

‘I’m Skeptical of Foreigners’: Making Space for Discomfort in an Oral History Interview

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Abstract

In this article I explore the dynamics which emerged in an oral history interview I conducted with a former senior public servant, John Menadue, in Sydney in 2017. Menadue was the Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (1980 – 1983), and remains a public commentator on refugee issues. Through an adoption of Sara Ahmed’s conception of emotions as relational – and produced by orientations to people, ideas, institutions and practices – in this article I inquire into the particular dynamics that arise through an uncomfortable interview. I consider this discomfort and the ethical questions it provokes, as I ponder to whom interviewees may be oriented and the ways in which ideas of race, belonging, control, and fear may be brought to bear within the emotional space of the oral history interview.

Article

In June 2017, I emailed a former senior public servant who had worked for a long time in the Australian Department of Immigration, requesting an interview as part of my research on the history of Australian government and federal bureaucracy approaches to child refugee and asylum-seeker policy. This public servant retired in 2016, alongside numerous others, when the face of the Department changed (as has been widely documented) under the leadership of Secretary Mike Pezzullo and Coalition Government Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Peter Dutton.¹ This change marked a shift towards a more militarised and securitised approach to governing immigration, including Australia’s ‘humanitarian intake’, and away from viewing settlement and integration support programs as a fundamental part of the immigration-management project and work of the Department.²

This public servant ‘respectfully’ declined to participate in an interview, stating in an email:

I am presently on vacation in the Greek islands... the first decent break in many years... and I have spent much time reflecting on my career of nearly 40 years in the federal public service. I have decided that I do not want to

re-live any of that period when I was dealing with refugee issues. I left that period of my career with my marriage barely intact and with a severe impact on my physical and emotional well-being.

While this person appreciated ‘that Australia’s refugee policies and programs are fertile ground for researchers, the broader academic and legal fraternity and journalists’, they pointed out ‘no one has given a nanosecond of thought as to the impact on the thousands of decent, hard working public servants who have been in the frontline of developing and delivering government policies and programs in this field.’ And although this respondent ‘appreciate[d]’ me contacting them, when they granted me permission to quote them anonymously, they clarified that they ‘would not want to be represented as a public servant who did not agree with the government policy i [sic] was charged with implementing. The point I tried to make in my previous response is that government policy in this field is challenging, difficult to implement and emotionally charged... and that it takes its toll on those who have the responsibility of implementation.’³

In this brief email correspondence, the respondent touched on a number of emotional issues raised when conducting oral history interviews, including the toll that an interview can take on an interviewee, the toll that the subject material can take on an interviewee’s life, and the question of the role of the interviewer: who are they conducting research for, and what happens when they extract knowledge, time, ideas, and emotions, from their interviewees? This respondent pointed to the ways that different emotional connections and attachments are made to our jobs, to the ideas that we produce in them, to the labour that we undertake and to the people with whom we interact. Our work takes a toll, this respondent asserted. Part of this is the oral history interview and the space it creates. The interview is a form of work that produces a certain intimacy or connection; it instantiates particular emotional valencies that can, indeed, take a toll. As scholars such as Esther Faye and Robert Reynolds show, the space of the oral history interview is one of co-constitution, involving the sharing of feeling,

sentiment and emotional knowledge. Emotional labour is undertaken in the space of the interview, both by and for the interviewer and interviewee.⁴ Indeed, as Anna Green states, 'oral histories are works in progress, as individuals cognitively and emotionally grapple with the contradictions and complexities of their lives.'⁵ Taking this respondent's reply as an invitation to reflect, I am left wondering: who do we (as both the interviewer and interviewee) make emotional connections with and to in our interviews, our research, and our work? Where are our emotions directed – both consciously and, more profoundly, unconsciously – when we engage with work and conversations around government policy and bureaucracy?⁶ And moreover, how, to follow Joy Damousi's lead, can we expand our historical understanding of Australia's past by exploring the public expression of private feelings?⁷

The research project for which I wanted to interview this former public servant, and from which the material in the rest of this article derives, involves producing a history of Australian child refugee and asylum seeker policy from the 1970s to the present. In this project I am exploring the emotional economies which are constituted through this policy making.⁸ To write this history of policy and policy-making, I am conducting both archival research (primarily in the National Archives of Australia and the National Library of Australia) and interviewing people who have been involved in policy-making over this period. I have conducted approximately 30 interviews which have been transcribed, examined by the interviewee and approved (or are somewhere within that process). Because of the obvious political sensitivities around the issue under examination, as well as the necessary ethical considerations involved in conducting any sort of oral history interview, I am diligent with approval processes and in respecting the needs and desires of my interviewees. I am also aware that – unlike the much more common oral history projects that attempt to tell histories from below – most of my interviewees carry significantly greater social, political, cultural and material capital than me. Some have already recorded their oral histories as part of other projects and may have had their recordings deposited within national institutions, such as the National Library of Australia.

