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The Tampa, Boat Stories and the Border

a line in the sea

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It was almost spring in Sydney the day the *M.V. Tampa* sailed into our national consciousness. At first it seemed like another of those stories we are now accustomed to hearing: people packed on a ramshackle boat were headed for some ocean outpost or other—Ashmore Reef, Cocos Islands, Christmas Island—it didn't much matter which. But for these voyagers a different (and as I write still unknown) landing awaited. Perhaps more than any event of subsequent weeks, the conflagrations in the United States that almost, but never quite, eclipsed it, the day the *Tampa* set sail towards us is a day that will change the meaning of Australia.

There are multiple frames through which, depending on who we are, we view the passage of the *Tampa*. This is a country full of boat stories. Some are commemorated in museums. Some live on in jubilee voyages and lovingly crafted replicas. Others are unspeakable passages to be relived only in dreams. They are transmitted through the generations in whispers and silence. The image of a flaming boat sears many Australian memories. The *Tampa* brings some of us face to face with past terrors. We weep for the ravages and triumphs that wash us to unknown shores.

But on this near-spring morning the frame conveniently to hand for many is the colonial naval adventure, a tale of national honour and mortal odds, of sovereignty won or lost on the high seas. There is a distinctly nineteenth-century feel to things as day after day the image of the motionless *Tampa* etches itself against the Australian skyline. In an age of DVDs and satellites, boats again take centre stage. The country slows to the pace of the ocean while we wait for news to flow in with the tide. As politicians scurry to appear on TV screens and journalists scramble to Christmas Island, sailors, those heroes of a bygone era, offer instruction on the chivalry of the seas. The SAS does a creditable imitation of a Victorian gunboat

expedition. Shades of Margaret Thatcher's Falklands are unmistakable as Prime Minister John Howard draws a line in the sea. The media spectacle of the *Tampa* re-enacts the colonial adventure classic as an occasion for national self-affirmation. We are in Joseph Conrad territory.

Lord Jim: A Tale, Conrad's 1900 fable of empire, is an illuminating starting point (but only that) from which to read the story of the *Tampa* one hundred and one years later. *Lord Jim* is, in Conrad's words, a tale of 'the acute consciousness of lost honour'.¹ Its defining event is a fatal decision by a young English officer, Jim, to jump from his damaged ship, the *Patna*, abandoning on board almost a thousand passengers, pilgrims on their way to Mecca. The *Patna*, miraculously, does not sink; its passengers and faithful Malay helmsmen are rescued by a French frigate, whose first mate displays all the naval virtues lacking in Jim. And here for the narrator, Marlow, is the irresolvable puzzle of the tale: that the handsome, blue-eyed Jim, indubitably 'one of us' by birth and bearing, fails so monstrously to recognise what is right. In stark moral contrast is the heroism of ordinary sailors who simply stick to their posts and act by the rules.

It is difficult not to see in the incorruptible bearing of the *Tampa's* Norwegian captain, Arne Kinnan, a latter-day incarnation of Conrad's steadfast sailors in *The Shadow Line* or *The Secret Sharer*; men who embody in their actions the weight of larger moral forces. For Australians, the *Tampa*, whose name uncannily echoes that of Conrad's fictional *Patna*, also represents a moment of moral decision: a moment at which, like Marlow, we ask: *Who are 'we'? Who is 'one of us'? What codes must 'we' live by? Who are 'we' part of? Whose humanity do 'we' recognise as akin to ours?* And a further, terrible, question: *What do 'we' owe to those whose humanity 'we' fail to recognise?*

In late September 2001 the Border Protection Bill, one of seven new pieces of migration legislation, was rushed through the parliament in two late-night sittings that bypassed customary legislative processes. Among other things, the bill excises the Cocos Islands, Ashmore Reef and Cartier and Christmas Island from Australian territory as far as people claiming refuge are concerned.² According to the journalist Paul Kelly, this legislative package is designed to 'weaken judicial review, remove the key asylum-seeker landing areas from Australia's migration zone and from our international refugee responsibilities, channel most asylum-seekers into a new visa and refugee determination regime, and deny permanent settlement even to people in this system proven to be refugees'.³ The legislation changes the definition of 'persecution', and imposes mandatory sentences on the crews of boats carrying asylum seekers. It allows for the use of 'necessary and reasonable force' to 'push off' asylum seekers' boats from Australian waters, a practice, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, that 'we are not aware of any nation currently engaged in'.⁴

The passing of this legislation brings us to a new moral threshold. Today Australia has arrogated to itself, with minimal public debate, a singular privilege: to forcibly push away



unarmed people seeking refuge in our waters. What constellation of forces enabled the passage of this 'Border Protection' legislation? What public representations and images facilitate our imagination of another, circumscribed Australia? What histories sustain our new, defensive geography? What moral and cultural maps chart the territory this side of the line we have drawn in the water?

Asylum seekers on customs boat after being rescued from their boat anchored off Ashmore Reef, 9 November 2001. Source: Megan Lewis. Newspix.

