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SHAPES ON THE HORIZON: READING THE PUMICE RAFT AND MIGRATION THROUGH AGENTIC ECOLOGIES AND AUSTRALIAN BORDER CONTROL

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Shapes on the Horizon: Reading the Pumice Raft and Migration through Agentic Ecologies and Australian Border Control

Abstract

In 2019, reports of a raft of pumice adrift in the Pacific Ocean circulated. Expelled from the Earth by an underwater volcanic eruption, the raft is wonderous and abject, severed from its geologic origins. A threatening Anthropocene omen, it troubles the smooth space of the ocean through its intrusion. We track its movement through surveillance technologies — tools of control that buttress turbulent and shifting contemporary borders.

Our consideration of the movement of people across porous borders apprehends migratory discourse and critiques framings of abjectness, fear, and colonial reperformance in an Australian context. Security and surveillance, and the littoral composition of Australian borders figure as means of maintaining and reinforcing fixed, terrestrial constructions of sovereignty. Recent border policies involving stratified spaces of offshore detention become bureaucratic and inhumane extensions of the littoral sphere — convergences of the smooth and stratified, that invert, yet reinforce colonial control and persecution.

Framed by Deleuzoguattarian notions of smooth, stratified, and holey space, and our ongoing research project, *Ecological Gyre Theory*, we see overlaps, collisions, and parallels between the pumice raft as agentic, ecological force, and legacies of invasion and colonisation, reperfomed onto people and landscapes. Considering the agentic power of bodies, we read the traversal of the sea by both raft and asylum seekers towards a critique of Australian history and cultural identity. Our critique endorses both a decolonial and New Materialist approach, exploring ecology and being amidst climate collapse and a rapidly changing world.

Following the eruption of geologic matter from an undersea volcano in 2019, its passage through ocean waters and rendering in media representations, to traversals of these same waters by asylum seekers journeying to Australia, we seek to draw a line between mediatization, attention, and flow as it relates to the drawing of borders. Through considerations of the agentic power of bodies, toward a reading of Australian history and cultural identity, our text parallels the traversal of the smooth space of the ocean by the pumice raft through its being and representation within an Australian context, with traversals of sea made by asylum seekers. The raft and the migrant disrupt Deleuzoguattarian concepts of the smooth and the striated. From the moment of Invasion, through the persistence of xenophobic attitudes to the Other, shifting borders and contemporary border policy developments, we follow the ongoing attempts of the nation-state to stratify the smooth. Positioning the raft and the migrant within the framework of holey space, we endeavor to elucidate aspects of Australia's nissol-

ogy, littoral ensconcement and political environment — entwining the oceanic with lived experiences, bridging gaps between the human and the more-than-human in moving toward apprehensions of power and control in relation to our oceanic surrounds. In stepping into these flows, whereby we encounter the striations of power and control, we step through Australian history, from Invasion to recent attempts to legislate refugee arrivals. In doing so, the sea and the shore become troubled sites, in which the arrival of bodies upon the shore, both human and other-than-human, are refigured as abject and aberrant.

1_Rafting

From August 6–8 2019, the undersea Volcano F, located in the South Pacific Ocean, erupted.¹ This eruption passed by largely without ceremony — there was no dance of now-unsteady feet, or submersion at the hands of a seismically unsettled ocean — it instead manifested as a ghostly appearance in the water, drifting unnoticed for weeks. By chance, sailors en route to Fiji from Vava’u encountered the raft and passed into an eerie zone; a terrestriality where it should not be, a 150 square kilometer ephemeral island formed by the expulsion of geologic matter to the surface. Shaky footage of the pumice raft appeared in news media in late August, circulating with a rapidity that belied the somewhat ominous approach of this uncanny hydro-geologic formation. Registered by satellites above as a dark and amorphous shape, the pumice raft was initially received with awe, heralded as a potential savior for the fast-bleaching Great Barrier Reef. A welcome potential arrival, this vesicular material bearing aloft ecological hope through the South Pacific.²

As we follow the oceanic drift of the pumice raft, it drifts too across further screens, those concerned with surveillance and national security, as it becomes entangled within the grids of the map overlaid onto water. Extending outwards from the Australian nation-state, this map attempts to legislate space, arrival, departure and national identity. Within this watery extension of the nation-state — the shadowy realm of ‘on-water’ — the pumice raft vanished from the media, overshadowed by the early appearance of the bushfire season, and the ongoing struggles of the Nadesalingam family of Biloea in the face of repeated deportation attempts by the Australian Government. When the raft did reappear in the media in December 2019, it was received with decidedly less wonder. There was no fanfare regarding the raft floating

into Australian shores, nor even any proof of its presence. Instead, the media reported the sobering news that this floating geological presence would *not* be the Great Barrier Reef's savior, and that the arrival of these abrasive oceanic stones may, in fact, have a deleterious effect upon the already precarious reef.³ And with that — the pumice raft disappeared again. While the pumice raft may still be visible on satellites, and is still subject to surveillance by computerized eyes, it no longer exists within the lens of the media. This mass of geology has disappeared, becoming elusive and ephemeral only because our attention has waned, whilst continuing its journey across the ocean to meet the Australian shoreline.

