Chapter One

How things fall into place in one's mind: A heuristic journey

I discovered my own ethnicity rather late in life. My birth overseas was a mere detail floating at the margins of my twenty five years in Australia. Having arrived in a cultural context of the early sixties which was still maintaining the White Australia policy, one became a 'new Australian' and we embraced this with alacrity. My mother was born overseas but had never been to Russia. In 1983, at the age of sixty-one, during a trip to India, she happened to walk into the USSR Embassy, immediately obtained a visa - in contrast to the very cumbersome processes involved at the time in Australia - and landed on Russian soil to be greeted not by sinister repression but by a vibrant civil society where people embraced her warmly. As the French language expresses it, *J'ai levé une oreille* (*I pricked up one ear)* at this stage and followed, with mild interest, my mother's awakening to the living USSR, diametrically distinct from the knowledge shared and actively promulgated in the Western world about (then US President) Ronald Reagan's 'Evil Empire.'

From childhood, I had incorporated the hegemonic attitude that migrant women should not be taken as a source of authoritative knowledge, but I do have a very admirable mother. I continued life with my Australian identity until moving to Melbourne, where my family connected with the Russian Orthodox church community for the first time. I felt strangely at home in the Russian church, somehow in a primeval way. My identity shifts occurred by osmosis, without great cataclysms. I lived easily with the contradictions of feeling Russian, Australian, Italian, Indian and Aboriginal when in company, and felt as if I had no

nationality at all. I retained firm my Christian, socialist and feminist commitments in a church community, which traditionally associated the Labour movement with communism.

I really started to engage with my own ethnicity when working as a manager of a Migrant Resource Centre in the mid-nineties. I had often been impressed by the sheer creativity and genius in living life by the migrant women I had known, across all age groups. Having taught feminist theory to social work students for some time, I suspected that a study of migrant women might shed insights that go beyond the prevailing academic categories. I decided to research what enables or inhibits migrant women from being authors of their lives while undergoing the settlement process and how contact with any services affects their agency. Some time after beginning the literature search, I saw the link between my topic and my own personal experiences of migration and determined that my thesis was to also be an example of *heuristic research*. My theoretical explorations and the interviews with a group of thirty women fed into a three-way conversation in my mind, as I discovered and recognised fragments of my own journeys. In line with the principles of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990), I owe it to myself and to the reader to outline the intersection between my personal narrative and the narratives uncovered in this thesis.

In the early-sixties, I arrived in Sydney from Morocco at the age of 12 with my mother, brother and sister, without money, relatives or English. We were born stateless and remained so until becoming 'naturalised (sic) five years after our arrival here. The fact of having been born as a member of a third generation under refugee status did not dawn upon me until my middle age, late in the course of this thesis and after working with refugees and migrants for several years. I recall my mother saying at times during my childhood that we were refugees and my inner response always was *that this did not reflect at all how I felt, as a confident, ebullient child/person in the world*.

My mother's parents fled the Russian revolution as they belonged to the landed gentry who were being systematically executed. She grew up a refugee in Serbia, in a tight-knit Russian community. My father left the Soviet Union illegally during World War II with his mother and sister. He had lost his father, who belonged to a family with a long line of surgeons originating in Germany, who had been invited by Tsar Peter the Great to 'civilise' Russia, along with many other European professionals and artisans. My paternal grandfather was labelled an 'enemy of the people' and charged with plotting to assassinate Stalin, along with several million others alleged to have this criminal intent. My parents met and married in Germany during World War II and went to the Middle East as one of the minority destinations for Displaced Persons (DPs) from Slavic nations that were 'occupied' by the Soviet forces after that war. Hence, my birth was in most exotic (and a bit dangerous for blond-haired children) Morocco.

We were initially part of an extended family and community of Russian émigré aristocrats or just intelligent, cultured people who were unappreciated in the Soviet Union, as my father's family had been. Morocco was a French Protectorate and few Europeans crossed the racial divide by mixing socially with Moroccans. The official language was French. All administrative and education systems were French and in each of the six years of primary school, we began the year with history and other classes about 'our ancestors the Gauls'. French culture was the norm, the peak of civilisation, the sexy culture for a child to belong to.

There were significant numbers of Spanish people and some 'stray' Germans, Portuguese, Italians, Greeks. To be Russian was definitely foreign, particularly when we left Rabat, the capital, where there was a Russian church, always the centre of Russian community, and went to live in the lower Atlas Mountains. When my mother decided to leave my father, she took us and my maternal grandfather to live in Casablanca, then finally to a town near Marrakech. This was during the fifties and she was a white sole parent who spoke fluent Arabic and criss-crossed Morocco, going about her business. I grew up within a 'habitus'

featuring a hierarchy of cultural desirabilities and aversions, within what Bourdieu (1977), calls a 'field' of 'hybridity', according to post-colonial parlance (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994:1-33). From the earliest beginnings of my life, 'stranger' experiences were mine (Schutz, 1976).

Upon being advised by the World Council of Churches in 1963 that it was no longer safe for Europeans to live in Morocco, my mother decided to accept their offer of a passage to Australia. As the boat pulled out of the port of Casablanca, I allowed myself to mourn our two dogs we had to leave behind, but my regret about the beautiful world of Morocco was a brief, secret one, as that country was represented in aversive terms in the culture of white children.

In Sydney, we took things in our stride enthusiastically, as kids do. Besides, we *loved it* here, we *felt great* here. My mother was a professional in the medical field and, although she knew no English, waved away advice from Russian acquaintances she met during the war in Germany, *that all migrants had to work in factories*. She took herself to the Prince Alfred Hospital, a large teaching hospital in Sydney, and told the French-speaking Head of Pathology that she did not come to speak but to work. In the sixties, Australian generosity was such that her colleagues in the laboratory would take turns to teach her English during lunch breaks.