More than any novelist of the British empire, more than Rudyard Kipling, more than E.M. Forster, Conrad retains a currency in the contemporary West's cultural frames of reference. His *Heart of Darkness*, after all, is the literary text most taught to undergraduates in the United States. Francis Ford Coppola's remaking of *Heart of Darkness* as *Apocalypse Now*, the transposition of nineteenth-century Belgian imperialism in the Congo to twentieth-century US imperialism in Vietnam, bears out Conrad's ongoing currency as we seek to make sense of the continuities of empire. Paradoxically, this currency is possible precisely because *Heart of Darkness* is so thoroughly a tale of its times; its contemporary resonances only explicable by the imperial frameworks that still shape our understanding of the world, strenuously though we may disown them. Both *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness* participate in and reproduce the seductions and corruptions of empire, even as they make them visible.

Like *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, *Lord Jim* is a thoroughly racialised fable. In all three stories, the natives of empire—African, Middle-Eastern or Asian—remain a largely undifferentiated, unknowable, inanimate mass, against whose slightly repulsive victimage the drama of the West's internal moral conflicts are acted out. A turn to Conrad to cast some light on a distinctly twenty-first century political question is, in this context, anything but precious

or whimsical. The wider questions surrounding the *Tampa* may belong to the twenty-first century: the tensions between globalising and nationalist forces; the Australian government's attempts to draw a line in the sea against the incursions of international law; its desire somehow to take control of a world where the borderless flow of information, goods and finances also inevitably involves the movement of people across borders. But these contemporary concerns clearly are also being played out in a recognisably colonial and highly racialised register. The phobias and hatreds that emerged in Australian public life in the spring of 2001 open the door to a much older storehouse of images, narratives and representations.

Images of a mass of bodies crammed on a boat going nowhere.

The word 'mass' is a clue. 'Crammed' is another.

What do you see?

These are not neutral, unmarked bodies.

Think: 'cargo'. Think: 'traffic'.

The mass movement of peoples is both a precondition and a product of the business of empire. Slave ships make the triangular middle passage between Europe, Africa and the Americas; ships packed with indentured labour and industrial poor traverse the Atlantic and Pacific oceans; and, yes, convict ships dock in antipodean waters. The traffic of empire is also people traffic. The business of empire is the control of mobility, enabling the free movement of some and the forced movement of others.

In *Lord Jim*, British shipping lines carry pilgrims to Mecca from the Indian subcontinent and the Malaysian archipelago. These are paying passengers, the customers of empire's multinationals; yet, as the course of the story makes clear, they remain mere 'natives', characterised solely by the force of racial otherness:

They streamed aboard over three gangways, they streamed in urged by faith and the hope of paradise, they streamed in with a continuous tramp and shuffle of bare feet, without a word, a murmur, or a look back; and when clear of confining rails spread on all sides over the deck, flowed forward and aft, overflowed down the yawning hatchways, filled the inner crevices of the ship—like water filling a cistern, like water flowing into crevices and crannies—like water rising silently even with the rim. (9–10)

Conrad's Muslims are a relentless, rising, swell of bodies, undistinguished by any trait of humanity, personhood, individuality. A hundred-and-one years later, echoes of this passage confront us in the suggestions of a flood of refugees, an overflowing wave of otherness that

threatens to swamp and engulf all before it. Multiple images of engulfment, swamping and a relentless tide of otherness seem so central to the imagination of Fortress Australia. These metaphors reappear, again, in the fear of 'our way of life' being swamped by the appearance on the horizon of a few hundred Muslim asylum seekers.

In *Lord Jim*, Islam is invoked only through a repeated phrase, 'the unconscious pilgrims of an exacting faith'. In this description the pilgrims' religion somehow qualifies their claims to full humanity. Passages from Conrad's historical sources resonate even more ominously with current representations of Muslim asylum seekers. The source materials in the Norton edition of *Lord Jim* include documents about a historical incident in which a damaged pilgrim ship, the *Jeddah*, was abandoned by its officers *en route* to Mecca. In their defence the crew painted the pilgrims they left to drown as violent, deranged—and potential rapists of the captain's wife. In 1870, a Captain Henry Carter wrote to the *London Times* in another attempt to justify the desertion of the *Jeddah*:

No one who has not witnessed the pilgrims ... can form the slightest conception of the unromantic and unpicturesque appearance of those wretched fanatics. It is a pity that some philanthropist will not take the trouble to make the tour and go on board with one of the pilgrim vessels about to start on a voyage for Jeddah. There are horrors on board such a ship which no Christian has ever dreamt of ... wickedness worse, by far, than was ever found on board a slaver. Only fancy 1,000 or 1,200 fanatics cooped on the deck of a small vessel for 18 to 20 days with no room to move and little or no fresh air ... Of course if these wretched beings die *en route* to Mecca, their eternal happiness is assured ... You must understand that my 'batch' consisted of Turcomans, Arabo-Persians, and Bedouins. They all came on board armed to the teeth, but of course I had all the weapons taken charge of by my officers ... I mean all the weapons that we saw. (312)

Here, by a strategic displacement of violence, the abandoned become the aggressors. The pilgrims, survivors of a voyage on which they are first shamefully exploited by the shipping line, and then left to their deaths by the crew, are somehow transmogrified into threatening and violent fanatics, even more evil than slave traders.

