The foundations of contemporary Australia have historically been tied to colonial habits and practices that extol superiority of whiteness while treating non-desired racial groups as ‘objects’ or non-beings. Immigration, border protection policies and notions of belonging and national sovereignty have always been designed to place certain restrictions on non-desired racial and ethnic groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) policy is the latest measure that joins the long list of previous policies aimed at preventing the ‘influx of alien’ races into Australia. This paper seeks to advance our understanding of the various mutations of the hegemony of whiteness in Australia by drawing attention to how border politics and attendant discourses of national sovereignty have increasingly become politics of race – albeit by stealth. The paper introduces ‘vernacular discourse’ as an alternative explanatory paradigm for speaking to the internal contradictions of border protection policies. The argument is that OSB policy is a statement of national sovereignty that emphasises the need for protecting national borders that are imagined in spatial terms – as constituting a completed and closed horizontality. Such a view of Australia misses crucial points: (a) about present conditions of unprecedented voluntary and forced movements of human populations; and, (b) about Indigenous Australians’ longstanding contestation of the mainstream narrative of sovereignty. The conclusion is that OSB policy contradicts the common values of humanity in that it represents an abyssal line separating the ‘zone of being’ (whiteness) from the ‘zone of non-being’ (the racialised non-desired other).

Keywords: language of legitimation, colour blind racism, refugees, asylum seekers, sovereignty, OSB policy, abyssal thinking, vernacular discourse approach.

Introduction

Migration policies and border regulations are, by definition, exclusionary and treat human beings unequally. They routinely and openly violate universal ideas of equality. (Bauder, 2017, p. 38)

Policy documents offer a rich resource for researchers to trace and analyse networks of policy enactment. Policy analysis provides a way for understanding the official mind
– that is, how and why governments enact certain policies and their material effects (Browne, Coffey, Cook, et al., 2018). Researchers using policy documents are interested in the way that policy problems emerge, are represented and have a bearing on the material experience of diverse human populations (Bacchi, 2009; Blackmore & Lauder, 2005; Fischer, 2003; Parsons, 1995; Yanow, 2000). Texts used to disseminate the representation of policy problems are increasingly linked to transformations in mass political communication (Sampredo, 2011). Some such texts include social policy documents (for example, OSB) and national political leader statements on social, economic and political issues. The need to examine the effects of policy processes is urgent for free civil societies. Browne, Coffey, Cook, et al. (2018) posit three broad orientations to policy analysis. First are traditional approaches that seek to identify the ‘best’ solution through reviewing all possible options. Second are mainstream approaches that draw attention to the interaction of actors in the policy-making enterprise. Third are interpretive approaches that focus on the framing and representation of problems as a way to arrive at how policies reflect the social and political construction of ‘problems’. In this article, I adopt interpretive approaches to examine the language and discursive tropes of OSB in order to understand the material effects of the policy. The clauses and provisions of OSB policy serve as the dataset that I use to support the arguments advanced about the entanglement of border politics with Australian politics of race and whiteness.

Since the promulgation of the Immigration Restriction Act (IRA) in 1901, Australian immigration and border protection policies have continued to be couched in a language that extolls whiteness while denigrating the very humanity of non-desired racial groups (Tavan, 2005; Ndhlouv, 2014). Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) is the latest such policy that does this. OSB is a military-style border protection policy that brings together some 15 Australian Federal Government departments and agencies led by a 3-star army general under the banner of a Joint Agency Taskforce. It was the launch pad to the subsequent ‘Operation Sovereign Borders’ legislation pursued by the newly elected Coalition Government. OSB policy builds on and extends a suite of previous measures and policies that sought to address the ‘problem’ of the arrival on Australian shores of refugee and asylum seeker boats. Chief among measures that preceded OSB are: restoration of temporary protection visas (TPVs); establishment of offshore processing on Nauru and Manus Island; turning back boats by the Australian Defence Force; intercepting all identified vessels travelling from Sri Lanka; and invoking section 91W of the Migration Act to deny refugee status for those believed to have deliberately discarded or destroyed their identity documents (Coalition, 2013). The mission of OSB is to stop suspected illegal entry vessels (SIEVs) into Australian territory. OSB policy and all other previous measures are aimed at ensuring that the Australian government “takes control of our borders and restores faith in our immigration system, including our generous humanitarian intake” (Coalition, 2013, p. 6). In addition, OSB is said to be “a measure intended to provide the maximum deterrence to people smugglers by denying them a product to sell to often vulnerable people” (p.6).

The key words I have italicised above are part of the much broader linguistic and discursive elements of OSB that I unpack in this paper. I locate the analysis within the broader context of debates around borders, territoriality, national sovereignty, and transnationalism (Longo, 2018; Bauder, 2017; Mau, 2012; Zartman, 2010). The argument is that in spite of the overwhelming evidence of cultural, linguistic, religious and political pluralities across the globe, nation state-centric forms of cultural and

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1 Coalition Government is the Liberal and National Parties of Australia governing together.
race-based political insularity are still being pursued and vigorously defended by the governing authorities of individual countries (Ndlovu, 2018). This is particularly the case in Australia and in other comparable countries in Western Europe and North America that happen to be the preferred destinations for most migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Longo, 2018; Ndlovu, 2018).

National borders have assumed the role of what decolonial theorist, de Sousa Santos (2007) calls 'abyssal lines' in the sense that they divide the human from the subhuman. In the words of de Sousa Santos (2007, p. 45) abyssal thinking operates through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of "this side of the line" and the realm of "the other side of the line." The division is such that 'the other side of the line' vanishes as reality, becomes non-existent, and is indeed produced as non-existent. de Sousa Santos goes on to say that what most fundamentally characterises abyssal thinking is the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line where the other side of the abyssal line is the realm of beyond legality and illegality (lawlessness), of beyond truth and falsehood (incomprehensible beliefs, idolatry, magic). Together, these forms of radical or dialectical negation result in a radical absence, the absence of humanity, which amounts to modern sub-humanity. Therefore, if we apply the logic of abyssal thinking to the discourse and praxis of border protection policies in contemporary liberal democracies such as Australia, we observe that national borders are used to divide the human from the subhuman in a way that allows for human principles to be compromised by inhuman practices. The tension between regulation and emancipation (on this side of the border) continues to coexist with the tension between appropriation and violence (on the other side of the border) such that the universality of the first tension is not contradicted by the existence of the second one (de Sousa Santos, 2007).

