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Threshold procedures: 'Boat people' in South Florida and Western Australian

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In the past two years points of arrival have become points of departure very quickly for me. Yet in both cities where I have lived and worked, Perth, Western Australia and Miami, Florida, my rapid transit has been shadowed by a slower and more perilous form of human passage. Despite their manifest cultural, geographical and demographic differences, both of these places have become destinations for a new group of dispossessed travellers, known since the end of the Vietnam war as 'boat people'. Who are these asylum-seekers? What does their desire to gain entry reveal of the political, economic and cultural anxieties of the cities they drift toward? I have pondered these questions in my journeys, but the answers have escaped me. Perhaps it was the jet-lag. Yes, I'm sure it was the jet-lag. For in this world of airplane food (the chicken or the beef) and global information flows, these 'boat people' are left perpetually 'at sea'. Too close to 'home' to be mere refugees, their name alone denies them a place to stand, grounds for appeal. On land, they become 'detainees', inmates of camps (Guantanamo, Port Hedland) that feed their images to Reuters and CNN. But unlike images of landlocked refugees (Rwandans, Somalis), these representations do not coax viewers to send food and medicine, to sponsor a child in return. For the most part, they encourage emotions of fear and exclusion. In both Australia and the U.S., there is widespread support for the forced repatriation of 'boat people'—for sending them 'back' to China or Vietnam, Haiti or Cuba. But where is 'back', and is it possible to go 'back' after committing metaphorical suicide at sea—putting an 'end' to all that is familiar in one's existence?

Leaving Perth

I think about this as I pack my suitcases. Days before leaving Perth for Miami my clock radio wakes me with the perturbed voice of the mayor of Port Hedland. Thirteen hundred kilometres to the north (close by local standards), this city, which draws its wealth from mineral exports, plays host to about six hundred 'boat people', courtesy of its 'detainment' facilities. Established in 1991, in response to an influx of 'boat people' from Cambodia and China (including the so-called Sino-Vietnamese—Vietnamese resettled in Southern China), this camp has become an increasing focus of public debate in Australia. During the years 1976 to 1981 Australia accepted tens of thousands of 'boat people' from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, so the Port Hedland camp signals a remarkable reversal of the national will on this matter. To a large extent, the detainees at this camp are commodities traded for political ends in Australia's cultural and economic relations with 'Asia'. The acceptance of refugees from Cambodia, for instance, would constitute an admission of the limited success of the Australian brokered 'Peace Plan' in that country, so Cambodian boat arrivals have been held

indefinitely—in some cases for more than five years. In April 1995, however, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, under heavy pressure from the U.S. government, reversed its longstanding opposition to the forced repatriation of 'boat people', making it possible for Australia to turn these people 'back'.

Thus far over one hundred refugees have been 'returned' to Galang Island in Indonesia (where the United Nations Comprehensive Plan of Action applies) and approximately three hundred and fifty Sino-Vietnamese have been 'repatriated' to China. Additionally, eighteen 'boat people' from East Timor (a highly sensitive area in Australian-Indonesian relations, especially since the Dili massacre of 1991) have been extradited to Portugal, the former imperial power in Timor. That the threat of repatriation is highly traumatic for the inmates at Port Hedland is evinced by a recent escape attempt—an unsettling incident for many Australians, reminiscent of much the fictionalized Cowra 'breakout' of World War II (when a group of Japanese prisoners attempted escape from a POW camp). It is the political fall-out from this 'breakout' that crackles through my clock radio. In Sydney, the Chief Justice of the Family Court has likened the Port Hedland facility to a Nazi death camp. In defence, the city's mayor plays the multiculturalism card—Port Hedland is a multicultural city, it boasts inhabitants from over forty nations (including Jews), its 'detainment' camp is state-of-the-art, people should come and see for themselves before passing judgment, the Justice ought to leave the narrow, urbane world of Sydney legal circles to learn what's really happening in Australia, he's lost touch with 'the people'.