At the same time, I am the granddaughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors, who came to Australia as stateless refugees on the *Sagittaire* on July 29, 1949.⁹ As I live in Australia, I am unavoidably a settler coloniser, living with great discomfort amidst ongoing settler colonialism and Aboriginal dispossession. Some of my primary obligations and empathies – ethical, political, historical – lie with refugees, Indigenous peoples, displaced people and those who have endured genocide, not with those who make the policies and political decisions which govern and control others' lives. This part of my self is not separable from my

work as a historian.

Many of the interviews I have been conducting have therefore been, in a word, fraught. When I listen over them to confirm the transcript, I hear myself undertaking the role of deracinated and detached oral historian, and particularly of a female oral historian, raised to encourage the men around me to continue speaking the way they want – I make routine approving utterances, agreeing with their words, adopting the role of a model migrant citizen. As is well practiced by many an oral history interviewer, my role in the space of the oral history interview is to ensure my interviewees are comfortable and to encourage them to share something new – a story, a sentiment, an idea. My role is to create a space for intimacy and reflection. I aim to be open to hearing what people say, to work to understand where they are coming from, what their personal and collective histories and memories are, and how and why they voice the stories and ideas that they do. My task is to approach interviewees in the spirit of openness and honesty. These interviews need not be cathartic or a space of personal growth; I am not intentionally providing a space for my interviewees to work through their feelings about their jobs, even if some may seem to work through certain ideas as they are talking. However, they are a space for the production of feeling.¹⁰ In this way, the work which I am undertaking in these interviews is connected to life history interviewing work undertaken by Australian oral historians such as Joy Damousi, Robert Reynolds, Shirleene Robinson, Alexandra Dellios, Niro Kandasamy, Sarah Green, Katie Holmes and Alistair Thomson. I am interested in providing space for interviewees to share their emotional responses, to think deeply and reflectively about the work they have undertaken in relation to the topic at hand. I try to think through the emotions which are produced through the interview encounter.¹¹ And although I want to understand the work that these emotions do, my task is not to empathise with my interviewees.¹² In this article and elsewhere, I want to describe the emotional work being undertaken to try to understand its force, but I am not seeking to sympathise with – nor encourage my readers to sympathise with – my interviewees.

In this article I am thinking about the role of the oral historian (who in this case is not herself a refugee, but who occupies the historical position of being a descendant of refugees and survivors of genocide) in undertaking research around child refugee and asylum-seeker policy, and about the emotions generated in this kind of oral history interview. It is important to note that, while the oral history interview has its own way of producing emotion, the emotions I am examining in this article and this project which are articulated by policy-makers working in this field, emerge in numerous other sources.¹³ For instance, during a speech

given by Tony Burke (a former Australian Labor Party Minister for Immigration, Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship) at the 2015 ALP National Conference, when Burke called for the Party to adopt a policy of supporting boat turnbacks, on the basis of his feelings about his experience as Minister when people, and most particularly for him young children, drowned at sea.¹⁴ This policy of boat turnbacks – later endorsed by the ALP – was designed to accompany a system of indefinite detention of asylum seekers arriving by boat, wherein they have been held in detention centres in Australia, Nauru and Papua New Guinea.¹⁵ Burke’s speech is one example of the types of emotions which float throughout policy discussions of refugee children, who are particularly emotionally potent, or sticky: as Burke spoke, he appeared to get teary.¹⁶ Discussions of refugee children are often emotionally loaded; policy-makers will regularly resort to the use of emotional language in order to express their policy ideas for them. This was apparent too in Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s 2018 report of his tears at the thought of children being held in immigration detention – a detention which he has been directly responsible for instituting as both Minister for Immigration and Border Protection and Prime Minister.¹⁷ These are two examples of many. In my broader project I am interested in thinking through the ways emotions bubble up in discussions of child refugee and asylum-seeker policy and in looking at both public iterations of these discourses and feelings, and how these expressions arise during the more private oral history interviews I conduct.

