White shores of longing:
'Impossible Subjects' and the Frontiers of Citizenship

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This essay begins with an incident that occurred in 2001, the arrival of a group of asylum seekers from Sri Lanka who arrived off the coast of Coral Bay, Western Australia. It follows these castaway figures through a sequence of discursive histories and representational contexts, situating their stories against practices of embodied citizenship at the intersection of law, land (as territorialised geo-body) and nation, in the UK, Sri Lanka and Australia, the sites of different, but deeply entwined, dramas of citizenship.

A true story threads this essay together, the story of an arrival—of sorts. It concerns the

experience of a group of Tamil asylum seekers from Sri Lanka seeking to escape the war at

home, who were dropped off by a boat somewhere off the coast of Coral Bay, in remote Western

Australia. They were discovered some days later, in several small groups, wandering in the bush.

As recounted, with some hilarity, in the national media, the arrivals, all men, had come ashore

dressed in their best suits to be ready for prospective job interviews, but had their trouser legs

rolled up and shoes slung across their shoulders to wade through the waves. When one group

came across a telephone linesman, they asked him for directions to the bus. The linesman

stopped to fill their near-empty cans with water before leaving to telephone the police. His

commentary, as reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is deadpan:

> They were all very polite, and each of them shook my hand and told me they were Sri Lankan . . . You
> could tell that they didn't fit in, and they looked like they were dressed in their Sunday best . . . they
> were really weak when they shook my hand . . . Once we had managed to make sense of each other's
> English I told them there was a bus coming to pick them up, the cops' bus. (*Sydney Morning Herald*
> 2001)

This scene on a beach is emblematic of a thousand others. The refugee from war, political

persecution or impoverishment flees the source of their suffering dressed in their

finest, ready to present their best face to their new home. They stand at the hostile and alien

threshold of this desti-nation, inappropriate, vulnerable figures, diminished by the ominous

forces that loom over them. Faint with starvation and thirst, they hold out their weak hands in

introduction, repeat their unintelligible names, and the name of that place to which they can

never return. Their unspoken solicitation, with its silent messages of courtesy, respect and

anticipatory hospitality, is met with what Joseph Pugliese has aptly described as the 'serviceable

brutality' (2005, 304) of the grudging host, one who stops to fill their canteens with water before

consigning them to the space of the detention camp, the holding place for the uncitizen at the limits of the nation.

The casual, serviceable brutality of the linesman who assures them that 'there is a bus coming to meet them' before promptly summoning 'the cops' bus' is reinforced by the humorous and derisive reporting of this incident in the national media. The reportage underscores the symbolic and physical violence embedded in the failure/refusal of the citizen to recognise either legal or ethical responsibilities of care and hospitality towards the refugee cast away on its shores. This refusal/betrayal of the ethic of hospitality at the threshold nation reaffirms the place of the citizen, as it locates the refugee/castaway as a pivotal figure in contemporary enactments of citizenship.

II

This is an essay about thresholds, literal and symbolic; about the frontiers of citizenship in disparate scenes and places, and across discursive and representational histories. In *Impossible Subjects*, her incisive study on United States immigration policy in the mid-twentieth century, Mae Ngai focuses attention on the in-between space occupied by the not-quite citizen because 'citizenship's threshold and its character are deeply interwoven' (Ngai 2004, 6). The impossible subjects who inhabit these spaces in Ngai's book are the illegal (and sometimes legal) 'aliens' upon whose invisible labour the economic viability of the US depends, even as its political and cultural identity requires their exclusion. Ngai argues that the undocumented alien as 'a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved' was 'the central problem in US immigration policy in the twentieth century' (Ngai 2004, 3-5).

In Australia at the beginning of the 21st century, as in the US and the UK, the refugee and the asylum seeker merge with the figure of the 'economic migrant', the 'illegal' and the unassimilable as paradigmatic noncitizens, those whose presence on the frontier delimits and defines national space, as it licenses the political and economic asymmetries that prevail within (Mitropoulos 2006; Stratton 2009). The asylum seeker at the frontier of national space coheres this territorialised national body and, in a parallel move, is located as the pivotal figure in contemporary enactments of citizenship.

In using the term enactment here I seek to focus attention on the interrelations between the legal-political and the sociocultural aspects of citizenship, that is, citizenship as a category constituted by the legislative acts of the state, as well as one that is, as May Joseph puts it, enacted in the 'sphere of metaphoric, literal, and performed possibilities available in the everyday through which communities and individuals access (successfully or not) the experience of citizenship' (Joseph 1999, 3). The extent to which citizenship can be successfully accessed, and bodies positioned as legitimate or illegitimate occupants of civic space, depends on their ability to perform citizenship, through acts of speech, demeanour, gesture, consumption and display.