With the exception of Hong Kong and Singapore, Australia is the world's most urbanized nation, and this type of rhetoric was familiar coming from an inhabitant of a regional centre—he could have been defending the shooting of kangaroos (a longstanding point of contention between city-based Australians and those from the 'country'). In any case, wasn't I worse than this judge, packing my bags to leave the country while contemplating another comparison, not with the Jews but with the 'boat people' of the Caribbean. I too had never been to Port Hedland, and nor did I intend to. Yet I was encountering representations of these 'boat people' in the 'public sphere', and continued to do so upon arriving in Sydney the following month. Here the Art Gallery of New South Wales was displaying the elegant photojournalism of Sebastiao Salgado; coffee-table pieces from the world's trouble spots—ship breakers in Bangladesh, refugees in Mozambique, 'boat people' in the Philippines. Absorbing this stuff with a cafe latte presents no contradictions for me. I am its audience. But later that week a story buried a third of the way through the television news left me disconcerted.

Amnesty International denounces Australia on two counts—first, for the ongoing problem of aboriginal deaths in custody; second, for the 'detainment' of the 'boat people' at Port Hedland. What distresses me is how the country sizes up these episodes of racial violence against its celebration of multiculturalism. How can this brutal treatment of refuge seekers be divorced from the values Australians hold regarding how their society should be internally structured? Ghassan Hage (1995) argues that such a separation is impossible—that "the categories of ethnic caging express a structure of perceiving ethnicity which constitutes and underlies all of Australian society rather than being external to it". While I am in strong agreement with this analysis, I find its terms of reference somewhat mystifying, since it repeats a central tendency of Australian multicultural discourse—i.e., the subsumption of the discourses of race to those of ethnicity. What links Australia's 'boat people' situation to its problem with 'aboriginal' deaths in custody is an explicit racialization of the excluded/oppressed group—a racialism

that is in turn silenced within the public languages of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism. Thus, the mayor of Port Hedland can avert implicit charges of racism (interestingly enough expressed via the European episode of Nazism) by invoking the city's ethnic diversity. Here, ethnicity signifies negotiable difference, predicated on contrasts that supposedly operate independently of power. Race, on the other hand, stands for unnegotiable difference—differences that defy comparison or scrutiny and thus cannot rate mention within the putatively 'rational' discourses of the 'public sphere'. Clearly, the mayor's multiculturalism obscures a racial preoccupation—a concealment inherent in the term 'boat people' itself, which refuses to identify the people it names by race. Such a preponderance of racial invisibility can only be reversed by addressing the question of 'boat people' in terms of the specific history of 'Asians' (a problematic construction, suppressing national, cultural and religious differences) in Australia. This is a project that cuts across the public euphoria of Australian multiculturalism, revealing the way in which it can collude with activities of a racial/racist nature. Furthermore, it requires a difficult assessment about Australia's treatment of 'boat people' in terms of its current claim to be part of 'Asia'.

In contemporary Australia, both the concept of multiculturalism and the idea of an 'Asian destiny' are official elements of public policy, encapsulated by former Prime Minister Keating's description of the country as "a multicultural nation in Asia." Both of these programmes are imagined as attempts to redress the imbalances of the country's racial history, particularly as embodied in the White Australia Policy, lifted only in 1972. Simultaneously, however, they are implemented under criteria of economic rationalism, blind to the discourses of race. Thus the predominant narrative of Australia's 'enmeshment' with 'Asia' explains that this is an economic imperative necessitated by the fall of longstanding trade arrangements with the U.K. and the U.S. At the same time, the country's immigration policy (which regulates at least the demographic base of multiculturalism) is structured by strict economic guidelines—does the applicant possess wanted skills, is he/she able to invest, etc. It would be economically naive to claim that Australia could afford to relax these regulations without incurring damages to its current standard of living, but this is precisely the point. Perhaps there is an economic price to pay for policies that would truly compensate for the racial exclusivity of the past—policies that would discriminate in favour of the 'boat people' on the basis of race. Doubtless, the official reprise here would be that Australia's current immigration scheme assesses candidates independently of their race, but this is only to perpetuate the racial blindness that I have suggested is sustained by the discourses of multiculturalism. Not until there is in place a set of public procedures that recognize that race matters (racial vilification law is only a first step) can the country claim to have left behind the era of the White Australia Policy or to have recognized itself as an 'Asian' nation.

