

When the artwork takes the pictures

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Introduction

I came to Australia on 26 December 1975 due to the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon. The war erupted in our neighbourhood and a Christian militia began recruiting local boys, including my younger brother. Choosing not to take part in the violence, we rushed to the Australian Embassy to apply for a visa. Thankfully it was still open for business. We applied for an immigration visa and within 6 months flew to Melbourne to where my uncle lived. We arrived with the status of ‘migrants’ and not as ‘refugees’. A few weeks later the Australian Embassy in Beirut closed and relocated to Larnaca, Cyprus. In effect anyone in Lebanon who wanted to flee to Australia had to travel to another country like Cyprus in order to apply for an Australian visa. Relatives who decided to brave the war were subsequently turned into refugees in their own country. In 1988, when Israel continued its invasion of the south of Lebanon, air raids obliterated my father’s village Salhié¹ sending those who survived and did not resist to flee to other villages. Being Christians, in 2000 they were scrutinised by Islamic forces who were credited by the Lebanese government with having successfully resisted and driven the Israelis out of Lebanon. In August 2001, I watched Middle Eastern refugees fleeing wars, being taken as prisoners by the Australian Army aboard the ship *Tampa*.²

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As an artist who positions the self as a site for exploring political and critical discourses, I attempted in 2003 to signify the complexity of the refugee status by producing and exhibiting the artwork *Tampa* at the annual *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition in Sydney. Ewa Ziarek (2003: 145) interpreting Hannah Arendt's strategy to recreate Kant's *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* stipulates that the production of an artwork is driven by a need for a kind of communal sharing and the articulation of a bond. She believed that the aesthetics shares with politics the assumption of a certain community and that this community is a prerequisite for the communicability of thoughts and the messages of affectivity in the public domain. As such, I am interested in communicating the definite schism the Tampa incident created in Australia's perception of itself and the crisis in nationhood the refugee's existence brings about.

***Tampa* as sculpture and performance**

Tampa was a site-specific sculpture, performance, photography and web project. The sculpture and performance attempted to highlight the imprisonment refugees faced as a result of their trust in the most basic form of humanity. The performance comprised myself acting out this refugee status for the 18 days of the exhibition, trapped and waiting for my release. The photography and web component attempted to reverse the direction of the gazed upon refugee and to signify her or his agency as an active observer. By inverting the gaze I sought to disturb and disrupt recognisable forms of visuality.

The sculpture imposed itself on an essentially sandy and hedonistic Tamarama Beach. The prison like structure was built as a 10:1 scaled version of the *Tampa* ship. Therefore the *Tampa* cell was 24.6 m long, 3.2 m wide and 2.1 m high. The bars were spaced approximately 15 cm apart with barely visible wires connecting the bars.

The performance consisted of myself sitting or pacing within the cage. My possessions and daily needs were contained in an old leather suitcase. I would arrive each morning at 10 am, enter the prison and stay there without exiting at any time, until 6 pm. Throughout the 18

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day performance, the relentless process of daily imprisonment, including sitting through an electric storm, scorching temperatures, sand blasting from gale force winds as well as public apathy and antipathy, was presented as symbolism of the suffering experienced by the refugees on the *Tampa* ship. I was silent the whole time but this did not stop questions and comments flowing repeatedly through the bamboo bars — questions such as ‘Do you speak English?’ or ‘So

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when are you going to get your permanent residency visa?’ or ‘You’ve been here a week now, have you discovered yet what it’s like to lock yourself up?’ or even ‘It’s hot in the sun, isn’t it! Ah! Well! You’ve got the skin for it!’ Otherness, caging and display were as such the underlying themes.³



***Tampa* as photography**

An essential part of the *Tampa* performance was the notion of display through the obsessive documentation of the process of imprisonment. Each day photographs were taken from within the cage and four were posted and circulated via my website (Astore 2003a) at the end of the day. This was played out against a backdrop of an audience unused to being confronted by an observing Other acting out a gazing process. In effect, I wanted to disrupt the perception of the refugee as someone to gaze at, and then to look away. Further, the expectation of the refugee as someone to be pitied is also challenged by symbolising agency through the personification of a refugee actually taking photographs.

