

Pondering Hierarchy of Oppressions in Australia: The Case of Refugees and Their Mode of Arrival¹

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Abstract: This paper is inspired by a conversation about the differences in treatment of refugees in Australia depending on their mode of arrival. The circumstances for seeking asylum are similar—displacement, forced migration, fight/fleeing for survival, hope for a better future in Australia. Yet the mode of arrival is different: plane versus boat. The mode of ‘entry’ is different: officially invited to enter the nation with a visa versus no invitation granted. These differences in classification mean that support packages are offered to refugees who arrive in Australia under the Humanitarian Program while refugees who arrive by boat, including children, are automatically confined in detention centres for undetermined and often prolonged periods of time. This paper reflects on why there is such a distinction considering the rationale for seeking asylum is the same in both cases. It questions what logic underpins this distinction and what this means in terms of Australian nationhood. In addition, it seeks to open up conversations about these questions while drawing links between the oppressions endured by refugees, under the Humanitarian Program and boat arrivals, to those of Indigenous Australians. As these links are made, the paper draws on the concept of coloniality to argue that despite differences in conceptualization and treatment, the same colonial ‘gatekeeper of the nation’ logic applies to the three groups.

Keywords: refugees; Indigenous Australians;² coloniality; colonialism; hierarchy; mode of arrival

Introduction

It is spring time in Australia, the land of plenty. Bright blue skies and lush green trees outside. I see beauty in my immediate surroundings but when I turn on the TV, the picture is grim. I see “walls of separation and racial discrimination, of hatred and fear, of humiliation and powerlessness ... erected around the world to divide and conquer, exacerbating existing conflicts” (Trinh 5). With contradictions and complications between beauty and ugliness, good and evil, guilt and innocence, I start writing this paper and recall the initial moments when it came into existence. On a day, similar to today, at a local library in Brisbane, Alejandra³ and I were talking about refugee⁴ experiences as part of my doctoral research. During our

¹ This paper was adapted from material coming from Chapters 1, 4 and 7 of my doctoral thesis “Opening-up Entangled Conversations: Engaging with the Stories of Refugee-background Students in Australia.”

² I use the term Indigenous Australians to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whilst acknowledging the limitations and problematics with the term. Here I stress that these groups represent diverse cultures and are not a homogeneous group. For more on terminology protocol see <https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/aboriginal-or-indigenous>

³ Alejandra was a researcher partner in my doctoral research that engaged with the narratives of refugee-background youth in Australia in terms of their forced migration and schooling experiences. Pseudonym was used for confidentiality purposes. Alejandra and her family migrated to Australia from El Salvador under the Humanitarian Program in the late 1990s.

⁴ I will use the terms refugees and asylum seeker interchangeably throughout the paper because the line between these two terms is blurry. The distinction is solely related on a legal technicality: “Asylum

conversation, she compared her family's experiences as recipients of the Australian Humanitarian Program to refugees who come to Australia by boat:

Asylum seekers who arrive by boat specifically, are treated like animals, worse. I think that if you come here like my family did, plane ticket, visa, there was a program for us, you know, it was nice, it was good, we had a home ... I've read some stories about people at Christmas Island and stuff, and it echoes my family's story but the only thing that is different is that they didn't have the access to apply for a visa, that's the only difference. And something like that could have so easily happened to us, so easily! ... it doesn't make any kind of sense, like, logic or so ever... I think it's really easy to distract people by saying oh we are focusing on our borders, and the image of a boat coming towards Australia without papers can be made to be seen very menacing, you can create, like visually into something, you can really create a story behind it... And I think it's just really really easy to dehumanize, and that's what they have done in Australia with the asylum seekers, calling them illegal arrivals instead of people...

