# Troubling political discourses of terrorism: Responding to the call of the other

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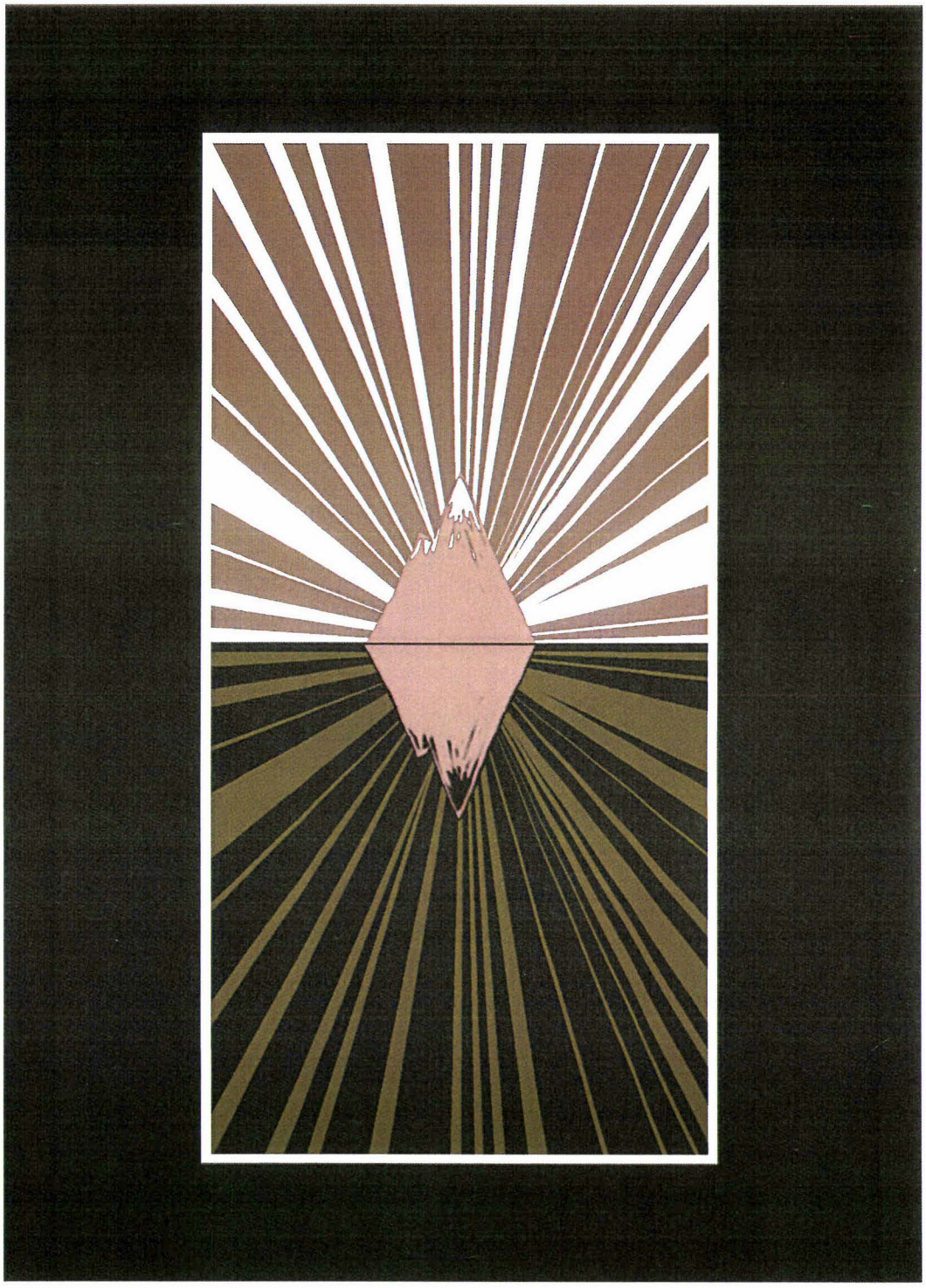
# Abstract

As a story of a complex interplay of hegemonic power relations that play out as relationships of violence on contested boundaries, the dominant narrative of terrorism may be understood as a discursive site of tension between sameness and difference in the production of a 'unified' political identity. Contingent on a binary relationship between 'self' and 'other', terrorism functions as a particular form of Orientalism (Said, 1978) that produces Western knowledges as the authority over meaning and excludes possibilities for ethical responses (Spivak, 2004). This thesis draws on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of the political production of discourse and subjectivity to question the conditions of possibility that enable the production of terrorism in discourse. Through an understanding of discourse as socially contingent systems of meaning, the analysis explored how social relationships were constructed in political text, and how, through these hegemonic constructions, it became possible to exclude some from the authority to articulate their experiences and understanding of social relations. Revealing the contingency of relation among multiple discourse, terrorism became necessary to the discursive field that constitutes nationalism through an ongoing antagonism between governance and sovereignty that enabled a rejection of the call of the 'other'. To enable an ethical response and open possibilities for authentic encounters with the 'other', this thesis argues into a space where new meanings and possibilities for social relations are enabled through the generation of 'new' discourses that attend to the spaces between our relational boundaries.