Embedded in the term enactment at the same time are what Lisa Law describes in *Immigrant Acts* as acts of 'labor, resistance, memory and survival' in which 'unrepresentative histories of situated embodiment … contradict the abstract form of citizenship' enshrined in law (Lowe 1996, 9; 7; see also Isin and Neilson 2008). As embodied practices, enactments of citizenship contradict and complicate the body of the state's legislative acts. They re-present the embodied histories of that which, at different stages of the national story, is placed outside the law; as such they fissure law's claims to a unified, abstract, disembodied and transcendent

relation to the citizen. Bodies once disallowed by the law of the land expose law's partial and contingent nature as a mutable body constituted by disjunction and contradiction—although they may serve simultaneously to recuperate or rehabilitate this fractured body through teleologies of national inclusion or reconciliation. There is an irresolvable contradiction here, as the narratives and images that celebrate the national story seek to incorporate and rehabilitate the history of its exclusions. In Australia, Aboriginal history is an obvious instance: the ABC's *Survivor*-type program, *Outback House*, set in the bush in the colonial period begins with an Aboriginal 'Welcome to Country' for the settlers, a move that is historically preposterous but serves retrospectively to recruit Indigenous people into the plot of a reconciled and post-colonial nation (the trope of *Survivor* is one I will return to presently). The SBS series, *The Colony*, described by one commentator as '*Survivor* meets *Big Brother* in period costume', included an episode in which a settler family hoists the Aboriginal flag, an artefact 150 years ahead of its time, as a symbol of 'sedition' (Gapps 2007, 67-68). In a similar vein, Baz Luhrman's epic-as-fantasy, *Australia*, incorporates the official apology to the stolen generations to frame its reworking of Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955), reinstating 'going native' and assimilation into the Anglo-Australian settler romance as the only two alternatives for being Aboriginal in the nation.

'Close scrutiny of the ways in which citizenship is actually embodied by the state' May Joseph writes (Luhrman's *Australia*, we might remember here, was heavily subsidised by the Commonwealth government):

> discloses a scenario filled with the anxious enactments of citizens as actors. The stock characters in this scenario include authentic citizens; inauthentic minorities; noncitizens . . . [and] emergent political subjects . . . an imagined geography of performed sites through which notions of the citizen as a 'legal' and 'cultural' subject emerge in tandem with the invention [or reproduction] of statehood (Joseph 1999, 5).

In what follows I track such nervous enactments of embodied citizenship at the intersection of law, land (as territorialised geo-body) and nation, in the UK, Sri Lanka and Australia, the sites of different, but deeply entwined, dramas of citizenship that attempt to solve the question of the nation's impossible subjects.

III

It is only in the first frames of its opening sequence that Michael James Rowland's 2007 Australian film, *Lucky Miles*, evokes the refulgent lyricism of the 1939 love poem by W H Auden that, presumably, inspired its title. At first the connection between poem and film might appear slight, even fanciful. But Auden's 'Warm are the still and lucky miles', thick with echoes of Shakespeare and Tennyson, Donne and Marvel, is a poem of yearning and arrival, exile and homecoming. Its imagined scene of arrival is a beach. This organising conceit, one that casts the body of the loved one as a dreaming, secret shore which the lover strives to reach, tossed by tempestuous currents amidst 'seas of shipwreck', is premised on an enduring trope of colonial discourse.

In Auden's love poem two distinct but connected figures, the literary construct of castaway, and its silent historical shadow, the refugee, brush against each other, though they do not quite meet. Earlier that year, declaring European civilization 'done for', Auden and his friend Christopher Isherwood had begun a self-imposed exile from the UK that would last for the greater part of their lives (Osborne 1979, 185-189). In this context the poem's coastline of desire,

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the 'white shores of longing' towards which it strives, appears (in the terms of a famous line from Donne's Elegy XIX) as a mapping of Auden's *Newfoundland*, the United States, on to the *America* of a lover's waiting body.

At the same time, the departure of Auden and Isherwood, prominent anti-fascist intellectuals, connects to a far more desperate exodus from Europe. In 1935 Auden went through a ceremony of marriage with Erika Mann, daughter of the novelist Thomas Mann, when she was threatened with the loss of her German citizenship as 'a public enemy of the Third Reich'; he urged other gay men to make similar marriages—'After all, what are buggers for?' (Osborne 1979, 109; 119). 'Refugee Blues', the opening poem of the sequence '10 Songs' in which 'Warm are the still and lucky miles' appears as number 3, is an explicit comment on the predicament of refugees from Nazi Germany:

> Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
> It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":
> O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.
>
> Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
> Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
> But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'
> March 1939

Much as Auden's 'Stop all the clocks' found new life as an elegy for the AIDS era after being featured in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, since the early 2000s *Refugee Blues* has circulated on the internet as a comment on the plight of asylum seekers brought to a standstill at the border. *Refugee Blues* evokes an all too familiar scene of recent years: people in rickety, overcrowded boats from Haiti to Burma, held at bay by invisible lines in the sea. Packed on unseaworthy craft, hidden in shipping containers or unprotected in their own fragile 'boat of one skin', contemporary castaways wash up on the white shores of Europe, North America and

Australia (Hulme 2005, 197; Pugliese 2006). It is significant that to tell the story of these *other* castaways Auden turns to the blues, the cultural expression of Afro-American forced removal and dispersal; the canonical literary trope of the castaway referenced in 'Warm are the still and lucky miles' cannot encompass their stories, even as they constitute its hidden conditions of possibility. Throughout this essay I invoke the stanzas of 'Refugee Blues' as a type of historical chorus on the fraught and violent trajectories of refugee bodies and the relations of fear, anxiety and hatred they generate, as well as on the legislative prohibitions and exclusions designed to stop them in their tracks.

