TRIBUTE

Tribute to Wadjularbinna Nullyarimma, Gungalidda Elder and Tent Embassy Leader

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Early in 2002, Borderlands published its first issue, Borderphobias, coedited by Suvendrini Perera and Anthony Burke. We chose this title for the inaugural issue to focus attention on the ‘insecurity politics’ that had become frighteningly prevalent in Australia since the Tampa’s arrival in August 2001, followed soon after by the 9/11 terror attacks. Central to our conceptualization of the issue was an inspiring statement by the Gungalidda elder, Wadjularbinna Nullyarimma, asserting the linkages among the prevalent forms of sovereign violence at home and abroad: perpetuating the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples; turning fleeing refugees into objects of xenophobic attack; unleashing an indiscriminate campaign of bombing and military raids across Afghanistan. In a media release on September 25, 2001, Wadjularbinna denounced the ‘border protection’ regime that had been put in place after the Howard government sought to draw a link between asylum seekers and the 9/11 terrorists:

I am appalled that even as I write this, laws are being made in the Parliament, to keep refugees away from this land ... As a black woman I recognise the racism and arrogance that is projected against the refugees - because that same racism and arrogance has been directed against us for over 200 years. We know what it's like to suffer religious persecution, because we have not had freedom since we were invaded . . . [T]his is not John Howard's country, it has been stolen. It was taken over by the first fleet of illegal boat people. We need to remind the world that the Aboriginal people who have stayed true to themselves, to their land and to their spiritual beliefs, do not have the same views about refugees, about the US or about a war of retribution that John Howard does. (Wadularbinna 2002, 8)
As Anthony Burke wrote in his eloquent editorial to this first issue of *Borderlands*, explicit in Wadjularbinna's statement 'is a rejection of the Australian government's claim to speak with authority about belonging and sovereignty. She shows how the denial of Aboriginal history, trauma and self-determination are closely linked with the exclusion and detention of asylum seekers. She shows how the constitutive violence of the past is perpetuated and echoed in the constitutive violence of the present' (Burke 2002).

From her earliest years Wadjularbinna intimately experienced the violence and trauma of colonization and dispossession. She was one of the first children to be removed from her parents when the Doomadgee mission was established in the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1936. Except for a brief respite in 1942, when the children were allowed to return home because of fears of a Japanese attack, most of her childhood and adolescence were spent at the mission (Gordon 2001, 56). In a 1996 article she gave an account of her painful lost years: ‘My marriage was arranged by missionaries. For 18 years, as a station manager's wife, I was forced to live a lie. It was 30 years before I went home and felt free to be myself’ (Wadjularbinna 1996). Out of the difficult process of freeing herself from forced assimilation Wadjularbinna derived the impetus for a very different way of being, and for articulating a compelling ecological ethics of interconnectedness with and responsibility for others. This is powerfully evidenced in her statement on the Tampa refugees:

> Those people were out on the water. The old women where I come from said "Look at this big river, where we're fishing, look at this big land." There's room for all of us, if we learn to live simply, within our country's means. This land is crying out for us to stop being so materialistic. We should be learning our lesson. Cutting down on the way we live, saving the land and embracing others in need. Giving them refuge. This is a spiritual country and we are a spiritual people, we are ready to embrace other people in their need. We should only be using the things we need to survive, and not keeping everything for ourselves, and living well at other people's expense. (Wadjularbinna 2002, 5)

Throughout the period of the Howard government, the regime of border protection entwined with the politics of denial and the repression of Aboriginal rights and aspirations. Wadjularbinna continued fearlessly to speak truth to power and to hold politicians to account both for the sham politics of reconciliation and for shamelessly purveying racism. On one memorable occasion she reduced the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Immigration, Philip Ruddock, to ‘stand[ing] palid’ before her at a stolen generations conference, as she upbraided him for the government’s posturing on border protection: ‘Stop this nonsense. You need to be smoked . . . You are descendants of the First Fleet of illegal boat people. How dare you treat the migrants who come here as refugees like that in this day and age?’ (Jopson 2001).
In the years since, a number of Indigenous leaders have, like Wadjularbinna, shown how enacting a living Aboriginal sovereignty is bound up with the ethics of hospitality towards those seeking refuge. As politicians count the number of boats arriving in Australian waters, Aboriginal leaders mark their ownership and sovereignty over their country through continuing practices of hospitality and openness to those arriving by sea, not as conquerors but as sojourners and supplicants. In conferring hospitality on refugees, and affirming their own status as the rightful hosts, Indigenous people repudiate their dispossession by the colonial state and renew their claim to ownership (Birch 2001). An instantiation of this sovereignty is the conferral of Aboriginal Nations passports to refugees and migrants. The Aboriginal Nations passports campaign began in 2010 with the issuing of passports to a group of Sri Lankan asylum seekers caught in limbo in Indonesia on the ship Oceanic Viking. More recently, in a ceremony held outside Villawood detention centre, Uncle Ray Jackson of the Indigenous Social Justice Association conferred Aboriginal Nations passports on two Tamil men held inside in security detention based on secret ASIO findings to which they will never have access (http://aboriginalpassportceremony.org/). These Aboriginal Nations passport ceremonies reference a history in which papers and certificates and the lack of these documents have circumscribed Aboriginal peoples’ citizen ship and regulated their own free movement across colonial lines (http://refugeeeaction.org.au/2012/05/13/aboriginal-passports-issued-to-indefinitely-detained-tamils-denied-australian-residency-on-security-grounds/). Conferring papers on these non-lawful non-citizens, then, is a moving enactment of solidarity and inclusiveness.