Orientations

This article understands these emotions primarily through the work of Sara Ahmed and her meditations on orientation. At the beginning of her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed asks ‘what difference does it make “what” we are oriented toward?’¹⁸ This question likewise frames this article. Ahmed explains that ‘orientation is a matter of how we reside in space... of how we inhabit spaces as well as “who” or “what” we inhabit spaces with.’¹⁹ Moreover, ‘orientations... shape how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy and attention toward.’²⁰ Orientations are therefore questions of familiarity, of how we engage with the familiar and the unfamiliar, and how we produce familiarity through normalisation or naturalisation: who we ‘know’ and ‘feel’ we are in community with.²¹ Orientations as described here can be understood to shape to whom, and how, we respond. They are the difference between, for example, a perspective that centres refugees and thus looks towards justice for asylum seekers as the purpose of policy, and a perspective aligned with the nation-state that instead looks towards border control. As such, emotions are ‘relational’; we can ‘understand them as part of the simultaneous production of subjects

and the social and the relationship between them.’²²

These orientations involve the circulation of emotions, which, in their movement, work to build an emotional collectivity or community – they orientate people to others and bring people together into a shared community. So, whether we describe something as a sad moment, or a moment of fear, or a moment of happiness, or another feeling, we become bound to others who think similarly about that moment. We learn to orient ourselves emotionally through our involvement in a group and a group is produced through a shared orientation or set of feelings. These can be conscious descriptions and collectivities, but they need not be. It is more likely that these emotions will be felt and expressed at the level of the unconscious. But regardless, we bring others into that circle, or emotional community, by displaying our emotions. The sight of tears, and thus their circulation, is a particularly prevalent community building tool; crying is a social act, as we can see in the tears coming from Burke and Morrison.²³ Circulation directs where certain feelings should go, and when they should stop. It determines who empathy is projected towards, and who is the focus of intolerance. It determines whose histories are narrated and heard, and whose are dismissed.²⁴ This process can be understood as being part of the creation of what Barbara Rosenwein has called ‘emotional communities’, namely the circulating emotions which bring people together into a community.²⁵ These are communities in which ‘shared vocabularies and ways of thinking... have a controlling function, a disciplining function,’ acting to aid in the production of a community that undertakes particular action.²⁶ Emotions secure us to others.²⁷ As is evident in the words of my interviewee, described below, work is done to construct an emotional community of public servants who control people’s movements, and who have certain feelings about that. This is a product, and a reinscription, of an orientation, expressed materially and discursively, towards the feelings of a white Australian nation.²⁸

The interview

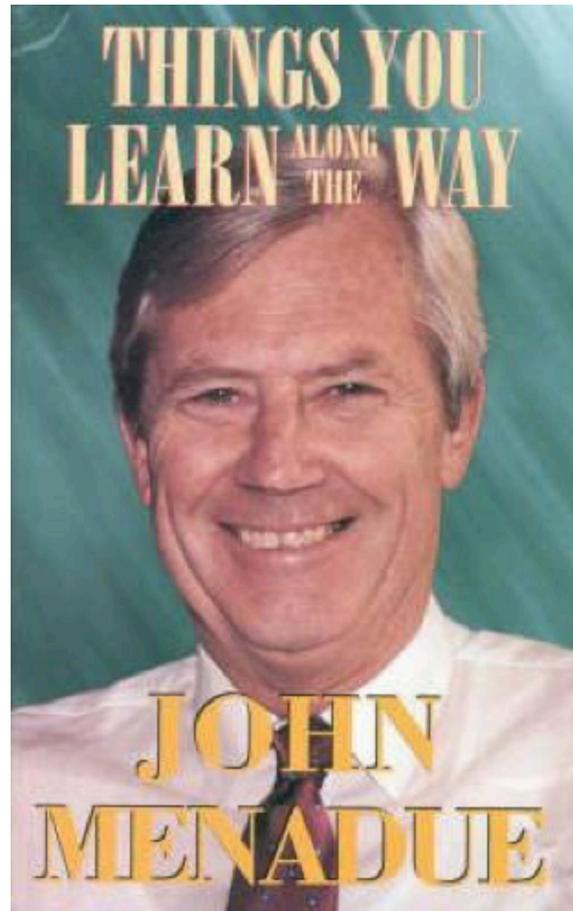
When I interview people about their role in policy-making, the interview is not producing a set of emotions which would not otherwise exist – for the interviewee, for me, or for the discourses which we are tapping into and further producing. However, interviewer and interviewee do, together, produce an emotional space that has its own texture and that creates its own emotional community, even if only for an hour or two. This article explores this texture via one interview in particular, namely one I conducted on 11 September 2017 with John Menadue at his home in a wealthy suburb in Sydney. Following Menadue’s recommendation, I arrived via ferry. On arrival, Menadue offered me a drink, set out two biscuits for us,

