Refugees and asylum seekers in Australia: border-crossers of the postcolonial imaginary[+]

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Introduction

Onshore refugees,[1] or those who arrive by boat, threaten to 'flood' this nation it is reported in the media (*The West Australian* November 2001), yet the actual numbers belie this. Onshore refugees represent some 3-5 per cent of the total migratory intake for Australia, and constitute a third of the places allocated for its humanitarian program (that is, allocated for onshore and offshore refugees).[2] The fear of invasion recalls similar fears of the 'yellow hordes' in the latter parts of the 19th century, from which the White Australia policy was born. What is occurring to and in relation to asylum seekers and

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[1]   The terms refugee and asylum seeker refer to different statuses given to people fleeing their nation of origin. Asylum seeker refers to those people arriving in another country, whether by land, air or sea, seeking asylum. The receiving country then follows a process of establishing whether these people are genuine refugees and assigns them this term if considered to be so. I use the term refugee from here on simply for purposes of economy, and because much of the treatment I mention in this article refers to that meted out to those already classified as refugees but not allowed to 'settle' in the emotional and material   sense. These are people who have been given temporary protection visas of three years' duration and have various restrictive conditions attached to them.

[2]   I include a further distinction here, which is probably fairly obvious by now however. Onshore refugees are those people entering a nation-space without prior arrangements and are granted refugee status with time. Offshore refugees are those refugees who have already been granted refugee status by UNHCR and are then 'picked' by the official bodies of a nation to settle there.

refugees within Australia, however, has never been about numbers. It is not even specifically or solely contingent on the violation of territorial borders, although the 'nation as sovereign' discourse does make this appear a viable point of origin and closure. Asylum seekers are entitled to be here, seeking asylum, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Convention to which Australia is a signatory. Those classified as refugees are entitled to the protection and rights provided to other citizens of this nation. The events running through and around asylum seekers and refugees in Australia have a succession of multi-layered meanings. Events that have conflated the borders of the 'imaginary' (Anderson 1991), those constructed discursive borders of definition, with geographical borders and produce meanings, anxieties, and responses that enact the fear of a possible loss from an 'attack' on the collective self.

National borders

Borders are motifs of powerful sway. They are constituted as physical and metaphysical constructs and thus justify the exclusion of those outside 'the line'. At the national level, these borders not only provide territorial limits; they also define who is to be considered to live within, and who is to be excluded. Those who don't exist in the 'national imaginary' become border-crossers:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line ... a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal' (Anzaldúa 1999: 25).

National borders actualise the limits of the nation's identity and its geographical integrity; the two are not separatable. Within them is contained the 'imagined community'[3] (Anderson 1991) as the Enlightenment drew it: whole, unitary and integral, and projected to the rest of the globe via European colonialism and imperialism (Hobsbawm 1994). The notion of nation (Yewah 2001) gathers the collective imagination and narrates itself into unity (Bhabha 1990), gathers people

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3   This is an important concept for this article and therefore deserves a little explanation. Benedict Anderson coined this term to refer to what he described as collective conglomerations of people into a perception of community, a sense of solidarity. He saw this sense as something constructed, not real outside our own social construction of it. 'Imaginary' therefore does not refer to a position that is not real, but a construct that has been socially constructed and very real for those who live it.

who may never meet each other (Anderson 1991) into a fantasy of continuity and solidarity; the past and the future collide and collapse into a homogeneous, unitary present. The physical and metaphysical conflate and produce a construct so robust, so unified that it forms a single seamless linear progression through time and space for those who belong to it:

> Nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (Renan 1882, in Bhabha, 1990: 19).

In a modernist manner all multiplicity is collapsed into 'one'. Place and space, identity and belonging, 'being', are collapsed into one. Space becomes an object for fervent attachment and thereby provides the group with a sense of collective belonging (Dummett 2001), and borders are constructed as that which defines the limits of this space of belonging. These formulate the 'safe spaces' within which identity can be handed on and 'practised'. Identity then becomes the connection of commonality between the 'practitioners' in the group, that which gives them a sense of continuity and solidarity. The nation-space and identity become fused, providing the illusion of unity, definition and limits: the construction of safety for those existing within it. Onshore refugees violate all of these embedded notions of nation-space, identity and safety. They violate the modernist need for unity.

