

Mirroring image: Seeing communities as they see themselves

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Abstract

A key theme of recent public debate is 'Australian values', specifically the way they are identified, expressed and measured. Central to the theme has been the nature of belonging as an Australian. It has been, quite literally, about border control, specifically the premise on which the rights to belong are conferred and about who controls the rights. In this paper I outline community-based impacts and responses to this debate. Research for the paper is drawn from my doctoral research that examines the role of community-based arts projects in facilitating self-expression by project participants, especially views of themselves and of their belonging to particular groups or locations.

On 28 October 2001, at the City Recital Hall, Sydney, then Prime Minister John Howard stated that 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'. It is conventional wisdom that his government was subsequently re-elected on the sentiment of this statement, which re-enforced Prime Minister Howard's earlier comments about the type of people he wanted in Australia. Prime Minister Howard's statement was made in the lead-up to an election at a time and in a climate of fear and suspicion in a country spooked by international events, and border protection was one of two issues defined by the Liberal Party director to put to the electorate before the 2001 election

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(Markus 2002). While it is not my purpose here to detail the then national and international political environment, this paper will explore apparent and implied meanings of this seemingly bland statement, and discuss some of the repercussions and responses to the echoes and ripples it created.

At face value Prime Minister Howard was stating the obvious and the reasonable, in that the business of governments is to exercise immigration policies and border controls. However, 'the banal idiom of everyday life' (Brett 2006), which characterised many of Howard's speeches typical of this statement, can be a 'calming operation' that serves 'to assuage and mollify' (Moore 2006) and to prepare the ground for the hard words and actions to follow. In this instance, the 'great breakers of applause [which] broke over the Prime Minister's head' (Marr & Wilkinson, cited in Moore 2006) when the statement was made, foreshadowed support for implementation of its inherent threats (Hyland 2007; Kerr 2005). The existence of the statement provided a rationale for government actions and, it could be construed, provided an endorsement of actions—whether overt or covert, subtle or extreme—by individuals and groups (Carney 2007; *Guardian* 2007). The 'We will decide' statement followed earlier comments regarding asylum seekers, and in the climate of the 2001 federal election it is not unreasonable to assume that the main players in the 'us and them' scenario were 'Australians'—presumed to be synonymous with 'Christian'—and people of Muslim faith. Whether individual Muslims might or might not be Australian citizens, in sections of Australian society and in language by politicians and community leaders, 'Muslim' and 'Australian' were envisaged as mutually exclusive adjectives or states of being: to be 'Muslim' was thus to be 'un-Australian'. Behavioural responses to this binary

position were documented in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report *Ismae* of June 2004.¹ They were also demonstrated by events in and around Cronulla Beach in December 2005 (Saeed 2007), as well as in the creation and distribution of bogus election



pamphlets during campaigning for the seat of Lindsay in the 2007 federal election (Carney 2007; Hutchison 2007b).

What was not so apparent but still very striking in the Prime Minister's statement and in subsequent verbal and physical contests was the apparent ignorance or denial of Australia's status as a settler nation, and the consequence of this on the original inhabitants and the status of members of successive immigration patterns. The statement was made without irony, but avoided acknowledgment of the settlement of the continent of Australia and any resultant impacts on actual and implied senses of belonging or of sovereign rights to land.

Australia in the early 21st century was thus in a situation in which some individuals—Australian, either by birth or citizenship—were labelled 'un-Australian' by virtue of their faith, and descendents of the original inhabitants of the land known as 'Australia' were excluded from the plural 'we' of the population of their ancestral lands. Such absurdities have been addressed in academic, public and media forums by many legal and human rights advocates and groups and in parliament by politicians including Senator John Faulkner (The Religion Report 2006). Vilification of migrants is not new to Australia, as noted by many authors including Jureindin (2002), with earlier arguments for deporting adherents of Irish Catholicism and banning their further immigration referenced in the federal parliament by Senator John Faulkner (2006). During this period individuals' economic status was also cited as a premise for delineation of borders of social inclusion or exclusion, irrespective of their means or access to education, employment or housing and a growing gap between expectations of even the basics, such as education (Mackay 2007; Saeed 2007).