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Holding a camera in my hand also acted as a witness to possible crimes, keeping intruders and aggressive behaviour at bay. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the The Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin writing about photography says:

For the first time in world history, technical reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual ... Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics (Benjamin 1999: 76).

Through the *Tampa* artwork, photography as a technically reproducible device, together with politics laid the ground for redefining the direction of the gaze.



Benjamin's emphatic declaration that contemporary masses desire to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly suggests that the exchange which takes place between the gazer and the gazed upon is an intimate process of identification (Benjamin 1999: 75). The performance of photographing from within the *Tampa* cage, then of placing the images on my website during the course of the performance was an attempt at

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'bringing even closer' the viewer to the subject or vice versa. In effect, through this process, the distance between the subject and the viewer's eyes had become so infinitesimal that their identities were caught in an oscillating and intense continuum. The fusion of two spatial and temporal processes through the act of photographing from within created a tension, which had at its core a conflict of identity. Therefore, the status of the subject gazing and photographing onlookers then boldly circulating their images through the Internet, stood in sharp contrast to my assumed and stereotypical refugee status. This contrast was precisely where the reversal of roles between the gazer and the gazed upon signified a possible shift in power.⁴



Birth and nation

Governments faced with incoming refugees continue to focus on a person's citizenship first and foremost as opposed to their rights inherent in them being people or human *tout court*. At the moment, citizenship and birth are the two linked entities that define a human being within a nation-state. Giorgio Agamben says:

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The fiction implicit here is that *birth* immediately becomes *nation*, such that there can be no distinction between the two moments. Rights, that is, are attributable to *man* only in the degree to which he is the immediately vanishing presupposition ... of the *citizen* (2004).

Refugees experiencing the perils of nationhood first hand are not only fleeing from their own nation, which has relegated them to the status of the Other, but continue to suffer the consequences of their assigned status as no nation is prepared to accept them without 'the fiction implicit in *birth* becoming *nation*'.

Nations treating refugees — that is, non-criminals — as the criminal Other through the practice of incarceration, is a sign that nationhood and legal systems are in crisis. By his or her very persistence, the refugee is breaking the continuity between birth and nation and introducing the notion of 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). While successive Australian governments have been at the forefront of economic free trade and globalisation, their repressive policies regarding asylum seekers, military operations and legal processes to repel and restrict refugees are driven by nationalistic anxieties (Bourke 2002). This heightened state of anxiety exhibited and channelled through a government-initiated camp system is an indication that the very government that is bleeding its sovereignty at the mercy of free trade and capital, effects responsibility for its own sovereignty onto the stateless refugee — the individual who through his or her 'bare life' demonstrates the disappearance of the link between nation, citizenship and birth.

Massive numbers of people arriving at borders of nation-states designed to take care of their 'own' human beings — their citizens — are placed in camps, in a state of suspension. It is the inability of governments to come to terms with a shift towards the sovereign subject that is creating a crisis and the supposedly state of exception. Speaking about the concept of refugee camps, Agamben says that these kinds of camps — of which Villawood, Port Hedland, Baxter and others like them are Australia's incarnation — are not the temporal suspension of rights we are led to believe but a permanent statement about the willingness of the nation to suspend the law, and the harrowing realisation that in these camps everything is possible.⁵

Australia and multiculturalism

The Australian government's multicultural policy, which set out to present the image of an ideal Australian society, sits in a bizarre state of tension with the practice of caging Middle Eastern people and their children. The multicultural policy, that 'embraces the heritage of Indigenous Australians, early European settlement, our Australian-grown customs and those of the diverse range of migrants now coming to this country'⁶ came into being following a series of surveys and studies by academics and government public servants in the 1970s who sought to undo the racist discourses and laws of the White Australia Policy.⁷ Equally, deliberations over the foundations of white belongings were instrumental in the passing of the 1993 *Native Title Act* (Cth) as well as the Howard government's subsequent amendments in 1998 that reversed many of the gains made under the original legislation. These deliberations to secure the national body and its *internal* territories were the precursors to the defensive actions taken by the Howard government to protect its *external* borders from yet another threat, such as Middle Eastern asylum seekers (Anderson & Taylor 2005: 460). The claim to a renewed sense of whiteness continues through a constant need to dispossess internally and externally. In short, the will to decide who is allowed to come into this country resides in the same frame as who is allowed to possess the land, metaphorically as well as in actuality (Hutchings 2004). Here, obsession with security, racial profiling, and alien infiltration, added to established mechanisms of social control, give definition to an unfinished colonial quest (Veracini 2005). In *The Colonial Present*, Derek Gregory concluded:

[T]he permanent state of emergency institutionalized through [the] imaginative geographies of the alien 'other' also reactivates the dispositions of a colonial imaginary. Its spacings are mirror images of the 'wild zones' of the colonial imagination (2004).

During the Tampa crisis in August 2001, the government had swiftly moved to excise Christmas Island, Ashmore and Cartier Islands, and Cocos (Keeling) Islands from the migration zone, as well as other smaller islands in order to deny asylum seekers who had landed on

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these islands to apply for refugee status.⁸ By coincidence, during my performance on 7 November 2003, a boat carrying 14 Kurds seeking asylum was detected off Melville Island, and so that island too was excised from Australia for the purposes of the *Migration Act*, joining the other 4000 excised islands. While Melville Island was re-instated and this regulation disallowed on 24 November 2003, the Kurds were not allowed to claim asylum, as this island was supposedly not part of Australia's 'Migration Zone' at the time they landed there. The removal of islands from the migration zone, then their reinstatement, makes 'a mockery of basic principles of territoriality and legal certainty' (Crock 2003).

Debates about immigration in Australia's colonial past are still echoed in the present. On 12 September 1901, during one of the first Australian Federation parliamentary debates, the issue of Afghan and Lebanese (known then as Syrian) immigration was already hotly debated. In a speech to parliament the then Member for Indi, Isaac Isaacs, thanks nature for its ability to give us signs and reasons for discriminating against Afghans and Syrians.⁹ He said:

I am prepared to do all that is necessary to insure that Australia shall be white, and that we shall be free for all time from the contamination and the degrading influence of inferior races ... I would simply follow the line that nature herself has drawn, that nature herself has painted in ineffaceable tints, and I would say in so many words that the colour line is the one that shall mark the distinction; the colour line is that which shall bar inferior races from entering Australia (Immigration Restriction Bill 1901: 4845).

And further in the same debate, the then Member for South Melbourne, James Ronald described 30 Afghans arriving at Port Melbourne as:

A most undesirable lot of people to have coming into this country. The sooner we pass such a measure as this so that there may be some restriction upon the wholesale flooding of Australia with this obnoxious element, the better (Immigration Restriction Bill 1901: 4803).

The 'wholesale flooding' James Ronald is referring to, of an Afghan population in 1901 of 394 men, has an uncanny echo with the affective debate which took place regarding the 438 Middle Eastern asylum

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seekers aboard the *Tampa* ship (Jupp 1988: 264). These very terms were some of the descriptors used by politicians for their justification for new border protection laws. Senator Peter McGauran during the debate on the Border Protection Bill said:

Senator Bartlett mentioned that this will become a statement for future refugees. I can assure Senator Bartlett that the government has received information that there is a flood of boat people on the way — there are several thousands more to come (*Border Protection Bill 2001*: 26884).

Senator Richard Alston also used this term when he said:

The opposition's failure to support these measures will certainly make it much more difficult to deal decisively with the entry of unlawful arrivals. It will provide all the wrong signals. It will provide incentives all the while that Australia does have in place a determination process that accords refugee status to undeserving applicants ... The flood will continue (*Border Protection Bill 2001*: 27071).

With the current treatment of Middle Eastern refugees, it is not too difficult to sense that the multicultural policy has degenerated into a tool to *contain* its *raison d'être* rather than a policy of recognition, respect and celebration. Ghassan Hage who coined the phrase 'ethnic caging' explains this containment in this way:

A dominant culture in which tolerance is grounded in the necessity of ethnic caging cannot possibly produce a politics which counters a racism which sees, in all Third-World-looking migrants, undesirable people who ought not be accepted into the nation (1998: 116).