In his powerful essay, *Cast Away*, Peter Hulme has pointed out the disjunction that prevails between the contemporary castaways of globalisation and late capitalism and the prototypical castaway of colonial discourse—the solitary, usually white and male, individualist marooned on a desert shore to begin over again the labour of reproducing his world. Such Crusoe myths remain alive today in the manufactured deprivations of *Survivor* and similar 'reality television' programs set on ever more exoticized faraway coasts. What remains unspoken, unspeakable, in these compulsive reenactments of the castaway plot are the collective stories of empire's historical and presentday refugees, of whole peoples cast away in the name of progress, casually removed from their homelands to lives in the brutal enclosure of a camp or exiled to foreign shores. Hulme reminds that:

> Although the trope of the castaway is usually limited to individuals or small groups, and almost exclusively European or North American, the colonial period saw many indigenous groups quite literally cast away. . . In a larger sense, the whole reservation system in North America could be seen as operating on the principle of creating enclosed islands within the larger sea of national sovereignty and casting away Indian groups onto those islands. (Hulme 2005, 194)

In the case of Tasmania, Hulme points out, all Indigenous survivors of the black wars were literally cast away to a lifelong exile on Flinders Island. Such practices are by no means confined

to the early phase of colonisation. In the mid-twentieth century Chagos Islanders were forcibly cast away from their homes to make way for a US military base on the British possession of Diego Garcia, while in the 21st century global warming once again causes inhabitants of small, poor, island postcolonies to confront the prospect of becoming cast away if they are not to be engulfed by rising seas.

Hulme's essay is invaluable in drawing lines of connection between colonial acts of mass casting away of colonised peoples and the contemporary stories of those who increasingly have no option but to become castaways. Their stories constitute the underside of tourist brochures advertising escape packages to remote tropical islands or *Survivor*-type fantasies staged on deserted coasts. These are the *other*, invisibilised, quests for sea change: 'To an extent rarely equalled since Shakespeare invented the phrase, those in search of a sea change to their lives are setting themselves on dangerous courses across water—Cubans and Haitians toward Florida, Southeast Asians toward Australia, Africans and other Asians toward Europe' (Hulme 2005, 196). *The Tempest*, as Hulme marks, is a point of origin for both types of sea change stories, and for the twin significations of the island as place of refuge. As Hulme goes on to note, Shakespeare's play is peopled almost entirely by castaways. Prospero and Sycorax, the chief antagonists on the island, are both what might be described in today's terms as political refugees. While Prospero is restored to his home after a long exile, Sycorax's fate is eternal incarceration. From its first use in a song designed by Ariel to bamboozle Ferdinand into thinking his father, Alonso, is dead, the phrase *sea change* itself is invested with double meaning: 'the literal changes brought about by salt water, from drowning to preservation; and the transformations experienced by those who cross the sea' (Hulme 2004, 187).

At the end of *The Tempest*, Alonso is discovered to be alive, but to have been transformed by his immersion in salt water. The film *Lucky Miles*, too, I will argue, replicates this movement from tragedy to comedy; from the possibility of death by water to a more fortunate sea-change—transformation into the deserving Australian subject. This happy ending is achieved through a movement from the figure of the refugee to that of the castaway, a movement that involves a reaffirmation of the nation and its inclusivist teleologies, as well as the assumption of assigned roles within the citizenscape.

IV

> *Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said:*
> *'If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread';*
> *He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.*

> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'
> March 1939

But before returning to the beach, a historical detour, via another threshold of arrival, the airport: It is Heathrow in September 2007. I am in the UK to speak at a conference in Brighton, *Interrogating Terror*. An incredulous Anglo-Australian woman stands behind me in the immigration queue. The scene has changed since she, and I, have last been here. The line that differentiated passport holders from, effectively, the white diaspora states (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) as against other former British colonies has disappeared. In place of the old queues that were markedly segregated by colour and race, we now face the stark alternatives: 'EU Passports' and 'Others'. My Anglo-Australian compatriot can't quite believe it. She goes to check with an immigration officer before returning to her companions and announcing disconsolately, 'Yes, we've got to stand here. We're the others, apparently'.

Her chagrin is, in one sense, entirely understandable. Australian citizenship, for most of its history, was coextensive with British citizenship. At federation the new state of Australia chose not to establish a distinctive category of Australian citizenship, but rather exercised its newly acquired sovereignty through the prohibition of non-white migration and a series of other forms of border control. Henry Reynolds argues that in the absence of substantive independence from Britain, the government of the newly federated Australia was able to 'assert its independence not by hauling down the Union Jack but by closely controlling who and what could enter the country through tariffs, immigration controls, customs and quarantine regulations. These restrictions, rigorously exercised, came to be the surrogate assertion of independence by an impaired nation state'. (Reynolds 2007, 66)

In the impaired Australian nation state produced post-1901, border control over people and goods operated in tandem with the continued definition of citizenship in racial terms and through subjection to Britain. Brian Galligan and John Chesterman argue that the Australian constitution was 'deliberately couched in [British] 'subject' rather than [Australian] 'citizen' terms' (1999, 73), a status that was reemphasised rather than amended by the 1948 Nationality and Citizenship Act. Introducing the Act in parliament, Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell (remembered for promoting continental European migration to Australia but drawing the line at the idea of Asians as future citizens by famously asserting that 'Two Wongs don't make a white') assured his audience that it was 'not designed to make an Australian any less a British subject'. Calwell promised that the establishment of Australian citizenship would 'in no way lessen the advantages and privileges which British subjects who may not be Australian citizens enjoy in Australia'. Galligan and Chesterman identify this 'deliberate eschewing of citizenship in favour of subjecthood' to Britain and the exclusion of 'non-white groups' as 'evidence of

Australia's non-citizenship tradition' and conclude that as a consequence 'contemporary Australians have no core notion of positive citizenship upon which to draw' (Galligan and Chesterman 1999, 76-7). Put another way, the constituent elements of Australian citizenship are exclusion of non-white subjects and the racial link to British ancestry.