and we proceeded to discuss his history of involvement in government and public service bureaucracy.

I focus on this interview in order to fully explore the words and ideas which are shaped in one encounter. There is a long history, particularly within the queer history frameworks which influence my research, of focusing on case studies through oral history interviews in order to gain a nuanced understanding of the textures of feelings and histories which individuals can carry. By examining the words of one former senior public servant, it is possible to gain insight into the emotional work which is expressed and undertaken within the space of the oral history interview, and to understand the forms and directions of attachment and orientation produced through this interview. My account here is my reading of our interview; Menadue would have his own reading, as would an outside observer, or someone listening to the recording or reading the transcript.

John Menadue was born in South Australia in 1935. From 1960 to 1967 he was Private Secretary to Gough Whitlam, then the Australian Labor Party's Leader of the Opposition. For seven years, from 1967 to 1974, he was General Manager at News Limited in Sydney. He then served as Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet from 1974 to 1976, working for both Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser (who was a Liberal Party Prime Minister). He was Australian Ambassador to Japan from 1976 to 1980 and in 1980 was appointed Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs by Fraser. In December 1983 he became Secretary of the Department of Trade, before becoming CEO of Qantas (June 1986-July 1989) and later Director of Telstra (December 1994-October 1996). Menadue has chaired various Health Reviews and Health Councils, as well as the Australia Japan Foundation and New Matilda's board. Amongst other honours and awards (including the Japanese Imperial Award, The Grand Cordon of the Order of the Sacred Treasure), Menadue was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1985 for his public service.²⁹ He has written an autobiography – which he encouraged me to read before we met – and maintains a blog 'Pearls and Irritations', where he regularly contributes to public conversation and provides a space for liberal perspectives on government and policy.³⁰

Having examined his writings, before arriving at the interview I understood that Menadue and his work were key to the dismantling of the formal bureaucratic aspects of the White Australia Policy. I also understood that Menadue continued to take a public role in advocating for refugee and asylum-seeker policies shaped by white liberalism.³¹ In February 2017, for instance, he wrote an article in *The Guardian* with Frank Brennan, Tim Costello and Robert Manne. Together they argued that 'concerned citizens need to accept that the boats will remain stopped' and that the general population need to accept the position emanating from both major



Cover of book by John Menadue, *Things You Learn Along the Way* (1999)

political parties: namely, that people seeking to come to Australia by boat to seek asylum should be stopped and turned around 'if that can be done safely, transparently, and legally.'³² In this, as in much of Menadue's recent approach, there is a balancing of discourses of concern with measures that are punitive, ethically unjust, and illegal under international law. His political approach is largely aligned with the liberal perspectives carried by numerous Australian politicians and members of the media.

Menadue informed me that when Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser called him back from his ambassadorship in Japan to appoint him Secretary of the Department of Immigration, Fraser 'said to me, "What did you want to do when you come back to Australia?" and I said, "I want to come back and bury White Australia." And he said, "You're on." As quick as that.'³³ This desire to 'bury White Australia' came both from his time spent at university with 'three Malaysian students' – which 'really was a shock' having come from a country town populated, he remembered, exclusively with white people – and his time in Japan, when he found Australia being regularly criticized because of the White Australia Policy.³⁴ Menadue said

we're all conditioned by a culture in the society in which we live and it's when we're confronted with something different, people that are different, that you think hell, you know, maybe

I need to rethink. And that's a painful process very often. You don't learn in comfort zones. That's my experience. You learn when you're challenged, which is a bit worrying at times. Some people react to that by just retreating completely and others say, 'Well, you know, let's, maybe there is something there I need to think about.' So it was that gradual process, and the political move at that stage was sort of to the left.

