

Expelling Slavery from the Nation: Representations of labour exploitation in Australia's supply chain

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Abstract:

On 4 May 2015, the Australian national broadcaster's current affairs programme *Four Corners* aired an episode titled 'Slaving Away: The dirty secrets behind Australia's fresh food', that provided revelations of labour exploitation of migrant workers on working holiday visas. The government reacted swiftly to these allegations with an 'operation' ostensibly designed to stop the exploitation. In reports of Operation Cloudburst, however, there was a shift in the media's definition of the problem: worker exploitation became visa violations and newspapers shortly reported the resulting action taken: the 'illegal workers' in Australia's food industry had been arrested. This paper tracks the competing discursive and visual representations of this case that ultimately made questions of labour rights become questions of immigration, making it plausible and acceptable that concern over exploitation of workers should be addressed by deportation of 'illegal immigrants'. Such discursive slippage is enabled by cultural amnesia over Australia's history of exploitation of racialised and migrant labourers, which allows 'slavery' to be represented as a 'foreign' problem that can be expelled in defence of the purity of the national domestic space.

Keywords: slavery, Australia, labour exploitation, supply chain, nationalism, border control

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Introduction: Slavery in Australia

This paper explores a recent media exposé of rampant exploitation of workers on temporary 'working holiday' visas (also called '417 visas') in Australia. On 4 May 2015, the Australian national broadcaster *Four Corners* ran a programme investigating the conditions faced by '417 visa' holders working in the fresh produce supply chain, picking and packing fruit, vegetables and meats. Employers, aided by labour hire companies, were found to be taking advantage of the workers' insecure status, particularly of those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. These workers, some of whom had arranged their visas from overseas agencies who advertised them as work opportunities, reported extremely long hours of work in painful conditions, work injuries, sexual harassment and underpaid wages.

The programme actively and explicitly supported the workers, going so far as to name the problem as 'slavery', thus invoking the contemporary discourse of 'modern slavery' that has sprung from international concern over human trafficking and labour exploitation. It was taken seriously enough that this framing of the problem emerged in government media releases, in which they announced 'Operation Cloudburst' to address the problem of exploitation in the agricultural industry. However, a few weeks later when the first results of the taskforce were reported, the issue was framed not as 'rescuing slaves', but as 'deporting illegal workers', a discursive shift which attracted very little public comment. This paper tracks the discursive moves by which such a solution became a plausible one. Taking the *Four Corners* programme as its primary example, it argues that the programme's uncritical repetition of nationalist perspectives produced a narrative in which slavery was positioned not as a problem inherent to the nation, but as one imported from outside. The discourse of slavery was thus absorbed into the more dominant discourse around border control, playing into an atmosphere of paranoia in which the nation is constructed not as exploiter of foreign labour, but as innocent victim of unscrupulous foreign criminals. This neat reversal allows Australia's contradictory and ambivalent attitude to migrant labour, and its history of reliance on slavery, to remain unspoken. In turn, the silence about this history reinforces the construction of the nation's innocence, so that border control and denial of responsibility for colonial exploitation become mutually reinforcing attitudes.

Migrant workers have always been an ambivalent issue for Australia: both needed and aggressively controlled. One of the first Acts of the newly federated Australian Parliament in 1901 was the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901 (Commonwealth), which authorised the mass deportation of the approximately 10,000 Pacific Islands labourers who had been indentured in Queensland's cane fields.¹ This Act was part of the 'White Australia Policy' that was officially

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-15.html>

pursued by the government for the following 65 years.² The policy was accompanied by Australia's enthusiastic participation in the transnational discourse on race and white superiority that circulated between Australia, North America and Europe.³ In the Australian context it was bolstered by an acute fear of 'invasion' from the populous Asian nations to the north of the continent, regularly featured in media articles and cartoons. White Australians imagined themselves as a small enclave of civilisation in a large 'empty' nation,⁴ surrounded by overpopulated territories of potential Asian 'invaders'.⁵ While the White Australia policy was officially dismantled during the 1960s and 70s, such imagery remains fresh, now applied to debates about asylum seekers who arrive by boat, who are similarly imagined as uncontrollable, invading 'floods' of foreigners.⁶