Individuals without work in the strong economic environment found themselves labelled by the Minister for Employment Services as 'work shy', 'job snobs' who would be able to get



work if they changed their views (Abbott 1999; 7.30 Report 1999; World Today 2000). This paradigm places poverty as the outcome of a lack of personal will or ambition, and so a personal choice (Jennings, cited in Schooneveldt 2002) rather than a result of government policy or labour availability. Yet, also within this paradigm, statements like that of Prime Minister Howard mean that decisions about the rights of individuals to hold Australian citizenship and/or to be portrayed as deserving of participation in and enjoyment of the benefits of that citizenship are made by others, with individuals themselves having little or no control over their destiny (Steketee 2006). In this negation of autonomous power and transfer of rights, value is ascribed to cultural, religious, social and economic signifiers and personal histories (Aristotle 2007; Farouque 2007; Hart & Maiden 2007; Hutchison 2007a; Levin 2007; O'Donoghue 2003; Saeed 2007; Sawer 2005; Summers 2006; Topfield & Rood 2007) in such a way that individuals' inalienable selves become the basis for creation of themselves as an alien Other. The Immigration Minister's controversial insinuation that the bashing death of a teenage boy of Sudanese refugee background, by white youths, was evidence of the failure of refugees to assimilate into Australian society alludes to a transference of these rights (Hutchison 2007a). Such ascription processes are supported by a reading of the 'We will decide ...' statement as being a statement about territorial border control, as its face value suggests, but also as being about the borders and boundaries of representation, and rights over representations of self (Elder 2006). In this latter sense the statement is about identity and about power. It is about self-identity, as one is seen by others, and it is also about power and authority over decisions that are made about self, and about the spheres of one's activities. Denial of this power involves an inevitable spiralling downwards of human dignity and the devaluing of individuals within a society, and ultimately the denial of their validity as members of a society or community (Herd 2006; Saeed 2007).

The remainder of this paper will outline two projects; firstly the Re-Igniting Communities program (RIC) which is a program of The Torch Project, and the Anti- Racism Action Band



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(ARAB) project, which is a program of the Victorian Arabic Social Services.² Both projects facilitate individuals and minority groups' location of themselves 'in the picture', as themselves, and in the picture of their choice, grounded in a concept of 'belonging' related to people and place.

Yuval-Davis presents 'belonging' as being about an emotional attachment, feeling 'at home', and feeling safe (2006, p. 197). Miller (2003) identifies belonging as being related to social connectedness and historical connectedness—as part of a past and future continuum, and having a relationship with a particular location. Alleyne (2002) sees community as being an imagined place based on ongoing relationships and best understood through action (Cohen, cited in Alleyne 2002, p. 608). Research by Wise (2005) suggests that the construction and maintenance of community is inherently dynamic. In *Ismae* Australians of Arab and Muslim background describe being labelled 'un-Australian', despite being legally and emotionally Australian. Personal stories in *Bringing Them Home* (1997) parallel the experiences of Aboriginal elder Bob Randall (*Kanyini* 2006). Randall describes his experience as a 'snip, snip' from his 'Kanyini', as his connectedness to family, language, spirituality and land is severed.

Common between the Aboriginal and Arabic and Muslim experiences is a forfeiture of identity and rights, and assumptions and value attribution by others about personal signifiers such as skin colour, religion or language. They gained minority status, using Louis Wirth's definition (cited in Alcock et al. 1979, p.2), by being singled out, based on physical or cultural characteristics, for differential and unequal treatment. They became objects of collective discrimination; politically subordinated, socially and economically disadvantaged, socially isolated, spatially segregated, and disaffected in their attitude to the state. By any of these measures, many participants in the RIC and ARAB projects could be described as members of minorities.

