

Finding Nemo

In 1869 the French novelist Jules Verne published his maritime adventure *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. A science fiction classic its narrator, Professor Pierre Aronnax, recounts his encounters with the enigmatic and vengeful Captain Nemo, who lives in self imposed exile aboard his remarkable submarine 'The Nautilus'. At the book's climax Nemo stages a fierce attack on a battle ship sent to destroy him, mercilessly sinking it and all those on board, to the horror of Aronnax and his peers.

Verne's "noble misanthrope"¹ is an uncanny anti-hero of a European imagination. He reveals in a later novel, *The Mysterious Island*, that Nemo was born Prince Dakkar, the son of an Indian Rajah. Educated and well travelled through Europe, he returned to India to wed and raise a family. In 1857 he fought in the Great Sepoy Revolt against the British Raj. When this, India's First War of Independence, was suppressed he took to the underwater life, "filled with hatred of the civilized world".²

¹ Jules Verne, *The Mysterious Island (L'Île mystérieuse)*, 1874
The Project Gutenberg Ebook April, 1998 [EBook #1268]
<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1268>

² *ibid*



Captain Nemo and Professor Aronnax discussing the plans of the 'Nautilus'
Alphonse de Neuville and Édouard Riou, 1869

Jumping Ship

During the European colonial expansions, the term 'Lascar' came to define a class of seafarer generally of South Asian descent. In the 1820's a series of 'Asiatic Articles' were developed to control and contain the movement of these men; never-the-less there are instances of Lascars jumping ship – *deserting* – at various colonial ports.

In Australia, there are histories of Lascars involved with anti-colonial and decolonizing movements, bringing with them their own experience of independence struggles. There are notable examples of individuals absorbed into Aboriginal communities, those that joined other sub-continental populations such as the 'Afghan' cameleers, and the presence of Lascars in dockland politics and disputes.³

³ Historians Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh & Lindi R. Todd outline some of these events in their essay *Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire: Indians, Aborigines and Australians across the Indian Ocean*. Transforming Cultures eJournal, Vol. 3 No 1, February 2008
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>



Indian Seaman's Union in Australia

Sourced: Heather Goodall, "Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47", *Labour History* May 2008

Black Ban

One of the most memorable episodes in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* involves a battle with a “devil fish”. A giant squid takes a French speaking crewman of the Nautilus in what is supposedly a reference to the French Revolution of 1848 – an uprising of the lower and middle classes that lead to the creation of the French Second Republic.⁴

A now obscure example of local Lascar history involves the formation and activities of the *Indian Sailors Union in Australia* from 1945–47, amidst the *White Australia Policy* and the racialisation of dockland disputes⁵. In this period, immediately after World War II, the Dutch were determined to re-colonize the recently declared independent Indonesia. Indian seamen were instrumental in sabotaging these ambitions by walking off Dutch ships at local ports, revealing hidden munitions disguised as commercial goods, and asserting their solidarity with Indonesian nationalists via well publicised sit ins and marches in Sydney. These were all characterized by Ghandi inspired non-violent disobedience⁶ – early instances of Asian dissent to strike into the consciousness of Anglo–Australia.

⁴ Verne also acknowledges a similar scene in another influential French novel *The Toilers of the Sea* (*Les Travailleurs de la mer*) by Victor Hugo (1866), which is in part a critique of the Industrial Revolution.

⁵ Although at the time also racially discriminatory, the worker’s unions were supportive of non–white sailors forming their own unions to combat the regulations used to entrench and divide seafarers. These events are outlined by R Dixon in his essay *Immigration and the “White Australia Policy”*, first published in 1945.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/australia/1945/white-australia.htm>

⁶ Heather Goodall, "Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47," *Labour History* May 2008

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lab/94/goodall.html>



Pieuvre avec les initiales V.H. (Octopus with the initials V.H.)
Victor Hugo, 1866

World Shattering Violence

Fast forward to the present and the connotations of the words “jump” and “ship” with South Asians remains potent. At the time of writing five Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka were being refused entry into Australia, evoking the spectre of terrorism.⁷ Concurrently refugees aboard the boat *Jaya Lestari 5*, intercepted by Indonesian forces at the request of the Australian Government, have refused to disembark at the Indonesian port of Merak, again raising the suspicion of ‘terrorists’ on board.