In the sections that follow, I analyse the Coalition Government's OSB policy in relation to the problematic nature of national borders. I begin by fleshing out the key contours of the vernacular discourse paradigm and the promises it holds for illuminating identity questions on which opinions significantly differ. Then, the discussion turns to the linguistic and discursive elements of OSB policy. In particular, I spotlight the discursive conditions and consequences of racial ideologies and political inequality that result from the strategic use of language in articulating migration and border protection policies.

The Vernacular Discourse Approach

The concept of vernacular discourse first appeared in the 1960s as an analytical category in cultural and social theory. In her ground-breaking article ‘Vernacular Culture’, Lantis (1960), used the term vernacular rather loosely to refer to cultural norms and practices of ‘the commonplace’ – those aspects of culture that remained accessible to all, against the backdrop of a ‘high’ culture that was only accessible to elite sections of society. During these early days in the evolution of the concept of vernacular, two broad meanings came to be associated with it:

On the one hand, vernacular forms [were conceived as] those available to individuals or groups who are subordinated to institutions, and, on the other hand, they [were considered to be] a common resource available to everyone through informal social interaction. Based on this dual meaning, the vernacular came to refer to discourse that coexists with dominant culture but is held separate from it. (Howard, 2008, p. 493)
This bifurcated view suggests that vernacular is a form of local discourse that is distinct from larger institutional discourses but is also simultaneously “a shared resource, a census communis [common sense], or community doxa [common belief or popular opinion], a communal chorus that emerges from the multiplicity of voices speaking in the non-institutional discursive spaces of quotidian life” (Howard, 2008, p. 493). Howard (2008) criticised these conceptions of vernacular, noting in particular, their overreliance on a strict division between the subaltern counteragent and the hegemonic institutional voice that always seeks to dominate.

Other scholars have long argued that vernacular discourse constitutes communities, constructs social relations, and protests identity and cultural representations circulating in the dominant culture (Boyd, 1991; Hasian, 2001). One of the main contours of vernacular discourse is that in criticising culture that is produced within mainstream discourses, it simultaneously creates subjectivities that both confront and reproduce hegemonic discourses in equal measure. That is to say, although it is true that vernacular discourse is reactive and counterhegemonic, it is also equally true that it simultaneously affirms the status quo. In other words, vernacular discourse may also reinforce dominant ideology insofar as it represents both the inside and outside of institutions (Howard, 2005) – because it affirms and contests, simultaneously. Vernacular discourse is, essentially, what Hasian (2001) called ‘extra-judicial’ discourse; that discourse about the law but which is at the same time separate from legal institutions. In this regard, vernacular discourse must be understood as something that is “common to all but held separate from the formal discursive products of legal institutions” (Howard, 2008, p. 494).

Overall, vernacular discourse emphasises the role of informal social forces in shaping the discourse of agents over time. It seeks to account for non-institutional power by imagining a fluid, temporal and transient division between the vernacular and the institutional. What we learn from the concept of vernacular discourse is that we need to consider the complex interdependence of the non-institutional and the institutional in our conversations on migration, national border protection policies and identity formation. This means we have to look at group and individual identities as performative elements emanating from the dialectical interplay of formal and informal everyday lived experiences.

In integrating the formal and informal voices into its analysis, this paper seeks to account for previously unexplored hybrid agencies that both resist and sustain the ongoing Australian political debate on borders and border protection policies. As will become evident in the rest of this paper, Australian border protection policies and informal national political leader utterances about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers exemplify the bifurcated nature of vernacular discourse, which is shorthand for racial ideologies.

**Linguistic and Discursive Elements of OSB Policy**

In analysing the language of OSB, it is important that we take into account the social and political context under which this policy was formulated. This will enable insight into the underlying forces that shaped the conceptual architecture and nature of the discourse around OSB legislation after the Coalition had formed government following their September 2013 election victory. Passed into legislation soon after the 2013 Australian Federal election, OSB policy was bound up with election promises and commitments, including that of stopping the boats. This latter agenda item had been
the buzzword throughout the election campaign and took myriad dimensions, including those that relied on race-talk. Eventually, OSB policy became one of the mandates that Tony Abbott and his Coalition colleagues claimed after forming government in September 2013. For this reason, the language of OSB policy was, from the very start, shaped by exigencies of agenda setting and establishing political legitimacy post-election. Three main discursive and political communication strategies that are discernible in both the rhetoric and stated goals of OSB policy are (a) reliance on dialogism or double speak/multi-vocality; (b) widespread use of pronouns of legitimation; and (c) abundant use of metaphors and figurative language. All three strategies were carefully crafted and deployed towards achieving two main goals. The first was that of agenda setting: that is, shifting the political debate away from social and economic matters affecting the electorate – rising cost of living, housing problems, soaring power bills, falling disposable incomes – to perceived threats of being swamped by ‘marauding’ refugees and asylum seekers arriving on the country’s shores by the boatload. The second was that of piquing real and perceived fears of terror and terrorism within the community, thus creating a false sense of alarm and emergency. The aim was to earn the Australian public’s tacit support for something that was otherwise an unjustifiable political agenda item. In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss the three strategies of communication (a, b, and c). Excerpts from sections of the Coalition’s OSB document (prepared and circulated during the election campaign period) are provided in relevant parts of the analysis to illustrate the particular point about how border politics is, in fact, race politics.