While the dominance of the bushfires and the struggles of the Nadesalingam family within the media during this period of the raft's traversal occurs quite by chance, for the purposes of this text it is somewhat serendipitous. We acknowledge the twinned horrors they represent, and seek not to downplay this in any way. However, these two issues speak to the overarching theme of mobility flowing through this text, manifest within the movement of the Earth, as read through Anthropocene notions; and the movement of people. Apprehending these mobilities through the Deleuzoguattarian triumvirate of smooth, striated, and holey space, within this text we seek to challenge inertness through the literal movement of the geologic via the passage of the pumice raft, and further extend this toward a challenging of fixity in relation to Australian borderscapes and the perceived boundedness of the littoral.

2_The Earth, It Moves

The drift of the pumice raft across the surface of the ocean unsettles. As this ephemeral island, a drifting shoreline, approaches, it muddies notions of terrestrial fixity. We redeploy this categorical unsettling within our interrogation of borders and the littoral as related to the construction of the Australian nation-state; but further, between human and other than human. Within this text, we aim to examine the shoreline as it shifts; is penetrated, marked, crossed, and refigured through challenges to, and reassertions of, borders.

The geologic, as foundation of terrestriality and also that comprising the pumice raft, is not neutral, nor is it mute matter. We understand the present as a period of unprecedented mobility and change, a consequence of the twinned upheavals of global warming and climate catastrophe. This mobility has become one of the defining char-

acteristics of the contemporary Anthropocene condition. The irony is not lost that whilst this marks our “ever closer proximity to Earth’s geomorphology, its dynamism, its fluidity,” increasingly our movements will be fleeing the disastrous effects of intensified earthly activity; heightened in consideration of imminent upheaval, transit and adaptation.⁴ Within the Anthropocene, points of reference for the destabilized contemporary find their roots in strata; both in geologic memory, but also within extractive processes and industries. As Robin Mackay acknowledges, humanity has become the first lifeform to communicate contemporaneously with geologic time.⁵ While Mackay’s assertion emerges from considerations of the extractive, we suggest that the Earth is beginning to speak back to us, manifest in the multitude of climate change effects we are now experiencing. Those events we now classify as being hallmarks of the Anthropocene; rising temperatures, habitat and ecosystem loss, a generalized and pervasive state of uncertainty emerge as a consequence of the one-sided dialogue that had constituted modern history until our present.

Whilst it is easy to view the Anthropocene as a human problem from a causal perspective, in this unification with geologic time through Anthropocene forces, a wide net is cast — one which encircles the globe, uniting human and other-than-human through precarity. In this sense, there is no longer just one Anthropocene, but one for everyone. Accompanying the enormous ecologic changes of the last, say, twelve months, we think here of the wide-ranging social changes that have occurred contemporaneously — global protests, isolation and quarantine. Examples such as the pumice raft, as rare occurrences, offer an opportunity or prompt through which we can reevaluate our relationship to the natural world, by apprehending their symbolic value. We seek to probe here at what the pumice raft — this uncanny geologic raft and ephemeral island — can tell us about our rapidly changing world. While a thorough analysis of the symbolic capital of the pumice raft is beyond the scope of this text, we apprehend it within the context of the nation-state; a foundational component of the World-As-We-Know-It.

Thinking foundationally, we look to the formation of the nation-state of Australia, particularly giving our attention to the littoral zone — the initial site of Invasion. The formation of Australia, a land ‘girt by sea,’ emerged from colonial power; an imposition of striated space upon the land, emerging from, and reaching back to cover the sea. Within the formational footstep of boot to shore, the littoral zone became an en-

closure. No longer simply the site of mingling sand and sea, the shoreline became a hermetic space within which national identity was variously composed and imposed. The hermeticism and enclosure of the Australian border is enabled by the strict ability to control entry upon the shoreline. Buttressed by the geographic locatedness of the Australian continent, as surrounded by ocean either side and Antarctica below, the most common point of entry by sea occurs north of the 26th parallel, drastically limiting the area of ocean that is to be surveilled and regularly patrolled and thus enabling Australian border security operations to be so effective.

Often those approaching by sea are stateless. However, within our traditional, and arguably outdated, understandings of country as nation, land is perceived and defined as territory and sovereign ‘property.’ The raft troubles these framings. Unmoored, the geologic interloper exists in opposition to the solidified demarcation of Australia as nation-state. The pumice raft is decidedly *unsovereign*, agentic land adrift and unclaimed, which is an inconceivable prospect in an ordered world — defined as such by human occupation and control. The approach of the raft through the South Pacific triggers latent memories of the initial wave of Invasion, whereby the enactment of control, through the frame of Western colonial structures, led to the forceful dismantling of Indigenous sovereignty. Advancing southwards through the South Pacific, the raft’s trajectory can be read as an inversion of the route taken by James Cook in 1770, before making land at Botany Bay. In the reperformative inversion of this event, the raft can be read as disrupting not only notions of Anthropocentric fixity, but of national fixity also. Presaged upon borders and the control of the littoral zone, we see the fixities become *unfixed*, troubled not only by the raft’s passage but the broader destabilizing effects of climate change.

These changes are set to continue, emphasizing the timeliness and necessity of these considerations. The Earth, and the people upon it, are moving and set to continue moving. Estimates from 2018 predict 143 million more climate migrants by 2050, as temperatures soar and water floods low lying states.⁶ In light of this, ossified, monolithic and outdated ways of living, dividing, and understanding the world require interrogation and destabilization, in order to reflect the dynamism of lived experience, the changing earth and to enable the move towards ethical and inclusive ways of organizing society and community. At present, the world of the future is but a dark smudge on the horizon, and we find ourselves still at sea.

