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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fishermen and Little Fish: Migration and Hospitality in Maxine Beneba Clarke's 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa'

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that Maxine Beneba Clarke's tale 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa,' in *Foreign Soil* (2014), is a provocative representation of migration in contemporary Australia. At a time in which the world is facing its largest migration since the Second World War and in which Australian border policy is making headlines around the world, Clarke's tale is a powerful intervention in discourses of contemporary Australian identity and nationhood. We demonstrate that the tale is a subtle manipulation of what McCullough terms the 'refugee narrative structure' since it carefully undercuts the myth of a nation as a coherent narrative across time and space. By juxtaposing the tales of an illegal migrant and a volunteer case worker, and by setting the tale largely in a functioning detention centre, Clarke gives voice to the voiceless and draws parallels between individuals on different sides of the insider/outsider binary. The encounter that finally takes place between them implicates the reader very directly in discourses of contemporary migration and border policy.

Keywords

Australia; migration; refugees; borders; hospitality; detention centres; narratives of nationhood; Maxine Beneba Clarke; The Stilt Fisherman of Kathaluwa; Foreign Soil

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world is facing its largest refugee crisis since the Second World War.¹ High numbers of refugees are fleeing not only war-torn Syria and Iraq, but also troubled countries such as Afghanistan, Kosovo, Albania, Pakistan, Eritrea, Nigeria and Serbia.² Australia is the destination for refugees from many of these countries, in addition to people departing from states in the Asia Pacific region such as Myanmar, Fiji and Sri Lanka. In Australia, the arrival of migrants seeking asylum in such large numbers has generated often vitriolic debate over national security and border arrangements. Recent changes in Australian immigration policy—Operation Sovereign Borders, a policy of blocking boats carrying so-called illegal immigrants—made headlines around the world. Gillian Whitlock observes that ‘Operation Sovereign Borders, a militarized program designed to prevent the boats entering Australian waters, uses eleven unmarked orange lifeboats that act as ‘vital weapons in a new “tow back” policy implemented in secrecy and in the interests of national security and border control’ (Whitlock 2015: 245). Revelations of such policies have provoked outrage among many Australians, as evidenced by the protests and rallies held in major cities in April and October 2015. One of the most controversial elements of the policy is the use of offshore detention centres on Christmas Island (an Australian territory in the north-eastern Indian Ocean) and, in the Pacific, Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) and Nauru. Reports of abuse, rape, riots and human rights infringements have raised questions over the practices followed in these centres and engendered strong reactions in Australian society.

In this article, we examine one such reaction: a fictionalized account from Maxine Beneba Clarke of an encounter between a refugee and a volunteer caseworker in an Australian detention centre. Clarke is a relatively new name in Australian literature but her debut collection of short stories, *Foreign Soil* (2014), is widely celebrated in Australia. The manuscript won the 2013 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for an unpublished work and the published volume was shortlisted for several awards, including the coveted Stella Prize. Clarke holds a specific migration story herself, having been born in Australia to a family that has four continents of migration in its history; her parents were born in London to Caribbean migrants who descended from African slaves (Shaw 2014: n. p.). *Foreign Soil* takes migration as its subject, weaving the trope through a series of short stories that each centre upon one protagonist in a variety of Anglophone settings. Throughout the volume, Clarke highlights the specific voices and accents of her characters in their myriad settings; Nathaniel Robertson of Kingston speaks in a Jamaican accent in ‘Big Islan,’ a family from Louisiana speak in New Orleans drawl in ‘Gaps in the Hickory,’ and Sudanese refugee Asha makes statements in imperfect English, such as ‘I have second husband. I lucky’ in ‘David.’

Here, we examine the two protagonists of the story ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’: Asanka, a young man who has fled Sri Lanka illegally; and Loretta, the volunteer who meets him in the Villawood detention centre, which in the world outside the text is a functioning centre located in suburban Sydney. Clarke interweaves the stories of these two characters, recounting Asanka’s background as a child soldier for the Tamil Tigers and his escape on an overcrowded, unsafe boat while at the same time situating Loretta as a graduate in law who lives in a Sydney suburb and is wracked by guilt over her lifestyle choices. The short story comprises an intricate layering of spaces and temporalities as it weaves between the

1 This claim is made by *Amnesty International* (Amnesty International Australia 2015).

2 Information on current migration trends mentioned in this article is drawn from the BBC report ‘Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts’ (2016) and the Australian Government’s *Australia’s Migration Trends 2013–2014* (2014).