To me it seems illogical that those *seeking* asylum would want to ‘terrorise’ the nation to which they are appealing. So, what exactly is the threat being posed?

In her analysis of the writings of Frantz Fanon, Professor Samira Kawash defines ‘terrorism’ as “typically the violence of formerly colonized groups against neocolonial or state oppressors”.⁸ She emphasizes the “world-shattering violence”⁹ of decolonization as a *discontinuum of colonial notions of progress* – “a rupture with, rather than a re-formation of, the colonial past” – concluding that the invariable response to the terrorist threat is security.

Alongside the specific violence of terrorism she draws attention to a non-specific, ‘spectral’ incarnation of this decolonizing violence. She reveals the failure of security against this excessive and uncanny force, “for the outside that terrorizes is always already at the heart of the inside that demands to be secured.”¹⁰

⁷ Samantha Hawley, *Asylum seeker fly-in an 'outrageous special deal'* ABC News, AM.
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/01/13/2791042.htm>

⁸ Samira Kawash, “Terrorists and Vampires – Fanon’s spectral violence of decolonization.” *Frantz Fanon – Critical Perspectives*. Routledge Press London, 1999.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*



CAUTION!!!! Weak Heart DO NOT SEE...
Unknown (via email), 2009

The Uncanny

To be frank, the pleas of “we are your children”¹¹ from 9 year old Brindha on board the *Jaya Lestari* makes me somewhat circumspect for it’s pulling-at-the-heart-strings media tactfulness. More refreshing is the matter of fact rebuff of Sanjeev “Alex” Kuhendrarajah, another spokesman for those on board. When questioned about the presence of former fighters amongst those seeking asylum he replied “they should have more credibility in their request for asylum than even a regular refugee because they really are fleeing for their lives”.¹²

An opinion posted on the website of RISE, a Melbourne based refugee advocacy organization run entirely by refugees and ex-detainees offers further:

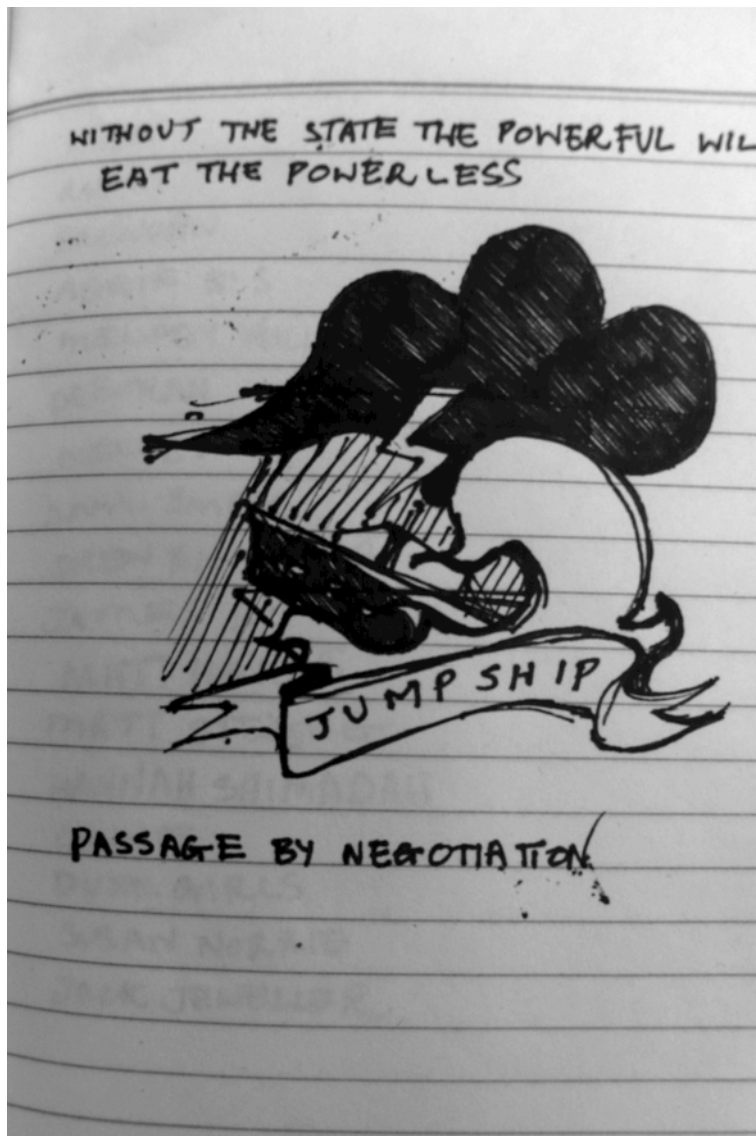
“What the Australian government seems to want is to claim its status as global humanitarian, but in practice pushing people back to places where these rights are not recognized, in order that some other country will pick them up later, broken, destitute, psychologically destroyed.”

