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Controlling the Ever Threatening ‘Other’

Abstract

Ideas of Australia being invaded by a foreign ‘Other’ have been present throughout much of its history and this legacy is still present today. My paper will reveal the red thread of control that runs through Australia’s attitude and policy towards asylum seekers since European arrival. Claims of current restrictions against asylum seekers being mere Islamophobia ignore this history. From the grudging admission of Jewish refugees during times of Nazi oppression to quotas placed on certain nationalities and later draconian punishments for those claiming asylum without a prior visa, control of the ‘Other’ has been a constant theme, with current policies of mandatory detention and offshore processing on far away Pacific islands separating the Australian ‘Self’ from the foreign ‘Other.’

The trope of a threading body invading Australia has been prevalent throughout much of its history. Indeed, since Federation the country has been casting a wary eye at those who attempt to reach its shores. Today, Australia finds itself, once again, in the middle of a discourse and asylum seeker policy towards the Other that is framed as a threat in the need of control. This restrictive nature of Australia’s ‘Self/Other’ relationship produces, at times, draconian responses to claims of asylum.

Despite recent claims of current anti-asylum seeker policy being centred on Islamophobia (Aly and Walker 2007; Tittensor 2011; Hage 2016), I would like to argue in this paper how, for Australia, it has always been an attempt to control who will come and in what manner, an attempt to hold the reigns of national sovereignty and an attempt to control the defiant faceless ‘Other.’ I will do this by first providing evidence of how the media focuses on the need to control asylum seekers while ignoring their identity. I will then proceed to examine the Hegelian relationship between Australia and those who have arrived by boat and highlight the criticism of those not following societal norms. Following this, I will trace the history of Australia’s attempts to control the ‘Other’ arriving on its shores, including the deportation of Melanesian sugar cane farmers, the denial of entry to Jewish refugees, the implementation of immigration quotas, the desire to control Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and the strict controls on asylum seekers at the

beginning of the 21st century. My paper puts forth the argument that there is a red thread running through attitudes and policies towards asylum seekers throughout Australia's history, whether they are arriving from the Middle East or Vietnam, whether they are Muslim or Jewish. This red thread has a faceless 'Other' at its heart, interchangeable in race or religion, with control as its watchword.

1. A Faceless 'Other'

A constant feature throughout Australian history has been a fear of invasion, with its position as a European settlement in Southeast Asia grounding it in a perennial state of siege. From the early 19th century a recurring theme has been one of peril that was either yellow, brown, communist red (Aly and Walker 204) or Jewish, Greek and Italian (Wilton and Bosworth 2) with the intention to invade Australia's vast empty spaces, particularly in the far north, or depress wages and bring about economic depression (cf. Richards 2008). The identity of the 'Other' arriving on Australian shores has mostly been ignored, a practice continued in newspaper coverage during the early 21st century, whether that be, for example, in a tabloid newspaper such as the Australian *Daily Telegraph* (September 9, 2015) or in broadsheets such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* (August 15, 2012), which featured a threatening photo of an asylum seeker under the headline "We're Still Coming."

Rather than reporting identifiable information such as names, backgrounds or narratives that would ground and explain an asylum seeker's desperation and pursuit of safety in Australia, a vocabulary of threat is deployed that dehumanizes and forebodes an invasion. This portrayal of asylum seekers as the dangerous 'Other' has been present both in the media and politics for at least two decades, where asylum seekers have often been described as "queue jumpers" or "illegals" leading to their connotation as social pariahs (Muytjens and Ball 451). Indeed, the use of language to portray asylum seekers as criminals that became so well-known during the Howard government years (1996–2007) is mirrored in the way the Fraser government described Vietnamese asylum seekers in the late 1970s as pseudo-refugees (Peterie 2016). Likewise, Howard's juxtaposition of the dangerous, immoral 'Other' against the egalitarian Australian Self (Peterie 438) can be also seen in former prime minister Gough Whitlam's call in 1977 for restriction and quarantine to stop the spread of drugs and disease, thereby associating asylum seekers with crime and infection (Neumann 276). Howard also continuously painted asylum seekers as not real refugees, as pseudo-refugees or queue jumpers ahead of the truly deserving, thereby dehumanizing and delegitimizing their claim to asylum (Peterie 2016). This association between asylum seekers and deviousness would be continued in constant references to asylum seekers as "illegals," "illegal asylum seekers" or "illegal immigrants," despite the solid legal fact that it is not illegal to claim asylum in Australia (Peterie).

