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Abstract

There are and have been Australian voices strongly raised against the now long-running mandatory detention of refugee boat arrivals to Australian waters. Yet just as Indigenous Australians exist as part of an impersonal category for most Settler Australians, the absence of any widespread community protest against the brutal treatment of boat arrivals has in part fed off the lack of a broader cultural and historical frame within which to tell and hear individual refugee stories. These victims occupy a narrative space whose moral dimensions are blanked out, as an integral part of their maltreatment. For those who want change, pressing questions arise. What kind of stories could let these refugees be admitted to the category 'Australian,' in a more inclusive version of our actual and potential inhabitants? In this context, might Australia find a version of the model of national community that England has long drawn from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?

Introduction

Modern 'Australia' is a place mapped and marked out by Settler colonialism and it continues to be so. Contemporary Australia maintains the long history of oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that began with early European settlement, flourished in the colonial period, and was further entrenched after the Commonwealth of Australia was established in 1901. Until a referendum in 1967, Indigenous Australians were not automatically recognised as Commonwealth citizens (AIATSIS 2021). Their current situation remains dire, as evidenced by much lower life expectancy than the Settler population, entrenched poverty, and the world's highest rate of imprisonment.

In a parallel development, Settler Australia has demonstrated a continuing attempt to exclude another category of actual or potential citizens. Refugees who have arrived by boat are treated as irreducibly 'Other,' not to be included in the category 'Australian.' Maritime refugees make up the great majority of our offshore detainees since mandatory detention began in 2001 and still figure strongly there.[1] The hidden exclusion and incarceration of these men, women, and children maintains the (unacknowledged) white colonial version of who 'Australians' are allowed to be.

In the case of our Indigenous peoples, Settler Australians have long lived with a situation in which the continued oppression of a minority group is accepted and causes little interference to normal operations. That situation seems to find both a model and a parallel in the more recent treatment of refugees. The Australian government's detention offshore of refugees arriving by sea, or their being turned back at sea to an uncertain fate, has been tacitly accepted by most of our population, and in effect approved by both Labor and Liberal/National politicians.

This 'othering' of refugees in Australia has its own long history, but was thrust into national prominence by the 'Children Overboard' sensation on 6 October, 2001. After a wooden-hull boat with 223 passengers was intercepted at sea by HMAS *Adelaide*, "Australian Prime Minister John Howard asserted that the asylum seekers 'irresponsibly sank the[ir] damn boat, which put their children in the water'" (Wikipedia, "Children" 2023). As with the criminalisation and impoverishment of the Indigenous, Howard blamed the refugee victims for their dire situation, establishing a pattern which subsequent governments, Liberal and Labor, have effectually supported through the mandatory incarceration of refugees arriving by sea.

Just as Indigenous oppression is normalised in Australia, maltreatment of refugees—though locking up refugees is illegal under international law—has never been a major issue for the Settler majority. Similarly, the well-documented appalling effects of incarceration of asylum seekers held in detention in Papua New Guinea, Nauru, and Manus Island has not resonated deeply with Australians. Successive governments' strategy to keep these men, women, and children distant, hidden, anonymised, and largely inaccessible to independent review has worked to prevent the refugees from becoming a main electoral concern. This strategy applied especially in a context where being seen to be 'tougher' on refugees largely won out with voters.

[1] As of 30 April 2021, all remaining detainees in Nauru and Papua New Guinea were, by order of frequency, from Sri Lanka, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan. For "[p]eople transferred to Nauru by nationality and refugee status," the list of those still there on 31 January 2022 was in order of frequency Sri Lanka, Iran, Stateless, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, India, Iraq, Myanmar, Nepal, and Somalia (Refugee Council of Australia, "Offshore Processing Statistics" 2023).

Certainly, there are and have been Australian voices strongly raised against the now long-running mandatory detention of refugee boat arrivals to Australian waters.[2] Yet just as Indigenous Australians exist as part of an impersonal category for most Settler Australians, the absence of any widespread community protest against the brutal treatment of boat arrivals has in part fed off the lack of a broader cultural and historical frame within which to tell and hear individual refugee stories. These victims occupy a narrative space whose moral dimensions are blanked out, and their status justifies their maltreatment. For those who want change, pressing questions arise. What kind of stories could let these refugees be admitted to the category 'Australian,' in a more inclusive version of our actual and potential inhabitants? More specifically, in the context of this discussion, might Australia find a version of the model of national community that England has long drawn from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?