In keeping with their intimate and local nature, both the RIC and ARAB projects are guided by local conditions and stakeholders, but their commitment to broader principles of



inclusion and participation are reflected in the projects' structures and processes. Primary to the project partners and sponsors is the quality of the participants' experiences during the projects, especially the value that participants themselves place on their experiences of the projects, whether from the project development processes, the performance events, or any other elements the participants might identify as valuable. The delivery of the projects emphasises individual decision-making, negotiation of those decisions within group settings, and participation in geographically-based social and political communities.

The RIC and ARAB projects both use facilitated programs of performing arts sessions with targeted communities to develop and present a performance work as a means of reinforcing and re-connecting dislocated, interrupted and disrupted social and political belonging—locally, intergenerationally, and multiculturally. The RIC program identifies key elements in maintaining and remaking community connectedness as history, culture, identity and belonging, and aims to make and remake these links both within Indigenous communities, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. ARAB's principal aims are to combat racism and gang culture by developing cross-cultural friendships, and to build self esteem and confidence amongst disengaged and at-risk youth, particularly those from Arabic speaking backgrounds, irrespective of religious or national origins. In 1999 the Torch Community Theatre Project began a series of productions, which explored the story of the Yorta Yorta people and the treatment of asylum seekers within the context of the contemporary political climate. ARAB began as a project of the Victorian Arab Social Services, to engage Arabic-speaking youth in a series of workshops to discuss, debate and analyse issues of racism, citizenship, identity, belonging and intercultural understanding. A commonality between the two projects is that both use performance presentations as outcome hooks for community-based research processes used with the participants. Both projects explore self-identified local, personal and group themes around perceptions of themselves, and self-perceptions and stereotypes of themselves as held by others including different generations, and different ethnic or socio-economic groups.



In 2007, RIC developed and presented *The Con* based in Laverton, an outer western suburb of Melbourne, and ARAB drew students from secondary schools in Melbourne's northern suburbs for *Ahlam*. Members of these geographic and age demographic groups described themselves, their ambitions and aspirations via the production of *The Con* and *Ahlam*. Both productions were presented in performance-based formats, but with different emphases on format: one more narrative theatre style, underpinned with music and dance presentations; the other emphasising music and dance presentations with a linking thematic narrative.

The Con ran parallel storylines grounded in local detail and experiences, while reflecting universal human themes of immigration, teen bullying, and family separations and reunions. It was developed from local stories and experiences identified during community-based skills workshops and steering committee meetings. In the workshops personal and local community stories were rehearsed as scenes for the performance, and controversial issues around process, content, aims and intentions were raised via the steering committee, which had representation from stakeholder agencies and individual community members. Many steering committee members were also active participants in the workshops, in the performances, and in support logistical and administrative roles. Performances of *The Con* were held at Laverton Community Centre, in local schools, near the site of the Aboriginal mission, *Cumagundga*, and at local community events between 12 November and 1 December 2007.

Community feedback identified changes in attitudes and behaviours, and slight but significant awareness shifts around issues within the community, particularly around social and behavioural activities. Also noted were a renewed sense of pride in the area, and a sense that the community was shown in a positive light. Cross-cultural connections had been made and understandings reached as a result of the opportunity for people to see commonalities of experience between themselves and others.



The *Ahlam* project included schools and agencies in Melbourne's outer suburban northern suburbs, and actively involved approximately 150 young people identifying from fifty-two ethnic or national backgrounds. A link for these groups was the project name, *Ahlam*, the Arabic word for 'dream', which created a conceptual umbrella for the project's three main parts: one based in an assisted care youth centre, another at a school for students with special needs, and the large scale project across the partner and client high schools.

