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“Because we all love our country”: Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children, Australian Policy-Makers, and the Building of National Sentiment

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In this article I look at Australian political discourse from 2013 to 2016 to examine two twinned schemas: the ways in which the category of the child refugee or asylum-seeker is produced, and the ways in which ideas of the Australian nation are produced, through emotional discourses, or economies of emotion. I am interested here in asking what emotional work these narratives about child refugees do in the national imagination, and to create an idea of “Australia”. Both the category of the child refugee/asylum-seeker, and that of the nation, are not natural: they are historical productions, built through multivalent, multilingual discourses and practices. They are forms of creating difference amongst populations in society. Through a focus on these discourses, languages, and grammars — as enunciated by politicians, NGO workers, lawyers, activists, and policy-makers — I will explore the specific ways in which the emotional economies function, and work to understand and historicise the systems of ideas and relations that they produce.

“Shame is a powerful word and a powerful emotion”, Andrew Wilkie MP told Parliament.¹ He continued: “Most people have felt it at one time or another — a feeling deep inside when we know we have done something wrong. And I think we all know that the wrong that leads to shame is often a wrong done to others.”² Wilkie — a former lieutenant colonel in the Australian army and former whistleblower who resigned from the Office of National Assessments “in protest over the Iraq War”, and who has been the independent Member for Denison (now Clark) since 2010 — was making this assertion in the House of Representatives, on Monday 26 May 2014, as part of his Second Reading speech for the Migration Amendment (Ending the Nation’s Shame) Bill 2014.³ This was a Private Member’s Bill, introduced by Wilkie, which sought “to amend the Migration

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¹ For a detailed exploration of shame in an Australian national context see, for instance, Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 2014), pp.101-121; Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Sydney, 2005). See also Peter N. Stearns, *Shame: A Brief History* (Urbana, 2017).

² The Rt Hon. Andrew Wilkie MP, “Migration Amendment (Ending the Nation’s Shame) Bill 2014: Second Reading Speech”, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, House, 26 May 2014, p.4031.

³ Andrew Wilkie’s biographical information can be found on his website, <<http://andrewwilkie.org/about-2/>>, accessed 21 May 2019.

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Act 1958 ('the Act') to afford specific rights to non-citizens who travel or are brought to Australia which they are currently denied under existing legislation".⁴ The Bill was also intended to ensure "that children who are travelling with their parents are not to be separated".⁵ In his speech, Wilkie described in some detail the quality of the shame, which was felt — as the name of the Bill makes clear — at the level of the nation. Wilkie argued that "millions of Australians do feel shame at the actions of this and previous governments when it comes to our country's response to asylum-seekers. And moreover they feel this shame keenly, shame at actions done in their name."⁶ He asserted in response that "this bill makes Australia act like the rich and civilised country that we are; a place that not only signed up to the refugee convention, but also one that believes in it. This bill would end the shame."⁷ Shame and civilisation, in this utterance, are counterpoised. Australia could be righted by taking these legislative steps to change the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Wilkie continued, noting that "we saw the pained faces of observers who tell of children in detention who have stopped speaking or who refer to themselves by number, rather than name. And *surely there is no greater shame than that done to the world's children*."⁸ On 28 October 2014, the Bill was removed from consideration by Parliament.⁹

We can understand Wilkie's legislative and rhetorical approach here as a performance of national emotions. This Bill, and its accompanying speech and explanatory memorandum, speaks a set of ideas, rhetoric, discourses and grammars in the public arena. That is, in this Bill and in his speech, Wilkie was drawing on a history of the centrality of the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers, and immigrants more generally, to white Australian national feeling, and furthering the production and performance of that history.¹⁰ He was, moreover, highlighting the central place which children have been understood to have in this emotional schema. In doing so, Wilkie reinforced the twinning of two schemas, and it is this twinning — or co-constitution — which I will be examining in this article: the production of the figure of the child refugee or asylum-seeker as an object of Australian governance and the production of the

⁴ See the Rt Hon. Andrew Wilkie MP, "Migration Amendment (Ending the Nation's Shame) Bill 2014: Explanatory Memorandum", 2014, available at <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/r5229_ems_c4dc0f26-adfb-4261-8a6e-632b5ca79907/upload_pdf/14117EMWilkie.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf>, accessed 5 December 2016. For the full documentation associated with the Bill see "Migration Amendment (Ending the Nation's Shame) Bill 2014", available at <http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r5229>, accessed 5 December 2016.

⁵ Wilkie, "Second Reading Speech", p.4032.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4031

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* [emphasis added]. On definitions of shame and shaming see Erica Millar, *Happy Abortions: Our Bodies in the Era of Choice* (London, 2017), p.187.

⁹ This came under Standing Order 42, "The Clerk shall remove from the Notice Paper items of private Members' business and orders of the day relating to committee and delegation reports which have not been called on for eight consecutive sitting Mondays". See House of Representatives Standing Orders, 2017, available at <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/Powers_practice_and_procedure/House_of_Representatives_Standing_Orders>, accessed 6 November 2018; "Migration Amendment (Ending the Nation's Shame) Bill 2014".

¹⁰ This is tied to ideas of a white Australia, about which there is a voluminous body of writing. See, for instance, Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York, 2000); Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (Melbourne, 2005); Millar, *Happy Abortions*, pp.221-236.

Australian nation through emotional discourses, or economies of emotion, between 2013 and 2016. I am interested, that is, in asking what emotional work these narratives about the population group defined as “child refugees” do in the national imagination and what emotional work narratives of the nation do in formulating ideas about child refugees. Or, to put it another way, I am thinking about the discursive and sentiment-rich relationship between ideas of child refugees and ideas of the Australian nation-state.¹¹ As Sara Ahmed has written with regard to Australian feelings of shame in response to the history of the Stolen Generations, the subject of inquiry here is to understand “how declarations of shame can bring ‘the nation’ into existence as a felt community”.¹² In this article I begin with Wilkie’s invocation of shame, but will look at emotions more broadly in order to understand this bringing into existence.