In connection with these questions, Jonathan Hsy cites the example of the deliberately estranged 'Chaucerian' verse of the Chinese-born Melbourne writer Ouyang Yu, written in what Yu calls "[a] crap old / Format / That treats other's histories as / If they were my own." Yu "traces forms of racial unbelonging … across Australia and the Pacific" (2008, 15). In doing so Yu shows that Chaucer can be mobilised both to symbolise a common currency of English national identity and to expose settler Australia's own identity anxieties. In his eyes, the abrasive likeness and unlikeness shows that Chaucer's example offers us a revealing challenge.

By reaching back to the Settler population's original metropole, Ouyang Yu's work highlights Australia's lack of a story trove common to indigenous, settler, and refugee populations that could fulfil the carefully tended functions that *The Canterbury Tales* has been given in England. For instance, Chaucer's story collection has been highlighted in the UK's *Refugee Tales* movement, both in its publications and in its associated annual Walk, which I will discuss at length below. In Australia, activists like the novelist Richard Flanagan (2019) and the internationally prominent former detainee and author Behrouz Boochani (MC 2023) have kept the need for an inclusive notion of 'Australianness' prominent. But in their appeal for inclusivity, they cannot invoke stories like Chaucer's to connect a past vision of a diverse national community with a long history of supra-national interactions down to the present day. Our Settler 'stories'—by the 'Explorer,' the 'Pioneer,' the 'Digger,' the 'Battler'—have excluded the Indigenous people and the incarcerated refugee.[3] Yet one can see how each of those narratives might, under different auspices, construct likenesses, as well as dissimilarities, with the people they exclude. The Chaucerian example opens up a much longer and broader perspective on Australia's history and present state.

[2] Examples include Refugee Council of Australia and Australian Human Rights Commission.

[3] The term 'Battler,' deployed by former Prime Minister John Howard, describes a working-class person striving to make ends meet in difficult circumstances that are not of their own making. It can also be appropriated by wealthier middle-class people who feel entitled by hard work to their status ("Howard's" 2004).

Medieval Australia

> What does it mean to read medieval literature […] in a pursuit of racial justice? How can people of divergent backgrounds come together to address past and ongoing harms of racism and related oppressions?
>
> — Jonathan Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms*

Jonathan Hsy's questions tap into the history and cultural function of medieval literature, and specifically of *The Canterbury Tales*, in Australia. As in numerous former British colonies, these matters are bound up with the long history of (especially British) colonialism with its links to much older exploitative ventures stretching back to Chaucer's own time and well beyond. This history is still with us. Gun massacres carried out in March 2019 at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, were the work of an Australian man, Brenton Harrison Tarrant.[4] As Louise D'Arcens has written of the event, medievalisms of this modern kind, however recent, "cannot be separated from the longer tradition of ideologically privileged and institutional practices that have placed the Middle Ages in the service of nationalist and colonialist ideologies" (2019, 179–80). In Australia, following the course of exploration and settlement, this context was traditionally British, and the historical worldview was focussed on the development of the British Empire, with Australia a noted part of what the poet Alfred Tennyson called in 1873 "Our ocean-empire with her boundless homes / For ever-broadening England" (1996, "To the Queen", 29–30).

These are many examples of such instances where the proof of continued British vitality was looked for in the colonies more than at home, and especially by the colonists themselves. Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965) is set in Geraldton, Western Australia, in the 1940s. The young protagonist learns:

> Pommies might be gallant in wartime, but they were descended from all the people who had declined to found America and Canada and South Africa and New Zealand and Australia. They were born non-pioneers. (314)

We learn that while Englishness, or Britishness—the categories are flexible—may be compromised in the case of those who stayed at home, it is highly valued in the adventurousness of those who voyaged abroad, as displayed in a catalogue of places not merely explored but 'founded' by Britain. The further concession that Pommies were "gallant in wartime" links the colonial Australian subject to a much longer British imperial history of founding nations. This was the long past that mattered to White Australia, given the common view that the Indigenous Australians were a fast-dying remnant of pre-history (O'Reilly 1952). In this long-term scenario, as we will see, the 'new chum' is linked to dominant masculine figures through whom Australia inherits the past of English/British foreign ventures, including Eastern involvements dating back to the Crusades and beyond.

