on to the question whether the research discussed here really produces knowledge that do not only challenge established truths, but move beyond dominant discourses.

Commenting on the Oxfam GB project previously mentioned, Rajaram (2002: 252) argues that through the presentation of its outcomes, the organisation ‘simplifies and abstracts [the] refugee voices so as to make them amenable to Oxfam’s own purposes and agenda’, with the result that common representations of refugees as, for example, helpless and puerile, are rather reinforced than undermined (Rajaram 2002: 256). And when turning to the rest of the studies, there are few results that cannot be situated within an already prevailing discourse. The aim of Horst’s (2006a: 28) investigation, which is the one concentrating most directly on representations of refugees, is, for example, to show that the Somalis in her research were, to a great extent, capable of dealing, on their own, with the insecurity they faced; an aspiration that stands in direct opposition to representations of refugees as vulnerable victims. A similar tendency, however in relation to the representations of refugees as a burden on their host society, can be seen in another sample focusing on how refugees are portrayed: a collection of interview based textual portraits of mostly Sudanese refugees living in Cairo, where, in the introduction, it is argued that ‘[t]he truth this book tells is that African refugees in Cairo are a potent force, whose talent, experience, and dedication could do much to benefit their host country’ (Eltahawy et al. 2009: 2).

Furthermore, from the perspective of this study, it is also noteworthy that the type of research discussed here leaves refugees and asylum seekers still dependent on other people to get their voices heard. Their opinions and points of views are not only mediated through the researcher during the research project, but after it is completed, they are left with no more possibilities or means to make their voices heard than they had before its beginning.

3.3 Refugee and asylum seeker narratives in literature
Lo (2013: 23) argues that ‘literature and the role of storytelling is largely overlooked and not thought of as part of the refugee condition or the study of refugees’. Still, up to this date, at least some attention seems to have been directed in this direction, whereof Lo’s own study is one of the examples that will be discussed here.

A recurring theme in earlier studies of literature written by authors with a refugee and/or asylum seeker background is the voice(lessness) of refugees and asylum seekers. In his reading of Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani’s novel Men in the Sun, Limbu (2009: 278) interprets the death of the three Palestinian refugee protagonists, trapped in an overheated water tank during their

37 It should be noted that positive aspects of the project are also acknowledged.
attempt to cross the border between Iraq and Kuwait, as an illustration of the lack of a space for refugees to speak ‘where there is recognition for both the status of the speaker and the sense of his or her speech’. Shemak (2011: 28, 86) comes to a similar conclusion, claiming that refugees have often had great problems with telling and making their stories heard. In her discussion of Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat’s “Children of the Sea”, Shemak (2011: 77) draws a parallel between the birth of a dead child in the leaking boat that serves as the vehicle for the story characters, and the ‘[male] narrator’s inability to bring his story, his testimony, to fruition’. Investigating the role of refugee and asylum seeker testimonial narratives in relation to refugee movements and different asylum seeker practices, Shemak (2011: 217) also addresses how practices aimed at refugees and asylum seekers serve to produce certain specific narratives, since as Mami, the family’s matriarch in Dominican-American novelist Julia Alvarez’s ¡Yo!, refugees and asylum seekers are often aware of the type of information that favours their interests.

However, on the other hand, Shemak (2011: 48) emphasises the role literature might have in producing actual spaces where refugees and asylum seekers can not only speak, but also be heard. Discussing Danticat’s The Farming of the Bones, Shemak (2011: 157) argues that the novel attempts to create a kind of refugee – more specifically Haitian – subjectivity that is otherwise left out. Lo (2013: 49) goes even further, arguing that the Hmong-American writer Kao Kalia Yang ‘through her writing, reveals that refugees have always had the ability to speak’.

According to Lo (2013: 2), analysing literary works produced by five authors and poets with a refugee and/or asylum seeker background, the writers in her study reclaim and recover ‘denied identities’ and ‘memories of escape’, simultaneously redefining concepts associated with refugeeeness and asylum seeking such as ‘flight’, ‘refugee camp’, and ‘resettlement’. With the representations of refugees and asylum seekers as silent victims in mind, Lo (2013: 24) claims that textual representations have allowed the writers to recreate or (re)imagine an alternative or complementary narrative to that of the silent, anonymous refugee […], or the muted victim. […] In many ways, these narratives are able to add real nuance to the refugee category even as they represent fictionalized and reconstructed accounts.

If the previous quotation holds true, a natural, attendant question is what kind of nuance the literary works discussed in the present studies may bring to the representations of refugees and asylum seekers, besides disputing their muteness. On a more general level, Lo (2013: 63) argues that Yang’s The Latehomecomer brings forward individual differences among refugees, which would undermine the idea of refugees and asylum seekers as a homogenous group of people. On a similar note, Lo (2013: 108) maintains that in Brother I'm Dying, Danticat ‘advocates for a refugee
identity that […] actually addresses the individual needs of the asylum seeker [emphasis added]’.

This view is also shared by Shemak (2011: 225), claiming that the works of Cuban-American writers Ivonne Lamazares and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés ‘reveal the deep fractures within the Cuban exile community in the United states’, which is the subject of their writing.

Going more into detail, Lo (2013: 185) emphasises Du, the Vietnamese refugee boy adopted by Jane, the protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, as an example of how representations of refugees solely as victims can be nuanced, contending that he is also a survivor. As an alternative to the same stereotype, Shemak (2013: 217-218) offers Mami in Alvarez’s *¡Yo!*, who, she argues, emerges, through the treatment of her daughters, as both victim and perpetrator. Shemak (2011: 236) also sees an alternative representation in the killer of Juan – a Mariel refugee living in Miami, just as the main character – in “La Buena Vida” and, further on, “El Loco”, written by Rodríguez Milanés; namely that of the murderer.

However, at this point, it should be noted that although representations of a refugee or asylum seeker as a murderer might be an alternative to representing him/her as a victimized, it falls well within the dichotomy of refugees and asylum seekers as either threats or victims. The extent to which that particular characterisation brings any nuance to mainstream representations of refugees and asylum seekers is, thus, questionable. However, regarding the other representations brought forward so far, the case is not as clear cut. Even though one might argue that Du, as a survivor, embodies the idea of the refugee or asylum seeker as an asset to the host society, one must keep in mind that it is never made clear what skills he possesses that have kept him alive or how they can be used to contribute to his new surroundings. As a matter of fact, his survival is something that draws him closer to his original family and caretakers (Lo 2013: 182). In a similar vein, it is possible to claim that Mami, the perpetrator, falls in the same category as Juan’s murderer, that is, the refugee or asylum seeker as a threat, but then it also has to be noted that unlike the latter, Mami is not depicted as a violent person in general and neither are her deeds directed at anyone outside of her own family or, more precisely, her daughters (Shemak 2011: 217).