two characters' stories. One of the most striking elements of the text is its dual narrative structure, in which the author presents the background to the two protagonists and only brings them together in the final section. The reader is thus well acquainted with the story, perspective and motivations of both characters before the encounter takes place. This narrative strategy, we argue, enables Clarke to create a new paradigm for the encounter between individuals of different languages, ethnicities, colours and nationalities. Overall, we argue that this text should not simply be read as part of a wave of immigrant stories but rather as a challenge to many of the paradigms that overdetermine immigrant and refugee narratives. In its juxtaposition of the two characters, the insider and the outsider, and the way in which it gradually undercuts the differences between them, 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' is an important intervention in the representation of illegal migrants and in discourses of contemporary Australian identity.

Parallel narratives

In her work on narratives about population movements Kate McCullough theorizes what she terms as the 'refugee narrative structure,' contrasting it with immigrant narrative (2011: 825). In the latter narrative form, texts stage an initial foreignness and recount a series of obstacles to the migrant protagonist before culminating in acculturation. Such texts foreground national difference and an insider/outsider binary and typically follow a teleological pattern. A 'refugee narrative structure,' by contrast, intervenes critically in the narratives through which nations emerge. McCullough bases her theory on Edward Said's stance that nationalism depends partially on the creation of a narrative that involves both time and space. That is, it is a narrative of the historical development of the nation through time as well as the physical space that it encompasses (Said 2000: 176). For McCullough a refugee narrative points to the disruption of such narratives of nationhood. Such texts employ 'a complex layering of spaces and temporalities, bringing together discourses of the local (ethnic) and the global and disrupting the time/space of the nation' (Said 2000: 804). By adopting a non-linear structure and by rejecting the tropes of immigrant narrative, refugee narratives not only disrupt the teleological time of the nation but also expose the historical homogeneity of the myth of nation creation. It is our contention that Clarke's story employs a series of narrative strategies that together perform exactly this movement.

'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' employs a dual narrative structure that is marked by the disruption of chronological time. The tale opens with a description of Asanka entering the fishing boat and hiding with the other clandestine migrants, yet the text proceeds to move back and forward through time to fill in the gaps in his history. Simultaneously, the reader is first introduced to Loretta as she wakes up in her comfortable, new house in an unnamed Australian suburb with her lawyer husband next to her. Slowly, the tale recounts snapshots of her past as Clarke weaves several layers of experience into Loretta's identity. The text is thus structured around a series of temporal shifts that identify the characters' present situations—the cell in the detention centre for Asanka, the middle-class suburb for Loretta—as the product of unexpected events.

Asanka is first presented as an isolated, innocent child who is entirely out of place among the adult migrants and human traffickers on board the rickety fishing boat. He fears the confined space of the fish hold beneath the deck in which the men are obliged to hide and is only spared being hidden in it by the pity of the older migrant Chaminda. He weeps but 'doesn't feel fear in the way that he used to' (Clarke 2014: 195) because, in the first temporal shift that the text stages, the reader learns that he was abducted as a young boy by the Tamil

Tigers and was obliged to kill in order to survive. The text recounts abuse he suffered, such as being confined in a potato chest as punishment, and murders he committed, then returns to the present time and space of the detention centre. The reader follows Asanka's daily routine at Villawood, before further temporal shifts recount his memories of his mother and father, the life-threatening illness he contracted on the fishing boat, and the moment at which the Australian authorities captured the migrants. After each of these incidents, the narrative returns to Asanka's life in the detention centre, thereby drawing explicit connections between his traumatic background and its unfair consequences. Asanka's mental deterioration is recounted in detail as he becomes steadily more paranoid, imagines blood gushing over him and his surroundings and becomes obsessed with time, tracking the seconds that pass in the seemingly endless days in detention. Time therefore becomes a central theme of the tale but is presented not as a marker of progress or development but as a metaphor of disintegration. These multiple temporal shifts thus gradually construct a complex portrayal of this character and invite the reader to sympathise with the child who is far from innocent but who is more sinned against than sinning. The theme of time and the non-chronological narrative structure immediately distance the text from the standard immigrant narrative theorized by McCullough; moreover, the multiple layering of time and space mirror the pattern of refugee narrative by working to undercut a coherent, progressive narrative of complete nationhood.