Alejandra's reflection about Australia's starkly different treatment of people who through intricate oppressive situations make decisive moves for survival, inspired this paper. The circumstances are similar—displacement, forced migration, fight/fleeing for survival, hope for a better future in Australia. Yet the mode of arrival is different: plane versus boat, the official invitation to enter the nation with a visa versus no invitation granted. These differences in classification mean that support packages are offered to refugees who arrive in Australia under the Humanitarian Program⁵ while refugees who arrive by boat, including children, are automatically confined in detention centres for undetermined and often prolonged periods of time (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre).⁶ Mandatory detention excludes the option of refugees contesting their case in a court of law (Henderson and Fitzgerald 68). And since the introduction of the Sovereign Borders Policy in 2013, with the claim to “turn back the boats,” anyone who arrives by boat is excluded from the possibility of applying for permanent residency in Australia (ASRC). This seemingly unfair contrast invites a number of questions: Why is there such a distinction considering the rationale for seeking asylum is the same in both cases? What logic underpins this distinction? What are the particularities of the Australian context in terms of its relationship with refugees? What does all this mean in terms of Australian nationhood?

While contemplating these questions I consider the existence of a hierarchy of oppressions in terms of refugee experiences depending on mode of arrival in Australia. Here borrowing from

seekers are the people who have sought protection as a refugee, but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been assessed. However, under international law, a person is a ‘refugee’ as soon as they meet the definition of refugee, whether or not their claim has been assessed” (Refugee Council of Australia).

⁵ The Australian Humanitarian Program assists selected refugees “through a range of services provided by the government, community organizations, and the private sector. They are given intensive support for the initial 6 months ... [and] are also entitled to social security benefits and student support services” (Puvimanasinghe et al. 314). The Refugee Council explains further: “The Minister for Immigration sets the number of people that Australia will take in and determines the priorities for deciding who will be accepted... Most of the Program is concerned with resettling refugees from overseas... In the past, the main focus was on resettling refugees as recommended by UNHCR. However, an increasing part of the overseas resettlement program is being used to resettle refugees who have been nominated by people in Australia, typically family members.”

⁶ Hereafter ASRC.

Lugones' work ("Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes"), oppressions is conceptualised as multiple and intermeshed. In other words, I read oppressions as entangled unfavourable situations and conditions that pressure/restrict/limit/interrupt the possibilities for people to function/be/thrive in the realities they inhabit. Whilst considering the possibility of a hierarchy of oppressions in Australia, I then turn to Audre Lorde's essay "There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions." In her essay, Lorde affirms that there is not such a thing as a hierarchy of oppressions, arguing that any kind of oppression is as cruel as the next and that they do not occur separately from one another but are fundamentally intersectional (1). I agree with Lorde's persuasive argument in terms of intersectionality of oppressions. However, it seems that a clear hierarchical distinction is in operation by the Australian government in the treatment of refugees who travel by boat and the ones who arrive on a humanitarian visa. In addition, in analysing oppressions in Australia another layer of complexity surfaces when the position of Indigenous Australians is taken into consideration, or when other categories such as gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, etc., are included in the conversation.

In order to make links between oppressions (read as intersectional) endured by refugees under the Humanitarian Program, people arriving on boats, and Indigenous Australians, this paper draws on coloniality as a theoretical frame to argue that despite differences in conceptualization and treatment, the same colonial 'gatekeeper of the nation' logic applies to the three groups. When refugees enter (or attempt to enter) the country, they arrive in a space that is neither neutral nor empty. It is a space already dense with "racial power relations with a long colonial history, colonial imaginary, colonial knowledge and racial/ethnic hierarchies" (Grosfoguel et al. 641). Within the specific Australian settler-colonial history, a narrative of dispossession and erasure of Indigenous peoples paralleling deep fears of invasion from outsiders provides an intensely complicated backdrop for new arrivals (Tascón 246). In other words, when refugees arrive, they enter an already intricate space dominated by racialised conditions.

In this dense narrative, the notion of *terra nullius* still takes centre stage. This very notion of *land belonging to no one* legitimises the superiority-authority-ownership logic that entitles an elite of settler Australians and their institutions to determine who is allowed to enter the nation and under what conditions (Moreton-Robinson 25-26). This is a logic of colonial-patriarchal-white-sovereignty,⁷ with an elite of settlers who see themselves as 'local,' in charge. Garbutt argues that "we settler locals say we belong as though we and our culture have naturally emerged from the bounds of this place" (4). By occupying a hegemonic position in the nation-state, a 'local' elite has had the ability to draw borders, geographical and symbolic, that demarcate spaces where certain groups of people can enter or not. Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos explain:

In Australia, whiteness is historically and socially constructed through processes that at once position Indigenous peoples as non-Australian, and designated migrant groups as what we might call 'perpetual foreigners within the Australian state'... Because dominant white Australia is unwilling to recognise its occupier status it has had to invoke a suitable 'other' to play the role of legitimating its authority and to alleviate the anxiety that the occupation of stolen land produces for an ontologically disturbed subjectivity. (32-33)

⁷ Here I use the hyphens to signify that these adjectives are intimately connected and cannot be pulled apart when describing the logic that governs settler colonialism.