(a) Dialogism/double-voice/multi-voice

The language of the OSB document is characterised by what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) called ‘double-voicing’, ‘multi-voicing’, or ‘dialogism’. This is about the use in a text of different tones or viewpoints, whose interaction or contradiction are important to the text’s interpretation. Dialogism refers to a general epistemological framework for understanding communicative interactions between or within individuals in situations and/or within sociocultural practices (Linell, 1998). Though Bakhtin pioneered these concepts in the context of literary studies, their analytical frames have been extended to the study of text and rhetoric more broadly (both written and oral). Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism proposes that all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourse on the same subject, as well as with discourse yet to come – that is, text as signifying matters in a broad sense. OSB being analysed here is in dialogue with nineteenth century colonial discourses on race and whiteness that constitute the foundations of contemporary Australia.

In reviewing Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and meaning, Petrilli (2014) puts forward the following philosophical, yet significant point about the ambiguity of language:

There is no such thing as a ‘general language’, a language that is spoken by a general voice that may be divorced from a specific saying, which is charged with particular overtones. Language, when it means, is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that someone else is one’s own inner addressee. (Petrilli, 2014, p. 21)

What this means is that each time we speak, each time we produce a text, that text or speech is also responding (thus double-voicing or multi-voicing). The actions accomplished by words and texts at the level of communicative exchange – or what Pierre Bourdieu (2001) calls the linguistic market – have a presupposition of social relations; that is, communication relations which are not necessarily relations among words and texts. Thus, whether written or oral, speech does not inherently install
communication relations. Rather, it ratifies, maintains, notifies, declares, or exhibits social and communication relations (Linell, 1998). This is precisely what Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism says about the way language works in everyday life in the community and in society at large. These contours of dialogism are ubiquitous in the language of the Coalition’s OSB policy document. In the introduction, the OSB opens with the following statement that criminalises asylum seekers who arrive on boats:

Illegal arrivals by boat to Australia have increased from just two people per month to more than 3,000 people per month [...]. The number of people in the immigration detention network or on bridging visas in the community who have arrived illegally by boat has increased from just four people in 2007 to more than 23,000 today. (Coalition, 2013, p. 3)

The tone of the language in this excerpt clearly indicates that refugees and asylum seekers are perceived as a menace and criminal elements arriving in Australia ‘illegally’ by boats. But the next two sentences in the same paragraph of the policy document slide into a sympathetic tone about “vulnerable people,” “more than 1,000 people that have perished at sea” and “more than 6,000 children that have had their lives put at risk” (Coalition, 2013, p. 3). This is reminiscent of what postcolonial critics characterise as internal contradictions of colonialism or the colonial mindset (Sur, 2005; Phillip, 2004; Radhakrishna, 2000), which operates through affirmation and de-legitimation at the same time. The contradictory tone of the language continues to change in the next paragraph where empathy and compassion for refugees that are being processed by United Nations agencies is displayed. Refugees that come via United Nations agencies are described as “desperate people” and “genuine refugees”:

More than 14,500 desperate people have been denied a place under our offshore humanitarian programme because those places have been taken by people who have arrived illegally by boats. These people are genuine refugees, already processed by United Nations agencies, but they are denied a chance at resettlement by people that have money in their pockets to buy a place via people smugglers. (Coalition, 2013, p. 3)

The implication here is that those asylum seekers who come by boats, some of whom have “perished at sea” and “thousands of children whose lives have been put at risk” (Coalition, 2013) are not desperate people and are not genuine refugees. This is a clear expression of vernacular discourse, of speaking with a double-voice. The overall intention is to justify the harshness of the OSB policy while at the same time seeking to pacify the Australian community’s feelings by projecting a thin veneer of compassion and empathy towards those other refugees that come through United Nations agencies. But at the heart of this rhetoric is the deliberate choice of a linguistic and communicative strategy that purports to be sympathetic towards refugees while simultaneously being ‘tough’ on the very same people that the OSB policy seeks to protect. Those refugees and asylum seekers that risk their lives by travelling on boats and (likely in many cases) paying all the money they have to make this dangerous voyage are said not to be desperate. If this is not a sign of desperation, one might wonder what the worst form of risk would look like.

The characterisation of asylum seekers arriving on boats as ‘illegals’ overlooks the fact that these are people driven by the instinct to flee threats and danger to life. But the Australian government expects them to have well-organised itineraries. How does someone fleeing war manage to get everything organised as if the trip had been pre-
planned? At the foot of page 4, the OSB document quotes the words of former Coalition Prime Minister John Howard who once declared “we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.” Though this sounds like a reasonable standpoint on national sovereignty and self-determination, it misses the significant point that the circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers are not determined by the receiving country. How do you decide on the circumstances of people who are fleeing war and persecution? Refugees are not voluntary migrants; they are people forced out of their countries of origin by circumstances that are beyond their control. Therefore, this quote from John Howard is clearly not a true statement of fact. It is a form of vernacular discourse; a strategy of misinformation that is intended to deceive the Australian public into thinking that local politicians can control everything, including the circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers wherever they are. This is vernacular discourse par excellence. It lays bare the arrogant superiority of whiteness and its tendency to claim knowledge and control of the entire universe – what Raewyn Connell (2007, p. 44) characterises as the fatalistic assumption that “all societies are knowable in the same way and from the same point of view.”

Another important observation relates to the use of numbers in the OSB policy document; specifically, frequent reference to ‘large numbers’ of ‘illegal asylum seekers’ breaching ‘our shores’. Arguably, this diverts attention from focusing on the real human interest stories of individual asylum seekers by creating an impression that Australia is on the verge of being swamped by refugees and asylum seekers. The use of the language of numbers is not surprising as it is consistent with how politicians and bureaucrats typically seek to justify their policy proposals and interventions (especially unpopular ones) by relying on big data. Part of the reason for this is the desire to placate Australians, who are overall a compassionate people, by making them feel as if the numbers of asylum seekers arriving on their shores are a threat to their very own existence. This is what we get from an obsession with and over-reliance on big data, which underpins many government social and economic policies in Australia and elsewhere. However, though big data is useful for some ends, for others, it is unhelpful as it tends to obscure and embellish more than it reveals. In the case of OSB, one thing that big data on boat arrivals obscures is the fact that the passengers on these boats are individuals with complex stories about persecution, suffering, and the risks they have taken to try and save their lives. This is lost in the double-voicing that puts numbers ahead of individual human interest stories around trials, tribulations and miraculous instances of survival and resilience. This is not unique to Australia. Anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments have increasingly become a common global phenomenon especially in Europe and in the United States where tendencies towards autochthony and parochial forms of inward-looking ultra-nationalism have become commonplace (Longo, 2018; Ndhlouv, 2018).