Turning to another short story by Kanafani, “Farther than the Borders”, there seems to be a representation of refugees and asylum seekers that is even harder to fit within the predominant patterns. In Siddiq’s (1995: 95) characterization of the protagonist of the story as ‘at once a refugee, a fugitive, a prisoner, and a potential revolutionary’, especially the last-mentioned is eye-catching. In his reading of Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun*, Siddiq (1995: 94), further, connects emotions of estrangement and alienation to the main characters. Similar feelings, that is, of detachment from their former identity, is found by Hammel (2004: 126), analysing Martha Blend’s *A Child Alone*. Hammel (2004: 129), focusing on autobiographies by five refugees authors who all came as

What this means is, to put it short, that here, there are, arguably, three new nodal points that are brought into play, expanding on the myth told by print media, namely those of ‘social change’, ‘adjustment’ and ‘emotions’.

### 3.4 Summary

Besides representing them as a speechless, homogenous group of people, there are, as shown, certain recurring patterns to be found in print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers. These are best described as connecting ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ to the nodal points of ‘threat’, ‘genuineness’, and ‘utility’.

When looking at investigations where refugees and asylum seekers have been used as native informants, it, firstly, has to be noticed that these tend to focus rather at themes more or less connected to refugee-ness and asylum seeking than directly at (self-)representations of refugees and asylum seekers. And the studies that do, seem to show no results that move beyond the already established discourse(s).

However, turning to studies of literary works by authors with a refugee and/or asylum seeking background, there is room for arguing that these offer representations that bring real nuance to the portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers, by introducing nodal points such as ‘social change’, ‘adjustment’ and ‘emotions’. Consequently, there are at least some support for similar texts as a mean to alter the prevailing (print) media discourse. On the other hand, as emphasised earlier, not much attention has been directed at the textual production of refugees and asylum seekers so far and the present study can, thus, be seen as an attempt to contribute to this field of research at the same time as it diverges from those discussed above in at least two ways: Firstly, it focuses not on the works of established, in the sense of published, authors, but on texts by writers who, with a few exceptions, are novices. Secondly, it starts out from a more exhaustive analysis of common representations of refugees and asylum seekers than earlier studies that, mostly, seem to take solely the portrayal of refugees or asylum seekers as a mute victims as their point of departure.
4. Analysis and discussion

4.1 Aim and focus of analysis

The aim of this part of the paper is to map the discourse on refugees and asylum seekers in the texts that serve as a material for the present study, by pointing out and illustrating how and to which nodal points ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are connected in and through the short stories and poems produced within the creative writing workshops.

However, before going into a more detailed analysis, there are two important things to keep in mind. Firstly, the stories and poems produced within the creative workshops are not products solely of the participants. The workshop facilitators have, in various ways and to different extents, participated in creating inspiration, choosing themes, translating thoughts into English and editing (Carole Angier, personal communication, 24 April, 2014; Malika Booker, personal communication, 16 September, 2014; Samson Sahele, personal communication, 2 July, 2014). At the same time, it should be noted that this involvement can be regarded as a natural element in any activity with the purpose of acquiring and/or developing means of expression and, further, that there is hardly such a thing as (public) writing completely free of external influences and restraints.

Secondly, it is also worth emphasising that the texts analysed here do not represent refugees and asylum seekers exactly in the same manner as print media, but in so far as their authors write about themselves and their peers, and by the emotions and states of minds that are expressed through the – sometimes apparently fictional – stories and poems. In fact, ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’ and other related signifiers are rarely used in the refugees and asylum seekers’ own texts (see Otunnu 2005c; Nazari 2013c; Kassa 2013d; Nan 2013c; Iradukunda 2013c for exceptions).

When it comes to the presentation of the analysis, there is a great variety to the representations in the refugee and asylum seeker texts. Since the scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive presentation, the main focus will be put on some features that are especially relevant in relation to how refugees and asylum seekers are represented in print media as well as frequent in the texts analysed. Rather than focusing on individual texts, the nodal points that ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are connected to in the refugee and asylum seeker texts will be presented one at the time, starting with those familiar from print media representations. After that, the themes that have been brought forward by earlier research of refugee and asylum seeker literature are addressed. Finally, some nodal points that are unique to this study are examined. All in all, the selection is made with the aim to illustrate a number of examples that makes it possible to answer and draw some important conclusions in relation to the present study’s primary, as well as

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38 As Hall (1997: 42) points out, meaning is often dependent on larger units of texts. Consequently, the refugee and asylum seeker texts are best understood not as isolated items or only related to each other, but in relation to, for example, the representations that they are meant to contrast.
more underlying, research question(s).

4.2 Refugees, asylum seekers, threat and genuineness

When reading the refugees and asylum seekers’s text against the background of print media representations, some familiar themes reappear. The most prominent is representations of refugees and asylum seekers that may be linked to the nodal points ‘threat’ and ‘genuineness’, first of all through descriptions of the authors/narrators/protagonists as victims of war and violence.

In “My Mother”, Askari (2005a: 22) writes:

No it cannot be happening
Sounds of rockets
On our beautiful village

Bamyani (2005c: 51), in “A Story”, describes the hardships that have happened to his home country, Afghanistan, through the metaphor of a winter hitting the country, ‘an unnatural winter such that no one had ever remembered and no one had ever seen. Mountains, deserts, streets, cities, villages – all were utterly frozen. In place of snow, hailstones fell. They were so large they broke the stalks of flowers and the branches of trees’.