Evidently, there is an uneven fit between Australia's economic and cultural aspirations and this is precisely the gap in which the 'boat people' are caught. Utilizing the scheme developed by Arjun Appadurai (1993) for describing the transnational mobility of cultures, we might say that this gap represents a radical "disjuncture" between the "ethnoscapes" and "finanscapes" that regulate the flow of people, money and goods in and out of Australia. Yet such an explanation, while describing the transnational movement of the 'boat people' with respect to other cultural flows, cannot account for the way in which their 'detainment' disrupts the official narrative of Australia's 'Asian' future. Recent theorists of diaspora and cultural hybridity emphasize the way in which the transportability of cultures 'de-motivates' teleological narratives of national 'destiny.' As Iain Chambers (1996: 53) writes (following Vijay Mishra), if "diasporas do not have a teleology" then they must "invariably disturb

narratives of national identities, and their particular utopias, by failing to register such local, invariably ethnically bound futures". Homi Bhabha (1994: 252–53) takes this argument further by claiming that "postcolonial" and diasporic modes of representation produce a "time-lag" within the narrative of modernity itself—a form of "cultural reinscription that moves back to the futures" erasing the "compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in the binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside". Such a disjunctive temporal movement might also be said to characterize the 'detainment' of the 'boat people'.

Consider the testimony of Lan Tran, a former Vietnamese 'boat person' currently living in Perth:

For me, my ordeal has become an adventure because over the years it has lost the element of danger and profound sense of uncertainty of what the future may hold. From where I'm speaking right now, I am at one point in that future of my past. I can see from my experience that the ordeal wasn't the journey itself. It was how we were received by the community at large. That is an on-going process. I am conscious of now and again, beyond my experience as a Boat Person, a refugee, an Australian citizen living in Australia, I am Asian and because of that I would have to continually justify my place in this society through a full admission of my history that was elsewhere (Tran, 1995) (emphasis is mine).

Although Tran exists 'beyond' her experience as a 'boat person', what she describes here is no less than a process of 'detainment'—of living in the future of her past. In this sense, her experience as an 'Asian' legally domiciled in Australia connects profoundly to the predicament of the refugees at Port Hedland. Tran (1995) confirms Hage's point that "the mode of categorising and dealing with national otherness in the process of defending the nation from external threats is intrinsically linked to the way national otherness is categorised and dealt with internally". Yet this process of 'detainment' not only plays havoc with the progressive narrative of Australia's 'Asian destiny' but questions its ghostly reversal in the act of sending the 'boat people' 'back'. Such a return to origins is all but an impossibility for these refugees, who have taken a suicidal risk at sea—cutting their ties with a "history that was elsewhere." The practice of forced repatriation, we might say, imposes a kind of "second death" (to borrow a term from the Marquis de Sade). This reveals not only the problematic relation of the nation to its narratives of 'destiny' but its complex entanglement in transnational processes that show how little the act of return has to do with national imperatives in the first place.

Regarding the first of these, it is important that the practice of repatriation enact a "second death" only as an imaginative possibility. In this way, it can project the desire for 'exclusion' beyond the 'reality' of its merely physical enactment and avoid the responsibility and guilt inherent in the production of 'real' dead bodies. As Christabel Chamarette (1995) suggests, the aggression directed toward 'boat people' in Australia perhaps reflects the fact that the country is a nation of 'boat people'—i.e., the initial 'white' settlers, who 'stole' the land from its inhabitants and left behind a trail of genocidal carnage. Yet, if this rewriting of Australia's origin as 'invasion'—taught as such in many universities and increasingly, if insufficiently, recognized in land rights agreements such as the Mabo Treaty¹—has coincided with the

¹ Named for Edward Koiki Mabo, the successful plaintiff in a 1992 Australian High Court hearing, the Mabo ruling overturned the 204-year-old doctrine of terra nullius, giving legal recognition to the fact that indigenous land ownership in Australia existed before European settlement. For an extended discussion see Rowse (1993).

official rewriting of its future as 'Asian', the government's explanations have not linked the paranoia inspired by the 'boat people' with the guilt surrounding the 'aboriginals'. Instead, the act of forced repatriation is justified in terms of international agreements—United Nations policies that are cited as if they provided unquestionable moral imperatives (Doepel 1995). Thus, while Australia passed legislation permitting forced repatriation months before the United Nations turnaround, the government justifies its actions by direct appeal to this international covenant. What this type of rhetoric conceals is the way in which the United Nations decision was made in response to heavy pressure from the U.S., which was looking to legitimate its three year practice of forced repatriation in the Caribbean. The 'boat people' problem in Australia thus needs to be viewed against the Caribbean situation (and vice versa), since these practices of exclusion and 'detainment' are mutually implicated and cannot be compared as if they were independent entities. With this in mind, my journey to Miami seemed more than fortuitous, as if compelled by some strange rite of motion, allowing me passage where others cannot go.