Consistent with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, we see in the language of OSB policy the co-existence of a multiplicity of divergent and contending voices whereby text is not an alien entity but a site for dialogic interaction of multiple modes of discourse – colonial, racist, supremacist and ultra-nationalistic. The polyphonic voice of OSB and its authors subordinates the voices of all other actors, including those of Indigenous Australians, the generality of the Australian people and asylum seekers. The significance of this silencing is that OSB policy, when enacted thusly, obscures the reality that Australia was never ceded; the authority of White Australia to determine “who enters and the circumstances by which they do,” is in fact a fragile
and contingent modality of rule that relies upon continued denial of Indigenous sovereignty.

Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism is equivalent to the term ‘intertextuality’ (Worton & Still, 1990; Clayton & Rothstein, 1991; Alfaro, 1996), which postulates that a text (in this case OSB policy) cannot exist alone as a self-contained, hermetic whole. The language and discourse of OSB policy have to be read within the context of the political temperature of the Australian Federal election of 2013 where scare mongering around threats of being swamped by ‘boat people’ became the trump card for the Coalition. The language of the Coalition’s OSB policy has also to be read as an extension of what appears to be a ‘trendy’ ideology of re-asserting the significance of national borders by many western liberal democracies – albeit at a time when discourses on globalisation and transnationalism are also being overplayed (Mau, 2012). This is precisely what accounts for the polyphonic voices that abound in OSB policy – the language that projects an image of compassion and harshness at the same time; and the language of closing borders while simultaneously speaking of an interconnected and borderless world. For these reasons OSB is both a political manifesto and a supplement to Australia’s immigration policies that have historically been framed by the dictates of white racial superiority and, simultaneously, denial of Indigenous sovereignty. The polyphonic and dialogic nature of the language of OSB is, in large measure, a consequence of this duality of purpose.

(b) Metaphors and figurative language

The second strategy of political communication that we find in OSB policy is that of metaphors and figurative language. Previous political science, sociological and public communication scholarship has long suggested metaphors and other forms of symbolic language are effective persuasive devices, yet they are also widely used as manipulative tools by politicians (Cammaerts, 2012; Chateris-Black, 2009; Mio, 1997; Edelman, 1971). Chateris-Black (2009, p. 97) says “metaphors contribute to the design of a leadership style through appealing to followers to share in a particular representation or construal of social reality.” Nearly half a century ago, Edelman (1971) explained the strategic and selective use of metaphors in political communication as follows:

> Each metaphor intensifies selected perceptions and ignores others, thereby helping one to concentrate upon desired consequences of favoured public policies and helping one to ignore their unwanted, unthinkable, or irrelevant premises and aftermaths. Each metaphor can be a subtle way of highlighting what one wants to believe and avoiding what one does not wish to believe. (Edelman, 1971, p. 67)

Edelman’s critique of metaphors followed hard on the heels of Walter Lippmann’s (1965) writings on the importance of political communication in which he posited that “politics is too complex and abstract to be directly experienced” (cited in Mio, 1997, p. 114). The significant point here is how the political world is created by public communication (Edelman, 1977), which subsequently “helps to reduce the world into simpler models that are easier to manage and manipulate” (Mio, 1997, p. 114). Several other theorists of political communication concur with this line of argument in positing that metaphors assist politicians in communicating more effectively by addressing latent symbolic themes residing in segments of the public consciousness (see Cammaerts, 2012; Britton, 1999; Schneider, 2002).
In a study on the strategic use of metaphors by the media and politicians during the 2007-2011 Belgian constitutional crisis, Bart Cammaerts (2012, p. 229) identified several types of metaphors that fed into six core frames of “expressing immobility, attributing blame, the need for unity, bargaining and teasing, the end is nigh and finally lack of direction and leadership.” Cammaerts goes on to suggest that metaphors were instrumental in strategies to present the Flemish demands as unquestionable and common sense, while the counter-demands of the French-speaking parties were positioned as unreasonable, impossible to accept. He concludes by noting that the strategic use of metaphors not only served to represent complex political issues in an accessible language but also shaped and influenced the negotiations through their various mediations and the ideological intentions embedded within the metaphor (Cammaerts, 2012).

In the remaining paragraphs of this subsection, I analyse two metaphors that feature prominently in the OSB policy document. These are: (i) the metaphor of border protection as a crisis and a national emergency, and (ii) the metaphor of an Australian protection visa as a product being sold by people smugglers.

The OSB policy document uses the metaphors of crisis and national emergency to paint a grim picture of the arrival of asylum seekers by boats on the shores of Australia. Generally, a national emergency or crisis is a danger or threat of danger to a nation from foreign or domestic sources and usually declared to be in existence by governmental authority (Britton, 1999; Schneider, 2002). In the context of this broad understanding of what constitutes an emergency, the OSB policy document presents the arrival of asylum seekers as a danger or threat to the country's national security. But given that it is well-known that these asylum seekers are unarmed people, most of whom are women and children seeking refuge and protection (Murdoch, 2011), politicians require a particular type of language to justify their heavy-handed response. The metaphorical language of crisis and national emergency was thus necessary as a way to justify allocating huge amounts of national resources to the task of border protection.

As is evident in the OSB policy document, this was a whole of government approach that brought together some 15 government departments, including the military and other security agencies. The Liberal-National Coalition had to convince the Australian public why it was necessary to expend such resources (human, material, financial) towards stopping the flow of asylum seeker boats. Using the metaphor of a crisis and an emergency enabled the Coalition to gain support from the Australian public, which ultimately saw them claim the issue of border protection and safeguarding national sovereignty as one of their mandates when they formed government. The metaphor of a crisis and a national emergency was thus an agenda-setting strategy (Gerbner, 1978). And this actually did work because the persuasive power of the metaphor blinded the electorate to the fact that these asylum seekers were vulnerable and desperate people looking for safety and protection. Although the military-style response under the command of a 3-star general was said to be targeting criminals (people smugglers), the victims of the operation turned out to be the very same people that the operation supposedly sought to protect. This was hidden and embellished in the duplicitous metaphor of a crisis and national emergency that never was.