Terra nullius is still here, it is still part of a plot that is thick and thickens. It is the founding concept that fosters the disturbed subjectivity Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos talk about. The notion of *nullius*—that no humans were here before the European arrived—is key. The colonial logic of white supremacy over the ‘less than human’ is the basis of *terra nullius* and is at the core of the logic that still governs the systems of power in charge of border control. While the treatment of Indigenous peoples and refugees has been different, with distinct historical trajectories, they both still occur and involve structural “practices of marginalisation and exclusion” (Rizvi 143). However, one of the many complexities in unpacking this topic is that marginalising mind-frames are deeply embedded in the national psyche of who might belong or not to the mainstream Australian imaginary. And these mind-frames are usually normalised under the pretence of ‘the way things are done here’ or ‘our right to defend the nation.’ Thus, oppressions and marginalization often become invisible to unaware eyes—for the bodies going with the flow, for the pieces of the ‘national unity’ puzzle who fit the mould. On the other hand, for bodies perceived as strangers, the reality is different (Ahmed 7): they are classified according to unspoken rules governed by coloniality.

Coloniality

In making links between coloniality and a possible hierarchy of oppressions among marginalised groups in Australia, it is useful to first unpack what is meant by coloniality. According to Grosfoguel, “coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism and continues to deeply influence knowledge production, subjectivity, gender relations, the economy, and relations of authority, well beyond contexts of colonial administrations” (126). Coloniality encompasses profoundly embedded mind-frames, amongst the Global North (and the Global South), around ideas of who counts as human; concepts of cultural superiority/inferiority; justifications of worthiness based on race; and the notion of ‘non-Western’ populations as ‘primitive’ (Quijano 176). Even though the era of ‘official’ colonisation has mostly ended, “invasion, occupation, disruption and relocation—in other words, colonization by other means—continue to set the stage for unending aggression and destruction” (Trinh 5). And the power hierarchies that have been created during the colonial era such as, for example, “the international division of labour (core-periphery), the racial/ethnic hierarchy (West and non-West), the Christian-centric patriarchal hierarchy of gender/sexuality and the interstate system (military and political power),” are still very much central elements of contemporary realities (Grosfoguel et al. 641). In other words, we are still today governed by colonial logics and power structures. This recognition is useful in offering a valuable frame to read contemporary Australia as it has been strongly shaped by the complexities and ambiguities of its unique history as a white European settler colony geographically situated in the Asia-Pacific.

As coloniality and its application to the Australian context is conceptualized, Grosfoguel provides another useful contribution. Working with Fanon’s notion of “zone of being” Grosfoguel et al. apply the concept of below and above the line of being to their analysis of race relations in migration. According to Fanon, people who fall below the line of being are deemed sub-human or non-human; while people above the line are considered superior beings and recognised as humans, having access to rights and recognition of subjectivities and epistemologies (see Fanon, *Black Skins/White Masks*). Racism is thus defined as “a global hierarchy of human superiority and inferiority, politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/ colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel et al. 636). And “depending on the varying colonial histories in a number of world regions, the hierarchy of human superiority/inferiority can be constructed through various racial markers” (Grosfoguel

et al. 636). Racism is therefore not simply reduced to oppression according to skin colour but takes place through markers such as religion, language, ethnicity, and, I would add for the purpose of this discussion, refugees' mode of arrival and symbolic national status.

