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The borderscape of detention: media depictions of the denizens of Woomera

Ron Hoenig

MnM Working Paper No 7

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Abstract

Border anxieties pervade discussions of refugees, asylum seekers and the defence of white privilege. Many scholars (see for example Burke 2002; Mares 2002; Tascón 2002; Macken-Horarik 2003; Green 2004; Hodge and O'Carroll 2006; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Soguk 2007) have explored the significance of borderlands/borderscapes in shaping and defending the white western self. The defence of a 'vulnerable' white subject includes the demonisation of the asylum seeker other and a deep fear of the erosion of 'patriarchal white sovereignty' (Moreton-Robinson 2004). In print news texts about lip sewing by asylum seekers, a common theme is the location of Woomera and other detention centres as 'states of exception' (Agamben 2005) or part of 'not-Australia'. Using Kristeva's notion of the 'abject' I explore the 'dark' place of Woomera and its (voluntary and involuntary) residents in news texts and the role such texts play in constituting what Rutherford (2000) called the 'good' white Australian subject. I explore how news texts depict 'Woomera' to marginalise both external and internal Others – asylum seekers and white residents – and find that such symbols of abjection reveal the extent to which news representations continue to involve white projections, desires and imaginings of the cultural and class Other.

¹ Ron Hoenig is a PhD student in journalism and cultural studies. His thesis focuses on the Australian media's depiction of lip sewing by asylum seekers. This paper was presented at the 'ReOrienting the World: Decolonial Horizons' international symposium at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, 22–23 March 2011. He would like to acknowledge that this paper was developed on the traditional lands of the Kurna people and would like to thank three anonymous referees for their very helpful suggestions for redrafting this paper. Any flaws remain his own responsibility.

Introduction

Border anxieties pervade discussions of refugees, asylum seekers and the defence of white privilege. Many scholars (see for example Burke 2002; Mares 2002; Tascón 2002; Macken-Horarik 2003; Green 2004; Hodge and O'Carroll 2006; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Soguk 2007) have explored the significance of borderlands/borderscapes in shaping and defending the white western self. A significant part of creating and maintaining a border is the power to define what lies on the 'other' side as alien. For Jon Stratton, 'The border functions as a marker of a decisive fracture producing "us" and "them", "self" and "Other"' (2004: 224). For Rajaram and Grundy-Warr borders are invested with affective value, as 'barriers to threats or pollution' (2007: xxxi). But they also see the border as a place of multiple possibilities, 'a zone between states where the territorial resolutions of being and the laws that prop them up collapse. It is a zone where the multiplicity and chaos of the universal and the discomfits and possibilities of the body intrude' (2007: x).

For, as Nevzat Soguk stated, 'Borders have lives of their own' (2007: 283). Rajaram and Grundy-Warr attributed the term 'borderscapes' to Perera, who wrote of the multiplicity of interactions and crossings, of fluidities of 'multiple resistances, challenges and counterclaims' as 'allegiances and loyalties are consolidated and challenged, as border spaces are reconfigured by discourses and technologies, of securitization and the assertion of heterogeneous sovereignties' (Perera 2007: 206). *Borderscapes* include the territory that is and is not 'ours'. In this paper I use print media discourses about those on the 'borderscapes' of detention to reflect on issues of belonging. I particularly focus on exploring dimensions of abjection (Kristeva 1991, 1993; Kristeva and Oliver 1997) that operate in news discourses about one place of detention, the desert town of Woomera, its immigration detention centre, and its inhabitants on both sides of the borderlands.

The 'carceral archipelago' in not-Australia

In 1991, the Keating Labor government established the first immigration reception and processing centre for asylum seekers at Port Hedland (Brennan 2003: 34). Mandatory detention for unauthorised arrivals was introduced under the *Migration Amendment Act 1992*.

The immigration minister Gerry Hand's rationale was that detention would facilitate processing of refugee claims, prevent de facto migration and save the cost of locating people in the community. On 1 September 1994, the *Migration Reform Act 1992* introduced mandatory detention for all 'unlawful non-citizens', that is for everyone without a valid visa (Phillips and Millbank 2007). The brutally utilitarian Curtin, Woomera and other immigration reception centres were designed to send a message both to other would-be refugees and to the anxious Australian public that their inhabitants had not yet reached 'Australia'. The decision to locate detention centres away from population centres was grounded both in practicalities and *realpolitik* – they were defunct or mothballed military installations and were relatively easy to establish as quasi-prisons for detained asylum seekers. Further, their remote location would indeed make it more difficult for these asylum seekers to obtain legal representation or media attention (Brennan 2003: 34) However, it can also be argued that the location of these desert stations of what Pugliese (2009) called the 'carceral archipelago' was designed to establish psychic distance for the Australian population from what Hage (1996) called the 'ethnic caging' of mandatory detention. As early as 1992, Bernard Cohen saw the remote newly established detention centres for onshore asylum seekers as 'not really in Australia': the asylum seekers 'are in the empty ungoverned spaces of their bodies, I guess, confined within not-Australia' (cited in Perera 2002: 2).

