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**The Good Neighbour: Conspicuous Compassion
and the Politics of Proximity**The Forum on D'Cruz and Steele's *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia***Suvendrini Perera**

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The response of Australians to this disaster has just been so overwhelming and so generous and so decent and so good that it makes you very proud indeed to be an Australian.

—John Howard, ABC Radio, 6 January 2005

1. Thus the Prime Minister's paean to being Australian in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami that slashed its way across coastlines from Sumatra to Somalia on 26 December 2004, leaving over a hundred and fifty thousand people dead and yet hundreds of thousands more bereft, destitute and deeply traumatised. In Indonesia, with its staggering toll of destruction, three weeks after the tsunami lone survivors are still emerging from the wreckage believing that they witnessed the end of the world. Several islands of the Maldives have become permanently uninhabitable, overrun by the sea. In Sri Lanka, my birth country, the effects are, simply, unimaginable. According to the *New York Times*,

Of the countries affected by the tsunami, none has suffered proportionately more devastation than Sri Lanka, with 30,000 people reported killed out of a population of just 19.5 million. (Indonesia has three times as many dead, but it has more than seven times the population.) In Indonesia, India and Thailand, the damage was largely confined to one geographical area, while 70 percent of Sri Lanka's 830-mile coastline was swept by the roiling waters (Waldman and Rohde, 2005).

People whose lives have centred on the sea for centuries now cannot endure the thought of returning to it. On the north and east coasts, which endured two decades of grinding civil war, not even the sea is any longer a constant. Immobilised by shock and stupefied with grief, people ask where to go, what to do, how to live next.

2. In Fremantle, my new city, the Indian Ocean is an inescapable, immediate, everyday, presence. The morning after December 26, locals experienced the abnormal tidal upheavals off Rottnest Island. Along this coastline 'Asia', for better or worse, is less easily an abstraction. Complex dynamics of proximity and distance evoke a spectrum of responses. As recently as last year a spate of firebombs destroyed Asian businesses and police uncovered a white supremacist plot by the Australian Nationalist Movement to assassinate the Chair of the Ethnic Affairs Commission and other key figures. But here, too, are traces of what might have been a different country. Henry Reynolds points out that in the quarter century predating the White Australia Policy, there existed to Perth's north a 'cosmopolitan and multiracial' society which 'more clearly and closely reflected its geographical milieu than has been the case at any time since' (Reynolds 2003: ix). This nascent society was forcibly brought to an end at Federation by the adoption of the White Australia Policy—in a particularly graphic staging of David Theo Goldberg's thesis on the 'co-articulation of race and the modern state' (Goldberg 2002, 2). Current attempts to deny the racist premise of the White Australia Policy, and therefore of the Australian state, suggest a further phase in the progress of the racial state (Goldberg 2002) as the ongoing whitewashing of the past and present, for example thorough declarations of 'treating everyone equally' or being 'raceless', is coupled with the renewed assertions of sovereignty and the triumphalist nationalism exemplified in my opening quotation.

3. That other Australia that Reynolds writes about is now irretrievable, but multiple threads still connect peoples along the edges of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Centuries old

affiliations with various fishing and voyaging communities are 'woven into legend, kinship networks and the coastal economies' of the Indigenous peoples of north and west Australia (Reynolds 2003,13). More recently, migrant itineraries past and present have fashioned a mesh of affiliations and border practices oriented outwards across the water as much as inwards to the centre of the continent (Perera, 2005, forthcoming). Along this coastline, closer, as the saying goes, to Singapore than to Sydney, the Indian Ocean is an intimate horizon. It contours the boundaries of the imagination and relays intimations of lives on the other side. Robert Drewe's autobiography of his Perth childhood, *The Shark Net*, describes the frisson experienced by a small boy looking out across the blue expanse, thinking of the coastline of Africa, with its thrills and terrors, on the other side. It is distant and yet very near; divided by nothing but the shifting, changeable waters in between. I remember the young Robert sometimes when I catch sight of a giant ship on the horizon or some configuration of sky and water transports me to Galle Face or Passikudah. I think, before I can stop myself: *the same ship, the same waves, they see on the other side.*

4. The ocean is a space that both links and separates. But in Prime Minister Howard's comments, Australians' empathetic response to the tsunami is repeatedly reworked to solidify distance and restage difference. It serves as another opportunity for national self-definition and a new platform for the repetition of favourite slogans in the domestic culture wars. Decency and goodness acquire an almost ontological status as the focus shifts from the suffering of the dispossessed and bereaved to a celebration of Australianness. A sense of connectedness with the region is remade into an act of nationalist consolidation and self-congratulation (*it makes you very proud indeed to be an Australian*). In place of a sense of shared vulnerability in the face of disaster or an affirmation of human connection, a distinct Australian identity is asserted that lays claim to benevolence as its defining national characteristic.