***Encounter***

*(Damian Rangiwananga, 2010)*

# Acknowledgements

*Ehara tāku toa i te toa takitahi, he toa taki tini taku toa.*

To engage with an academic piece of work like writing a thesis is a difficult journey. Frustrated with the struggle to move within the limitations of language there were times when I wanted to leap off the path and run in a different direction. I was told that the bulk of the work done wouldn't show in the final document, but I didn't understand what that meant until this point. What isn't readily apparent on these pages is the aroha that went into keeping me on the path.

In another conflict with words I struggle to find the language that can adequately express my gratitude to everyone who has supported and inspired me during this process. We often talk about unconditional love but it's not until we feel in those times of stress that we understand the taonga we have received. So I say a simple thank you to my whānau who have cared for me when I needed to heal and allowed me space when I needed distance. To my daughter and my partner thank you for your compassion and your patience while I was absent in my thoughts and sparing in my affection.

To my friends, my wāhine toa, thank you for listening to me while I rant and rage. Your faith in me has been greater than my own, especially in those moments when I lost sight of my path and questioned my capacity. I thank you.

To my supervisor Dr Leigh Coombes, I name you specifically because if there is anyone who has understood the struggle of my writing back it is you. I am grateful that you were there walking beside me. Thank you for sharing your skills and wisdom, for helping to collect my wandering thoughts, and helping me to believe it was possible.

To my tūpuna wāhine, "He taitai whetu ki te rangi, mau tonu, mau tonu, mau tonu. Ehara au nā tenei ao, engari nā te aroha i wae aku matua. Ko aku kahu, ko te mauri me te wehi o oku tīpuna. Ko aku kupu whakaaro, a ratau tikanga..." (Melbourne, 1982, p. 2). This is my gift to you. E iti noa ana, nā te aroha.

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

## Responding to the call of 'other'

Arguably, the concept of terrorism became well known in New Zealand[1] during the Cold War era of the 1970s and 1980s. Using terrorism as a rhetorical weapon to undermine the political and moral power of political enemies, the Reagan and Thatcher governments constructed discourses of terrorism through propaganda that presented particular political and social movements, such as communism, as terrorist threats to the democratic liberties of the West (Altheide, 2006; Jackson, 2008; Sluka, Chomsky, & Price, 2002; Stohl., 2008). Growing up in the Cold War era I was aware of the 'evils' of terrorism through how they were presented in media. But the first time I remember being confronted with the power and contradictions of terrorism was as a girl while staying with my grandmother. She wasn't how we imagine our grandmothers to be. Standing less than five foot tall one could be forgiven for mistaking her small frame as a container for a small spirit – but that would be a mistake one would only make once. And I think that if the reporter she

[1] As a colonial term New Zealand derives its meaning from imperial assumptions and colonial practice. In contrast, Aotearoa derives its meaning from Māori understandings of the relationship between tangata whenua (the people of the land or Māori) and the land prior to colonisation. Although it has become convention among many writers to privilege the term Aotearoa New Zealand, such use is dependent on assumptions of 'sameness' and bicultural competency. Resonating with imperial aspirations, the idea of New Zealand as a sovereign nation-state united beneath an umbrella of common heritage not only imposes meaning on Aotearoa but also obscures the fact that important differences in meaning exist. Transformed into a site that resonates with assimilation and an intolerance of difference, I tentatively use Aotearoa New Zealand in recognition of a history of relations (with aspirations for shared social power relations), or where appropriate, I prefer to use Aotearoa or New Zealand with the assumption of differing relational contexts and different meanings.

was hurling abuse at was in the same room, he would have been left with no doubts about how she felt about him and his report. The reporter was presenting a story about an IRA bombing, and although I don't remember the details I do remember thinking that terrorism must be something that was really bad – England was fighting it, and so was she.