The outburst from the woman in my immigration queue at Heathrow was perhaps provoked by her sense that this historical compact between Australian and British citizenship was being abandoned. I wished I could have offered her a copy of Arun Kundnani's *The End of Tolerance* by way of explanation and reassurance. Kundnani tracks the progressive erasure in immigration policy since WW2 of Britain's imperial entanglements: 'Those who had been made into colonial subjects as Britain expanded its imperial rule over multiple "races" were now to be excluded from the white nationality that Britain sought in a context of contracting sovereignty' (2007, 15). During the 1960s and 70s Britain sought to jettison its non-white Commonwealth subjects while retaining its links with white diaspora states such as Australia through the biologised concept of 'patriality'. (Growing up in post-independence Sri Lanka, I could have charted the workings of this policy in the narratives of my friends and neighbours as a white grandparent, once a skeleton in the cupboard, suddenly became the pivotal figure in many a family tree.) From the 1960s to the 1990s, according to Kundnani, British immigration policy was sustained by two complementary strategies: the adoption of a range of measures, such as the racist construct of 'patriality', to restrict immigration from former non-white colonies, while also upholding an official policy of domestic multiculturalism that provided minimal recognition and rights to the non-white citizens already within its borders.

In time, this uneasy policy of promoting multiculturalism within national limits as a trade-off for strict controls on non-white immigration at the border was supplanted by a

reemphasis on 'cohesion' and 'core values' that had the effect of revalorising whiteness and affirming an implicitly racialised model of British citizenship. In the 1980s, anxieties over globalisation, EU membership, sovereignty and the out-of-control welfare state were collected around the figures of the non-white migrant and asylum seeker, who came to be cast as:

> potent symbols for the loss of a nation-state that once 'belonged' to its people and afforded them certain privileges as citizens … [T]he icon of the asylum seeker not only came to stand in for new kinds of migrations that globalised capitalism had produced but also became a screen on to which [anxieties around the diminishing sovereignty of the nation-state] could be projected (Kundnani 2007, 65-66).

Kundnani locates the moment when these anxieties came to a head in 1985 at the point when the first group of asylum seekers who were neither white nor fleeing communism arrived in Britain. They were Tamil refugees from the war in Lanka. To prevent their entry, for the first time Commonwealth citizens arriving in Britain were now required to have a visa: in effect this meant that they had to arrive illegally because travel to Colombo or to a third country to apply for a visa was an impossibility for most (Kundnani 2007, 39). On arrival they were promptly stigmatised as 'economic migrants' rather than 'genuine refugees', a response, Kundnani argues that 'set … the template for a campaign against asylum seekers that would escalate relentlessly over the next two decades' (2007, 66). In the late 1990s and 2000s this campaign would be replayed in Australia. In the UK its culmination was the new model of race relations put forward in the 2002 White Paper on citizenship, symbolically reconfiguring whiteness through democracy, core 'values' and cohesion (read assimilability) in the context of the war on terror (Kundnani 2007, 5).

Under the new dispensation, although white subjects from the white diaspora states of the Coalition of the Willing might have to endure the brief indignity of standing in the wrong immigration queue, the racialised reconfiguration of citizenship under the rubric of shared values

and culture ensured their continued entrée into the national family. For those placed outside the pale in terms of cohesion and core values, on the other hand, the immigration queue represented only the first of a series of tests, checkpoints and blockages that circumscribed entry to both legal and cultural citizenship. This marked differentiation is nowhere more clearly manifested than immediately after passing through the immigration queue at Heathrow. My Anglo-Australian compatriot might look forward to jumping into a taxi or collapsing into the arms of waiting friends after enduring her wait in the Others' queue at Heathrow. But postcolonial itineraries of displacement and impoverishment, colonial processes of racial abjection and the global city's unceasing demand for flexible, low wage, low status labour converge in the bodies of the non-white women from former British colonies, particularly South Asian women from Pakistan and Bangladesh, who clean the floors and toilets of Heathrow. At the intersection of colonial economies of representation and the gendered and raced counter-geographies of globalisation, the bodies of women reorientalised by the war on terror into targets of suspicion and pity and cast as the bearers of an obdurate 'cultural difference', serve in their heightened visibility and yet tacitly agreed on imperceptibility as object lessons of the uncitizen for new arrivals into the UK (Perera 2008).

V

> *Once we had a country and we thought it fair,*
> *Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:*
> *We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.*

> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'
> March 1939

What Kundnani identifies as a watershed in British immigration policy, the arrival of Tamil refugees from the war in Lanka, is a key moment in my own biography. The 1983 anti-Tamil

pogroms and escalation of violence that followed it caused the dispersal of my extended family out of Lanka. For me, already a sojourner in the west, they put an end to any idea of return 'home'. The cleaners at Heathrow airport, then, embody complex injunctions and reminders for me. Yet I must not forget either that my escape from the worst effects of the war in Lanka were purchased by entry into a different theatre of colonisation, and mobilisation into another national war—the war in Australia.