Race and whiteness within the borders

Australia's borders have historically been racialised and premised on whiteness. They have provided the parameters for the inclusion and exclusion of certain peoples along racialised lines. Race and whiteness are most complex, elusive, and ever-changing concepts (Hage 1998; Stratton 1999). Race usually refers to the marking of peoples for exclusion, and whiteness as the 'norm', the privilege that is invisible (Frankenberg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2000). Although race as a construct and practice has shifted over time to become what has now been termed 'the cultural', and as a practice as 'culturalism', the 'neo racism'[4] (Balibar 1991; Modood 1997;

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4   This new racism has transformed the language of race from biological determinism to cultural determinism: '[s]ince World War II, and especially the past fifteen years or twenty years, the cultural conception of race has tended to eclipse all others' (Goldberg 1993: 71). Thus when I mention from hereon race, racialisation or racism, I am referring to this new way of marking for exclusion.

Markus 2001), whiteness has remained the positioning of power that grants privilege and choice. Whiteness grants the ability to construct others at will and the ability to construct borders of definition using racialised parameters of 'difference' to enact inclusion and exclusion.

Australia, as a nation with 'its roots in the history of European colonisation which universalised a cultural form of White identity as a position of cultural power at the same time as the colonised were in the process of being racialised' (Hage 1998: 58), is deeply inscribed with racialised exclusions and the need to determine who crosses the borders. It is a need that attempts to protect its whiteness. There are ethnic/religious dimensions to this whiteness — including the preservation of Anglo-Celtic and Judeo-Christian traditions (Stratton 1999).

Immigration policies, as part of the 'national narratives [that can] only be resolved into a [racial] unity through the state's intervention' (Pease 1997: 4) have always been embedded within metanarratives of assimilation, integration into the larger group (Kymlicka 1995). Maintaining unity and modernist order, a particular form of order, has been a central role of the Australian state since its inception. The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, which in its practise barred the entry of non-Anglo Celts into Australia, is a clear example. Even the multiculturalist policies introduced from 1972, which began to accept a more pluralistic society, had a sombre history. They had been introduced from 'above' within the confines of liberal discourses, through conversations between intellectuals and policy makers, in an administrative search for solutions to the 'problem' of 'difference' after the drive to 'populate or perish'. Migrant groups were not consulted (Lopez 2000).

Multicultural diversity creates a paradoxical space (Bhabha 1990) within the universal metanarrative of nation (Pease 1997). Balibar (1991) suggests that this paradoxical space requires an exclusion of national Others in order to effect the nation's internality. Australia realised internality not by apparent exclusion, but by introducing a new way of 'marking' difference at the very moment diversity was officially accepted. White privilege has the ability to mark difference in new and inventive ways. 'Ethnicity' became the new marker (Stratton 1998) and only applied to non-Anglo Celts (Dixson 1999). This invests the exclusions with an air of natural necessity. 'Culture' thereby became the new way of noting those who were outside[rs] (Stratton and Ang 1998). Indeed culture continues to be invoked today to mark irreconcilable differences between 'us' and 'them'. In an interview on ABC's *Four Corners* (13 September 2001), the Minister for Immigration related the self-harm of the detainees in Port Hedland Detention Centre to their 'culture': 'the sorts of things people from those parts of the world are used to doing'. In my own

conversations with a local from Port Hedland, culture was again invoked (in relation to the riots occurring in the detention centre in January 2001): 'it has to do with where they come from; it's what they do over there'. During the 'children overboard affair' in 2001 when asylum seeker children were supposedly thrown into the ocean from their boat by their parents, Mr Howard as Prime Minister and Mr Ruddock as Minister for Immigration, spouted their horror at 'the sorts of things these people' were capable of doing. It has since been revealed that this did not occur. The dark irony of the truth has made the 'culturalism' and thereby the racism of these statements so much starker.

Retaining nationalist borders

Stratton and Ang (1998) suggest that multiculturalism is a symptom 'of the failure of the modern project of the nation-state, which emphasised unity and sameness — a trope of identity — over difference and diversity' (p 138). While multicultural policies and practices are the acknowledgment of a very real world, the modern project of the nation-state has not failed. At the same historical moment that its borders are made permeable for the transfer of capital and information, they become impassable for refugees and asylum seekers across most of the developed world (Sassen 1996) and particularly Australia. In a postcolonial context of politicised ethnic fragmentations and multivarious uncertainty, nationalism is invoked to protect the nation's borders. Afghan nationalism, Iranian nationalism, and Iraqi nationalism are all an attempt at protecting territories from further Western incursions, and contrast with Australia's nationalism, but are inverted versions of the same phenomenon. These nationalisms are the preservation of unified identities within the 'real' shape of territorial borders, at a time of perceived possible loss of identity for these nations. Those distant Third World nation[alism]s shaped as they have been by European colonialism and imperialism (Hobsbawm 1990; 1994) return to haunt the First World.