Historical documents like this illuminate, if they cannot explain, the contradictory representations of the *Tampa* refugees over a hundred years later. By extraordinary processes of signification the asylum seekers become, in certain popular understandings, simultaneously the objects *and* the agents of criminality: criminal *and* passive, inanimate *and* violent, wretched *and* millionaires, cargo *and* pirates, contraband *and* hijackers, traffickers *and* traffic, victims of 'people smugglers' *and* invaders of Australian sovereignty.

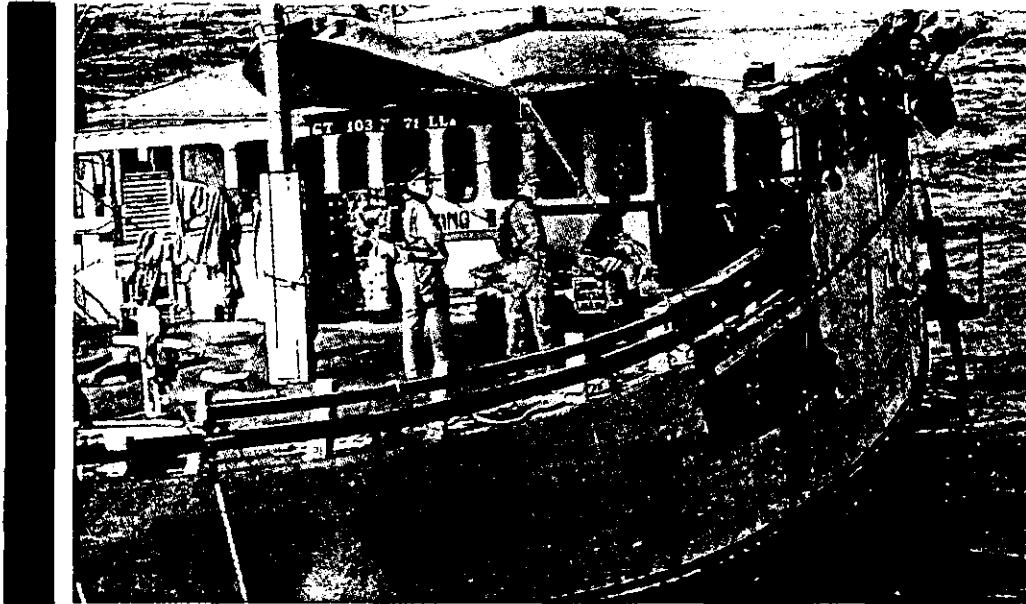
Representations such as these, that manage to position the suffering and banished as simultaneously aggressors and invaders, suggest a continuing, deeply grounded and only

partly understood, moral ambivalence and cultural hostility. This ambivalence resonates even through apparently sympathetic accounts such as a recent headline, 'When the Poor Cry Freedom and Sell Their Souls to People Smugglers'.⁵ An extraordinary series of oppositions is packed in: between 'poor' and 'sell', between 'crying for freedom' and 'selling one's soul'. Revealingly, the act of buying a chance of freedom is metaphorised into 'selling one's soul': in the imagery of the Faustian pact invoked here, people who sell their souls put themselves beyond the pale. Their penalty is to forfeit any claims to humanity, or to being 'saved'.

An ensemble of images and associations, then, feeds into everyday Australian representations of asylum seekers like those on the *Tampa*. Imperial images of the abject bodies of 'trafficked' natives and a long history of Western representations of Muslims as both violent and fanatical, mesh with specifically Anglo-Australian phobias of incursion by sea and fears of being 'swamped' by 'waves' of foreign invaders.⁶ This complex combination provides fertile ground for anxieties actively cultivated by the government's use of terms like 'people trafficking', 'queue jumpers', 'disease carriers' and 'illegal immigrants' to describe refugees and asylum seekers. These terms at once dehumanise and criminalise, placing human lives in the same category as contraband drugs and other forms of deadly, forbidden cargo.

The Border Protection legislation, introduced a few days after the *Tampa's* arrival on our horizon, was initially rejected by the Senate. The entire issue was reignited less than a week later by Defence Minister Peter Reith's efforts to link the *Tampa* to the attacks on the US by assailants, the identities of whom were, at that point, unknown. Other politicians quickly endorsed Reith's idea that asylum seekers from countries like Afghanistan were potential 'terrorist sleepers'.⁷ In the tumult of emotion that followed, horror at the September 11 attacks combined with Western jingoism, moral panic and racist antagonism towards anyone perceived as Arab or Muslim. As hijabed women were reviled in the streets of Sydney and a bus carrying Islamic school children was stoned in Brisbane, the government introduced a second Border Protection bill.⁸ The Prime Minister's support rocketed in the polls. The Labor Opposition succumbed with indecent haste, not even bothering with a fig leaf of principle to conceal its boundless political opportunism.