Upon commencing high school, my sister and I met Russian girls, whom we identified as a bit strange and unfriendly. Almost subliminally, we knew from day one, that it was best to say we were *French*, as *Russianness* was represented as inferior. *Frenchness* was and remains *cool* in the world (even in many former colonies except for the politically astute). I loved school, did well and had lots of friends but no really close ones. It never crossed my conscious mind to expect any hint of being treated differently. After all, we were Australian, felt Australian and I did not experience being different. It was the sixties. I liked only one Russian girl from my year, a plump girl with large, kind, green eyes and unfashionable plaits

and long skirts. I realised that I felt very comfortable with her and made overtures of friendship, which met with no real response.

I continued as part of the *mainstream*, working with and befriending mostly people from Anglophone Australian backgrounds. In my mid-thirties, my family had all discovered Russia in various ways, including my mother, who, with intellectual and personal integrity, set about investigating and revising the taboos and representations she had been brought up with as a royalist or White Russian.

Thirty years after leaving school, I ran into my old, green-eyed school friend. We connected quickly and enjoyed meaningful communication. I told her that I had wished we had become friends at school. She said that she had really liked me, but could not imagine that a popular, trendy girl like me would be interested in her, who was on the edge of the school scene and whose private life consisted of helping her parents, who had poor English, run a rather modest boarding house. She then mentioned that she liked me because I was like her, an outsider, different and that that is how I was perceived and treated by the girls at school. I was stunned…

Studying Social Work at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in the seventies, we were taught to focus on personal, inner growth and awareness as keys to effectiveness as facilitators of the growth of others. The leftist critiques of social work as an agency of social control were beginning to emerge but, in this first four-year Bachelor of Social Work course in the country, it was assumed by academics and students alike that the professional tools and knowledge were to be utilised for *emancipatory* purposes. I thought that I had got to know myself pretty well in the course of the ensuing 25 years and felt a fulfilled person. During the winter of 2001, I spent a day at a friend's place in the country, to do some quiet writing. I went for a walk in the delightful township. The golden late autumn light on the red roofs took me back to a feeling of beauty I had when I was five, in a country town with

similar architecture and golden wintry light. I was invaded by a feeling of deep grief. I sat in the garden and pondered about this strange sadness.

I realised that the particular colour of the light and of the roof tops connected me with the European architecture I enjoyed in the Middle-Atlas Mountains and with a feeling I experienced then living with my maternal grandfather. The grief I experienced was a mourning for the loss of our homeland, in the Don Valley in Russia, where my Cossack ancestors had lived for hundreds of years. I had picked up, as if by osmosis, the grief of my grandfather who escaped the revolution on foot with only one of his ten siblings, the others having been killed. He had never spoken about this grief but, as children do, I had absorbed intuitively his mourning of our lost family. I realised then, in 2001 in downtown Kyneton (Victoria), that I have actually never lived *at home*.

I started seeing connections between meanings, events, my quest for understanding the human condition and my professional and personal commitment to social justice:

Diaspora - home – naturalised – stateless – hybridity – pot-pourri…

- living a post-modern life from the beginning

- the agency of women inhabiting spaces of hybridity.

Some time after finishing the fieldwork for this thesis, I read Homi Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), he proposes that the 'in-between spaces' occupied by 'post-colonial subjects', closely related to Lacan's (1968:71-77) concept-in-movement of différance', are the terrains from which Spivak's (1987) 'subaltern voice' can articulate innovative identities and insights about the continuously transforming social world. Bhabha clinched for me the portent of this PhD thesis as the illuminations involved in heuristic research and the richness and thickness of the conversations between researcher, researched and theory, which, once started, continue in self propelling motion in my mind and the minds of others interested in such knowledge.

The nature of this research

I decided to provide a written account of a group of migrant women's own stories about how they dealt with the challenges of migration and how they went about rebuilding their lives, as expressed through a dialogue with me. I conducted thirty in-depth interviews with six women each from Vietnam, the Philippines, Russia, the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea and South Sudan) and Lebanon. I tried to understand how migrant women negotiate and experience their capacity to act during their settlement process and how contact with any aspect of the welfare state, including community services, affected their self-determination in building a life they defined as meaningful. The themes I explored began with their childhood and youth, the cultural milieu of a particular geographical space at a particular time in history, and what their aspirations and dreams as young women had been.

We then moved on to discuss the circumstances which led to their migration, maintaining the focus on how they felt about and responded to events, what they did, how they negotiated life and for what purpose. I asked them to talk about what enabled them to be the creators and authors of their lives and on the basis of what knowledge they managed to be so. I was interested in their physical survival as well as how they preserved coherence as integrated human beings through experiences of suffering and overcoming while moving intentionally towards the fulfilment of their aspirations. I asked them to describe their contact with public infrastructure and services, particularly in terms of the impact on their intentions and needs during settlement. We discussed what factors and dynamics bounded their creativity and authorship and what they felt they had achieved thus far. Finally, I asked them to speak about their current external material and social reality, their sense of identity and belonging, and to comment on existential questions at this time of their lives.

I hoped to listen to and report these women's accounts of their realities in a manner which I believe has not been well done in the social sciences. In this thesis I present what is essentially my hearing of each woman's dialogue with me. Clearly, who I am perceived to be

is a key aspect of what and how each woman chooses to or is able to express herself. I have aimed to produce a trustworthy account.