One of the outcomes was a music and spoken-word piece dealing with a universal teenage concern—that your mother is 'stalking' you by phoning frequently to ask where you are, who else is there and when you will be home. Another was a project for youth with special needs, workshopped theatrically with full make-up and costuming, which gave rise to a photographic 'dreamscape' installed in a prominent position opposite Glenroy railway station. There was also a large-scale performance, shown at Coburg Town Hall from 26 to 28 October 2007, which had a loosely structured narrative around 'Ahlam', a young girl who wants to be a dancer. Like many other musicals, its structure provided a means for combining music and dance performance segments. Over a ten-week period the ARAB artists held skills workshops in schools and community venues. Many groups or 'crews' rehearsed independently, and at their own undertaking formed additional, cross-school crews, which were facilitated by ARAB. The crews were art form-based and/or location and ethnic-based. In many of the performances, they incorporated traditional cultural elements related to their own backgrounds into quite contemporary routines. The strength of individual crews drove the content and messages of individual performance pieces, while the choreography and spoken elements were developed by ARAB and based on participant interviews. A valued outcome of the *Ahlam* experience, as expressed by some of the participants, was a growth in their self-confidence, as a result of discovering social and physical skills within themselves.

National and international events in the 1990s and early 2000s, not least the centenary of Federation and the Sydney Olympics, cast a spotlight on the conceptual identity of Australia



nationhood: the basis of its identity as a Commonwealth, and the commonality of those peoples described as being 'Australian'. In the process, two groups identified racially and religiously within the Australian population found themselves at the centre of this debate, while others found themselves liable to be under suspicion of sharing questionable values or opinions. A commonality in all these examples is a questioning of the rights of sections of the population to their participation in Australian society, of legitimacy of access to and usage of land and facilities, and of rights to Australian citizenship.

Events such as the Mabo ruling in June 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating's so called 'Redfern Speech' of December 1992, and the publication of *Bringing them Home*, precipitated community examination of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and of their support for the so-called 'Reconciliation' movement. The Reconciliation movement was slowed with the advent of the conservative government lead by John Howard and an entrenchment of sentiments expressed by other conservative politicians such as Pauline Hanson and some historians, which questioned the legitimacy and premise of the Reconciliation movement in what became derided as 'black armband' views of Australian history and society (Sinclair 2007). Around this time boatloads of asylum seekers from various non-Anglo backgrounds arrived in Australian territorial waters (Herd 2006; Hyland 2007). They came predominantly from countries with large Muslim populations, where international terrorist incidents had occurred, including some which claimed Australian lives. Muslim identity thus became synonymous with Arabic background,

despite statistical reality, and associated with breaches of Australia's territorial, social and cultural boundaries. This theme was most dramatically expressed by rioters in Cronulla in December 2005, but also by the then Prime Minister, Treasurer, and others including MP Danna Vale. Vale ventured that not only were 'Muslim values' incompatible with 'Australian values' but that Muslims in Australia were looking to take control of Australia, using violence, or by sheer weight of numbers (ABC News Online 2006; Garnaut 2006; Braithwaite & AAP 2006; *Guardian* 2007).



The statement 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' can be seen as an exercise in muscle-flexing, aimed at domestic audiences worried about border security as the Howard Government sought a second term in office. It was very much about what

I will do to and for you: I will protect you from breaches of our joint borders, and as for you, I will monitor and control your movements to prevent breaches by you.

Projects such as RIC and ARAB are aimed at individuals and groups with minority status inside or outside those tightly controlled borders, and they facilitate opportunities for people to control their own access in, around and through the borders. Through the creation of opportunities for self-expression, the comment that 'We will decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances in which they come' becomes rephrased as 'We will decide what is said about us, and the circumstances in which it is said'.

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Notes

1. The *Ismae* report (2004 p.86) notes an incident in which a school girl's hijab was blacked out in the annual school photograph without her consent, because 'she stood out too much'.
2. Information presented in this paper about The Torch Project Re-Igniting Communities program and the Anti Racism Action Band project was gathered through preliminary research, including participant observation, as part of my doctoral research.