Commentators like Richard Glover on ABC radio were quick to point out the sheer irrationality of connecting the September 11 assailants with asylum seekers like those on the *Tampa*. The connections are certainly illogical, but far from accidental or inexplicable. The conflation of the high levels of existing hostility towards asylum seekers with the revulsion, fear and desire for retaliation aroused by mass destruction in the US is eminently explicable by reference to the representational histories drawn on in *Lord Jim*. The hysterical and violent response to asylum seekers in the days following the destruction of the Twin Towers, authorised and cultivated as it was in official statements by figures such as Reith, in this context becomes far more comprehensible.



But while the images and discourses of empire provide one easily accessible framework into which asylum seekers can be inserted, what other possibilities and frames are available for official understandings of asylum seekers? Are historically explicable responses inevitable and necessary ones? Our attitudes towards refugees are not *inescapably* bound up in colonial representations and racist stereotypes; we are *not* condemned to an endless recycling of Conradian narratives and images. An alternative framework based on a discourse of human rights and international commitment was employed by Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien when, in the wake of the US attacks, he faced questions about asylum seekers and migrants as potential terrorists:

Asylum seekers' boat anchored off Ashmore Reef, 9 November 2001. Source: Megan Lewis, Newspix.

Let there be no doubt. We will allow no one to force us to sacrifice our values and traditions under the pressure of urgent circumstances. We will continue to welcome people from the whole world. We will continue to offer refuge to the persecuted.⁹

Chrétien's rhetoric is positioned unequivocally in a discourse of universal human rights, democratic freedoms and anti-discrimination, and in the idea of Canada as a country that offers protection for the persecuted and suffering regardless of external pressure. This idea of the nation as a universal beacon of protection is common to settler societies such as Canada, the US and (at certain periods) Australia, where it *runs parallel with* discourses of xenophobia, racial exclusion and imperial expansionism. While the universalist discourse of rights has its own problematic history, it can operate as a powerful ethical force to mobilise support for beleaguered groups in a society.¹⁰

In Australia the appeal of human rights discourse has been weakened and discredited in recent years by the attacks of Hansonism, as well as by the government's repeated disagreements with the United Nations, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Amnesty International and similar bodies. This vitiated rights discourse is not available to us now as a unifying element in troubled times. Instead of a focus on equal access for all to the institutions of citizenship (the discourse drawn on by the Canadian Prime Minister) Australian 'multiculturalism' in recent years has been confined to exhorting the Anglo majority to display 'tolerance' towards racial and ethnic minorities.¹¹ At the same time, the insistence on 'decency' as an innate national characteristic blocks attempts to examine past or present policies from a human rights perspective.

We need only compare Prime Minister Chrétien's statement with our own Prime Minister's response to the attacks on Muslims in the weeks following September 11, to understand how differently human rights discourse operates in the two national rhetorics. Following the torching of a Brisbane mosque, the Australian Prime Minister commented:

If it is an act of vandalism or vilification, I condemn it unreservedly ... Islamic Australians are as entitled as I am to a place in this community. If their loyalty is to Australia as is ours, and their commitment is to this country, we must not allow our natural anger at the extremes of Islam which have been manifested in the attack on the World Trade Center to spill over on to Islamic people generally.¹²

In contrast to the absolutes in Chrétien's speech, Prime Minister Howard's position is modified by a string of qualifications. 'Islamic Australians are ... entitled ... to a place in this community. *If their loyalty is to Australia as is ours, and their commitment is to this country*'. (my emphasis) For Islamic Australians the protection of the state from racist violence is made conditional on a demonstration of 'commitment' and 'loyalty', while the commitment of other Australians, 'us', is understood as given. The progressive use of the pronouns 'I', 'ours' and 'we', strongly identifies Prime Minister Howard as speaking *as an Anglo-Australian*, not as a Prime Minister presiding over a nation that is racially and religiously non-discriminatory. 'Natural anger' at the attacks in the US is attributed only to some (non-Muslim) Australians, and then naturally conflated with the arsonists' anger at the 'extremes of Islam' and seen to 'spill over' by extension 'on to Islamic people generally'.¹³ The unequivocal assertion of the (as yet unproven) link between the attacks in the US and the 'extremes of Islam' strongly contrasts with the cautious and conditional way in which the attack on the mosque is described: '*If it is an act of vandalism or vilification*'. (my emphasis) 'Vandalism' and 'vilification' are at best an inadequate pair of alternatives to represent the deliberate destruction by fire of a place of worship.

And suddenly as I write I feel the touch of a shadow from Colombo in July 1983, a moment no non-racist Sri Lankan forgets. As mobs, sometimes incited by government MPs, robbed,

burnt, raped and killed Tamils on the streets, our one hope was for a broadcast by the Prime Minister, a strong message of leadership to rein in his supporters and deflect the gathering avalanche of violence. Instead, Prime Minister Junius Richard Jayewardene, considered until then by my parents and many other Colombo Tamils as an old school, parliamentary type, spoke about 'appeasing the just anger' felt by many at the murder of thirteen Sinhala soldiers by Tamil separatists. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister had waved a green flag to the racist mobs. After the pogroms of 1983, Tamil separatist groups, which until then had only a small number of active members, enjoyed a vast surge in recruitment. The deadly and dirty Sri Lankan civil war, which continues still with little prospect of a lasting solution, began in earnest.