Woomera a site of detention: not just any little town in the desert

This analysis is part of my wider research on print media depiction of lip sewing by asylum seekers at Curtin and Woomera detention centres in 2000 and 2002 respectively. Here I draw on news articles written at the height of the hunger strike and lip sewing episode at Woomera in January 2002 to explore the perspective that Woomera and other detention centres located in Australia were 'states of exception' (Agamben 2005) and not part of Australia, or rather part of 'not-Australia'. Using lenses provided by the Bulgarian-born French thinker Julia Kristeva and, in general, critical race and whiteness studies, I examine the stories news texts tell us about the Australian 'self' and the asylum-seeker Other and how the text is performative in constructing particular Australian identities and confirming 'belonging'. I suggest these texts document *and* contribute to a process by which both the unwilling

residents of the detention centre and the residents of the township of Woomera are represented as living on the borderlands between Australia and the carceral archipelago of Australia's immigration detention system.

In the lead paragraph of her article 'Some locals give a sign to the guests they just don't want', Ahwan (2002) referred to Woomera as a 'tiny town surrounded by the red dirt of the Australian outback'. While Woomera was then indeed a small outback town of some 300–350 inhabitants (Garnaut, Johnson and Freestone 2002: 19), it has a particular history. Among the reasons Woomera was selected as the site for an immigration detention centre are its splendid isolation (500 kilometres from Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia) and its established facilities, rooted in its military/security past. As Perera noted, Woomera 'can be located in a series of interlocking economies that link it to the global military and prison complex as well as to a long history of domestic dispossession' (2002).

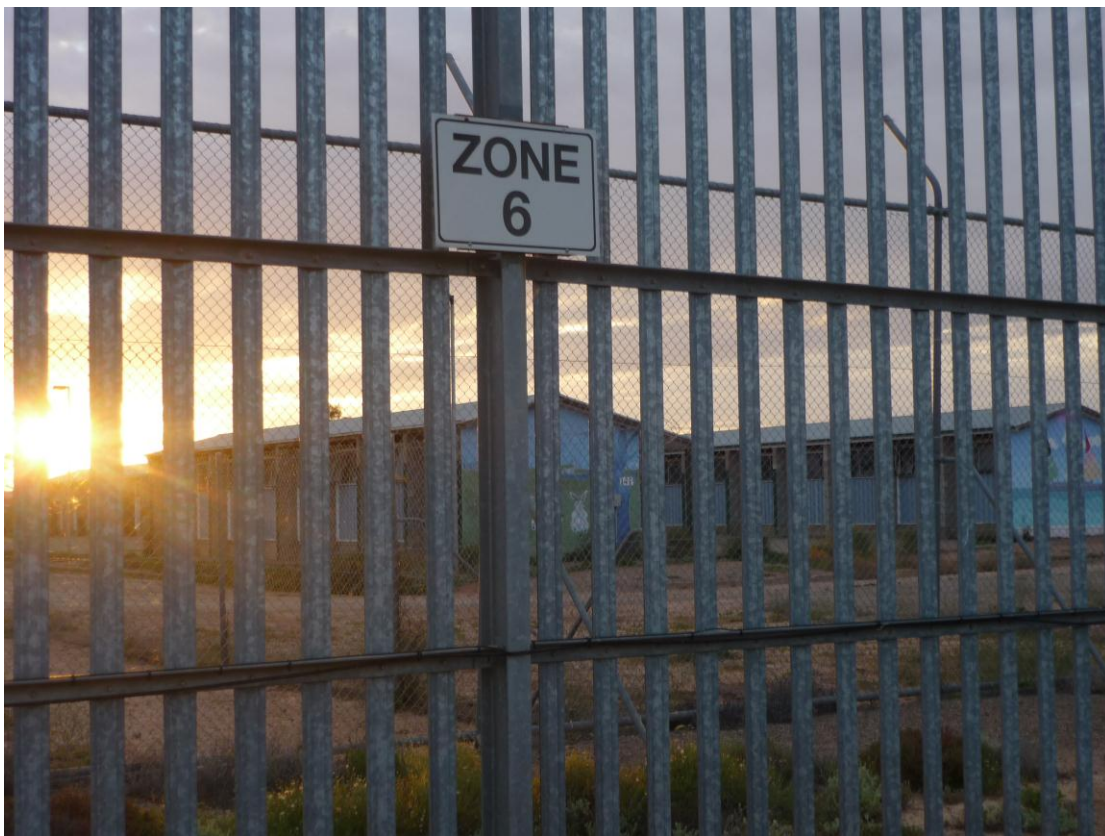
The Woomera Prohibited Area (WPA), which the village of Woomera serves, was 270,000 square kilometres in area. Though usually characterised as desert, it is the traditional country of the Kokotha people. In the 1950s, in the context of the Cold War, Woomera was set aside for military and space testing, including the British atomic testing at Maralinga and Emu Field (Perera 2002). The initial purpose was for Britain to build its rocket defence systems. Later the WPA was a base for the European Launcher Development Organisation (ELDO), a partnership between France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain and Australia to test the Europa rocket. Woomera's activities reflected Australia's historic shift from one powerful white diasporic friend to another. Between 1960 and 1970 the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) operated a deep space tracking station, Nurrungar, at Island Lagoon, located about 25 km south of Woomera (Rigby 2004). Even since the closure of Nurrungar the area continues to be used for military testing by the Australian, US and Singapore defence forces. At the time of writing it is again experiencing new life as a testing range for military and aerospace companies (Perera 2002; Debelle 2009).