But in spite of this anxiety about the presence of black and brown bodies, Australia has always depended on non-white labour, both from Aboriginal workers and from migrants from across Asia and the Pacific. The pastoral stations depended on Aboriginal labour until the 1967 Pastoral Industry Award Wages decision granted equal wages and farmers chose to pay white labourers instead.⁷ Up until 1970, Australian governments removed one-third to one-tenth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and put them into institutional care, with the intent to 'protect' and 'assimilate' them. From here girls were sent to work as domestic servants in white homes, where they often suffered abuse and deprivation.⁸ As they were considered unable to manage money, both station workers' and domestic workers' wages were paid into government trust accounts, and most never received anything more than 'pocket money'.⁹ The lucrative pearling industry of Western Australia operated first on brutally enslaved Aboriginal labour and then on indentured labourers 'from China, Japan, Malaysia, the Malay Archipelago (now Indonesia) and the Philippines'.¹⁰ From 1863 until the turn of the century approximately 60,000 men, women and children from the South West Pacific were brought to Australia, often forcibly, to serve as indentured labourers in Queensland's cane fields, some staying for generations before they were summarily deported at the inauguration of the White Australia policy.¹¹ South Australia in the 1890s brought in Tamil indentured workers to work in the tropical regions of the Northern Territory because Europeans were thought unable to physically work in the climate, but also controlled and monitored their movements strictly in the midst of debate about the possibility of them 'settling' or 'colonising' the land and competing with white labour.¹²

Hence, as Banivanua-Mar puts it, Australia was founded on an 'uncomfortable paradox of white settlement in the tropics, where success was seen to be dependent on the absence (to vacate the land), as well as the presence (to work the land), of blackness, which needed in turn to be both protected and restricted and, above all, contained'.¹³ Blackness, Banivanua-Mar goes on to point out, was subjected to endlessly changing and policed definitions, while 'the only consistent category seemed to be that of whiteness'.¹⁴ Australia's migrant labour discourse has thus historically been bound up in its overtly racist and colonialist pursuit of what Aileen Moreton-Robinson has called 'The possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty': a circular logic in which white control of land, people and resources is both the founding assumption and the over-arching goal.¹⁵

This ambivalence and denial has continued to the present day. Australia has prided itself on being a nation that has focused on permanent migration and avoided developing a significant 'guestworker' population. But this is not entirely true. In 2014/15 the combined granting of temporary skilled work visas (33,329 visas) and working holiday visas (54,449

² Museum of Australian Democracy, *Timeline 1952-2001*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/timeline-b-1952-t-2001.html>

³ M Lake and H Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White men's countries and the question of racial superiority*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2008.

⁴ Australia's colonial regime had also long depended on a discourse of Australia as 'empty', known as the doctrine of 'Terra Nullius', which, if it acknowledged Indigenous presence at all, argued that they were itinerant and had not therefore 'possessed' the land, but only 'wandered' across it. After a long struggle by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the doctrine was officially overturned by the Mabo legislation of 1990, which recognised Indigenous occupation of the land and sovereignty as a foundation for land rights cases, however this decision was partially wound back by subsequent government legislation.

⁵ D Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the rise of Asia 1850-1939*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, 1999.

⁶ A Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's invasion anxiety*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2008.

⁷ S Kinnane, J Harrison and I Reinecke, 'Finger Money: The black and white of stolen wages', *Griffith Review*, issue 47, 2015, pp. 49—70; M Allen, 'The Brothers Up North and the Sisters Down South: The Mackay family and the frontier', *Hecate*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2001, pp. 7—31.

⁸ A Haebich, 'Stolen Generations', in B Galligan and W Roberts (eds.), *Oxford Companion to Australian Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; R Wilson, *Bringing Them Home. National Inquiry into the separation of aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997; J Huggins, 'Firing on in the Mind: Aboriginal domestic servants in the inter-war years', *Hecate*, vol. 13, issue 2, 1987/8, pp. 5—23.

⁹ A Haebich; S Kinnane, J Harrison and I Reinecke, 2015.

¹⁰ R Balint, 'Aboriginal Women and Asian Men: A maritime history of colour in White Australia', *Signs*, 37, issue 3, 2012, pp. 544—554, p. 548; M Allen, pp. 16—20.

¹¹ T Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australia-Pacific indentured labor trade*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2007, p. 1.

¹² I Krisjansen, 'Australian Orientalism and Liberal Governance: Asian labour in South Australia and the Northern Territory 1890s', *Labour History*, no. 80, 2001, pp. 173—190.