Neither the category of the child, nor of the refugee/asylum-seeker, nor of the nation, are natural: they are historical productions, built through multivalent, multilingual, discourses and practices. By focusing on a series of discourses coming from a range of different political and subjective positions, I will present a historical snapshot of the ways these categories have been understood. I will first explore emotional utterances from a series of politicians and then turn to the emotional responses of advocates and politicians to a High Court judgement in 2016, concluding by examining the different emotions which have circulated from the refugee and asylum-seeking children detained on Christmas Island and Nauru, exploring the different demands on politicians and the Australian people — as distinct from the nation — which they make. I will explore these emotions and feelings by examining a series of documents: Hansard, newspaper reports, and social media postings. Exploring these writings and speeches provides the opportunity to undertake a close analysis of the discourses being deployed and mobilised at this period in time.

In the years 2013 to 2016, Australia’s federal government was a Coalition government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott (18 September 2013 — 15 September 2015) and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (from 15 September 2015). The Minister for Immigration and Border Protection was Scott Morrison (18 September 2013 — 23 December 2014) and Peter Dutton (from 23 December 2014). Over the course of this period there were a number of flashpoints in public discussions about the place of refugee- and asylum-seeking children within Australia. I explore some of these flashpoints in this article, taking a slice-in-time approach, to illuminate the political feelings and sentiments active at this time in Australia.¹³ My intention here is not to argue that this moment is unique in Australian history: this period of emotionality stretched throughout the years surrounding 2013 to 2016 and has precedence from across Australia’s life. Examples exist in the longer Australian histories and emotions around

¹¹ On story-making and nationalism in Australia see Catriona Elder, *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (Sydney, 2007), p.25. On the relationship between children and adults, see Joanne Faulkner, *The Importance of Being Innocent: Why We Worry about Children* (Cambridge, 2011), p.1. On the historical production of the category of the child in Australia see, for instance, Sana Nakata, *Childhood Citizenship, Governance and Policy: the Politics of Becoming Adult* (London: 2015); Joanne Faulkner, *Young and Free: [Post]Colonial Ontologies of Childhood, Memory and History in Australia* (London, 2016); Joanne Faulkner and Magdalena Zolkos, eds, *Critical Childhood Studies and the Practice of Interdisciplinarity: Disciplining the Child* (Lanham, 2016); Jordana Silverstein, “‘I Am Responsible’: Histories of the Intersection of the Guardianship of Unaccompanied Child Refugees and the Australian Border”, *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol. 22, 2 (2016), pp.65-89. See also Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life* (New York, 1962).

¹² Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.101.

¹³ On the use of a “slice” approach to tell Australian history, see for instance Graeme Davison, “Slicing Australian History: Reflections on the Bicentennial History Project”, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 16 (1982), pp.3-20.

children contained particularly in the histories of the Stolen Generations; the British child migrants of the twentieth century; and the histories which have arisen out of the stories told at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.¹⁴ Additionally, the fact of child refugees and asylum-seekers having emotional valence at this time is not unique to Australia, as numerous social commentators around the world have shown. But by exploring this moment, taking this slice-in-time or case study approach, we can gain an understanding of the ways in which feelings have been mobilised, and ideas of child refugees and of the nation have been created.

This article fits into a broader trend within Australian historiography and scholarship on the politics surrounding refugees and asylum-seekers. Increasingly, social and political historians — such as Klaus Neumann and Claire Higgins — are turning their eyes towards the words and works of politicians, in order to understand a history of the ideas of Australia and its relationships with refugees that are produced.¹⁵ Behrouz Boochani, a journalist, writer and critical theorist, writing while imprisoned within and by the Manus Prison System, as he terms it, similarly provides great insight into the workings of the immigration carceral system within Australian colonial history and logics, explaining the centrality of the treatment of refugees by Australia to understanding Australia's past, and its present sense of itself and its nation-building projects.¹⁶ Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese provide similar insights into the relationships between Australia's coloniality and its treatment of refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants.¹⁷ Additionally, scholars such as Michelle Peterie, Danielle Every, Sukhmani Khorana, Debra Dudek, and Catherine Kevin and Karen Agutter, along with numerous others, are investigating and critiquing the recent biopolitical and emotional manoeuvres undertaken by Australian governments and publics in relation to refugees and asylum-seekers, and looking at how they further nation-building projects and develop so-called humanitarian, or "caring", ethics of relationality.¹⁸ It is this substantial,

¹⁴ On the connection between the Stolen Generations and the treatment of displaced children see, for instance, my discussion in Silverstein, "I Am Responsible", p.81, and the analytics of the confluence of settler colonialism and border regimes provided by the Deathscapes project. See <<https://www.deathscapes.org/>>, accessed 25 February 2019. On British child migrants in relation to this, see for instance Emily Soper, "Discursive Children: Stolen or Just Forgotten? Racial Politics and the Figure of 'the Child' in an Australian Culture of Liberalism", in *Critical Childhood Studies and the Practice of Interdisciplinarity*, pp.153-8. On the Royal Commission see the Final Report at <<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>>, accessed 15 February 2019.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Claire Higgins, *Asylum By Boat: Origins of Australia's Refugee Policy* (Sydney, 2017), and Klaus Neumann, *Across the Seas: Australia's Response to Refugees, A History* (Melbourne, 2015).

¹⁶ Behrouz Boochani, trans. Omid Tofighian, *No Friend But The Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (Sydney, 2018).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (New York, 2009); Joseph Pugliese, "Migrant Heritage in an Indigenous Context: For a Decolonising Migrant Historiography", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 23, 1 (2002), pp.5-18.

¹⁸ Michelle Peterie, "Docility and Desert: Government Discourses of Compassion in Australia's Asylum Seeker Debate", *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 53, 2 (2017), pp.351-66; Michelle Peterie, "'These Few Small Boats': Representations of Asylum Seekers During Australia's 1977 and 2001 Elections", *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 40, 4 (2016), pp.433-47; Danielle Every, "A Reasonable, Practical and Moderate Humanitarianism: The Co-Option of Humanitarianism in the Australian Asylum Seeker Debates", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 21, 2 (2008), pp.210-29; Sukhmani Khorana, "Screening the Refugee: Freedom Stories and the performance of empathy in an 'emotional community'", in Roger Patulny, Alberto Bellocchi, Rebecca E. Olson, Sukhmani Khorana, Jordan McKenzie, Michelle Peterie, eds, *Emotions in Late Modernity* (London, 2019), pp.237-249; Debra Dudek, "Seeing the Human Face: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Narratives and an Ethics of Care in Recent Australian Picture Books", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Vol. 4, 4 (Winter 2018), pp.363-76; Catherine Kevin and Karen Agutter, "Failing 'Abyan', 'Golestan' and 'the Estonian Mother': Refugee Women,

and growing, body of literature — and these critiques of these relationships — that this article engages with and contributes to by drawing in the historical specificities of governmental affective approaches to displaced children.