Woomera Village was surveyed by swashbuckling surveyor Len Beadell,² working for the Australian military (Beadell 2007), and constructed in 1947 as a restricted-entry town to provide accommodation for scientists, defence technicians and their families (Garnaut et al 2002). Up to its de-restriction in 1972, all Woomera Village residents had to sign the *Official Secrets Act* (M Hoenig, personal communication, 2009). In the 1960s the town, with its security-conscious inhabitants, had a population of more than 6000. Woomera Village had a deeply and intricately stratified social geography, with areas segregated to scientists, ranking officers, married defence personnel and single men's quarters. West Woomera, where the Woomera detention centre was located up to its closure in 2003, was originally established as the non-military bachelors' quarters (M Hoenig, personal communication, 2009). This military scientific history made Woomera the immigration detention centre with the best established facilities for the purpose of detaining large groups of asylum seekers in a remote and inhospitable location.

The Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre was commissioned in November 1999 at the disused Woomera West Construction Camp as increasing numbers of asylum seekers exceeded the available places at Curtin and Port Hedland in north-western Australia. Originally designed for 400 people, by April 2000 the detention centre held nearly 1500 detainees (Whitmont 2003) in accommodation that included only three washing machines and five toilets. In October 2001, following the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the United States and its allies attacked the Taliban government in Afghanistan and by December of that year, the Taliban were routed and a new government was installed (Maley 2010). The government claimed these changed political circumstances contributed to a slowdown in processing claims for refugee status by Afghan refugees at Woomera (Taylor, Kremmer and Kingston 2002). However *The Age* later revealed that detainees had been informed that processing of visas was being suspended in response to riots in December

² Beadell is a controversial figure. He is commemorated in multiple locations in the town centre of Woomera including a board on the wall of the Woomera Heritage Centre on which he is recognised as 'the last of the true Australian explorers' (Rigby 2008). On the other hand, Beadell, the 'nuclear age nomad', can also be seen as a coloniser, bringing Cold War military and space technology into territory that belongs to the traditional owners, the Kokotha and Pitjantjatjara people (see Gorman 2005; Vincent 2007). His role in the 'evacuation' of Aboriginal people for the Maralinga atomic test is discussed in Vincent (2007).

(Jackson 2002). In January 2002, long-term detainees at Woomera, many of them Afghans, fearing that their asylum claims would never be heard, dramatised their plight using lip sewing, a hunger strike and lying in graves they dug for themselves in the baking sun. The event dominated the front pages of the nation's newspapers. Representatives of the major media flocked to Woomera to report on the dramatic showdown between the asylum-seeker detainees and the federal government.



The Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, now known as Camp Rapier, August 2010. Photo by the author.