5. In contrast to this mood of unabashed self-congratulation is a series of mordant cartoons published in the *Australian* immediately following the tsunami. The sequence alerts us to the inescapable contradictions that underpin relations of aid and empathy and reflects on the limits of reciprocity. Two cartoons feature an emaciated figure clinging perilously to a coconut tree amidst rising waters as it scans headlines in the (fictional) Sri Lanka Post and voices concern at the rough weather in the Sydney to Hobart boat race (*Australian* December 28 and 29, 2004). On 1 January Bill Leak's 'The Wash-Up' represented a brown hand buried on a beach, echoing a grim photograph of a woman weeping over a disembodied arm published on the front page a few days earlier. As wreckage swirls around in the water, the buried hand holds up a sign proclaiming 'Happy New Year 2005' against a backdrop of Sydney's 'best in the world' fireworks display from the Harbour Bridge. I read these cartoons as among the keenest commentary to date on Australian responses to the tsunami, prompting us to reflect on the asymmetries of reciprocity and the limits and ethics of neighbourliness.

6. The remarks by NSW Premier Bob Carr two weeks later, on Australia's official Day of Mourning for the tsunami victims, testify to Leak's prescience. For Carr, the hoped for effect of Sydney's commemoration on Bondi Beach was an image that would 'go round the world' and demonstrate to everyone that 'Australia is a good neighbour' (ABC Radio January 14). Carr's comments illuminate the dynamics of what I term conspicuous compassion, the desire to harness to nationalist and self-affirming ends the fellow feeling and generosity towards the tsunami victims shown by rich and poor alike around the globe. After an initial period of lag, members of the Coalition of the Willing in particular have, for a range of reasons and egged on by pointed comments from the UN, entered into what feels like an informal Olympic event to promise the biggest and best aid ever as they labour to keep up with the surge of popular feeling in their constituencies (Uren 2005; Herman 2005). For Australians, Anne Summers suggests, an underlying motive factor may be the opportunity to recover some of the humanitarian credentials lost in the last few years through our treatment of asylum seekers (Summers 2005). In the exceptional moment of humanitarianism engendered by the tsunami, Prime Minister and people engage in a ceremony of reciprocal reflection and, indeed, reconciliation: long term critics line up to praise the government's response to the crisis while politicians in turn extol the public's generosity (Carlton 2005). But more deep-seated anxieties are also in play: the need for recognition, the desire not only to do good, but to be acknowledged as *being* good, serves as a form of self-affirmation both in the present and *retrospectively*, as it is deployed to vindicate whitewashing narratives of national character and history.

7. In the face of the desire for Australia to be affirmed in the sense of its own goodness, Leak's cartoon sequence refracts back to Australians a different image of themselves and gestures towards the incommensurabilities that structure the view from 'the other side.' This task of refraction and reflection that requires Australians to confront the nature of their exchanges with the space of 'Asia' is undertaken in more sustained form in JV D'Cruz and William Steele's astute and thoughtful study *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia*. The *Borderlands* forum on this key work of cultural analysis appears at a time when Australian-Asian relations are in particular need of examination as, in a climate of nationalist self-

assertion in the face of perceived threats from racialised others within and without, the stage is set for a new phase of engagement and intervention in the region.

8. If the tsunami does mark, as frequently claimed, 'a defining moment' in Australia's relations with the neighbourhood, *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia* offers some indispensable insights for the way forward. Although the responses to this text published in this forum were mostly written before 26 December, they suggest directions for debates on renegotiating the neighbourhood and, at the very least, for better understanding the more egregious failures of the past.

A Backyard Blitz? Sovereignty, Security and Remodelling the Neighbourhood

This crisis will re-engage the U.S with Southeast Asia on a broader front than just the war on terrorism. That is a very good thing.

—Greg Sheridan, *The Australian*, 6 January 2005.

9. As the effects of the tsunami inevitably reconfigure the geopolitics of the region, it has not taken very long for the language of opportunity to emerge in commentary on the disaster (eg. Sheridan 2005; Ghosh and Muecke 2005). Trade, aid and security imperatives are now more closely and more openly entwined than before with the bid for power and hegemony in the region—as evidenced most clearly in Australia's aid deal for Aceh. The package, billed as the largest in the state's history, is characterised by a number of features of the Howard government's other recent interventions: for example, unilateralism and a side-stepping of the role of the U.N in favour of a partnership with the U.S (Sheridan's essay is accompanied by a representation of an Australian kangaroo and an American eagle advancing into a scene of devastation that closely resembles a war zone, inviting a fraught parallel with the war in Iraq). A second defining feature of the package is the insistence on monitoring mechanisms and professionalisation that will see a joint secretariat established and Australian government officials employed in the day-to-day administration of the aid, echoing the measures for 'good governance' recently set in place in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (DFAT 2003a; DFAT 2003b). Finally, as in the intervention in East Timor (see Kehi's discussion in this volume), the Indonesian aid package is couched in the rhetoric of benevolence and patronage rather than of reciprocity or moral imperative, with the same implicit (and sometimes not so implicit) expectation of gratitude and compliance in return.