¹³ T Banivanua-Mar, p. 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁵ A Moreton-Robinson, 'The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision', *Borderlands*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2004, retrieved 15 July 2016, http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/moreton_possessive.htm

visas) was close to the total number of permanent visas granted (94,543).¹⁶ Such figures have been accompanied by perennial outcries about unfair competition for local workers and undercutting of labour conditions. These panics have an only barely hidden racial subtext; as Mares points out, it is not ‘Irish nurses or English doctors’ who incite fears of reduced wages and stolen jobs, but workers from developing nations, particularly India and China. Rather than improving pay and conditions for these workers, the union movement consistently calls for the reduction of temporary skilled labour visas, and for migrant workers to be the first to be made redundant.¹⁷

As a further symptom of denial of any ongoing need for migrant labour, Australia’s current migrant labour regulation system is not only increasingly based on temporary visas, but to a large extent on visas which are not primarily defined as work visas. The largest group of temporary workers in the country are international students working casually and part-time in low-paid service jobs while they complete their studies. The second largest group is the official ‘457’ visa for temporary skilled workers, but the third largest is then ‘working holiday makers’ on tourist visas.¹⁸ Hence much of Australia’s migrant labour, particularly the low-skilled sectors, is not named as such in immigration regulations. It is effectively ‘hidden’, as though there is still a reluctance to admit openly that Australia imports, and depends upon, temporary labour.

This paper focuses particularly on the representation of workers employed under the ‘Working Holiday Visa (417)’. This visa is offered to citizens of Belgium, Canada, the Republic of Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Taiwan and the United Kingdom.¹⁹ These are one-year visas designed to allow travellers under 31 years of age and without dependents a year of holidaying supplemented with short-term work of no more than six months with any one employer. The visa requirements are clear that the primary purpose of the trip should be ‘a holiday in Australia’, and applicants must show that they have enough funds to support themselves and to buy a ticket to leave the country. At the same time, these tourists are encouraged to remedy Australia’s rural labour shortages by offering them the opportunity for a second year-long stay if during their first year they work for three months in agricultural, mining or construction work in a ‘regional area’. In other words, the government implicitly and deliberately positions these visas in order to meet ongoing labour needs for Australia, while at the same time presenting this labour as merely incidental and secondary to the ostensible purpose of providing tourist holidays to young people. This construction seems designed to obscure their presence and legitimacy as foreign workers, placing them in a grey area where they are defined not primarily as workers in need of a living wage, but as tourists earning pocket money to fund their holidays. Even so, they are crucial to the agricultural industry, which suffers from labour shortages. They are thus caught in Australia’s ambivalence. As workers they are in demand, yet marginalised and invisible. As migrants, particularly if they are non-white, they are subject to the hypervisibility of border surveillance practices: their identities carefully validated, their length of stay and working rights policed through visa requirements and immigration raids, and their presence in the nation the subject of public debate.

It might be expected that such a situation would result in both abuse of workers’ need for documented employment, and a market for the ‘irregular’ labour of visa-overstayers, and that is indeed the case.

Exploitation in the Supply Chain

The *Four Corners* programme reported on the conditions experienced by tourists in Australia working in the agriculture industry under the 417 visa programme. It reported that young tourists working on farms and in associated fresh food companies, producing food for Australia’s three main supermarket chains and ‘at least two major fast food outlets’, were being exploited, harassed, injured and underpaid. The programme showed that workers were being made to work up to eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, without adequate toilet breaks, packing and cutting cold chickens, crying from the pain in their frozen hands while their supervisor yelled at them to work faster. They stayed in company houses with twenty people sharing a bathroom, or in horse barns. Some workers were being paid half of the legal minimum wage, and paid late and irregularly. A manager offered one young woman accommodation in return for sex. Another young woman working for a company called Covino Farms severed a nerve in her right index finger at work, and when she returned from hospital a manager sexually assaulted her, causing her to rupture her stitches while trying to fend him off. This company has also previously been investigated for imposing twenty-two-hour working shifts. Other allegations included exchanging sexual favours or bribes for visa extensions and providing workers with fake identity papers to use

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *3412.0 Migration, Australia, 2014-15*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/3412.0Main%20Features52014-15?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=3412.0&issue=2014-15&num=&view=>

¹⁷ P Mares, ‘The Permanent Shift to Temporary Migration’, in S Perera, G Seal and S Summers (eds.), *Enter at Own Risk: Australia’s population questions for the 21st Century*, Black Swan Press, Perth, 2010, pp. 65–89, p. 71.

¹⁸ P Mares, p. 66; see also Australian Bureau of Statistics.

¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection, *Working Holiday visa (subclass 417)*, retrieved 23 July 2016, <https://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/417->

when their legal visas ran out, so that they could keep working beyond the officially allowed six months. Informants and advocates interviewed on the programme identified third-party labour hire companies as managing much (but not all) of this labour. These arrangements allowed businesses to outsource labour provision without responsibility for pay and conditions. Nonetheless, the business managers and the labour hire company managers often clearly had an intimate relationship, and were shown socialising or working together.

