

Living on the borders of belonging: An editorial note

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This post-congress *Coolabah* issue entitled “On the Borders of Belonging” offers seven papers developed from presentations at the *Go Between In Between* congress, held at the University of Barcelona 18-22 January 2016. They offer different perspectives on identity formation but all deal with the potentialities and pitfalls, the enrichment and impoverishment, the empowerment and disempowerment that may flow from identitarian in-between positions, an area of inter and cross-culturality Homi Bhabha famously coined “the Third Space” in “The Manifesto” (*Wasafiri* 29, Spring 1999: 38–40). Located between the known and the unknown, the homely and the unhomely, the national and the foreign, the Self and the Other, this culturally fluid, mixed, hybrid discursive space is the zone where more and more human beings, perhaps willy-nilly, find themselves in these times of globalisation. In Western societies, most of us have turned into cosmopolitans, or *Weltbürger* to stick to the Kantian term: citizens of the world, free to use our resources to travel abroad and imbibe gratifying experiences, presumably open to cultural difference.

Yet, globalization and cosmopolitanism also appear to favour those that already have over those who have not. The global spread of capitalism and its increasingly free circulation of capital is not necessarily accompanied by an equally free flux of labour, curtailing access to vital resources to large populations. As nation–states fail to control multinational capital, they can and do often impose restrictions on processes of migration; this is especially the case with political and economic refugees, who cannot return to their countries of origin but depend for their present and

future well-being on the world's wealthier nations' adherence to the universal declaration of human rights passed by the United Nations in 1948, precisely in the wake of the genocidal horrors of WWII. In the face of increasing economic insecurity at the Western home front, immigrants and refugees are often perceived as unfairly feeding on jobs, resources, services and rights available to local citizens.

Weltbürgerschaft only reaches so far, and where the cultural other comes to close for comfort, where the comfort zone threatens to disappear between Self and Other, where the distant tourist view is confronted with itself, nationalism may raise its head again to defend local interests, perceived as inalienable. Great Britain of the 1980s was a precursor of the xenophobe ghosts that have been haunting the Old Continent over the past two decades: PM Maggie Thatcher's ultra-liberal economic policy delivered the country to the mercy of multinational capital. Yet, this opening up to free trade was corresponded by a much tighter and stricter definition of national identity, which was felt to be endangered in the face of diminished economic control, and whose impact on migratory movement was serious. It is not difficult to see that Britain's current Brexit zeal responds to similar spectres in the European continent at large; neither that the United States' president elect Donald Trump is immersed in, and conditioned by a similar set of regressive racial politics, ordering a wall to be built on the Mexican border and American territory to be closed off for Muslims. And as scholars of Australian studies, let us not forget the barely-hidden racism of the Howard years in Australia, which laid the ground for ex-PM Tony Abbott's border policies based on offshore retention in Nauru and Christmas Island, continued as part of the current PM Malcolm Turnbull's conservative agenda.

In one way or another, the seven essays presented in this *Coolabah* issue have connections to the themes raised in the lines above and interconnect in various ways. Yasue Arimitsu's essay elaborates on the postcolonial links between the Australian writer Richard Flanagan's awarded novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and its Japanese namesake *Oku no Hosomichi*, the masterwork by the 17th c. Japanese poet and travel writer of the Edo period Matsuo Basho. Flanagan's investigation and reimagination of his father's sufferings as a prisoner of war in Japanese captivity on the Burma/Death Railway develops into a critical assessment of the cruel behaviour of the Japanese officials in charge of the Western POWs. Arimitsu places Flanagan's text within a reversed postcolonial framework which puts the Asian in the place of the colonizer, which at the same time allows her to profile the coloniser as a victim as well as victimiser within the self-same colonial logic. Arimitsu argues that, as the Japanese code of honour traditionally places service to the Emperor at the centre of life, an understanding of the absolute obedience, sacrifice and hence suffering this cult requires paves the way for a process of mutual understanding and acceptance between the East and the West. If Flanagan's intentions are indeed of breaking open this taboo area of war crime and creating a space of communication and healing between both former enemies, then his novel may be seen to occupy an illuminating cultural in-between location.

Intercultural incomprehensibility also forms the backbone of Linda Brinkman and Susie Latham's essay, which provides an overview of Australian-Muslim relations over the years, and the way these have evolved into Islamophobia on the part of the Australian mainstream ever since the Twin

Tower Attack in 2001 and the subsequent fear of local ‘terrorist’ acts by Islamic perpetrators. Brinkman and Latham delve deep into the border patrol history of Australia ever since its founding as a British convict colony, and lay out the conditions that inspired invigilation of the fearsome conceptual, emotional and geographical border zones on White Australia’s inner and outer perimeters of identity, affected by the proximity and enduring dark presence of its Indigenous nations and the Asian continent as well as by its physical marginality to Europe and North America. According to Brinkman and Latham, the current height of Islamophobia in Australia follows on to the older perceptions of black and yellow peril, and is nothing but the latest manifestation of a lobby as old as post/colonial Australia itself: one that secures white privilege over other ethnic groups’ rights of access to common resources, and that fears to lose such advantage. Brinkman and Latham claim a productive space of intercultural acceptance and coexistence can only be created by laying bare the hidden interests of those media and lobbies that advocate Islamophobia in the first place, which is a conclusion we should bear in mind in contemplating contemporary Europe’s treatment of immigration as well.