Reasons for undertaking the study

Increasingly profound irritation is the key motivator for this research. I have always found it irritating that my mother was treated in a patronising way by many Australian people, even in her professional field where she achieved more than her peers. I found it very irritating to hear the shifts in social and economic policy discourses emanating from New Right think-tanks from the mid-eighties onwards, taken up with gusto by the mass media, owned and controlled by a small number of people, then repeated like mantra by both sides of politics in preparation for the dismantling of the welfare and industrial relations systems which had provided reasonable protection for the Australian population, albeit modestly in comparison with European nations (Castles, 1998). I have been totally dismayed by the Australian public's seeming propensity for amnesia and ignorance of recent history. I found it irritating that, after almost two decades of destruction of public infrastructure, the world's highest rates of youth suicide are still greeted with perplexity by politicians and experts, and people began anti-youth-suicide fundraising collections, particularly at busy street intersections. I had developed full-blown rage when I discovered that, under the ghastliness of the attempted genocide of Indigenous Australians, is buried a culture of subjugated knowledges so humane and lofty that it has not seen the need to build itself monuments and accumulate hoards of possessions.

My research then became more concerned with uncovering knowledges that have been and continue to be subjugated, not only in academic and empirical research discourses but also more and more in Australian culture's definitions of the unquestionable grounds of reality here and in the rest of the world. The ethnocentrism which is part of any country's nationhood should be enabled to decrease by mass communications, ease of travel and by globalisation. At the same time, however, the advances of particularly Anglo-Saxon styled

capitalism into every aspect of the life world everywhere continue to severely constrict the spaces and parameters of public discourse.

Knowledge about the missing half of humanity began to emerge through feminist research, inherently altering the status of what was previously honoured as legitimate knowledge. Feminist standpoint epistemologies and research approaches have emphasised that knowledge about any social practices begins, in the first place, from the embodied locations of the author. Dorothy Smith (1990) devoted a great deal of her life's work to developing research methods which begin with the articulation of women's experiences of life in multifarious circumstances. She argues cogently that traditional social science objectifies social reality because it begins with (the assumption of) an Archimedean point located in a textually grounded and disembodied order (Smith, 1990:52). The power of the academies of philosophy, sociology and psychology and related disciplines begin with assigning the abstract concept an *a priori* ontology. *A priori* is defined as referring to modes of reasoning based on assumed concepts or knowledge that are independent of experience or empirical investigation (Moore 2004) and *ontology* refers to the branch of philosophy dealing with questions of being (Hamlyn 1987:65). Smith makes a powerful critique by stating that academic scholarship is often based on the reification of assumed ideas. The practice of advancing the social science then involves the building of conceptual edifices, applied as filters for investigating the world. Knowledge produced by media, government and research bodies, and/or other such independent experts is already ideologically structured and constitutes a virtual reality under the guise of objectivity.

I initially wanted show that migrant women have been represented in a distorted manner across the bulk of the social sciences. There is a great deal of writing about migrant women's deficits, their lack of resources and power, and frequent angry denouncements of injustices, but little material acquainting the reader with the creative, lived experiences of women who come to this country as strangers. The arts do afford women opportunities for self-expression

as authors, but social science has been inept at capturing and learning about the rich creative energies of women positioned as migrants.

As I engaged with the research, I discovered the vastness of the subjugation of information about how the majority of the people of this planet enact their social relations. The thesis took on a greater import as the increasingly brutal social and economic, industrial and now international policies of Australian governments over the last decade or two continued to impact destructively on human beings and on our ecology.

My two research questions

What are the sources of migrant women's agency as self determining subjects?

How does contact with Australia's publicly funded infrastructure influence migrant women's agency during their resettlement in Australia?

Research 'on' migrant women

Predicated on its presumed and putative value in contributing to the modernist project of ameliorating human life, social science has significantly shaped welfare regimes. Research and knowledges defined as legitimate by the propagators and keepers of a country's dominant discourse/s are usually operationalised into policies and programs which impact on people's lives, including the lives of migrants. This is the process Michel Foucault (1994) calls 'governmentality', where the 'mentality' of a nation state, in all its complexities, determines the framing or naming of the subjects to be governed and whose conduct is to be moulded towards certain ends. Authorities and agencies invoke particular forms of truth which are in reality expressions of beliefs and norms agreed to, in the first instance, by those who occupy positions of power to proclaim or enunciate a society's defined legitimate discourses (Foucault, 1994:201-222). It is important to uncover such knowledge, because people suffer when constricted by the imposition of 'foreign' definitions of their identities, worth and needs. Governmentality based on (chosen) ignorance impacts materially on

migrant women, because it determines the resources and opportunities made available to assist them in their struggle to build meaningful and fulfilling lives. An additional layer of struggle that is rarely acknowledged adequately by authorities is the oppressiveness of dominant representations and definitions about who the migrants are, how they should contribute to the new society, the spaces it is proper for them to inhabit and the manner in which their time should be spent. Many of these thoughts and concepts will be elaborated later in this thesis and build the inquisitive framework within which my conversations with the thirty women, and indeed my heuristic recollections about myself, are to be cast.

In the following sections of this introductory chapter, I intend to skim the surface of some of the available empirical and theoretical knowledges about migration and migrating women's experiences and how these have been cast within several epistemological and theoretical approaches. The intention of this brief overview is not – nor can it be, given the approach chosen for this thesis and which will be dealt with later – to offer a firm theoretical standpoint from which to derive hypotheses which will then subsequently be 'tested' and, if proven 'correct', added to the 'established knowledge'. Rather, the following briefly excerpted areas of investigation only intend to offer some windows into the complex world of migrant women, their predicaments and their 'issues' as they have been and continue to be, however partially, acknowledged by mostly Australian literature.