While there are many Europeans in Australia on 417 visas, the workers shown on the programme were mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The companies had clearly deliberately sought out those who spoke little English and therefore had limited access to information about their rights and few contacts outside the company. There are evident racialised hierarchies at work here, with employers perceiving Asian workers as being passive, exploitable and sexually available. One employer was caught by hidden camera facing a group of workers who were demanding payment of late wages. When two young, white English women in the group spoke up, his response was to turn to the manager of the labour hire company and say ‘Don’t bring any more Europeans here, OK?’ In line with historical tradition, non-white workers are clearly the expected workers for this particular kind of exploitation.

‘Slaving Away’: The positioning of slavery as outside the nation

The *Four Corners* episode titled ‘Slaving Away’ entered a television environment in which issues of border control are highly prominent. Throughout the 21st century in Australia, being ‘tough’ on border control has been seen by politicians in both major parties as a crucial vote winner, and the media have often enthusiastically reproduced the discourse. Border control has become a ratings winner, as demonstrated by programmes such as *Border Security: Australia’s Front Line*. This programme, hosted by the commercial network Seven and made with the assistance and sanction of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, is described variously as ‘border-based reality television’,²⁰ ‘docusoap’²¹ and ‘securitainment’.²² It shows footage of customs officers at work in Australia’s airports and postal service, keeping out the ‘risks’ embodied by the potential entry of foreign food pests, animal products, diseases, and irregular migrants. Since its debut in 2004 it has consistently been one of the nation’s highest rating television programmes.²³ The main issues covered in the programme tend to be the possible entry of crop pests, ‘illegal workers’, criminals, and drugs.²⁴ The programme concentrates disproportionately on non-white offenders and represents those from poorer countries, or shabbily dressed, as intrinsically suspicious.²⁵ In its viewpoint, explicitly parallel with border control officials, and dressed up by dramatic music and cliff-hanger plot structures, the programme contributes to what DeGenova calls ‘Border Spectacle’.

The Border Spectacle, as we have seen, conjures up the fetish of transgression at the ever-multiplying points of interception in an amorphous border zone where migrant trajectories may be interrupted. These humble migrant practices are produced as flagrant violations of the law, as the brazen acts of veritable outlaws, and thus as occasions for apprehension—literally and figuratively—which is to say, occasions for arrest and deportation, but also for fear and loathing. The Border Spectacle works its magic trick of displacing ‘illegality’ from its point of production (in the law) to the proverbial ‘scene of the crime’, which is of course also the scene of ostensible crime-fighting.²⁶

It would be fair to say, therefore, that the *Four Corners* investigation entered a media space that was already thoroughly primed to be suspicious of migrant workers. It is important, however, to understand the different branding of *Four Corners*, a long-running current affairs programme hosted by the national broadcaster, the ABC. In contrast to the close relationship between Seven’s *Border Security* and the government Department of Immigration, the ABC is often criticised by the current Coalition Government for being too ‘Left-wing’ and biased against Coalition policies and politicians, and has faced multiple funding cuts. *Four Corners* presents itself not as ‘entertainment’, but as serious investigative journalism, designed to keep an educated audience informed. It thus targets a rather different audience from *Border Security*, and has a different presentational style. In this respect it is not altogether surprising that the programme is ostensibly more sympathetic to migrant workers than its commercial competitors.

²⁰ J P Walsh, ‘Border Theatre and Security Spectacles: Surveillance, mobility and reality-based television’, *Crime Media Culture*, vol. 11, issue 2, 2015, pp. 201–21.

²¹ P Hughes, ‘Governmentality, Blurred Boundaries and Pleasure in the Docusoap *Border Security*’, *Continuum*, vol. 24, issue 3, 2010, pp. 439–449.

²² M Andrejevic, ‘“Securitainment” in the Post 9-11 Era’, *Continuum*, vol. 25, issue 2, 2011, pp. 165–175, p. 167.

²³ J P Walsh, p. 201; E Price and A Nethery, ‘Truth-telling at the Border: An audience appraisal of *Border Security*’, *Media International Australia: Incorporating culture and policy*, no. 142, pp. 148–156, p. 148.

²⁴ M Andrejevic, pp. 169–170.

²⁵ M Andrejevic, p. 174; J P Walsh, p. 212.

²⁶ N De Genova, ‘Spectacles of Migrant “Illegality”: The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, issue 7, 2013, pp. 1180–98.