3_Smooth Sailing

The ocean flows at the center of the concept of the smooth. As presented in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the smooth is one half of a twinned concept, co-constituted by the striated.⁷ Like the co-composed space of the littoral, the smooth and the striated are not dichotomous concepts; although separate, they intermingle, overlap, and entwine — Moebius-like. While the smooth and striated are spatial theories, Deleuze and Guattari do not necessarily present a strict theory of space, moving through epistemological and ontological concerns related to these concepts. The smooth is aligned with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of nomadism, whereas striated space is part of the operation and influence of the state apparatus. Existing as smooth space is the other-than-human world: the pre-human, pre-industrialized and nomadic world. However, this world became increasingly striated as Western colonial and hegemonic forces began to colonize; striating and redistributing land, challenging and redrawing borders. The smooth space, once without the influence of the state apparatus, continues to grow narrower in response to this incursion.

There are few truly nomadic smooth spaces left — even the “smooth space par excellence” of the ocean, in the words of Flora Lysen and Patricia Pisters, is shrinking.⁸ They describe the sea, this smooth ideal, as follows: “water always moved by the wind, the sun and the stars, nomadically traversable by noise, colour and celestial bearings,” but warn that “increased navigation of the open water resulted in demands for its striation.”⁹ The striation of the ocean occurs through navigation, cartography's cruel geometry, constant surveillance and the imposition of rigid national boundaries over fluid sites. Within this, however, the ephemeral island of the pumice raft enacts the nomadism of the smooth space; a city-sized geological interloper floats, boundless in motion as it traverses the ocean.¹⁰ The pumice raft is an uncanny intrusion, a terrestrial aberration that reasserts the flows of the smooth.

Entering into this smooth space is to recognize proliferating striations resulting from incursions by the state-apparatus, which become readily apparent when read in the frame of tidalectics — a particularly useful frame amidst the destabilized flows of the Anthropocene. Tidalectics, emerging from the work of the eponymous Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, presents a counter to traditional Hegelian dialectics; one which seeks to privilege cyclic motion, rather than linear progression. In Brathwaite's words, tidalectics is informed by history; “...the history of the sense of migration, the

constant movement of peoples over the landscape of the world and how, from the very beginning, people have by their very contiguity influenced each other.” In essence, tidalectics seeks to recognize the “entanglement[s] between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots” stemming from colonial Caribbean histories in which the stratifications of the sea occur through the trajectories and histories of slavery and control.¹¹ This tidalectic approach has utility to the extent to which it challenges dominant framings of the world, unseating Western anthropocentrism in a shift toward a dynamic pluralism of being that more accurately represents our changing world.

Whilst the flow of the pumice raft across the ocean realizes smooth space, the stratifications of the oceanscape become resonant when read through cyclical histories, experiences, and narratives of bodies across place. When the raft takes on a human form and speaks to passage of bodies across place, these striations become vibrant and deeply politicized. We mobilize this concept of vibrancy as it emerges from Jane Bennett’s New Materialist apprehensions of matter, in which the agentic force of the other-than-human is recognized. For Bennett, politics, deemed to be “an exclusively human domain,” can be destabilized through New Materialist challenges to traditional dichotomies of human and other-than-human, nature and culture.¹² The work of Kathryn Yusoff furthers this project through recognition of the agentic force of geology, and the destabilization of traditional borders between human and other-than-human toward critical apprehensions of race. In her critical analysis of the geologic, particularly as tied to industry, Yusoff challenges frameworks which position human-geologic relations as apolitical, locating racialized conditions within these histories and perspectives. As she writes, “racialization belongs to a material categorization of the division of matter (corporeal and mineralogical) into active and inert,” a material categorization which is mapped onto both geologic matter and non-white bodies.¹³ The movement of the pumice raft, when read alongside the movement of bodies, positions the Earth as an active participant — no longer just constituting the world, but co-composing the world.

The encroachment of the sea actively alters the composition of the world, as it changes the physical space of the shoreline. Within our Australian context, the shoreline has long been perceived as the physical border of the nation-state. In understanding, however, the capacity for this physical border to change — particularly when

viewed through the twinned lens of the Anthropocene and the necessary reconfiguration of the divisions between human/other-than-human and life/non-life that our context demands — the mobilization of the border as an immutable symbolic divider within social and political frameworks serves to emphasize both its fabricated nature and the capacity for the symbolic power it represents to be wielded. For Yusoff, “the border in the division of materiality (and its subjects) as inhuman and human, and thus as inert or agentic matter, operationalizes race,” drawing a parallel between the subjugation of matter and people through histories of industry, extraction, and power.¹⁴ In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Yusoff locates geology as a site for the inscription of racial politics, connecting labor to extraction, whilst positioning the ‘inhuman’ as a ‘connective hinge’ which allows for the explication of intertwined apprehensions of power dynamics between human other and inhuman other.¹⁵ In tracing the passage of the pumice raft, and the journeys of asylum seekers toward the Australian shore, we seek to further this connective hinge, considering explications of power as enforced by the Australian government, and as embedded in traditional dualisms of self and other.

