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'Welcome To Paradise': Asylum Seekers, Neoliberalism, Nostalgia and *Lucky Miles*

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This article considers the Australian film *Lucky Miles* (2007) in the context of the developing emphasis in Australia through the 1990s and 2000s on neoliberal policies. This emphasis started with the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and was qualitatively reinforced by the conservative coalition government of John Howard. *Lucky Miles* is a film which narrates the experience of asylum seekers arriving on the Australian mainland. My focus is particularly on the impact of neoliberalism on the role of the border and on the popular attitude towards asylum seekers. To help develop this argument I also consider the film *Children of Men* (2006), which was set in Britain in a dystopian future. I analyse *Lucky*

Miles to understand how it replicates anxieties about asylum seekers and the porosity of the border that are, at bottom, a consequence of changing attitudes bred by neoliberal policies.

Lucky Miles was released in July 2007. That year it was nominated for both Best Film and Best Screenplay at the AFI Awards and won the Audience Award at the Sydney Film Festival. Critical reaction was generally positive if a little cautious. For example, Philippa Hawker in the Melbourne *Age* described it as 'a poignant film, but it is above all a comedy of errors: a political film, without a doubt, but a subtle, oblique and entertaining one' (Hawker, 2007). It should also be noted that the film was not particularly successful at the box office. In 2007, *Lucky Miles* took $544,000. That same year, *Romulus, My Father* took $2.5 million and *Bra Boys*, $1.6 million. Interestingly, in 2007 there were two other major Australian films featuring Asian characters. *Home Song Stories* ($371,000) and *The Jammed* ($252,000), both achieved lower audience figures than *Lucky Miles*. David Dale classifies all three films as 'Aussie Flops That Should Have Done Better.'[1] This may suggest that mainstream, by which I mean the majority Anglo-Celtic Australians, may still not be ready to watch in films set in Australia those Australians think of as Asians.[2] *Lucky Miles* is set in 1990. It follows the tribulations of a group of asylum-seeking boat people set down on the remote, northern coast of Western Australia. They are all, it should be noted, male. I shall discuss this later.

In this article I will discuss the relationship between *Lucky Miles* and the practices of neoliberalism which began to be instated in Australia by Bob Hawke's Labor government after its election in 1983 and which were radicalised under John Howard's Liberal and National Party coalition which came to power in 1996. Anxieties about the border and its 'protection' from asylum seekers have been transformed by the ways that

neoliberalism changes understandings of the state, asylum seekers and the relationship between power and sovereignty within the state. I am particularly interested in how these films relate to these anxieties. My main focus is on *Lucky Miles* but because, as we shall see, it attempts to minimise the effects of neoliberalism by, among other things, being set before the Howard government gained power. I shall also refer to *Children of Men*, a film set in Britain, which presents what we might describe as a dystopian version of a neoliberal future, to show how some of the anxieties about the consequences of neoliberalism can be played out in film. By minimising these concerns, *Lucky Miles* creates a more favourable context for watching a film about asylum seekers reaching the Australian mainland.

Given the highly charged Australian debates through the 1990s and early 2000s on the treatment of asylum seekers, *Lucky Miles* surprised many viewers by being a comedy—which may be one reason for its relative success as compared to *Home Song Stories* and *The Jammed*. One of the factors that made this generic choice more feasible is that in 1990 mandatory detention of those identified as illegal migrants was only just becoming the norm. Peter Mares writes that, 'after 1989 almost all of them [boat people] were detained.' (Mares, 2002). To begin with they were held in the low-security Westbridge migrant hostel in Sydney. Westbridge was part of the Villawood complex. In 1991 the first purpose-built immigration detention centre, known as the Port Hedland Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, was opened in Port Hedland on the north-west coast of Western Australia somewhat near where the boat people of *Lucky Miles* were put onto the shore. Helen Grace notes that: 'The landscape in which Lucky Miles is set … requires only one language—that of money—since the Pilbara setting is the

landscape of the transnational commodities market of resources export.' (Grace, 2008). There is a certain neoliberal irony in Port Hedland being both the site of an asylum seeker detention centre and the main port for the export of iron ore from the Pilbara. In 1992 Paul Keating's Labor government guided the Migration Amendment Act through parliament. This required that a 'designated person' who was a non-citizen 'should be kept in custody until he or she leaves Australia or is given an entry permit.' (Mares, 2002, 75). The requirement was backdated to 19 November 1989, and the Amendment also ensured that no court could overturn this ruling (ibid). The immediate cause of the legislation was the arrival of boats carrying Cambodian asylum seekers. The first Cambodians had arrived on November 28. Hawke labelled the Cambodians economic rather than political refugees. Howard's government radicalised Keating's detention practices. It is not coincidental that both Keating and Howard were strong supporters of neoliberal economic policies.