10. These elements taken together amount to the emergence of a coherent and crafted policy that progressively attempts to remap the region through interlinked initiatives of security, nationbuilding and good neighbourliness (Perera 2005, forthcoming). The entry of the Australian military into the Solomon Islands (inevitably named 'Operation Helpem Fren') and East Timor were similarly cast as good neighbour exercises. In Adrian Vickers' words, in East Timor, 'The diggers were presented as a sporting team with guns' (2003, 108). Yet this benign image of the local champion stepping by to sort out the neighbourhood is not without its sinister aspects (D'Cruz and Steele, 304-16; Kehi, this volume). Sherene Razak's discussion of the role of peacekeepers in the New World Order of the 1990s provides an interesting framework for understanding these more recent peacebuilding interventions. Razak argues that in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, the role of peacekeepers such as the Canadians in Somalia:

is constructed as a colour line with civilized white nations standing on one side and uncivilized Third World countries on the other ... [T]he peacekeeper ... is entrusted with the task of sorting out the tribalisms and the warlords that have mysteriously sprung up in regions of the world where great evil dwells (Razak 2003, 7*).

11. Extending Razak's thesis, I would suggest that, in addition to the role of peacekeeping, the colourline between Australia and its neighbours is also enacted through the rhetoric of good governance and nationbuilding as the 'civilized white nations' are confronted with the chaos, inefficiency and corruption that dwell in the dark places of the region (Perera 2005, forthcoming). Like policing and peacekeeping, the rhetoric of good governance partakes in the 'mythologies' of bringing civilisation to these benighted locales. Following on from her discussion of the role of peacekeeping, Razak poses a question for her fellow Canadians:

When a nation announces itself as peacekeeper to the world and when its national subjects derive from this and related mythologies a sense of self, history and place ... what racial hierarchies underpin and are supported by such apparently innocent beliefs? (Razak, 2003, 6*).

12. Australia's engagements in nationbuilding and peacekeeping in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, and now, it would seem, in Aceh, beg a similar question. This is a question that D'Cruz and Steele's text, through its extended discussion of Australia's racial and spatial hierarchies, attends to in careful detail. Unlike much of the more familiar

discussion on Asian-Australian topics, D'Cruz and Steele's analysis foregrounds the *constitutive* relationship between Australian colonization of Indigenous land and its ambivalent claiming of space in the region (see also Perera 1995, 5-6). D'Cruz and Steele insist on the co-constitution and interdependence of 'inside' and 'outside', 'domestic' and 'regional', 'Asia' and 'Australia': each of these categories grounds and defines the possibility of the other.

13. Aileen Moreton-Robinson recently pointed out that it is the Australian state's appropriation of Aboriginal sovereignty that grounds and enables its hegemonic moves in the surrounding region (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Moreton-Robinson's insight highlights the interdependence of regional policies with a raft of recent moves that consolidate Anglo-Australian authority and reassert a colonizing 'white patriarchal sovereignty' in the face of Indigenous struggles for self-determination (Moreton-Robinson 2004). These moves include the dismantling of ATSIC; the refusal to entertain any discussion of a Treaty; the denial of the stolen generations and, underpinning all of the above, a concerted attack on those who dare question national mythologies of a decent and good colonizer.

14. The whitewashing of history and attempts to stifle Indigenous self-determination at home are inextricably connected to the extravagant demonstrations of Anglo-Australian sovereignty in response to the supposed threat presented to it by the arrival on our beaches of a few hundred asylum seekers. These assertions of sovereignty were enacted through attempts to bring national and regional space under differential forms of control – for example, by technologies of excision of various parts of Australia from the mainland and the creation of immigration detention camps as 'spaces of exception' that are not part of Australia (Perera 2002; Perera 2005, forthcoming). At the same time, as Prem Kumar Rajaram points out, the boarding of the *Tampa* by the SAS and the 'Pacific Solution' were 'performative acts of sovereignty' (Rajaram 2003, 292) that attempted to overwrite other spatiotemporalities and exercise hegemonic power over the region as a whole.