Of course Chippendale, where I write this today, is not Colombo (although in the week of September 11, I was racially abused on Broadway as I was on Colombo's streets almost twenty years ago). Australia is not Sri Lanka. But it is as well to remember that multiethnic, multiracial societies are not geared towards *unavoidable* conflict. For that to happen active choices must be made: one set of options adopted over another; certain things said or not said; positions actively staked out; exclusions and inclusions clearly demarcated. As the recent work of Henry Reynolds shows, alongside the stream of racism, exclusion and violence there also always exists the possibility of dissent and opposition; of critiquing the racial claims and myths of our society; of challenging the stereotypes that would exclude certain groups from full citizenship.¹⁴ Historically this stream is a source of counter-representations and narratives that resist the powerful, ongoing legacies of empire in Australia.

The dissenting stream of Australian society with regard to asylum seekers includes refugee activists, religious leaders and some media analysts. Important leaders such as Justice Marcus Einfeld and former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser have challenged the policies that criminalise asylum seekers and set them apart from other members of society. Our current practice of compulsory, indefinite and indiscriminate detention of all onshore asylum seekers is accompanied by a number of other measures: the establishment of remote, privatised detention camps whose conditions of operation are protected by 'commercial in confidence' agreements; restricted information about the increasing levels of violence, break-outs and inmate deaths in the camps; a lack of accountability on the part of camps' operators; limits on detainees' access to independent legal advice; attempts to weaken the appeal process for detainees; a significant reduction in advocacy and resettlement services by government funded-organisations; and the punitive refusal of refugees' access, even after their release into the community as 'genuine refugees', to essential services and rights.

The official response to the *Tampa* episode has both further extended existing policies and added new dimensions: all information relating to the operation was controlled by the Prime

Minister, ministers Reith and Ruddock and their advisors, with alternative sources of information, such as the navy's media liaison, blocked out. The government's decision to recover legal costs from the pro bono lawyers who sought an injunction on the removal of the *Tampa* asylum seekers will likely limit future legal interventions on behalf of refugees. All this adds up to a series of measures that effectively sequesters asylum seekers from the community.

This bundle of policy and ad hoc responses establishes worrying precedents in a society where the lines between detainees, asylum seekers, refugees and non-Anglo migrants are increasingly blurred. What enables many of these moves is precisely the effective disconnection, quarantine and alienation of asylum seekers from the rest of Australian society—including complacent or fearful non-Anglo migrant communities. The process of disconnection operates primarily through isolation, restriction of information, and by a strikingly successful deployment of terminology. Linguistically, the government has achieved almost total success in its campaign to substitute loaded, pejorative terms like 'illegals', 'queue jumpers', 'economic migrants' and 'wealthy customers of people smugglers' for the neutral term 'asylum seeker'. Despite efforts by refugees and their supporters to challenge the notion that the imperilled and persecuted can simply line up somewhere, or attempts to explain that the act of seeking asylum is not a crime under international law, the Minister for Immigration's language is widely echoed on talkback radio and in the tabloid media. Heavy pressure is exerted on other journalists to drop the descriptive term 'asylum seeker'.¹⁵ The blockade of information about life behind the razor wire has been extraordinarily successful—with a few important exceptions like the ABC 'Four Corners' report on the trauma experienced by a six-year-old Iranian detainee, Shayan Bedraie.¹⁶

The terrain of representation, of language, imagery and narrative, then emerges as a crucial point for contesting the disconnection and separation of refugees and asylum seekers from wider society. What representations of refugees, other than official ones, are available in the public sphere? What are the forms and modalities by which refugee stories are told and made visible? While individual stories of asylum seekers in the Australian media (like the previously mentioned 'Four Corners' report on Shayan Bedraie, performed in a recognisable televisual genre) do have break-through effects, our ways of viewing contemporary refugees and displaced peoples remain for the most part enmeshed in the colonial and neo-colonial forms of representation discussed in the earlier sections of this essay. Other possible frames, for example classic popular culture representations of World War II refugees from *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Schindler's List* to the Von Trapp family in the *Sound of Music*, are seemingly unthinkable as reference points for figuring today's non-European refugees. Apart from the universalist discourse of human rights, a discourse not exempt from its own Eurocentric biases, where can we look for images and stories that reconnect us with the bodies on the other side of the razor wire? What other histories and counter-discourses, what alliances and



interconnections, engender different representations? How is a new cultural politics articulated and enacted? What communicative strategies, modes of address and emergent subjectivities does it materialise?

Armed SAS soldiers heading towards the Tampa, 29/8/2001.
Source: Megan Lewis, Newspix.

As the *Tampa* lay anchored in the waters off Christmas Island, a barrage of telephoto lenses were trained on its passengers who were almost universally described in the media as 'human cargo'. In government speak the *Tampa* asylum seekers became 'rescuees', although they were simultaneously 'pirates', 'hijackers' and potential terrorists. Contesting these negative and negating descriptions, Captain Rinnan referred to the people aboard the *Tampa* as his 'guests'; he bid the SAS to take good care of them as they were moved onto the Australian navy's *Manoora* for transfer to Nauru. The Christmas Islanders, similarly, signalled their willingness to extend hospitality. A array of organisations on the Island signed up to a petition to bring the *Tampa's* passengers ashore, where others had arrived before them.