The mandatory detention of asylum seekers was part of a larger ideological shift associated with neoliberal policy implementation. The key to neoliberal practices is the claim that the market should be self-regulating.[3] My interest here focuses principally on neoliberalism as it relates to the Australian border. It is no coincidence that during the eleven years of Howard's Coalition government, at the same time that large numbers of skilled temporary and long-term migrants were able to enter Australia, a furore of anxiety and anguish was whipped up over the comparatively very small number of asylum seekers. Official figures tell us that, in 1998-9, 921 asylum seekers arrived by boat. In 1999-2000 this figure increased to 4,175 and remained roughly steady in 2000-2001 at 4,141. In November 2001, around 3,400 people were being held in immigration detention

facilities. We should note that, at the same time, for the 1990s and up to 2004, the

Australian humanitarian intake was set at 12,000 people a year, of these 4000 were

people identified as refugees. The overall figure was increased by 1000 in 2005.[4] These

figures compare with a total migration intake in, in this case, 2004-05 of 120,060

(Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009). By 2008 the skilled component of

the permanent intake in the migration program stood at 70% (Kelly, 2008). There is, then,

a stark contrast between the welcome given to the relatively high numbers of skilled

migrants and the treatment apportioned to putatively unskilled asylum seekers as well as

the small number of refugees permitted to enter the country. While many asylum seekers

are, in fact, skilled, the image of the asylum seeker is predominantly of someone

unskilled. In a study of the cultural construction of the asylum seeker conducted in the

South Australian city of Port Augusta by Natascha Klocker, she found that 48.5% of

respondents thought of asylum seekers as unskilled (2004 5). Only 19.5% of Klocker's

respondents thought of asylum seekers as skilled.

In short, in terms of the market logic of neoliberalism, asylum seekers and

refugees are considered to be too expensive to skill in the areas where it has been

identified that Australia has needs. Mares reports a presentation given by Philip Ruddock,

the Minister for Immigration, in 2000. Ruddock asserted that:

> for every 1000 people who enter the country as skilled or business migrants, there is a net
> gain to the Commonwealth budget of $36.7 million over five years. By contrast family
> migrants cost the budget $1.8 million over the same period, while 1000 refugees and
> humanitarian entrants represent a much bigger burden, draining the government coffers of
> $21.5 million (Mares, 2002, 103).

In 1991-92 the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs

calculated that the total cost of operating the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre was

$7,922 million. There being 294 detainees this works out at $27,184 per person (Reilly

1995). More recently, Chris Evans, the Labor Minister for Immigration and Citizenship has noted that, in 2006-07, it cost $220 million to operate the immigration detention system.

The Australia of 1990, then, for all its increasing neoliberal economic and social architecture, was a more benign environment than that of seventeen years later. *Lucky Miles* is not just a comedy, it trades on a nostalgia for a more humane time. This nostalgia is present even in the film's title. Arun is the one boat person to escape being rounded up. He is sitting in a deserted petrol station which doubles as a bus stop. It has obviously had this role for a long time. Behind Arun there is a scene painted onto the wall. In art deco style there is a coach set into a tropical landscape signalled by two palm trees. Beneath the scene is the phrase 'Lucky Miles.' It would seem that this is an old advertisement for a long-gone coach company, a sign from a more hopeful, yet also racist, past. Australia moved from using imperial units, inherited from Great Britain, to the more generally used metric units in 1974, during Gough Whitlam's time as Prime Minister. In 1973, Whitlam formally abrogated the White Australia Policy in favour of non-discriminatory migration. 1974 was before the first Vietnamese boat people arrived on the north Australian coast, that was in 1976 and, indeed, before the establishment of multiculturalism as a government policy. Thus, the very title, *Lucky Miles*, conjures a time when Australia was still closely linked to Britain and before any thought of a threat from asylum seekers. Was this a lucky time? Donald Horne had published his attack on Australian complacency, *The Lucky Country*, in 1964. The title was ironic. Horne wanted to point out in his book that Australia's success had come in spite of poor leadership and a lack of innovative forward-thinking. The greater irony was that, within two decades, the phrase was being

used without irony as a description of the quality of life available in Australia. Moreover,

setting *Lucky Miles* in 1990 places it in a time when Bob Hawke was still Prime Minister,

a time before the Howard government set about radicalising Paul Keating's neoliberal

policies, which he instituted first as Treasurer in Hawke's Labor government and

subsequently as Prime Minister, before the 9/11 attacks of 2001 in the United States and

before the so-called War on Terror. This was also the time before the Tampa affair,

Operation Relex and the militarisation of Australia's border; and before the establishment

of immigration detention centres beyond Australia's border, in other Pacific countries—

the so-called Pacific Solution.

The Border and the Neoliberal, Gothic Other

In the traditional state, where the juridico-legal order marked out the space of the state, as

Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr argue: 'The border…is a transformative

and creative instrument; it marks the transition from a state of anarchy to one of order,

thus enabling a narrative of justice and recognition centering on the clarification of what

form of life or living constitutes belonging and what constitutes non-belonging.' (2007,

xii). In philosophical terms, as I have discussed elsewhere, this was metaphorised as the

classic version of the state of nature as described by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1660),

the place inhabited by the racial Other.[5] How, then, are people beyond the state's border

thought about? I want to start thinking about this by referring to Judith Butler's

conceptualisation of the abject. Butler is writing about the formation of the gendered

subject:

> This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous
> production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects", but who form the
> constitution outside of the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those
> "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated

by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute the site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation (1993, 3).

I have quoted this at length because, while Butler is writing about gender, her metaphor is spatial and her description of the abjected Other beyond the border meshes well with the way the modern state has traditionally functioned. What David Theo Goldberg, in *The Racial State*, has called the container state. This state 'has enabled the internal dynamics of modernity to be played out by offering not just a backdrop for pressing modern tensions but structural constraints on their explosiveness, and so on the scope of their effects'(2002, 121). The state was formed simultaneously with the production of a domain, identified philosophically as the state of nature, of abject beings, the racialised Other who, historically, have been denied the status of citizen; indeed, as it happens, very often of subject. The border marked this separation. One way of thinking about these abject people is that they do not have access to the rights and entitlements, and the quality of life, of those who are citizens of the state.