In late December 2012, when the Aboriginal Tent Embassy released the news of Wadjularbinna’s death, I reread her ‘Gungalidda Grassroots’ statement in a climate marked by renewed borderphobia over asylum seekers, the re-establishment of offshore detention camps, and a necropolitical approach of ‘wishful sinking’ towards refugee boats (Nakhoul 2010, 120; Perera 2012). The words of the women elders fishing in Gungalidda country reminded me of what Deborah Bird Rose describes as ‘water business,’ a set of practices for ‘finding ways to protect and defend the fullness of water in itself and in its relations with other things, and thus engage with water’s living presence’ (Rose 2007, 12). Wadjularbinna’s Gungalidda elders connect the living water business of their big river with the lives of those seeking refuge along the coastlines of this settler state whose identity is premised on being ‘Girt by sea.’ Founded on separation and insularity, this identity of an exclusionary Australia involves what Bird calls the ‘death work’ of ‘unmaking water’: impairing ‘water’s living presence and at the same time … killing the human capacity to understand water in its living complexity.’ The ‘deeply death-oriented work’ of unmaking water is ‘mystified often by being performed under banners that seem to signal life: production, … economic advantage, national security etc, etc’ (Rose 2007, 12).
While refugees who entrust their lives to the oceans remake and affirm its complexity with their own stories and bodies, the death-work of unmaking water ensnares seaborne refugee bodies in the sovereign logic of territoriality. Rejecting this exclusionary logic, the Gungalidda elders in Wadjularbinna’s statement teach us how to avoid the trap of territorial violence; their voices enunciate a reminder, as Burke wrote in the preface to Borderphobias, that ‘we already possess the tools to think our way out: to understand and exercise sovereignty differently, to acknowledge the violence hidden in its arrogance . . . to question the link between terra nullius and “border protection”, to think of identity as connection rather than mastery, vulnerability or possession’ (Burke 2002). In this claiming of identity as connectedness, moreover, Joseph Pugliese points out in the same volume:

the ethical duty toward the other is . . . articulated not as chore or as a service that has to be begrudgingly rendered, but as an embrace - an enfolding of one body by another, a corporeal act of refuge in the face of hostility and suffering. The embrace is the ultimate incarnation of generosity: when one has little else to offer in the face of one’s own poverty and destitution, there is always the transcendent act of the embrace - transcendent as it conjoins two subjects in an act of affirmation without obliterating difference. (Pugliese 2002, 48)

A decade after Wadjularbinna’s statement, the politics of national insecuritization seem to be once again on the rise. Liberal and Labour politicians continue the racist dog whistling, calling for ‘behavioural protocols’ for asylum seekers (Taylor 2013) and advocating controls over the entry of ‘foreigners’ on 457 visas (Ireland 2013). The politics of ‘uncertainty’ whipped up in the wake of the Mabo and Wik legislation have given way to the Northern Territory Intervention, whose failed tactics are exempted from questioning by a self-seeking consensus between the major parties. In this time of foreboding, we pay tribute to Wadjularbinna’s inclusive and courageous warrior spirit. The generous enfolding of her embrace, the transcendent affirmations she enacted, must inspire us more urgently now than ever before:

Our religion and cultural beliefs teaches us that everyone is a part of us and we should care about them. We can't separate ourselves from other human beings - it's a duty. (Wadjularbinna 2002, 6)

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Through Terror (coedited with Antonio Traverso, Routledge, 2011). Currently with Sherene Razack she is editing the anthology, At the Limits of Justice: Women of Colour Theorize Terror.

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