This discourse of hospitality and care for guests in need is drawn on most strongly by Indigenous Australians as a powerful assertion of their continuing ownership of, and responsibility for, this land. Tony Birch writes:

as Aboriginal people ... we must also assert moral authority and *ownership* of this country. Our legitimacy does not lie within the legal system and is not dependent on state recognition. It lies within ourselves ... We need to claim our rights, beyond being stuck in an argument

about the dominant culture's view of land rights or identity. And we need to claim and legitimate our authority by speaking out and for, and protecting the rights of others, who live in, or visit *our* country.¹⁷

In a similar spirit of responsibility and ownership, the Gungalidda elder Wadjularbinna issued her own media release, repudiating a comment by an ATSIC spokesperson who had supported the government's stance on the *Tampa*:

If we as Aboriginal people are true to our culture and spiritual beliefs, we should be telling the government that what they are doing to refugees is wrong! Our Aboriginal cultures do not allow us to treat people this way ... Those people were out on the water. The old women where I come from said, 'Look at this big river, where we're fishing, look at this big land.'

There's room for all of us, if we learn to live simply, within our country's means ... Cutting down on the way we live, saving the land and embracing others in need. Giving them refuge. This is a spiritual country and we are a spiritual people, we are ready to embrace other people in their need ... Before Europeans came here, (illegally), in the Aboriginal world, we were all different, speaking different languages ... Our religion and cultural beliefs teaches us that everyone is a part of us and we should care about them. We can't separate ourselves from other human beings—it's a duty.¹⁸

Captain Rinnan's brief parting remarks; the petition by a touching assortment of Christmas Islander groups offering safe harbour; the gentle movements of Nauruan dancers welcoming travellers to makeshift shelter; the wisdom of Gungalidda female elders: all these signal breaches in the carceral forces separating asylum seekers from the rest of us. They link inside and outside, these and those bodies, our stories and their stories; they make simple reciprocal gestures between guest and host, sheltered and homeless, harbour and traveller.

Wadjularbinna's words locate the seemingly alien bodies on the *Tampa* in a distinctly Australian history of successive arrivals by sea and their reception by the Indigenous owners. She rejects a circumscribing and closed Australia, an Australia of ever shrinking, heavily defended borders. Grounded in the authority of her firmly located, Indigenous and gendered, space in Gungalidda country, her embrace opens outwards: 'The old women where I come from said "Look at this big river, where we're fishing, look at this big land."' Her narrative of Aboriginal hospitality does not erase trespasses and incursions of the past, but recognises nonetheless the 'duty' not to 'separate ourselves from other human beings'. It rebuts the repressive tolerance of official multiculturalism and affirms the differences that have always coexisted in 'an Aboriginal world'.

Wadjularbinna's is not some nostalgic invocation of a bygone age. It is an astute recognition of current political realities. She claims responsibility as *an Indigenous Australian* for the treatment



JANUARY 1788: Boatloads of illegals arrive off Australia's eastern seaboard. Many are criminals, expelled from their own country. Many are sick and have chronic diseases unknown here. None possess valid travel documents. Locals oppose them coming ashore...

of guests in *her* country. This assertion of ownership links the politics of Indigenous rights to other claims for justice. In a previous statement at a conference on reparations for the stolen generations Wadjularbinna addressed Minister Philip Ruddock as the representative of a government that refused to acknowledge responsibility for past policies. She called on him to reckon with Anglo-Australians' own place in this country: 'You are descendants of the First Fleet of illegal boat people. How dare you treat the migrants who come here as refugees like that in this day and age?'¹⁹

In these remarks Wadjularbinna takes the Howard Government's recent decision to combine the responsibilities of Aboriginal affairs, reconciliation, immigration and ethnic affairs into one giant Ministry of the Other, and turns the logic of that decision around on itself, making an inescapable link between the politics of Indigenous rights and migrant and refugee rights. As the newspaper headline, 'Ruddock Gets the Refugee Treatment',²⁰ recognises, Wadjularbinna foreshadows an alliance that positions Minister Ruddock as himself the alien and interloper.

Along with Wadjularbinna, others are also calling on Anglo-Australians to remember and account for their own histories as boat people. An unsourced image circulating on the Internet shows an Indigenous man shouting out a warning as a ship sails into Sydney Harbour. In the manner of a newspaper report the caption below reads:

January 1788. Boatloads of illegals arrive off Australia's eastern seaboard. Many are criminals, expelled from their own country. Many are sick and have chronic diseases unknown here. None possess valid travel documents. Locals oppose them coming ashore.

Against the infinitely consumable images of Anglo-Australia's maritime history, the triumphalist parades of tall ships and glorifications of the harbour, these representations tell other boat stories.

Whether as oppositional, satiric counterpoint in Indigenous retellings or in the testimony of migrant communities, the boat story, in forms as diverse as the media release, the personal essay or performance art, makes its appearance again and again as a means of reaching out to the newest asylum seekers.²¹ Through their different boat stories diverse migrant populations interconnect, and identify imaginatively and politically with one another. In the recent Citymoon Theatre production *Soft Silk ... Rough Linen Lua Ong ... Vai Tho*, Vietnamese-Australians bring the testimony of their own histories to today's debates. The play's text combines current media reports on asylum seekers with Vietnamese-Australian poetry. In the program composer Ngoc-Tuan Hoang includes an autobiographical note, 'Tuan's Story':

I am a refugee, a boat person. I have no choice ...