In the Australian state, founded on the denied sovereignty of Aboriginal and Islander people, the categories of white, non-white and black, of *native*, *alien* and *citizen* were from its inception constituted through interlocking inscriptions of alterity and sameness, by the hierarchies of colonial raciology and its performed differentiations and discriminations. The decision in 2006 to introduce a citizenship test was both an extension and a reworking of what Galligan and Chesterman characterise as 'Australia's non-citizenship tradition', a tradition founded on the exclusion of any 'aboriginal [sic] native of Australia, Asia, Africa, or the Islands of the Pacific' (73-4). Neoliberal ideologies, an aggressive new program of assimilation and the push for national security were the driving forces of the 2006 amendments to the 1948 citizenship act. For Indigenous peoples these forces resulted in a campaign against collective title arrangements and the imposition of mutual obligation contracts and culminated in a military intervention into Aboriginal-run communities, positioned as internal failed states along the lines of those in the Pacific and the Middle East (Perera 2007). For migrants, the test instituted under the amended citizenship act recalls the infamous dictation test under the White Australia Policy (Reynolds 2007, 67), while replicating moves by Australia's senior partners in the coalition of the willing and paralleling the successive Border Protection Acts adopted since 2001. As a nodal point for a number of immigration and assimilation policies, the test draws attention to a new

space at the threshold of citizenship. Like the beach and the coastline this symbolic threshold space at the frontier of citizenship is one that implicitly, and at times explicitly, references the figure of the asylum seeker.

The citizenship test as a new borderline, or checkpoint, targets the foreigner at the gates, making visible a new category of uncitizen, or infra-citizen, at the threshold of citizenship. Together with a constellation of other formal and informal practices, the test is a technology that subjects the aspiring citizen to a gaze that scrutinizes, disciplines and separates. The proliferation of a number of lampoons and mock enactments of the citizenship test suggest a clear understanding of its function as performance, a script that the aspiring citizen must be able to deliver, more or less convincingly, with the aid of appropriate actions and props, such as Tim Brunero's lampooning of the citizenship test on the ABC's *Chaser* comedy show (Brunero, 2007). As the test imposes a mode of performance on the infra-citizen, as Brunero makes clear, it is also a staging of 'national values', the ritualised affirmation of a body of knowledges, mythologies and symbols that make up the national story. In this sense, too, the test can be understood as performative, a set piece directed at the privileged subjects of the nation. As it recognises and reaffirms the histories and symbols of these privileged national subjects, the citizenship test is a nod to insider knowledges. It acts, in the words of one commentator, as a 'dog whistle' (Fear 2007).

Reinforcing the idea that the citizenship test interpellates the insider is the fact that on Australian television, commercials promoting the aims of the citizenship test have replaced previous ones that previously urged migrants to take up citizenship. Prior to the war on terror, dominant representations cast the achievement of citizenship as the culmination of the migrant narrative, with the naturalisation or citizenship ceremony as the ultimate staging of arrival, the

logical *telos* of the narrative of migration—although the closure promised by naturalisation remained unachievable for differently raced and gendered bodies. The spectacle of migrants and refugees assuming national status, or becoming 'naturalised' affirms the ideal of a consensual liberal citizenship that allows existing citizens to 'reenact liberalism's fictive foundation in individual acts of uncoerced consent' (Bonnie Honing quoted in Ngai 2003, 5). The shift from the citizenship ceremony as a staging of arrival and a liberal validation of choice, to a form of certification and a technology for separating out the unworthy and the suspect, resignifies citizenship and makes it visible anew as a site where the limits of the national are enforced. A speech given by the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship in 2007, for example, specified that 'migrants who fail to show willingness to integrate into Australian society will be denied a permanent visa and face being sent back to their home country'. Furthermore it stipulated that '[s]pecially trained officers will evaluate migrants' attitudes towards learning English and integrating when assessing their applications for permanent residency' (*The Australian* 2007). Despite a change of government in 2007, Andrew Jakubowicz has pointed out that the citizenship test, like Australian refugee policy itself, retains the stamp of the Howard era (Jakubowicz 2008). The spotlight cast on the threshold or frontier of citizenship reenacts the literal policing of borders that has been at the forefront of Australian politics at least since the arrival of the *Tampa* in 2001, enacting the border policing of Australian citizenship as a search for the enemy within.

V

> *Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,*
> *A thousand windows and a thousand doors:*
> *Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.*

> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'

Theatre of Migration, a community production by members of the Sri Lankan diaspora in

Sydney, premiered at Macquarie University's Lighthouse Theatre on the eve of the 2001 general

election, what came to be thought of as the *Tampa* election (Marr and Wilkinson 2003). That

morning the cast had awoken to the news that two women asylum seekers from Iraq, Fatima

Husseini and Nurjan Husseini, had drowned as fire broke out after the navy attempted to turn

away their damaged boat from Australian waters (Garran and Saunders 2001). The women were

the first known casualties directly attributable to new 'Border Protection' legislation, but their

deaths followed the drowning of over 350 asylum seekers a fortnight earlier in the sinking of

SIEV X, in circumstances that remain to be accounted for (Kevin 2004, Perera 2006).