Australia's connection to this long past can be understood as constructed, in terms Cheryl Harris has used, by the interaction of two key factors, whiteness and property: whiteness (made manifest in

[4] See Moses 2019. "In [Tarrant's] own mind—preventative self-defence … [is] not … aggression but, as he writes, 'a partisan action against an occupying force.'" Moses notes that Tarrant ignores his own status as a white Settler benefiting from genocide against Indigenous Australians.

the right to exclude and the construction of different racial formations) and property (viewed as an atemporal or transtemporal right) are deeply entangled with each other, morphing, but continually revolving around each other (1993, 1714). 'Whiteness' *is* a fundamental property. 'Race' itself is a multi-centred matter, involving "religion, descent, custom, law, language, monstrosity, geographical origin, and species" and physiology. It includes skin colour but is not limited to it (Cohen 2013, 111). To take the white medieval Christian body as normative in this way operates like the modern idea of whiteness by locating 'race' in othered bodies, leaving whiteness "unmarked," thus masking its epistemological and structural power, yet making it all the more privileged for that (Cohen 2001, 116). As Geraldine Heng writes,

> [r]ace makes an appearance in the late Middle Ages not only through fantasmatic blacks, historical Jews and the collections of hybrid humans pressing on the edges of civilization, but can also be found at the centre of things, in the creation of that strange creature who is nowhere, yet everywhere, in cultural discourse: the white Christian European. (2007, 265)

In Australian eyes that Christian European, the medieval forerunner of themselves, was White and British. A pressing question is: how might such a narrow historical and cultural inheritance respond to Jonathan Hsy's proposition, cited above, to read medieval literature, including *The Canterbury Tales*, "in a pursuit of racial justice" and "to address past and ongoing harms of racism and related oppressions?" (2021, 2, 3). In what follows, I consider that question in the context of the contemporary British *Refugee Tales* publication project and its associated annual Walk, beginning with special reference to the *Man of Law's Tale*.

The *Man of Law's Tale*: A Medieval Refugee Story

More than one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* take their readers in and out of regions that bring the experience of modern refugees strongly to mind. As Candace Barrington remarks, Chaucer "sets his stories and peoples them with characters beyond the usual western European spheres." He "recognizes a much broader world [than England], reaching across Europe, around the Mediterranean Sea, into Africa, the Levant, and Asia" (2019, 1). The *Squire's Tale*, for example, immediately takes us east to "Sarray, in the land of Tartarye" [Mongolia] (l. 9) and a great king "Cambyuskan" [Genghis Khan] (l. 12) who wages war on "Russye" (l. 10), now Southern Russia. "Sarray" is identified with 'Sarai,' "the capital of Tartary" on the Volga, which Marco Polo visited (Gray 2003, 428). In the *Squire's Tale* (ll. 9; 46), it is the capital of Tartary, a region Chaucer never visited but has no trouble imagining as a setting for his Englished stories of far-away travels.

When Chaucer takes his readers to Syria in the beginning of the *Man of Law's Tale*, the narrator opens his tale about an unfortunate refugee, Cunstaunce, by referring to the "hateful harm" (l. 99) of poverty in general rather than to refugee status in itself. Judging from his description in the *General Prologue*, this narrating lawyer's motivation is money, thus placing Constance within the wider context exploring how and where money is made. Because Constance's exile is triggered by the merchants' action, her status as a refugee is implicitly compared to the merchants' actions that "[evoke] a roll of dice [and suggest that] merchants themselves are 'high rollers,' engaging in risky but potentially very profitable business ventures overseas" (Hsy 2013, 67). Both the refugee and the merchant travel the

seas to find better opportunities. Moreover, the story content and the thematic emphases of the tale give it a wider scope still, bringing the condition of historical and contemporary refugees strongly to mind, and underline Hsy's further point that in the *Man of Law's Tale* "narrative is, quite literally, the most precious resource that merchants transport," just as their tidings will transport Custaunce as a precious commodity far to the East (2013, 68).