The *Four Corners* programme is in many ways good investigative journalism. It presents a compelling case backed by interviews with participants, hidden cameras, and a wide range of commentators. These commentators present analyses that go beyond simplistic accusations against ‘evil’ traffickers. In particular, the involvement of supermarket chains in driving prices down, thus forcing employers to keep wages down, is explained at length. Unlike *Border Security*, where irregular migrants are dehumanised, denigrated, and rarely allowed to speak to camera,²⁷ *Four Corners* presents the voices of abused employees sympathetically and at length. They were able to talk directly to camera with an interpreter and subtitles, and hence not reduced to trying to speak in their limited English. As noted above, some were upset and tearful, but others spoke with determination and with a visible sense that they would be taken seriously. They took the opportunity to present themselves as moral characters, to explain how clearly they had tried to reject sexual advances, and to describe their employers as ‘bad men’. They offered a precise analysis of what had made them vulnerable to exploitation: lack of language skills, no knowledge of Australian employment standards, and racism. It should be noted, too, that some, although clearly suffering from sleeplessness and overwork, were determined to accept the reality of their situation and keep working. ‘If we don’t have a job we can’t earn any money’, said a young Taiwanese man the programme named as Moe. These are more complex representations than are generally afforded to stereotypical ‘victims’ in trafficking and slavery discourses, who are frequently represented as ignorant, passive victims in need of rescue.²⁸

However despite this complexity, the programme was framed in particular ways that made certain repeated themes dominate its message. These were encapsulated in the programme’s opening statements. The opening teaser includes two excerpts from interviews: one of MP Keith Pitt saying ‘There is slave labour in this country and we need to get rid of it’, and another of the reporter asking a white British tourist, ‘Did you expect to experience this in Australia?’ and the tourist responding, ‘No, absolutely not. We were shocked. It made me question Australia as a country’. Presenter Kerry O’Brien then speaks to the camera, saying,

First-world country, Third-world bondage. Welcome to *Four Corners*. The idea that slave labour might exist in Australia is abhorrent. But get used to it. When it comes to food, we’re often exhorted to buy Australian. And we probably assume, when we see a sign on the supermarket shelf, ‘produced or grown in Australia’ that it’s safe, hopefully fresh, and we’re supporting local jobs.

The words ‘Australia’ or ‘Australian’ are repeated five times in these introductory statements, bolstered by further references to ‘this country’, ‘First-world country’, and ‘local’. The programme thus clearly defines the problem not only as exploitation of workers, but as exploitation of workers *in Australia*. While O’Brien’s statement ‘Get used to it’ could be read as suggesting that in fact slavery *is* structurally present and continuous with Australian society, it is clear that viewers are not expected to dwell on this suggestion. Rather, the overall tone of the commentary is to emphasise the *unexpected, anomalous* revelation of such practices in a ‘First-world country’. O’Brien’s phrasing makes it clear that the concept of ‘bondage’ belongs in the ‘Third World’, rather than in a ‘First-world’ country. No further explanation of this statement is considered necessary—the audience is assumed to take for granted that Australia is not a place where bondage might occur, but that the ‘Third World’—that stereotypical, amorphous, poverty-stricken realm of suffering—naturally is.²⁹ In fact it is not entirely clear where the outrage is meant to lie—perhaps if bondage can be labelled without explanation as ‘Third-world bondage’, then the occurrence of bondage in itself is neither surprising nor shocking; rather what seems to be shocking is that the bondage would occur ‘here’. This is what the reporter asks the British worker, and she concurs, this is not what she expected *in Australia*. The overall message, then, is that slavery is self-evidently ‘abhorrent’, and that this needs no explanation or definition. What needs explanation is its presence in Australia, and it is its presence in Australia that needs to be ‘got rid of’, as though slavery can be expelled from the nation, leaving it to proceed with business as usual. Slavery appears as a contaminating agent in an otherwise just and fair nation.

This implicit representation structure is strengthened by the programme’s focus on consumption as the end result of the problem. The audience who will be horrified at the presence of slavery will, the narration suggests, be yet more horrified because the food chain puts them into close contact with the products of the exploitation. The audience is identified with the consumer through shots of supermarket shelves and an ominously-toned voiceover: ‘The brands we trust. The food we buy and eat on a daily basis’, thus constructing an audience ‘we’ identified by their shopping at the three major chains Coles, Woolworths and Aldi. A union advocate is asked what an accurate food label would be, and suggests

²⁷ J P Walsh, p. 211.