We follow the geologic matter of the pumice raft as it enters the water. Rather than a truly fluid and metaphorically open site of flux and possibility, the ocean is marked by the controlling force of nation-states, carceral control, and colonial power. This site, in the words of Laura Lo Presti, which was once a picture of abundance and eternal life, is transformed — becoming “a motionless deathscape: a static and viscous cartography of wet flesh... turned into a terraqueous ‘deathworld.’”¹⁶ The unfolding humanitarian crisis of migration has led to almost 20,000 deaths in the Mediterranean since 2013, with the rigidity of so-called ‘Fortress Europe’ not only turning a blind eye to those in peril, but actively discouraging help.¹⁷ Fortress Europe here, is positioned as “a continental camp where non-Europeans are ‘included by exclusion’ and ‘excluded by inclusion’”¹⁸ This is an example of the fluid and watery body of the sea becoming rigid and fixed — enacting “relational practice for the construction of ‘otherness.’”¹⁹ Between sea and land is a necropolitical boundary marker — the crossing of which becomes a threat of invasion, as the approach of the migrant, positioned in the world as invader, necessitates the protection of the citizen. A watery rigor mortis occurs, as that which flows grows still under the steely gaze of the state;

sinking, as the borders are weighted by increasing surveillance, militarization, and punishment.

4_Coming Ashore

Although we follow the journey of the pumice raft, we reckon with those that cannot slip easily through smooth or striated space, those ensnared in webs of control. As de Certeau tells us, it is the map that ‘colonises space’ — through crisscrossing the ocean under the auspices of trade and colonization, the surface of the globe became increasingly striated; controlled and confined by the drawing of borders, and the designations of place and non-place this entails.²⁰ In acknowledging this, we locate the roots of the current crises within these colonial histories; the continual drawing and redrawing of borders, universally entangled with racist projects of imperialism, colonialism and control that are amplified within Australia and its island border. Hélène Frichot writes that “In Australia, the two dominant settings for this ongoing contest occur on the sea, and in the desert, spaces otherwise given as archetypically smooth,” speaking to the contest of boundaries in relation to the asylum seeker.²¹ These are both the shores of arrival, and the inland detention centers, that are navigated, before individuals are evacuated offshore.²²

In speaking to Australia’s colonial pasts and presents, Nikos Papastergiadis identifies what he terms an ‘invasion complex’ embedded in the very center of Australian national identity, regardless of the perceived successes of Australian multiculturalism.²³ This fear is a memory of what was and is continually done to the First Nations Peoples of the country, in pursuit of *terra nullius* and Commonwealth control. Writing from a white Australian, Invader perspective, much of the historical context for the littoral lies in the notion of arrival. Our presence here occurs as a direct result of that first step — the first in an ongoing process of dispossession, displacement, and destruction, which continues to date. As such, the relationship between white Australians and the littoral zone is contentious, or somewhat schizophrenic, as we struggle to separate the beach from the invasion that occurred there.

For some, convict heritage is a source of pride, speaking to hackneyed motifs of the Aussie battler and the cliched perseverance and eventual domination over a harsh and unforgiving landscape. For others, generations of occupation speaks to their complicity within White Australia, and the emergence of their privilege from dispos-

session and disenfranchisement. For some, it is a truth that is eagerly sought to be forgotten. But for all of us, it is becoming impossible to ignore, amid continued and ever-louder calls for treaty and reparations for the physical and spiritual damages caused by that original trespass. Since that crossing, the border has remained relatively fixed; Invaders sealed it behind them through claims of ownership, in order to protect and contain an envisaged and illegal sovereignty.

Inasmuch as it keeps *in*, the border excludes that which is deemed undesirable. As Didier Bigo describes, drawing from Walker; “the boundary between inside and outside distinguishes and separates a sphere where the words of government articulate the truth of the real, which is applied through law (and order) from a sphere where there is nothing, except anarchy and perpetual war.”²⁴ We equivocate boundaries with porosity of the pumice raft, with its holes that give rise to buoyancy, the entry of air and water that allow for oceanic transit. Like the pumice raft, the Australian border is not truly hermetic, despite governmental intention and intervention. Instead, as an island nation, the constant redrawing of lines, and reformation of entry, is enacted in recognition of porosity — the ports and river mouths giving rise to the possibility of intervention. From above, the porous pumice appears as a fixed mass, an ephemeral island making its way across the water as a whole entity. When those sailors drew close to the raft in the South Pacific, however, they discovered that the raft was not a solid mass, and can bear no weight, composed as it is of multiple and separate geologic constituents. As we look closer at the Australian nation-state, we discover that the fixed mass is not so, the real as enacted by governmental rhetoric, enmeshed as it is within the fabrications of symbolic power it wields, is too incapable of bearing real weight.

5_ The Drawing and Redrawing of Borders

The border distinguishes what belongs and what does not; “where the multiplicity and chaos of the universal and the discomfits and possibilities of the body intrude.”²⁵ The border “has a life of its own;” a site of exchange and interaction, distinctive from the intersections of which it emerges.²⁶ It fluctuates in response to the mutability of what exists on both sides of it; growing thicker, thinner, permeable or rigid. In recognizing the complexities of these exchanges, and embracing the subjective and contested nature of spatiality, Perera apprehends Appadurai, offering the neologism of *bor-*

derscapes to explore the temporalities, solidarities and cosmopolitanisms that “refuse the categorization of inside/outside generated by the border.”²⁷ The borderscape is a space of *becoming* — mobile, relational, and perspectival.