As such, internal and external borders are erected and their content displayed precisely in order to be reminded of the existence of these kinds of people in the Australian nation and therefore the need to lock up their ethnic identity, both in reality as well as metaphorically. Therefore, the government's actions about what types of people are allowed to come and belong to the Australian nation becomes an echo of what type of people are considered valued and worthy members of this society and what type of people are considered undesirables that need to be caged and displayed as unwanted.

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The double layering of the notion of display were signified firstly through the *Tampa* artwork itself being an object of display, and secondly through a representation of caged Middle Eastern asylum seekers as exhibition items. According to Hage, displaying caged ethnics has its history in the 19th century through the practice of colonial nations needing to show through any means their colonies (1998: 116). He says that one of the manifestations of colonial ownership is the parading of as many colonies as possible in order to prove one's superior standing and competitive advantage. This took place in the form of pavilions at grand exhibitions specifically organised for the purpose of flaunting colonial goods (Hage 1998: 157). These exhibitions were not only limited to goods and produce, exotic people were also part of the exhibit. Raymond Corbey says:

At these gigantic exhibitions, staged by the principal colonial powers, the world was collected and displayed. Natives from a wide range of colonised cultures quickly became a standard part of most manifestations of this kind. Together with their artifacts, houses, and even complete villages, so-called savages or primitives were made available for visual inspection by millions of strolling and staring Western citizens (1993: 338).

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The caging of refugees, excisions of islands and the issue of national border and identity therefore, as played out in the current refugee crisis, highlight the continued need by colonially spirited governments to practice caging, displaying and reinforcing Otherness. In a sense, incarcerating refugees plays out two 19th-century modes of visibility — Panopticism and Orientalism whereby the figure of an imprisoned Middle Eastern woman is seen to be set in a colonial ‘zoological leisure garden’.

Edward Said who defines Orientalism as the study, manufacture and invention of the Oriental Other describes four distinct forms of Orientalism: an expansionist view of unexplored and fertile terrain ready for travel, discovery and colonisation; a social and scientific laboratory for the study of archaeology, genetics and religious studies; a sympathetic view which sees the Other as charming and exotic people ready to be accepted and appreciated; and a fantastical view which allows one to live out sexual or horror fantasies without risking one’s reputation or sense of identity (1994: 185).

In a contemporary sense, it is the fantastical view that is reinforced most poignantly through the caging of a horrific and threatening Other. Removing it from sight in camps not only reinforces this perception of horror but also sends a signal of the will of the dominant White body that ethnicity is an entity that needs to be contained and therefore displayed through caging in order to signify this containment. Display takes place through the occasional TV broadcast, descriptions of unruly behaviour by the inmates, as well as political debates over what’s to be done with these horrific human beings. For example, it is the fantasy of the horrific Other and the need to remove it from sight that allows the incumbent Prime Minister of Australia John Howard to declare on a leading talk back radio program that Middle Eastern people threw their children into the sea to gain sympathy and illegal entry into the country. He said, ‘We don’t want people who seek to come to this country illegally to be able to do so. . . . I can’t comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard’ (Howard 2001). What stands out here is not so much the pronouncement which has been proven to be a lie, but Howard’s attitude and appeal to a subjective

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discourse of affect based on the Oriental Other as a site for horror fantasies as well as the need to describe and display its gruesome Otherness. This could also be seen in the response by the then Minister for Immigration Philip Ruddock, to protests by asylum seekers being held in the Woomera Detention Centre. He remarked that 'Lip sewing is a practice unknown in our culture. It's something that offends the sensitivities of Australians' (Ruddock 2002). This statement works to double the refugees' act of violence, which is itself an explicit doubling of the violence inflicted upon them by the Australian government's policies. The implication that the practice of lip sewing is *known* in *their* culture serves then to display and perpetuate the fantastical Orientalist discourse which sees and judges Middle Eastern people as heartless, horrific and opportunistic sub-humans.