The dehumanizing of refugees is continued in the use of language by both the government and media. A common method used by the news media is the description of asylum seekers as “flows,” “floods” or “waves” (Hage 39). The use of terms such as “waves,” “hoards” or “swarms” to describe refugees instils a sense of fear that may lead to an unwillingness to allow entry of asylum seekers (Cox 483). In this case the ‘Other’ loses any identifiable features, thereby taking on an abstruse predatory quality that demands action to impede and quarantine. This method seems to support Chomsky’s claim that the use of fear of a terrifying enemy to whip the population into line behind contentious policies is standard practice in many countries (1989, 269).

Fear-laden language in Australia would provide the impetus for an ever strengthening anti-asylum policy that eliminates the possibility of reaching Australia if the asylum seeker arrived via boat and, instead, transports them to offshore centres for processing. The introduction of mandatory detention for asylum seekers in the 1990s in order to quarantine and remove the ‘Other’ away from Australia for processing created “a new class of criminal and new criminality – the unlawful non-citizen” (Carrington 42). These non-citizens at the same time became “illegal entrants” or simply “illegals” – a parasitic burden upon Australia’s legal and health care system (Pickering and Lambert 75). In a post-September 11 world this criminality would soon slide into accusations of terrorism, as well. The new connotative language of criminality and the ‘Other’ was present, for example, in September 2001 when Australian federal government ministers claimed an “undeniable link” between illegal immigrants and terrorism (Klocker and Dunn 71), a claim later found to be untrue (Commonwealth of Australia 2002).

The use of dehumanizing language towards asylum seekers is linked with a desire to control the ‘Other.’ The controlling aspects of asylum seeker policy in Australia also serves to strengthen the resonance in such harsh discourse. A primary reason for this is due to the limited contact the Australian public has with asylum seekers i.e. they are placed offshore on islands such as Nauru or, until recently, Manus Island, as well as the media bans on access to detention centres and asylum seekers, which has resulted in a dependence of the media on information provided by the media (Muytjens and Ball 451). Therefore, any sense of objectivity is hard to determine and the power of the language used by the government is both significant and persuasive. As of 2018 there is a limited amount of information coming out of offshore processing centres with films and social media posts mostly made by Kurdish asylum seeker and film maker, Behrouz Boochani, who has described violence and inhuman treatment on Manus Island where he is imprisoned (Grewcock 2017). These few posts on social platforms seem to be the only messages slipping through the governmental desire for control of the ‘Other.’

2. Australia's Relationship with Its 'Others'

Some have argued that the relationship between 'Self' and the 'Other' is that of the 'Other' being seen as a radical alien, a form of crude 'Othering' that distances the 'Self' from the 'Other' (Brons 70). Others, such as De Beauvoir (1949) have introduced the notion of the 'Other' as a construction opposing and thereby constructing the 'Self.' Identity is, indeed, not thinkable without a border to an 'Other,' the boundary functioning as a "brokering of difference [...] a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness" (Butler 43–44). This form of identification has been largely influenced by Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic (1807 B.IV. A.) of identification and distancing where the self-consciousness sees itself in the 'Other.'

This notion of identification and distancing can be seen in Australia's attitudes regarding threatened Asian invasion, fears of immigration and recent attitudes towards asylum seekers. The argument runs along the lines of stopping the 'Other' because Australians are different in terms of race, backgrounds or values i.e. identifying Australians and distancing them from the 'Other.' The resentment from the RSL and trade unions when it was suggested that the White Australia policy be dismantled in the second half of the 20th century drew upon these fears of losing identity (Tavan 2004). This fear of the 'Other' is often centred on the belief that Australia will lose what makes it different from those attempting to enter the nation. The fear is that of the 'Other' taking control of the land and replacing the current owners with their own children. This fear has been prevalent throughout Australian history, focusing on a supposed plan by Asians to defile white Australian women and "outpopulate" the Anglo-Celtic population (Aly and Walker 2007). Arata (1996) has described this fear of invasion by migrants from Africa, Asia and the Middle East as a "narrative of reverse colonialism" that has existed since the Victorian age – the former colonizing nations now being confronted with citizens from the lands that they had once colonised. Consequently, it has been claimed that countries such as Australia or the United States of America operate under a constant state of siege, geared towards violence even when they are peace (Hage 2016).