These were weeks of unprecedented tension as 'Border Protection' legislation was

rammed through parliament and public feeling against asylum seekers whipped into a frenzy

following the 9/11 attacks. The Border Protection legislation had the effect of consolidating

homeland and citizenship as raced and gendered categories and placing under suspicion diasporic

groups located at the fringes of a nation now reconfigured as a 'homeland' under siege. And as in

the US, in this most attentive of its junior partners in the war on terror, communities and

individuals reorientalised and reracialised as Muslim, Middle Eastern or South Asian were put on

notice to perform their allegiance in the absolutist terms demanded by President George W Bush,

'[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' (Bush 2001).

News of the deaths added a sense of urgency to tensions already built up over the

preceding weeks as the cast engaged with the play's relation to charged debates on citizenship,

refugees, terrorism, security and border protection. These debates reinflected the investments that

cast members brought to the production as a performance of cultural citizenship. Aihwa Ong

describes cultural citizenship as a 'dialectical process' of migrant self-making and self-representation in negotiation with 'the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory' (Ong 2003, 264). As a performance of cultural citizenship, *Theatre of Migration* encapsulated the contradictions and divides that characterise the Lankan diaspora, and its formation through the forces of ethnonationalism and war.

The play, performed mostly in English, was put together by a cast of multiethnic middle class Lankan migrants—Burgher, Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim—led by Ernest Thalayasingham MacIntyre, a director with an established reputation in both Lanka and Australia. On one level, the play can be situated as part of the project of the claim for political status undertaken by a recent migrant community, the staging of a claim for visibility and legitimation on the Australian scene (Ong 2003, 266). At the same time, the making of the play inevitably brought to the surface cleavages and contradictions among a cast marked by a series of ethnic, religious, political and linguistic divides, and provided a forum for airing differences that would have been repressed in other social interactions between them. Unavoidably, internal conflicts over the meaning of terms like *terrorism*, *nation, citizen* and *rights* produced by the war 'at home' also acquired new inflections in light of Australia's internal debates in the war on terror and the arrival of refugees.

A product of these split positions, *Theatre of Migration* emerged as a 'chaos of stories', a text cumulatively assembled, rather than authored (Perera 2001). As the play was put together, by argument, negotiation and adjudication, a process in which I participated both as dramaturg and contributor to the script, its dimensions expanded, until it eventually reached back in time to include the period before the introduction of the White Australia policy (that is, prior to the

establishment of the Australian state) as well as forward to the present, to the refugee boats that seemed to be arriving almost on a daily basis. A defining moment for the direction that the play would take came when the decision was made to represent an event that occurred a few months prior: the story of the Lankans dumped off the coast of Coral Bay, Western Australia. When a telephone linesman comes across them in the bush, bleeding feet, inappropriate suits, strange accents and all, they ask him for directions to the bus, only to end up on the bus to the Curtin Detention Centre at Port Hedland.

Weaving their bloody trails on and off the set of *Theatre of Migration*, these starving, barefoot refugees invoked nameless figures from different times and places—unlawful non-citizens, illegals, disappeared and other 'impossible subjects'. Over seventy Lankan nationals were in detention in Australia at the time of the performance, incarcerated along with hundreds of more visible detainees from Iraq and Afghanistan in offshore camps on the Cocos Islands, Nauru and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Beyond these were the shadows of scores of thousands more disappeared and 'internally displaced' as a result of twenty years of war and terror in Lanka. In the paired contexts of war here and there, telling their stories triggered multi-layered frictions and fears among the multiethnic cast. Opposing allegiances in the war in Lanka mingled with domestic anxieties about the risks posed by 'illegals' and refugees to the aspirations of mostly professional, middle class Lankan-Australians. Anxieties expressed by some of us over behaving like bad guests in our new home and straining the hospitality of our hosts were compounded by the real danger of appearing 'unAustralian' in dangerous times. These fears clearly indicated the limits that circumscribed both the play and the multicultural citizenship it aimed to perform.

Only a brilliant decision by the director allowed the production to proceed, not by resolving the incompatible political positions among the cast, but by staging them, literally, on a set divided into unequal parts: at one end, the comfortable, suburban domesticity of prosperous, apparently happily assimilated migrants; at the other, the bleak lines and harsh lights of a detention camp where the illegal, unruly and unAustralian were dispatched in the course of the action. Set apart from these two major divides was a small third space, suggesting a café or kitchen table, where a group of rambunctious old men drink arak, tell dirty jokes and reenact the history of Lankan migrants in Australia—a profane, irretrievably obtuse, anti-chorus. The action of the play shuttled between these spaces, from the airport lounge of legal arrival and the citizenship ceremony to inhospitable beaches on which refugees wander; from suburban *baila* parties to stories from behind the razor wire.