But a curious question around the notion of national sovereignty looms large in Australia. As is the case in many other settler societies (the United States, Canada,
New Zealand and, partly, South Africa) national sovereignty remains a contested notion. The ‘sovereign’ in OSB policy proceeds from and perpetuates the colonial legacy of the invasion of Indigenous peoples’ lands. Since the arrival of white settlers in the late 1700s, Indigenous Australians have been contesting the sovereignty being claimed by the Australian nation-state (Dow, 2015). The Aboriginal Tent Embassy established across Old Parliament House in Canberra on 26 January 1972, which is still there to this day, is a stark reminder of the competing narratives of sovereignty in Australia (Foley, Schaap & Howell, 2013; Newfong, 1972). Additionally, the ongoing demand by Indigenous people across Australia for a treaty with the Federal Government attests to the contested nature of the colonial model of sovereignty. After meeting at the Old Bungalow, Mparntwe (Alice Springs, NT) on 27 and 28 November 2014, a group of Australia’s First Nations Peoples issued a declaration that begins with the following statement:

We, the Aboriginal Sovereign Peoples with the National Aboriginal Freedom Movement demand that the Commonwealth of Australia begins negotiations to establish a time frame for our decolonisation, through Treaties under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties with the legitimate authorised representatives of each Nation State. This will form the basis of the recovery framework for the healing from the devastation wreaked upon Aboriginal Nations and Peoples by State sanctioned genocide and gross violations of human rights... (Aboriginal Sovereign Manifesto of Demands, 2015).

These demands for sovereignty by Aboriginal people are made against the backdrop of Australia being the only Commonwealth country that has not signed a treaty with its First Nations people. Such a treaty would ideally include agreements about issues of sovereignty, the relationship between Indigenous people and the Government, the rights of Indigenous people and decision-making processes (Foley, Schaap & Howell, 2013, Newfong, 1972). But this currently does not exist in Australia and thus raises some serious questions about the sincerity and legitimacy of the national sovereignty claims that are written into OSB policy. The typical modus operandi of colonial habits and practices is that they fundamentally proceed through affirmation and denial – in equal measure. The Australian Federal Government affirms the importance of sovereignty (in the context of OSB policy) while simultaneously denying Indigenous people’s demands for the same. This is a contradiction of the highest order – and yet not quite surprising because it reflects the colonial habitus creating conditions for the emergence of the OSB.

The second metaphor uses the symbol of a product to refer to Australian humanitarian visas granted to refugees and asylum seekers. In this metaphor, the humanitarian visa is the product, which people smugglers ‘sell’ to asylum seekers keen on being resettled in Australia. Though this metaphor does make sense on face value, the symbolism used overlooks some fundamental human-interest perspectives. The characterisation of people smuggling as a lucrative business model is oblivious of the fact that as well as those of their passengers, people smugglers put their own lives at risk. So, there is a much bigger and complex human interest story at the point of departure that needs to be investigated and understood — beyond the simplistic assumption that both asylum seekers and people smugglers are willing actors who enter into a ‘transaction’ purely in the economic sense.

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2 The ‘Manifesto of Demands’, formerly available here: [http://sovereignunion.mobi/content/aboriginal-sovereign-manifesto-demands](http://sovereignunion.mobi/content/aboriginal-sovereign-manifesto-demands), has since been removed.
Arguably, the metaphors of a ‘crisis and national emergency’ and a ‘product to sell’ are used in the OSB policy document to shift focus away from human suffering – as a way to justify the inhumane treatment of the non-desired racialised other. The deployment of these metaphors is, indeed, a form of political discourse that helps the politician persuade the voting Australian public to support a policy regime that is otherwise disproportionately harsh and insensitive to the human suffering associated with pushing back the boats and forcing asylum seekers onto refugee camps on Manus Island and Nauru. These two metaphors give a false impression that both the asylum seeker and people smuggler enjoy embarking on perilous journeys on boats and, therefore, do not deserve the compassion and empathy of the Australian public. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it would be illuminating to hear the stories of these two groups of people. What do they think about the perception projected in these metaphors – that they are participating in a lucrative and mutually beneficial economic transaction?

The infamous case of underage Indonesian fishing boat crew imprisoned in Australian adult prisons is one example that disproves the ‘economic transaction’ theory. In June 2011 and in August 2018, the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried stories about Indonesian boys aged between 13 and 16 years who had been snatched from an impoverished village by people smugglers. The young boys had been tricked by people smugglers who then used them as crew on SIEVs carrying asylum seekers. Lindsay Murdoch for the *Sydney Morning Herald* interviewed Mr Onesimus Ledoh from Manamolo village who had this to say about the people smugglers’ deceptive ways:

> The people smugglers come to this part of Indonesia because the boys are vulnerable. They trick the boys by offering them money to get on the boats and then they cannot get off … they are trapped. (Murdoch, 2011)

What we learn from this story is that not all so-called people smugglers are willing partners in a ‘lucrative commercial’ activity. Most are vulnerable and uneducated minor children who are duped by sophisticated people smuggling syndicates (Murdoch, 2011). But the other side of this is that when Australian authorities intercept the SI EVs, these minors are often held for months in adult jails with paedophiles, rapists and murderers (Murdoch, 2011). A major reason for this travesty is that Australian authorities doubt the self-reported ages of these minors and in those instances where birth certificates verifying their ages are provided, the documents are deemed unreliable. Australian Federal Police then resort to the use of wrist X-ray examinations, which they say prove the boys are not children. Defence lawyers and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have advised that “reliance on wrist X-ray examinations based on a technique developed in the US in the 1930s is highly questionable” (Topsfield & Rosa, 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, the United Nations child protection agency, UNICEF, is said to have warned that dental and skeletal tests should not be relied upon to determine ages of children (Topsfield & Rosa, 2018).