Refugees as global rejects are often the direct result of nations' struggles for independence, and the upheavals these produce (Said 1993). Refugees arrive in Australia and make this nation forcibly face an Other, present but not imprinted on our national psyche.[5] Indeed 'forgetting' within Australia does not end with certain migrant presences. The treatment of Aboriginal peoples, and their invisibility within the archives of our collective memories, attest to a systematic silencing of certain

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5 Here I refer to the Afghans brought to help develop the West's northern regions, whose presence is all but erased from our national memories. The Afghans return as onshore refugees, and the nation is forced to 'see' them.

presences (Markus 2001; Curthoys 2001). Australia's unitary borders then find a champion in a political party interestingly enough seeking oneness, and by our national leader surreptitiously taking on the oneness mantle.

Refugees as border-crossers

Brawley (2001) has said that refugees are the new international pawns and border protection one of the problems of the 21st century as globalisation heralds the demise of the nation-state. Davidson (2001) sees refugees as at the 'bottom of the pile' through the forces of globalisation and as victims of the nation-state principle. McMaster (2001) makes similar comments in relation to refugees:

> [t]he predicament and vulnerability of refugees were intensified by the growth of the nation-state. The nation-state had structures that could legitimately exclude those it did not want, opening spaces for policies that could discriminate against its 'other' (p 19).

National borders impact significantly on refugees. Onshore refugees as border-crossers collide with the boundaries set by the modernist invention of the nation-state, and become the unwanted. They interrupt unified meanings of nation, and the choices a nation has to maintain these unitary meanings. The racial dimension is an integral part of the borders that delimit the Australian nation. But for Australia geography has also had a significant role to play. The territorial borders have been highly controlled, both by the state as the executive arm of the nation, and by its place. This placing has made Australia the fortress it has been for over 200 years and added to the 'spatial/racial' fear mentioned by writers in relation to Australia's invasion anxiety (Ang 1999; Burke 2001). Refugees attack this modernist, controlled space. This 'spatial/racial' anxiety was most apparent in the Liberal Party's slogan in the 2001 federal election: 'We decide who comes to this country and how they come here'. It was a slogan many concur won the current Australian Federal Government another term in office. Those refugees who enter this nation-space as boat people then become border-crossers of a multiple kind, of the imaginary and the territorial space.

Most asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia within the last five years have been from the Middle East and Africa, places 'of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts' (Said 1994: 402). Places also 'distant' to Australia. Distant in the geographical sense, and in the identity sense. Australia, during the Keating era particularly, began to come to terms with its proximate neighbours, and accelerated the process of reconciliation with its indigenous population (the outsiders within). The nation at large has hardly begun the process of facing the challenges posed to its

borders of identity by Muslim Black Others however. Or perhaps it has not wished to begin. Wolfgang Kasper, a former Professor of Economics at the University of New South Wales, recently argued that Middle Eastern migrants should be excluded because they imposed upon us unacceptable 'transaction costs' (quoted in Manne 2001(b)). John Stone, the former head of Treasury recently made the comments that Arabs were not welcome in Australia because of their supposed inability to assimilate to what he called Australia's 'Judeo-Christian civilisation' (quoted in Manne 2001(b)). The Australian imagined community has been shaped in such a way that accommodation to this 'difference' is too problematic. I contend that the racial is deeply embedded within this 'problematic'.

I diverge slightly here to illustrate my last point. The everyday practices of a people speaks volumes of the discourses that inform them. I want to illustrate this with a personal observation. I recently attended a dance concert where one of my nieces was performing. One of the troupes danced a passionately stirring Irish dance and a dancer amongst them was black. This of itself is interesting, the ambivalence in such a scene. The women dancers' costume was a graceful purple velvet traditional Irish dress that appeared to be too low-cut to stay so securely as they performed their movements. The security was achieved by an attachment of skin-coloured fabric from the end of the upper bodice to neck. I became aware of this piece of fabric on the black dancer; it was not visible on the other dancers. Apparently it is not possible to buy this piece of fabric in her skin colour in Perth. Such artifice, so necessary for dancers to perform in comfort, became an incongruous presence on this woman's body. The supposed invisibility of this piece of fabric made her visible, physically marked her for non-inclusion into the larger group; in that sense she was also made invisible. I wondered what the situation was elsewhere in Australia in relation to dancers and this cloth. Was her presence an anomaly in the national imaginary?