The non-chronological narrative structure with which Clarke portrays Asanka is mirrored in the description of Loretta. The reader is first introduced to this character as she awakes one Saturday morning to volunteer at Villawood. Her pristine, newly built house fashioned by an interior stylist with a perfect lawn outstretched in front of it belies a more complex domestic and personal situation. A succession of temporal shifts again moves the narrative into different timeframes, providing glimpses into Loretta's history. She is considering motherhood, for example, and the text recounts incidents in which she speaks to her mother-in-law about starting a family. Snapshots of her at school and university show her studying law and dreaming of a career in refugee and asylum seeker law. The reader also learns in another temporal shift that Loretta resigned a position at the Asylum Seekers Support Centre since her husband, now working in a prominent legal firm, found it embarrassing. The tension between the two is tangible, as their interpretations of the law and their relationship to it are vastly different. In one flashback, Loretta weeps on the floor upon hearing of Chaminda's suicide in the detention centre and Sam violently rebukes her for her emotional response (231).

Between these incursions into the past, the text returns to the present of Loretta's life, in which she drives to and volunteers at Villawood, leading up to her encounter with Asanka. This middle-class lawyer is thus far from a faceless, unfeeling professional and her personal story likewise garners sympathy from the reader. Moreover, small clues in the memories of her life lead to another layer of this narrative: Sam has a *nonna*, the name Loretta is of Italian origin, she buys Turkish bread and prepares Mediterranean food with her family (179). Were the non-chronological narrative to reach further back in history, perhaps to Loretta's childhood or to the tale of her parents, one may imagine that it would be a classic Australian tale of successful migration and multiculturalism. The frequent temporal shifts that present each character's history are a subtle indication that everyone is directly impacted by their personal, familial and collective histories and that these may be closer to the characters' present than one may imagine from superficial appearances. Furthermore, by moving time backward and forward in her narrative of these characters, Clarke undoes the teleological time of the nation as understood by McCullough. If the myth of the nation depends upon a narrative of

progress through chronological time and through space, the complex layering of spaces and temporalities in Clarke's story subtly yet convincingly undercuts it.

Parallel voices

The short story's 'refugee narrative structure' therefore disrupts time and space in both strands of narrative, thereby creating a parallel between the two characters. While their situations are vastly different, the way in which their present experiences are framed through layers of temporalities draws them together as products of the migrant experience. Clarke draws further parallels between the two strands of narrative that tell each character's story through a manipulation of focalization. The tale is narrated by an unnamed, third person narrator who is situated externally to the tale. Clarke also uses focalized narration in order to draw parallels between the two main characters. The French literary theorist Gérard Genette draws a distinction between voice and focalization by asking 'who speaks?' of the former and 'who sees?' of the latter (Genette 1980: 186). Mieke Bal pushes this further by distinguishing two different categories within focalization: the 'focalizer,' who focalizes somebody/something else and the 'focalized' who is the object of the focalizer (Bal 1983: 234).

In 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa,' the third-person narration incorporates such focalization to convey Loretta's and Asanka's voices; in terms of Genette's distinction, the third-person narrator speaks but the two characters see, and in terms of Bal's, both serve as 'focalizers' of a focalized Australia. There is very little dialogue in this tale, yet Clarke enables the reader to hear her characters' voices through this technique. In Asanka's case, the narrative focalization serves first to emphasize his youth and vulnerability. The reader hears his childlike vocabulary and ideas through phrases or terms, such as in his nicknames for his captors: Ponytail and Moustache. Asanka imagines the captors in relation to a personification of an element of nature, the sea, that we readily associate with children: 'if they shout at him, they will wake the ocean for sure, wake the snoring beast' (Clarke 2014: 195). Importantly, this technique allows the reader into the intimate thoughts of the characters and it is clear from the outset that Asanka's thoughts are extremely troubled. While still on the boat, he hallucinates, imagining a group of fishermen who provide the title of the tale: 'the fishermen nod their heads, as if to wish safe passage ... He thought they were extinct, the stilt fishermen of Kathaluwa. He learned about them back at school. There were photographs of them in his geography book' (198). The focalization thus places the reader in the position of the child refugee, viewing the scene from his perspective yet knowing through the third-person narration that his thoughts are irrational. Moreover, Clarke's use of focalization enables the reader to view the full extent of his mental spiral in the detention centre. Using his wristwatch, Asanka counts constantly in his mind, second by second. Clarke renders the reader witness to his habit thus:

08.09.23. He undresses, moves into the tiny shower cubicle, turns on the hot water tap, steps under the cold spray. The water warms, scalds, starts burning his skin. 08.10.52. Blood is washing off him, running down his thin brown body and into the silver drain hole. There is red, everywhere. He has not killed anybody today, not killed since he got away from the Liberation Tigers. But there is blood all over this shower cubicle, all over him. (209)

Crucially, nobody around him—Loretta, his fellow captives or the guards whose habits he describes methodically—notices the depth of his psychological suffering. Even the man whom Asanka describes as the 'head doctor' tells him that there is no blood but had then 'walked

out of here, left him behind, in the chest' (209). By contrast, the reader is fully aware of the character's silent, inner turmoil through the narrative focalization.