The temporal and spatial disjunctions of the play, its juxtapositions, asynchronous staging of heterogeneous lives and interspersed song and dance numbers, projected the disparate stakes and positionalities among the cast. They enacted not only the absence of a unified diasporic community, but of any stable form of citizenship. At the same time, the division of the stage into these different kinds of space, 'inside' and outside', legal' and 'illegal', suggested not the absolute separation between the zones, but their contiguity, and the exchange between the categories of 'Australian' and 'unAustralian'. Against the razor wire and the detention camp, happy histories of arrival and assimilation faltered, while also frustrating neoliberal multiculturalism's demand for stories of what Gayatri Spivak describes as 'bottom-line national origin validation' (Spivak 2006, 83). The unAustralian, illegal and impossible subjects of the play undermined the category of the assimilated Australian by making visible the contingencies and the complicities of citizenship in time and space and revealing the limits of belonging. They

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worked as a reminder of citizenship's limits, such as the fate of 200 legal Australian citizens who were wrongfully held in detention camps during this period. As a migrant act, *Theatre of Migration* performed the *other* Australian stories that not only disrupted the notion of a unified national identity but refuted the fiction of a progressively inclusive nation. On this divided stage the reconciliation of illegitimate migrant bodies into a national story was revealed as an impossibility.

VI

> *Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,*
> *Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:*
> *Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.*
>
> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'
> March 1939

Immediately following the opening titles of *Lucky Miles*, the viewer confronts a body struggling in the ocean, seemingly in the throes of drowning. Held in suspension underwater, it is weighted down by awkward packages. Its hair streams alarmingly upwards. A froth of perfect bubbles issues from its mouth. The image is an immediate reminder of the fate of thousands of castaways in the years of the *Tampa* and SIEV X. In the next frame these tragic expectations are confounded as the body is lifted out of the sea, a helping hand under its head and back, evoking the gestures of immersion, baptism, rebirth. The rescued man laughs with delight as he emerges from the water. One by one other bodies make landfall on the beach around him, allowing the viewer to anticipate, instead of the expected tragedy, a contemporary drama of redemption and sea-change.

But such expectations are once again confounded as the arrivals survey the stark coastline around them. Here is no welcoming landscape of arrival, unfolding like a lover's compliant

body, but a harsh and barren shore. As the boat that conveyed them makes a hasty getaway with the assurance that there is a bus stop on the other side of the sand dunes, one of the arrivals protests, 'This does not look like a place where a bus stops'. Later we learn his name, Youssif, an engineer from Iraq. He is dressed, improbably, in a white suit; his trouser legs are rolled up and his shoes slung around his neck. Out of hearing, the sailor responds, sardonically, "Welcome to Paradise!"

Lucky Miles is set entirely along the coastline of Western Australia. The main part of the action consists of the meanderings up and down this coastline by different groups searching for the road to Perth or to Broome (*The Tempest* is not too far away in these opening scenes). The new arrivals include asylum seekers from Iraq, chief among them Youssif, who obsessively rehearses the words of the UN Refugee convention, reminding us of debates in the present over the alleged illegality of seeking asylum. There is also another group, young men from Cambodia. All their fathers are dead, presumably in the war—with one exception, Arun, who has come in search of his Anglo-Australian father who disappeared many years ago. Two Indonesian fishermen moonlighting as 'people smugglers' separately wander the coastline, searching for Broome after their boat catches fire. It is a place they know well as many Indonesian fishers are imprisoned there for trespassing in Australian waters. In inept pursuit of them all are three Australian army reservists, two Aboriginal and one Anglo-Australian. In the wayward itineraries of these disparate parties *Lucky Miles* stages a drama of contemporary citizenship that focuses attention on the beach, coastline and bush as entry points into Australia.

Stumbling in and doubling up on each others' footsteps, the reservists and the new arrivals at times appear to be equally at sea in the bush; like the radio command with whom the former maintain sporadic contact, it seems they 'couldn't find their arse with both hands'. The

presence of the two Aboriginal members who occasionally act as trackers lends the reservists a semblance of professionalism, while connecting the action to the 'lost in the bush' narratives of settler mythology—dramas in which Aboriginal guides play an ambiguous role as the insider-outsiders of a nation-in-the-making. The achievement of citizenship in the film is bound up with acts of fraternity and filiation in this landscape of coastline and bush that implicitly references the alien and hostile landscape experienced by early colonisers-settlers. Rather than a contemporary refugee drama, I read *Lucky Miles* as a yarn of multiethnic mateship and an interracial family romance of sons and fathers. As Stratton points out, women are absent—except for the stony-faced barmaid who betrays the strangers when they walk into a pub, and Arun's abandoned and virtually comatose Cambodian mother in the film's prologue (see Stratton, this issue). These all-male bush adventures of the characters mimic those of classic survivor-explorers as the new arrivals move from refugee stories into an increasingly familiar castaway plot.

    Lucky Miles is one of the few Australian films whose dialogue is in Farsi, Bahasa Indonesia and Khmer, and where Indigenous, refugee and migrant actors play the key roles. Despite this, its narrative structure, tropes, landscape and characters are all part of a cinematic stock-in-trade, working to affirm an assimilationist injunction that, in Graeme Turner's revealing turn of phrase, 'makes it national' (Turner 1994). The transition of the new arrivals from refugees to castaways culminates in an extended sequence reminiscent of classic explorer/survivor tropes, when three main characters make camp in an abandoned settler's hut and succeed, after days of effort, in repairing a rusty, damaged ute they find there. The moment when all three pile into the corroded, misshapen and broken ute and manage to steer it in unison marks their achievement of mateship, where previously they had quarrelled, cursed and abused

one another. An unlikely metaphor for a ship of state, the ute sets the three castaways on the right track to Australian citizenhood. The bond between them is consolidated soon after, when Youssif and Ramelan disable one of the 'people smugglers' (who also happens to be Ramelan's wicked uncle, another inadequate father figure) and then jointly give themselves up to the reservists.