The two points of greater significance here are about: (a) Australian authorities’ contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and, (b) the use of an outdated, questionable and discredited technique to determine people’s ages. Both of these acts of travesty would be strongly condemned by the Australian government if the people concerned were Australian citizens and, especially, if they were white Australians. Privileged ‘white’ Australian children are never locked up in adult prisons and neither are their ages determined through the use of unreliable
techniques such as wrist X-rays. But why do contravention of the Rights of the Child and use of unorthodox age verification techniques seem to be acceptable in the case of Indonesian minors?

Decolonial theorist, de Sousa Santos’ (2007) notion of abyssal thinking provides a clue as to why this is so. de Sousa Santos says abyssal thinking operates through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms: the realm of ‘this side of the line’ (zone of being) and the realm of ‘the other side of the line’ (zone of non-being). The Indonesian minors belong to the ‘zone of non-being’ and illegality; the zone occupied by those racial groups whose rights can be violated and their childhood denied. It is precisely for this reason these violations that are unacceptable in the ‘zone of being’ and legality (occupied by superior racial groups) are normalised in the ‘zone of non-being’. This is consistent with longstanding colonial habits and practices of doubting the humanity of the non-desired Other that date back to the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Victims of the slave trade were treated like non-beings – with their teeth, bone density, genitals and all, inspected like stock being prepared for the market (Fanon, 1986; Klein, 1999; Mudimbe, 1988). The locking up of Indonesian minors in adult prisons after being subjected to primitive ways of ascertaining their ages takes us back to these dark ages where the humanity of non-white racial groups was doubted when seen against the normative judgemental values of white superiority.

Beer and de Landtsheer (2004, p. 24) could not have put it any better when they said metaphors are widely used “as tools of persuasive communication, to bridge gaps and build identification between strangers; to frame issues; to create, maintain, or dissolve political coalitions; to generate votes and win elections.” This is exactly what we see in the use of metaphors in the OSB policy document. The metaphors discussed above serve the purpose of framing the political issue of border protection as a national emergency in order to not only gain community approval of the policy but to win elections. As it turned out, this strategy worked for the Coalition as they won the 2013 Federal election with a significant majority and went on to form government. The Coalition managed to pique people’s emotions, fears and uncertainties about the perceived threats posed by asylum seekers and refugees arriving on boats. The strategic deployment of metaphors was key in this.

(c) Pronouns of Legitimation

Pronouns of legitimation are a common and widely used strategy for political communication. They constitute specific ways in which language represents an instrument of control (Hodge & Kress 1993) and manifests symbolic power (Bourdieu 2001) in discourse and society. In political communication, pronouns of legitimation are part of ‘political-talk’ used by politicians to potentially legitimate truth claims. That is, they are deployed as rhetorical strategies in legitimating or de-legitimating specific issues in society. Numerous previous studies on the language of legitimation (for example, Reyes, 2011; Martín Rojo & van Dijk, 1997; van Dijk, 2005; van Leeuwen, 1996, 2007, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) have posited some key strategies employed by social actors to justify courses of action. Strategies of legitimation can be used individually or in combination with others, and justify social practices through: emotions (particularly fear), a hypothetical future, rationality, voices of expertise and altruism (Reyes, 2011).

In this section, I extend the discussion on the language of legitimation by analysing five pronouns that feature prominently in the OSB policy document. These are ‘we’,
‘our’, ‘us’, ‘they’ and ‘their’. I explain how these strategies are linguistically constructed and shaped to validate or invalidate courses of action in the context of what was a raging asylum seeker and border protection policy debate in Australia. As I have already indicated, there are two main functions of these pronouns in political communication: to legitimate or to de-legitimate. I provide below examples of each and their contexts of usage in the OSB policy document.

Pronouns that seek to legitimate OSB policy (‘we’, ‘our’):

Examples of usage: Our current disjointed institutional arrangements; securing our borders (p. 2); Labor has failed our borders; our offshore humanitarian programme (p. 3); we will decide who comes to this country (p. 4); effectively sells-out our immigration regime to people smugglers; restore faith in our immigration system; our generous humanitarian intake (p. 5); our regional policy approach (p. 6); our regional partners; we also recognise that if we fail to take the initiative (Coalition, 2013, p. 7).

On face value, these may seem like everyday pronominal usages – but they are not. They have underlying meanings of including (collectivising ‘we’ and ‘our’) as well as excluding (segmenting ‘we’ and ‘our’). The collectivising usage brings together the Coalition party (authors of the OSB policy) and the dominant Australian population; in other words, those on ‘this’ side of the abyssal line. The overall intention here is to advance the message that OSB policy is in the best interest of all Australians and that it is supported by all Australians minus the Labor party that subscribes to a different set of policy prescriptions. So, in essence, though the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ in these examples are overall inclusive, they are also segregating in the sense that there is a category of people who sit on the other end of the spectrum. In this case it is the Labor party and its supporters, prospective immigrants, and non-white refugees. An element of ‘othering’ along racial lines is being projected by this type of pronominal usage. The tensions and contradictions are quite glaring in that whereas OSB policy is said to be aimed at protecting all Australians, it also simultaneously sends a message that says the Labor party is not part of the ‘we’ and ‘our’ in this context. These observations align with Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of dialogism and double-voicing discussed above.