The Work of Emotions in Relation to Refugee and Asylum-seeking Children

We can understand that emotions circulate, and in doing so they do work. People can trade in emotional stocks, using them as barter for political gain, to put forward a position, to mine and extract a political change or effect, as a source of wealth to vouch for their standing, or as a way of demonstrating the impoverishment of others. Sara Ahmed writes of “affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation. The circulation of objects allows us to think about the ‘sociality’ of emotion.”¹⁹ That is, affect “is produced as an effect of [emotions] circulation” through the social and psychic fields.²⁰ Emotions are traded as emotional work is done: value, or affect, is acquired through circulation and exchange. And through this trade, an investment is being made.²¹ There is an economy to this trade or circulation in emotions: as people trade in emotional stocks, they are using different forms of emotion in order to get other work done.²² This is not, it should be clear, necessarily conscious work.

In this article I am exploring the ways that the emotional circulation or economy functions in the years 2013 to 2016 as a means of constructing both fields of sociality and individual and group subjects, such as “the politician who cares about refugees and asylum-seekers” and “the nation which is both ashamed and caring”. This then functions, I want to suggest, as a regulatory framework, producing a definitive “good”: all Australians should be aiming, it would seem, to be part of this community, this nation, which “feels sad”, “feels shame” and “cares”. At times these feelings may be discursively linked with other instantiations of emotion — fear, for instance, at the threat of the imagined breach of Australia’s borders, or horror, disgust, hate and outrage. In this article I want to examine the limited range of “caring” emotions which discursively circulate and direct a sense of the nation as needing to be “better” or “civilized”. Together, through this emotional circulation, there is an attempt to regulate the behaviour of others and create the ideal kind of nation. These emotional economies, then, are part of a broader technique of an Australian settler-colonial white governmentality which has long focused on controlling the nation’s population in various ways.²³ Those who voice these emotions, these feelings, are producing themselves as “good people”, as part of a national community which is “good”. But we can understand that they are doing so as part of a project of violence and control, as part of the project of maintaining the Australian settler-colony. My interest in this article, therefore, is not in evaluating whether those who espouse these feelings “really care” or not, but rather in looking at what language is used as part of the instantiation and control of national borders, the production of governable populations, and the governing of those populations.

Reproductive Coercion and the Australian State”, *Immigrants and Minorities*, Vol. 36, 2 (2018), pp.87-104.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

²² For a discussion of how Ahmed has recently been taken up by historians see Sarah Pinto, “The History of Emotions in Australia”, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 48, 1 (2017), pp.103-114, p.107.

²³ See, for instance, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minnesota, 2015); Ien Ang, “From White Australia to Fortress Australia: The Anxious Nation in the New Century”, in Laksiri Jayasuriya, David Walker, and Jan Gothard, *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation* (Perth, 2003), p.54.

Following a large body of work from across the academic globe, we can understand that refugee and asylum-seeker children are regularly — although not exclusively — conceptualized by non-children as a group of people who are uniquely highly vulnerable and in need of saving. It is the doing of this saving, in a sense, that is seen to be the thing which can redeem the Australian nation, and it binds together in a shared project those who seek to do that saving. As Anna Szörényi has explained it, “in the standard refugee story, or at least the one with a happy ending, the host nation in which the suffering protagonist resettles plays the role of benevolent rescuer and peaceful haven”.²⁴ There is a “relationship between victim and saviour” which Erica Millar asserts — following Lauren Berlant — creates feelings of compassion towards these figures who are understood to be carrying a “suffering”,²⁵ or being “distressed victims of unfortunate circumstances beyond their control”, which the saviour can, and must, “alleviate”.²⁶ This helps to form what Barbara Rosenwein has called “emotional communities”: a community of people who will do this “saving”.²⁷ These communities are generated as people share in the circulation of a set of emotions: these are communities in which “shared vocabularies and ways of thinking [...] have a controlling function, a disciplining function”, acting to aid in the creation of a community.²⁸ In the context being explored here, these circulating emotions serve the project of linking “saving the children” with “saving the nation”. This sentiment comes from speakers from across the political spectrum. And its discursive and public enunciation, it should be clear, does not necessarily correlate with the material activities which occur.

While Szörényi writes of refugees in general, we should note that this is heightened for refugee and asylum-seeking children.²⁹ Indeed, children are seen, Liisa Malkki explains, as representatives of a fundamental, pure, untainted humanity: they “are more powerful than adults; they are attributed an affective authority that adult refugees and other victims can generally never hope to possess”.³⁰ Moreover, “children as sufferers are familiar charismatic figures with an *affective* authority of great proportions”.³¹ In idealised form they do “affective cultural work as expressive moral subjects (but not as rational knowing subjects). [They] are ‘good to think’ as innocent victims”, who require saving.³² This notion of rescue is of great importance in the emotional economy under

²⁴ Anna Szörényi, “Two Dreams in One Bedroom”, *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, 73 (2012), pp.297-306, p.300. This is troubled, Szörényi makes clear, when refugees undertake political action — the Australian state begins to see them less as “victims” and more as trouble-makers who threaten the nation (p.300). We can extend this to include those refugees and asylum-seekers who make their own way to Australia by boat, rather than by aeroplane or by being brought to the country on a humanitarian resettlement visa.

²⁵ Millar, *Happy Abortions*, p.59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.58.

²⁷ Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2006), pp.24-27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

²⁹ On the particularity of children’s movement across borders, see, for example, Alison Brysk, “Children across Borders: Patrimony, Property, or Persons?” in Alison Brysk and Gershon Shafir, eds, *People Out of Place: Globalization, Human Rights, and the Citizenship Gap* (New York, 2004), pp.153-173; Jason Pobjoy, *The Child in International Refugee Law* (Cambridge, 2017).

³⁰ Malkki, “Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace”, p.65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.66.