Overview of selected literature on migrant women

Most of the research on migration and migrant women relevant for this thesis falls into four categories:

Social work practice-based or clinically focused studies of the migration process
Australian empirical research on migrant women, issues, programs and activism
Multicultural theory and debates
Post-colonial literature

Social work practice-based or clinically focused studies of the migration process

Following Jean Martin's early work, *The Migrant Presence* (1978), David Cox's (1987; 1989) classic studies of the phases of the migration process were critically valuable in assisting social work practitioners to become aware of the levels of human experience involved in dislocation and resettlement. Such texts continue to be essential building blocks for eliciting and developing a sense of empathy amongst human service professionals, such as teachers, medical staff, child care workers, serving a multiethnic population (Hayes, 2004; Gonzales-Mena, 1997; Dominelli, 1997; Dominelli *et al*., 2001; McConnochie *et al*., 1988; Pettman, 1992; Thomson, 2006). More specialised, and probably more sophisticated, knowledge of this kind can be found in the literature about assisting refugees suffering from the trauma inflicted by the experiences of deprivation, violence or even torture prior to or in the course of their fleeing their home country. This theoretical and empirical material has been drawn upon by decision-makers in releasing funds and designing specific migrant support services. It seems like an indictment that possibly the fastest, but also finally stigmatising, route for a migrant to elicit a respectful response from fellow Australians is to allude to past trauma. People change their attitudes rapidly and the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (2006:55) has had an unparalleled legitimacy in securing substantial government funding during the decade 1996-2006, at a time in Australia when the last remnants of specialist migrant services were being 'consolidated' away and replaced through the bureaucratic cleverness of 'mainstreaming'. In 2005-2006 government funding was approximately $4 million. This process had, of course, begun much earlier as the policies inspired by so-called economic rationalism started to take hold of the imaginations of decision-makers of all political plumage (Castells, 2004; Jamrozik, 2005; Kalantzis *et al*., 1997; Kalantzis, 1995).

This body of literature, whilst substantial, is rather contextual to my inquiry and, in that sense, will allow readers to gain a fuller picture of the issues discussed in further chapters of the thesis. I also hope that with the inclusion of this material, however suggestively it has

been rendered here, will allow my findings to be better inserted into the practice theories of the several 'helping professions' referred to previously.

Australian empirical research on migrant women, issues, programs and activism

In 1982, 300 women from non-English-speaking (NES) countries gathered in an historical national meeting to put their issues on the public agenda. Women's lobby groups emerged, such as the Immigrant Women's Speak Out Association and the Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia (ANESBWA). Over the next 15 years or so, such advocacy groups achieved significant gains in educating decision-makers and service providers as well as slowly changing public perceptions about the new arrivals. By the early nineties, State and Commonwealth Governments' funding programs formally included items for migrant women and although there has been much criticism of the shallowness of many such government responses, to achieve or even attempt a change in the public agenda of an essentially conservative country remains a respectable feat.

A volume of rigorous empirical research covering more than two decades was produced through government funded dedicated institutes, such as the Centre for Multicultural Studies at the University of Wollongong and the Bureau of Immigration, Multiculturalism and Population Research (BIMPR). These centres were abruptly or gradually disbanded when the conservative Liberal/National Party Coalition Government under John Howard took office in 1996. I was fortunate to be able to access the library of the BIMPR just a few weeks before its final demise. Some universities continue research into multicultural issues, mostly reliant on project funding, with the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and the Workplace Studies Centre at Victoria University (VU) active amongst others.

Much of the empirical evidence collected for these investigations was based on traditional quantitative surveys of statistical trends as well as some qualitative methods, and was

critical in elucidating key aspects of women's experiences in Australia and the obstacles they face. The research helped in constituting the objective justification for government support of ethno-specific services and I will summarise this literature below. It is, however, clearly dated as the late nineties signified the cessation of more or less systematic Australian research about immigration except when occurring coincidentally in the context of demographic research or issue oriented research where it appears under the rubric of 'special groups' or some such denominator.

Employment, education and training

Labour market experiences of women are related to birthplace and proficiency in the English language; for example, recent immigrants from English-speaking Asian countries, such as India and Hong Kong, have often higher mobility than Australian-born women of non-English speaking backgrounds. For women from NES cultural backgrounds, the evidence consistently shows negative labour market experiences and concentrations in low status, unpleasant, dangerous and unrewarding jobs. For example, in 1981, 48.9% of Yugoslav-born, 42.2 % of Greek-born and 33.3 % of Lebanese-born women worked as production workers and labourers, while only 6.1 % of Australian-born and 7.9% of British-born women were employed in these categories (Collins, 1991:86). Such disparities continue to be reported (ABS & BIMPR, 1992), leading to frequent conclusions that NES women are the most oppressed workers in Australia (except for Indigenous Australian women). They have lower earnings, work longer hours, are subject to racist and sexual harassment and surveillance that constitutes contravention of industrial laws and they are poorly serviced by unions. Employment issues and discrimination at work continued to be chosen as the chief priority for action by migrant women from the seventies onwards (Alcorso, 1991). Even in white-collar work, women reported a continued lack of confidence, leading to recommendations for affirmative action programs needing to be designed and monitored by the women themselves (Barnett, 1991). They are the first and most vulnerable casualties of industry restructuring processes which began with the adoption of neo-liberal economics in the late

1970s (Ackland & Williams, 1992). They are least likely to benefit from retraining opportunities, promotions and union protection (Jamrozik *et al*., 1987; Stromback *et al*., 1992; McAllister, 1991; Fincher *et al*., in Cope, 1992). Indeed, existing retraining provisions are inappropriate for retrenched migrant women, as they are not based on a thorough understanding of trainees' cultural frameworks and material living circumstances (Bertone, 1996).