Let me provide another example, one more relevant to the theme of this article. Australia is the only developed nation with mandatory and indefinite detention of refugees. Arguments across the political divide for the preservation of detention centres focus on the nation's ability to control asylum seekers' movements, to know they can be sent away easily; the 'threat' they pose to national security is so great. Yet some 84 per cent of those in detention will be assessed as genuine refugees (Edmund Rice Centre 2001). Upon release from detention these refugees are granted temporary protection visas (TPVs) and continue their invisibility: They will not speak out publicly for fear of damaging their applications for permanent visas. They sew their lips metaphorically. The nation's treatment of refugees (Mares 2001; McMaster 2001) enacts serious fears. Australia's anxieties of invasion of the borders are enacted on refugees' bodies, and so we place them within even tighter borders of control. They are made invisible, silent within these borders. Their presence is an

incongruous presence within the national imaginary and they remain unacknowledged.

Postcolonial anxieties

I argue that Australia's policies and national practices described above are a form of postcolonial nationalism. The two terms stand antagonistically in my usage, one annotating diversity,[6] the other an ideology of unity. In the Australian setting this paradox, this tension, the anxiety, has always been there. 'Fortress Australia' has largely sought to resist 'being dislodged from "tradition"' (Pollock et al 2000: 577), as this tradition has been Anglo Celtic, Judeo-Christian (Stratton 1999) white. Refugees have simply come to represent the latest challenge to maintaining this tradition. Australia's treatment of refugees has shown that the 'tolerance' Stratton (1998) and Hage (1998) mention as always premised on the nation's ability to withdraw it, is being withdrawn. Australia's borders are being 'tightened' and the fear of the outside[r] is building yet again.

When territorial borders were invoked in the 2001 Australian federal elections, we heard more than the cry for national sovereignty in the territorial sense. We heard an anxiety that has run through parts of the Australian psyche for the term of its existence as a united nation, as a federation of separateness joined as one. It is an anxiety born of fracturings that go unacknowledged. Rutherford (2000) calls it a contradiction in the national psyche that fragments action, a desire to do good at the very moment we do evil — a kind of schizophrenia, or is it neurosis? The 2001 election wafts winds of the past to the present, of a hundred years ago at Federation, reminiscent of the federal election at this other time, and which resulted in the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*. In September 2001 amendments to the Migration Act preceded the election, but a set of similar anxieties/questionings underwrote them (Manne 2001(a)). The amendments resulted in the possibility of active ejection from the mainland of boats carrying asylum seekers, what has now been termed the 'Pacific solution', and the continuous extension of TPVs. The amendments brought

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6   It is important to note that the term 'postcolonial' is a highly contested term, and does not suggest one meaning alone. It has been used to speak of that which comes after colonialism, decolonisation, and in a more general sense 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day' (Ashcroft et al 1989: 2). It has also been used to speak of colonial power, the structures of power that survive until today as a heritage of the colonial era (McClintock 1993). Homi Bhabha tends to use 'postcolonial' to denote the hybrid moment, the creation of the 'in-between' although he has in recent times moved to speaking more of 'cosmopolitanisms'. It is this Bhabhalian sense that I have tended to use in this article.

the borders closer, Australia enclosed itself. Onshore refugees were the catalysts for this questioning, this latest fear of the outside[r] in 2001.

Hope in the 'in-between'

The operation of modern borders is almost always partial. Borders are a fantasy position of wholeness, of unity; they rely on facile binaries of opposition. The so-called hybrids, the bilingual, the multilingual, the multicultural, the in-betweens, the negotiated new spaces, and, in fact, most of us, challenge them. Refugees as border-crossers, forcing themselves on the borders of the nation-state, challenge them more so. They challenge the fantasy.