Butler writes about the subject's 'dreaded identification' with the dense population of 'the zone of uninhabitability.' The fear, we might say interpreting this, of recognising oneself, as a white citizen, in the abject racial Other. Dread describes a very powerful emotion. It should remind us of those tropes of modernity which, sometimes gathered under the rubric of the Gothic, unsettle, disturb and threaten the citizen's everyday life. Immanual Kant, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, described the experience of what he called the terrifying sublime as 'a certain

dread, or melancholy' (1799/2004, 47-48). Introducing the Gothic, Fred Botting writes that:

> Gothic terrors activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity, honour, property and social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms. The terror and horror of transgression in Gothic writing become a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits (2001, 5).

For Botting, here, the ultimate Gothic terror is the uncontrollable and overwhelming power which transgressively crosses what I shall call the border and, in doing so, brings into that ordered, let me now say juridico-legal, realm the chaos, or in Rajaram and Grundy-Warr's word anarchy, that exists beyond the border. This is the nameless horror of the Other, the monster, like the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or the destructive creature in James Cameron's film, *Alien* (1986)—the title is worth a little thought in the context of my argument; 'alien' had been used in Australia, as it had in Britain, for a non-naturalized foreigner since before the First World War when 'enemy aliens' were interned[6]—which is not named, where naming places something within an established epistemological order, and so remains fundamentally outcast.

At this point we need to remember that in Australia, and indeed in Europe, the anxiety over those described as asylum seekers began as elements of the neoliberal state were beginning to be put in place. The term 'asylum seeker,' we should remember, is used for people who have not, or not yet, been classified as refugees—that is, incorporated into the international legal order. 'Asylum seeker' is a placeholder. In Australia those now conventionally described as asylum seekers have been called boat people, queue jumpers, economic migrants, possible terrorists among other appellations. In 2000 Mares interviewed Ruddock. For Ruddock, these few asylum seekers who were

arriving by boat on Australia's shores metamorphose into the Gothic terror of Australia

being overwhelmed by the 21.5 million refugees that the Office of the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees estimated were displaced in 1998. Ruddock says: 'The

issue of principle is that there are people who have refugee requirements, and here is

Australia. Why not take 21 million? You tell me. Why not 21 million?' (Mares, 2002,

111). Discussing illegal migrants Catherine Dauvergne notes that:

> By the late 1960s, it ['illegal'] was used in quotation marks, or as a repeat reference, once
> illegal immigrants had already been discussed. Now it is used without drawing any special
> attention at all. (2008, 10).

In other words, it has been during the ascendency of neoliberalism that 'illegal' has

become a noun to describe a category of people. Dauvergne writes that:

> Although the term "illegal" is precise in its relationship with the law, it is empty of content. It
> says even less than other identity markers in the migration hierarchy: resident, visitor, guest
> worker or refugee. It circumscribes identity solely in terms of a relationship with law: those
> who are illegal have broken (our) law' (2008, 16).

Those described as illegals are essentially not named. Rather, like the Gothic monster,

they are placed outside of the state, an empty category containing the anxieties of those

who live their everyday lives in the neoliberal order provoking the dread that they might

cross the border and bring the anarchy, the state of nature, out there, in here, into the, in

this case, Australian nation-state.

The dread of this loss of distinction between an ordered 'inside' and a chaotic

'outside' became greatest as Australia was being transformed into what Goldberg

describes as a traffic-cop state, that is to say a state which 'order[s] flows[,] freezes time

and controls through special regulation, through normalized exception' (Goldberg, 2009,

348). This is a succinct description of the neoliberal state in the globalised order. This

fear is a consequence of the establishment of a new partially permeable border, a border

with minimal import tariffs and through which flows of desired entrants are encouraged while those not desired are to be kept out at all costs.

We can describe neoliberal governmental practice in terms of Giorgio Agamben's idea of the state of exception. For Agamben 'The state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold to the limit concept' (2005, 4). It is this setting aside of the law that marks the similarity between neoliberal and neoconservative governmental practices and the state of exception. To quote David Harvey: 'Neoconservatism is … entirely consistent with the neoliberal agenda of elite governance, mistrust of democracy, and the maintenance of market freedoms' (2005, 82). Without the law, as Hobbes understood, power was its own legitimation and the law functions in relation to that power. The fear is of the loss of that ordering power. For Hobbes, 'no Law can be Unjust. The Law is made by the Sovereign Power, and all that is done by such a Power is warranted, and owned by everyone of the people; and that which every man will have so, no man can say is unjust' (1651/1991, Chapter 30). As Terence Ball comments, this means that, 'the only operation or test by which we can determine whether a particular command is indeed a law, and therefore just, is to see whether it in fact issues from the sovereign' (1995, 102). When the law is set aside, it is simply authoritarian power, manifested in military force, which marks the site of the border. After all, paradoxically, as Dominic La Capra indicates in his commentary on Agamben's idea of the state of exception: 'In the runaway state of exception (which seems close to Schmitt's state of emergency), the exception becomes the rule (hence the distinction becomes blurred or breaks down), and pre-existing normative and legal orders are suspended. (At the limit

one is in a "state" of anomic or Hobbesian war.)' (2007, 139). At the fantastic, final

moment when the neoliberal state of exception is fully established there would be no

border, nothing to distinguish 'inside' from 'outside.' For Agamben, a defining quality of

the state of exception is that the rule of law is set aside. With the full institution of the

state of exception the law disappears. Once it is set aside, there is nothing to ensure its

restoration. Order is defined by the whim of the sovereign and is always on the verge, the

border, of chaos. Here is the dystopian future that is shown in *Children of Men*. It is

important to remember that, for Agamben, 'the state of nature survives in the person of

the sovereign.' And it is only this authoritarian power that stands between the fragile

order of the state and the anarchic chaos of the state of nature. Only this lawless authority

stands between the state of nature and the state of exception. It is no wonder, then, that

the understanding of the Australian border should have been transformed; that the fear of

this neoliberal nation-state being overwhelmed by asylum seekers should be so powerful.