Destination Miami

As a destination for 'boat people', Miami presents an almost opposite set of problems regarding the construction of multiculturalism in the discourses of ethnicity and race. With recent challenges to affirmative action initiatives and the result of the O.J. Simpson trial there can be little doubt as to the centrality of race in U.S. public discourse. Here, multiculturalism is the aberrant idea. Far from being an item of public policy, as in Australia, it is seen as the agenda of a radical minority (mostly the professoriate) that seeks to undermine the 'common culture'—i.e., those shared assumptions and values that supposedly unite Americans from diverse backgrounds.² Yet the fact remains that the U.S. is a multicultural nation, and it is to Miami (with its Hispanic, Caribbean, Anglo, Jewish, African American and Asian communities) that U.S. cultural commentators have often turned to study the workings of cultural difference in their society.³

Part of the complexity of multiculturalism in South Florida derives from the large numbers of refugees who have arrived via the Florida Straits in the past twenty years. There have been two major influxes of 'boat people' to Miami. First, in the years 1977–81, came the arrival of sixty thousand Haitians (predominantly 'blacks') in commercial craft as well as homemade rafts. To this can be added the *marielitos*—one hundred and twenty five thousand Cubans (including blacks and mulattos) who left at the instigation of Castro and were shipped to Miami in chartered boats by the established exile population. Then, following the 1991 coup in Haiti came another wave of refugees—over thirty thousand in 1992. Many of these people were processed via the U.S. Naval base at Guantanamo Bay (in Cuba), but this practice ceased in May, 1992 when the U.S. Coast Guard began to return their vessels directly to Haiti in direct violation of United Nations directives—a Bush policy continued by Clinton despite election promises to the contrary. No sooner had this outpouring of Haitians ceased, when a new wave of 'boat people' set out from Cuba. Their numbers peaked in August, 1994 when Castro threatened another Mariel and eighteen thousand refugees were returned to Guantanamo. After that, the U.S. agreed to accept more immigrants through legal channels in exchange for Cuba preventing refugees from leaving its territorial waters. But this

² For an extended comparison of U.S. with Australian multiculturalism see Ang & Stratton (1994).

³ Somewhat fortuitously, three Miami books were published in 1987—see Didion (1987), Rieff (1987) and Allman (1987).

arrangement ceased in March, 1996, when Cuban forces shot down two light aircraft belonging to the Miami-based exile group "Brothers to the Rescue," an organization that purportedly searches the Straits for distressed rafters (although many suspect paramilitary activities). Amid all these changes, it is difficult to know how many 'boat people' actually make the South Florida shores—for 1994, the estimate is over five thousand. Whatever the figures, Miami still has a siege mentality and the symbol of the boat occupies a large space in its public imagination.

As opposed to the Australian situation, it is clear that the "boat people" problem in Miami is interpreted via questions of race. This is largely to do with differing perceptions of Haitian and Cuban refugees. The Haitian 'boat people', who are classified as 'economic refugees', are immediately recognized as 'blacks'. Cuban refugees, on the other hand, are usually imagined as 'white', despite the high proportion of 'blacks' and mulattos among them. Partially, this perception is due to the racial composition of Miami's established Cuban population, which left the island during the era of the revolution. This largely 'white' community actively welcomes refugees from the Castro regime, as shown by its activities during the Mariel boatlift of 1980—an exercise that backfired when vessels hired to transport relatives from Cuba ended up ferrying large numbers of criminals and homosexuals across the Straits (see the Brian de Palma/Oliver Stone film *Scarface*). Whatever the actual racial makeup of Miami's refugee groups, it is obvious that the term 'boat people' has very different implications in the South Floridian and Western Australian contexts. Here, the idea does not so much obscure a racial discourse as it is overdetermined by race—i.e., internally divided by discourses of racial anxiety and conflict that are central to public debate in the U.S. and to its historical imagination.