One of the aspects I find valuable from this take on racism, apart from its explicit link to coloniality, is the centrality it places on intersectionality. Intersectionality, an analytical approach developed by African American feminists, focuses on the crossings and junctions of various identity markers, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality in analysing oppressions (see Crenshaw; Davis). In other words, intersectionality centres analysis on the complexity of the world and human experiences by recognising that “events and conditions of social and political life and self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor [but] by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways” (Collins and Bilge 1). Bringing together the decolonial work of Fanon and intersectionality, Grosfoguel et al. take into account the diverse racial, class and gendered experiences in migration (644). They stress the necessity of migration theory to consider race and racism in migration processes, together with an analysis of migration experiences in “relation to colonial legacies” (648).

If this approach is applied to the situation of refugees and Indigenous peoples in Australia, it is possible to suggest that they would often fall under the line of being.⁸ This positioning is then significant in the way refugees and Indigenous peoples are treated and perceived by groups who belong to the zone of being within the Australian context. Through this perspective, racial oppression intersects with other forms of oppression and those intersections affect individuals differently. In this way, an entangled heterogeneity in the zones of being and non-being is revealed. Zones of being are heterogeneous spaces and accordingly it is impossible to homogenise experiences in either of the zones. This focus on heterogeneity is extremely important not only in trying to unpack if a hierarchy of oppressions exist in Australia but also in placing whiteness as a marker of privilege. This focus allows me to approach both privilege and oppressions in non-reductionist ways since they are experienced differently between/within both zones of being and non-being.

Thus, when I refer to ‘whiteness’ my aim is not to promote the illusion that there is such a thing as a homogeneous ‘white’ experience. Aware of problematics with labelling and fixed categories, I use the term “dominant-white-Australia” (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos 32) to refer to a governing Australian culture that is grounded on middle-class-patriarchal Anglo-Celtic settler histories, institutions and values. I employ this term not simply as a racial marker, but as a heterogeneous socially constructed concept that is entangled with class, gender, religion and coloniality. I am not in any way suggesting that people experience whiteness in uniform ways, nor am I classifying oppression and privilege in mutually-exclusive senses or in simplistic binary opposition.

I in the story

As I ponder and ask questions about oppressions, tolerance, borders, coloniality, refugees and Indigenous peoples in Australia, I think back to my own story and the part it plays in the discussions addressed in this paper. From the beginning of my story in Australia, I was moved by the atrocities that colonisation inflicted and still inflict on Indigenous peoples. I thought I understood the illusion and lies of *terra nullius*. Yet, for a good part of the nearly 16 years since

⁸ See detailed statistics on Indigenous Australians' structural disadvantages: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/close-gap-report-our>

I migrated to Australia, I failed to see myself as a colonial settler. For me a colonial settler was a white person who came here a long time ago. I was simply a non-white migrant. And because at times I endure some of the oppressions that might be linked to this positionality I did not see my complicity with the continued colonization and displacement of Australia's traditional custodians. I have only recently started to understand some of the complexities of my strange positionality as a non-white migrant in a colonised country. I am still not sure how to make sense of all of this. Yet starting conversations about what it means to make home in Australia as a migrant/refugee in relation to the dispossession of Indigenous Australians is certainly a relevant point here.

One aspect I believe essential to the argument I am putting forward, is the fact that non-white migrants/refugees are socialised into a system where who holds the power to decide if we are allowed to stay or not, if we can belong or not, is a dominant class of white Australians (see Moreton-Robinson). And this was the very system I came into as I migrated to this country. I did not have to ask any of the traditional custodians of this land if I could come and stay. I did not have to apply for a visa with them. I did not have to be inserted into their institutions and culture(s). I could simply ignore the fact that they even exist if I wanted to and I would still be allowed to stay. In contrast, I had to do all of these things in relation to the nation-state of Australia and its mainstream group of inhabitants. I could not in any way ignore the fact that the law and all institutions that I am now part of are controlled by the people who claim the positionality of 'real Australians' (Moreton-Robinson 21).