Following Hegel's argument that self-consciousness sees itself in the 'Other,' a comparative example can be found in Australia, where much of the population can boast of family, including myself, who arrived by sea. Australia sees itself in new arrivals to its shores. This attempt to see the 'Self' in the 'Other' and to give the 'Other' a face can be seen in the "#I came by boat" campaign which began in Australia in 2015. This ongoing campaign aims to capture the positive way asylum seekers contribute to Australian society. Through the use of photography and television viewers see the faces and learn of the backgrounds of certain asylum seekers who explain how and why they came to Australia as well as their successful lives that have included careers in medicine, education, the arts and many other areas (SBS 2015). The campaign provides a counter-balance to much

of the media depictions of asylum seekers that largely ignore biographical markers, are generally negative in portrayal (McKay, Thomas and Blood 2011; Hightower 2015) or question the validity of their refugee status (Lawlor and Tolley 2017).

However, as Hegel argues, the relationship between the 'Self' and 'Other' is an unequal one, identification does take place and the self-consciousness does see itself in the 'Other' but there is also distancing and the 'Other' is often criticized for not meeting societal norms. The process of 'Othering' itself places certain groups on the social margin. Consequently, there is always an attempt by the 'Self' to control the 'Other.' This need for control is mixed with a constant unease over sovereignty in Australia. With the overturning of *Terra nullius*, or the claim that Australia was not settled at the time of European arrival, the legal basis of white Australian sovereignty has been called into question (Duncanson 25; Giannacopoulos 2007, 48). Additionally, fears of invasion have been prevalent since the early days of European settlement beginning with the French scientific expedition by Baudin from 1800–1803 and the subsequent settlement of Tasmania by the British fearing the arrival of French settlers (Peron 2013).

3. Controlling the 'Other'

If we go back to the beginnings of modern-day Australia we can see that Federation got off to a rocky start with the Immigration Act of 1901 being passed to supposedly safeguard Australia against a hostile world. Demands for social homogeneity as well as social Darwinism would result in the infamous dictation test restricting entry only to those who could write a passage of 50 words in a European language that was to be determined by the officer present at the time (Palfreman 81–85). Australia from the very beginning was attempting to control the 'Other' arriving on its shores.

This attempt at controlling the 'Other' would take place centre-stage during the 1901 federal election (Australia's first) when Melanesian workers in the cane fields of northern Australia came under criticism. It had been previously claimed that such hard work in the tropical north was unsuitable for whites, yet these workers, many who had been kidnapped ("blackbirded") from their homes in the Solomon Islands, New Hebrides or New Caledonia and subsequently lived and worked for years in Australia, were singled out for deportation (Markus 117). Edmund Barton's protectionist party went on to win the election and deportations began almost immediately for these labourers who had worked so hard on Australian soil. Of the 9324 Melanesians in Queensland in 1901 only 1654 would remain while others fled for refuge in the bush (Markus 117).

Before the immigration act of 1901 Lutheran refugees had come to Australia from Germany in 1838 (Neumann 16). This was followed by a small amount of Jews arriving who were fleeing oppression in Tsarist Russia but it was not until

1941 that refugees played a major role in the government's population policy.

Despite Nazi atrocities there was great fear of Jewish refugees in Australia during the early half of the 20th century. A plan to settle them in Western Australia was considered and then rejected due to fears of the colony growing out of control and establishing a competing nation on Australian territory (Blackeney 281). This is a recurrent term throughout Australian history – a fear of losing control of the land itself to an outsider and an uncertainty over what Australia was exactly – a nation with an indigenous population and yet based upon a legal concept, *terra nullius*, that asserted that the land was empty. The fear appears to be that if one population can be denied ownership and subsequently replaced, then another must be controlled lest it attempt to repeat this action. In November 1941 the future Minister for Immigration Arthur Calwell's speech to the parliament seems to support this argument:

There is no need for the nations to the north of us to cast covetous eyes on Australia and fight a way into it if the present trend continues, because they need only wait a generation or two until we are so reduced in numbers that they will be able to walk into Australia in much the same way as Captain Cook did 150 years ago against the boomerangs and spears of the aborigines.