At the time I was confused about why the report was so offensive to my grandmother though it was clear by her stream of outrage, which ended with a blunt "they'll say whatever suits them", that terrorism wasn't as simple as it was being re-presented in the news. Staunchly proud of her Irish heritage it appeared as if she was responding to a proposition that equated her heritage with terrorism. It seemed absurd; she wasn't part of the IRA and she even agreed that their tactics were a form of 'terrorism', so it didn't make sense that she responded as she did. But she was Irish, and so was I, which meant that there was something threatening about us. Unlike others we supposedly already had a predisposition toward to being 'the terrorist' – or so it seemed.

When my grandmother said 'they' she had something specific in mind. Not necessarily referring to any particular people 'they' symbolised something different from 'us'. I had grown up hearing the 'Irish' jokes so it almost made sense that 'we' had the potential to become 'terrorists'. After all, everyone 'knew' the Irish were crazy and short tempered and prone to irrational actions. But my other grandmother also spoke about another 'they'. Although I understood that it was

different, I recognised this 'they', at least in the recognition that it was spoken into my body, for longer than I could remember.

I was also Māori, and like my grandmother I learnt that 'they' wouldn't tolerate the potentialities of my 'other' differences. As a child my grandmother was beaten across the knuckles with a ruler just for speaking te reo Māori at school. Retelling that story over and over, it was clear that for her being Māori was considered unacceptable in some social relationships and she would 'drum' that into me to make sure I understood the implications well. I embodied the social power relationship that seemed to speak with a singular voice that stretched across time and space with deadly precision; 'they' taught 'us' how to 'overcome' *our* difference and become part of the 'one'. I learned quickly enough to get the ruler only once, but I felt shame and terror when it happened to others. There was something in how it was done that made each crack applicable to 'us' all. Tarred with the same brush[2], 'us' kids marked by similar difference were positioned as disruptive and troublesome, slower to learn and more defiant. Terrorised into compliance I 'played the game' and for a while I conformed to how 'they' told me I should be. Simultaneously I also resisted – when it mattered to me. From my grandmothers, I learned how to resist with a dignity located with my 'otherness'.

[2] As a metaphor that marks a particular group as embodying the same 'faults', "tarred with the same brush" also carries the racial overtones that were taken up in the US.

Whereas my Pākehā grandmother had the privilege of being able to 'pass' easily as part of the 'one' this wasn't possible for me or my Māori grandmother - we had to work on it. Through processes of domination that inscribed our bodies with meanings of 'otherness', we wore the mark of the 'other'; visually imprinted onto our skins the meaning of our difference was like an open book that anyone could 'read' and know our stories. Although I learnt that this mark was a threat to the dominant social relationship that might enable passing, I also learnt through experience that it was a gift that gave me freedom 'they' couldn't experience. Like others, I had the opportunity to walk between worlds, to be in a space where I wasn't completely imprisoned by rules or stereotypes, and although it was painful with each side trying to claim me or disown me, it was a position that I would take up and speak from. Located on the boundaries, neither here nor there, in this space I embodied a borderline position that enabled me the subjective knowing that could gaze back.

Spivak (2004) argues that responding to the call of the 'other' is an ethical relationship that requires a discursive space for the 'other' to exist. It is a call into a relationship on the boundaries that are contested, not to look for a singular answer (the 'one'), but to question its meaning, its possibilities, its goals, its limits. Spivak's idea of a response to the call of the 'other' enabled a questioning of the 'war on terrorism' as a response to terror-ism. Arguing that responses are not made to concrete objects but to abstract concepts that have been made meaningful through the process of response itself, Spivak suggests that the call to respond may be

understood as a social process constituted through the operation of power relations; "a response not only supposes and produces a constructed subject of response, it also constructs its object" (Spivak, 2004, p. 82). In this sense, response frames the social terrain in particular ways that presupposes and marks out specific concepts and practices as important, and while creating social positions through which response is possible and warranted, it also proposes an 'impossibility of response' that delimits who can say what, when and how.

Reading through Spivak I can understand that my grandmother wasn't responding to terrorism as 'a thing' but rather, she responded to how it was made meaningful and how through that process she was constructed as a particular kind of respondent. Over time I realised that how she understood IRA 'terrorism' is probably better described as a form of resistance, but through an impossibility of response she was excluded from alternative ways of knowing and so was her ability to take up a position that enabled her to voice those understandings from within the limited discourses available. Subjected to 'a thing' called terrorism, for my grandmother to take up the position of respondent meant that she would also need to take up the conditions precluded through response. Effectively, this would mean frustrating her own story, history, and subjective knowing and taking up a position consistent with 'they'. Reflecting a pattern I often saw in the responses of my Māori grandmother, my Pākehā grandmother took up an ethical position on the boundaries of exclusion that enabled her to challenge how re-presentations of terrorism and their limits reified a relationship of domination and subordination

that equated her heritage with terrorism. Through discourses of rights to freedom she questioned the meaning of a constructed subject of response by making a 'reasonable' response to the imposition of knowledge of the 'other'. Confusing but effective, this ethical response enabled me to ask to what "do most of these responses respond?" (Spivak, 2004, p. 82) when we live in the contradictions between 'one' and 'other'?