War and violence is also present in Nan’s (2013b) “The green people”, telling about how his remote Burmese village is drawn in to the fights between the military regime and local nationalist troops, forcing Nan and his family to flee for Thailand. Just as Otunnu’s (2005c) “Refuge at Amuru” and Nazari’s (2013c) “Dreams of my father”, “The green people” focuses on the plights the family is faced with during their immediate flight. In what may be characterised as a sequel, “Tension at Ban Mai Nan Soi Camp”, Nan (2013c) demonstrates that the suffering does not necessarily come to an end despite reaching a refugee camp. In the latter short story, it is, namely, the guards hired by the UNHCR to protect the refugees that are responsible for the ‘[b]ullying, rape and other distressing things [that] were happening across the camp’ (Nan 2013c: 30). At the same time, although victimized, the refugees in “Tension at Ban Mai Nan Soi Camp” are depicted neither as passive nor helpless, since the main thread in the story is an uprising against their living conditions that the camp residents organise and carry through. With the revolt taking off on a dark cloudy day with coming rain and rippling winds (Nan 2013c: 29), but ending with a new day dawning where “[t]he mountains woke in the sun, trees seemed to be greener, the air inhaled seemed to be fresher than the night before and the clouds frolicked in the wind under the red morning sky’ (Nan 2013c: 44), a change in the weather is used to symbolise the refugees’ accomplishment and capacity for change.

However, while there is at least a gleam of hope in “Tension at Ban Mai Nan Soi
Camp”, elsewhere Nan gives expression to greater vulnerability in the face of the acts of violence that he has encountered. In the closing lines of “This is war”, Nan (2013a: 3; cf. Nan 2013b: 5) describes how he is left with permanent marks: ‘They said, the war is over, the war is gone / But the scars are never older, it’ll never be gone.’ In Munezero im’s (2013b: 138) “When I was little”, there is no longer any hope of a solution to the conflicts that are devastating the country of his childhood, Rwanda, and the challenges appear as insurmountable. Seeking refuge somewhere else is, by many of the writers, presented as an inevitable choice. In “From Africa to New Zealand”, Iradukunda (2013c: 49: cf. Nazari 2013c: 79) states that

in 1990 my mother and her family went to Congo from Rwanda to save their lives. The war was spreading everywhere and people were running for their lives, children were crying and parents forced to watch their daughters being raped, killed or have their legs and arms cut off. This was the life they faced and my parents decided to leave their homeland. They couldn’t live with war and see so many women being raped and killed in front of their husbands and children.

Although in a somewhat shorter fashion, Ahmed (2011: 12) gives, in “Where I am from”, similar reasons for leaving:

I left because it was chaos.
It was loud like guns and bombs and the sound of people screaming.

4.3 Refugees, asylum seekers and utility

Another recurring theme in the refugee and asylum seeker texts is that of their skills and/or general capacities, leading on to the issue of ‘utility’. Its presence in Nan’s “Tension at Ban Mai Nan Soi Camp” has already been touched upon, but the subject can be found in other places as well.

The abilities of the refugees and asylum seekers is often represented in terms of wisdom and/or bodily strength, as in Otunnu’s (2005a: 21) portrayal in “My Grandmother”:

Why did she smoke?  
Was it because she was strong, like a man?  
Her husband respected her.  
He followed her instructions and obeyed her commands.

Other women came to her.  
In the sowing season  
She mixed their seeds  
and scattered them in the fields.

Returning to Nan’s (2013b: 20) “The green people”, there is similar descriptions where the father appear not only as almost omniscient, but also tireless. In Iradukunda’s (2013c: 51) “From
Africa to New Zealand”, the father is portrayed as ‘a very strong independent man with a vision for
his family’s future. [...] When he was a boy he would wake up at six every morning and go to
school. When he finished high school he went to university to study agriculture and he had a job
while he was studying’. After reaching Malawi as refugees, he and his wife, without any outside
assistance, build up a prospering business almost from scratch (Iradukunda 2013c: 52). At the end
of the short story, upon their arrival to New Zealand, Iradukunda (2013c: 58) goes on to describe
how the family contributes to their new home country; the father by working full time, the mother
by studying to become a nurse, and the children by being rather successful athletes.

Another representation in terms of both physical and mental power is noticeable in the
opening lines of Bamyani’s (2005e: 85) “I See I am Dying”:

I was a high mountain
Higher than everything
Full of power
Full of pride

I looked down at everything
I didn’t know weakness
I didn’t know exhaustion
I didn’t know fear

However, as the past tense suggests, this strength is now gone, or as Bamyani (2005e: 85) continues
his poem:

The heavy rain over my peak
Is eroding me day by day
I am becoming a plain
A desert

In “Sediga”, Bamyani (2005a: 32) gives a more literal expression to the same line of thought, by
describing the gradual loss of his bodily strength and, simultaneously, his capacity to work as a
teacher, concurrently with Afghanistan sinking deeper and deeper into violence.

In relation to print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers as a burden to host
societies, it is worth observing that in the two extracts from Bamyani’s texts, perhaps most
explicitly put in the latter, his weakness is not innate, but the result of external circumstances. A
similar change can be seen in Iradukunda’s (2013b) “The game can’t fade”, where the challenges of
living in exile, embodied in her friend’s outburst of agony, makes the narrator loose her strength.
Only on one occasion, there is a description of a more permanent weakness, namely in Otunnu’s
(2005c: 47) “Refuge at Amuru”, where her two children are described as, respectively, asthmatic
and suffering from bone pain.
4.4 Refugees and asylum seekers as messengers

The questions of voicelessness of refugees and asylum seekers and their possibility to make their voices heard, which are, as mentioned, central to the research of print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers and refugee and asylum seeker literature, is also discernible in the refugee and asylum seeker texts analysed here, where the writers/narrators often are described as a ‘messenger’ of sort.

In “My Grandparents”, Mukobya (2005a) depicts herself as a museum of her grandparents memory which would, otherwise, be lost. In a similar vein, Askari (2005a: 23) is promising, in “My Mother”, to make his mother’s fate known:

And now I am alone
With her story in my heart’s beat
Mother!

[…]

I will tell your heroic story
I will pass on your tragic history

To all
The world

Habtemichael (2005a), in turn, in “Golden Words”, represents herself as a carrier of her father’s worldly wisdom.

In several texts, a need to tell the rest of the world what the author has gone through is given an expression. Introducing “The green people”, Nan (2013b: 5) explains that the reason why he is putting his story on paper, is that ‘[m]y heart wants everyone to hear my inner voice, the sounds of the broken fragments of my haunted life’s experiences’. A similar desire is present in Askari’s (2005c: back page) “The story of my life”:

I wish I had time to tell
My entire story to somebody
Somebody who listens,
Really listens
To what I went through.