Visualising the Border Threat: Children of Men

To appreciate how this dread works, we can turn to one of the most celebrated films of

2006, *Children of Men*. The film was nominated for three Oscars including for Best

Writing (Adapted Screenplay), and won the Saturn Award for Best Science Fiction Film

from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films. It took around $US70

million worldwide and was the most watched film in Britain the weekend of its release.

Clearly, the film spoke to many people's anxieties. *Children of Men* was directed and co-

written by Alfonso Cuarón.

 Children of Men is set in 2027. Based on a dystopian novel by P.D. James,

Cuarón's *Children of Men* highlights a world that has, indeed, been overwhelmed by

asylum seekers and refugees. Britain is the only country left with a functioning

government, though, as in the book, parliamentary democracy appears to have been

replaced by some form of authoritarian dictatorship—as it happens the type of

government not only reminiscent of Hobbes' theory of state power but also that favoured

by those who advocate neoliberal policies. Barry Hindess explains that, in Hobbes's

understanding of sovereign rule:

> the sovereign is in no way bound by the desires or moral concerns of its subjects. Subjects
> may disagree with the sovereign's actions moral or other grounds, but their disagreement
> gives them no right to withhold their allegiance or to replace one sovereign by another. In
> Hobbes' view of the constitution of sovereignty, then, there is no scope for anyone to
> question the legitimacy of the rule to which they are subjected (1996, 48).

Neoliberalism has a strong affinity with authoritarian government. Friedrich Hayek, for

example, commonly considered the founder of neoliberal theory, was a supporter of

Augusto Pinochet's right-wing dictatorship in Chile (I discuss this in Stratton, 2009a). In

Children of Men, the authoritarian government protects the country's borders with

military zeal. More, the army patrol the city streets picking up illegal migrants. The

border now pervades the state.

The breakdown in social order is implicitly attributed to the overwhelming

pressure of the illegal migrants. The film, and the book, lift off from many of the

assumptions of neoliberal, and neoconservative, ideology. That the film spells out some

of the logic, and consequences, of neoliberalism may well have been a contributing factor

in its popularity with critics—that is to say, the film gains much of its emotional power

from triggering shared fears that are the consequence of neoliberal and neoconservative

practices. Illegal immigrants in large cages pepper the streets of London and the sleepy

seaside town of Bexhill-on-sea has been transformed into an enormous detention centre

secured by the army. Bexhill is portrayed as a totally disordered, Hobbesian state of

nature. Like the London cages it is full of British people's most feared racial Others;

blacks, Eastern Europeans, Arabs and a very few Muslim women identifiable by their

hijabs. If the border gives way then what little difference there remains between the order

of the state and the disorder of the state of nature will be erased and the limit-case of the

state of exception will be materialised.

Dauvergne remarks that: 'We imagine illegals as poor and brown and destitute.'

(2008, 16). However, this is only partly correct. While Dauvergne's 'we' is clearly

positioned as white, the racialised identification of illegals will be inflected by the

particular anxieties of the members of any particular white, developed state. In Australia,

historically, the fear has been about an influx of 'yellow' people, of east Asians.

Interestingly, since the last two decades of the twentieth century, asylum seekers were

increasingly less characterised as Asian and more as Muslims from the Middle East.

Thus, for example, Hurriyet Babacan and Narayan Gopalkrishnan argue that, during the

early 2000s, the Howard government's anti-Muslim rhetoric:

> impacted on asylum seekers from the Middle East. Most of the boat people arriving in
> Australia during the 1990s and into 2001 were of Islamic backgrounds (mainly from
> Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh and Pakistan). A convenient connection was made by the
> Australian government between asylum seekers and terrorists in public discourse. Muslim
> asylum seekers were portrayed as a collective group to be feared and treated with suspicion
> (2008, 148).

It should be noted that this shift in stigmatisation has taken place at the same time that

increasing numbers of Indians and Chinese have entered Australia on forms of skilled

work visas allowing variously temporary and permanent residency (see Stratton—ref to

come).

James' original book version of *Children of Men* centres on the horrifying idea

that, suddenly, women stop getting pregnant and no more children are born—a

consequence of the male sperm count declining to zero. While this idea that there have

been no children born for eighteen years is central to the narrative of the film, it is the

dystopian world in which the story is set that lives in one's memory. As Slavoj Zizék

says: 'The film is there in the background and it is crucial to leave it there in the

background' because, he argues, only then will the horror of that world be fully apparent

(2007). Cuarón is Mexican. In an interview with Richard von Busack he placed the film's

background in the context of American attempts to stop Mexican immigration and

explained that:

> I have to question the ethics of borders when there is humanity in need. When we start
> segregating ourselves from what humanity needs…we lose more and more of the sense of
> humanity as a whole (2007).

Nevertheless, the image of a world without borders which he presents in *Children of Men*

is of a disastrous state of nature where, without borders, the state of exception is, indeed,

becoming the norm.