Studies of small business enterprises have shown that migrant women from NES backgrounds are much more likely to be self-employed. Small family businesses usually translate into punishing hours and unregulated working conditions and many women were found to be unaware of existing supports and available information (Lampugnani & Holton, 1991; Kermond *et al*., 1991; Strahan & Luscombe, 1991). Migrant women's levels of economic, political, social and cultural vulnerability continue to be the prerequisites for taking up employment as outworkers at home under sweatshop working conditions within the clothing industry. Concerted union activism to protect such outworkers began rather late in the nineties in Melbourne and in Australia in general. There is anecdotal evidence about recent documentation of the abusive illegal working conditions endured by refugees, illegal migrants, asylum seekers and even sponsored skilled migrants whose family arrangements have broken down.

An extensive empirical enquiry, based on feminist principles and examining Department of Immigration data, concluded that the disadvantages suffered by migrant women are institutionally constructed, rather than residing in women's personal attributes (Fincher, Foster & Wilmot, 1994). Fincher *et al*. uncovered a systematic linking of women's entry to Australia with their marital status, a dynamic which inhibits skills recognition and prescribes and proscribes the spaces women can inhabit. The authors concluded that such a state intervention into the lives of women should be a cause for public concern.

Much labour market research recommended the critical importance of infrastructure, such as appropriate training, child care, family friendly employment conditions, recognition of overseas qualifications, affirmative action policies and transport, as central for migrant women's capacity to participate socially and economically (Cass *et al*., 1992; Iredale, 1996; Issaris *et al*., 1986). Analysts also concur, however, that the above strategies are not sufficient to alleviate or altogether counteract successfully the power embedded in institutions operating on a mono-cultural basis (Fincher *et al*., 1994).

Of particular interest were the industrial actions in particular industries and taken by migrant women from the late seventies up to the nineties. In NSW, during almost a decade, through the 'Jobs for Women Campaign', Anglo-Australian and immigrant women participated in a protracted campaign which included legal action against BHP (the largest mining company in Australia – now multinational) through industrial and Equal Opportunity systems and concluded in a 1986 victory with $1.24 million in compensation. In the context of economic recessions linked to world fluctuations, the capacity of the women to resist public pressure to abandon strike action which was often cast as taking jobs away from fathers, is noteworthy. Similar high-profile industrial action, with traditional picketing and strikes, led to other gains for migrant women and men (Collins, 1991; Lever-Tracy & Quinlan, 1988). Although unions bypassed migrant women due to sexist assumptions about their passivity, when women did participate in public activities outside of work and home, they were found to be much more militant and outspoken than their Australian-born counterparts and than the unions themselves (Bertone, 1992).

As Verity Burgman (2000:14) concluded in her overview of the achievements of three social movements in the late twentieth century, significant gains are not made through respectable means, but through disrespectful and confrontational strategies.

Health

Although migrant women tend to be healthier than their Australian-born counterparts (being 33% less likely to die between the ages of 15-74), the evidence consistently shows that the longer they reside in Australia, the higher the deterioration along health indicators of occupational injury, reproductive issues and mental and emotional health (Gonzales, 1996). Newly arrived women such as Filipinas, Cambodians and Lebanese tend to have very low rates of non-normal deliveries and ante-natal and post-partum complications. On the other hand, although only making up one eighth of the workforce in the early nineties, they represented a quarter of all women admitted to hospital for occupational injuries. Much of such occupational ill-health is unreported and uncompensated (Alcorso & Schofield, 1992; Jakubowicz & Morrissey, 1980). Predictably, 73% of refugees had experienced significant degrees of trauma and 43% continued to suffer ongoing serious mental illness. In general, migrant women do not have significantly higher rates of psychiatric conditions, which may be related to significant under-reporting. They did score significantly higher, however, on 'mental disorders – ill defined' criteria, such as anxiety and depression, low self esteem, with frequency doubling for the southern European women who had been here the longest. The 1992 *National NESB Women's Health Strategy Report* (Alcorso & Schofield 1992) concluded that the causes reside in lack of family supports, caring for disabled relatives or children, poor English language skills limiting participation in Australian public life, not understanding the mass media, lack of essential services such as transport, housing in low socio-economic neighbourhoods, and discrimination at work and by landlords. The stresses of migration also entail the loss of authority in their traditional parental expertise and a higher likelihood of domestic violence (Alcorso & Schofield, 1992; Gonzales, 1996).

Family life and children

The majority of migrant children are cared for by their relatives and a study by the Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia (ANESBWA) revealed that 75% of women were not able to utilise their preferred arrangements, such as

formal child care. Women caring for children are excluded from the opportunity to learn English, compounding their isolation from resources, support and information (ANESBWA, 1994:15). A nationally funded study of child care for immigrant families chaired by Anna Yeatman (1988), pointed out that culturally relevant child care services depend on public investment in a climate of policy predictability, because access and equity measures are usually thought to be not cost-effective. Needs-based planning is most likely to be the framework leading to public investment (Yeatman, 1988).

Early research about migrant families (Castles *et al.*, 1986) was followed by an extensive project into the disadvantages of migrant children by the *Brotherhood of St Laurence Life Chances Longitudinal Study* (Taylor & McDonald, 1992). It was found that 54% of children from NESB lived in families with incomes below the poverty line, compared to 18% of other immigrant families and 8% of Australian-born families. Mothers were hampered by inadequate housing and a lack of social support with young children, had less access to help from grandparents, were less likely to have a friend to turn to for advice and were less likely to have attended prenatal and post natal medical care. All had access to the Maternal and Child Health Nursing Service, however, which is universal in Victoria. To prevent these children's long term social exclusion, Taylor and McDonald (1992) argued for policies to ensure adequate housing, employment, income support and targeting of immigrant families by support services. Parents were often unable to support their children's education, not only due to language barriers, but also due to inexperience with an education system based on different assumptions than those operating in their countries of origin. The impacts of such systematic difficulties were tracked in the more recent publications of this study (Gilley & Taylor, 1995).