15. The Pacific, the Prime Minister has taken to declaring since 2001, is 'our patch' to cultivate, beautify and protect. Following the Kuta Beach bombings of 2002 it has become common to hear incredulous Australians protesting 'But Bali is our backyard!' (Perera 2005, forthcoming). These are both terms that suggest the parallel forms of ownership and overlordship being claimed over domestic and neighbourhood space. They reveal interlinked anxieties regarding the legitimacy of the Australian state in its backyard both 'at home' and in the region (Perera and Pugliese, 1997 and 1998; Rajaram, 2003, 290). D'Cruz and Steele's text engages precisely this paired dynamic in the self-constitution of Australian whiteness. As such it provides an important corrective to a 'whiteness studies' that tends to focus exclusively on domestic black/white relations (eg. Riggs 2004) overlooking the complex formations of whiteness in Australia and the interlocking racial and ethnic hierarchies and multiple spatialities that structure and produce it. These omissions indicate the extent of the conceptualising, theorising and historicising work that remains to be done in the unpacking of Australian whiteness.

A Necessary Balance?

16. *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia* is a big book in every sense of the word. It is sweepingly bold in conceptualisation, large-spirited in approach, and encompasses a vast theoretical and political range. The seemingly modest statement by the authors in the opening paragraph that the book 'provides for a necessary "balance"' (D'Cruz and Steele 2003, 7) is, characteristically, not to be taken at face value, for providing 'balance' involves no less than a reassessment of every aspect of Australia's history since colonization, and an unpacking of the 'formative elements of white Australia' (20). Reading *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia* is not an undertaking for the small-minded or the faint of spirit. It is a veritable gadfly of a book, or perhaps a big Australian blowfly that alights where it sees fit and is no respecter of privilege. As some critics have indicated, it is unsparing towards its targets but D'Cruz and Steele, it must be said, are no Old Testament prophets (Teo 2003); not brimstone, but a knowing, double-edged humour, reminiscent of Bhabha's 'sly civility' (Bhabha 1994, 93-101), characterises their barbs. And they are far too civilised to call down plagues on anyone.

17. Like all large projects, this one (as some contributions below do not hesitate to point out) can be contradictory, partial, untidy and unrepentantly opinionated. The text foregoes surface consistency and formal purity for greater ends, and confounds classification in disciplinary, theoretical or ideological terms. This quality is also its great strength: its most striking feature is its ability to think a number of seemingly disparate elements together. It combines a keen analysis of what Goldie Osuri describes as the 'ordinary orientalisms' of popular culture (Osuri, this volume) with an insight into their wider geopolitical context and the psychocultural landscape of Anglo-Australia.

18. The contributions in this forum were invited from a number of key scholars who were

asked to respond to *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia* in any way they chose (unfortunately, one of the original contributors, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, was compelled to withdraw from the project for personal reasons). The ten brief pieces that follow provide commentary on D'Cruz and Steele's work from a range of different specializations. Three pieces examine the theoretical bases of the study: the forum opens with Anthony Langlois's elegant framing of the text in relation to formations of liberalism and egalitarianism; Paul James pursues the implications of the 'concrete-abstract' psychocultural framework employed by the authors; and Tseen Khoo borrows a phrase from Ashis Nandy's Foreword to question D'Cruz and Steele's positioning of 'hybrid' identities—westernised Asians or Asians in Australia—in 'The Contagion Within'. Ouyang Yu's 'Far and Near' provides an implicit comment on this discussion in six beautiful lines that sum up the place of a 'Chinese-Australian'.

19. The next grouping of articles begins with Goldie Osuri's discussion of 'ordinary Australian orientalisms' and their continued circulation through contemporary cultural texts like the acclaimed film *Japanese Story* with its reworking of the orientalist inscriptions that D'Cruz and Steele identify in *Turtle Beach*. Joseph Camilleri assesses Australia's contemporary and future relations with Asia through a reevaluation of foreign policy from the 1960s to the 1990s. Wang Guanglin returns to the contemporary relevance of orientalism from a Chinese perspective, while Balthasar Kehi contributes an analysis of recent Australian policy towards East Timor that forensically details the limits of any claim for 'good neighbour' status. The forum ends with Prem Kumar Rajaram's unsettling meditation on the nature of ambivalence itself, and its reading of immigration detention camps as 'borderland spaces shadowing "Australia."' Finally, D'Cruz and Steele contribute a typically 'balanced' response to their critics up to the time of publication in 'Doing Cultural Pluralism in Australia, Against the Tide.'

20. The contributions included here are intended as a starting point for discussion as Australia seems set to embark on a new phase of engagement in the neighbourhood—an engagement deepened, and in some ways transformed, by the tsunami, but already well underway since at least 2001. In this short period multiple postures and identities have come into play—the Deputy Sheriff, the pragmatic trading partner, the peacebuilder, the good neighbour. In convening this *Borderlands* forum, my hope is that a new front has been opened for understanding the implications and possibilities of these and other positions adopted, discarded and reinvented in Australia's politics of proximity.

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