

**A Stone from the Borderzone:  
Women and Multiculturalism  
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Multiculturalism in the New Millennium

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Many thanks for inviting me to address you this morning. I was a bit uncertain as to how I could best contribute to this debate, as I am not a specialist in multicultural affairs. I am merely a woman who has for many years been living and working in Asia. What I hope to present to you this morning may appear to you as bit of stream of consciousness – it certainly appears to me like that, in which I traverse my own experiences particularly with the world of women, and explore what this might mean for Australia. Most of what I say will leave pockets for you to fill with your own ideas, creativity and caring. This is more appetizer than main course.

A few weeks ago I attended a meeting in Brisbane to protest the mandatory detention of so-called illegal refugees. I was delighted to see that some of the young people present had taken up radical discourse, which reminded me at some wincing times of my own full throated past. But, what struck me was how deeply what is now known as ‘wedge politics’ has bitten. That a meeting was needed to defend the rights of those who had already suffered and whose rights are protected by international conventions, to which Australia is signatory, indicated to me that something infectious is happening at all levels of Australian society.

While I was sitting there listening to the very impressive presentation by a volunteer from Amnesty, I was taken back to my own time in Bali where I would watch the tourists flocking around the various ceremonies, some looking decidedly uncomfortable. Some had transcended the respectful distance and were affecting a deliberate and arrogant intimacy. I thought about this phenomenon called tourism, and what it is that draws us all to go to look and photograph or film people from other countries...later I read an article by Bruner<sup>1</sup> discussing what he calls the Borderzone between our comfort zone and that of The Other. In the Borderzone we are free to project our prejudices, hopes, needs and to make tentative forays into other cultures. We are eager to see the exotic and erotic but not, for instance, the poverty and privation.

But what happens when The Other become our neighbours? Women wearing *jilbab* in Indonesia are interesting and photogenic. In Australia they are

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<sup>1</sup> Bruner.E. *Tourism in the Balinese Borderzone. In Displacement and Diaspora and Geography of Identity*. Duke University Press. Durham and London 1996.

'downtrodden'. He proposed that tourism safely enables the exploration of The Other while at the same time allowing an escape. Tourism develops an artificial familiarity and limited curiosity, while at the same time preserving class and economic distance. I think this analysis is a useful one, and one that I will come back to.

But first I would like to explore how the two examples fit together. Since returning to Australia I have felt some alarm at how the phenomenon now known as 'wedge politics' had developed an interior concept of The Other - fed by lies and deceit about refugees and denials about the history of Black Australians. Add to this recent statements from political and police leaders in NSW, and the media's selective coverage of events and subjects<sup>2</sup>, and you have the basis for vilification and the sorts of fear in the population that lead to holes being created in the fabric of Australian society (arguably one of the most tolerant on earth) - into which groups like One Nation can pour the corrosive acid of racism and intolerance. Add to this the explosive detonators of poverty and alienation, of misplaced machismo, of vanishing expectations and you have the sort of mix that most policy makers need acupuncture for.

Women are, by and large, the wearers of the cultural emblems. It is they rather than men who may adhere to traditional dress - *sari's* or *shawal kameez* is a good example - or the emblems of their religion, the headscarf of the Muslim women. Thus they are more likely to attract the attention of those who want to isolate and stereotype The Other and keep them in the Borderzone. For women - who are largely those responsible for care of children and thus the passing on of lineage - feeling unambiguous about their identity is important, if not vital. It also enables them to wend their way in safety in a society where they are at risk; which is these days most societies.

### **Me as The Other.**

I have been an Other. I lived and worked in Asia for the past 12 years. The Philippines, Indonesia - where I spent the majority of time - Vietnam and Nepal. Previous to that, I had spent time in the Pacific before the days of coups and militarism.

In that time I floated like an island of my culture within those of the countries in which I lived. While I participated and fully entered into the life and struggles around me I never had a sense that I was, in the words of the pop song, the equivalent of "turning Japanese". I felt particularly in my relationships with women, that I could not be like them. My body shape and size, my comparative loudness, the things that weighed on my soul and theirs, the wide range of obligations I did not have to face, the religious and social expectations, were, in the translation, totally different to mine. But in

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that the only photographs that one sees of Muslim women are those of the woman standing shapeless and devoid of personality in the distance. Very few show the beautiful faces that shine forth.

all that I was able to strike great intimacy with women in both countries, and my role as The Other also gave them great freedom to project onto me all their beliefs about for instance ‘Western’<sup>3</sup> sexuality, wealth and atheism. At no time did I feel women were victims, except of war and conflict. The standard view of Asian women as being passive and compliant is not my reality. While we use the term empowering a lot (which tells us more about our own needs), the women with whom I spent time wanted influence and their roles both traditional and new to be valued, not to be clones of western women. They have a very clear view of themselves as women, stemming from close contact with their lineage.