In the relationship of response to the 'other', how is it possible to make sense of terrorism so as not to answer for it, or obey it? How is it possible to make sense of the representations of the 'other' from my histories and the histories of those who went before me and those who come after me because 'my' differences, 'my' so-called terrorist markers were accumulated in the histories of counter-cultures that threatened the 'one' that dominates my socio-political location. Slipping between worlds was not necessarily a freedom anymore. As Morse argues, "[t]he first casualty of the war agenda [against terrorism] was personal privacy...Those who are not mainstream, those whose language, skin colour, religion, history or politics do not fit the mould, are the 'other' New Zealand — not white, not middle-class, not content with the status quo. In this war, to be the 'other' is to be the enemy" (Morse, 2007, p. 10). Being positioned as 'the enemy' was something that I was familiar with, but to be positioned as a potential 'terrorist enemy' was terrifying, and not something that I would necessarily take up willingly.

In 2001 I was confronted by the effects of what was to become repeatedly declared a "war on terrorism" through media representation of a global 'threat'. As I sat watching the media coverage of 9/11 I knew that how the US government responded would matter – located as allies in war and trade it was probable that 'we' would respond in like. Responding to the events *as if* it was terrorism the US government set an agenda that re-constituted 'the social' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Dissolving many categorical distinctions that marked previous forms of terrorism while re-producing and solidifying others, terrorism was made real (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) through a political response against an 'other' and transformed into a tangible reality that could be defined, identified and measured in the social realm. Re-affirming the antagonism between 'us' and 'them', terrorism was produced as 'a thing' that legitimated and reified social practices and relations not previously possible. And as potential victims of terrorism 'we' also became subjected to the hegemonic gaze of the West.

As a student of psychology, I was disturbed with the epistemological assumptions that enabled the discipline to participate in Guantanamo Bay. Regardless of disagreement as to what constitutes 'terrorism'[3] involvement at Guantanamo has been presented as a necessary engagement in the name of national security

[3] Acknowledging the problem of defining terrorism, Victoroff (2005) draws attention to Schmid's (1983) list of 109 academic definitions to illustrate the extent of disagreement. The problem however is that since 9/11 there has been a global surge in research on terrorism which means that this compilation may not reflect the current contestations over meaning. Although it is likely that the number of definitions have risen dramatically since 1983, it is also possible that hegemonic power of global discourses have contributed to more consistency among researchers and academics as to a broad definition of terrorism.

(Summers, 2007). Beginning with an assumption of 'other' and made possible through a body of empirical evidence that qualifies psychology to engage in abstractions of the 'other' (as opposed to the lived experience of 'otherness'), pathologising experts have taken up positions as terrorism experts capable of describing and constructing dominant representations of 'others' (Summers, 2007). Representing a culmination of psychological knowledge to 'know' and have authority over the 'other' the intertwining of psychological and military aspirations has been criticised from within the discipline through a questioning of the meaning of and possibilities for an ethical relationship (Summers, 2007).

Yet despite questions regarding its legitimacy, even across a range of disciplines that emphasise the 'normality' of so-called terrorists, the ongoing search for the psychopathology, the personality, and the behaviours of the 'terrorist' persist within the discipline of psychology (Abrahms, 2008; Frost, 2005; Horgan, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005; Puar & Rai, 2002; Victoroff, 2005; R. M. Young, 2003; Zimbardo, 2000, 2002). In a contest for meaning over ethical relationships, how do we make sense of a 'helping' discipline that enables practitioners to use and exploit psychological knowledge in the search for power (Summers, 2007; Zimbardo, 2006)? What is constituted as evidence and what does it mean to have knowledge of the 'other' without ethical regard for the relationship that reproduces stereotypes on which that knowledge is based; an encounter dependent on stereotypes that typify domination, colonialism and conflict (Said, 1994).

The aim of this thesis is an attempt to write back in response to and against terrorism as 'a thing' by making sense of the processes that make its particular constitution possible. Challenging the social power relations that produce and re-produce the 'reality' of terrorism as lived experience I take my subjective knowing and engage with this writing as a process of political resistance that rejects subjectification beneath an idea of 'terrorism as a thing'.