In their book *City of the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*, for example, the sociologists Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick argue that the depiction of Haitian refugees in the media arouses strong anxieties for Americans, because it evokes "images buried deep in the collective mind"—i.e., images of the slave-ships that carried Africans to the Americas in past centuries (1993: 51). Here the experience of the Haitian 'boat people' is clearly paralleled with the historical experience of African-Americans—a comparison that perhaps explains why politicians like Jesse Jackson have taken up the Haitian cause.⁴ Yet such a representation of the 'boat people' (Portes and Stepick write of the first wave of Haitian refugees) does not coincide convincingly with the current means of imagining the refugee situation here in Miami. The image of the slave-ship is a powerful one indeed, and it has often been used as an organizing symbol for studies of diasporic human movement. In *The Black Atlantic*, for example, Paul Gilroy uses the slave-ship as a starting point for his study of the African diaspora—describing it as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (Gilroy, 1993: 4). Such microcosmic dimensions, however, cannot be so easily attributed to the representations of boats I have encountered in South Florida. Let me describe two instances in which boats have been publicly displayed in contemporary Miami as a means of showing how the understanding of the refugee situation, according to a 'black'/'white' race polarity, covers over some of the most difficult questions of ethnicity and identity at stake in the city today. In particular, I want to consider how the idea of 'boat people' in this context

⁴ In April 1980, Jackson led a march of one thousand people to a Miami hotel where the government was holding sixty Haitian "boat people," primarily women and children.

demands a reckoning between emergent notions of Caribbean identity and the existing categories of U.S. identity politics—e.g., 'African American' and 'Latino/a.'

One of the pitfalls of living in the increasingly gentrified Art Deco district of Miami Beach is the sheer cost of living. From the omnipresent Euramerican models to the eco-friendly bath products to the eight-dollar loaf of bread at Biga—if it wasn't for the humidity, 'the Beach' would easily confirm the argument that Soho is the same in every city. Not surprisingly, my shopping expeditions take me out of the area. When it's seafood at stake, a trip to South Dade is well worth the drive down U.S. 1. Here, in the area hit most heavily by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, stands "The Golden Rule"—a pastel pink seafood emporium cum daycare centre cum maritime museum, whose prices well match its 'do-unto-others' theme. The debris from the hurricane is still evident in the vicinity. Across the road an entire strip-mall lies in ruins, three years later. Demographically, this cataclysm has meant an outflow of Anglos from the area and a consequent strengthening of the Cuban-American community. Inside, amid playing children, disused cash registers and aging aerial photographs of the hurricane destruction, stands a small raft—discovered by fishermen at sea and hauled back for public display. Constructed from polystyrene blocks and wooden slates, it measures about one by three meters. The Coast Guard has sprayed the letters "OK" on the sail, and somebody has attached to the stern a bumper sticker proclaiming "I'd cheat on Hilary too." The woman at the check-out tells me that it's been in the store for about a year. There's been plenty of looting, she says, but initially it contained shoes from Mexico, clothes from Russia and a shampoo bottle full of drinking water. Obviously, the boat is a relic from the August, 1994 exodus from Cuba.

The most noticeable thing about the raft is its sheer unseaworthiness. It's scarcely big enough to hold three people, let alone sustain a 'living micro-cultural, micro-political system'. Yet as an exercise in vernacular museology, the display tells an elaborate tale about Cuban-American cultural identity in Miami. Exhibited among the abandoned hardware of the exiled 'business enclave' (the cash registers), the boat shows how the figure of the refugee underscores the Miami Cuban 'success story'. A recent *New Times* (Miami's *Village Voice*) article reports a conversation between two Cuban-American women overheard by the newly exiled writer, Roberto Uria (author of the short story that inspired the 1993 film *Fresa y Chocolate*)—"Don't invite a balsero for dinner. They have old hunger. They eat everything" (Cantor 1995: 21). Here, at "The Golden Rule," where so many Cuban-American dinners are bought and sold, the boat exhibition both enforces and prohibits this type of paranoia. The photographs of hurricane damage, for example, could imply that the 'boat people' threaten the city's well-being in a way analogous to natural disasters. This would concur with longstanding fears (grounded in no economic reality) that refugees displace locals from their jobs in much the same way as hurricanes displace them from their homes. Alternatively, the pictures could posit a solidarity between South Dade's inhabitants and the 'boat people'. After all, the hurricane blew across race and class lines, exposing homeowners on land to a similar risk to that faced by refugees at sea. Whatever the cultural and economic fears associated with the 'boat people', Miami's Cuban population has good political reasons to naturalize this kind of solidarity. The refugees are not only fellow protesters against Castro (unlike the Haitians, they are officially classified as "political refugees") but probable allies on the U.S. political front. At least, this is how I read the bumper sticker affixed to the boat.