Rarely, if ever, however, is the border, in all its complexity, presented so. For the authors of the text, migrations — reductively categorized as ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ — commanded the airwaves during our adolescent years. The 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a littoral discourse characterized by polemical outbursts by governments, picked up by media and infiltrating everyday attitudes; capitalizing on the invasion complex seeded in the very foundation of our flawed national identity. We were warned constantly of the impending danger of the ever-approaching hordes — a strange reperformance of 19th century Yellow Peril rhetoric.²⁸ However, these only ever manifested as images of ramshackle boats filled with the thin and desperate faces of those from the Middle East, South East Asia or the subcontinent who had undertaken this perilous journey in the hope of a better life, but who were ensnared within the amorphous and invisible entanglement of barriers that constitute the border encircling Australia.

Though invisible, this border has very real ontological and epistemological consequences, particularly for those who cross it without sanction. We employ the term invisible here, directed towards its lack of physicality at sea, as Australia extends past the littoral and beyond the land’s visible edge. Australia’s maritime border is a conglomeration of zones: Coastal Waters, Territorial Sea, Contiguous Zone, Australian Fishing Zone and the Exclusive Economic Zone. These zones demarcate the sea, determining what activity is permissible where, and by whom. The Exclusive Economic Zone extends some 200 miles, largely coextensive with the continental shelf. Above, however, in the water and within the EEZ, the lines that demarcate these zones are blurry — they flow. Similarly, allowable activities within these zones tend to blend. For example, the Territorial Sea is “a belt of water not exceeding 12 miles in width measured from the territorial sea baseline. Australia’s sovereignty extends to the Territorial Sea, its seabed and subsoil, and to the airspace above it.”²⁹

The Territorial Sea flows into the Contiguous Zone, the outer limit of which does not exceed more than 24 miles beyond the baseline of the Territorial Sea. Within this zone, Australia “may exercise control necessary to prevent and punish infringement of its customs, fiscal, immigration or sanitary laws and regulations within its territory

or territorial sea.”³⁰ The Contiguous Zone becomes an extension of the striated and sovereign space into the smooth space of the sea. Even though the EEZ is in part contingent upon the underwater terra of the continental shelf, the lines of striation grow blurry as they travel to the water’s surface — as Jones explains, “the sea is constituted by movement; any and all fixed measurements are ultimately frustrated by this.”³¹ This fixity contrasts with the slippery and vague nature of the language employed by the Australian government in ‘prevent and punish.’ In these terms, a mimicry of the border is enacted as a pre-emptive strike against those who could potentially violate some law or regulation. A transgression is perceived and potential, not actualized. As we have seen, the border flows — accordingly, so do the understandings of legality and illegality that are tied to, and responsive to the fluctuations of the border. This speaks to the notion of the borderscape as a site of becoming; becoming threat, becoming permissible, becoming legal. Further, it also opens out space for viewing the oceanic border as a site of becoming, speaking to both the ever-flowing and changing nature of the water’s surface and the vague language that scaffolds it, in recognition of necessary fluidity in attempting to enact harsh striations in the smooth space of the sea.

As Perera outlines, co-opting the ministerial jargon of ‘on-water matters,’ and re-contextualizing it with an Agambenian framework, the on-water realm is both a “material and floating space;” an “unlocalizable location” where “what may happens relies not on any law, but on the goodwill or otherwise of those invested with sovereign authority over that space.”³² As such, it is both inside and outside law; the distance at which what happens at sea occurs means that these events arrive on shore mediated by those exercising sovereign powers — it is “swathed in a very public shroud of secrecy.”³³ This shroud of secrecy is now central to the Australian Government’s border management strategies — prior to this veil being drawn, the mediatization and visibility of the human migration and the seeking of asylum, inflamed public sentiment, the most memorable example of which is the 2001 *Tampa* affair.³⁴ Since 2001, however, Australian border policy has become defined by limitations between on-shore, and offshore, trapping asylum seekers in locked down locales, if they do manage to breach the stronghold of the shore.

6_Overboard and into the On-water

As of March 31st, 2020 there were 1373 people in onshore detention in Australia, with astronomical detention times exceeding 500 days. There have been 4183 asylum seekers sent to offshore detention since 2012, and currently, 192 asylum seekers subsist in hotel detention within Australia, having been brought onshore for medical attention.³⁵ It is important to note that these are not widely publicized statistics.³⁶ While the plight of the 60 individuals detained at present in the Mantra Bell City Hotel in Preston has been the subject of repeated protests at the location, there is a strange absence of this news within the mainstream media. This secrecy has come to characterize approaches to, and policy regarding, border security that have existed over the past two decades. Indeed, the foundations to contemporary Australian border management may be traced back to the original crossing of the littoral border, but are particularly resonant when read through the 2001 *Tampa* affair.

The events of the *Tampa* thrust Australian border control measures into an international spotlight, in which the in/humanity of the Government's approach was debated at home and abroad. On 29 August 2001, the Norwegian freighter *MV Tampa* was refused entry into Australian waters, due to its cargo of 433 refugees, rescued three days earlier from a sinking vessel en route to Australia. Once aboard the *Tampa*, a delegation from those rescued demanded that the ship proceed to Australia. International law dictates that medical treatment is to be sought from the closest suitable port — in this instance, Merak, Indonesia, some twelve hours away. Far closer was Christmas Island, an Australian territory reachable in some six or seven hours, but which lacked the capacity to receive a large freighter. Heeding the demands of the newly-arrived passengers, and citing the unseaworthiness of the *Tampa* to sail with that many people aboard due to a lack of safety equipment, the *Tampa's* captain, Arne Rinnan, set course for Christmas Island.