Menadue here outlines precisely the experience of moving outside one's emotional community, and the new feelings and connections this can produce. He told me that, from the beginning of his time in the Department, he was working to dismantle the focus on migration from England and encouraging public servants under his charge to look outside the United Kingdom for migrants. Throughout the interview, Menadue emphasised the important role, as he saw it, that 'fear of the foreigner' has played in immigration programs in Australia. This 'fear', he said, bonded together, and bonds together still, workers within, and sentiments of, the Department. It is one of the emotions which orients them to each other.³⁵ I will return to this below.

During the interview, Menadue said that he believed that the

immigration and the refugee program... changed Australia for the better. It was a case of nation-building on a pretty heroic scale. Maybe we pushed it too fast and too hard, maybe, but I mean looking back it was successful. So I think it was that element of a sense of nation building and the ending [of] White Australia which gave the satisfaction [of the job].

He described what he considered to be 'successful multiculturalism', which, he stated,

depends on broad adherence to particular basic and agreed structures [and] attitudes in terms of the structures, the parliament, rule of law, separation of powers, beyond that into the English language, if you like the British system which I think most people will agree is – apart from the monarchy – is not a bad sort of system... And that diversity brings strength [and] challenges, but diversity for its own sake is not to be supported. Diversity is fine if it contributes to a greater good, but in diversity like, you know, child marriage, polygamy, genital mutilation, whatever, isn't in my view a diversity that improves Australia. That's a value judgment I would make. And I have a view on burqa, for example, which I think it's contrary to multiculturalism because it does divide unnecessarily and in my view public space should be secular and neutral whether you're Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or whatever.

It's not a view which the left endorses. They state a politically correct view 'oh, you know, that doesn't matter,' but I think it does matter, to then building a stable, strong multicultural society.³⁶

From this lengthy answer we get a sense of where Menadue now appears to position himself, whom he sees himself aligned and in community with, and whom he expresses displeasure or disagreement with. As a former Secretary, Menadue aligns himself with the white governmental practice of controlling the biopolitical, racial and cultural makeup of the Australian populace.³⁷ This comment from Menadue came after he had mentioned 'the risks of multiculturalism' and I had asked him in response 'what are the risks?' His reply follows what Danielle Every has identified as being the use of 'liberal binaries' in 'political discourse to establish an exclusionary humanitarianism as obvious, natural and right.'³⁸ Moreover, it sits within the idea of multiculturalism sketched by Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, wherein 'multiculturalism provides a discursive space for debating questions of race, culture, legitimacy and belonging.'³⁹

This article will demonstrate how these sentiments, these 'questions', were produced throughout Menadue's words. This moment – one of many – was difficult and uncomfortable for me, sitting with him at his kitchen table, as an interviewer. Menadue was instrumental to the bureaucracy and sentiments of dismantling official White Australia, but in this moment, I was compelled to wonder what this interview would have looked like if it was being undertaken by a woman wearing a burqa. Or if, indeed, my Jewishness had been more visible in that moment – what if it was more profoundly marked on my body through my clothing? What if my difference was more visibly marked? How would this have changed his orientation towards me? And yet, on the transcript, all I say in response is 'Yep.' This, it would seem, was the requirement of the oral history interview, in which my interviewee and I were co-creating a discursive and material space of conversation. What (white, Australian) emotional community, then, did we create in that moment of the interview? This was for me a moment of deep ambivalence and uncertainty as an interviewer.

Menadue argued that there is a deep fear in Australia about asylum seekers coming on boats, and no possibility of Australians being comfortable with people making their own way to Australia via boat. That is why, he suggested (as did numerous others I have interviewed), boats need to be controlled. At the same time, he told me, 'our refugee flow' should be increased, through a vital 'spirit of generosity' and for humanitarian reasons.

'We've behaved disgracefully on that in recent years, but also refugees are just such superb settlers. I think we have a self-interest in the sort

of get up and go of refugees. They choose, they self-select themselves. Better than a migration officer ever could select them. They're the people who are prepared to abandon everything. Everything, physically apart from family, for a new life. And they don't sit around and make a judgment whether we'll go or not. Well, we're going. And that's why they're so good as small business entrepreneurs, hard work. I'd choose a refugee any day over a migrant for that reason.⁴⁰

But, he continued,

The selective high schools are just dominated by migrants and particularly refugee children. Just – I think too much – it frightens some Australians but it's just that commitment of parents. I think they do cram schools and so on which I worry a bit about, but it's a bit overdone, I think, but it's just recognition of how those refugee families are determined to make a new life. Remarkable people.