"I'd cheat on Hilary too"—as well as Castro? At one level, the sticker protests the Clinton administration's supposedly 'soft' line toward Cuba. Read allegorically, however, it presents

the refugees' flight from the island as a politically sanctioned act of adultery. The boat comes to represent the presidential phallus (emasculated by Republican victories?) advancing toward South Florida and Hilary Clinton (the advocate of health care reforms that conservatives label 'socialist') stands for the betrayed Cuba. It is tempting to understand this in terms of what Ilan Stavans calls the "Latin phallus"—a symbol of both repressive, macho bravura (Tony Montana in *Scarface* describes Miami as a "big pussy") and repressed, homosexual longing (for the phallic shaped Florida). Yet the parallel here is not to the norms and/or stereotypes of Hispanic society, but to the (alleged) sexual proclivities of the president. In this instance, the fractious processes of transculturation by which Cuban identities are renegotiated as Cuban-American identities are metaphorically contained by the gender politics of Anglo-America. Partly, this reflects the predominant identification of Cuban-Americans as 'white', but more importantly it highlights the complex systems of intercultural cross-referencing by which the refugee acquires an ethnic and racial identity in the U.S. context.

These processes of re-identification are never simply a matter of self-fashioning, but a means of stepping into or defining oneself against the recognitions of others. Thus in the U.S., the Cuban refugee acquires the identity of Latino/a—a label that refers to a wide range of ethnic, racial and national groups whose past or present includes the Spanish language and/or Hispanic culture. Such a category arises by virtue of America's need to identify a certain 'minority' culture at a time when the demographic presence of 'Latin' people has reached critical proportions. My point is that the acquisition of such an identity is never self-contained or wholly intentional. Rather, it is subject to complicated processes of assimilation, translation and resistance—such as those performed at "The Golden Rule."

The same is true of the processes by which Haitian 'boat people' negotiate an identity *vis-à-vis* African-American cultural and political practices. In the early 1980s, according to Stepick and Portes, there emerged in Miami high schools a practice known as 'the cover up', by which Haitian students adopted African-American slang, dress styles and body language. Resistance to this assimilation built up, but it manifested itself only in Americanized forms—e.g., Creole rap music rather than traditional Haitian dance. This shattered the cultural pride and hopes for social mobility of many older Haitians, who worried that their offspring were being integrated into the 'black' underclass. Despite friction with the Cuban community (e.g., beatings in front of a Cuban clothing store in Little Haiti just after Nelson Mandela's visit of 1990), some Haitian business people even tried to model their activities after the 'successful' Cuban enclave. For the most part, however, the persistence of a 'black' racial identification forced a conciliation with the not-always-welcoming African-American community. Again, assuming an identity required a complex cross-referencing across racial and cultural lines.

These practices of identity formation must ultimately undo the 'black'/'white' racial divide that overlays the official classification of Cuban 'boat people' as political refugees (having to show evidence of persecution) and Haitian 'boat people' as economic refugees (a standard euphemism for illegal immigrants). Such a binary understanding of race is destabilized by the existence of 'black' and mulatto Cuban 'boat people' as well as by light-skinned Haitian refugees (the 'invisible Haitians'—many of whom pass as Anglos or Latinos). Although Cuba and Haiti have very different racial and cultural traditions, they both possess a much more variegated system of racial classification than the U.S. This is not to say that segregationist social practices and economic hierarchies do not exist in these countries, but in both instances, there exist anticolonial traditions that are, at least in theory, integrationist. As

Stuart Hall (1995: 6) writes, the Caribbean was "the first, the original and the purest diaspora", involving a discontinuous intertwining of cultures and races.⁵ To study the present negotiation of refugee identity in Miami without considering the history of this diaspora (the violent ruptures of conquest, colonialism and slavery) would be to ignore the problematisations of identity that took place in the initial Caribbean context. There is a real need to understand contemporary forms of transculturation in South Florida as an ongoing part of this diaspora, recognizing the longstanding historical role of the peninsular in the region's destiny. This is the central challenge in studying multiculturalism in Miami today. Such a project requires not only an understanding of current U.S. identity politics, but a translation of its complexities into the Caribbean context and vice versa. The city needs to be approached not only as Miami, USA, but as Miami, capital of the Caribbean.