This act was condemned by the Australian government, who denied any obligation under international law and threatened Rinnan with prosecution should he proceed. In light of the ill-health of the asylum seekers, Rinnan pleaded with the Australian government for permission to dock, and despite this being denied, proceeded after declaring a state of emergency. The *Tampa* was boarded after entering into Australian waters, and after medical attention was given, received orders to return to sea. Citing the unseaworthiness of his vessel, Rinnan refused — which ignited an international

storm. Following the Australian Government's failures in negotiation with Indonesian and Norwegian authorities, in seeking to pass off responsibility for the asylum seekers to other jurisdictions, Australia was reported to the United Nations for a failure to discharge obligations under international law.

However, responding to the *Tampa's* movements, late on the evening of the 29 August, then-Prime Minister John Howard introduced the emergency Border Protection Bill 2001. If successful, this legislation would be retroactively applicable to the *Tampa* and those aboard it; vesting the Australian government with the power to forcibly return the asylum seekers to the vessel, and then return the vessel to international waters with the use of 'reasonable force' — which authorized opening fire on unauthorized vessels. The bill also attempted to seal any possible holes within existing legislation, providing that neither civil nor criminal proceedings would be permissible against either the Australian government nor its officers for carrying out these actions, nor would any visa applications by those aboard be considered legitimate. The hyper-visibility of the *Tampa* affair on the world stage emerged not from purely ethical critique related to Australian government attitudes, but a legal clash between the right of entry for this Norwegian ship and the fear of the other contained within.

The *Tampa* affair is critical in the extent to which Australian border policy became restrictive for those whose passage is economically, politically, and culturally sanctioned. Howard's attempted manipulation of governmental legislation illuminates the manner in which the border can be manipulated from within; exposing the border's fabrication, and the supercilious attitude with which this power may be wielded. As Soguk explains, "a border can move inward and becomes a policy of denial of rights to migrants and refugees. Or it can fold outward and translate into a policy of intercepting refugee ships and forcing them to return to worlds of insecurities."³⁷ The striations spread into the smooth and here; at this intersection, the waters thickened. The *Tampa* was literally and metaphorically at sea, stuck between the boundaries of national and international law. Despite attempts by the Australian government to open out legislation in this manner, the bill was deemed "far too broad" and failed to pass through the Senate.³⁸ The fluid, yet imprecise striation they sought to impose within the sphere of smooth space was washed away.

Perhaps it was the visibility of the *Tampa* affair and the representation of Australia as inhumane for refusing to extend compassion to those in need that invited the 'Pa-

cific Solution.’ Disregarding momentarily the fraught connotations carried by the name, the policy was implemented as a way of dealing with the problem of those seeking asylum through ‘illegal’ means. Under this policy, thousands of islands were excised from the Australian migration zone, meaning that were individuals to land at these locations, they would be unable to legitimately claim asylum. Supporting this, Australian naval ships sought to intercept those travelling by boat, where, upon interception, they would be transported to offshore detention and processing centers, located on Christmas Island, Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru.³⁹ Between the legislation, the presence of offshore detention centers and the trajectories of naval vessels, radar and satellite surveillance, a net of striated space forms and tightens over the smooth space of the ocean surrounding Australia.

The connotations of ‘Pacific Solution’ resonate here, as we understand it as a process of disappearing; within the shadowy realm of the ‘on-water,’ things happen both out of sight of us in Australia, but also out of site, as those apprehended through this policy disappear from ‘Australia.’ Following Khaled Ramadan, through Perera, the ‘on-water’ belongs to the “chamber of public secrets,” “the secrets we know yet must not know; move on, nothing to see here, nothing to remark.”⁴⁰ Out of sight/site, out of mind. Indeed, although the 2008 closure of the Nauru processing center ‘officially’ constituted the abandonment of the Pacific Solution, the issue never fully disappeared from public view. Successive changes of government, with evolving border control and immigration policies, kept the topic close enough to be of concern, but never brought it fully into view — like a boat in the distance, it remained blurry. Like the pumice raft viewed from above, its appearance on screen belied its real nature. Snippets and statistics that did appear within the news media gave no true or full picture of what Australian border policy entailed or how it was enacted. The shadowy nature of border policy and policing in Australia becomes reflective of the shifting and watery borders of the nation-state itself. Following the election of the Abbott Government in 2013, however, and the subsequent implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders, even those blurry figures on the horizon disappeared — with offshore waters growing strangely empty.

7_Emptied Horizons

The disappearance from view of those who had been at sea does not emerge by chance, but from the deliberate operational motivation of ‘stopping the boats’ within Australian government policy. Drawing from Jane McAdam, Operation Sovereign Borders is a militaristic program of border control, “premised on the idea that Australia is experiencing a ‘border protection crisis’ that is ‘a national emergency,’ thus requiring ‘the discipline and focus of a targeted military operation.’”⁴¹ Under OSB, a zero tolerance approach has been adopted to what was previously known as Irregular Maritime Arrivals — now, through OSB, reclassified as Illegal Maritime Arrivals; a continually shifting taxonomy, as the legal frame of the borderscape is erased and redrawn. Whilst from the outset of OSB’s implementation, regular briefings informed the media and the public of OSB operations, a ‘need to know basis’ was adopted in early 2014. This was presented as of the utmost necessity, given the militaristic nature of the policy, and the involvement of naval personnel. The Australian Government went silent on asylum seekers, save to release infrequent and dated statistics that served to demonstrate the apparent effectiveness of the OSB policies. Under OSB, it seemed that the net grew increasingly tighter — the holes within it shrunk — as those at sea were captured, and disappeared into the striated space of the detention center.