Similarly, Loretta's voice is rarely heard, besides snippets of conversations or short exclamations. Instead, the focalization switches to her in the strand of narrative that recounts her story. Her seemingly perfect suburban lifestyle is quickly undone by the intimate thoughts to which this narrative technique gives access. The reader learns of her dissatisfaction with her husband, whom she resents on the basis of his general dismissive behaviour. The morning after he misses dinner with her and her mother due to excessive drinking with a client, the reader follows her vision of his face twenty centimetres from her and reads her thought: 'Saturday morning's the only time Sam ever sleeps in. Fuck him though' (199). Likewise, the reader understands her glee when she knocks the contents of a rubbish bin over the lawn and later thinks 'when it rains, the toilet rolls, newspapers and cereal boxes strewn across the grass will sog to grey pulp. They'll look like old vomit on the manicured jade nature strip' (217). More than feeling ill at ease with her middle-class environment, though, Loretta is also emotionally involved with the individuals with whom she volunteers in the centre and the focalized narration gives the reader access to this aspect of her life. When she learns of Chaminda's suicide and Sam shouts at her, she reacts viscerally—'it'd felt like ice-cold fingers were closing around her lungs'—and admits internally to feeling responsible for the death. She had taped a note to her boss's desk, but on learning that the note had been lost, the reader hears her exclaim: 'she should have fucking known though—better than that' (231). The wry comment on her marriage—that she is silent in the face of her husband's outburst—cannot be lost on the reader. The final section of the story, after her encounter with Asanka, recounts her silently sitting in her car: 'hopelessness burrows into her chest again, its fingernails digging into her lungs, slowly squeezing out the air. Fuck Sam, fuck having a baby, fuck her new job, and fuck this stupid fucking car' (243). Overall, the focalized narrative demonstrates the mechanisms through which the voiceless are silenced. By placing the reader within Asanka's and Loretta's minds, showing personal perspectives that nobody around them notices, the narrative technique cautions against the facile reading of the characters according to stereotypes. That technique also underscores how the voiceless may constitute the site of imagined alternatives to an accepted historical record but that these alternatives are rarely accepted as legitimized narratives. Taken together, the dual narrative structure and the focalized narrative voice create considerable readerly sympathy for the two characters who are closer to each other than they or anybody else realize, and who are apparently understood by nobody around them.

Parallel metaphors

In addition to the dual narrative structure and focalization that draw parallels between the two characters, a set of metaphors that are common to both strands of narrative creates further proximity between them. The opening lines that describe Asanka's boarding of the fishing boat mention the 'olive-green' ocean, the migrants' 'brown legs,' and their 'black or blue shorts,' and recount how the migrants were instructed 'do not wear white' (192). Metaphors of colour abound in the story and are a striking element of Clarke's style; amid the simple, unpoetic prose that narrates the characters' thoughts with little description, the images provided by the adjectives of colour stand out. The ocean is described in hues of dark blue, green, grey and black and the migrants' skin is evoked by similarly sombre colours; by contrast, the Australian police uniforms are white, as are the walls and ceilings of the detention centre. These images of dark and light, of shades of black and white, are contrasted to the violent red hues of Asanka's hallucinations.

In the shower, for example, his focalized narrative reads ‘blood is washing off him, running down his thin brown body and into the silver drain hole. There is red, everywhere ... The waxy white soap bar turns pink with blood’ (209–10). Given there is little other description, therefore, the imagery of blood redness stands in contrast to the repeated imagery of black and white hues in the confined spaces of the detention centre in which Asanka finds himself.