However, in the latter poem there is, simultaneously, a sense of difficulty in getting the message across or even being listened to, a problem that is picked up by Nazari (2013c: 73), who, in “Dreams of my father”, wrestles with the question about how to capture in words the story of Afghanistan, the country he once left. The lack of an adequate expression is also present in “Always in my Mind”, where E. Habtemichael (2005e: 64) writes that
I don’t have words
To express the smallest part of how I feel.
How can I fill the sea
With my small spoon?

Another writer addressing the same issue is Tadesse’s (2013a: 124) in “When I wake up”, but in her case it is not the (in)capacity to express herself that is put forward as an obstacle. Rather, the problem lies in not having a recognised voice:

I have a history, I have something to tell the world
But my voice is never heard
I can’t tell the world what I want them to hear

In Bamyani’s (2005c: 54) “A Story”, the problem is presented as a matter of mistrust. Upon the narrator’s mystical arrival in a foreign country, his account of the course of events that brought him there is met with doubt: ‘So I told them my story, from beginning to end. When I had finished they conferred quietly. “It’s possible” – “No, it’s not” – “Maybe the storm brought him” – “Maybe he’s just lying”.....’.

4.5 Refugees, asylum seekers and adjustment
While the emphasis in earlier research on refugee and asylum seeker literature is put on how the writers treat the question about refugees and asylum seekers’ possibility to make their voices heard, there are, as mentioned, other subjects that have been explored as well, although more briefly. One of these is representations of refugees and asylum seekers in relation to ‘adjustment’, a topic that is given a rather extensive role in the present refugee and asylum seeker texts.

In “My first impression of London”, Anonymous (2011a: 8) describes the very first encounter with England, his/her new country of residence, as a moment of disorientation:

I remember when I arrived in Victoria station
and it was so busy and I had no one and didn’t know anyone.

In Ahmed’s (2011: 12) “Where I am from”, a similar, initial feeling grows into a more permanent state of not fitting in:

I arrived to a place I didn’t know who I am and what to do?
I dream of being free,
To escape from my own skin.

The same phenomenon can be seen in Tadesse’s (2013a) “When I wake up” and Bamyani’s (2005c:
“A Story”, where, in the latter, the narrator is regarded by the locals as ‘from a different planet, from a completely different climate’. In the end, Bamyani (2005c: 54) gives the problems with acclimatisation a physical expression: ‘Now I am free, but I still have trouble breathing’. In Kassa’s (2013d: 115) “Strangers at the centre”, the narrator’s feeling of maladjustment is voiced in a more direct manner: ‘This isn’t my home and it’s not the weather I’m used to. This is not Iraqi. I don’t feel I belong […]’. However, returning to “A Story”, the root of the problem is not exclusively the refugee/asylum seeker not understanding or finding a place in his/her new environment, but also the other way around. Or as Bamyani (2005d: 81) continues in “The Rug Speaks”:

You don’t understand me,
you don’t know where I come from,
who I am.

On the other hand, arriving in a strange place is not necessarily connected to feelings of maladjustment and/or alienation. In Iradukundas’s (2013c: 57) “From Africa to New Zealand”, fear is, indeed, present, but overrun by happiness and excitement, even though the narrator is met with wonder: ‘I felt like I was in heaven when arriving in New Zealand. I looked and kept looking. I was not going to get tired of this. But it wasn’t just me who was amazed. The white people looked at me as if they had just seen money drop out of the sky’. Elsewhere, feelings of estrangement are, along the road, turned into a sense of comfort. In the opening lines of E. Habtemichael’s (2005d: 61; cf. Kassa 2013b) “Lovely Time”, it is stated that

When I was first in England
I didn’t like anything and was sad
I cried all the time
I dreamed of home

However, by attending a computer class, the narrator gains confidence, skills, friends, and, in the end, hopes for the future (E. Habtemicahel 2005d: 61-62; cf. E. Habtemichael 2005e).

At the same time, neither a successful adjustment is always represented as an entirely unproblematic experience. In “Life Changes”, Issa (2005: 70) describes how he, upon the arrival in England, ‘tried very hard to work out how to fit in, to achieve something worthwhile and make up for what [he] had lost’. However, simultaneously, he loses contact with the country that he has left, and his former friends that he feels more and more distanced from. A similar insight strikes Nazari’s (2013b) when he, in “A day in Kabul”, arrives in Afghanistan, the country where he was born and once lived. Before even passing through the passport control at the airport, Nazari (2013b: 64) realises that ‘[e]ven though this was the country of my birth, I felt like such a Westerner in my Chuck Taylors, my black denim jeans and my H&M jacket’.

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4.6 Refugees, asylum seekers and emotions

The previous section touches upon yet another subject identified in earlier research of refugee and asylum seeker literature, namely refugees and asylum seekers in relation to ‘emotions’. These appear in the refugee and asylum seeker texts in a great variety, covering different parts of the emotional scale. However, often, and although there are exceptions, it is a rather dark picture that is presented.

In Bamyani’s (2005f: 87) “My Body” there is joy, although ambiguous:

Most of my body is burning.  
Suffering, starving,  
Dying of thirst,  
My legs unable to walk,  
My blood unable to flow

And yet a part of me  
Is happy, dancing  
in a garden,  
not knowing what is happening  
to the rest

When E. Habtemichael (2005b) writes about happiness, in “Traditional Festival in Eritrea”, it is in relation to the festivities in her country of origin, that is, as belonging to the past. In E. Habtemichael’s (2005c: 57) “Arrival”, joy is also present merely as an absence:

Never again to breathe pure happiness  
My gorgeous memories withered like flowers  
[…]

All my happiness is unreturning  
Everything is unbeautiful

The same goes for Nan’s (2013a: 3) “This is war”:

Storms scream during the summer  
Wipe out all my tears with bullets  
And leave me without my happiness.

In “The green people”, Nan (2005b: 23) maintains that ‘happiness doesn’t last for long’ and accordingly, the initial joy in Askari’s (2005a: 22) “My Mother” is soon turned into something completely else:

Later

The sounds and echoes change their  
Rhythm  
Not laughing but crying
What happened?

In Iradukunda’s (2013b) “The game can’t fade”, sadness and despair are presented as the dominant feelings of life in exile.