Land as Possession

With the lingering discomfort generated by the reflections above, moved by convolutions and uncertainties, I return to the discussion about land. Moreton-Robinson makes further contributions to this point by linking a sense of "national ownership" to Australia's colonial history and land claims by the British who justified Indigenous dispossession and genocide under the legal fiction of terra nullius (Moreton-Robinson 24). She adds that "who calls Australia home is inextricably connected to who has possession, and possession is jealously guarded by white Australians" (27). Importantly, the possession Moreton-Robinson refers to is deeply connected to land as commodity. And when land is understood in this way, the logic of ownership becomes central. Thus, when nation-state is considered under the logic of ownership, one of the ways in which it transcends social construct and enters the realm of materiality is through land. Nation-states are situated on land and when land is conceptualized as property, by default the nation becomes property. The question then becomes, who owns the nation? Is it possible to read nation-state as a conglomerate of land owners calling the shots and setting parameters? I believe a sense of ownership is pivotal in reading the nation but the answer is a lot more complex than a sum of owners in terms of conceptualizing the nation-state known as Australia.

In unpacking (rather than providing answers to) questions about possession and protection related to land and nation, the notion of borders becomes useful. Gloria Anzaldúa defines borders as follows: "Borders are set up to define places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 25). Borders for Anzaldúa do not only refer to geographical barriers but also to symbolic ones. These borders (geographical and symbolic) around contemporary Australia are consequences of our colonial history and are intrinsically linked to the divide between 'us' and 'them.' Despite their strength in setting boundaries, borders are quite complicated, especially symbolic ones, as they are ever shifting. These movements of boundaries affect who is in and who is out, or who is 'allowed' to call Australia home. Returning once again to the question of

land, the symbolic borders that define inclusion and exclusion to norms of ‘Australianness’ are intrinsically connected to claims of land ownership and Indigenous dispossession. Tascón explains that in settler societies such as Australia land becomes an object:

... for fervent attachment and thereby provides the [dominant] group with a sense of collective belonging and borders are constructed as that which defines the limits of this space of belonging. [These] physical and metaphysical constructs ... justify the exclusion of those outside “the line.” At the national level, these borders not only provide territorial limits; they also define who is to be considered to live within, and who is to be excluded. (126-127)

What is significant here is the connection between the colonial concept of land as possession and borders, and who has a privileged position in relation to these two constructs. Within this privileged position to determine access, it becomes obvious that depending on complex entanglements of power/racial structures, some bodies are perceived as more tolerable than others in multicultural Australia.

Multicultural Australia is often defined through diversity: a multitude of cuisines, dance, festivals, art, many languages on the street, fashions. Yet this is an extremely curated diversity. This diversity is expected to function within the often invisible but mighty rules and regulations of “dominant-white-Australia.” There is a general claim to tolerance and thriving multiculturalism but it is useful to consider what may lay under the surface of this seemingly successful story. One needs to ask complicated questions to get to the bottom of this intricacy. Part of the difficulty is that anything/anyone that disrupts (or threatens to disrupt) the imagined multicultural Australia becomes a villain.

In her paper “The Curse of the Smile,” Ien Ang addresses these issues as she engages with the idea of tolerance in multicultural Australia. She discusses the complexities of this concept with a special focus on the ‘power to tolerate’ as a mark of privilege. Ang argues that “Australia’s desire to be (seen as) a tolerant, multicultural nation tends to vindicate a redemptive national narrative designed to come to terms with its explicitly racist history of Aboriginal annihilation and the White Australia policy” (37). According to Ang, a key issue is that this redemptive desire tends to simplify an extremely convoluted colonial history thus creating a utopic fantasy of multiculturalism. She claims: “The idealized fantasy of such a purified, squeaky clean utopia only blinds us to the always less-than-perfect messiness of daily life in social” (39). Ang then calls for a deep examination of what tolerance means in the Australian context, especially in terms of ambiguity and power relations. Core to her argument is that “racially and ethnically marked people are no longer othered today through simple mechanisms of rejection and exclusion, but through an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of inclusion by virtue of othering” (38).

Following Ang’s reading, I argue that refugees who arrive under the Humanitarian Program are othered in terms of tolerance. Even though they are not perceived as ‘one of us’ they have been selected and granted a visa by the Government before arriving. In this sense, this category of refugees may occupy the position of ‘tolerable’ other in the social imaginary. They have been invited in and this entry to the nation does not overtly disrupt the status quo. The self-proclaimed custodians of the land in charge of the rules and regulations in terms of border control have granted entry. Here it is important to remember that the group of refugees who are recipients of the Humanitarian Program is heterogeneous in their intersectional relation to systems of power and oppressions. In this way, following Grosfoguel’s conceptualization of

racism, they are likely to be racialized and othered in various ways. Thus it is important not to homogenize experiences whilst making a link to the idea of 'tolerable other.' The contrast takes place when the same concept is used for refugees who attempt to arrive by boat because they are likely to be perceived as overtly disrupting the status-quo of colonial nationhood. They attempt to cross borders without an invitation, hence they are seen as trespassers. In the land girt by sea, the symbolic threat of invaders coming by sea is strong in the national imaginary.