Panopticism

Gazing at and displaying Middle Eastern refugees through a prison structure whether physically through the razor wire, through descriptions of unruly behaviour, or virtually through the TV screens, signifies yet another technique through which power is exercised on the Other. Michel Foucault describes panopticism as the one directional gaze towards the imprisoned subject. He says: 'The Panopticon ... must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men' (1979: 205).

In other words, the prison structure is a symbol that sets out to control not only those already behind bars, but 'the everyday life of men' whose identity is pre-determined and judged by the ordering system. Here, it is the identity of the imprisoned refugee as Middle Eastern that is what is being judged as worthy of imprisonment. In *Tampa*, the enactment of the prison structure in an incongruous setting such as at Tamarama Beach, highlighted the pervasiveness of the panoptic vision operating towards Middle Eastern people — such as myself — inside as well as outside the confines of the walls of detention centres.

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Joseph Pugliese explains this relationship in his analysis of refugees undergoing the act of sewing their own lips together mentioned earlier. He says: ‘In order to understand its complex significations, I argue that this practice must be located at the level of *the corpus of the nation*’ (2002). In other words, the act is, on the one hand, an attempt by the asylum seekers to exercise some degree of power over the self when all seems to have been stripped from it — a bare life — but, on the other, it is a need to defy panopticism and transcend the self in order to signify the structures, governments and nations that allow the act to take place. Transcending the self, then, is a mirroring of the laws that govern the spaces the refugees and their ethnic identities occupy or more accurately are not allowed to occupy.

The prison is one of the key sites through which the regime of governance of the embodied subject is exercised. The prison is a site where the discursive forces of the law and the government work hand-in-hand in shaping the extradiscursive materiality of bricks and razor-wire that constitute the

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architectonics of incarceration ... The penal exercise of state power must be seen to produce a body that does not simply and self-identically belong to the individual subject (Pugliese: 2002).

‘The discursive forces of the law and the government’ include further marginalisation and subjugation of the Other inside as well as outside the prison structure through the process of effacing ‘the individual subject’. In *Tampa*, incarcerating myself for 18 days inside a prison on a beach, with all the accompanying physical and mental fortitude this entails albeit not as extreme as lip sewing, signifies the need I have as a Middle Eastern refugee to also defy panopticism through voluntarily constructing and representing a prison structure. Voluntarily undergoing an act of incarceration is an exercise that signifies the powerlessness of this status while at the same time, signifying the institutions that determine this act. Finally, the inverted gazing process through photographing onlookers seals this defiance and provides an example of how an individual can indeed disrupt the panoptical gaze.



Conclusion

Viewers' relationship to the caging process in the *Tampa* performance no doubt created tensions and stresses as illustrated in the comments received through the bars of the cage (Astore 2003b). Comments such as 'Congratulations, I hope you make a difference', or 'I went overseas recently and I was ashamed to say I'm Australian. There was a time I used to hold my head up high and say I'm Australian with pride ... but now ... we've done so much damage to our reputation ...', or 'This is my favourite piece. I just want to say that we don't all agree with Mr Howard. You've got my vote! Well done!' illustrate the unease and conflict some people felt when interacting with the artwork. While some were relieved that I was in some way shouldering the burden of 'speaking out' about the current Howard government policies, others felt the need to express their will to dissociate themselves from this government.

Tampa is also an illustration of the pre-emptive determinism which leads people to continue to accept notions of the Middle Eastern identity based on the Orientalist tradition — a tradition whose premise is a hierarchy of the Western observer gazing, classifying, fantasising and ruling over the Other. Classification, spatial dominance and caging also highlight how implementation of the current multicultural policy is failing and is reduced to a mechanism for displaying colonialist greatness and power through the subjugated ethnic Other. Therefore *Tampa* was a collision between a contemporary art discourse and popular culture: a multi-platform politically charged art project right in the midst of a 'relaxed and comfortable' Australia at the beach.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 United Nations, General Assembly of the Security Council: 'In less than 24 hours Israel launched two vicious aerial attacks on the eastern suburbs of Sidon and the villages of Majdalyoun, Bcosta and Salhié.' Letter dated 24 March 1988 from the Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General, Forty-third session, Item 40

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of the preliminary list: <<http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/0/99059deb731d4ac485256b72005a764c?OpenDocument>> accessed 17 February 2006.