Another emotion apparent in the refugee and asylum seeker texts and closely related to those in the previous section, is that of loneliness. The feeling is present in Bamyani’s (2005c: 54) “A story” as well as E. Habtemichael’s (2005c: 57) “Arrival”, and in “The world for me” and “My Mother”, Denny (2011: 42) and Askari (2005a: 23) respectively describe how they, after the death of their respective caretakers, are left alone. However, in Nazari’s (2013a: 62) “Adventures in the bazaar”, the loneliness is only temporary:

But my friends are not here
I am alone in this foreign place
But I will join them soon

This, opposite, feeling of togetherness that Nazari’s poem signals, can also be found in Tadesse’s (2013c: 127) “Finding my other half” and S. Habtemichael’s (2005) “My Second Home” where, in both instances, school is presented as a primary location for friendship. And as mentioned, in E. Habtemichael’s (2005d) “Lovely Time”, it is through the participation in a computer class that friendship is found. In Nan’s (2013c: 29: cf. Tepdza 2011b) “Tension at Ban Mai Nan Soi Camp”, hardships bring people together, since the darkness and winter creates a sense of community in the refugee camp.

Despite overrun by sadness and despair, a profound friendship constitutes the core also in Iradukunda’s (2013b) “The game can’t fade”. However, this relation is simultaneously marked by a distance, making communication difficult. As Iradukunda (2013b: 46) writes, there is

Silence between us.

My eyes follow her eyes and
Listening to her deep feelings
I can’t answer her question
Because now we live miles away.

A similar personal relation, strong but subject to separation, can be found in Munezero im’s (2013a) “My best friend”, and, as established earlier, in Issa’s (2005) “Life Changes”, the distance between them is making the narrator’s feelings of affinity towards his friend crumbling.

Besides sadness, happiness, loneliness, and feelings of friendship, one of the most frequent emotions in the refugee and asylum seeker texts is that of love, which appears in many different forms. Both Bamyani (2005b), in “Lyla and Manjon”, and Tadesse (2013b), in “I still love you”, address the subject of erotic love, although in the latter, it is bitter-sweet. Erotic love is also central
to Bamyani’s (2005g) “I Have Seen Stars in your Hair and Fountains in your Eyes” as well as Niyonzima’s (2013) “Moving on” and can, further, be seen flashing by in Nan’s (2013b: 23) “The green people”.

In S. Habtemichael’s (2005) “My second home”, it is rather the child’s love to people in its vicinity that is in focus, and in Tepdza’s (2011a) “I remember”, love is also seen from the perspective of a child, although grown-up:

Looking back, I know that
you loved me dearly and all you
wanted was the best for me. […]

Finally, in Bamyani’s “I love” (2005h), a general feeling of love towards life is central to the poem:

I love love because it burns me
I love the burning because it keeps me alive
I love my life because it gave me my love

4.7 Refugees, asylum seekers and family

So far, the nodal points that ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are connected to in the texts analysed in this study are familiar, either from print media representations or earlier research of refugee and asylum seeker literature. However, there are others to be found as well. As mentioned, the authors/writers of the refugee and asylum seeker texts seldom represent themselves directly as refugees or asylum seekers. A more common way to identify oneself is as children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters, parents etc.; that is in relation to ‘family’.

Family relations are mostly presented in a positive light. Both Nan’s (2013b), in “The green people”, and Iradukunda’s (2013c), in “From Africa to New Zealand”, admiring portraits of their respective fathers have already been commented on, as well as Otunnu’s (2005a) portrayal of her grandmother in “My Grandmother”. An even more glorifying representation of, in this case, his father, can be found in Askari’s (2005b: 24) “My Father”: ‘A young man full of passion and energy to serve the nation, to help the nation, to die for the nation. […] I and all Hazarah generations to come will follow you. […] And you will be the hero and martyr for me and for all’.

A more played down, although still admiring and loving, portrayal is seen in “My grandparents”, where Mukobya (2005a: 19), in the opening lines, writes that ‘They were kind to me, / Very kind – you can’t imagine – ‘. In Kassa’s (2013d: 113) “Strangers at the centre”, there is
a strong sense of affection in the relation between the narrator and his siblings as well as admiration, this time towards the mother: ‘[…] I can see how my mother’s determination and perseverance changed the harsh reality of those days during the war in my country, transforming our poverty into memorable times filled with delight’ (Kassa 2013d: 116). In E. Habtemichael’s (2005f: 65) “Sweet Lily”, there is also a strong sense of unity and love, although this time it is a mother that is addressing her child:

When I heard music
She danced
When I was angry
She stayed still
As long as she was inside me
I was warm

However, on several occasions, family members stand for something that is lost, a loss that becomes even harder to bear because of the strong relation between the writer/narrator and the missing one, as in Munezero im’s (2013c: 140) “My bond with my grandmother”:

And you left me with no more hugs and playing
I really miss you so much
I know we are far away from each other
Miles and miles away and we can’t see
Even touch each other

Also in Askari’s (2005b) “My Father”, the portrait of the father constitutes a obituary, and in “My Mother”, still by Askari (2005a), the death of a mother is running through the text. In “My Parents” by Mukobya (2005b: 30) there is a double loss at the centre of attention: ‘They loved me too much – but / they were torn from me by war’.

In Tadesse’s (2013c) “Finding my other half”, the main thread is the narrator’s yearning for a reunited family. Also here, there is a parent missing, but this time it is because of separation, not death. While a similar longing for family union can be seen in Tepdza’s (2011b) “My journey”, what is even more interesting to note in the former text is that the narrator’s continual questions about the mother is causing a tension between him and his father, signalling that family relations are not always represented as happy or even unproblematic. In Kassa’s (2013c) “My inner challenge”, there is also a conflict central to the story, although this time it is the narrator’s plans for the future that is the root of the quarrel.

An even more problematising representation of a parent can be found in Otunnu’s (2005b) “My Father”. Although taking off in a rather positive way, the short story contains a constant sense of uncertainty, with the father gradually exposed as an alcoholic. One late night, upon his return to the house, the underlying tension is finally unleashed: ‘My father stopped and looked at us. And all
of a sudden he dropped his bicycle, and ran towards us, and began hitting my mother and stepmother furiously. I watched his hands moving, from side to side, from side to side, and I knew I would never feel safe again’ (Otunnu 2005b: 27). Similar feelings of mistrust and even anger are given vent to in Kassa’s (2013a: 102) “Suffering”:

But I began my dark journey  
With you mum  
To suffer and live an agony life  
Is it the gift from you mum  
Or from my dad?