The strand of narrative that recounts Loretta’s story performs a seemingly identical movement. The white colour of her skin is repeatedly referenced, in a clear contrast to Asanka’s colouring, and her environment is also monochrome. Sam has bought her an ostentatious black sports car that she detests. In the most salient example, her bathroom consists of black surfaces that contrast with plain white tiles. Loretta remembers the words of the interior stylist, who described the palate thus: “black and white” ... “never goes out of fashion. You just dress it up with whatever colour you want to suit the season. Yellow cushions and wall art in summer, purple throw rugs and candles in winter” (202). Yet, as Loretta regrets, there is never any colour change, neither in summer nor in winter, and the colourful images of the children she imagines—brown, Vegemite fingerprints, green playdough, flame-haired daughters—never materialize physically. While Asanka is confined in black and white and haunted by colours, red-haired Loretta—‘not red like blood, though, orange-red like sunset’ (228), as Asanka describes her—is similarly confined, despite her dreams of a multicoloured life. For Loretta, even the view of the lawn strewn with rubbish is a source of pleasure, as she gazes upon the ‘dark green bin,’ the ‘yellow lid,’ the ‘Lite White milk cartons’ and ‘an orange juice bottle’ (214). The racial distinction between dark and light skinned individuals is clear throughout these repeated metaphors, and so is the will for a multicoloured society that sees beyond monochromaticity. These striking metaphors, the only descriptive adjectives in the tale, further highlight the similarities between the two narratives and the lived experience of two characters, despite their apparently opposed personal situations. Together, the two characters represent a view of Australia that does not conform to a multicoloured, multicultural palette; rather Australia emerges as a stark juxtaposition between dark and light colours that do not come together. Given Australia’s historical exclusion of certain “races” from immigrating, some policies of which persisted until 1973, and its inescapable legacy, Clarke’s representation could be interpreted as a wry comment on Australia’s past, present and future.

The second metaphor that stands out in Clarke’s un-descriptive prose is that of animality. There are several images in which humans are compared to non-human creatures, most commonly to fish, in an apparent will to emphasize the fragility of human experience. Asanka narrowly escapes being transported in the claustrophobic fish hold in which other immigrants are packed tightly together. The ‘people traffickers’ who command the fishing boat poke at Asanka with fish knives, treating the human being no differently to how they would inspect their catch on a fishing trip. The migrants drink fish blood when their water supply is exhausted; their skin is compared to fish scales due to dehydration; and, when sick with dysentery, Asanka’s fellow migrants hold him over the side of the boat, suspended in the ocean like a floating fish so as not to spread the disease. The text thus presents the experience of these refugees as gradually dehumanizing, and likening them to the migrating fish who cross the seas to survive elsewhere. Yet these migrants are clearly not those who reach their destination and prolong their species, as Asanka notices: ‘the boat post-catch, the entire deck writhing silver and shimmering as a hundred netted herring thrash and wriggle, gasping for air’ (196). The detention centre, following these piscatorial images, is presented as akin to a fish tank, full of barely-human specimens who thrash about in cramped quarters and who are gazed upon from the outside by the journalists who flock to its gates. Ironically, the Australians who surround Asanka in the fish bowl of a detention centre

confine him for far longer than the illegal migrants confined their cargo to the fish hold and the Tamil Tigers confined Asanka to the potato chest.

This metaphor is reiterated in one specific moment in the narrative devoted to Loretta's story, but with a notable difference given that it involves a sex scene that alludes to the fickle distinction between the human and the non-human. Loretta's focalized narration describes her husband during the sex act, while she is thinking of the detention centre and noticing the precise time on the alarm clock, just as Asanka does as he walks around his very different environment: 'Sam's mouth is opening and closing, right next to her ear. He thrashes and gulps and writhes, like a landed fish' (201). The scene portrays sex as base and animalistic—but only briefly. Sam's transformation into a non-human is a temporary movement that culminates in him returning to his usual state, comfortable in his safe, suburban environment. By contrast, the refugees undergo a gradual change into a state that, culminating in their entrapment in a fishbowl, is irreversible.

The culmination of this metaphor is the first encounter between Asanka and representatives of Australia: the border police who intercept the boat in Australian waters. The reader again hears Asanka's voice as he narrates their appearance: 'The tall Australian man is a stilt fisherman crouched two metres about the water. He is staring down at Chaminda, at Asanka, at the whole boatload of them. They are tiny fishes, flitting above his stilts, unaware what crouches above them, and he is quietly suspended, waiting' (242). The border police thus appear to Asanka like the stilt fisherman whom he imagined during his hallucinations. He views both groups as phantom beings who embody a protective force, but his childlike comparison emphasizes their dissimilarity; while both are figures of authority, the fishermen inspire wonderment in school children, whereas the border police are figures of distant, foreign laws. What unites the two groups is not their respective roles but Asanka's position in relation to them. Both look down on him from above as they would look down on a fish: a powerless, motionless creature, a *fish out of water* destined to exist in a state of unbelonging before its eventual demise. In this metaphor, therefore, the short story extends its representation of the dehumanizing aspects of migration by implying that no positive resolution is possible. The fate of Asanka and his fellow migrants is exactly that of a captured shoal of fish on the floor of a boat.