From 1977 to 1983, I escaped by boat twenty-six times, but none was successful ... I was labelled 'traitor' and had to spend totally five and a half years behind the iron bars of four detention centres and finally the notorious 'A.30 re-education camp' ... Musical imagination was my best vitamin, and I could secretly compose many songs during my years in jail. Then, in May 1983 I got an opportunity to escape again ... Without any knowledge of navigation we wandered on the sea for eight days ... we were luckily rescued by a Philippine fishing ship. The kind-hearted Filipinos offered us food, water and petrol, and showed us the way to the Philippines ...

I arrived at the Sydney airport on the 22nd of December 1983. After having examined my refugee visa, the immigration officer said to me:

'Welcome to Australia.'

'Thank you very much,' I said.

'Forget the past, and start a new life here,' he added.

I thanked him and walked through the gate. How can I ever forget my past? But, yes, I will start a new life as a baby with my bare hands at the age of twenty-eight. I am too fortunate, am I not? Finally, I am here on this land with some new melodies on my mind, while numerous others are still in refugee camps, waiting day by day.²²

Despite the immigration officer's well-intentioned recommendation, the new melodies Tuan contributes to Australia are not songs of a 'new life'. How could they be? They are songs that recognise not a rupture but a continuity with the past and the responsibilities it entails. Tuan's story is a testimony, keeping faith with the numerous others of various religions and races, waiting in still more camps; his personal narrative is a means of countering public ignorance and lies.

The play connects Tuan as a refugee from Vietnam with today's Middle Eastern, Arabic and South Asian asylum seekers, forging a politics of inter-ethnic refugee solidarity. It signals new forms of coalition where shared boat stories and camp stories ground the articulation of different subjectivities (*I am a refugee, a boat person*). It enables inter-ethnic alliances in a climate where relations between Arabic-Australians and Vietnamese-Australians are dominated by adversarial images of 'gang warfare' and violence. For prosperous and self-absorbed migrant communities content to accept mainstream images at face value, stories like Tuan's act as a bridge to the suffering of refugees today, making direct connections with those communities' own past experiences. They link migrants and refugees within and across communities through a set of recognisable tropes and motifs of displacement, persecution, internment, wandering and arrival.

Alternative understandings of today's refugees, then, are often grounded in the marginalised or dissident histories of Indigenous and non-Anglo migrant communities. Derived from personal histories (Vietnamese boat stories) or alternative practices and knowledges (Gungalidda tradition) they promote responses of recognition, empathy, identification and responsibility. As such they hold the potential for forms of inter-ethnic and inter-racial coalition, alliance and collaboration.

In 1993, after the then Labor Government adopted a policy of compulsory incarceration for asylum seekers, the novelist Bernard Cohen wrote with frightening prescience:

There are foreign people in Australia thinking foreign thoughts. Some are locked up in Villawood, at the detention centre. Some are restrained in Perth. In those places, you see, they are not really in Australia. They are in the empty ungoverned space of their bodies. I guess, confined within not-Australia. Some people in Villawood have seen much of not-Australia—sites in Broome, Darwin, Melbourne, as well as Sydney—flying from no place to no place in Utopian airliners.²³

Not-Australia has expanded since Cohen first named, and so made visible to us, this ever-present shadow society. Not-Australia now spreads beyond Australia's mainland, to an exhausted phosphate field on Nauru and Manus Island off Papua New Guinea. It annexes the territories named in the Border Protection Bill.²⁴ Christmas Island, whose inhabitants proclaimed their welcome to the *Tampa* only a few weeks before the passage of the bill, is now part of not-Australia, marked out as the site for our newest detention camp—all of fifty metres from the local garbage dump.

Lines in the water are such weighty and such ephemeral things: a mile this way or that is the line between life and death, safety and terror. Yet these all-important lines are a creation

of yesterday or the week before. Christmas Island has been on this or that side of too many maps and proclamations; the subject of lines and fealties drawn, erased and redrawn. On these ambiguous shores the locals have seen enough to know that 'stranger' and 'foreigner' are contingent, shifting words, and 'one of us' announces at best an equivocal kinship.

Christmas or Cocos Islands were not always foreign ground in the Indonesian archipelago. Visiting Indonesian MP Amin Rais reminded us at the end of 2001 that 'people smuggler' is an emotive and misleading description for poor fishermen whose ancestors always plied the waters around what we now call Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Australia.²⁵ Contact between the fishing communities of the Indonesian archipelago and the Indigenous peoples of Arnhem Land and the Torres Strait long predates British arrival in these parts. Yes, lines in the water are such weighty and such weightless things. A desire, Canute-like, to command the flow of oceans flouts the currents of history, its multifarious, shifting tides of arrivals, castaways and withdrawals.