4.8 Refugees, asylum seekers and origin  

Earlier research of print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers has, as mentioned, emphasised the collectivisation and anonymisation of individuals that is brought about, for example, through the omission of personal traits and backgrounds. In the present texts, an opposite tendency is discernible, namely that of the writers/narrators representing themselves in terms of ‘origin’.

In many cases, the narrator’s original home country is brought out more or less in passing, while in others it constitutes the text’s main focus or the setting where the course of events take place. Both of the latter can be seen in Nazari’s (2013b) “A day in Kabul”, where the narrator’s brief visit in Afghanistan brings an ambivalent relation to his country of origin to the fore. Towards the end, Nazari (2013b: 71) concludes that ‘I felt like a man who had woken up in house to find the furniture rearranged. But as the day came to an end, I felt an increased attachment to that country’.

The ambivalence immanent in Nazari’s short story, can also be seen in other texts. While there initially is often an unconditional love towards the country of origin, its problems later shine through. In the first half of “My country Rwanda”, Iradukunda (2013a: 45) states that

Rwanda is rhythm and a song  
I can’t help but find myself dancing and singing  
The power of music brings our people together  
Rwanda is healthy and strong

However, as the poem continues, there is a change in perspective. The positive tone vanishes, and a completely different side of the country is presented: ‘When a country that was once called paradise becomes hell / At the point where lives were ended in seconds’ (Iradukunda 2013a: 45). In Makamu and Seasy’s (2011: 30) “I come from”, there is, in the description of an unnamed country of origin, a similar duality:
I come from Kassava leaves, gel of rice, pondu spiced,  
a tasty mangoustan, a juicy pineapple

[...]  
I come from polio, malaria and sickle cell  
I come from blood, pains cries

In Munuzero im’s (2013b: 138-139) “When I was little”, Rwanda is once more in focus, but this time the negative aspect comes first:

I remember my home country  
Every day and night  
People are dying  
Leaving their village  
[...]  
I can’t recall the tragedy that happened in my home land  
Rwanda a mystery place that I have left

In a similar vein, Ahmed (2011: 12), in “Where I am from”, gives prominence to the unfavourable side of her former home country: ‘I came from a place where they don’t give freedom to women’.

There is also another take on the subject of origin. As can be seen in the poems by Makamu and Sesay as well as Ahmed quoted above, they present their origin not primarily as a geographical place, but as a set of cultural traits and traditions. In Anonymous’ (20011b: 9: cf. Wanzo and Muse 2011) “I come from”, the two perspectives converge:

I come from Ethiopia which is east Africa  
I come from doro wet, sega wet, Alecha wet.  
I come from tasty food, drink and trades  
I come from the sound of Kerar,  
sound of kebero, masinko, washent

Cultural festivities and customs appear also in Iradukunda’s (2013c: 55) “From Africa to New Zealand” and Nazari’s (2013b: 69) “A day in Kabul”, where in the latter they cause the narrator’s journey through the city to be brought to one hold up after the other: ‘There is a certain level of hospitality that Afghans are notorious for. It is rude to turn down an offer to have a chat over some tea but it is a cardinal sin not to offer it in the first place’.

Since presumed cultural differences sometimes have been used to paint the picture of refugees and asylum seekers as a threat to the (potential) host country, it is worth pointing out that the conception of cultural stability and distinctiveness that constitutes a foundation for this line of thought, is problematised in some of the refugee and asylum seeker texts. As mentioned, in “A day in Kabul”, upon the arrival to his country of birth, Nazaris (2013: 69) realises that he is now more of a Westerner than an Afghan and, further, that Kabul is also influenced by Western culture,
symbolised by a Coca Cola factory in the city’s industrial area. In Denny and Ahmed’s (2011: 40) “I am unity”, the narrator emerges a hybrid of many cultures:

    I am a woman from the womb of many,  
    Continents, cultures,  
    Continents who thought they’d never meet,  
    Nelly Furtado and the Tabla beat,  
    March in union to dancing feet,  
    Scoffing Tiramisu and licking ludoo,

### 4.9 Refugees, asylum seekers and memories

Many of the texts already accounted for revolve, in one way or another, around the past. Against this background, it is not surprising that ‘memories’ play an important role.

As demonstrated, memories appear in some texts as portraits of loved ones, often parents, and are, simultaneously, associated with loss; in other, they are recollections of more or less traumatic experiences or the country of origin, its traditions etc. In E. Habtemichael’s (2005c: 57) “Arrival”, the perspectives meet, as the loss in itself consists of withering, ‘gorgeous memories’. At the same time, the poem touches another recurring approach to the subject, namely that of the writer’s/narrator’s relation to his/her memories. Often, there is a tension between the personal importance of the memories and their insignificance on a more general level. As Nan (20013b: 25) notes in “The green people”, in relation to the death and burial of his mother, ‘[p]eople would soon forget this moment, the moment my mother passed away, the moment of losing her. But not me, she would be in my memory for many years to come’. In “My Grandparents”, Mukobyaa (2005a: 19) writes that

    I never tire of these treasures  
    Their variety does not exhaust me.  
    […]

    Yet no one remembers who they were,

    While in E. Habtemichael’s, Nan’s and Mukobyaa’s texts there is a wish to hold on to their memories, other writer’s present them as a burden. In fact, this is visible already in “The green people”, since in the introduction, Nan (2013b: 5) presents his memories as ‘an unhealed pain that I have been carrying around for many years’. Similar memories are also seen in Munezero im’s (2013b: 138) “When I was little”:

    I remember seeing  
    On the street  
    Close to my village
People killed and dying
The blood is flowing
Nonstop and mixes with the river

Seemingly aware of the heavy load that memories might constitute, Denny (2011: 20) urges, in “Prayers for the forgotten”, her peers to leave them behind: ‘My Brother, Sister, don’t dwell on the past, its draining, irretrievable’. However, as Iradukunda (2013c: 51) notes in “From Africa to New Zealand”, this is easier said than done, since despite moving on and starting a new life in another country, the narrator’s parents are unable to ‘forget the war in their homeland and the people they’d left behind’. Bamyani (2005c: 54), in “A Story”, gives this thought yet another twist, describing memories from the past as an necessity for surviving in the new country of residence: ‘I remember my life in my country, my land, my friends my family / Every minute I feel I am dying. Only the blood and the breath I have brought from my country keeps me alive’.