³² Liisa Malkki, “Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace”, in Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin, eds, *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* (Durham, 2010), p.67. See also Erica R. Meiners, *For the Children? Protecting Innocence in a Carceral State* (Minneapolis, 2016); Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York, 2011); Faulkner, *The Importance of Being Innocent*; Carly McLaughlin, “It’s all about the children’: Child Asylum-Seekers and the Politics of Innocence in Australia”, in Anke Bartels, Lars Eckstein, Nicole Waller, Dirk Wiemann, eds, *Postcolonial Justice* (Leiden, 2017), pp.295-315;

examination here. The children who are being drawn into the discourses I am exploring are positioned as in need of saving, as will become clearer from the examples below.³³ This notion of saving is, broadly speaking, one informed by ideas of humanitarianism. But, as Miriam Ticktin argues, “while humanitarianism is often understood as driven by emotions — compassion, empathy, benevolence, pity — in fact, it relies on a very narrow emotional constellation, and this in turn constrains our responses”.³⁴

Joanne Faulkner, writing about children in Australia, has noted that — when it comes to public discussions of refugees — “the focus on children distracts from the complicated geopolitical and historical factors through which we and the boat people washed up in Australia. These factors are messy and, in the short term, irresolvable.” Focusing on the problematic of children, Faulkner argues, provides a “tidier” response.³⁵ Thus, refugee and asylum-seeking children sit within recent Australian political history as a group of people discursively deployed to demonstrate suffering, vulnerability, and the need for rescue in a way which adults are not. At times this affective work is undertaken by people attempting to advocate on their behalf, as will be explored below. It can also be seen in the actions of the Coalition government in December 2014, when they worked to convince a crossbench senator, Ricky Muir — member of the Australian Motoring Enthusiast Party, and holder of a Victorian Senate seat for just three years — to support legislation which would negatively change the immigration possibilities for people seeking asylum in Australia, but would release a group of children from detention on Christmas Island.³⁶ Children detained on Christmas Island spoke on the phone to Muir, in a move which Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young described as “using children in detention as hostages”.³⁷ Similarly, in a 2014 reply in Parliament regarding Budget spending, then Treasurer Joe Hockey used the image of children drowning to add an emotional punch to his claims about the Coalition government closing detention centres and hence saving money (and hence building a better Australia). He proclaimed:

I tell you what, as the boats came in under [the ALP] the boats stopped under this minister for immigration. The boats stopped, and not only that; because the boats have stopped we have saved the budget \$2½ billion and we have closed nine detention centres. But most of all, as a result of the

Sana Nakata, *Childhood Citizenship, Governance and Policy: The Politics of Becoming Adult* (London, 2015).

³³ There is a long history of “paternalistic” Australian humanitarian efforts to “rescue” and “save” children. See Joy Damousi, “The Campaign for Japanese-Australian Children to enter Australia, 1957-1968: A History of Post-War Humanitarianism”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 64, 2 (June 2018), pp.211-226. See also Miriam Ticktin, “Humanitarianism as Planetary Politics”, in Suvendrini Perera and Sherene H. Razack, *At the Limits of Justice: Women of Colour on Terror* (Toronto, 2014), pp.406-20.

³⁴ Miriam Ticktin, “Thinking Beyond Humanitarian Borders”, *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 83, 2 (2016), pp.255-271, p.256. See also Sara Wills, “Un-stitching the Lips of a Migrant Nation”, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, 118 (2002), pp.71-89.

³⁵ Faulkner, *The Importance of being innocent*, p.112. See also Miriam Ticktin, “A World Without Innocence”, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 44, 4 (2017), pp.577-90.

³⁶ For the text of the Bill and the explanatory memorandum see “Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Bill 2014”, Parliament House of Australia. Available at

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r5346. For Muir’s parliamentary history see

https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Parliamentarian?MPID=250024.

³⁷ Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, “Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Bill 2014: Committee Speech”, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, Senate, 4 December 2014, p.10331.

actions of this government there are no children floating in the ocean between Australia and East Timor as occurred under Labor!³⁸

Children here, then, are useful as emotional currency, with value extractable to achieve the policy outcomes desired by the government. Children are differentiated, understood to carry some distinct signifiatory power and are used discursively — and materially — to produce a particular set of national emotions, as in Wilkie’s call to the nation’s shame, or in the examples I will now outline.

Refugee Children as Generative of Politicians’ Emotions

In this section I will explore the utterances of a range of politicians over the period under exploration, drawing from examples of their words to provide a sketch of the vocabularies which produce the emotional imagined relationship between the Australian nation and the forcibly displaced children. Through these examples we can more concretely understand the felt Australian community being described and produced. In December 2014, Senator Christine Milne, responding to the provision in the Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Bill which would “classify children born in Australia to asylum-seeker parents as unauthorised maritime arrivals” argued that, on the contrary, “they are babies born in Australia on Australian soil, and they should be regarded in the same way as any other child born here and be given their citizenship — their statehood”.³⁹ This Bill was, Milne claimed, “*un-Australian*. It is a matter of *shame* to me”, she said, “that this parliament will pass this legislation.”⁴⁰

For Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, children as a useful category could be both the people who are deemed to need saving, as well as the motivating force behind action being taken. But these are substantially different groups of children, whose import is framed in different emotional languages. Responding to the Migration Amendment (Regional Processing Arrangements) Bill 2015 — which was designed to shore up the statutory authority of the government to implement offshore processing⁴¹ — Shorten touched on the “devastating loss of life — the drownings, the perishing of vulnerable people, of children.”⁴² He then used the languages of humanitarianism and emotional valency to argue for a different Australia, asserting: “We stand here not as defenders of an inward looking fortress where the problems of the world are never ours; instead we stand here guided by our compassion, because our compassion demands that we prevent drownings at seas, just as our compassion demands the humane treatment of all those in our care”.⁴³ He continued: “We will vote for this bill because people’s safety comes first

³⁸ The Rt Hon. Joe Hockey MP, “Budget: Questions Without Notice”, *CPD*, House, 4 June 2014, p.5535. The Messenger podcast used this soundbite to demonstrate the operations of border control and the emotions at work (and their affective work) in Parliamentary debates. See Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre, “#5: A Safer Place”, *The Messenger Podcast*, 13 March 2017. Available at <<http://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/the-messenger/5-a-safer-place>>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

³⁹ Senator Christine Milne, “Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Bill 2014: Second Reading Speech”, *CPD*, Senate, 4 December 2014, p.10275.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.10277 [emphasis added].

⁴¹ The Rt Hon. Peter Dutton MP, “Explanatory Memorandum: Migration Amendment (Regional Processing Arrangements) Bill 2015”, p.2. Available at <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/r5491_ems_69664dbc-a4f0-4331-9f52-590524956ff3/upload_pdf/502989.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf>.