Like many a modern refugee, the tale's heroine Custaunce is torn from her family by political developments and consequently subject to religious persecution. Literally cast adrift, she goes wherever the seas may take her, both within and beyond the Mediterranean:

> Forth gooth hir ship thurghout the narwe mouth
> Of Jubaltare [Gibraltar] and Septe [Morocco], dryvynge ay
> Somtyme west, and somtyme north and south,
> And somtyme est, ful many a wery day. (2.946–49)[5]

Again, like modern refugees, she is shunted from one place to another: Syria (134–322), Northumberland (508), and an unknown "heathen" castle (904–6) whose lord, Alla, marries her and adopts her religion. When Alla travels abroad, Custaunce is put to sea again by his "heathen" mother, who is angered at the royal change of faith and tells Alla that his wife is dead. Custaunce, who has been led to believe that Alla has turned against her, is returned by a chance rescue to Rome (967–76). Alla eventually finds her there, learns the truth, reunites her with their son, and identifies her to her imperial birth family (1002–13).

Custaunce, true to her husband, then reaffirms her new status as an immigrant refugee in Rome by returning with him and their son to their Northumbrian kingdom—now identified as "England" (1128–31). She only finally settles in Rome with her birth family after Alla's death (1142–58). For all its noted tendencies towards hagiography, the *Man of Law's Tale* strongly recalls many modern refugee stories in its emphasis on how religious difference, especially in the case of cross-faith marriage, marks the course of the story. In particular, its preoccupations closely match those of an organisation working with contemporary refugees in the UK, the *Refugee Tales* project, to which I now turn.

The *Refugee Tales*

Refugee Tales is the name of an annual publication series, initiated in 2015, with its first edition in 2016 and continuing to the present. Its successive volumes draw attention to developments in the plight of refugees detained indefinitely under the British government's policies. Each volume gives information about the refugees' plight and agitates against their conditions. The publication project adopts the Chaucerian concept of tale-telling to describe its operations, but in another respect *Refugee Tales* sharply distinguishes itself from many collections of 'tales' by making a strong truth claim for its contents. The truth of the experiences and reported consciousness of each anonymous or pseudonymised tale teller is shown as centrally important. The action of 'telling' the Tale belongs to the refugees themselves or to a person with some direct role in their treatment (such as "The Lorry Driver's Tale"

[5] All references to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, edited by Larry D. Benson (Houghlin Mifflin, 1987) and indicated by fragment and line number.

or "The Interpreter's Tale").[6] The named hearers of the Tales, those it is 'told to,' also claim to be representing their true experience of listening, even when the process of obtaining the account is complex.[7] Together these factors form the basis of a further moral claim on the books' readers: the Tales urge readers to respond to a true, evident, and active emergency.

In addition, the real experience and consciousness of the disguised tale tellers in the *Refugee Tales* project are presented as of absolute significance for their named hearers and recorders, except in the case of apologists for government policy. Were readers to learn that the Tales' content was false, the case would be reminiscent of past literary scandals where audiences felt that their sympathies had been falsely evoked by fiction in the appearance of literal truth.[8] Nevertheless, the project that has produced *Refugee Tales* each year since 2016 has had Chaucer, a maker of 'tales' of uncertain truth, centrally in mind from the beginning, both as a popular link to local English culture and as a model and framework for extending English sympathies beyond the local.

It can be seen that Chaucer's relation to *Refugee Tales* is not entirely straightforward. As a founding co-ordinator of *Refugee Tales*, the "poet, critic and teacher" (2016, 146), David Herd explains what he hoped to achieve by making him so prominent in the project. First, there was an obvious resemblance between the two projects: "a culturally charged sense of space, the visible fact of human movement, and an exchange of information through the act of telling stories" (2016, 133). In line with this resemblance, the event that inaugurated the *Refugee Tales* project was a nine-day "Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees (from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury)," 13–21 June 2015 (133). At stops on the way the group listened to "the tale of an asylum seeker, former immigration detainee or refugee" and the tale of a person "who works with people seeking asylum in the UK" and who relayed their stories (133). The overarching purpose of this project was to call for an immediate end to indefinite immigration detention in the UK.