The experience of being an island, Tom Hanks notwithstanding, was one that was of great interest to me, as I realized that while I could live in these countries, I was separated by interpretation, by experience, and by my lack of lineage. Lineage is what deeply connects us to not only culture, but to our ancestors and the genetic sequence that gives us our eye colour and to have a large nose. Lineage is what determines what status we have in our families and how our families are structured. It determines how women are accorded power and, more importantly, influence through their ancestors, their skills and reputations. In our world of rapid change and consumer fashions, lineage is the living pattern on batik, the symbolism in the bent fingers and lithe movements of Indonesian dance and gestures and communications, which slide with subtlety and infuriating indirectness. We, as the white faces, have largely lost our cultural lineage. Instead, we are caught in consumer culture that emphasises redundancy and change rather than continuity. Lineage is not found in a mobile phone or in the fashion departments at David Jones.

It was in that time that I realized the importance of Australian multiculturalism, which recognises that culture, belief, language, and behaviour defines who we are. Culture is not an overlay that disappears when you go through passport control. Multiculturalism recognises the stone.

I realized in that time that who I was and what I was in cultural terms was not merely skin deep. It was not a matter of language – as I became reasonably fluent in the local language - or behaving correctly, but something deep in the heart, a stone in the center of the chest which contained the essence of who I am. A semi-pervious center.

My hosts helped. I was never expected to be an Indonesian or Philippina. My colleagues were very happy to allow me to be the crazy mix of cultures that I am, and politely overlooked some of my worst *kasar*<sup>4</sup> blunders. What they looked for in me was an alternative viewpoint, understanding and a chance to test out new ways of thinking and, possibly, of being. For women in particular, hearing and reading about feminism, and being exposed to Western (that is largely American) culture, it was important to value what was

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of ease I will use ‘Western’ knowing full well that like ‘Asian’ it is a meaningless term, in that it homogenises complexity and difference.

<sup>4</sup> Kasar in Indonesian means unrefined, unenlightened, coarse or rough.

essentially freeing and valuable about who they were in relation to the models that they were seeing. But more about that later.

### **Indonesia: Diversity With Force.**

I would like to tell you a little about being a woman in Indonesia as I think we are going to be entangled with this nation for quite some time.

In Indonesia the *suku* or ethnic group from which you come is most important. The question *Asal dari mana?* Which sort of means where are you originally from: where are your roots? Is one that greets all visitors. Women from each ethnic group are known for their various attributes. East Javanese women for instance, are famous for being serially married. The more married the better.

Each group has its own cultural symbols and language. Some cultures are matriarchal. The Minangkabau culture of west Sumatra is the best-known example. Until Soeharto's New Order came into being, all land was passed along the women's line. After the radical sixties, in which Indonesian women by the literal millions, fought for the rights of working women, for women's education and health services, the New Order instituted many forms of social and political control of women, which reduced their formal powers and attempted to change who they were. This process was known by some scholars as the 'housewifisation' of Indonesian women. In 1965 thousands of radical women were slaughtered in the so-called communist cleansing of the time. Some of the mass graves, the last resting place of those women, are currently being excavated; so Indonesian women can reclaim their history. How much of the women's side of the Indonesian Killings was ever known? What role does the media have in shaping our appreciation of women's history? Most older women carry the images of women being slaughtered. They rarely talk about it, and when they do, it is with furtive looks all around and in very quiet voices indeed.

Indonesia does not have a multicultural policy *per se*, despite being ethnically diverse. Except for the SARA<sup>5</sup> rule, which used to prohibit publications, jokes, speeches and books that pit one group against another, and was designed to reduce ethnic or religious vilification, there are no obvious programs to inculcate multicultural values.