On the other hand, it is also important to point out that not all memories are as dramatic as those that Nan and Munezero im give voices to. In many instances, it is more about everyday experiences, often belonging to the narrator’s childhood, as in Nazari’s (2013a: 60) “Adventures in the bazaar”:

I remember when I was four
I went to the markets with my parents
One fine afternoon

I hear cars going past
I hear chickens clucking
I hear people talking
I hear music pumping from the stereo
I hear people haggling for a bargain

Memories of schooling is another, recurring theme. As Kordany (2005: 40) writes in “School”, ‘[s]chool memories are unforgettable because they are the first memories’. In Wanzo’s (2011) “I remember”, school is a place of social intercourse, play and pranks. However, in Makamu’s (2011: 24) “There is a place”, memories of school are given a more profound meaning:

There is a place where you can start life

where your first best friend makes you laugh for the first time.

[…] 

There is a bench where you make your first dream

38
about your future.

In Tepdza’s (2011a) “I remember”, seemingly ordinary thing are also revealed as standing for something much more significant, as the recollection of a pink Barney and friend’s track suit leads on to memories of parental care and love.

4.10 Refugees, asylum seekers and the future

If the past and memories thereof constitute an important part of the refugee and asylum seeker texts, so does ‘the future’. In some cases, seeking refuge in another country is presented as a necessary way to create a future for oneself, as in Nazari’s (2013c: 79) “Dreams from my father”.

Iradukunda’s (2013c: 59) “From Africa to New Zealand” illustrates this line of thought, going from the parents giving up all their aspirations and hopes, to the narrator’s closing statement that ‘[n]ow I can realise the dreams that my parents had for us, and also finish their dreams as well’.

However, the path forward is not always as straight, even when finding a new place to stay. As E. Habtemichael (2005e: 63) writes in “Always in my Mind”

When you are new in this country
Will anyone give you rest and peace
To light your way
To a bright future?

Still, in the second half of the same poem, there is a glimmer of hope (cf. E. Habtemichael 2005d: 62), which can also be seen in the finishing lines in Denny’s (2011: 21) “Prayers for the forgotten”: ‘We can tie up those loose ends, only together can we see, / The bright future on the horizon, for you, and for me’.

In E. Habtemichael’s (2005c: 57) “Arrival”, the tone is, however, more pessimistic. Even though the future is awaiting, it is unattainable, due to the narrator’s past:

A new life is waiting
But I cannot take it
Yesterday will not let me go.

Finally, a similar feeling of hopelessness can also be seen in Tadesse’s (2013a: 124) “When I wake up”:

Everything has collapsed
No way to walk
Day and night I wake up with fear
Fear for myself and society
I walk and walk but it never ends

Other noticeable nodal points in the refugee and asylum seeker texts that will not be presented any further in this
4.11 Summary and discussion

Going back to the present study’s primary research question, that is what differences there are between print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers and representations found in texts written by refugees and asylum seeker themselves, it is possible, based on the texts that have served as a material for the present investigation, to conclude that the nodal points central to print media representations —‘threat’, ‘genuineness’ and ‘utility’ — are common to the refugee and asylum seeker texts as well. However, while in print media, refugees and asylum seekers are often casted in a negative light, there is a different tone to the refugee and asylum seeker texts. The participants in the creative writing workshops describes themselves and their peers not as threats or cheaters in any sense, but as true victims of war and violence. At the same time, their capacities are emphasised, although they are sometimes described as diminished, due to the hardships the writers/narrators/protagonists have gone through.

Furthermore, in and through the refugee and asylum seeker texts, ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are also connected to nodal points that are unknown to the print media discourse. Some of these, primarily ‘messenger’, ‘adjustment’, and ‘emotions’, are highlighted already in earlier studies of refugee and asylum seeker literature while others, in this respect, may be regarded as new. In this latter group, ‘family’, ‘origin’, ‘memories’, and ‘the future’ are the most distinguished ones.

What is important to note, is that the introduction of these – when compared to print media – alternative nodal points, opens up for and offer more extensive representations of refugees and asylum seekers. When in print media, refugees and asylum seekers are represented only in terms of possible threats, their genuineness and utility to the potential host country, their own texts widen the myth about them(selves) even further, by presenting them as people with a story to tell; who are trying to adjust themselves to their situation; who harbour emotions; who have loved ones, a background, memories and expectations for the future etc.

Considering that in print media, refugees and asylum seekers are often represented as a homogenous, voiceless group of people, it is, further, important to note that in many cases, the introduction of new nodal points directly addresses this former type of representations, for example by emphasising the voices, messages and origins of the writers/narrators/protagonists. Further, in themselves, the nodal points also make more individualised portraits of refugees and asylum seekers possible. The characters that arise in the refugee and asylum seeker texts have different stories to tell; have various and sometimes conflicting experiences of adjustment; carry a variety of emotions; have both harmonious and problematic family relationships; originate from a multitude of countries, cultures, and traditions; have happy and tragic memories of their past; and have both paper are ‘convictions’, ‘education’, ‘interests’ and ‘character’.
hopes and fears for the future.
5. Conclusion

5.1 Concluding remarks

This study has compared print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers with representations in texts written by refugees and asylum seeker themselves, within the frames of creative writing workshops. Starting out from the notion that print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers follow certain recurring patterns, resulting in more or less simplistic portrayals; Smith’s suggestion that people positioned outside of a particular discourse might offer viewpoints that undermine the way reality is commonly perceived and understood; and the post-colonial call for such a destabilisation when it comes to the (social) development discourse(s), the aim was to investigate whether the refugee and asylum seeker texts could offer representations that nuance, or even challenge, those in print media.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the findings of the present study indicates that there are differences when it comes to how refugees and asylum seekers are represented in print media and how, in their own texts, they represent themselves. Although the representations to some extent correspond, the refugee and asylum seeker texts diverge from the discourse in print media, first of all by offering a widened understanding of ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeking’, through the connection of the signifiers to an increased amount of nodal points. While in print media, refugees and asylum seekers are mainly represented in connection to ‘threat’, ‘genuineness’ and ‘utility’, the refugee and asylum seekers texts also equate ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ to, for example, ‘adjustment’, ‘emotions’, ‘family’, ‘origin’, ‘memories’, and ‘the future’. And, as argued, the introduction of these additional nodal points does not only offer a wider as well as deepened conception of refugees and asylum seekers, but, also, a possibility for more individualised representations, as a contrast to the homogenising tendencies in print media.