Reflections on Paradise

As a piece of comedic realism *Lucky Miles* does not carry the dystopian loading of

Children of Men. An important element in this lack is the nostalgic positioning of the film

in the early years of neoliberal policies in Australia. Where *Children of Men* is set in a

future and exaggerates the possibilities inherent in the neoliberal worldview, *Lucky Miles*

is set in the past and minimises these. In *Lucky Miles* asylum seekers do not carry the

level of anarchic threat that is present in the apocalyptic future of *Children of Men*.

When the asylum seekers are disembarked on that remote beach, nowhere near a

road and a bus stop as they had been promised, the skipper of the Indonesian boat,

Muluk, played by Sawung Jabo, says to himself in Indonesian: 'Welcome to paradise.'

He is being ironic. For the viewer the ironies are many. The first is the connection between the idea of paradise and idea of Australia as the lucky country—which, as we have seen, is itself a complicated phrase when applied to Australia. Also, through the nineteenth century the phrase 'workingman's paradise' was often used to describe Australia. In *Inventing Australia*, Richard White notes that it 'was most often heard' in the 1880s (1981, 41). Indeed, so common was the phrase that, in 1892, William Lane could publish the ironically titled *The Workingman's Paradise*, his novel attacking the conditions in which Australian workers were forced to labour. Lane later left Australia to form a utopian community called New Australia in Paraguay. We should remember that this Australian workingman's paradise was for white men. The radical nationalist magazine, *The Bulletin*, founded in 1880, carried 'Australia for the White Man' on its masthead until 1961 when, under the ownership of Frank Packer, that same Donald Horne who published *The Lucky Country* was appointed as the magazine's editor and deleted the phrase. In 1903, Joseph Furphy, under the pen name Tom Collins, published *Such Is Life*. Tom Collins is the name of the Aboriginal army reservist in *Lucky Miles* played by Sean Mununggurr. The book purports to be extracts from the Collins' diaries. Collins was supposedly a white colonial. Giving the name to an indigenous Australian offers another irony, then, for knowledgeable viewers—an irony compounded in an unfortunate way for viewers who also know that in Furphy's time the name 'Tom Collins' had negative connotations as it was a slang term applied to rumours and gossip, and those who spread them. In 1893, Banjo Paterson had published a poem about rumour in *The Bulletin* titled 'Tom Collins'. The book begins with an exclamation full of irony: 'Unemployed at last!'. As such, the novel is another example of the disillusionment of the

period with the idea of Australia as a workingman's paradise. Muluk's comment, then, has many complex resonances for Australians. These signal for *Lucky Miles'* audience that the asylum seekers are not where they think they are in a number of ways. They are not near a bus stop, but also they think they are in a rich western country which will treat them well. We know they will soon find out their mistake. By 1990 this paradise is beginning to guard its borders with detention camps.

The asylum seekers quickly split up into their two ethnic groups, Cambodians and Iraqis. The decision to use these two groups is intriguing. Cambodians signify the older, 'Asian invasion' anxieties of white Australians. They also echo the Cambodian boat people who arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These Iraqi asylum seekers were fleeing the autocratic rule of Saddam Hussein, either before or after the First Gulf War when the United States at the head of a coalition of forces invaded Iraq in August, 1990. However, watching the film in 2007, the immediate referent is the Second Gulf War which started in 2003 when the United States again invaded Iraq with the Australia as an ally. The second war was much more unpopular with Australians than the first war and, unlike the First Gulf War, was not sanctioned by the United Nations. With this reference, the Iraqi asylum seekers would have more sympathy from film viewers. Nevertheless, Iraqis have come to be associated with the concern of the 1990s and, especially, 2000s with Muslims and the threat of terrorism. As Elisabeth Porter writes with reference to attitudes during the period of the Howard government:

> Senior politicians fostered people's fear of terrorist threats by promoting the idea that the mainly Afghani and Iraqi asylum-seekers might be criminals, terrorists and morally shallow people who do shocking things like throw their children into the sea. There is an 'associative logic of racism' at work here, whereby these claims about asylum-seekers are attached to Arab-Australians and Muslims in general.[7]

With the exception of one man from each group they are all soon taken into custody. We see no more of them. Whatever happens to them—incarceration at the Port Hedland detention centre, most probably—is not shown. In the main, Australia functions as an empty backdrop against which the asylum seekers, with their hopes and fears, allegiances and enmities, are humanised.

Protecting the Australian Border—Or Not

The strangest element in this humanisation is the framing story of Arun. At the very start of the film we see Arun's father in Phnom Penh about to leave Huoy, his pregnant Cambodian girlfriend, to go back to Perth. He tells her it will only be for a few weeks. She obviously does not believe him. He gives her his business card and says that she should contact him if she has any problems. He speaks very poor French, which she points out to him when he addresses her as '*vous*,' a mode of address used in formal situations and between masters and servants—not within the family or between lovers. French, we should remember was the colonial language. The Australian Peter Coade, perhaps, can be read as poorly replicating French colonialism—I shall not dwell on the obvious pun of his name. It should make the viewer wonder about the nature of the couple's relationship, about the power relations through which it takes place. In this context it is worth remembering that, in 1972, Australia was still eliminating the last formal remnants of the White Australia policy, to the dismay of many Australians.