While the physical disappearance of asylum seekers from the horizon constitutes an execution of distressing government power, it is worsened by the disappearance of related information from the public realm. No news broke through the impossibly tight net. This was not simply a lack of attention, which saw the pumice raft disappear from view — but a deliberate governmental strategy. Indeed, these silences were considered as so totalizing that the UNHCR held ‘profound concerns’ over Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers, with a 2013 report finding almost 150 violations of international law in Australia’s treatment of refugees.⁴² Minister Eric Abetz was forced to refute claims that Australia was guilty of ‘disappearing’ people through its immigration policies, particularly the returning of asylum seekers to their country of origin, while Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser likened the practice of refoulement as “redolent of handing Jews to Nazis in 1930s.”⁴³ This is no longer part of the contemporary Australian mediascape — the removal of processing centers offshore through Operation Sovereign Borders contributes to the turning of the gaze.

Memories shorten and attention continually shifts as satellites bring us into immediate communication with the globe; media outlets trawl social media for stories unfolding in hyperreal time. Our contemporary understandings problematize our memories and derealize the present in an accelerated state of being. But given the pernicious mediatization of the everyday, perhaps it is hidden in plain sight. Though rendered visible in cases such as the Nadesalingam family from Biloela, for the most part it is a continued and quiet process of dehumanization — a process not dissimilar to the dispossession that occurred, and continues, in the name of sovereignty, at the expense of Australia's First Nations people. While we mobilized the borderscape as a site of becoming, it is perhaps necessary to highlight here that it also becomes a site of unbecoming: a becoming-illegal upon entry and decreed violation, which triggers a process of unbecoming in the dehumanizing and striated environment of detention and processing facilities.

We equivocate a drift in attention between the pumice raft and the asylum seeker. The raft disappears from collective attention within the maelstrom of the news cycle. A once-promising oceanic visitor, its utility diminishes in the face of climate disasters, pandemic and scandal, as it is no longer capable of bringing new life to the reef. The long and desperate wait for good news stretches on. The grainy footage of the pumice raft no longer holds our attention, despite the ASMR-akin nature of the soundscape that is created by the airily geologic bumping against hulls. It drifts from the mediascape, lingering on the very edge of memory. To search for information about the raft engages the suggested search function of the Google browser window. What it offers are questions, formed by complex algorithms, predictions, which suggest that we are not the first seeking to find out what happened to the raft. As if something the size of a city could just vanish into nothingness. There is a technological apparatus at play here, within the accelerated contemporary period. Boats disappearing in the Mediterranean, belongings washing up on shore, life jackets as eerie, untethered ciphers for absent bodies; all of which speak to homes and peoples left and lost amidst ongoing humanitarian crises. Bodies, objects, and things other-than-human slip through the nets, lubricated by the fluidity of oceanic smooth space, even whilst enframed by the striations of carceral, imperial, and necropolitical control.

8_Slipping in and out of Statehood

The gaps in the net parallel with the Deleuzoguattarian concept of holey space, and speak also to the permeability of the pumice itself. Not the smooth space of the ocean, not the harsh striations of infrastructures, and not the mixing of the two as upon the littoral or the more supple lines of flight as in those made by nomadism. Instead, the holey spaces, the Deleuzian phylum “simultaneously have two different modes of liaison: it is always connected to nomad space, whereas it conjugates with sedentary space.”⁴⁴ Somewhere between the two, the gaps in the cast net lie. These are gaps in the world as we knew it — a possibility in and of escape.

Behrouz Boochani, Kurdish-Iranian journalist who spent years in offshore detention at the hands of the Australian government, was entrapped by the carceral manifestation of the Australian government on Manus Island. With seemingly no way out, he wrote in *No Friend But The Mountains* of his experiences and toward the notion of “Manus Island Theory” — a critical engagement with kyriarchy and the Australian border-industrial complex — and in doing so, was able to slip through the gaps manifested within the digital sphere.⁴⁵ The operations of control lead to the materialization of the text via the mediation of digital technologies, as Boochani’s fear of his manuscript being discovered and destroyed by constant searches from guards lead to its composition through thousands of WhatsApp messages exchanged with translator Omid Tofighia.⁴⁶ A littorary work, *No Friend But The Mountains* speaks to the shore and the transit which greets it. Its construction and circulation is aligned with a line of flight, only made possible through Boochani’s capacity to enter the holey space and subvert those striations of control within the encrypted space of a digital messenger.

There are other ways to seek out these holes in the net, to slip through and into holey space. Whilst the aerated holes of the pumice raft stop this geologic matter from bearing weight, the holes allow for traversal, and imbue this geologic conglomerate with symbolic weight. Further, it is the necessity of passage, despite the constant redrawing of boundaries, that ensures slippage — which often occurs with the assistance of those operating within the permissible bounds of striation, such as seen with Behrouz and Tofighian. This slippage can also occur in the manipulation of infrastructures, and the queering of their intended use. We see this occurring within the mobilization of tools of surveillance, such as satellite maps, for the purpose of divining new passages, through which those journeying can pass unimpeded. These maps,

as explored by Matej Povse and Lo Presti, seek out holes in the striated space of states — individuals capitalize upon the real-time and open-source capabilities of this technology to alert others to potential threats as they arise, to alert others of changes in routes, and most importantly, to disseminate these navigational tools freely and widely.⁴⁷ These technologies provide not only an important survival tool for those undertaking these perilous journeys, but they also enable continued proof of existence, in undertaking movement outside the striations of the state.