Until poverty, and deliberate provocation, brought Indonesia into the spotlight, Indonesia was, by and large, ethnically and religiously tolerant. But Indonesia did not have a lot of in-migration; rather migration was internal, driven by government policy. Now as a result, refugees are an internal phenomenon. Indonesia now has over one million people (about 10%) of the world's internally displaced persons - a fact that Australia needs to ponder on deeply, as they do not fall under the aegis of UNHCR. Many of the refugees

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<sup>5</sup> SARA is the acronym which means Suku, agama, ras, antar golongan (ethnic group, religion, race. or relations between groups)

are women. Widows whose husbands have been killed in conflict. In Pidi Province of Aceh, over 90% of the women are widows. That is, in an area with the population of Perth, 98% of women are widows. The media cover the men's war, not the women's.

For women, participation in International Women's Year was not allowed. Rather they were given *Hari Kartini and Hari Ibu*. The first celebrating the life of a young Javanese aristocratic poet who conveniently died of TB before she had a chance to become too radical, the other celebrating motherhood. These were the stereotypes allowed Indonesian women. Despite all that, radicalism thrives and Indonesian women are negotiating their own feminist ideals.

Globalisation has meant that Indonesian women are finding more work than men. The fragmentation of the labour market and the out-sourcing of production have meant in particular that women more than men are marginalized from the mainstream of industrial muscle. Indonesian trade unions are in the ascendancy after years of suppression, and women are actively participating as organizers and members. I worked as an independent factory monitor for Reebok, checking the subcontracting firms performance in terms of occupational health and safety. Each factory (2) had to pay out at least USD2 million to retrofit the factories to achieve the standards set by Reebok (9 and by me).

The US and European consumer movements recognised this risk years ago and have provided outreach programs to women workers in particular. They have insisted on Codes of Conduct, which although ineffective, at least make some attempt to regulate the worst of Transnational Corporation excesses.

### **What Is the Message for Australia?**

The recent events in Kalimantan show how poverty, marginalisation and the denial of ancestral rights can trigger outrage and hatred. While the example is extreme, we have to be watchful, as parts of Australian society are, as a result of long periods of unenlightened economic and political thinking, becoming more fragmented and alienated. We have a lot to learn from Indonesia as we grow our underclass like fungi in the dark, away from the glare of middle class life. Policy is at times no defence in the absence of strength. In Indonesia police sat by eating lunch as people died nearby. They were part of the vendetta. In Australia how many police harbour misunderstandings? And do we know why? In Indonesia SARA did not stop women, children and men being decapitated. Being a woman is no defence from anger and feelings of revenge. The target now in angry pop songs listened to by the disaffected, are women and gays.

Multiculturalism like feminism is regarded as a by-gone fashion. Other issues have taken their place. The public becomes complacent. Like young women who despise feminism, as they are able to take the gains without the struggle, it is easy for all of us to forget the struggle for inclusion and

fairness. After all multiculturalism is in essence institutionalised fairness. It is incumbent on all of us to raise the profile of multiculturalism in all sorts of creative ways, and to give voice and face to those who make up this nation.

Women however are not victims. Most do not want to be seen that way. Most have clear links with their ancestry and their religion which informs their definitions of who they are.

But we can also learn how the media systematically reduce the impact of events on women. Today I told you some things that you may not have known about Indonesian women. Their story more than likely is replicated in the shadows that follow most women refugees and some women migrants, particularly those from conflict zones. My work with service women led me to understand that women suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at a rate higher than men and are more likely to be affected longer. It is likely that most of the women in the refugee camps are suffering PTSD. The need for psychological support and outreach to refugee women and to migrating women is imperative.

We can also learn how racism and wedge politics can create advantages for governments. In Indonesia racism against those with darker skin ensured that little sympathy was given to those in the occupied countries of East Timor and West Papua. Here wedge politics can divert our attention away from the reasons underlying divisions in Australian society.

Indonesia has also shown us what we can expect from a so-called flexible labour market resulting from the globalisation of trade. Fortunately they are increasingly taking an internationalist approach to the issue, networking with consumer, university and labour groups as well as trade unions. In Australia most of the outworkers in globalised assembly industries are women of non-English speaking backgrounds. The effects of a globalised trading system when coupled with the loss of collective bargaining and other industrial safety nets rights under the so called reforms to the Workplace Relations Act are possibly most felt by these women most unlikely to be able to resist. On top of that, women at home are now defined as subcontractors and hit with GST accounting responsibilities. What assistance is there to them as a group? Who takes care of the children while they are working and accounting?