Yet, the Australia of 1990 that we get to see, which is understandably very little because all the Australian scenes until the final one are shot in the remote outback, remains very white. The people in the pub, both when the Cambodians arrive looking for water and that bus to Perth, and when the pub is crowded and the patrons are watching

the news of the apprehension of the asylum seekers, all appear to be Anglo-Australians. The police who come to pick up the Cambodian asylum seekers are also Anglo-Australians. The only non-white Australians we see are the two Indigenous army reservists who, along with another Anglo-Australian, spend much of the film rather incompetently, if humorously, searching for the remaining asylum seekers. Given the ideological thrust of the film, I suspect that viewers are supposed to read this positively as the integration of Indigenous Australians into positions of authority in the management of Australia's borders. However, if we remember the argument above about the militarization of the neoliberal border then we need to think of these two men as being co-opted into the military protection of white Australia. This co-option is especially ironic given the role of the military in The Northern Territory National Emergency Response which was taking place as *Lucky Miles* was being released. This Australia of 1990, then, which many viewers will think of as the present-day Australia when they are watching the film, could be the Australia of 1972—or, indeed, earlier as there are not even any representatives of the post-Second World War European migrants. In this way, again, the film panders to the prejudices of Anglo-Australia in order to get across its humanitarian message.

Coade, who, his business card tells us, works in Engineering and Construction, never returns to Cambodia. Whether Coade simply stays in Perth and forgets his Cambodian liaison or whether the Khmer Rouge take-over of the country and the ensuing genocide made returning impossible we do not know. Certainly there is no reason to think that, after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown, Coade went looking for his lost lover and their child. In 1990, when Arun lands on the Australian coast, he has with him his

father's business card. His purpose is to visit his father. Why? We are not told. Perhaps

he just wants to meet his father. Perhaps he wants to live with him in Australia. Perhaps

he wants a job. Or perhaps Arun wants to ask his father why, when he knew he was not

going to be returning to Cambodia, he didn't send for his pregnant girlfriend. Whatever it

is, Arun's quest subverts the narrative of the film. He is not, in the first instance, an

asylum seeker. He is an Asian man looking for his white, Australian father. It is, then, not

surprising given the anxiety, perhaps better dread, around asylum seekers, that he should

be the only one to make it past the border.

　　　This he succeeds in doing with the help of a kangaroo shooter. In the horror film,

Wolf Creek, as I have argued elsewhere, the serial killing kangaroo shooter, Mick Taylor

played by John Jarrett, patrols the border murdering those considered unsuitable to live in

Australia—many of them, as it happens, Europeans, either tourists or descendents of the

post-Second World War migrants (2007). As a neoliberal figure, he operates outside of

the law. In *Lucky Miles* the unnamed kangaroo shooter, played by hard-man actor Gerard

Kennedy, appears just as awful, and, as it happens, he is working in the same vastness

where Taylor lives. He meets Arun when he mistakes him for a kangaroo and almost

shoots him. He is taciturn in the extreme and we, the viewers, like Arun, do not know

what his plans are for Arun. It is the moment of highest anxiety in the film. The moment

when the Gothically constructed neoliberal anxieties of *Wolf Creek* and *Children of Men*

leak briefly into this comedy. Finally, though, the kangaroo shooter drops Arun off at a

bus stop where he can, indeed, catch a bus to Perth—it is this bus stop that carries the

advertisement for the Lucky Miles coach company. Like Taylor, this kangaroo shooter

seems to defend, in a free enterprise way, the Australian border. Why does he allow Arun

in? For Australian viewers, this is a moment of confliction. The film asks us to side with Arun on his quest and, therefore, to feel grateful to the kangaroo shooter for his humanitarianism in helping Arun, but, at the same time, through the Howard years, Australians have been schooled in protecting the border against entry from asylum seekers.[8] We see this earlier in the film when the barmaid at an outback pub rings the police to tell them that a group of Asian men have come in wanting to know how to get to Perth. As Mares writes, criticising the Australian public's acceptance of the treatment of asylum seekers: 'We assuage our collective conscience with the thought that the asylum seekers may be criminals or terrorists-in-waiting' (2002, 246). From this point of view this kangaroo shooter is being un-Australian in allowing Arun into the country.

In the next scene Arun is knocking on his father's door. He still lives at the same address as is on the card. We see the scene from inside the house. A woman calls out; a man, Peter Coade eighteen years older, says that he will go to the door. He opens it. Arun is framed by the doorway. He asks, in good English, unlike his father's poor French and seemingly non-existent Khmer: 'Hello, Mr Peter Coade?'. Coade asks: 'What can I do for you, son?' Another irony, the Australian colloquialism is realised but Coade does not know this yet. What are we to make of this extraordinary scene? In their review of the film on ABC's *At the Movies*, Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton like this conclusion:

> Margaret: I love the discipline of the ending. I think it is the most beautiful ending.
> David: It is a very nice ending (2007).

We can surmise that in their minds this is a moment of reconciliation; Arun has found his father. He has closure and the narrative of the film is resolved. As viewers, we might wonder if it was Arun's whiteness that motivated the kangaroo shooter. Indeed, as a

metaphor, this scene can be read as the reconciliation of Asia with Australia. With this ending the film forces its viewers to forget the other asylum seekers most likely languishing in the Port Hedland detention centre.

But this ending is itself deceptive. Will Coade be pleased to see the son he fathered while working in Cambodia all those years ago? It seems he is now married, and from her accent to an Anglo-Australian woman, a member of his own race and class. What will she think of Arun's arrival, and Coade's behaviour during his sojourn in Phnom Penh? Did she know Coade in those days? Were they, perhaps, already in a relationship then? Were they married—after all, Coade is still living in the same house he was at that time. It would certainly seem to be a good thing for the reconciliation narrative that Arun's mother appears to have been murdered in the Khmer Rouge killing fields. Her presence with Arun at Coade's door would without doubt have disrupted this 'most beautiful ending.' Of course, none of these questions have answers but they unsettle a narrative that is too determined, indeed too anxious, to give this comedy about asylum seekers a happy conclusion.