²⁸ R Andrijasevic, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, issue 1, 2007, pp. 41–42.

²⁹ O’Brien does not appear here to be referring to any particular location such as the nations the workers come from, which are actually ‘First World’. Ghassan Hage has argued in his ethnographic study of Australian White nationalism that ‘when the White people who embrace the White Nation fantasy look at a migrant, what they differentiate between are not those who are NESB [non-English-speaking-background] and those who are not, or those who are European and those who are not, but those who are Third World-looking and those who are not.’ In turn he defines ‘Whiteness’ as ‘a fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion’. G Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 18–20. Hence in an Australian context, the term ‘Third-world bondage’ might be read as referring to a fantasised region of the world inhabited by brown people who are by definition subject to exploitation. It is not an actual social category, but an imagined one.

‘picked and packed by exploited labour’. Addressed as a consumer rather than a worker or an activist, the audience member’s agency is thus tied to the food, and her decision to consume or reject it, while potential interaction with the workers who produce it is not considered. The consumer is not asked to boycott the supermarket and fast food chains, or to campaign for the dismantling of the control these corporations exercise on the nation’s food supply and labour standards, or to join a union that supports workers; she is asked to read labels when she is shopping. The focus on food also locates the impact of slavery not only in the nation, but in a nation defined as *domestic* space. While this rhetorical strategy is no doubt effective in making audiences think about their proximity to the problem, and even perhaps in encouraging them to consider their implication in the overall structure of Australia’s food chain, it also reinforces the sense of there being a contaminating agent within what would otherwise be a comfortable, nurturing, homey space. Nation and home appear to become co-extensive.

The fact that *food* is the vehicle by which slavery enters proximity with the comfortable Australian consumer renders this sense of contamination all the more vivid. In recent scholarship, there has been a turn to exploring the ways in which media creates ‘affective communities’,³⁰ becoming sites where audience members can create shared group identifications through their shared emotional reactions to what is shown on screen. Given that emotions are deeply embedded in our sense of self, the ways in which media representations can combine sensory and emotional reactions with particular perspectives on the world are potentially powerful and far-reaching. In this case, the *Four Corners* programme is quite explicit about the emotional responses it expects from its viewers: it addresses them directly as consumers worried about what they are taking into their bodies. While stopping short of suggesting that exploited workers are physically contaminating the food supply, the programme nonetheless raises the spectre of unsafe food through the use of phrases such as ‘we probably assume... the food is safe, hopefully fresh’, and (in ominous tones) ‘the brands we trust, the food we buy and eat’. As the programme’s subtitle suggests, slavery is a ‘dirty secret’. The story thus has the structure of ‘disgust’: the problem of slavery becomes something taken in that needs to be expelled. As Sara Ahmed argues, disgust is an emotion that makes us aware of boundaries between inside and outside.³¹ To the mapping of the nation onto ‘home’ we can thus also add a bodily dimension.

Where do exploited workers fit in this alignment of bodies around domestic safety and external contamination? ‘Slaving Away’ is unsettled on this question. While on the one hand it places workers’ experiences centre stage, on the other hand its nationalist framing and its address to an audience defined as comfortable consumers leaves workers with no clear plot role beyond being witnesses to a crime that does not belong in the nation. Only the British tourist shown at the beginning of the programme is invited to align her gaze with that of the audience, shocked at the entry of ‘Third World’ practices into their ‘First World’ lives. The position of the other workers is not given a plot resolution in the programme. It was, however, given a plot resolution in the media reports that followed, in which the narrative seamlessly merged concern over slavery into the scandal of border violations, a story in which workers were placed firmly into the category of foreigners under suspicion.

Operation Cloudburst

In the *Four Corners* report ‘Slaving Away’, the problematic tendencies I have noted towards presenting the issue of worker exploitation in nationalist terms as an issue of foreign slavery were mitigated by other possible explanations of the problem. In subsequent news reports, however, these tendencies become all too literal. As noted above, on 28 May, weeks after the *Four Corners* programme, the government announced Operation Cloudburst, a joint operation between the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, the Fair Work Ombudsman, and state and federal police, to ‘tackle illegal workers, visa fraud and worker exploitation across Australia’.³²

In spite of the Department’s mention of worker exploitation, most outlets reported the resultant arrests simply as the detention of ‘illegal workers’. The *Guardian’s* entry in its parliamentary briefing reported that three of the businesses raided were featured in the *Four Corners* programme.³³ But most media outlets simply reported the joint press release from the Minister and Assistant Minister of Immigration and Border Control, without reference to that story. The headline on the press release was ‘Illegal Workers Targeted Nationally’. The ABC’s rural news outlet ran with ‘Operation Cloudburst detains 22 suspected illegal workers at Gatton, Queensland’.³⁴ The Murdoch-owned national newspaper *The*

³⁰ S Yell, ‘Natural Disaster News and Communities of Feeling: The affective interpellation of local and global publics’, *Social Semiotics*, vol. 22, issue 4, 2012, pp. 409–428.