### **A Postscript.**

When I left in 1989, Australia still had tolerable levels of unemployment. Trade unions, collective bargaining and the arbitration system guaranteed workers' rights and made sure we remained a collective, cooperative society. Demonstrations, I remember, were reasonably peaceful affairs, where police stood by and occasionally moved on the more rowdy participants. There was a feeling of collectivism, but more so, an international outlook. The ABC news contained items from overseas, as did the print media that reinforced that we were part of the greater world. Globalisation was a word that meant little other than maybe getting soccer live from Spain. The WTO wasn't in

existence. On the other hand: reconciliation wasn't on the radar; the banks had just been let loose and Gerry Hand brought in detention for refugees.

Strange things started to happen. Firstly, as a British passport holder, I was asked to confess when I came back to Australia whether I had any of the following in my family: cancer, diabetes or lunacy. I was also asked whether I had been declared bankrupt. (A question they could have asked Skase on the way out!) I explained to the grim faced Immigration officer that such questions were potentially discriminatory, 'medical in confidence' and had no bearing on my ability to return to Australia. Most forms of mental illness are not, as far as I know, genetically based, nor are most forms of cancer genetically transmitted.<sup>6</sup> The form was changed. Increasingly it became difficult for Indonesians to get into Australia. Letters to the local press complaining about departmental misrepresentations, fudging and blocking became more frequent. Mothers couldn't visit their student children, women were denied visas to visit dying family members, and those even trying to make a new life were completely denied entry. This all began to happen about seven years ago. I tried to tell the embassy staff, based on the evidence of refugees staying in our house, that East Timorese women were being raped and forced into concubinage, but was told that I was overreacting, before being hung up on. Two East Timorese women who applied for refugee status on the grounds of sexual crime and violence were refused refuge by the Australian Consular section in Jakarta.<sup>7</sup> Radio Australia' signal was reduced to such a degree that only Indonesian Intelligence had the equipment to listen in. Australian television became a media stall by which to flog Australian holidays and universities. We learned how to make gilt Christmas decorations - a skill every Muslim woman should learn. Later, we got the overfed Christian evangelicals, in one of the most insensitive broadcasting decisions I have ever been witness to. And then there was Home and Away! Indonesians who had relied on Radio Australia though the dark days of the Soeharto regime, those in the eastern islands who used it to teach their kids English, those who had studied here and wanted to catch up on global affairs all were puzzled - and wondering why Australia had cut off a media lifeline.

That for me signaled a tacit turning away from the politics of regional inclusion. In Australia, we had wedge politics to look forward to.

Now the police can use torture holds against demonstrators and may be given 'tasers'. Both sides of politics agree that the military can be used as an aid to civil power in case of social disruption, and money is being diverted from public education to the high end of town, away from the kids who most need it - most specifically newly arrived children and their parents. At the same time, teachers report that TAFE funding for English classes for refugees

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the current propensity to victim blame and ignore occupational and environmental triggers.

<sup>7</sup> If I can remember correctly, one had been forced into concubinage and had only been released when she became pregnant with a soldier's child. The other had been forced to watch as her brother, a suspected Fretilin was beheaded and his head used as a football by ABRI.

is about to end. What are we doing but creating a borderland upon which we can focus feelings of outrage, smugness and exclusion. A sociological minefield that protects the well off from the embarrassment of those who are not so. Is this what we want? We have created a wide Borderzone a round our own marginalized people. We visit but don't want to stop. We see a Muslim woman shopping, and while we look and suppose she is just another victim, we do not stop to talk to share her experience. Multicultural policy should ensure that we are not merely creating Borderzones within Australia.

The media suffers selective outrage. A woman's rape and her child's murder are reduced to a twenty-second sound bite between share prices and rugby union scores. She had become simply a filler. The ABC, which along with SBS, struggles to bring us more than a microtome-thick view of the world is now being told that it is out of date, not moving with the specious, superficial times. We step around things we don't understand or that are uncomfortable.

We have to ask ourselves is this the direction we want to go? We have to ask ourselves, what we will do if and when a new wave of Indonesian boat people hit our shores. Men, women and children escaping poverty, women escaping rape, and children escaping the inevitability of child labour. Will they be queue jumpers, illegals - or will they be people in need of our understanding?

Closer to home, we need to reflect on what it is that we want to create on the street where we live, in our childrens' schools, shopping centres, government, and, most importantly, for those people mainly women, whom we have consigned to our own internal Borderzones.