Indeed, he later told me, recognising the importance of 'caring for the stranger' is an important driver in refugee policy as 'who knows, we might be a stranger ourself one day.' He noted that the important additional principle in the making of 'good policy' is the understanding that 'these strangers are usually such superb settlers. The odd Jewish family's done well.' Disconcertingly, Menadue and I shared a chuckle at that comment – my chuckle almost certainly from awkwardness and discomfort, his harder to read.⁴¹ Here then was a moment when he attempted – perhaps successfully – to incorporate me into the 'we' of the governing white Australian nation. But, he reiterated, he 'think[s] those two things: that caring for a stranger and [the] contribution they make' are the two important considerations. Here fear, ambivalence, resentment, and admiration bubble to the surface in this instance of the capitalist logic sitting alongside – or perhaps slightly displacing – the most elementary of humanitarian impulses.⁴² People are deemed to have utility for the state if they may provide a basis for growth and development; they are not approached on the basis of equal claims for justice and mutual aid but rather as fitting into the binary of productive and unproductive, 'deserving' and 'undeserving'.⁴³ Indeed, RISE has pointed to such discourses as 'popular misconceptions' that play a role in 'escalat[ing] existing xenophobia' in the 'general community'.⁴⁴ In this way, such sentiments aid in the exclusion of refugees from the emotional community; they orient bureaucrats towards the capitalist state, rather than refugee or migrant justice. Within the context of this interview, this was perhaps a moment when Menadue saw me as being aligned with, or oriented towards, him, rather than

contemporary asylum seekers. The weight of my familial and communal history was made oblique.

Children

In the interview I asked Menadue what he remembered about his work with regard to children in particular. Like others who worked in government or the public service in this policy area in the 1970s and 1980s, he had only a 'vague' memory of this work.⁴⁵ But his first explanation of the specific place of children in policy discussions was articulated through the lens of the racist language of people as 'anchors'.⁴⁶ Menadue told me that

a feature of any refugee flow, almost any one, is that they send teenage boys out, sort of their anchors. Get them through 'cause they're usually pretty resilient. You don't have to commit the whole family and so if you can get them through the process into a new country then they're the anchor to bring the rest, which is understandable. People don't like it. And then that creates particular problems of how do you handle, you know, young children. And these are children. In many cases they're 13, 14, 15. But there's a political reason for them doing it. And so they're not helpless little kids. There's a plan there by their parents and others, so I think sometimes people like Frank Brennan and others [they're talking] about, you know, these kids in special protection, you know, and they say, 'Oh, you know, you can't treat them as refugees. You've just got to give them entry.' Well, if you do that, you'll have more anchors coming. So, I'm a bit hard-headed on that one. But they've still got to be treated decently and the best way to treat them is to put them with their parents if you possibly can. But they don't want that, of course.

In Menadue's distinction of 'people [who] don't like it' as responding to the 'anchors' who do 'it', he is making plain the emotional – and political – communities which he identifies into existence. Menadue is evidently addressing a non-refugee audience with this framing- he is imagining refugees as people to be governed, rather than people to be addressed directly.⁴⁷ Indeed, in his wording, 'people' here are counterpoised to the refugees and asylum seekers who are either on the move or whose family members are on the move. This is a common rhetorical move, and one to which it is important to draw attention, to make clear the community building work such rhetorics undertake.⁴⁸

Menadue's primary memory of interactions with children was not connected with any 'specific policy'. Instead, his actions 'would've been in response, he was 'sure, to the UNHCR saying, "We've got these large

numbers of young kids. Will you do something?’” And, as he told me, they ‘often did’ do something. He similarly did not remember taking any action as a result of the Minister being the guardian for unaccompanied children, telling me that it was not an issue when he was Secretary.⁴⁹ ‘We were pretty naïve in those days,’ he told me. What or who is remembered, and who is forgotten, plays a crucial role in creating emotional communities.