Arun, of course, is not white—or, is only partly so. As it happens, this part-Anglo-Australian, part-Cambodian man is played by Kenneth Moraleda who has a Filipino heritage. It is worth considering what a white Australian audience might think of Coade's behaviour if Arun's mother had been white—but, of course, white people are characteristically not asylum seekers. Arun is also male. It is interesting to wonder what the audience reaction would be had he been a woman instead; if Coade had left a mother and daughter to fend for themselves through the years of Khmer Rouge violence. However, as I have mentioned, all the asylum seekers in *Lucky Miles* are male. What are

we to make of this? Certainly it decreases the emotional loading of the film, allowing it to be more of a comedy. It also enables the film to erase the memories of those female asylum seekers who died in the tragedy of the Siev X which sank in October 2001 killing 353 people when Australian naval ships did not come to their rescue. 142 of these people were women. Suvendrini Perera has discussed the testimony of one of the women, Amal Basry, who survived:

> Encircled by sharks, surrounded by the dying, she keeps alive, clinging to the body of an unknown dead woman. Little children, dead babies, desperate parents, families dying one by one, and I was alone believing all the while my own son was dead. Three women are reported to have given birth in the water as they drowned during those desperate hours, the waters of new life hopelessly engulfed in the waters of death (Perera, 2006, 642).

This history, and the history of the treatment of all the female asylum seekers, is erased by the film's focus on male asylum seekers, making the Australian government appear less hostile, less morally culpable, and therefore enabling white Australian audiences to feel better about themselves and the government that represents them.

It is no coincidence that Arun, with a white father, is the only one of the people from the boat to avoid being rounded up. Arun, we might say, is not, or not entirely, one of those 21 million abject, racial Others that Ruddock was so fearful would want to come to Australia. Being part white, Arun is also partly humanised. Perhaps this is what the threatening kangaroo shooter realised when he allowed Arun into the country and enabled him to reach Perth. Arun is a product, both literally and metaphorically, of Australia in Asia. As such, he also signifies the ongoing difference between Australia and Asia. For this film, Australia remains a white nation in Asia. When Muluk makes his ironic remark about Australia being paradise as he turns the boat round for the trip back to Indonesia he is signalling this fundamental distinction.

Arun can also be read as the uncanny return of the repressed. In this reading Cambodia is a displacement for Vietnam. In a review on the web for the 2007 Chicago International Film Festival, Marilyn Ferdinand mistakenly writes that: 'The film begins…in Cambodia in 1972, as an Australian soldier bids farewell to his Khmer lover'(2007). Australia joined the United States in the Vietnam War in 1962. Australian troops pulled out (pun intended) of Vietnam in 1973, the year after Arun's father left Cambodia. Arun stands in for the Vietnamese asylum seekers, the people who came to Australia by boat and gave the name 'boat people' to all who followed them. Australia accepted 137,000 Vietnamese refugees just as the White Australia policy had been finally laid to rest. The first boat arrived in Darwin in 1976. The presence of these people in Australia can be read as a consequence of Australia in Asia, of Australia's military and political, and indeed colonial, presence in the region. Arun's biography parallels this other, dark history. The histories of Cambodia and Vietnam have been inextricably linked. Indeed, Ben Kiernan argues that the success of the Khmer Rouge in gaining power in Cambodia was linked to the American bombing of Cambodia as part of their attempt to stop Viet Cong forces moving into South Vietnam (1996). Arun is a reminder of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and the complex feelings of responsibility that that aroused in Australia. The film trades on liberal guilt about that war, as well as on a nostalgia for the radical activism of the 1960s and early 1970s, for what is now regarded as a time long gone.[9]

Lucky Miles narrates a time before neoliberalism was more fully deployed in Australia. Of the group of three characters whom the film follows after the bulk of the asylum seekers have been rounded up only the Iraqi, Youssif Al-Samir, played by

Rodney Afif, is an asylum seeker, the others are Arun and Muluk's clumsy nephew, Ramelan, played by Srisacd Sacdpraseuth, who accidently sets fire to their boat forcing the Indonesian people smugglers to abandon it. It is one of *Lucky Miles*' many ironies that Youssif, like Coade, is a fully qualified engineer. T. Fred Smith writes that, 'data extracted from the 1991 Census reveals that 31,369 (44.2 per cent) out of all 70,910 persons holding degree level qualifications in engineering resident in Australia were born overseas and that, of these, 12,082 arrived in Australia in the period 1986-91' (1996, 67). However, as an asylum seeker rather than an applicant for a long-term or permanent residency, Youssif will be compulsorily detained.

In a scene near the end Youssif finally has his chance to ask for asylum. The person he asks is the Indigenous army reservist named Tom Collins. The resonances here are complicated. Geoffrey Partington tells us that: '[Furphy's] concern was with groups which could not or would not join together with the majority population, but he was willing to welcome as mates individuals who were able and willing to make the effort. His novels depict numerous bullockies and other workers of many varied ethnic origins who have been fully accepted by the native-born' (1998, 27). Thus, it would seem, Collins, the author of *Such Is Life*, might have been favourably disposed towards Youssif in his plight. We need, though, to think a little more about giving an Indigenous man the name of the white, pseudonymous author of that book. Partington tells us that Furphy, 'had no time for what have now become termed 'black armband' contact histories' (1998, 27) and:

> He believed that all people born in Australia were 'indigenous' and determined that it should always be their home. Although he had little confidence that it would easily or quickly be achieved, Furphy hoped that a way would be found towards genuine equality of condition between Aborigines and other Australians (1998, 29).