- 2 The Artwork *Tampa* refers to the Norwegian merchant vessel named MV *Tampa* which, in August 2001 rescued refugees from drowning in a leaking boat in the vicinity of Christmas Island (Australian territory). The Australian authorities had refused to allow the ship and the refugees to land and instead dispatched 35 SAS military personnel to arrest the refugees. The motivation for the government's action was to deny the refugees the right to seek asylum — a legally binding action the refugees are entitled to once they set foot on Australian soil.
- 3 Coco Fusco & Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit Sydney* performance in 1992 provides a thematic comparison. In their performance, Fusco and Gómez-Peña sat in a cell at the Australian Museum posing as exhibits of two newly discovered savages from an island in the Gulf of New Mexico (Green 1995: 121).
- 4 A similar inversion of the gaze, also presented in the context of the Australian beach can be seen in Tracey Moffatt's film *Heaven* (1997). Shot with a hand-held camera at Sydney's Manly and Bondi Beaches, Moffatt sneaks a peek at tanned male surfers changing out of their wetsuits and swim trunks on the side of the road with only skimpy towels to protect their white buttocks from her prying gaze. The artist's conceptual reconfiguring of the white colonial subject always claiming a position of gazing at the indigenous Other is reinforced by the unease experienced by the filmed white surfers. Here their eroticised and exotised bodies play not only on their gendered presence but also through subjecting the symbolic colonising body to the mute object of desire and display.
- 5 'It would be well not to forget that the first camps in Europe were built as places to control refugees, and that the progression — internment camps, concentration camps, extermination camps — represents a perfectly real filiation' (Agamben *We Refugees*).
- 6 'Australian multiculturalism is the philosophy, underlying Government policy and programs, that recognises, accepts, respects and celebrates our cultural diversity. It embraces the heritage of Indigenous Australians, early European settlement, our Australian-grown customs and those of the diverse range of migrants now coming to this country' (DIMIA 2003: 6).

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- 7 The Australian origins of the public policy of multiculturalism are found in a range of critiques of Australian society in the late 1960s and early 1970s that were concerned with issues of equity. Prominent among these was Professor Ronald Henderson's poverty survey in 1970. Several universities also conducted studies at this time that highlighted social equity problems, including those facing migrants. The work of Jerzy Zubrzycki at the Australian National University and Jean Martin at La Trobe University was particularly significant in this early period. The influence of Sir Peter Heydon, then Secretary of the Department of Immigration, was also crucial to the early evolution of multiculturalism (National Multicultural Advisory Council 1999: 31).
- 8 *Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Act 2001* (Cth), Schedule 1:
 - “excised offshore place” means any of the following:
 - (a) the Territory of Christmas Island;
 - (b) the Territory of Ashmore and Cartier Islands;
 - (c) the Territory of Cocos (Keeling) Islands;
 - (d) any other external Territory that is prescribed by the regulations for the purposes of this paragraph;
 - (e) any island that forms part of a State or Territory and is prescribed for the purposes of this paragraph;
 - (f) an Australian sea installation;
 - (g) an Australian resources installation.
 - Note: The effect of this definition is to excise the listed places and installations from the migration zone for the purposes of limiting the ability of offshore entry persons to make valid visa applications.’
 - <www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_act/mafmza2001n1272001516/sch1.html> accessed 3 August 2005.
- 9 Sir Isaac Isaacs went on to become Attorney General of Australia (1905–1906), Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia (1930–1931) and 9th Governor General of Australia (1931–1936). He was also noted for opposing the State of Israel. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Isaacs> accessed 2 April 2006.
- 10 John Howard used these two descriptors for his vision of Australia during his 1996 election campaign, which saw him and the conservative coalition come into power after 13 years of Labor government.

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