The abject and national identity

Kristeva has written about the psychological need of the developing subject for something that is neither object nor subject as part of its process of self-definition. The abject is neither subject nor object. It is not absolutely 'other'; rather it is 'something rejected from which we

cannot part' (Kristeva and Oliver 1997: 232). For Kristeva, the 'abject' is part of the process of self-definition of the developing subject by determining what does and does not constitute its physical and psychological selfhood. For Kristeva, too, there is a borderscape. On the very boundary of the skin and the orifices – eyes, ears, nose, lips, anus, vagina – there is 'disputed' territory between the me and not-me. Like bodily functions and products that suddenly become disgusting and literally repulsive when they are external to the body, that which lies outside is contrasted with that which is inside, but it remains both of it and not of it. In Kristeva's view what causes abjection is 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva and Oliver 1997: 232).

In *Nations without nationalism* (1993) Kristeva drew out the implications of the abject for the development of national identity. She recognised the internal other-ness that drives the formation of national identity and the rejection of the despised external other. Kristeva saw an intimate connection between that which we reject in 'the other' and the 'strangeness within ourselves':

only a thorough investigation of our remarkable relationship with both the *other* and *strangeness within ourselves* can lead people to give up hunting for the scapegoat outside their groups, a search that allows them to withdraw into their own 'sanctum' thus purified: is not the worship of one's 'very own', of which the 'national' is the collective configuration, the *common denominator* that we imagine we have as 'our own' precisely, along with other 'own and proper' people like us? (Kristeva 1993: 50–51)

In contemporary Australia and in many parts of the modern western industrialised world, asylum seeking, the 'unauthorised' transgression of borders by those who have no state to protect them, stimulates the process of 'hunting the scapegoat' and an intensified expression of national belonging. As Tyler said, 'the identification of the figure of the asylum seeker is increasingly constitutive of public articulation of national and ethnic belonging': 'It is through the production of the imaginary figure of the asylum seeker as an "illegal" threat to "our"

sense of national belonging that “we” learn to desire and demand “their” exclusion’ (2006: 189).

The detention centre in not-Australia

Agamben (2005) described the state of exception as the political state of emergency in which the sovereign power – emperor, king or elected president or prime minister – suspends the normative order and takes on dictatorial or quasi-dictatorial powers to counter a lethal threat to the political order. Agamben located the contemporary and permanent out-of-law political state in the institution of the camp.

The camp is the space which is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule. In the camp, the state of exception ... is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order. (Agamben 1998: 168–169)

Drawing on Agamben’s theoretical analyses of the camp, Perera (2002), Pugliese (2009) and Palombo (2009) have shown how contemporary refugee detention centres recapitulate historic states of exception such as internment camps, missions and plantations. In these sites, Indigenous peoples and non-British Australians were segregated to spaces that were ‘not-(White) Australia’. Palombo argued that the camp ‘absolves the white diasporic subject from its obligations to other political lives, or even the political rights of “communities”, and by so doing immunizes that subject from the scrutiny of its ownership of Australia’ (2009: 614). I suggest that both the Woomera residents and the journalists themselves are involved in that process of ‘immunisation’ through boundary production. For the Woomera residents on the Australian side of the ‘border’, differentiating themselves from the detainees and constructing themselves as the ‘own and proper’ inhabitants of their territory is part of staking a claim to white ownership through the narrative of patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004). For some journalists, constructing themselves as part of a cosmopolitan, multicultural consensus, the residents of Woomera represent an opportunistic and heartless step back into an abjected assimilationist past.

Woomera: a town surrounded

As part of the narrative of articles by Lauren Ahwan and Cynthia Banham, Woomera, a tiny, fragile locality with a history as a ‘secret’ town (Banham 2002) is invaded as much by the unblinking eye of the media as by the unwanted asylum seekers. In Ahwan’s *Advertiser* article ‘Some locals give a sign to the guests they just don’t want’ (2002), the lead is a description of a ragged banner fluttering from a road sign, saying ‘Go home. Tell a friend – no visas’. While presumably intended for asylum seekers released into the community, in both Ahwan’s article and Cynthia Banham’s (2002) *Age* piece it is interpreted as possibly including journalists. Banham explicitly pointed out the ambiguity: ‘Yesterday,’ she wrote, ‘journalists could not work out if the sign was meant for the detainees or themselves’ (Banham 2002).

Structurally, Ahwan located her story about Woomera Village’s residents in the binary between the ‘international’ – the worldwide media focus on the protest in the detention centre – and the local: ‘their tiny town surrounded by the red dirt of the Australian outback’ (Ahwan 2002). This global–local binary helps to characterise the town as fragile and vulnerable. The metaphor is echoed in the private–public binary in her characterisation of the townspeople: ‘Publicly, they refuse to comment on the issue that has brought international recognition to their tiny town surrounded by the red dirt of the Australian outback ... Privately, they hate the attention which the detention centre has brought’ (Ahwan 2002).