In her paper "Oceanic Corpo-graphies, Refugee Bodies and the Making and Unmaking of Waters," Suvendrini Perera offers an enriching reading of the relationship between refugees who travel by sea and the deep meaning of the ocean in the conceptualization of Australian nationhood. She explains that:

Insularity, the insistence on being an island girt by sea, is the logic that underwrites Australian assertions of nationhood. The ocean, the beach and the coastline are the sites where this insularity is most clearly exposed as well as most violently defended ... These surrounding waters, always heavily mythologised as that which defines and delimits national identity, and as the source of both its deepest pleasures and threats, have been increasingly territorialised since 2001: highly monitored, patrolled and explicitly demarcated as a racialised national preserve ... Australia's waters are simultaneously a space in which other ontologies, geographies, poetics and politics are mobilised, set in play, enacted and resignified by the movements of foreign bodies in small boats. (66)

The sea which surrounds Australia, the body of water that acts as border, that holds back bodies, 'protects' Australia from the ugliness of the outside world, to the faraway, the over there where bad things happen. In the land girt by sea, refugees who arrive by boat disrupt the neatness of the invented nation. Refugees who travel by boat also disrupt the fantasy of tolerance. They attempt to enter the nation without approval, without prior selection by the ones in charge. They thus must be hidden, put aside, away from the public eye.

These bodies challenge borders as stable spaces. They challenge the stability of what modern nation-states represent. In this sense, within these logics of nationhood, the concept of refugees who travel by boat is 'intolerable.' The men, women and children kept in indefinite detention because they dared to act for survival, asking for asylum, are "below the line of being," below the line of tolerable. This can be clearly seen in the tragedies taking place in Nauru and Manus Island. Disguised as the defenders of the nation, the oppressors, like parasites, suck the life force out of people who disrupt borders. With a carefully constructed rhetoric of ends justifying the means to keep 'Australia safe', the cruel classification of worthiness based on mode of arrival seems undeniable. I would add that such classification can be seen as a type of racialisation. People are racialised as 'boat people' and from this categorization based on mode of arrival refugees who seek asylum via the oceans are unfortunately placed at the bottom of humanness.

Intersectional Oppressions

As mentioned at the beginning, central in linking the positions occupied by refugees (both under Humanitarian Program and boat arrivals) and Indigenous Australians is that the same colonial 'gatekeeper of the nation' logic applies to the three groups. Marginalising mind-frames are deeply imbedded in the national psyche of who might belong or not to the Australian imaginary. "Dominant-white-Australia" perceives itself as being entitled to decide under what conditions new arrivals might enter the nation. Under the Humanitarian Program people have

an invitation to come in whilst people who come by boat are perceived as forcefully invading the national space. Under hegemonic colonial logics, this kind of invasion cannot be tolerated. Thus, under these lenses, hierarchical division between worthy refugees and menacing refugees are common place with oppressive measures (e.g. indefinite detention, Temporary Protection Visas without the option to apply for residency, ‘turning back boats’ policy) against persecuted groups often justified as means to protect the Australian nation from ‘invasion.’

Coloniality thrives under this kind of hierarchical division. The division of worthiness based on race is a product of coloniality. Starting in the Americas, “a hierarchical, dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonized in the service of Western man” (Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” 743). Thus, in order to sustain itself coloniality depends on the divisions created by a logic of hierarchical categories and this is very much the situation taking place in Australia in terms of a hierarchical distinction between marginalised groups. Even though I recognise the existence and pervasiveness of this hierarchy I wish to challenge the very logic that sustains this division. In order to challenge coloniality and its hierarchical classification, interventions at the level of meaning making are necessary.