⁴² The Rt Hon. Bill Shorten MP, “Migration Amendments (Regional Processing Arrangements) Bill 2015: Second Reading Speech”, *CPD*, House, 24 June 2015, p 7491.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

[...] We will vote for this bill because we are guided by our compassion.”⁴⁴ Shorten concluded his speech by affirming his idea of the Australian nation, as expressed through citizen children:

Take what we are doing, and let us commit to a parliament which we can explain to our children we were proud to serve in, because this is the right thing to do. Let us commit to a parliament worthy of our decent, civilised, humane country, a parliament which shows us for who we truly are. The nation that we want to see in the mirror should be reflected in the parliament of Australia: compassionate, strong, generous, secure, safe and fair. We all love our country. We are all human beings who do not want to see anyone else suffer. But, *because we all love our country*, today let us vow to serve it better.⁴⁵

ALP MP Michael Danby furthered the narrative of a binding sentiment, asserting in 2015: “No-one likes to see children in detention”.⁴⁶ ALP Senator Susan Lines has spoken of taking “a call from a refugee advocate who was in tears at the treatment of children. She told me many stories.”⁴⁷ Indeed, this emotional use of stories has a large degree of currency in parliamentary discourse. Greens representative Adam Bandt has used stories of his own children to propel the emotional manoeuvre. In February 2016, he explained that

one refugee advocate told me recently that in a detention centre in Australia there is now a six-month-old baby that the doctors have started referring to as ‘the baby that does not smile’; not because the family does not love it, but because the parents themselves are so full of anguish and desperation as a result of being locked up [...] That is what we are doing to children now. As someone who is the extraordinarily proud father of a seven-month-old, I live for those moments when my child smiles at me, and to think that our system is breaking children — and that that is a deliberate intent of it, because it is put there as a deterrent measure — is something that shames us.⁴⁸

Bandt then framed this treatment of children in terms of a national question, arguing that “it is about creating Fortress Australia and creating a mean Australia [...] [W]e should be celebrating the fact that Australia is a land of hope for people, that Australia is a beacon of democracy, freedom and stability.” Not doing so “makes us weaker”, it “make[s] Australia a meaner place”, and so legislation should be forthcoming which would “make sure that we have an Australia we can all be proud of”.⁴⁹

ALP MP Anthony Albanese noted that “like everyone in this House [of Representatives], the member for Corio understands that no society can consider itself civilised if it does not do everything in its power to protect children [...] when it comes to protecting children there should be no differences of opinion.”⁵⁰ In 2015, Dutton responded to a petition from Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children and claimed: “The government takes the welfare of children seriously and moving children

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7492.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7494 [emphasis added]. On the role of national pride in this affective formulation, see Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.113.

⁴⁶ The Rt Hon. Michael Danby MP, “Petition: Asylum Seekers, Mirabel Foundation: Speech”, *CPD*, House, 4 March 2015, p.2106.

⁴⁷ Senator Susan Lines, “Migration Amendment (Regional Processing Arrangements) Bill 2015: Second Reading Speech”, *CPD*, Senate, 25 June 2016, p.4570.

⁴⁸ The Rt Hon. Adam Bandt MP, “Migration Amendment (Complementary Protection and Other Measures) Bill 2015: Second Reading Speech”, *CPD*, House, 2 February 2016, p.83. For a similar approach by the Greens see also Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, “Children in Immigration Detention: Speech”, *CPD*, Senate, 2 December 2015, p.9613.

⁴⁹ Bandt, “Migration Amendment”, pp. 84, 85.

⁵⁰ The “member for Corio” to whom Albanese was referring was Richard Marles MP, the then-ALP Shadow Minister for Immigration and Border Protection. The Rt Hon. Anthony Albanese MP, “Migration Amendment (Mandatory Reporting) Bill 2015: Second Reading Speech”, *CPD*, House, 23 November 2015, p.13394.

out of detention and into the community is a priority".⁵¹ In response to the "Protecting the Lonely Children" report from the Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce, Dutton similarly "reiterate[d] that I take protection of children very seriously and am committed, as is the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, to ensuring that children are protected from abuse and exploitation".⁵² These words work in the service of producing an idea of the government, and of the nation, as one which cares. In doing so, they work towards obfuscating, or covering over, the punitive, violent, and colonial entrenchment of national borders. As we can thus see, the emotions that circulate around the border are intimately linked to the emotions that circulate around the children. Ideas of the nation are built through these emotions circulating together. We can see in these statements that which Francesco Ricatti has described as "the emotional morality of *we* Australians [being] called into question while also reaffirmed as the central focus of the asylum seeker debate".⁵³

Rescuing the Children

To focus in more on the emotional vocabularies utilised during this period, which intertwine nation and children, we will now examine the discourses brought forward in the public and political classes' discourse surrounding a High Court case. We will see here the ways in which refugee and asylum-seeking children become discursively saturated with a certain set of emotional vocabularies. These vocabularies intertwine the Australian people in an idealised relationship of "protection" towards the displaced children. In this section we will thus see the ways in which these "carers" speak emotionally about the children and their potential rescue, before — in the next section — turning to the words of some detained children and identifying the vastly different emotional register in which they speak.

In February 2016 the Australian High Court declared legal the detention, in Nauru, of asylum-seekers who had travelled towards Australia by boat, seeking asylum.⁵⁴ Media and public discussions of this case focused particularly on the ability of a group of 267 asylum-seekers who had been brought from detention in Nauru to Australia for medical treatment to remain in Australia. Following the judgement, Dutton made clear that he intended to send them all back to detention on Nauru. Of the 267 people who were to be removed as a result of the judgement, thirty-nine were children and a further thirty-three were babies born in Australia. Following legislation passed in 2014, these Australian-born babies received the immigration status of their parents: they were not legally considered to be Australian citizens.⁵⁵ As the judgement was handed down and in its aftermath, it was these children and babies who were the focus of public discussion.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Hon. Peter Dutton MP, "Petitions: Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children: Procedural Text", *CPD*, House, 17 August 2015, p.8401.

⁵² The Rt Hon. Peter Dutton MP, "Asylum Seekers: Children: Procedural Text", *CPD*, House, 25 May 2015, p.4252.

⁵³ Francesco Ricatti, "A Country Once Great? Asylum Seekers, Historical Imagination, and the Moral Privilege of Whiteness", *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 40, 4 (2016), pp.478-493, p.484.