“For all the lawyer talk, the refugee conventions basically recognise the things that we should learn from stories of Jews and others forced to flee Europe for their lives – that sometimes to get out alive, you have to lie and break laws, and cross borders without permission. You would do it if it was your family.”¹³

¹¹ Ashley Hall, *Asylum seekers issue personal plea to PM*
ABC Radio National, AM. October 15, 2009
<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2009/s2714594.htm>

¹² Stephen Fitzpatrick and Paul Maley, *Jakarta set to force refugees off boat*
The Australian January 14, 2010.
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/jakarta-set-to-force-refugees-off-boat/story-e6frg6nf-1225818996412>

¹³ <http://riserefugee.org/random'-discrimination/>



Jump Ship (after Hage)
Sumugan Sivanesan, 2009

Let's Flip

Shifting regional politics and economic power into neighbouring Asia would suggest we should seriously consider how Australia is perceived in this region.

Recent speculation over population growth and aging has raised debate on the viability of our infrastructure and environment to support these demands.¹⁴ This debate will invariably lead to the sensitive issue of immigration.¹⁵

I've had a number of conversations regarding recent domestic flares over race and representation ('Indian Students', 'Lebanese Gangs', 'Aboriginal Resistance') and the official responses. The general consensus is that culturally we are still too immature to deal with these issues effectively.

Thinking through what *is* the actual threat and from *where* it comes, brings to mind a history of race-based politics, policies and internal frictions. Under what circumstances does this violence begin to escalate?

In regions of conflict those that are the most seriously at threat by a regime change/cultural upheaval are those with the means – *enough power* – to get out well before the ship goes down.

All things considered, it might not be such a bad time to...

¹⁴ "In 1994, the Australian Academy of Science held a conference to publicise its findings on population: 23 million people should be our limit. Today, with peak oil and climate change now realities rather than theories, that might have to come down."

Mark O'Connor, *Many in denial over rising population*
Sydney Morning Herald, December 19, 2008
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/many-in-denial-over-rising-population/2008/12/18/1229189797496.html>

¹⁵ "Senator Evans said Australia needed a rational immigration debate, beyond the hysteria about the few hundred boat people who arrive each year."

Mary-Anne Toy, *Migration rules set for revamp*
The Age August 31, 2009
<http://www.theage.com.au/national/migration-rules-set-for-revamp-20090830-f3ya.html>



Lambing Flat Banner

1860

Collection of Lambing Flat Museum, Lambing Flat, NSW, Australia

Leap Into The Open End Of History

*Cyrus Harding extended his hand to the ci-devant prince and replied gravely, "Sir, your error was in supposing that the past can be resuscitated, and in contending against inevitable progress. It is one of those errors which some admire, others blame; which God alone can judge. He who is mistaken in an action which he sincerely believes to be right may be an enemy, but retains our esteem. Your error is one that we may admire, and your name has nothing to fear from the judgment of history, which does not condemn heroic folly, but its results."*¹⁶

¹⁶ Jules Verne, *The Mysterious Island (L'Île mystérieuse)*, 1874
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Jump Ship

Sumugan Sivanesan with WT Norbert
Mixed Media
2010

Cameras and assistance: Gustavo Böke and Melletios Kyriakidis