At the climactic moment, Youssif walks forward towards these representatives of the state, formally invoking the words of the 1959 UN Refugee Convention. Unaccountably, the Anglo-Australian head of the unit stumbles at this point, and leans back onto his vehicle. This conveniently leaves the lead Aboriginal reservist, Tom Collins, to receive Youssif's plea for asylum. He responds by declaring laconically, 'Yeah, Ok'. In this gesture, *Lucky Miles* neatly sidesteps the problematic question of sovereignty. A momentary misstep stamps the grant of asylum by an Aboriginal man as an act that at once exceeds and falls short of official legitimacy. As if to underline this, Youssif reiterates his claim again as the Anglo-Australian officer, once more in charge, radios back to base. This time he receives a hasty thumbs up in reply. The urgency of Youssif's claim is in sharp contrast to the casual responses it receives from the army officers. The taken for granted acknowledgment of Youssif's asylum claim enables a forgetting both of the earlier arrest of the Cambodian group at the pub, and of the unrelenting border protection regime in place at the time of the film's making and first viewing. Instead, acts of reciprocal recognition confer inclusion in a nation whose historical burdens are increasingly bracketed as the narrative develops.

The scene with which I began—barefoot, starving Sri Lankan asylum seekers asking directions to the bus—is enacted twice in *Lucky Miles*. The first time it plays as tragedy when, shortly after their arrival, some of the Cambodian arrivals are hauled off by armed police after going into a pub to ask directions to the bus stop. Only one, Arun, manages to escape. In the final

scene of the film, Arun, still stubbornly searching for the Australian father who abandoned him at birth, is driven to a bus stop by an inscrutable kangaroo shooter who recalls both Mick Dundee and Mick Taylor, the serial killer of *Wolf Creek*. In Stratton's reading, Taylor is a figure of then Prime Minister Howard's murderous attitude towards refugees (see Stratton, this issue and 2007). In *Lucky Miles*, the kangaroo shooter turns out to be not a psychopath but a good Samaritan, one who even offers the starving Arun some beef jerky before driving him to the bus stop. Finally finding himself waiting for a coach to Perth, under an advertisement for the Lucky Miles Bus Company, Arun collapses into sobs. His journey is over. The next scene finds him standing at the door of a middle class house in a Perth suburb. It is shot, significantly, from within. An Anglo-Australian man opens the door with a 'What can I do for you, son?' In this moment the fate of Arun's fellow castaways, the Cambodians hauled off at gunpoint on 'the cops' bus' is consigned to oblivion, and patriality provides the ultimate solution to question of the unAustralian subject.

VII

> *The consul banged the table and said,*
> *"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":*
> *But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.*
>
> W. H. Auden, 'Refugee Blues'
> March 1939

In *Theatre of Migration*, the decision to represent the violence of Australian refugee policy in the end could not be separated from the state's long non-citizenship tradition and entailed a performance of its repressed histories of the non-citizen. As an immigrant act, the play's staging of unrepresentative lives invokes the impossible subjects of the nation, those limit-figures of citizenship. *Lucky Miles*, in contrast, is representative of the way refugee stories are enfolded and

reframed within the citizenscape through the incorporation of the main characters through fraternal and filial relationships. What must remain outside the film's frame are the spaces of the camp, and the hidden stories of what Joseph Pugliese describes as the 'theatres of cruelty' that are Australia's refugee prisons (2001, 2004).

And what of the unrepresentative subjects who leave their brief, indispensable, traces in these dramas of citizenship and whose stories open up a momentary space at the threshold of nation, the space of the impossible subject? My attempts to provide a symmetrical ending to this essay by returning to the starving, barefoot asylum seekers of Coral Bay with whom I began have proved futile. The last public view of them remains that of their being driven away on the cops' bus to the Curtin detention centre at Port Hedland. From here I might imagine a glimpse of them among the riots, hunger strikes and outbreaks of self-harm that occurred there in 2001-3 or their consignment, among other recalcitrant inmates, to punitive detention in a notorious camp within the camp known as Juliet Block (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001). Media accounts and official reports as well as writings by various refugees and advocates document these events, as they do the forced deportation of asylum seekers to a number of places, including to Sri Lanka, where they were subjected to abuse, violence and even death (CNN 2001; Edmund Rice Centre 2004, 2006).

As I write the last lines of this essay in April 2009 refugees from Lanka are once again in the news. The arrival of two separate boats, including a small craft that appeared to have sailed all the way from Lanka, prompted a new round of borderpanic here that corresponded with the chilling escalation of the war there. As Tamil civilians fleeing the battlefront are being compulsorily confined by the Lankan state in camps where it intends to hold them incommunicado for between three to five years, in Australia politicians and media are calling for

the reopening of detention camps in Nauru ('the Pacific Solution') or the forcible turning away of boats from Australian waters. Against these stark alternatives, a passing image or two, fragments of narrative that strain to account for the brief spaces where their lives touch ours; some bloodied footprints on a white beach of arrival.

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