At the primary, overt level, ‘international recognition’ contrasts the cosmopolitan urban news flow and what is figured as the rural insularity of the town. There is however a less overt binary in the phrase ‘surrounded by the red dirt of the Australian outback’. This contrasts the homeliness of ‘tiny town’ and its ‘surrounded-ness’ by the red dirt. The metaphor suggests a threat from the very territory in which the town is located. Woomera is thus figured as a tiny and fragile ‘island of civilisation’ (Loughlin 1949, cited in Garnaut et al 2002) in a deeply threatening ‘emptiness’.³ This connects to oft-rehearsed discourses of vulnerability deployed

³ This trope of Woomera as an island of civilised modernity framed against the ‘emptiness’ of the desert is common and long-lived. In 1949 John Loughlin used it in a press release for the Department of Information. In 2002, Garnaut

in locating Australia in a hostile sea in a culturally hostile region (Stratton 2007; Perera 2009).

Woomera may thus be read as a synecdoche of the white Australian nation: isolated, fearful of invasion, surrounded by what it perceives to be hostile territory or an even more threatening emptiness. In this representation there is an implicit racialisation of the residents as white and the detainees as a non-white Other. While never spoken, this underlies the distinctions the residents and the journalists construct through the discursive resources they deploy. For example, in Ahwan's representation of the town as 'surrounded' by dirt there are resonances of frontier outposts of whiteness in a desert of alien but more specifically Aboriginal otherness. On the borderlands between Australia and not-Australia, Woomera is figured as white territory in danger of being ceded to an engulfing otherness, subsuming both the occluded former Indigenous inhabitants and the asylum-seeker Other. The underlying theme is the determination of who 'belongs'. Belonging appears to be a zero-sum game. In the self-avowedly racist past, those considered not to belong were of 'racially inferior' backgrounds. With the formal disappearance of that rough clarity, the notion of belonging has become much more contested, even if, as Jon Stratton (2009) said, racialisation is still a primary method of marking not-belonging.

But the outback discourse also bears other mythic baggage. According to Jon Stratton, in Australia's cultural imaginary the outback is constructed as part of the beach-desert binary, which characterises the coast as lawful and the outback as 'uncivilised, indeed lawless and empty' (2009: 79). There is an evil in the empty heart of the Australian outback that expresses itself here in silence and silencing. In the current case that evil is in part represented by the detention centre. Silence and being silenced is absolutely the crux of the lip sewing within the detention centre. The detainees have chosen to enact and embody *systemic* silencing by sewing their lips. But Ahwan and Banham referred to other silences imposed on the residents of the

et al cited *News* journalist B Brownrigg's article 'Woomera – land of hush-hush' (February 1952) to conclude their paper on the planning of the village as 'a model residential environment amidst a "rolling waste of red dust, saltbush and gibbers"' (Garnaut et al 2002: 20). To most white observers, the desert is 'waste' land. To the Kokotha, it is a lost home (see Vincent 2007).

town and silences they impose upon themselves. Banham referred to the residents' unwillingness to talk, 'some citing confidentiality agreements and others "because it's a small town"' (2002). In another article, Woomera's security-conscious culture of secrecy was allied to the obsession with confidentiality of the private managers of the detention centre, Australian Correctional Management (ACM) (Kremmer 2002b). Service station owner David Kirby underlined the silence demanded by a new industrial player in Woomera, telling Ahwan that ACM staff refuse to patronise his service station 'because I talk to the media' (Ahwan 2002).

Woomera as 'not-Australia'?

References to Woomera as a place of abjection were common in the news texts of the period. Famously, Senator Natasha Stott-Despoja described Woomera as a 'hell-hole' (Kremmer 2002c). The boundary between the Australian norm and this island of exception is discursively enforced. Metaphors of exclusion and enclosure such as gates, fences and cages are common. Banham detailed Woomera's geography of exclusion and incarceration:

The town centre is a few minutes from the detention centre, which is surrounded by a barbed wire fence and beyond that a gate designed it appears to keep the media out (the gate extends only for 100 metres, but journalists have been trained not to venture past it). (Banham 2002)

The detention centre is 'something rejected from which we cannot part' (Kristeva and Oliver 1997: 232). Leaving detention at Woomera is sometimes described in news texts in terms of rebirth into a new world (Kremmer 2002a). In *The Age* news story 'Shut down Woomera' (Forbes and Kremmer 2002), the word Woomera is almost an incantation, a symbol of all that is wrong with the system of immigration detention. The immigration minister's advisory group called for 'the closure of the Woomera detention centre' and other measures to help avert a 'human tragedy of unknowable proportions' (Forbes and Kremmer 2002). However through the story, while it is clear that the authors were referring to the detention centre, the word 'Woomera' was sometimes used by itself to denote a space of tragedy: 'the crisis at

Woomera could not be allowed to deteriorate further'. The discursive boundary between the detention centre and the town begins to slip. It is as if the border is no longer between the detention centre and Australia. It is now shifting and, at least metaphorically, the border that excludes the dis-order appears to exclude all of Woomera.