The parallels with *Canterbury Tales* are clear. One practical difference is that Chaucer's fourteenth-century pilgrims can somehow literally converse and share stories while all riding in a large group on horseback, so have less need than the moderns to stop on the way. Another difference is the 'public' telling of the modern Tales on the Walk; other listeners than the main walking group are anticipated, while in Chaucer's frame fiction the pilgrims speak to and within their own group, with only occasional interruptions from outside it, for instance from the Canon's Yeoman. Despite these differences, a vital connecting feature is that the *Refugee Tales* and their tellers 'talk to' each other, just as Chaucer's pilgrims do, both literally on the Walk and through the multiple recurring incidents and thematic emphases in their presentations. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Chaucerian and modern stories, along with incidents from other historical eras, also puts the *Refugee Tales* and *The Canterbury Tales* in dynamic conversation with each other.

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the project, as Herd explains, tensions were perceived between invoking *The Canterbury Tales* in a Kent-centred version of national Englishness and the

[6] Each title in the books of Tales is recorded in exactly the same format, for example, "The Migrant's Tale as told to Dragan Todorovic" (Herd and Pincus 2016, 1).

[7] The third footnote to "The Unaccompanied Minor's Tale" in *Refugee Tales* describes it as "generated from a series of improvisation, story-telling and character-generation workshops with a group of unaccompanied minors living in Canterbury" (2016, 24). The problems of dealing with the trauma of children—the major informant in this Tale is eight years old—seem to lie behind the use of this method.

[8] See e.g., Freeman 2020.

evident need for a wider context in which to understand the experience of an "asylum seeker, former immigration detainee or refugee" in the Britain of 2015 and since (Herd 2016, 133).[9] Reference to Chaucer risked obscuring, rather than revealing, the plight of detainees:

> It is in these spaces as much as any—Kent, Surrey, Sussex—and in the idiom of these spaces, that the language of national identity forms and perpetuates, functioning as it does to hold the migrant out of view. (Herd 2016, 138)[10]

There seems to have been a strategic trade-off made in the decision to invoke the name of Chaucer and a version of *The Canterbury Tales* in the structure of the *Refugee Tales* and in its main presentation to the public. The familiarity of Chaucer in his supposed guise of 'father of English poetry' in Dryden's phrase, and his association with a revered but still living British cultural inheritance, perhaps also reflected Herd's own inclination as a professor of English literature.

Having initiated the 'English Chaucer' strategy, with its centring on Canterbury, Herd immediately makes it even clearer that he has a wider aim. In the refugee crisis, "national identity" is inadequate "as a way of orienting ourselves to space" (2016, 138). The *Refugee Tales* and the Walk stage, instead, "the crossing of a deeply national space by people whom the nation has organised itself in order precisely that they may be kept from view" (2016, 138). Herd welcomes here the instructive clash between a cosy domestic cult of Chaucer and the grim national and international context of the Walk. He also reveals that there are other kind of events in which the refugees, who can mainly have known little or nothing of Chaucer, participate directly. These include "a dramatic representation of 'The Ex-Detainee's Tale', in which people previously detained took the metamorphosis of Kafka's Gregor Samsa as a starting point for depicting the effect of detention on an individual life" (2016, 142).

Herd points here to structural ironies in using a walk to publicise the condition of UK refugees. One is that lack of access to public transport means that "many former detainees would already have to walk for long distances just to make the report … to a Home Office Recruiting Centre" (2016, 136). Another, deeper irony is that "[t]he more general effect [of restriction on public transport] … is to fix a person in a given location, often for months and years on end (over a decade is not at all uncommon)." In all, Herd argues, "refugees have a deeply compromised relation to public space" (2016, 136). The "Walk in Solidarity with Refugees" of 2015 was therefore both a response to their plight and an acknowledgment of the free status they lacked, even if they were able to join the walk.[11]

For all the ironies, Herd remarks that the Walk itself, despite the terrible stories told, carried feelings of "ease" and "relief" at being "out and about," "a way of being in space that for some hadn't been available for several years." "[P]eople whose rights of residence were not under scrutiny" could wander at will without endangering "the sovereign actions of the individual citizen," a sly reference to the indefinite time period allowed for holding those in immigration detention (2016, 139). Another

[9] For the sake of brevity, I mainly use the term 'refugee,' while remaining aware of Herd's original distinction between these three categories.