We live in a world of integrated variety, of multiple identities, of 'Janus-faced … in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated' (Bhabha 1990: 4). I turn to the Bhabhalian conception of postcoloniality here, as that which accents on the 'in-between', that 'difficult borderline, the interstitial experience' (Bhabha 1998: 36), that place where resistances, negotiations, passive and active, create new forms. I turn to it to formulate an Australian vision similar to that proposed by Gelder and Jacobs (1998), for the opening of this nation-place to ambivalence:

> where difference and 'reconciliation' co-exist uneasily … The conventional colonial distinctions between self and other, here and there, mine and yours, are now by no means totally determinable; a certain unboundedness occurs whereby the one inhabits the other at one point, disentangles itself at another, inhabits it again, and so on, in a relationship we have designated as soliciting … we want to contemplate the possibility of producing a postcolonial narrative which, rather than falling into a binary that either distinguishes 'us' from 'them' or brings us all together as the same, would instead think through the uncanny implications of being in place and 'out of place' at precisely the same time (pp 138-9).

This ambivalence, this sitting together 'soliciting', the 'certain unboundedness', the opening of borders of definition, is necessary if this nation is to face this global human challenge. There are many people within Australia who already enact and live this position of the interstitial, of ambivalence: those who question and challenge the official policies in relation to asylum seekers and refugees. And because it is people who live policy, it is people who create and live the interstitial, people who illuminate the political with the personal, I provide a story of 'interstitial experience' and new negotiations.

There is an Iraqi family who is here because of persecution and murder at the hands

of the current regime in Iraq. The father was a prominent intellectual who openly criticised Saddam Hussein's Government. The parents escaped to a European country before their children were born, and their children were born there. The children were not granted citizenship in this nation, however, since they were Iraqi. Some few years ago they all returned to Iraq, thinking it would be safe. The father was murdered by the Government, the mother escaped and arrived in Australia as an onshore refugee. She arrived before September 1999[7] and therefore was granted a permanent visa. Her children (two of them young women) fled to Iran and lived there as refugees until they too could pay a smuggler to bring them to Australia some few months ago. They had not been granted Iraqi citizenship while in Iraq due to their father's beliefs. On arrival in Australia the young people have been granted a TPV which does not entitle them to the normal range of citizenship rights nor settlement services. They remain nationless.

These young people, reunited with their mother, feeling a sense of place, wished to follow their father's dream and further their education. They are not entitled to this under the provisions of a TPV. One of the social service agencies, the only one in fact enabled by the legislation to provide TPV refugees with services, advocated for them and the eldest has been offered a place in one of our universities. There are now a number of scholarships that have been offered for TPV holders by other Western Australian universities. This is in spite of the federal policies.

Conclusion

Onshore refugees, 'boat people', intersect with the Australian border in its manifold manifestations in a most violent manner. We cannot name it an interaction, as that would imbue the contact with an equality it does not possess. These refugees are some of the most vulnerable people on the globe, needing to leave the safety of their own borders to cross others', to enter spaces possibly hostile to them. Australia's space has been hostile to them. We have to ask ourselves why, when we undertook at the international level to provide these people with asylum should they seek it of us, and envelop them within the safety of these borders. Yet our borders have become more rigid rather than more elastic in relation to them. This nation-space accepts some of the smallest numbers of refugees, per capita, in the world (Austcare 2002), yet the nation's official responses are similar in manner as that shown to lepers

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7   This was the date when the legislation was amended so that certain categories of refugees, largely onshore refugees, could be granted temporary status rather than the permanent status granted previously. This type of visa disallowed most of the settlement services like language lessons and accommodation assistance, as well as minimal employment assistance.

in the past. What lies beneath this treatment, this active rejection, has not embedded within it fear of numbers, but who constitute these numbers. Because refugees challenge too many dimensions of the borders as they have been constructed for Australia since British colonisation. The geographical or territorial dimensions have been but a part of the colonial construct, a part of the entire picture that has allowed white privilege to remain a fairly intact fantasy position. In a reverse manner to the First Fleet of 1788, where power lay with British technology and an ontological position of superiority, onshore refugees replay that initial colonial contact and bring white colonial Australia face to face with its own actions, and frailties in the face of a global situation it is unable to staunch. An extreme nationalist protection is all that some powerful groups have left, but a powerful tool it is at that. What is at stake for these groups is far greater than the mere crossing of territorial borders; it is the fear of the collapse of unitary and imagined identities as imposed and made dominant by British colonialism (Young 2002). ●

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