Those at sea, between states, are deemed stateless — a term connoting the absence of statehood. Within the categorical and administrative demarcations of the state, this statelessness is positioned as a lack — of certainty, security, and legality as it relates to conditions of being. The appearance of the stateless individual on state-surveilled radar screens is to be deemed a threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state. However, in adopting and redeploying these same technologies of mapping, charting and presence to elude the striations of the state, a line of flight is engaged in. The passage through and of statelessness is a passage that speaks instead to the reassertion of life and agency beyond carceral control. As Perera outlines, the borderscape is a space of becoming; the being-between of borders as a zone of possibility. We offer that too, this statelessness, as the condition of being-between states, is also a zone of possibility. Within this zone, there is potential to adapt, to alter and to move alongside our rapidly changing world.

Moshin Hamad tells us, “In the 21st Century we’re all migrants.”⁴⁸ He means this not only in terms of our origins in the long spread of *Homo sapiens* outwards from the Rift Valley, but in our futures, too. As we move forward, leave our pasts and grow older, their truths fade into memory. There is a rift, through which we enter into new states of being — the possibility of becoming other than what we were, amplified and accelerated in the contemporary. That which seemed firm; the primacy of the human, no longer seems so certain. It is difficult to say whether the trembling of the ground is caused by the undoing of fixity, an aftershock emanating from Volcano-F, something or someone unknown coming this way. Perhaps instead it is the pre-quake from something larger, the beginning of the crumbling of the world as we knew it. Moving forward, however, our borders will continue to be ever-mutable and ever-exclusionary. The rapidly changing nature of our world means that soon many of us will become all-too-familiar with the littoral, in the face of rising water levels and an increase in

climate migrants. But as borders can be made and remade, drawn and redrawn, there are opportunities presented to challenge striations through attention to the slippages and the radical potential of holey space.

9_Troubling Trajectories and Tangling Temporalities

The asylum seeker troubles the striations and the borderscapes of the nation-state, triggering the invasion complex of colonial Australia by presence and passage. The raft, too, troubles by virtue of its being. Portentous, this harbinger of earthly and ecologic matter moves across smooth space, despite the reinforcement of striations which seek to corral and expel intrusion. Both the raft and the asylum seeker, moving with the flows of the ocean, entangle within nets overlaid onto smooth space. They catch our attention as they sit outside of the fixity of borders — positioned as other-than, abjected and aberrant through historical understandings of power and knowledge. This abjectness is seeded within mediatized and enculturated structures of racism and white supremacy in Australia, and enacted within the becoming-ness of the ocean as enframed by the carceral state.

As we have outlined, the asylum seeker complicates notions of the contained state, activating and amplifying dormant memories of Invasion, lest that which was done onto others is done onto us. The pumice raft is an uncanny interloper; the appearance of the other-than into watery space surely a sign that something is not right. It is displaced geology, muddying fixed boundaries of matter by moving, rather than being utilized toward movement. Despite its name and terrestrial appearance, it cannot support the weight of any of us. The mirage of terrestriality as stability is one easily held by dominant colonial powers — as countries on the periphery, such as Tonga, the origin point of our raft, face the realities of their submergence by rising sea levels. Reading it in this manner, the raft becomes a menacing presence — the approach of ecologic matter a threat of reckoning for ecologic matters. A cruel prank, the (lithic) rug pulled from under us.

The tangling of the boat and the raft's trajectories, alongside the structures of rigidity and slippage afforded by striations, challenges fluid space. This challenge comes from many sides but can be pinpointed to the unexpected intrusion of the pumice raft — agential and outside, but also the challenge ensconced with the infiltration of Australia's sovereign space by the migrant. This latter challenge is what leads to the re-

drawing of borders; reframings of power and vernacular mutations, as those in control seek to shrink the holey spaces within the net. In doing so, however, it draws attention to that which flows beneath; the smooth space of the ocean. It is this space comprised of flows, currents, depth and volume, that enables the conception and the embrace of tidalectic methodologies. These methodologies are frameworks of being which counter dialectical structures and destabilize flat and gridded conceptualizations of space. Embracing these tidal ontologies of the sea, and being at sea, we act as the encroaching sea levels, and begin to erode and destabilize that which is firm and terrestrial. Reflective of the perceived abjectness of the pumice raft and aberrance of the boat containing migrants, these methodologies also act to demonstrate the futility and fabrication of traditional and ossified conceptions of the world, identifying pathways toward more ethical and inclusive conceptions of space, its traversal and categorizations of self and other.

In the time of writing and reviewing this text, the sweep of COVID across the globe has seen widespread economic, political and social destabilization and uncertainty. Within Australia, individual state borders have been reasserted, in an attempt to curtail free movement across the country — striations reemerging onshore within the nation-state. This reassertion harkens back to post-Invasion, pre-federation Australia, with the possibility of shifting public sentiment as it relates to conceptions of fixed national identity. The consequences of these shifts are yet to play out clearly, as the thrums of change murmur underfoot, accompanying our drift toward uncertain futures. As we apprehend the multitude of slippages which appear when interrogating notions of the border, it is imperative that we acknowledge the insidious capacity of striations to ensnarl and entangle; their ability to adapt to, co-opt and curtail the radical destabilizing potentials of movement, as read through the pumice raft and its voyage.

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