Uncovering the well springs of migrant women's agency: Connecting with Australian public infrastructure

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Olga Bursian
29 August 2006

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For Raimond Gaita (1999) humanity is not a noun but a verb and this thesis reflects the influence of a number of great human beings. I use the term *great* to refer to people who are all-rounders - intellectuals who are consistently life affirming in dealings with others – regardless of their *importance* or lack thereof. While intellect may be due largely to genetics, the latter attribute reflects a chosen personal praxis of generosity of spirit in line with espoused politics and values, requiring honest reflexivity. We act on the basis of our inner world of possibilities, and the journey to my PhD began with Professor Tony Vinson's first empowering contribution. Working with Concetta Benn and the ensuing years of friendship with Keith Benn also have most precious and envigorating. Conversations with my supervisor Jacques Boulet always kindled my passion for ideas and Jacques contributed most of all to this thesis. History will be very kind to you Jacques as you and Borderlands transform the world around you. Bob Pease was a generous colleague initially and a scholarly supervisor, going out of his way to link me with literature. I would have abandoned the project had it not been for Dominie Dale's insistence and insight. The

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Gaita, R 1999, *A Common Humanity*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.

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List of Acronyms

AMEP ..... Australian Migrant Education Program

CALD ..... Culturally & Linguistically Diverse backgrounds

DEST ..... Department of Education, Science & Technology

DIMYA ..... Department of Immigration and Indigenous Affairs

DSS ..... Department of Social Security

ELF ..... Eritrean Liberation Front

EPLF ..... Eritrean People's Liberation Front

EOC ..... Equal Opportunity Commission

HREOC Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission

NESB ..... Non-English-Speaking Background

TAFE ..... Technical, Adult & Further Education

UNHCR ..... United Nations High Commission on Refugees

VUT ..... Victoria University of Technology

"Uncovering the well springs of migrant women's agency: Connecting with Australian public infrastructure".

Abstract

Olga Bursian, RMIT University

The study sought to uncover the constitution of migrant women's agency as they rebuild their lives in Australia, and to explore how contact with any publicly funded services might influence the capacity to be self determining subjects. The thesis used a framework of lifeworld theories (Bourdieu, Schutz, Giddens), materialist, trans-national feminist and post colonial writings, and a methodological approach based on critical hermeneutics (Ricoeur), feminist standpoint and decolonising theories. Thirty in depth interviews were carried out with 6 women migrating from each of 5 regions: Vietnam, Lebanon, the Horn of Africa, the former Soviet Union and the Philippines. Australian based immigration literature constituted the third corner of triangulation.

The interviews were carried out through an exploration of themes format, eliciting data about the different ontological and epistemological assumptions of the cultures of origin. The findings revealed not only the women's remarkable tenacity and resilience as creative agents, but also the indispensability of Australia's publicly funded infrastructure or welfare state.

The women were mostly privileged in terms of class, education and affirming relationships with males. Nevertheless, their self determination depended on contact with universal public policies, programs and with local community services. The welfare state seems to be modernity's means for re-establishing human connectedness that is the crux of the human condition. Connecting with fellow Australians in friendships and neighbourliness was also important in resettlement.

Conclusions include a policy discussion in agreement with Australian and international scholars proposing that there is no alternative but for governments to invest in a welfare state for the civil societies and knowledge based economies of the 21st Century.