⁵⁴ Plaintiff M68/2015 v Minister for Immigration and Border Protection [2016] HCA 1. Judgement handed down 3 February 2016, available at <<http://eresources.hcourt.gov.au/showCase/2016/HCA/1>>.

⁵⁵ See Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Bill 2014. Available at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r5346.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Nicole Hasham, "High Court finds offshore detention lawful", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 2016; Elizabeth Byrne and Stephanie Anderson, "High Court throws out challenge to Nauru offshore immigration detention; Malcolm Turnbull vows people smugglers will not prevail", *ABC News*, 8 February 2016.

On 2 February, the day before the High Court handed down their ruling, *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the two newspapers in major Australian cities then owned by Fairfax, published a front-page spread with pictures of the faces of twelve of the babies who were subject to this ruling. The accompanying article began:

Samuel arrived into the world chubby; a miniature wrestler who, eight months on, has just produced his eighth tooth. Born at the Royal Darwin Hospital, his parents had him baptised as soon as they could and earmarked him for great things.

The dream is that their boy will become an Australian doctor or lawyer, but Samuel is unlikely to realise it. He is one of 37 babies the Turnbull government wants to put on a plane, as early as next week, and send to Nauru's offshore processing centre.⁵⁷

These same photos were used by GetUp!, a largely online campaigning group which is independent of any political party and runs mass campaigns on broadly progressive issues.⁵⁸ GetUp!, together with the Human Rights Law Centre, launched an online campaign with the photos prominently displayed and the accompanying words: "These are photos of babies Malcolm Turnbull wants to send to Nauru. We say, Let Them Stay."⁵⁹ ChilOut — an activist and advocacy group focused on child refugees and asylum-seekers — issued a statement on the day of the judgement, noting that they had "spoken to children in detention in Australia who are slated to be transferred to Nauru and they consistently tell us they are living with daily fear and anxiety about being sent there".⁶⁰

In the days after the ruling, two Australian Labor Party state premiers — along with large groups of the general public — called for all the asylum-seekers to be allowed to remain in Australia, particularly focusing on those children born in Australia. These were children who, in a sense, could be readily understood to have joined the Australian national community. Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk — who is in the Right faction of the ALP — was quoted in the media as having "joined calls urging the Prime Minister not to send Australian-born asylum seeker children back to offshore detention centres [...]. She pledged to call the Prime Minister to talk to him about the effects of offshore detention on children, adding: 'It's about time we put politics to one side'."⁶¹

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews — a member of the Left faction of the ALP — produced a Facebook post with a photo, taken from behind, of himself and two children at the Melbourne zoo, and the accompanying words:

I can't show you their faces, but I can tell you a bit about these two beautiful kids who I took to the Melbourne Zoo.

They're ordinary Victorians in almost every way. They go to their local primary school; they laugh, they learn, they play.

But one thing is very different: any day now, these two boys will be deported to Nauru and will stay there indefinitely.

Dozens more children face the same fate.

Please, Prime Minister: it doesn't have to be like this.

⁵⁷ Michael Gordon, Nick McKenzie, Richard Baker, "The faces of the babies Australia wants to send back to 'hell' on Nauru", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 2016.

⁵⁸ For information about GetUp! as described by themselves see "About GetUp!", <<https://www.getup.org.au/about>>, accessed 13 May 2016. See also Ariadne Vromen, "GetUp! in Election 2016", in Anika Gauja, Peter Chen, Jennifer Curtin and Juliet Pietsch, eds, *Double Disillusion: The 2016 Australian Federal Election* (Canberra, 2018), pp.397-419.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Law Centre, Twitter, 3 February 2016. Available at <https://twitter.com/rightsagenda/status/694628956188708864>. Accessed 6 November 2018.

⁶⁰ ChilOut Revived, Facebook, 3 February 2016. Available at <<https://www.facebook.com/chiloutrevived/photos/a.138971586144691.14728.137380946303755/1029812587060582/?type=3&theater>>. Accessed 3 February 2016.

⁶¹ AAP, "'It's Time to Put Politics Aside'", *The Courier Mail*, 7 February 2016.

[...] Perhaps they don't really know what might be happening to them. Perhaps they don't yet understand.

But they love this place. And they certainly loved their trip to the zoo.

They loved seeing the baby animals in their sanctuary, safe and sound.

I wish I could have shown you their faces at that moment. You wouldn't believe how much they smiled.⁶²

Later that month, a community picket was set up outside Brisbane's Lady Cilento Hospital, as threats were made to remove a baby and her mother. The campaign focused on this baby, pseudonymously-named Baby Asha, and worked to force the government to move them into community detention, rather than back to Nauru.⁶³

These discussions which focused on the children, it should be clear from these quotes, were deliberately highly emotive. Circulating images of smiling babies, talking about their "chubbiness", the sense in which they are just like every other child, the loss they would face by being removed to Nauru, and their position alongside baby animals, was intended by advocates to produce a discourse around asylum-seeker and refugee policy which would be saturated with affect: with feelings of sadness and despair, but also of the potential for hope. That is, an intervention into government policy was intended to be conducted through the mobilisation and production of a set of affective ideas surrounding asylum-seeker and refugee children which foregrounded the idea that they required saving by Australia. Australia, here, could be the saviour.⁶⁴ Through these mobilisations, these children could be constructed in the political imagination as firstly, innocent victims requiring state aid, secondly, everyday children, and thirdly, highly vulnerable. Alongside this, a political and emotional community of dissenters was brought together through their creation of themselves as aiding a "vulnerable" group of children, and as (re)defining Australia as a place of aid. All of this work was directed both towards creating a common space of dissent, as well as an idea of the Australian space as being one which cared about, and for, these refugee children.

Listening to Child Refugees

As can thus be seen, across this period numerous politicians and advocates have issued calls for children to be allowed to have a childhood, for children to be saved, and for children to be rescued from inhumanity. But the quality of this rescue, the question of what it would mean to be saved, the history of what makes someone understood as "vulnerable", and of what it means to "have a childhood", is kept from discussion: these terms or ideas maintain a signficatory power that exceeds their direct meaning. Moreover, it is well known that the concept of the racialised child as needing to be saved has a long history within British and Australian imperial discourse.⁶⁵ These moves by politicians and members of the public to entrench themselves as saviours of the children thus also serves to install an idea of Australia as the site of possible saviourness: as

⁶² Daniel Andrews, Facebook, 8 February 2016. Available at <<https://www.facebook.com/DanielAndrewsMP/photos/a.149185875145957.31693.134712696593275/1017325011665368/?type=3&theater>>, accessed 13 May 2016.