The decision whether to accept Jewish refugees was discussed with the opposing camp arguing that they would disrupt the social balance in Australia and the pro-camp arguing Australia needed to increase its population and that despite misgivings, Jews could “be controlled, harnessed and used like steam” (Wilton and Bosworth 8). In the end, Australia's interests and the need to control the ‘Other’ would be the deciding factors. At the beginning of Nazi oppression, with Jews applying for asylum in Australia at the annual rate of more than 50 000, the federal cabinet adopted a quota of 5100 based on “selecting those who will become valuable citizens of Australia and, we trust, patriots of their new home, without this action disturbing industrial conditions in Australia” (Neumann 17). Such a small number seems to indicate that humanitarianism was never an issue with Australia also denying entry in June 1939 to a ship, the *St. Louis*, with 907 German Jews on board. This ship had already been denied entry into Canada and Cuba and, cruelly, would be forced to return to Germany where many of these passengers would be murdered by the Nazi regime (Neumann 22).

It must be said that Australia's generosity was quite favourable in terms of per capita basis at the time when compared to Germany's European neighbours (Neumann 22). However, the primary factor was always the attempt to control the ‘Other.’ Social homogeneity was desirable with no action taken to encourage refugees fleeing the Spanish Civil War, for example. The fear of communists gaining control in Australia, of the ‘Other’ threatening the ‘Self,’ would outweigh any humanitarian demands.

The flip side of the constant attempt to control the ‘Other’ was Australia's

continual desire for a larger population. This demand was based on the wish to compete economically with the rest of the world and the fear of northern Australia being populated by Asian invaders (cf. Neumann 2004). Certain groups which were seen as being beneficial to the economy while not disturbing social homogeneity were encouraged to come to Australia while others that clearly did not fit the white Anglo-Celtic idea of Australian identity were denied entry outright. Despite these fears, the restrictions on entry to Australia were gradually relaxed while still maintaining a strict sense of control of the 'Other' entering the nation. For example, quotas beginning in the 1920s were set on Maltese, Greeks, Albanians, Yugoslavs, Estonians, Poles, Bulgarians and Czechs (Markus 158).

Even after the war, when the Displaced Persons Program would bring in the largest resettlement of people in Australia's history (Richards 182), control and the benefit for Australia were the most important topics. The humanitarian aspect of the scores of people uprooted after World War II does not appear to be an issue of major concern. Instead, the race was on for Australia to snap up the European displaced persons before other nations did with 180,000 being resettled in Australia in the period 1948 to 1953, making up more than half of all immigrants during that time (Neumann 34). In the post-war period, Britain proved unable to supply the amount of immigrants that Australia was demanding. By the 1950s the Menzies cabinet was slowly moving its eyes to other parts of Europe for prospective migrants despite protests from the political left-wing and trade unions (Tavan 2004). Pragmatism and control, as always, would rule, however. Deciding factors were that the prospective immigrant was not a communist as well as being healthy and able to work for Australia. Blonde attractive persons, the famous Beautiful Balts, were desirable and those seen as too darkly skinned or unhealthy were restricted (Neumann 2004). Once again, humanitarianism was not a main factor. Those who did arrive were controlled by having to enter two-year work contracts in remote areas throughout Australia (Markus 161). A similar controlling practice can be seen today in Safe Haven Enterprise Visas that allow asylum seekers to stay if they study or work in regional Australia. The bottom line was that Australia would accept refugees but they would choose who comes, in what manner and what they would do when they arrived in the nation.

Control of the 'Other' would continue as a major factor in the 1960s and 1970s. Although much has been made of changes regarding immigration and refugees under Gough Whitlam, many of them were in name only with migrant numbers and refugees settled actually decreasing during his time in office (Neumann 143). It was during this time that Manus Island would first take its place in Australian asylum seeker history. In the late 1960s and early 1970s West Papuans fled Indonesian forces, with many being stopped at the border or returned due to Australia's desire to stay on friendly footing with the Jakarta government (Neumann 65). Uncontrolled entry of the 'Other' into Australia, even in times of dire need, was

dismissed immediately. Once again national self-interest would trump humanitarian concerns and to this day Manus Island houses many West Papuans who fled their homeland.

It was the succeeding government under Malcolm Fraser that seemed to be more swayed by the humanitarian need of South-East Asian refugees at the close of the Vietnam War. Between 1975 and 1977 10,628 people were accepted as refugees (Neumann 252). Many others, such as Lebanese Cypriots and East Timorese were also resettled, being classified as displaced persons.