Domestic violence against overseas born women attained public prominence through the activist work of Filipina advocacy groups, such as the Centre for Philippine Concerns and Advocacy (CPCA), which exposed the abusive practices underpinning serial sponsorship of (usually) Asian women (Marginson, 1996; Iredale *et al.*, 1992). This evidence led to the

enactment of a domestic violence provision in the Migration Regulations. In 1996, representatives of the NSW Immigrant Women's Speak Out Association of NSW referred to the enormous benefit flowing from this legal initiative, enabling women without permanent residency in violent domestic circumstances to be granted citizenship protection, rather than facing deportation when the partnership broke down (Hales *et al*., 1996).

Domestic violence against migrant women shares many of the features of that against Australian-born victims and some factors, such as gender, religious and family discourses from the country of origin, may exacerbate the stresses of migration. A study by Easteal (1996) concluded that the greatest risk is a woman's isolation and incapacity to participate in the broader community. Commissioned by the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, Easteal (1996) pointed to the double disadvantage that immigration imposes on women because of government reluctance to fund necessary infrastructure, such as accessible child care and settlement services.

Legal issues

According to leading feminist lawyers such as the recently deceased Justice Elizabeth Evatt, in a landmark Law Reform Commission (1994) publication *Equality Before the Law: Justice for Women,* the legal system's response to migrant women is influenced by how they came to Australia. Racist and sexist stereotypes influence what a magistrate allows in the courtroom and attempts at culturally sensitive responses are based on patriarchal stereotypes about the culture in question (Scutt, 1992).

Migrant women and politics

Migrant women's activism continued throughout the eighties and nineties, with areas prioritised for attention in 1993 being education, employment and training, participation in socio-political arenas, and representation in government and policy areas (Vasta, 1993:3). Much of the focus by writers and advocates has been on the development and funding of ethno-specific services. As mentioned at the beginning of this overview, significant gains

were made in eliciting funding from governments for ethno-specific services, such as child care (Fakhri, 1996), health education in workplaces (Women in Industry and Community Health in Melbourne), Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and a range of local initiatives (Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) 1992).

NESB women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making positions in private enterprise, the public sector and in trade unions (Bertone, 1992; Castles, 1995:22; Chan, 1996). Whilst the dangers of incorporation of dissent are debated in activist circles, the critique is that taking up senior roles within government entails participation in the reconfiguring of conflict and injustice into mystifying discourses of 'partnership' and 'consultation' or 'collaboration' (Parella, 1993), and thus leads to collusion with the parameters set by those whose interest is to silence protest (Kalantzis, 1989). Incorporation also serves to divide the ranks of 'educated' and unskilled migrant women. The entire enterprise obscures the continuing and worsening material conditions of the majority of migrant women (Parella, 1993). Vasta (1993:17), however, argues that multiculturalism's contradictions still offer women a platform from which to operate politically and culturally.

Conclusion

I prefaced this overview of the Australian empirical research upon migrant women issues, programs and activism to the late 1990s with an acknowledgement of its datedness. Cosmetic though much of the practical implementation of multiculturalism may have been, the research constitutes a solid and indeed essential beginning. Often in spite of intentions to the contrary, much of the research has been based on a *deficit model* and only captured how far migrants strayed from the norms of the (often unquestionably and unquestioned) normal and good life, which was Australian or which derived from English-speaking cultures. My aim is to re-orient my investigation and start from the paradigm within which each of the women participating in the study operates, thus uncovering unexpected and strength-based ways of being human.

Multicultural theory and debates

The location of migrant women can be understood through the lenses of citizenship and multiculturalism theories. Bryan Turner (1993:2) defines citizenship as:

> … that set of practices (juridical, political, economic and cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society and which, as a consequence, shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups.

This conceptualisation focuses on the *social constructedness* of citizenship through political struggles. Citizenship is thus centrally about who has the power to define it. Social citizenship emerged from working class struggles during 19th century and is particularly contested because, as Turner (1993:1-18) expresses it, social rights bite into property rights. What is at stake is the legitimacy of claims made upon the state and the latter's corresponding perception of its obligation to provide for citizens (Salvaris, 1995; Turner, 1993).

Migrant women were located in post-war immigration policies as the necessary source towards civilising migrant men, as males from nations other than northern Europe were believed to have virility stronger than is afforded by decency. This is illustrated in Anne Summers' celebrated historical work (2002) on Australian constructions of women as either "damned whores or God's police". Summers (2002:338) notes that:

> women's status and their allocated functions were always to be tied to national needs…Women have been treated as a group – a group defined purely on grounds of gender – and rarely have had more than a single vocation imposed upon them.

She also quotes Henry Parkes, speaking at the NSW Legislative Assembly on 14 August 1866, as saying:

> Our business being to colonise the country, there was only one way to do this – by spreading over it all the associations and connections of family life (Summers, 2002:337).

Women and men from the British Isles were attracted by propaganda tailored to creating a capitalist society which offers opportunities for people from modest class backgrounds to engage in commercial activities and enjoy the fruits of flourishing industry. The working class could acquire a plot of land, marry (there was an oversupply of women in Britain at that time and marriage was unaffordable for many) as well as have three meals a day in sunshine (Summers, 2002:351). Immigrant women from NESB were brought in as wives, mothers and daughters (Vasta, 1993:1) as post war mass immigration stressed security and prosperity. Migrant women themselves, however, needed civilising in order to be fit for working as servants in British-born households (Vasta, 1993:1). It was assumed that they could not have any skills that would match the quality standards of public or private British-born life, a racist assumption that has proved to be the most stubborn barrier to participation for migrant citizens till today.