⁶³ Judith Ireland, Deborah Snow, and Jorge Branco, "Asylum seeker row: Baby Asha can stay in Australia, for now", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 2016.

⁶⁴ Similar approaches, seen in the work of photojournalists and newspaper editors, have been critiqued by Behrouz Boochani for these ways in which they engage with refugees, creating "a brilliant piece of art" out of an unconsented-to image and discursive representation of damaged refugees, needing Australia's aid. Boochani, *No Friend But The Mountains*, p.98.

⁶⁵ Rhian Keyse, "What is a Child? The Calais Child Refugees in Imperial Context", *Imperial and Global Forum*, 31 October 2016, available at <<https://imperialglobalxeter.com/2016/10/31/what-is-a-child-the-calais-child-refugees-in-imperial-context/>>. Accessed 6 November 2018. See also Shurlee Swain and Margo Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915* (Manchester, 2010).

holding the key to a positive future. This is a thoroughly racialized and settler-colonial manoeuvre. Through these utterances it thus becomes apparent that in this period children served as a battleground over which a biopolitical and humanitarian debate occurred. As politicians worked to describe what kind of country they want Australia to be — and the sort of country they imagine Australia to already be — they kept the question, and the conversation, as one of control: of people, of borders, of nation, and of emotions. Through the circulation of these emotional discourses surrounding ideas of the child refugee and asylum-seeker, a group language is formed and a political outcome is striven for. A battle is played out over the type of Australia which can and should exist. In this way, migration of all types continues to function as a form of colonial nation-building.

This points us to the historical contingency of these instantiations of emotional discourses, as well as the way that these discourses form part of the extractive economy of emotion — to use Audra Simpson's phrase — wherein people can pitch their idea for Australia upon a shared emotional project.⁶⁶ Indeed, this extractive economy is very real, with Richard Marles — the then Shadow Minister for Immigration and Border Protection — asserting in Parliament in 2015 that “the most important asset that any country has is its children”.⁶⁷ This extractive economy seemingly relies upon the children being objects of emotion, rather than conceived of as having political, ethical, bodily and emotional sovereignty in their own right.⁶⁸ And yet, through the rise of internet cultures and greater accessibility between peoples, we can view, listen to, and learn from, those refugee and asylum-seeker children who are the subjects of these parliamentary discussions, and who present a very different mobilisation of emotion. Their mobilisation of emotion, as we will see, is much grimmer, much more focused on representing the dystopia of the carceral practices in operation, rather than utilising emotional discourse to describe the potentiality for a group of people to save, and another group to be saved, in order to redeem a nation.

If we look towards these children we can find, for instance, the words of a seventeen-year-old asylum-seeker, held in detention on Christmas Island, who submitted four poems to the 2014 Australian Human Rights Commission's National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention. Drawing on history, emotions, critical analysis and political claims, one of the poems, “Dear Bird Send My Message”, read, in part:

Dear bird send my message.
Send an image of my eyes- to Abbott-
where tears are rolling like a river,
send my heart full of sorrow,
send my mind full of thoughts,
send him images of why I came.

Dear bird send my message.
Send my emotions to Morrison
who is enjoying my pain,
who does not think that I am a human being like him,

⁶⁶ Audra Simpson, The Wheeler Centre, 22 February 2016. Available at <<https://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/audra-simpson>>, accessed 6 November 2018.

⁶⁷ The Rt Hon. Richard Marles MP, “Migration Amendment (Mandatory Report) Bill 2015: Second Reading Speech”, *CPD*, House, 12 October 2015, p.10699.

⁶⁸ For explorations of children as vulnerable see, for instance, John Tobin, “Understanding Children's Rights: A Vision beyond Vulnerability”, *Nordic Journal of International Law*, Vol. 84, 2 (2015), pp.155-182, p.171; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care* (Geneva, 1994), p.5-6.

who thinks that i am just a number the waste of population.⁶⁹

Undertaking a similar political and emotional project is the Free the Children Nauru Facebook page, formed by children and adults on 2 November 2015 in order for the children to communicate with children outside the detention centre, as well as with their supporters.⁷⁰ On this page, children posted a range of political assertions with the stated aim being that: "The asylum seeker and refugee children doomed on Nauru speak out and share their dreams and hopes with other children around the world". On 18 November the children posted that they were unsure what to tell their audiences and had been given advice by their teachers to share information about Nauru, and that their posts should be hopeful and filled with humour. For a brief moment that humour was sustained, before the author turned to the desperation of the situation, telling followers: "We are very tired and now they are building new accommodation and we think they want to tell you that it is good now. But it's not good because all of Nauru is like a gaol. All of the children's are busy writing and finding things to show you that will make you happy, buut know our hard life too. Thank you."⁷¹

On 11 November they wrote: "When we see people like our page and say something in coment we want to scream our happiness because we know you and you know us. We want to say we love you! It is also amazing to see people that did not know us be so kind and know that we hear. Might because we not forgotten childrens. We hope we not forgotten child's."⁷² Seeing these posts seems to be understood by the children as being active engagement, resulting in a circulation of emotions which would bring viewers or readers into human community with them.

Another post, on 27 November, described the ways that security would act, told followers about the new camp being built, and about the families being separated. The author wrote: "Border force doesn't call us when we get touched badly in school, but they worry about who write facebook page. We are refugee now but no difference. They said we have to get out of mouldy tent tomorrow and family separate like we animals. I really breaking now into pieces I can't really hold on anymore I m too tired."⁷³ Refugee and asylum-seeker children's voices are thus deeply powerful and a threat to the established political order. As I read and understand their words, it would seem that they are working to challenge normative ideas of what speech a child is capable of, and to cross borders to bring very different communities together through their speech acts which appear to call for liberation, *rather than saving*.

In this way, it would seem to me, the emotional discourses which are circulated by the children are vastly different to those issued by the parliamentarians: there are fundamentally different vocabularies at play. While both are intended to serve as calls to

⁶⁹ "Dear Bird Send My Message", from "Submission No 20 – Name withheld – 17 year old asylum seeker", Australian Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into Children in Detention, 2014, p.4. Available at <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/Submission%20No%2020%20-%20Name%20withheld%20-%2017%20year%20old%20asylum%20seeker.pdf>>.

