

Burning Our Boats

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As someone on the fringes of Australian literary studies, I am honored to be in this very distinguished company, but also feel a little apprehensive, perhaps a little bit unmoored. So I begin by offering some coordinates, partial and unreliable coordinates as they are, or interpretive markers, for what follows.

First, a scene from Michael Ondaatje's recent novel, *The Cat's Table*:

Once, before I left Ceylon, I saw an ocean liner being burned at the far end of Colombo harbour. All afternoon I watched the blue acetylene cut into the flanks of the vessel. I realised the ship I was now on could also be cut into pieces. (38)

This image of a ship being incinerated, its flanks, like those of some living creature, eviscerated by deliberate blue flames, sets the scene for *The Cat's Table*, described by Ondaatje as a 'fiction of un-remembered autobiography' (Kumar). At one level this is the story of an eleven year-old boy, Michael, who is put on a boat from Colombo to England, not understanding much about why he is leaving, where he is going, or that this departure is forever. *The Cat's Table* is a tale of unexpected, often hidden and inexplicable violence; of mad dogs and misfits, and a shackled prisoner below deck; of sudden deaths and bodies overboard. Most of all, it is an inventory of uncertain landfalls and of arrivals that will always remain incomplete, unfulfilled.

And now, all that held-back youth drives her forward. She lights out for whatever land will hide her until she is found. So that for now what she swims towards is just *somewhere*—to one of those ancient cities that was formed originally because of its existence on a delta or a reliable tide—to make a new life. As we too might do when we make our own landfall. (*Table* 281)

In the *we* of the final sentence the focus zooms out and upwards from the girl swimming steadily in the water to other bodies lighting out for some safer shore, some random silt of river sand or splintered outcrop on which to tread dry land. Casting out for an unknown European harbour, the girl Asunta is no Crusoe-figure, but the representative of a mass of dispersals, historical and contemporary. Her father, the prisoner, sinks down below, still shackled; whether he will succeed in freeing himself from his chains remains unknown. Indeed, we will never know the fate of either of these characters, whose voices are hardly heard in the text, though they are at the heart of this tale of uncertain landfall for those seeking to make the postcolonial voyage in, their awkward, illicit, asymmetrical returns, myriad minor counterpoints to the assured trajectories of the colonial voyage out. As Peter Hulme points out in a series of fine essays, these stories of enforced movement, the plunge into the oceans in their hopeful 'boat of one skin' (Hulme, 'Straits' 197) brush up against, but never quite meet the trope of the castaway that is so central to the English literary tradition.

One of the most plangent and evocative accounts I know of the dispersal from Sri Lanka is an essay by Amitav Ghosh, not a Lankan by birth, but one who spent his early school days there.

particularly excessive and horrific forms of violence. Mbembe's 'necropolitics,' Barder and Debrix's 'agonal sovereignty' and Cavarero's 'horrorism' all may be seen as attempts to theorise this excess of sovereign violence, in both historical and contemporary contexts. In the face of a growing sense of the inadequacy of my existing theoretical lexicon to comprehend the violence of the borderscape, I turn to Cavarero's theorisation of horrorism, as a form of sovereignty characterised by its sheer excess of violence: a violence that is designed to immobilise and paralyse. Where terror is mobile, and sets us in motion, Cavarero writes, horror stops us in our tracks; it arrests us with its spectacular violence; transfixes us by the sight of its severed and bloody Gorgon head (Cavarero 14). Horrorism is characterised by the sheer, useless excess, even exuberance, of its violence; its overkill. Its favored mode is the visual, and the symbolic: *stop the boats!* There is, Barder and Debrix point out, 'a daring, challenging, defiant and reactive aspect to horror and horrific violence': indeed a 'recreational' aspect (35). The logo of Australia's proposed Border Force, a parallel paramilitary controlling all border operations from 2015, exemplifies this defiant, daring aspect. On social media, memes drawing from sources including the pirate flag to science fiction have illuminated the sinister yet recreational, even playful, overtones of this Border Force.² This recreational or pleasurable, defiant and daring violence is what we might identify in the public performances of the then Immigration Minister, Scott Morrison, and Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

The targets of this type of sovereignty of excess are no longer 'human subjects, citizens, selves'—life, humanity, species—but 'body parts, fragments of lives, bits and pieces of singular human experience and . . . their always readily reopened wounds and scars.' This is a form of sovereignty that seeks to 'dismantle' and disjoint and that 'indiscriminately mutilates bodies as much as it arbitrarily traumatizes minds and psyches,' operating across cognitive and sensory registers (Debrix and Barder 22).

The determination to exercise sovereign power to 'dismantle,' 'mutilate' and traumatise its targets is most clearly evidenced in the aptly named 'No Advantage' policy adopted towards illegalised boat arrivals and implemented through the offshore detention camps on Nauru and Manus Island. Mark Isaacs, a young Australian who served a series of rotations as a contracted Salvation Army support worker at Nauru's Topside camp in 2012, provides one of the most sustained accounts of the brutalising regime operative in off-shore detention in his book, *The Undesirables*. Together with sporadic reports from inmates who manage to circumvent the control of communications with the outside world, Isaacs's narrative of his experiences on Nauru allows an insight into the daily workings of the 'No Advantage' policy. Isaacs remarks that for the inmates of Nauru:

Despite the long and arduous forms of their escape from murderous and war-torn countries . . . detention marks the longest and most treacherous part of their flight for freedom. There were no bombs in Nauru, no guns, no indiscriminate murders. Just waiting, boredom, insomnia, self-harm, suicide attempts, uncertainty . . . second-guessing, yearning and fear, fear, fear. Their enemies were themselves, their own minds. (320)

Numerous accounts of life on Australia's offshore camps on Manus Island and Nauru attest to the effectiveness of the tactic of turning the detainees' own minds into their enemies, breaking them both bodily and psychologically. A painfully long record of mental breakdown, self-harm and suicide attempts has been documented. Conditions in the camps are ripe for rape, sexual violence and other forms of abuse to break out among detainees, and for the