It would be wrong simply to accept that the views of Furphy and his alter-ego were the same. Nevertheless, Partington writes that in *Such Is Life*:

> At Runnymede Station, the Aboriginal stockman, Toby, is presented as a very positive figure. Toby has racial pride and claims 'Why, properly speaking, I own this here (adj.) country as fur as the eye can reach'. Yet Toby also identifies with much of White Australia, including a loyalty to New South Wales in sporting contest with upstart Port Phillipers. Toby also shows himself a true mate by his fondness for Collins' kangaroo dog Pup.

In Toby, Furphy as Collins has created the colonialist's fantasy Aborigine; the one who can acknowledge that he no longer owns the land, only owns it 'properly speaking,' and who is assimilated enough to practice mateship, enjoy sport and barrack for New South Wales. *Lucky Miles* points up the politics of this characterisation by making the film's Tom Collins Indigenous—not 'indigenous' in the sense that everyone born in Australia could be described as indigenous, as Partington signals Furphy, and probably Collins, believed. At the same time, this Collins is, as I have noted, a member of the Australian army reserve. He is, then, assimilated in the sense that he has entered the military which defends the Australian state but he retains his culture enough to be an expert tracker, a skill he uses in the service of the state. This Collins, like Toby, is 'properly speaking' the owner of the territory over which he and his colleagues travel. This is the complexity at the heart of his acceptance of Youssif's request for asylum—a request which, in the years to come, the Howard government would struggle hard to ensure could not be made by those seeking asylum by excising Australia's northern islands from the migration zone and using the navy to patrol the seas and turn back approaching boatloads of asylum seekers. We cannot know if Collins' acceptance of Youssif's request is made as a member of the local Indigenous land-owners or as a representative of the Australian state. Of course, since, even with native title rights, Collins' ownership of the land is

subjugated to the sovereignty of the Australian state, in the end this question is always already resolved.

Making Arun the dominant character, rather than Youssif, provokes the film's nostalgia—a yearning for a lost pre-neoliberal yet always racist Australian paradise. During the 1990s and early 2000s the bulk of boat people arriving in Australia were not the east Asians that Australians were used to as boat people. Rather, they were mainly Iraqis, Afghans, Turks, Iranians and Sri Lankans. It is these people, often Muslims, who have been caught up in the neoliberal reconstruction of the border as the state is transformed into a state of exception. These are the people who have been constructed as unskilled and therefore unwanted and a potential burden in Australia's renovated, skills-intensive economy—as it happens, Youssif identifies himself as a fully qualified structural engineer. It is these people who were detained on Manus Island and Nauru as part of the Pacific Solution. These are the people who, as a nameless Other, have been constructed as possible terrorists and as a threat to Australian sovereignty and, indeed, as Muslims and, therefore, as a threat to Australia's secular, though in reality Christian-founded, way of life. These are the people who, attempting to cross the border, precipitate a sense of dread in those who live within the border of the neoliberal, increasingly authoritarian state. The marker for *Lucky Miles*' nostalgia is that seemingly kindly, white, kangaroo shooter who nevertheless, like the enterprising, serial-killing kangaroo shooter in *Wolf Creek*, protects Australia's border. Certainly, at the least, he is able to make a decision about who should be turned over to the authorities and whom he will help. I wonder if he would have been so kindly if it had been Youssif whom he found in his gun sights.

Notes

[1] All these box office figures come from David Dale 'The Tribal Mind: Aussies Lose the Cinema Struggle'.

[2] Olivia Khoo has made a similar point. She writes that: 'Despite the proliferate categories for the nation's cast of marginal characters, there is a reluctance, or an inability, to make space for Asians within such a seemingly leveling discourse of marginality. It is not that prominent films recounting the stories of Asians in Australia, or of Australians in Asia, do not exist. Rather, this silence is perhaps due to the fact that the Asian Australian relationship is one that is difficult for many Australians to dream or conceive of fully yet.' (Khoo 2008, 45-46).

[3] There is now a large literature on neoliberalism. See, for example, David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston eds. *Neoliberalism: A Critical Introduction*.

[4] For general, background information see Adrienne Millbank 'Australia and the 1951 Refugee Convention' in *People and Place*, vol 9, no. 2, 2001.

[5] See Jon Stratton 'Uncertain Lives: Migration, the Border and Neoliberalism in Australia' in *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, vol 15, no. 5, 2009.

[6] In English law the idea of the alien goes back to the 15th century, see Kim 2000.

[7] See also, Ghassan Hage 'Postscript: Arab-Australian Belonging after September 11', in Ghassan Hage (ed) *Arab-Australians: Citizenship and Belonging Today*.

[8] In 2008 a similar scene of border protection was narrated as bathos. Here is the event described in a news release from the office of the Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Dr Sharman Stone: 'Happy Campers, the new front-line border protection: Stone. The role of campers in detaining 12 Sri Lankan men, some of whom swam through shark-infested waters yesterday to illegally enter Australia, shows Federal Labor's border regime to be failing, the Shadow Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Dr Sharman Stone, has said.' (Stone 2008). I owe this reference to Kristen Phillips.

[9] The first Vietnam Moratorium march, held in May 1970, saw around 100,000 people take to the streets of Melbourne and up to another 100,000 march in other cities in Australia. See, Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett *Seizures of Youth: 'The Sixties' and Australia*, p. 46 for a discussion of the Melbourne march.

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