⁷⁰ Free the Children NAURU, Facebook. Available at <<https://www.facebook.com/Free-the-Children-NAURU-839867502797443/?fref=ts>>, accessed 6 November 2018.

⁷¹ Free the Children NAURU, Facebook, 18 November 2015. Available at <<https://www.facebook.com/839867502797443/photos/a.840306886086838.1073741828.839867502797443/846647258786134/?type=3&theater>>. Accessed 6 November 2018. All posts quoted here will be verbatim.

⁷² Free the Children NAURU, Facebook, 11 November 2015. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=843389355778591&id=839867502797443>, accessed 6 November 2018.

⁷³ Free the Children NAURU, Facebook, 27 November 2015. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=850191338431726&id=839867502797443>, accessed 6 November 2018.

action for those brought into the consumption and circulation of the emotions, the children demand action in solidarity while the parliamentarians' emotional language is used in the service of producing a shared knowledge of Australia as a nation of saviours. The children seem to speak in a much bleaker emotional language, refusing the "caring" logic which the politicians produce, and demanding an engagement with the people of Australia, distinct from the Australian nation-state. They are displaying the force of their survival: they are to be worked with, not pitied or seen as a source of another's shame. This is, perhaps, the power of emotional truth-telling in the face of the political use of emotions to govern and control.⁷⁴ It is a speaking-back to those emotional discourses which rest on a paternalistic nation-building.

Conclusion

In his 1999 book *The Public Emotions*, Graham Little writes: "Political leaders must, of course, represent our interests, our traditions, our ideas and our policies. But we also need them to express and consolidate what we feel."⁷⁵ In this article we have seen the ways in which these feelings are materialised, the discursive practices which result from this emotional leadership. By looking at a snapshot in time, the years 2013 to 2016 in Australian politics, and by examining different emotional registers, claims and utterances offered by different groups of people — politicians, activists, and refugee and asylum-seeking children — I have explored the different claims on the Australian nation's feelings which have been produced. The ways, that is, in which emotions around ideas of the place of refugee and asylum-seeking children are, in Australia, rested on ideas of Australia as a nation which "should be better". My intention in doing so has not been to argue that emotions, and their political deployment, are Bad. Emotional responses are necessary. Rather, I have been interested in taking this approach in order to understand the complexities of the ways in which the Australian nation, and ideas of Australianness, are produced, as well as the relationships between governed populations and national sentiments. These are, it should be clear, thoroughly racialised relationships and sentiments. Politicians' ideas of themselves as arbiters of the nation and its emotions — particularly in relation to the assumed well-being of children — is an expression of Australia's settler-colonial sentiment.⁷⁶

I have been interested in this article in thinking about the relationality of sentiments — the relation between the figure, or category, of the refugee or asylum-seeking child and the Australian nation-state. I have not been interested in judging or determining the quality of care, empathy, or sympathy that different speakers have held regarding child refugees. I am interested instead in the emotional and political work which is undertaken through these utterances, in understanding this political and emotional moment in time and place, and in understanding the "we" which is "generated" through the "performance" of these emotional utterances.⁷⁷ In doing so, I have wanted to think critically about what constitutes the Australian nation, and its possible histories, memories and futures. The nation is constituted through emotional communities and economies, through the circulation, that is, of discourses of emotion. By looking at the

⁷⁴ Behrouz Boochani's book begins with a disclaimer that articulates the claim to truth. He writes: "This book has been written to give a truthful account of the experience of Australia's Manus Island Regional Offshore Processing Centre, and to convey a truthful first-hand experience of what it has been like to be detained within that system". Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, p.xxxv.

⁷⁵ Graham Little, *The Public Emotions: From Mourning to Hope* (Sydney, 1999), p.15.

⁷⁶ On this topic generally, see for instance Erica Burman, "Innocents Abroad: Western Fantasies of Childhood and the Iconography of Emergencies", *Disasters*, Vol. 18, 3 (1994), pp.238-53.

⁷⁷ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p.110.

emotional utterances offered by child refugees and asylum-seekers in comparison to those offered by Australian citizens, we can grasp some of the particularity of the political and emotional project which helps to constitute the imagined Australian nation at this moment in time. What then is this imagined Australian nation? Writing in 2012, Teju Cole described what he termed "the White Savior Industrial Complex" as being "not about justice" but instead "about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege".⁷⁸ While Cole was writing of US-based sentiments, there is something of this spirit in the emotional calls to the shape of the Australian nation which I outlined above. The imagined Australian nation, then, is one which is part of this "white savior" project.⁷⁹

The intention in this article has been to denaturalise the claims made about the centrality of Australia to political and emotional discussions about refugee and asylum-seeking children, and thereby to attempt to decentre the nation-state and its associated claims to saviourship in our political discourses. As Erica Millar has explained: "'The nation' is a socio-historical construct forged through a continual process of demarcating who belongs, and who is excluded from, the body politic. Such technologies of inclusion and exclusion take many forms."⁸⁰ One of those forms, I have shown in this article, is the repeated iteration of sentimental ideas of Australia's character in relation to child refugees and asylum-seekers. This sentimentality serves to help construct an idea of Australia, placing the feelings of the nation — and the quality of those feelings — in front of the feelings of the children about whom the discourse is being produced. The different emotional registers at play, the different communicative styles, are a reminder of an incommensurability between these feelings; a reminder, that is, of the ways that colonial logics and discourses relentlessly, and often unconsciously, persevere. Thus when we consider the potency of the emotions around child refugees and asylum seekers, and the extents to which governments work nationally and transnationally to control these children's movement and govern their lives (and the sheer breathtaking violence of that work), it becomes evident that it is vital that we unravel the work that such emotional discourses do in furthering these governmental projects. This article has been an attempt in this direction, an attempt to think through the ways in which the constant project of nation-building is undertaken through the emotional economies around child refugees and asylum-seekers.

⁷⁸ Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex", *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012.

⁷⁹ See Luke Pearson, "Just Another Australia Day Post Hoping To Make You Feel All the Feels", *IndigenousX*, 25 January 2016; Luke Pearson, "Tony Abbott and the White Man's Burden", *IndigenousX*, 6 December 2018.

⁸⁰ Millar, *Happy Abortions*, p.225.