In this intervention at the level of meaning making, I read oppressions as intermeshed, drawing on the work of Maria Lugones. In her book *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, Lugones provides an analysis of oppressions in terms of being intermeshed and interlocking. According to Lugones, intermeshed oppressions mean they are multiple/entangled and cannot be separate as discrete units (174). On the other hand, interlocking oppressions are dependent on fragmentation and are based on fixed categories (174). Lugones argues that the latter is the way in which we have been socialized into understanding oppressions. If we take as an example racial oppression, reading it as interlocking would assume that racial oppression is a discrete unit of categorization that can be separate from other parts of someone’s reality. Lugones explains that “interlocking is conceptually possible only if oppressions are understood as separable, as discrete, pure” (170). Treating oppressions as interlocking thus leads to fragmentation of the oppressed person as reducible to a totalizing category. Within this logic, in the case of racial oppression, the racialized person is reduced to race whilst ignoring the complexity of their subjectivity and the entanglement of conditions that make them who they are. Lugones clarifies:

Oppressions interlock when the social mechanisms of oppression fragment the oppressed both as individuals and collectivities. Social fragmentation in its individual and collective inhabitations is the accomplishment of the interlocking of oppressions...It is not merely an ideological mechanism, but the categorial training of human beings into homogeneous fragments that is grounded in a categorial mind frame. (170)

Using intermeshed and interlocking oppressions as a framework is useful in providing a theoretical basis that links directly to Lorde’s argument on the impossibility of classifying oppressions in terms of hierarchies. Reading the multiple oppressions that marginalised groups face in Australia as intermeshed, allows for an understanding of people and their specific situations as complex and multifaceted where they cannot be reduced to a category as, for example, ‘boat people.’ If people cannot be reduced to a category, framing oppressions in terms of categorial hierarchy does not make sense. In other words, dividing oppressions in terms of hierarchies plays into the very logic of rigid classification that allows the objectification and homogenization of refugees according to their mode of arrival in Australia. As I mentioned before, I am not denying that a hierarchical treatment does exist. Yet, in order to challenge the

logic that creates and reproduces the fragmentation, homogenization and objectification of people, I suggest that a new reading is necessary.

Reading oppressions as intermeshed allows for developing a nuanced reflection of the ambiguous and often cruel ways in which Australia, as a nation, interacts with and treats people who do not fit within concepts of “dominant-white Australia.” In this sense, Australia is a place full of contradictions. A place that time after time has failed to embrace difference as a strength and not as a problem to be ‘whitened’ away. There are anxieties and fear in xenophobic mainstream discourses and policies. At the same time, there are also localised displays of community spirit and kindness, when, for example, community groups take matters into their own hands and work together to support each other. There is compassion, generosity and love in micro-sectors of the community.

Conclusion

To end, I want to situate this paper within the time and space of Australia in 2019. This is a year of great tragedies around the globe, of chaos, of environmental and human suffering. What is intriguing is that 2019 is quite similar to 2018, in fact, it is similar to most years before. In 2019, Gloria Anzaldúa’s words, written about 20 years ago, are still timely, encapsulating today’s calamities:

We are experiencing a personal, global identity crisis in a disintegrating social order that possesses little heart and functions to oppress people by organizing them in hierarchies of commerce and power—a collusion of government, transnational industry, business, and the military all linked by a pragmatic technology and sciences voracious for money and control. This system and its hierarchies impact people’s lives in concrete and devastating ways and justify a sliding scale of human worth used to keep humankind divided. (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* 118)

This hierarchical division Anzaldúa speaks about, division that excludes and divides people into levels of worthiness, is at the core of coloniality and all interrelated human crises, including refugeeism. Human hierarchies, based on race, gender, class and other rigidly imposed subjectivities are like powerful weeds with solid roots that spread wildly taking over habitats. These hierarchies keep us stuck, solidly divided into categories, into oppositional classifications. My reflection on these divisions in this paper concludes with the following: if hierarchical divisions based on firm categories are at the core of the problem, dialogue and connections are essential elements for solutions and for interventions at the level of meaning making. Yet, to create the possibility of new understandings through dialogue and connections without the dangers of oversimplification and naïve optimism, a careful examination of not only our worlds but also our implications/complicities in/with intermeshed oppressive systems is essential.

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