³¹ S Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, p. 83.

³² The Hon P Dutton and the Hon M Cash, ‘Joint Media Release: Illegal workers targeted nationally’, 28 May 2015, retrieved 24 July 2016, <http://www.minister.border.gov.au/peterdutton/2015/Pages/illegal-workers-targeted-nationally.aspx>

³³ G Chan, ‘Australian politics live with Gabrielle Chan: Illegal workers found’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2015, retrieved 11 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2015/may/28/sydney-siege-gunmans-letter-to-brandis-anything-but-routine-politics-live#block-55668c94e4b05d536e4bc243>

³⁴ K Buchanan and M McCarthy, ‘“Operation Cloudburst” detains 22 suspected illegal workers at Gatton, Queensland’, *ABC Rural*, 29 May 2015.

Australian said ‘Firms flouted work visa laws’³⁵ while the tabloid *Herald Sun* said ‘Alleged illegal farm workers to be deported after police raids’.³⁶ The problem of worker exploitation all but disappears here, replaced by the problem of ‘illegal workers’. Indeed it seems likely that ‘Kevin’, the worker who testified on ‘Slaving Away’ to having been given fake identification so that he could keep working after his time limit expired, would have been one of the arrested workers.

Beyond the headlines, the issue of worker exploitation did not entirely disappear, but drifted in and out of focus. The ministerial press release, from which most of the newspapers simply copied extracts, quotes the minister sliding from talking about illegal workers to employers and back to illegal workers.

Mr Dutton said the vast majority of workers did the right thing, but a small number were breaking the law.

‘The Australian Government has made it very clear to that small minority that we will not put up with unscrupulous employers and labour hire companies blatantly flouting the law and allowing overseas workers to work illegally in Australia,’ he said.³⁷

Ultimately, then, the minister identified workers as the problem and as criminal agents, their crime as ‘working illegally’, and employers as accessories who ‘allow’ the problem to happen. Working conditions and payment below the legal minimum wage disappear in this picture, and Mr Dutton certainly does not mention slavery.

The press release also contained the detail that two of those detained for visa violations were being investigated as operators of labour hire companies. Taken on their own, these reports thus gave the picture that the problem is created by foreigners. Both those who run the labour hire companies that enforce workers’ poor conditions, and those who do the work, are here covered by the one category—‘illegal workers’—and the event becomes a case of crime solved, rather than one of structural problems in the organisation of supply chains. In keeping with this interpretation, the Department released a hand-held video showing the police carrying out the overnight raids, as if it were a police drama.³⁸ Interviewed for the ABC news report, the Assistant Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Senator Cash, did mention exploitation, but did not clearly link it to working conditions. As quoted by the ABC, the statement seems to suggest that in fact working without a visa *is* the exploitation. ‘We will be as tough on those who seek to abuse our immigration system as we have been on those who seek to come here illegally,’ she said. ‘We will not stand for worker exploitation.’³⁹

To anyone who has lived in Australia in recent decades, Cash’s phrasing here is familiar and clear: she is positioning irregular labour as equivalent to onshore asylum seeking. Since Prime Minister John Howard came into power in 1996, being ‘tough on borders’ has been the mantra of both major political parties, and refers to the intent to stop asylum seekers from gaining access to Australian territory in order to claim asylum, an act that in Australian government rhetoric, and contrary to international law, is positioned as ‘illegal’. Onshore asylum seekers are thus variously called ‘queue jumpers’, ‘boat people’ or simply ‘illegals’. What may not be apparent to those who have not lived in Australia is the extent to which this language in turn serves as an implicit shorthand for racism in general. Deliberately sensationalised fears over border crossing by asylum seekers have become the primary means by which Australia is constructed as a vulnerable nation whose borders must be protected.⁴⁰ Aside from a certain incoherence then, what Cash’s unstable positioning of blame and victimhood does is to divert compassion away from the workers in the same way that it has been diverted away from asylum seekers: the need to save them from exploitation is overridden by the need to save the nation from people without visas who carry slavery within Australia.