Pronouns that seek to de-legitimate policies of the previous Labor government (‘we’, ‘they’, ‘their’):

Examples of usage: they have neither resolve nor competence to combat people smuggling (p. 4); as we have learned from Labor’s many failures (p.9); a key failing has been their inability to implement them. (Coalition, 2013, p. 10)

Here, three pronouns ‘we’, ‘they’ and ‘their’ are strategically used to de-legitimate the previous efforts by the Australian Labor government to deal with asylum seeker and border protection issues. Again, the collectivising and segregating elements of these pronouns are apparent. The intention here is to bring together the Coalition party and all Australians on one side and leave the Labor Party on the other, hence the use of ‘they’ and ‘their’. In so doing, the Labor Party’s attempts to be re-elected are de-legitimated; they are portrayed as incompetent in both policy formation and implementation of border protection strategies that would keep Australia ‘safe’ from being ‘swamped’ by refugees and asylum seekers. However, although this is about political power-plays between the two major parties, there is also a bigger picture. This bigger picture is about the real-politik of such pronominal usage – justifying the
racialisation, stereotyping and inhumane treatment of people from non-desired racial backgrounds seeking asylum in Australia.

Through their use of these pronouns in ways that exclude and de-legitimate, the authors of OSB policy are effectively saying the Labor Party does not deserve another chance at forming government because their border protection policies have failed. However, as previously indicated, the point of greater significance here is one about the Coalition’s concerted efforts to win public trust and support for what was otherwise a controversial policy proposal that was open to being challenged by various actors. In short, the context of the debate during an election year clearly betrays the political imperatives that are at play – the Coalition was determined to form the next government and did everything they could to achieve this goal. The deployment of pronouns of legitimation and de-legitimation was part of the arsenal that led them to their desired goal.

But a strand of racial ideology that is hidden beneath the political rhetoric on border protection policy in Australia still remains: the spirit of Hansonism. I discuss this in the next section.

Hansonism as Racial Ideology: Mainstream Political Leader Statements

Ms Pauline Hanson, Leader of the One Nation political party, is well-known for her far-right anti-Asian and anti-Muslim immigration sentiments as well as her racial prejudices against Indigenous Australians. Pauline Hanson has been criticised for holding bigoted and racist political views that are anachronistic to the Australian values of inclusivity, tolerance, respect and acceptance of cultural diversity and religious freedom. In this section, I argue that although it might be convenient to dismiss Pauline Hanson’s consistent anti-immigration sentiment as the musings of a disgruntled fringe-dwelling voice, most of her views resonate with mainstream political thinking in Australia. This includes the views expressed in the OSB policy documents and in statements by members of major political parties such as the Australian Liberal/National Coalition Party. I will cite a few examples here to support the proposition that Pauline Hanson’s racist and white supremacist views are consistent with statements made by mainstream Australian politicians.

In 2007, then Coalition government immigration minister, Kevin Andrews expressed a bigoted view on African migrants alleging they were failing to ‘integrate’ into mainstream Australian society. Following the fatal bashing of a youth of Sudanese heritage in the Melbourne suburb of Noble Park, Kevin Andrews was reported to make the following statement which subsequently circulated widely in the media:

> I have been concerned that some groups don’t seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life as quickly as we would hope and therefore it makes sense to put the extra money in to provide extra resources, but also to slow down the rate of intake from countries such as Sudan. (Farouque, Petrie & Miletic, 2007 my emphasis)

Therefore, as is currently the case with OSB policy, instead of sympathising with African background migrants as victims of street violence who need community support in their resettlement efforts, Kevin Andrews was proposing reducing African refugee intake. In other words, instead of being assured of more protection by the government and the community, African refugees were seen as a problem (Ndhlovu, 2013, 2014). This resonates with Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) critique of colour blind racial ideologies that perpetuate and justify the alienation of racial minorities by blaming the
same people who need support, for allegedly failing to measure up. Thus, the strategic avoidance of race (through normalisation and naturalisation) has been invented as an effective political strategy for hiding the persistence of inequality and the mechanisms of racism while simultaneously blaming the individuals or communities for allegedly failing “to integrate or participate competently in a white dominated society” (Doane as cited in McAllen, 2011, p. 3).

The second example of a statement by an Australian political leader that is consistent with Pauline Hanson’s views was made by Cory Bernardi, leader of the Australian Conservatives and Federal Senator for South Australia. Following the June 2017 ‘London Bridge’ terrorist attack, Senator Bernardi prepared and emailed a survey titled ‘We need to talk about Islam’, to his supporters soliciting their views on Islam. In an interview with Fairfax Media, Senator Bernardi said the survey aimed to “begin the national conversation Australia has to have about Islam in our country” and asked questions about prayer spaces in public buildings, the construction of new mosques, child marriage, banning the burqa and sharia law (Maley, 2017, p. 1). The survey offered multiple-choice statements. Writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Jacqueline Maley (2017) made observed: “[A] graphic next to the survey showed the Islamic ‘shahada’ or proclamation of faith, written in Arabic with a large cross through it, a move labelled ‘fiercely extremist’ by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, and offensive by Sydney Muslim community leader Dr Jamal Rifi” (Maley, 2017, p. 2).

Prior to this, in February 2017, Senator Bernardi advocated halving Australia’s immigration intake, citing the example of United States’ President Donald Trump’s ‘Travel Ban’ decision to suspend immigration from six predominantly Muslim nations. Here is what he said about his proposal to halve Australia’s intake of immigrants:

> [...] we should be discerning about the qualities and characteristics of the individuals we let in. Are they going to fit in and abide by the rule of law? Anyone who comes here and thinks they should set up a parallel legal system or they should bring some culture or historical sort of baggage with them and they want to place that in Australian society I think is barking up the wrong path and we don’t want that sort of thing here. You can’t assess how people think or their religious beliefs, you can’t change that, what you need to do is make sure they’re coming here for the right reasons and they’re going to do the right thing. (Bernardi, 2017)

Arguably, if average Australians were to be randomly selected and asked to say who they think this statement was made by (with Mr Bernardi’s identity hidden), it is feasible that many could associate it with Pauline Hanson. The statement bears the hallmarks of Hanson’s 1996 and 2016 maiden speeches to the Federal Parliament as well as several other statements made at different forums and in political platforms. If we look closely at the language of the political statements made by several other leading Australian political actors, it is clear that Pauline Hanson is not a lone voice. The themes of her political views and the language in which they are couched resonate with those of some of her peers across the political spectrum.