Conclusion

One of the last questions I asked Menadue was about the role of emotions in this policy-making. He replied

Emotion is fear of the foreigner. Fear of the stranger. It’s in everyone. A person that’s different and what do you know about them. I think it’s a natural sort of human reaction in it. The worry about the person that’s different. But I often think also, in addition to that sort of fear of a foreigner there is also a decency in everyone that they will respond to a person in need. As Abraham Lincoln described, the better angels of our nature.

Menadue continued his explanation, saying ‘I think it’s a mistake to think that it’s all just black and white. I’m skeptical of foreigners. I hope I’ve got a generosity as well, but, you know, that struggle goes on in everyone and it goes on in every country. But it’s got to be managed.’

As a historian, I know that these ‘fears’ are social rather than natural – they are learned, developed, coerced and controlled by governments and societies. They are not natural, but the project of naturalisation is a deeply political one. In other words, ‘Fear of the stranger’ or ‘the foreigner’ is not simply in everyone: it is learned by some people, developed by ideologies and projects of racism, xenophobia and nationalism, and then routinely spoken of, and enacted, as hegemonic. There is a process of naturalisation, and this is key, I argue, to the project of the construction and maintenance of these communities of feeling. Discourses such as this, accessible through the space of the oral history interview, adjoin some people to certain others and ensure that some people remain merely other. The precise discourses and words spoken here are, perhaps, a product of the time when this interview was recorded as much as (or even more-so) the time in which Menadue held power as Secretary of the Department. His mention of the burqa and its place within Australian multiculturalism was certainly reflective of the discussion of the day – throughout the previous weeks it had been a topic of discussion amongst the political classes, with various right-wing politicians and newspapers openly calling for women to be banned from wearing it.⁵⁰ As they bend time, bringing together past and present within the space of the story-telling, oral history interviews give access to a

person’s developing political thinking.⁵¹ They also give access to an understanding of the ways emotions are expressed unconsciously, and how they are produced by and through individuals, communities, prevailing discourses and systems of governance. There is no one neat line, no one neat package, which explains how emotions come into existence or how they are expressed. Rather, there is a great deal of slippage amongst the different influencing factors and systems of making meaning. Moreover, how we identify someone’s emotional discourses from the outside may not resonate with how they understand themselves internally. Of that I am keenly aware. The oral history interview is a space of iterative performance, with both interviewer and interviewee performing their roles.

But, as demonstrated above, the types of words and emotions that I have identified Menadue using reveal a set of prevailing attachments and orientations. We can see how he is oriented towards governing and controlling. We can identify when and how refugees are made visible and not visible and the way they are understood as useful because of their imagined entrepreneurial spirit. The position of Secretary of the Department of Immigration is one which orients towards building an emotional community that controls – and this becomes apparent in the space of this oral history interview. The interview is a space that produces its own emotional dynamic – of Menadue as producer of knowledge and controller of population, and me as interviewer as uncomfortable (to put it mildly) with the work his discourse does, but feeling compelled into playing my role in the interview. My discomfort at his white liberal racism, his normalisation of discourses around the danger and threat of difference, pervaded my feelings during and after the interview. But I additionally recognise that my discomfort is insufficient to overcome, or work against, the racialised control that his words instantiate. Indeed, in many ways my discomfort is beside the point of the larger story being written here.

Returning to the reply I received from the public servant discussed at the beginning of this article, we can understand that there must be space within the histories of policy-making to dwell on and with the emotions that are generated when the work is done. There must be space for historians and others to study these emotions that are generated. And this research in turn produces certain emotions. The task then, it would seem, is not to refuse emotional engagement as an historian utilising the tools of oral history methodologies. Rather, the task is to seek to bring them to the forefront, turn them against themselves, find ways to dismantle the borders that are being created between people through the use and naturalisation of emotional discourses – of fear, alienation, discomfort, and sentimentality towards particular acts – in the oral history work. The space of the oral history interview

allows us to think about who and what, to return to Sara Ahmed's question, we are orienting ourselves towards. When interviewees speak of, or gesture towards, populations of (child) refugees as mere groups to be governed or 'felt' against, 'speechless emissaries', to use Liisa Malkki's phrasing, we need to unpack and work against these formulations.⁵² We need instead to centre the emotional communities built around claims for migrant and refugee justice. But what this precisely means – how these stories can be used to orient myself as an interviewer, and the histories with which I am engaging, away from naturalising racism and fear of difference and towards more open borders – remains the vital, humbling, challenge.

This article has been peer reviewed.

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Endnotes

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