Woomera is located in a borderscape that is both 'Australia' and 'not-Australia'. In her article 'Township speaks out against the media' (2002), Banham's lead focuses on tropes of communication, introducing the 'no visa' banner. She paralleled 'stories of sewn lips' and the banner as 'messages' of exclusion and protest. The lip sewing speaks of the asylum seekers' control of the most limited 'territory', their bodies, and the use of an embodied metaphor of silencing to send a powerful message. The banner speaks in a discourse of exclusion, claiming and controlling territory for its 'own and proper' rightful owners. Banham drew both implicit and explicit parallels between the invasion of the media and the asylum seekers: both in their different ways foreign, both 'descend', unwelcome, both 'camped' uninvited in the territory claimed by the white residents of Woomera. Both, in the eyes of the Woomera residents, at least as she depicted them, an unwelcome intrusion into their space.

For at least some Woomera residents, it is the media that *produces* the lip sewing. They say it is media 'animalism' that has created and provoked the lip sewing: 'If the media was not there, they say, people would be eating, so many mouths would not have been sewn together, so many detainees would not be trying to kill themselves' (Banham 2002).

At one level, this sentiment can be read as a compassionate response to the spate of self-harm, a concern for the fate of the asylum seekers and their children. At another, it is an explicit rejection of asylum seekers' pain as a publicity stunt. Moreover, it marks out the territorial lines between the residents and the outsiders – both the media and the asylum seekers – as invaders and corrupters. It is the media that have provoked the monstrous acts and brought the normality of Woomera (both the detention centre and the town itself) into question. As David Kirby said to Ahwan, 'Whoever heard of a detention centre before they heard about Woomera?' (Ahwan 2002).

Asylum seekers are also abjected through infantilisation of their issues and actions. One Woomera resident explicitly compared asylum seekers to ‘a group of noisy children’. ‘It looks like they’re getting their own way now’, the resident said, minimising the asylum seekers’ plight by defining their response to their incarceration as an issue of childish bad behaviour. Here, the speaker sought to diminish any responsibility of the Australian state and the Australian community in producing or resolving the asylum seekers’ distress. Implicitly, too, it marks the Woomera resident as a speaker for Australia and therefore ‘adult’ and stoically quiet in the face of severe provocation. In a sense it highlights the view that ‘their story is not being told’. Government ministers and conservative commentators also deployed the trope of asylum seekers as unruly or wilful children who need to be taught lessons to modify their ‘behaviour’. Moreover, since the residents and the asylum seekers share the same spatial location, this rhetorical strategy serves to produce a boundary between the residents and the asylum seekers, reinforcing the residents’ belonging to and participation in Australia, while at the same time defining the asylum seekers’ intrusion and their actions as belonging to ‘not-Australia’.

Woomera overboard?

In a reference to the ‘children overboard’ story, when asylum seekers were falsely accused of having thrown their children into the water in 2001, Hage (2003) adverted to certain marginalised white communities as under threat of being ‘thrown overboard’. He held that certain elements in the Australian populace found it plausible that asylum seeker parents might have thrown their children overboard because they, too, felt that the neo-liberal globalised capitalist consensus represented by the new economic order had, in a sense, already thrown *them* ‘overboard’. Hage referred to those excluded from the cosmopolitan consensus as ‘refugees of the interior’ and described the process of the internal ‘global reject’ turning against the external ‘global reject’ (Hage 2003: 21). In Hage’s view, up to the mid-1960s, merely being ‘from an Anglo-Celtic background was enough to make one feel that one had the capital to maximise both homely and governmental belonging as an innate right’ (Hage 1998: 189). The cultural ascendancy of the white cosmopolitan multiculturalists in the 1980s meant

that social capital, and even the fantasy of governmental belonging, was being taken away from the rural and working-class poor who identified with the assimilationist paradigm of the 1950s. Their sense of being rightfully, unchallengeably ‘at home’ in their society was being depleted through ‘a devaluing of Anglo-ness in the field of Whiteness in the favour of cosmopolitan Whiteness’ (Hage 1998: 183).