Conclusion

De Genova points out that ‘illegal’ migration is not a pre-existing act propagated by migrants, but a direct effect of the categories created by the processes of border management and surveillance that are ostensibly designed to control it.⁴¹ In the case of Australia’s 417 visa, a dependence of the labour market on migrant workers combined with a denial of that dependence produces a regulatory environment in which workers are structurally liable to exploitation, caught between industry demand for their labour and government surveillance of their migration status. This ambivalence and denial is continuous with cultural amnesia over Australia’s long history of exploitation of migrant and Indigenous labour, which has always been both necessary to the nation and viewed as a problematic element in a nation aspiring to be ‘white’. It might be expected that ambivalence would produce competing representations, and that is what has happened in the

³⁵ J Owens, ‘Investigators swoop on businesses in illegal work visa crackdown’, *The Australian*, 28 May 2015.

³⁶ D Hurley, ‘Alleged illegal farm workers to be deported after police raids in Shepparton’, *The Herald Sun*, 1 June 2015.

³⁷ The Hon P Dutton and the Hon M Cash.

³⁸ Department of Immigration and Border Protection, ‘Operation Cloudburst’, Newsroom, retrieved 24 July 2016, <http://newsroom.border.gov.au/channels/Community-awareness/videos>

³⁹ K Buchanan and M McCarthy.

⁴⁰ A Burke, *In Fear of Security: Australia’s invasion anxiety*, Pluto Press, Annandale NSW, 2001.

⁴¹ N De Genova, p. 1190.

case studied here. While the ‘Slaving Away’ programme positioned exploited 417 visa holders as victims of abusive labour practices, reports on ‘Operation Cloudburst’ positioned them as ‘illegal workers’. The juxtaposition of these reports produced a picture in which the deporting of migrant workers appeared as the solution to the exploitation of those same migrant workers.

My argument here is that this apparently contradictory juxtaposition attracted little public comment because while it may not make ethical sense, it makes *affective* sense. Its affective sense comes from the fact that in spite of their differences over what the real problem of migrant labour might be, *both the ‘slavery’ discourse* (as it was presented here), *and the ‘border control’ discourse share the same vision of the nation*. Even as it sought to evoke sympathy for the workers, the ‘Slaving Away’ programme participated in a vision of the nation as a comfortable domestic space vulnerable to contamination by the ‘foreign’ problem of slavery. The programme thus produced competing images of vulnerability, in which the vulnerability of the workers vied with the vulnerability of the national consumer. The audience, however, were addressed precisely *as* this national consumer, primarily concerned not with helping others, but with preserving the purity of the national domestic space of consumption.

Meanwhile, defined as victims of a ‘slavery’ presented as foreign evil, rather than victims of Australia’s contradictory attitude to migrant labour, the exploited migrant workers in the food chain seem to belong to a different world, one outside the boundaries of the developed nation, where ‘bondage’ is apparently to be expected. There are convenient reversals happening here, in which white Australia, living off the wealth and territory gained through colonial exploitation, can now present slavery—and slaves along with it—as a problem that happens elsewhere. The story that would render such alignments impossible is the one story that was not told: the story of how slavery is not an external problem, but one integral to the Australian nation. Recognising this means also recognising the ways in which Australia’s ‘borderpanic’, proliferating across multiple and intersecting sites of xenophobia,⁴² is a means of avoiding responsibility for its own history, and thus inevitably a site of the violent repetition of that history.

Without this insight, ‘foreign’ bodies, the bodies of exploited workers, easily become aligned with the problem of slavery itself, and the solution appears not as structural adjustment to migration and labour regulations, but as expulsion of the contaminating presence. The nation’s claim to being an ‘innocent’ and privileged space where exploitation does not happen can thus only be maintained through the obsessive construction of borders between inside and outside. From here the difference between giving a worker decent working conditions, and deporting a worker, do not come to matter, because the differences which have been made to matter instead are those between the insiders and outsiders to the nation. The term ‘illegal’ does the work of aligning the nation together in fear of outsiders, and positions outsiders as those who break the law. The consumer who wants to safely purchase her food without thinking about slavery then becomes located in this government discourse as the law-abiding insider, who is under threat from these outsiders who have brought foreign methods of exploitation into the nation. From here the solution can only be to expel the contaminating agent.

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⁴² S Perera, ‘The Gender of Borderpanic: Women in circuits of security, state, globalisation and new (and old) empire’ in M Caine and A Howe (eds.), *Women, Crime and Social Harm: Towards a criminology for the global age*, Hart, Oxford, UK, 2008, pp. 69—93, p. 69.