Fortress Australia, a contracting, defensive, shouting creature, folds in on itself. As Australia diminishes, not-Australia expands. Like sinister twins, one is feeding off the other. Not-Australia consumes Australia's self-identity: we have become the nation that, in Prime Minister Howard's words, will not be 'held hostage to our own decency'. Our self-definitions, like our coastlines, shrink to a barrage of rebuttals. But isn't it not-Australia now that holds us hostage, cordoned off in our sea of delusions, with a few unarmed asylum seekers we have tricked out as 'the enemy'? A hundred years ago, at Federation, Australians locked themselves in a prison house of whiteness, consumed by phobias of marauding Aboriginals within and encroaching Asians without. Blockaded anew by our own overwrought terrors, will Australians choose again to become prisoners, the ultimate hostages of a line we decided to draw in the sea, in the first spring of our new century?

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1. Joseph Conrad, 'Author's Note', *Lord Jim*, Norton, New York, 1968, p. 2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
2. Paul Kelly, 'How PM's Ship Came In', *Australian*, 22-23 September 2001, p. 29; David Marr, 'Still

Adrift', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22-23 September 2001, p. 32.

3. Kelly. See also James Jupp, 'Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Policies' in William Mayley et al., *Refugees and the Myth of the Borderless World*,

- Department of International Relations, RSPAS, Canberra, 2002, pp. 38–39.
4. Marr.
 5. Paul McGeough, 'When the Poor Cry Freedom and Sell Their Souls to People Smugglers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September 2001, p. 1.
 6. On Australian invasion narratives see David Walker, *Anxious Nation*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1999, pp. 98–112.
 7. See Ian Henderson, 'PM Warns of Anger if Boat-people Let In', *Australian*, 17 October 2001, p. 5.
 8. The racist violence experienced by Muslim Australians in the weeks following September 11 was detailed by a number of speakers at the Forum 'Women Report Violence in a Time of War: Silenced Voices of the Race Election' held at the University of Technology, Sydney on 8 November 2001 <www.international.activism.hss.us.edu.au/w_violence/>.
 9. James Smith, 'Canada Tries to Remain a Refuge for the Persecuted', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 September 2001, p. 4.
 10. On the limits of human rights, see Angela Mtropoulos, 'The Barbed End of Human Rights', *Overland*, no. 164, 2001, pp. 51–55. See also Suvendrini Perera, 'What Is a Camp?' in *Borderlands* <www.borderlandsejournal.com/> forthcoming.
 11. See Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, "Racial Suicide": The Relicensing of Racism in Australia', *Race & Class*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1997, pp. 1–20.
 12. Katherine Shine, 'PM Outraged as Arson Destroys Brisbane Mosque', *Sun Herald*, 23 September 2001, p. 3.
 13. The rhetorical moves here are reminiscent of the strategies discussed by Guy Rundle as working to 'include out' Indigenous people and other minoritised groups in the Prime Minister's draft preamble to the constitution. (23) See Rundle, 'The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 3, 2001, pp. 1–74.
 14. See Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards 1998.
 15. 'Refugees in the Media', Refugee Council of Australia seminar with Claire Harvey, Greg Wilesmith and Catherine Lumby, Sydney, 4 September 2001; see also Robert Garran, 'Defence Force in a Secrecy Bunker', *Weekend Australian*, 27–28 October 2001, p. 4.
 16. The program, 'An Inside Story', was broadcast on ABC TV on 13 August 2001. The transcript can be accessed at <www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s344246.htm>.
 17. Tony Birch, 'The Last Refuge of the "Un-Australian"', *UTS Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2001, pp. 17–22.
 18. Wadjularbinna, *A Gungalidda Grassroots Perspective*, media release, 25 September 2001.
 19. Debra Jopson, 'Rattled Ruddock Gets the Refugee Treatment', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 2001.
 20. Jopson.
 21. See for example, April Pham, 'Refugees, Arabs and Asians: Keep Them All Out—A Call from the Government', *Speaking Out*, no. 9, 2001, p. 18, and Minh Bui, 'Alone on an Empty Sea', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 October 2001. An exhibition, 'The Boat', held at the Asia-Australia Art Centre in Sydney's Chinatown in October 2001 also made similar connections.
 22. Extract from the program for the Seymour Group and Citymoon production, *Soft Silk ... Rough Linen Lua Ong ... Voi Tho*. Performed in Sydney at Sidetrack Theatre, 4 August 2001.
 23. Bernard Cohen, 'Aliens', *Westery*, no. 4, 1993, pp. 33–38.
 24. On the neocolonial expansionism of the 'Pacific Solution' see Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, 'Refugee Solution Spills Trouble across Pacific', *Weekend Australian*, 24–25 November 2001, p. 10, and Greg Fry, 'The "Pacific Solution"?' in Mayley, pp. 23–31.
 25. The documentary 'Troubled Waters', broadcast on SBS TV on 26 March 2002, examines the stories of Indonesian fishermen imprisoned in Australian jails, contrary to the principles of the International Law of the Sea, on charges of violating of Australian waters. The treatment of the fishermen—burning their boats, denying them access to legal advice, imposing draconian fines and jail sentences—disturbingly parallels the punitive policies directed at asylum seekers and refugees.