It is at least partly a sense of being ‘thrown overboard’ by the Australian media and the consensus that reverberates in the quotations of the Woomera residents and their anger at the bad publicity for their town. However, it is important to understand the specific nature of Woomera. For all its isolation, Woomera is neither a rural nor an impoverished town. It is a place of people transplanted for a purpose. Since its inception Woomera has been a Department of Defence town. People who are not working in the town or whose partners are not working in the town cannot live there. There is no private property. All property is rented from the Department of Defence (Collins Anderson Management 2002: 12). The population includes mine workers and their families working in Roxby Downs some 72 kilometres from Woomera but accommodated in Woomera, defence trials personnel, staff at the hospital and the school and other community services infrastructure. For all its ‘homeliness’, Woomera Village is a place of internal immigrants.

The village and the detention centre

The Woomera residents draw a distinction between the village and the detention centre – a distinction that journalists, operating from the perspective of the metropolis, sometimes do not make: ‘The village is not the detention centre, Woomera isn’t that bad and I really get upset when people say “imagine those poor people out there”, and I choose to live here’, said one (Banham 2002).

It is interesting that the resident identified him or herself as ‘choosing’ to live in Woomera. But one can only choose to live in Woomera by choosing to work there. There are no permanent residents in the town. According to Christine Garnaut, a very small number of residents have lived longer than 10 years in Woomera, but most are ‘posted’ there for a

specific period of time (C Garnaut, personal communication, 2011). But that is not how the residents or the media represent them. The impression one gains from the stories is of a threatened town with an established rural population. But, in the same way that white belonging in Australia can be said to be built on the shifting sands of a desert, so the narrative of invasion that permeates these articles requires a figure of a fragile but permanent population that is also invaded.

Media representatives, too, need to draw boundaries – both the professional ones implicit in their role as reporters and, I suggest, political, social and perhaps ideological ones between themselves and the residents. For example Ahwan’s description of Kirby as ‘boast[ing] tattoos over most of his body and face’ is the only physical description of her sources she gave. Does this tattooing bear other inflections of meaning? The description resonates with the dystopic view of the outback and its men, in particular, that informs the cultural imaginary through films such as Ted Kotcheff’s 1971 adaptation of Kenneth Cook’s book *Wake in fright* and more recently, Greg McLean’s *Wolf Creek* (2005). The threat of evil in the desert represented by murderous white men is part of a cultural imaginary that subverts the dominant myths of mateship and represents outback Australia in the words of film reviewer Paul Byrnes as ‘one of the inner circles of hell, a place of mad, murderous men and dull-eyed sluttish women’ (Byrnes 2009). For the cosmopolitan middle class of the coast, it is a nightmarish vision of the colonising vigilante male world of the assimilationist era of the 1950s (Stratton 2009).

The discursive framing of the articles by Ahwan and Banham gives voice to the expression of anger, confusion and dislocation of the village residents, but also enacts a distinction between the residents, figured as long-term rural inhabitants, and the metropolitan educated elites to which the journalists themselves belong. In one article (Kremmer 2002b), the peculiar nature of Woomera as a town with a long-ingrained culture of silence was recognised and critiqued. In an interesting mixture of narratives, the people of Woomera were dismissed as opportunists benefitting from the existence of the detention centre. ‘All the people of Woomera know or want to know is that the prison has bought them freedom. Subsidised

water means their sprinklers can continue dousing their electric-green lawns at high noon' (Kremmer 2002b) and they are condemned for the town's security culture. The narrative is of a Disneyesque 'whitebread' 'model community' with all mod cons that occupies a frontier position in its obsession with secrecy and the pathological lack of empathy: 'They shrug off the frequent suicide attempts by detainees as acts of spoilt children. The use of ambulances to rush protesters who have mutilated themselves to hospital is, they say, a waste of public money' (Kremmer 2002b).

The frontier theme signalled obliquely in 'high noon' is underlined in the metaphor of the people of Woomera 'circling the wagons' and the theme of silent desert evil is picked up in a remarkable comparison between Woomera in the desert and the urban detention centres:

But the cult of secrecy enveloping Woomera is unlike anything witnessed at urban detention centres such as Villawood and Maribyrnong. At Woomera, you sense that anything could happen, and the nation might be left none the wiser. Its special status provides a dangerous immunity. (Kremmer 2002b)

What is fascinating and disturbing here is less the reversal of the empathy that Kremmer shows for the asylum seekers in other articles (Kremmer 2002a), but more the framing of his critique of the residents of Woomera as pathological and opportunistic, very similar narratives to those the Howard government chose to highlight in its discourse about asylum seekers.