At Sea

This kind of study, however, does not account for the primary point of commonality between the Western Australian and South Floridian refugee situations—i.e., the current 'detainment' and exclusion of the 'boat people'. Miami has received hundreds of thousands of refugees over the past twenty years, but since mid-1992 these people have been turned 'back' or held in camps—in Guantanamo and Panama, but also Krome Detention Center (outside Miami) for those who make the Florida shores. Let me turn to another boat exhibition in Miami, which (at least in part) confronts this problem in order to prepare the ground for a more sustained comparison with the Western Australian situation.

I have in mind a sculpture entitled "Immigration Law" by the artist Joe Nicastri. The piece was recently displayed in an exhibition at the Metro-Dade Cultural Center called "Boat Images." Located at 101 W. Flager St., the zero point of Miami's traffic grid, this was as good a place as any to gauge the official, city-sponsored reaction to the 'problem'. The show announced itself as "a celebration of the boat in all its implications" (Boat Images 1). Works addressing the 'boat people' issue were displayed alongside paintings of submarines and leisure craft. The catalogue contained a bibliography suggesting that I read Moby Dick and Peter Pan to understand the symbolism of the boat. In many ways, the exhibition seemed a deliberate attempt to defuse and deracinate the difficult questions surrounding the city's treatment of refugees. Yet amid the representations of banana boats and cruise ships, there were some politically capable pieces—mostly depicting the boat as a coffin. Nicastri's was the most striking of these, featuring a weather-beaten oar encased in a slim wooden box. Inside this cabinet another found object was displayed—a card quoting directly from the U.S. Immigration code:

Exclusion proceedings are aimed at preventing the entry and enforcing the departure of aliens whom Congress has deemed ineligible for entry into the United States. An exclusion proceeding is a threshold procedure, which may not be available to all aliens (Nicastri, 1995).

Putting to death the oar, putting to death the law—the sculpture pulls together questions of legality, forced repatriation and death. At one level, it seems to be a commentary on the postmodernist artistic strategy of appropriation, exploring the limits of its use as a political gesture.⁶ Thus while the coffin frames the oar, presumably its 'artist' is an absent 'boat person'

⁵ Hall (1995). See also Benitez-Rojo (1993) for a theorization of the Caribbean as a dynamic system in disorder.

⁶ For a related discussion of the politics of appropriation in intercultural art see Fusco (1995).

('detained' or lost at sea), it also contains the quotation from the Immigration code—the law itself being an elaborate system of citation. The act of appropriation here is not simply a dramatic illustration of the arbitrary relations between signifiers and referents or a critique of modernist notions of originality, but a means of exposing the violence of the legal practices by which the 'boat people' are excluded from entry into the U.S. These 'threshold procedures' can themselves be understood as forms of appropriation since they involve the forced adaptation of refugees to an imposed symbolic order. At this level, the sculpture protests the practice of forced repatriation by asking to where, after risking their lives at sea, can the 'boat people' be returned.

Looking at the piece, I am reminded of another quotation, this time from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, cited by Philip Gourevitch (1995) in a recent *Granta* article about Vietnamese 'boat people', in which the character Svidrigailov describes his own suicide as "going to America." By putting an end to their life in Vietnam, Gourevitch claims, the 'boat people' commit a metaphorical suicide, and thus by threatening to kill themselves in the face of repatriation, they are acting out the death already forced upon them. Nicastrì's piece makes a similar point about the 'boat people' of the Caribbean. If they have taken a suicidal risk at sea, then sending them 'back' cannot be conceived as an act of return or resuscitation—a "saving of lives" as U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry at a White House press conference of August 19, 1994 described the Guantanamo operations. This is perhaps the strongest point of comparison I can level between the 'boat people' who head toward Australia and those who sail for the U.S., despite the very different constructions of race and ethnicity that motivate their 'detainment'. Their experiences converge on the threshold between life and death, but in both cases this is not a line that can be drawn in strictly existential terms. In fact, it is not a line at all, but an ocean, a sea, a body of water.