Rethinking the encounter

The encounter between the two characters occurs at the very end of the short story and the reader is thus acquainted with the multiple parallels between them before they come together. The narrative is carefully crafted to place the reader in the position of the knowing outsider who understands the similarities between the two characters, whereas the characters themselves face each other in awkward silence. The few words that they exchange cause discomfort. Asanka refers to his treatment by the Tamil Tigers and says, 'Chaminda said you would help me' (235). Loretta replies little except for 'sorry' before he abruptly tells her: 'I have to go now' (237). The focalized narration presents her voice in the car park as she thinks: 'She's left him there. Wasn't even in a position to help anymore' (243). Meanwhile Asanka has returned to his room with the hairpins, tissues and dental floss he has stolen from her bag. A graphic passage recounts how he removes the plastic coating from a hairpin, threads the dental floss around it and uses it to sew his mouth shut. The metaphor of silencing (the migrant) is clear, yet the image also iterates the gradual dehumanization of the refugee in the story. The description of Asanka pushing the pin through the flesh of his lips reduces him again to the status of a fish, but with a hook in its mouth: caught, trapped, helpless and awaiting its inevitable fate.

The presentation of this encounter, we argue, is the main reason why Clarke's tale subverts the script of immigrant narrative as theorized by McCullough. This event, which provides the conclusion of the tale, may at first appear as a missed encounter between the two characters. They are largely silent and uncommunicative, unaware of the parallels between them. Nevertheless, occurring after the story has drawn attention to the personal parallels between them, the story's final encounter becomes an important site of potentiality. Literary critic Mireille Rosello (2005) theorizes the 'performative encounter' as the rare exception in which international and/or intercultural encounters do not adhere to the overdetermined scripts set down by history, encounters that forge identity formations that break open new possibilities of subjectivity in a post-colonial era. She defines the performative encounter as 'a type of encounter that coincides with the creation of new subject positions rather than treating pre-existing (pre-imagined) identities as the reason for, and justification of, the protocol of encounter' (Rosello 2005: 1). In the case of Asanka and Loretta, the encounter that transpires between them does not immediately create new subject positions; but both are significantly changed as a result of it. Asanka is on the brink of becoming a militant activist and Loretta is on the brink of taking action in both her professional and personal realms. The central enigma of the story lies in the potential of their encounter. 'The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa' ends on this meeting, one that provides little conclusion. Instead, the tale invites the reader into the text to imagine the closure to each character's tale. The media personnel are gathering around Asanka and Loretta is voicing her desire for change in her car; the potential for a performative encounter between these two characters is now evident. Rather than providing a neat, teleological ending to this migrant narrative, Clarke's potentially performative encounter implicates the reader directly in her tale, forcing that reader to imagine what might happen to Asanka, how his story will be covered and how his request for asylum may unfold, and to speculate, as well, about how Loretta may choose to live her life.

Overall, this tale of two characters in very different positions insists upon the unknown parallels that may exist, but that lie unknown, in the stories of strangers. These are not just any strangers, however, but fictionalized representations of individuals caught in the specific trauma of contemporary migration. The third-person narrative voice in the short story is carefully crafted to render the perspectives of such individuals, thereby giving voice to those who find themselves in a situation that is often described yet rarely heard. McCullough's notion of a 'refugee narrative structure' finds an echo in Clarke's story, which undercuts the legitimized, chronological and teleological narrative of the nation through its emphasis on the complex layering of time and space that becomes the fabric of alternative narratives. Asanka and Loretta both form part of the tapestry that constitutes the contemporary Australian nation and demonstrate the myth of any coherent, complete narrative of its formation. Instead, given the importance accorded to time within the story, time appears to be out of joint for these two characters, who meet at the wrong time and in the wrong place. In a different time and a different place, their encounter could have been performative, leading to changed subject positions and a subversion of historical narratives that would ordinarily dictate the protocol of their meeting. In this story, however, the reader is forced to acknowledge that such an encounter does not occur, and that it would be extremely unlikely to occur in the reality outside the text of contemporary immigration practices and policies. Moreover, the reader's ethical position as a reader who passively observes the stories of others is similarly called into question. At a time in which reports of psychological suffering, incarceration of minors and self-harm in detention centres is being widely publicized, to what extent is the reader willing to stage a performative encounter with the fictional characters who represent the reality of the migration crisis?

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