Conclusions

There are thus a number of levels of representation in articles about Woomera Village: the representation of the asylum seekers by the journalists, and within that the separate representation of the asylum seekers by the village residents, as rendered by the journalists. At still another level, there is a representation of the media by Woomera residents and of the residents by the journalists. The abject provides a useful tool to analyse these separate representations. The key theme is the claim for recognition of belonging. Many Australians

may demonise asylum seekers as the racialised other, a potential invader who does not belong, in a word, the abject. But Woomera residents, because of their proximity to the detention centre and its troubled and troublesome detainees, are reminded that they are on the borderscape of the abjected detention system and that the centre and its demonised inhabitants are both part and not-part of their tiny community. It therefore becomes crucial to the residents' view of themselves as 'good' Australians and for Woomera's self-definition as a 'good' Australian place to live to differentiate the village from the detention centre and the residents from the detainees. In the struggle to continue to belong to Australia, despite their location on the borderlands, and to remain unsullied by the stain of living next to this abjected place, their belonging must be underlined and the scapegoated other must be discursively expelled into the desert.

The response of the people of Woomera is a microcosm of the Australian community's abjection both of the asylum seekers and of the detention system in the carceral archipelago, the not-Australia in the desert. It is made even more significant by the fact that the residents of Woomera are also immigrants and transient, not merely in the same sense that the vast majority of Australia's population is 'immigrant' and not in any long-term sense 'Indigenous' but in the sense that Woomera's peculiar nature ensures that the white residents themselves are transients. Their belonging to the town is not rooted in home ownership or long residence in this location; it is purely through a generalised sense of white belonging to Australia that they have ownership of their location. Their claim to belonging in Woomera is a claim to generalised white Australian sovereignty.

It is here that the representation of the Woomera townspeople by the 'invading' journalists takes on even greater importance. As Hage (1996) pointed out, the detention centre continues to remain a place of 'ethnic caging'. While the Australian people may attempt to immunise themselves by constructing a 'state of exception' in the detention centres, the system remains a psychic threat confronting the 'good' Australian with the human cost of the structure of mandatory detention. The national psyche views the system with such revulsion that it wishes desperately to expel it from beyond the nation's borders. Thus we see in 2011 both major

political parties locked in furious agreement that offshore processing of all asylum seekers is in some ill-defined way part of the ‘national interest’ (see for example Franklin 2011). The desire to avert our eyes from the repulsive spectacle that is constructed in our name and in the name of protection of our borders is so strong that even the initial processing of asylum seekers must be removed from the very soil of Australia.

In this context, the response of the journalists to the people of Woomera becomes more explicable. Images of exclusion, of gates and bars and razor wire, emphasise the separation of the detention centre both from the village of Woomera and from Australia itself. While clearly these symbols of imprisonment are there to contain the asylum seekers, they also represent a material metaphor of caging which allows us not to acknowledge the abject as part of us. A deal of psychic energy must go into the process of abjection, so that the village can remain pure and unsullied by the stain of the detention centre. The risk is that, in some sense, the village will become part of not-Australia.

On the borderscape of Australia and not-Australia, Woomera is often figured as white territory in danger of being ceded to an engulfing otherness, subsuming both the occluded former Indigenous inhabitants and the asylum-seeker Other. The underlying theme in the representation of asylum seekers and the residents of Woomera is the determination of who ‘belongs’. Belonging appears to be a zero-sum game. In the self-avowedly racist past, those considered not to belong were of ‘racially inferior’ backgrounds. With the formal disappearance of that rough clarity reflected in the White Australia Policy, the notion of belonging has become much more contested, even if, as Jon Stratton (2009) said, racialisation is still a primary method of marking not-belonging. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson said:

The existence of those who are defined as truly human requires the presence of others who are considered less human. The development of the white person’s identity requires that they be defined against other ‘less than human’ beings whose presence enables and reinforces their superiority. (2004: 76)

Asylum seekers are figured in various texts as ‘not belonging’ in Australia. But some Australian residents may also not belong. From certain populist perspectives, this involves the exclusion of Indigenous people or migrants from certain racialised backgrounds. But from the perspective of what Hage called the white cosmopolitan multiculturalists, those ‘internal refugees’ whose views and attitudes put them at odds with the prevailing cosmopolitan multicultural ethos may also be discursively ‘thrown overboard’. Among them are the white residents of Woomera. Perched on the borderland of media interest and stained by their propinquity to the abjected human tragedy that Australia’s asylum seeker policies have made inevitable, they too may be made to appear to be monsters on the borderlands.

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