However, once again control would remain important with Australia acknowledging its responsibility to take refugees for resettlement but also that it retained the ultimate say over who would be resettled and that resettlement in Australia was not always the best solution (Neumann 262). It was also during this time that much of the language seen in recent years regarding asylum seekers reared its head – “pseudo-refugees,” “queue jumpers,” and “illegals” were terms applied to those arriving in Darwin in 1976 (Peterie 2016). Once again there was little talk of the identity of the ‘Other,’ they remained faceless in that they were once again taking the role of the uncontrolled ‘Other.’ Future Prime Minister Bob Hawke suggested that only refugees selected offshore be accepted and that compassion should only be shown to “refugees who have gone through our formal process of screening and meet our requirements” (Neumann 283).

Control of the ‘Other’ would increase at the end of the 20th century with the Keating government introducing mandatory detention in 1992 and then the Howard government making international headlines during the Tampa Affair. The Tampa Affair, where Australia denied entry to a ship filled with asylum seekers, is an apt example of Australia’s desire to control the ‘Other.’ Despite initial offers to take the asylum seekers to Indonesia made by the ship’s captain, and the refusal of entry by the Howard government, the ship continued towards Australia and was eventually boarded by members of the SAS. Entry of the ‘Other’ into Australian territory would only take place if it was controlled by the Australian ‘Self.’

Since then offshore processing has ensured the ‘Other’ remains a faceless ‘Other’ with much of the public only receiving information from the government or through media which itself has to depend on government press releases. This is significant as upon examination of press releases from August 2001 and January 2002 it has been found that 91% of government terminology on asylum seekers contains negative references (Klocker and Dunn 77). Access to the refugees on Nauru or Manus Island is near impossible for the general public and difficult for others such as border protection workers who wish to tell of the conditions on the islands. This is due to the implementation of the Australian Border Force Act 2015 that makes it a crime punishable by two years imprisonment for an entrusted person to make record of or disclose protected information. Once again control rears its head, with the desire to control attempts to put a face on the ‘Other.’

Since 2013 the need for control has increased with the militarization of plans to deal with asylum seekers. Operation Sovereign Borders and the introduction of policy under the left wing Labour government that ensures that no asylum seeker arriving by boat would be settled in Australia has ensured total control of the 'Other' as well as the Australian public's contact with this faceless 'Other.' Other forms of control have taken shape in the granting of visas – with the two options being either temporary protection visas of 3 years with no possibility of renewal, family reunion or the ability to leave Australia and return, or the Safe Haven Enterprise Visas that requires study or work in regional Australia.

Australia's current asylum seeker policy is another chapter in a long attempt to control the 'Other.' The 'Other' remains faceless in that the Australian public knows little of who these asylum seekers are or why they are attempting to seek asylum in Australia. An example of how the need to control is at the root of the harsh measures against asylum seekers can be seen in the criminalization of the manner with which they arrive – with settlement in Australia impossible if an asylum seeker attempts to reach Australia by boat. The desire for control over the manner in which the asylum seekers arrive can also be seen in the fact that Australia is one of the most generous takers of refugees from UNHCR camps throughout the world (Watson 44) and yet reserves harsh measures for those who arrived as "illegal maritime arrival detainees." In summary, it can be said that Australia takes in large amounts of refugees each year as long as they can control who and how the arrival takes place.

The need for control can also be seen in the change of Australian governmental criticism from asylum seekers to human smugglers (Cameron 242). Transnational crime has become the threat, externalizing the problem and subsequently ensuring the use of punitive measures against asylum seekers with former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd describing smugglers as the "scum of the earth" and deserving to "rot in hell" (Rodgers 2009). This focus on the smugglers is the very fear of the faceless 'Other' that Australia endures – that the 'Other' is coming without Australia's consent or control.

Australia has long had fears of a faceless 'Other' invading and claiming ownership of the land and yet, in a Hegelian manner, Australian is bound with this 'Other' across the seas, giving the nation identity and shape. The history of Australia's attitudes towards asylum seekers has always been one of attempting to control this identity, to shape these borders. For Australia it has always been an attempt to be the one in charge of deciding who will come to Australia, the attempt to hold the reins of national sovereignty and the attempt to control the threatening 'Other.'

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