Turning to the more underlying question about whether and how dominant discourse may be altered, it is, consequently, based on the present study, possible to draw the conclusion that there is a potential worth taking care of and foster in the creative writing workshops for refugees and asylum seekers, as well as other, similar initiatives. Besides constituting an opportunity for refugees and asylum seekers to acquire/develop means of self-representation and answering to the call of post-colonial theorists with all that that might entail in terms of developing more sufficient strategies for social development, by simultaneously opening up a channel of communication and breaking up the refugee/asylum seeker identity, they may also be seen as a step towards the agonistic democracy/pluralism advocated by Mouffe.
5.2 Limitations and further research

For reason made clear earlier, geographically, the main focus of this study has been North America, Great Britain and Oceania. Although there are indications that the results of the research of print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers are valid for other areas as well, a natural way to expand on this investigation would be to include print media and creative writing workshops for refugees and asylum seekers from other parts of the world. Insofar as it is possible to find creative writing workshops, shifting focus to regions and countries with other relations, historical and present, to colonialism, immigration etc. would be a natural way to test the universality of the findings in this study, as well as crossing the boundaries to another language. As it has been argued that in similar research, the researcher is caught up in the assumptions that s/he is striving to expose and produces knowledge of his/her own, there is, furthermore, a general and, in principle, inexhaustible need for adding more data that might reveal new perspectives and other points of view. In this regard, it would also be possible to include other forms of mass media and means of communication as well.

However, considering that the texts investigated in the present study are likely to reach only a limited amount of people, it seems even more urgent to focus on whether projects of this type might lead on to other forms of writing, possibly with a greater outreach and impact. This would mean studying to what extent the participators in the creative writing workshops continue to write – or engage in other forms of communication – and what direction they might take in doing so. As noted in the introduction to this paper, print media representations of refugees and asylum seekers may, partially, be seen as a result of the procedures and considerations that structures current news reporting, which might be put forward as an explanation to the divergency between them and the (self-)representations in the refugees and asylum seekers’ own texts. Although this is not a problem in the sense that there is nothing saying that representations aimed at countering each other must come from the same types of texts, it would be interesting to see to what extent writers with a refugee and/or asylum seeker background, if their writing took them to contexts where the same rules and norms apply, could still bring nuance to representations of refugees and asylum seekers.
Literature


Hanyes, Amanda, Devereux, Eoin, Breen, Michael. 2004. A Cosy Consensus on Deviant Discourse:


Laclau, Ernesto, Mouffe, Chantal. 2001. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical*


**Texts used in the analysis**


Appendices

Appendix I: The creative writing workshops

The Story of My Life: Refugees writing in Oxford was published in 2005 and consists of texts written by refugees and asylum seekers living in Oxford. The creative writing workshop was arranged by Asylum Welcome and led by biographer Carole Angier.

Flowers that Grow From Concrete: A collection of poems, thoughts and reflection from brighter futures was published in 2011. The writers are young refugees and asylum seekers living in London who took part in English PEN’s creative writing workshops for people with a refugee, asylum seeker or migrant background. The workshop was facilitated by writer Malika Booker.

Walking with a fragile heart: Short stories and poems by young refugees in New Zealand was published in 2013 and contains texts written by young refugees from the greater Wellington Region. The creative writing workshop is an annual event arranged by the Refugee Trauma Recovery, and the writers were mentored by journalist and poet Samson Sahele.

At the time of the creative writing workshops, the participators had lived in their new country of residence for periods of two to fifteen years. As far as countries of origin are mentioned, they stem from Afghanistan; Burma; Chad; Congo; Ethiopia; Eritrea; Rwanda; Somalia; and Uganda.
Appendix 2: List of newspapers

**Great Britain:** The Asian Voice; Barry & District News; Brecon and Radnor Express; The Business; Cambrian News; Carmarthen Journal; The County Times; Cynon Valley Leader; The Daily Mail; The Daily Mirror; The Daily Post; The Daily Record; The Daily Star; The Daily Telegraph; Denbighshire Free Press; Edinburgh Evening News; The Express; The Express on Sunday; Financial Times; Flintshire Leader and Standard; Free Press; Glamorgan Gazette; The Guardian; The Herald; The Herald of Wales; Herford Times; The Independent; The Independent on Sunday; The Journal; Liverpool Echo; Llanelli Star; London Evening Standard; The Mail on Sunday; Manchester Guardian; Merthyr Express; Metro; News of the World; The Observer; The Pioneer; Port Talbot/Neath Courier; Rhondda Leader; Scotland on Sunday; Shropshire Star; South Wales Argus; South Wales Echo; South West Evening Post; South Wales Guardian; The Sun; The Sunday Mirror; The Sunday People; The Sunday Times; The Sunday Star; This is Lancashire; The Times; Vale Advertiser; The Visitor; The Voice; Wales on Sunday; Weekly News; Western Mail; Western Telegraph; Wrexham Leader/Evening Leader; Ynys Mon Chronicle.

**USA:** Arizona Republic; Atlanta Journal and Constitution; Baltimore Sun; Beatrice Daily Sun; Bellevue Leader; The Boston Globe; Christian Science Monitor; Columbus Dispatch; Columbus Telegram; Daily Press; Fremont Tribune; Grand Island Independent; The Houston Chronicle; Los Angeles Times; Lincoln Journal Star; The Miami Herald; Minneapolis Star Tribune; The Modesto Bee; News and Record; Newsday; New York Amsterdam News; The New York Times Magazine; Norfolk Daily News; Omaha World-Herald; Philadelphia Inquirer; Press Enterprise; The Salt Lake Tribune; The San-Diego Union-Tribune; The San Fransisco Chronicle; Seattle Times; South Florida Sun-Sentinel; The Spokesman Review; Star Tribune; St Petersburg Times; The USA Today; US News & World Report; Windsor Star; Wall Street Journal.

**Canada:** The Gazette; The Globe and Mail; The National Post; The Toronto Star; The Toronto Sun; The Vancouver Sun; Victoria Times-Colonist.

**Australia:** The Advertiser; The Age; The Australian; The Australian Financial Review; Brisbane Courier Mail; The Sunday Mail; The Sydney Morning Herald; The Weekend Australian; West Australian.

**New Zealand:** The Dominion; Dominion Post; The Gisborne Herald; The Greymouth Star; Napier
Daily Telegraph; Nelson Evening Mail; New Zealand Herald; Otago Daily Times; The Press; Southland Times; Waikato Times.