The language of 'minority groups' is still applied to people from NESB (Brett 2005), although over a quarter of Australia's population has been born in a NES country and approximately 70% of the population either derives from a NES country or has parents who do. In either case, the women occupy the lower rungs of perceptions of social status. Brilliantly argued, *Mistaken Identity* (Castles *et al*., 1990) shows that the foregoing evidence is not accidental but an illustration of carefully crafted policies by governments from the earliest invasion and attempted genocide of Indigenous Australians. Foundations of nation-building in the Australian way included racist exclusions, denial of personhood to coloured people, and the admission of people considered inferior to the British only in order to undertake dirty and dangerous jobs required by a growing economy. Differences were erased through the policy of assimilation, presuming that the migrants could be raised to the civilisational peak embodied by antipodean British stock.

Castles *et al*. (1990) in turn, argue that multiculturalism was adopted in Australia largely due to the embarrassment felt during increasing contact with our neighbours during the 1960s. Although the Whitlam government put forward a social democratic vision of

multiculturalism (albeit without accompanying resources), the Liberal government of Malcolm Fraser, for the sake of 'cohesion', developed and funded a multiculturalism identified as assigning respect to our NES population. The increasingly militant exposure of the systematic material and symbolic injustices migrants were subjected to were reframed as 'needs', requiring appropriate support services that were best provided by ethno-specific organisations. Thus, potentially explosive social conflict was diverted to a scramble for meagre funds, a jostling by ethnic leaders for positions as close as possible to the halls of real power and prestige, and a general self-congratulatory celebration of the colourfulness of the different peoples who live in this bountiful land (Castles *et al*., 1990).

Feminists have shown that citizenship claims upon the state are accorded to men as citizen-workers within the more lucrative occupationally-based welfare and to women as citizen mothers, attracting meagre benefits (Shaver, 1993; Orloff, 1991; Showstack-Sassoon, 1987). Migrant women's claims upon the welfare state are even more tenuous, as they have less capacity and confidence to operate outside the private sphere of the home. Despite the critique that women's reliance on government income support reinforces gender divisions, analysts also point to the facilitating impact of accessing the welfare state and its opportunities (Gordon, 1990; Cass *et al*., 1992; Shaver, 1993:10; Orloff, 1991), whilst Wendy Weeks (cited in McMahon *et al*., 2000:11) tracks the advances made by Australian feminists in using legislation to cement equal opportunity principles.

Writings emerged about the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity in systematically oppressing and barring immigrant women from access and participation (de Lepervanche, 1992; Bottomley & de Lepervanche, 1991; Kalantzis 1989). Stephen Castles (1995:ii-iii, 15-19, 29) points to the intact and unchallengeable political, constitutional, legal and administrative frameworks based on mono-cultural assumptions, concluding that multiculturalism has been stalled by the lack of translation of official endorsement of cultural diversity into fundamental reforms of economic, social and political structures. The evidence is that migrant women are losers in their location in the economic, political, legal and discursive

arrangements in Australia (Kalantzis, 1989:8-11). The capacity to define difference continues to be the most intractable exercise of racist oppression, reconstructing the politics of identity and difference into what Eva Cox (1993:39) calls the politics of categories. Migrants in Australia in 2005 still belong to 'special needs' groups or disadvantaged minorities, despite their numerical prominence in the population, and migrant women who attain senior positions in government too often only have limited powers.

Jock Collin's (1991) historical analysis *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land* deconstructed the contradictory constitution of Australian multiculturalism as one of deep-seated racism, tolerance and friendship amongst individuals at the community level, and noted the absence of extremes of racist violence. By 2005, however, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and xenophobia were firmly in place and transforming our cultural landscape with an exponential growth in instances of racist violence linked to world events, expressed through the defacing or burning of churches, shops and other property as well as individual abuse (HREOC, 2003; Poynting, 2004). A decade after Collins' work, dramatic intervention by the Coalition government seems to have successfully recreated a white and 'fair' Australian imaginary which was thought to have already perished in the 1960s (Jakubowicz, 2002).

Abdelmalek Sayad's (2004) *The Suffering of the Immigrant* uses a similar approach to mine in focusing on narratives by Algerian immigrants in France. A collaborator of Pierre Bourdieu, his theoretical approach to elucidating life-worlds will be a useful backdrop for this work. In general, theoretical explorations of multiculturalism draw on a wide range of political, social and philosophical theories and will be useful to illuminate the narratives in the thesis (for example, Parekh, 2000). Some of these works adopt a partisan aim of building theory for a transformative multiculturalism, rather than a consumerist or pluralist, 'touristic' approach (Willett, 1998:2) and I feel that the present work should be understood as part of that emerging tradition.

Postcolonial literature

Within this final group of writings, I am inspired by Australian Indigenous authors, using literary or visual arts genres (Tucker, 1983; Peris, 2003; Coffey *et al*., 1993; Harding *et al*., 2002; Purcell, 2002; Huggins & Huggins, 1994). I also include writings, from non-European or non-English speaking countries and cultures or, as they are increasingly identifying themselves, from the South or Third World (Ye, 2004; Chetjer, 2004; Kaiwa & Zemke-White, 2004; Atiya, 1888; Anzaldua, 1990; Minh-ha, 1999). The authors may not necessarily identify as belonging to the feminist camp, with the latter obviously dependent on the construction of feminism in particular locations. This body of knowledge, of theoretical or of artistic genres, is usually identified as post- or past- or contra-colonial, as it begins by privileging the vantage point of the colonised subjects and as it is an expression of the solidarian project of undoing the legacy of colonialism, including uncovering the historically and presently subjugated knowledges.