The third example is Peter Dutton, then Minister for Immigration and Border Protection. Speaking during parliamentary Question Time in November 2016, Mr Dutton insinuated that descendants of Lebanese Muslims in Australia were over-represented in terrorism crime-related statistics and that it was a mistake for the Government of Malcom Fraser to have accepted Lebanese refugees in the 1970s:

> The advice I have is that out of the last 33 people who have been charged with terrorist-related offences in this country, 22 of those people are from second and third
generation Lebanese-Muslim background. The reality is Malcolm Fraser did make mistakes in bringing some people in the 1970s and we’re seeing that today. We need to be honest in having that discussion. There was a mistake made. Lessons from past migrant programs should be learnt for people settling in Australia today. (Dutton, 2016)

This statement sparked backlash across the country with objections coming from the Federal Labor opposition, the Lebanese community as well as other communities across the country – both Muslim and non-Muslim. Some who commented on Mr Dutton’s statement made it clear that this was an unwarranted racist, white supremacist and bigoted view that should not have been made in the first place. The important point is how Peter Dutton, then Minister for Immigration in the Coalition government is reading from the same script as Pauline Hanson. One would have expected him to be rebuked and ridiculed by his party as has often been the case when Pauline Hanson makes similar utterances. Instead, Peter Dutton received glowing praise from then Prime Minister, Malcom Turnbull who defended his minister and endorsed the comments by saying that “Peter Dutton is a thoughtful and committed and compassionate Immigration Minister. Peter Dutton is doing an outstanding job as Immigration Minister” (Conifer, 2016).

The above sentiments by Peter Dutton mimic much of what Pauline Hanson said in her maiden speeches. For example, in both 1996 and 2016, Pauline Hanson made a clarion call for halting immigration:

> Abolishing the policy of multiculturalism will save billions of dollars and allow those from ethnic backgrounds to join mainstream Australia, paving the way to a strong, united country. Immigration must be halted in the short term […] Indiscriminate immigration and aggressive multiculturalism have caused crime to escalate and trust and social cohesion to decline. Too many Australians are afraid to walk alone at night in their neighbourhoods. Too many of us live in fear of terrorism. (Hanson, 1996, 2016)

There is a clear resemblance between this statement and what Peter Dutton said about second and third generation Lebanese-Australians who he characterised as the ‘unintended consequence’ of previous immigration and multicultural policies and Ms Hanson’s statements. The language and tone of both statements reveal a consistent theme about the non-desired Other that remains over generations. Their message is this: there is something wrong with the DNA of different cohorts of refugees and immigrants that are the subject of ridicule and racial abuse. I would further argue that it seems there is a Hansonist spirit at play; but this spirit usually gets rebuked, loathed and frowned upon when it manifests through its progenitor, Pauline Hanson. When the same spirit expresses itself through individuals such as Peter Dutton, Cory Bernardi or Kevin Andrews, it is defended and the people who embody it are praised and rewarded for “doing an outstanding job” (Conifer, 2016, p. 1). What is being missed here is the fact that the anti-immigrant Hansonist spirit looms across the political landscape in Australia as it takes different forms and mutations such as those reflected in OSB policy. Its virulent effects in the community and society remain the same regardless of where it manifests. The story being told about fear of the non-desired ‘Other’ and perceptions of a world without others remains the same.

**Conclusion**

At the heart of OSB policy is entrenchment of the politics of race and the hegemony of whiteness in a manner that contradicts – *ipso facto* – the realities of our present time whereby the world has become more and more transnational and interconnected.
Contemporary societies have become superdiverse – that complex form of diversity, which is an outflow of unprecedented trends in migration characterised by movement of more people from many places, to many places, through many places (Vertovec, 2007). But in the midst of this are deep-seated sentiments – loud and muted, formal and informal – for narrow, parochial, inward-looking, autochthonous and racist narratives and imaginings of identity and belonging. How do we explain the tensions and contradictions that emerge from this situation? This article has addressed this question by analysing the complex overlay of multiple linguistic and discursive practices that shape and mediate Australia’s Operation Sovereign Borders policy. The language of OSB policy is slippery, contradictory, and subtle, thus exemplifying what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2000, 2002, 2006, 2010) calls ‘colour blind racism’. Colour blind racism is essentially racism without racists – whereby the ideological ensemble of racism is masked behind tolerant, non-racist, liberal language. The racial ideology of colour blind racism operates as an interpretative repertoire (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) consisting of frames, styles of race-talk, and racial stories. These elements are employed by institutional and individual actors “as building blocks for manufacturing versions on actions, self, and social structures in communicative situations” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 67).

The argument advanced throughout the paper is that while national sovereignty does, in several ways, provide states with a sense of community, it is, at the same time, at odds with Indigenous sovereignty. Rather than seeking to protect borders and talking about porous borders as a national emergency, what is required is a re-imagining of the border. This can be done by acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty and respecting the human rights and dignity of people arriving on Australia’s shores seeking asylum and protection. The ultimate goal will be to dismantle white colonial and racial hegemony that currently undergirds the notion of sovereignty in Australia – and, indeed in other settler-colonial societies around the world. Doing so will ensure that any new policy proposals accord with the indisputably transient, fluid and flexible nature of present day global societies. As this paper has argued, the three strategies of political communication that we find in the OSB policy document — dialogism, metaphors and pronouns of legitimation — bear the hallmarks of vernacular discourse. They constitute forms of vernacular discourse insofar as they are about official government policy on immigration and border protection, and yet, they simultaneously resonate with mundane public domain rhetoric about non-desired others; refugees and asylum seekers arriving on boats. Australian national political leaders’ widespread use of such communication techniques as dialogism, metaphors and language of legitimation is unhelpful in that it inflames subjective perceptions about asylum seekers and refugees being the present day non-desired Other. These strategies of political communication constitute forms of coloniality and colour blind racism that are (re)produced, (re)enacted and picked up by different actors, including politicians aspiring to win an election. It is also for this reason that the discursive tropes of OSB policy are out of sync with the underpinning ideals of community in an interconnected and globalised world.

Author Note

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Acknowledgements

I express my sincere thanks for the comments by three anonymous reviewers.

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