In the case of the 'boat people', the metaphor of border as a way to describe processes of transculturation (a metaphor central to transnational cultural studies) does not hold water. Discussing these issues in an undergraduate seminar on "The Literature of Travel and Tourism," my students (Cubans, Jamaicans, African Americans, Haitians, Anglos, Trinidadians, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Greeks) resisted my attempts to allegorise the South Floridian situation via one of the most widely disseminated 'border culture' texts—the Chicaria lesbian writer Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The multiple constructions of identity, the shifts between English, Spanish and Nahuatl, the celebration of *mestizaje*, the transborder dialogue as artistic and cultural strategy—all this seemed too remote, too specific to the U.S. Southwest/Mexico borderline to encapsulate the local situation. When presented with the Vietnamese writer Tran Vu's *The Coral Reef*, however, the students immediately began to read allegorically. In fact, the class strayed from discussing this story about a group of Vietnamese 'boat people' stranded on a reef to become a full scale debate about refugees in the Caribbean, despite my protests that the specificities of the 'Asian' situation were being ignored. One could conclude that the issues are just too sensitive here, but in that case why didn't a similar discussion erupt while studying cultural border-crossing?

The answer surely is that there just aren't any borders close to Miami—at least, not land borders (unless one counts the invisible boundaries that mark the city's 'ethnic' divisions). As a nation-state, however, the U.S. must deal with both 'border-crossers' and 'boat people' two situations that give rise to very different modes of representing the act of 'illegal immigration'. Compare, for instance, the 1996 media spectacle involving the video-taped

beating of Mexican 'border-crossers' by the California Highway Patrol with the U.S. outcry against Cuba's shooting of the "Brothers to the Rescue" light aircraft over the Florida Straits. In the 'border-crossing' situation the act of 'exclusion' is imagined as an act of racial violence, but in the "Brothers to the Rescue" situation the interception of refugees is represented as a humanitarian act—thus Castro is denounced for committing violence in the face of altruism. What I want to suggest is that this figuration of interception as 'rescue' also applies in the Australian situation, where it provides an important precedent for the imagination of multiculturalism.

Due to its geographical insularity Australia must cope with 'boat people' but not 'border-crossers', and this means its processes of demographic 'exclusion' can be framed as humanitarian acts. Just imagine an Australia with a land border edging on Indonesia—how different would its racial and immigration histories be, its current policies of multiculturalism? The imagination of 'exclusion' as an act of 'rescue' is a central trope of Australian multiculturalism—one which displays the suppression of racial discourses within this cultural imaginary. What I am suggesting is that Australian multiculturalism, despite its supposed reversal of the White Australia policy, is actually its product—a mark of its very success. In other words, Australian multiculturalism exists as a means of containing and surreptitiously continuing the country's history of racial violence. Thus, the on-going silence on aboriginal deaths in custody, or more recently, the absolute necessity to read the massacre of thirty-two people at a Tasmanian historical site not as an act of racial aggression (the murderer uttered epithets against Japanese tourists) but as a pathology of individual maladjustment. Central to this multicultural imaginary is also the suppression of racial discourses in the public languages surrounding the 'exclusion' and 'detainment' of the 'boat people'—a state of affairs that shows the need to rethink their predicament with respect to the idea of 'border-crossing'.

Thinking about the 'boat people' requires a drastic renegotiation of the critical mastertropes by which contemporary cultural critics understand the processes of transculturation and intercultural identification. The metaphor of the border has been a helpful one, producing a wealth of work on transnational cultural exchange, gender bending, racial passing, etc.⁷ Ultimately, however, it is based on a geographical rather than a racial or an ethnic paradigm and thus its applicability is limited—more suited to the U.S./Mexico or the Israel/Palestine situation than to Western Australia (an insular culture) or South Florida (a peninsular culture). Unlike the border-crosser, the 'boat person' has no ground to stand on—he/she is perpetually 'at sea'.

For these people, there can be no easy 'crossing', no playful transvestism as a means of questioning essentialist notions of identity, no celebration of hybridity as a way of averting the politics of representation. These are all important forms of oppositional cultural practice, but 'boat people' can attempt such 'crossings' only at the risk of death. There is no going 'back'. Yet there is also no going 'forward'. Their movement is highly policed, existing at the point where the operations of governments and international organizations clash with the survival strategies of marginal communities. 'Detainment' is a different fate from 'border crossing', but it is on this threshold that the 'boat people' exist—somewhere between 'here' and 'elsewhere', between 'exclusion' and 'repatriation', between life on land and "second death" at sea. In this sense, their experience of transnational passage (living in the future of

⁷ For a collection of recent essays in the growing field of "border theory" see Welchman, 1996.

their past) involves a very different negotiation of time and space than my jet-lag. For me, there is always the possibility of 'return'—to some place out there, in a mess of papers, a passport, a ticket. But where is this 'back' for the 'boat people'? There's no 'back' 'back' there.

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