The early attention to non-Western women was couched invariably within a binary assumption of white women as the normal, enlightened referent against whom the necessarily oppressed and often passive 'coloured sisters' could be empathised and commiserated with and assisted towards their liberation. For example, even for those white women who did not belong to the middle- or upper-classes, the division between public and private is emptied of its feminist content, as not only have working class and coloured women always engaged in employment - often as servants for the wealthier white women - but they have, in addition, also lived under the state surveillance of their family lives (Rowbotham, 1992; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Such binary constructions are colonial acts, including the assumption that patriarchy is necessarily more virulent in the non-Western world than it is 'at home'.

Feminism has undergone a metamorphosis, moving from a time narrated by hooks (1989), reminiscing about her days as a university student, when she confronted a solid refusal from

white feminists to hear the voices of Afro-American women (hooks 1989). It was as recently as 1989 that the prominent US-based National Organisation for Women (NOW) realised awkwardly that the monumentally successful March for Women's Lives was attended by a sea of white faces. Anthologies, such as *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances* (Albrecht & Brewer, 1990), documented emerging forms of activism dealing with the full implications of the admission of these previously silenced voices. The early literature critiquing western feminism was a debate between feminists in academia and those in political movements. Much of it was rather sparse on substantive content of interest to me: that is, non-Western women's ways of being and enacting their humaneness.

The startlingly rich and evocative works of Minh-ha (1988, 1989,1999), Gloria Anzaldua and Rigoberta Menchu (1984) and multi-genre artistic expressions by Australian Indigenous women (Moffatt, 1989, 1993) signified a paradigmatic shift. A mass of writings in the narrative genre has been produced about women's lives. A small sample includes work from Egypt (Atiya, 1988), Brazil (Patai, 1988), First Nation Americans (Sonneborn, 1998) and Australian locations, such as the edited *Alter/Asians* (Ang *et al*., 2000) and *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions* (Perera, 1995).

Feminism has transformed itself by engaging with the significance of hearing women, such as Ien Ang (1995), proclaim about the incommensurability of the ontological and epistemological bases from which women across the planet operate. Collections, such as *Gender and Institutions* edited by Gatens and Mackinnon (1998) and the very influential *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* edited by Gunew and Yeatman (1993) are further examples of such work. Hannah Papanek offers some strategies for US scholars who have not deconstructed their own consciousness by facing the challenge that "the world is not like us" (Papanek, 1988; Daniels, 1987:18-19). In undertaking cross-cultural research, economists Leghorn and Parker (1981:4, 6) quickly noted that there was a need for new sources of data, namely accessing the knowledges women from all over the world have always expressed and passed on to younger generations, often orally. This provides the rationale for a

scholarly inquiry into epistemology, namely addressing the theories underpinning knowledge (Moore 2004), as the starting point of my research.

Emerging trans-national and post-colonial feminist writings seem to be most promising in informing the leap that I am looking for, to inform pedagogy for emancipatory social work and other human services practice (Mohanty, 2003:106-107). From the Combahee River Collective's (1983) *A Black Feminist Statement*, Angela Davis' (1983) explosive *Women, Race and Class* to feminist theorists, such as Enloe, 1990; Sassen, 1988; Sen and Grown, 1987; and Lazreg, 1988, these writings have all been developing new and exciting analytical tools and frameworks which I will freely use to interpret the experiences of the thirty women I have had the privilege of talking to and conversing with as well my own.

The approach I find most useful is exemplified by Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential essay "Under Western Eyes", published originally in 1987 and revised in Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* (2003:17-42). It is necessary to theorise women's experiences from various corners of the planet at historical junctures, revealing the complexities of their agency and their interventions in creating a history, that is not only theirs, but also that of humankind in its various realisations. Together, their experiences reveal generalised and complex patterns of material and symbolic dominations. The epistemologies and ontologies of those who bear the brunt of most injustice are privileged because they represent the most valid sources for the development of knowledge about the human condition and the multilayered and systematic operation of institutional power. This, obviously, is quite different to post-modernist ways of framing diversity and multiculturalism as pluralism and/or relativism (Mohanty, 2003:231). As Mohanty (2003:191) observes:

> So 'race' or 'Asianness' or 'brownness' is not embodied in me, but a history of colonialism, racism, sexism, as well as of privilege (class and status), is involved in my relation to white people as well as people of colour.

Moya's (1998) *Learning from Experience: Politics, Epistemology and Chicana/o Identity* and other work collected in Moya & Hames-Garcia (2000), Sandoval's (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Smith's (1999) *Decolonising Methodologies* and Reid's *Negotiating Racialised Identities* (2004) are other examples of such realist trans-national theory.

It is within this emerging tradition that I would see my own investigation being located. Hopefully, it will contribute to filling what I see as a gap in Australian theorising about migrant women's experiences.

The thesis architecture

This introductory chapter, which served to set the overall scene of the present investigation, will be followed by Chapter Two, which discusses the epistemological and methodological foundations of the thesis. Chapter Three will present the theoretical-conceptual framework, based on the life-world and action theories of Alfred Schutz (1970, 1972, 1976), Anthony Giddens (1984, 1991) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1988; 1990; 1999) and additional theoretical contributions from work on gender and colonial relations of domination. The thirty women's narratives will unfold across the several subsequent chapters, with Chapter Four dealing with their diverse worlds of childhood and youth. Chapter Five will follow the women as they respond to the disruptions which lead them to arrive in Australia. Chapter Six traces how they lived and struggled through the myriad issues during the years of their settlement and what they had achieved at the time of the interviews will be covered in Chapter Seven.

Within these chapters, a three way conversation between the women's narratives, established theory and my experiences and insights will occur, very much in the tradition of the narrative approach to research. The final Chapter Eight will draw together the insights, theoretical reflections and my heuristic journey and it will conclude a policy discussion. I hope my work may have applications to professional education for human services workers,

activists and others working or living in close proximity to the 'female other' which, indeed, includes all of us.