The ongoing discursive effects of the colonialist White Australia Policy are at stake in Thor Kerr and Shaphan Cox’s essay, which looks at Australia’s Indigenous underbelly analysing the media portrayal of Aboriginal solidarity gatherings on an urban heritage site for which Native Title was claimed and granted. In uncovering the subtle changes in media discourse centring on the Heirisson Island Aboriginal presence in Perth 2012 and 2015, Kerr and Cox show how the adverse mainstream reactions towards the Aboriginal presence on this officially recognised Indigenous site is steeped in fear of proximity and too close for comfort. Yet, after initial rejection and calls for eviction and the imposition of the law, some media started to frame the Aboriginal gatherings within a discourse of tolerance, foregrounding that people gathered round fires which offered a sense of home and safety, while a discourse on Aboriginality as a non-urban phenomenon, at a safe distance from spaces perceived as white was maintained. Kerr and Shapan’s analysis reveals that, at bottom, the intercultural meaning of a gathering around fire as a temporary shelter for all to share could muster up a sense of mainstream solidarity only to reinstate the premise that once-tribal land now be considered urban and therefore white.

Julieta Mallari’s essay on the Aytas, a group of indigenous people displaced from their natural habitat in the Philippino highlands to the urban lowlands by the 1991 eruption of Mt Pinatubo, takes another take on indigeneity and national belonging—not from the point of land recovery but highlighting university training to counter the disenfranchisement contemporary Aytas are confronted with, and how this affects their identity. Mallari’s essay is another case study that delves into the often vexed relationship between first nations and settlers, laying bare the depth to which colonial discourse perpetuates itself into postcolonial contemporaneity. As Mallari’s set of interviews with selected and funded university candidates shows, positive training results often run up against engrained Philippino mainstream racism and the Aytas’ assimilation of mainstream values regarding behavior, aspirations and looks. Mallari concludes that university education has certainly boosted the Aytas’ self-esteem, improved their chances of employment and raised their standard of living; yet, her study also reveals that this process implies what Homi Bhabha has termed a “struggle of identification” sparked off by a strong, often traumatic loss of cultural identity, so that the critical issue remains where these well-trained Aytas belong.

Cynthia Lytle's essay draws on Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's conceptualisation of disenfranchisement and dispossession by showing how white sovereignty is maintained in Western society through acts of "dehumanization, disposability and death" of targeted ethnic minorities. This enables her to draw a parallel between the events surrounding the recent 'Black Lives Matter' movement in her homeland, the United States, and the refugee crisis in her host continent, Europe. Despite the vast differences in both focus groups, Lytle discerns a common agenda in the underlying "necropolitics" and "necropower" exerted by the state apparatus which are given wider traction by active media support: both the oppression of the Afro-American underclasses and the barring of poor, displaced, disenfranchised migrant and refugee flows from Europe share the political objective of keeping American and European territory white. Ultimately, Lytle's argument is we can only rehumanise the populations discarded by white sovereignty by recovering their silenced voices, incorporating their personal histories from the identitarian borderlands where they have been made to dwell as part of a diverse national history.

Paula Horta's essay on the practice of *Ubuntu* also chimes in with the need for recovering subaltern voices. She takes her cue from the South-African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was proposed by the country's first black president in democracy, Nelson Mandela, and directed by the black religious leader Bishop Desmond Tutu after the Apartheid regime had come to an end in 1994. The Commission, in which victimisers and victims of the Apartheid regime were heard in public hearings without punitive intent, made an essential contribution to the peaceful cohabitation of formerly segregated classes and peoples beyond the racist violence, damage and trauma of Apartheid. The ability to share individual stories, confessions and forgiveness so as to create a sense of community, collective and national identity and belonging took place in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, defined as "a person's self-realisation and manifestation as a human being" by delivering a personal narrative in which the tellers make themselves vulnerable and open to critique before an ethically responsive audience. *Ubuntu* has subsequently been applied in other postcolonial settings as well, amongst which Portugal. Referring to some case studies, Horta describes the importance of the implantation of the *Ubuntu* philosophy in some educational community projects in disadvantaged areas in and north of Lisbon, involving immigrant, refugee and other minority groups, and so highlights how solidarity, engagement and progress can be achieved despite disenfranchising social contexts.

Inez Baranay's contribution is a creative writer's reflection and unique voice on the question of national, communal and individual belonging that firmly commits itself to a transcultural location and strongly argues for the benefits of our constant going and being in between identities. Baranay's multicultural biography is testimony to the identitarian fluidity and flexibility she proposes, in which a certain amount of outsidership is often—and contradictorily—tantamount to the most inclusionary of attitudes. Aware of the extent to which our lives have become intercultural and defined by crosscultural contact in these times of globalization, Baranay argues for transcultural space as the very place "where the unbelonging can belong".

Although my presentation of these essays suggests a certain order of reading, no bias of interpretation is intended, and they have therefore been uploaded alphabetically according to the author's last name as is habitual in this journal.

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