[10] To be 'held from view' has been a literal reality for refugees in England, both those incarcerated and others who can be at any time suddenly transported several hundred kilometres away from their current place of residence and made dependent on vouchers that give no access to public transport.

[11] See, for example, Gurnah's "The Arriver's Tale": "I am not allowed to work. I have now been here for eight years. I have no choice but to live where I am told to live and wait for the next hearing to allow my application to be considered. Do you know what limbo means? It means the edge of hell" (2016, 39).

strong positive was that the refugee narrators "said that it was a relief that the tales were being told" and "the account was being passed on" so that the story "now belongs, also, to other people." These tales "need to be told and re-told so that the situation they emerge from might be collectively addressed" (2016, 142). Unlike those actually on the walk, readers of *Refugee Tales* cannot experience the "relief" of the tale-telling. To the reading audience, the tales are grim, shocking, sometimes bizarre, but together they convince us, as part of a "wider audience," of "the [then largely ignored] scandalous reality of detention and post-detention existence" and "demand that such detention ends" (2016, 143). They carry out the informative and provocative work Herd wanted them to do.

More broadly, and in a way that suits my own interest in the appropriation of Chaucer, Herd insists that *Refugee Tales* must "question any aspect of mediation, including its own"; the anonymity of the refugee experience 'as told to' another must not become "a shaping conceit" (2016, 142–3). That means, in my understanding, that the Tales matter to Herd and the other writers because they communicate the lived experience of real, but otherwise hidden people. With that in mind, I turn now to an analysis of a selection of the Tales themselves, with an emphasis on those that engage with the *Man of Law's Tale*, asking how does this involvement with Chaucer play out in the *Refugee Tales* stories as the recording listeners—'the told to'—recount the experience of their informants?[12]

***Refugee Tales,* 2016 and beyond**

Like *The Canterbury Tales*, *Refugee Tales* (2016) has a poetic 'Prologue.' Locating the audience in Shepherdswell, six miles north-west of Dover, David Herd offers it to the group as it sets out on its walk on 13 June 2015. He wants to "set the tone" of the present event—"welcoming," "celebratory," "courteous," "real" (2016, x) and to interpolate commentary on how the "real story" (2016, ix) of injustice towards asylum seekers has been hidden from public view. He reminds us that the England of Chaucer's time, as in later times, exploited distant regions for its own purpose. What comes "out of Southwark" provides "a whole new language / Of travel and assembly and curiosity / And welcome" (2016, viii). The far-flung geographical locations encountered in *The Canterbury Tales* take both hearers and readers well beyond the confines of Kent. Herd uses Chaucer to evoke a wider and more troubling world of "pilgrims [crusaders / combatants] crossing / Palatye and Turkye and Ruce / Across the Grete See / Which is the Mediterranean" (2016, viii). We are reminded that the England of Chaucer's time, as in later times, militarily exploited distant regions for its own purposes. The lord of "Palatye" is mentioned in the *General Prologue* as a ruler for whom Chaucer's Knight has fought "[a]gayn another hethen in Turkye" (1.66–7).[13]

Herd's marking of the Dover region as his starting point both for the Walk and the Tales brings out its double significance as an English 'home' locality and as a site of traumatic contemporary cross-cultural displacement. For the most part, Herd's Dover-London route reverses Chaucer's broad pilgrimage direction, from Southwark (now inner London) to Canterbury. Writing in "December 2015," he can already look back on events that occurred in the period after the walk in July that year: the many thousands of refugees "walking through Hungary towards Germany and other parts of

[12] As I note below, explicit reference to Chaucer in the 'stories' largely died out after *Refugee Tales II*, 2017.

[13] See Gray 2003, 361. In the fourteenth century, "Palatye" was an independent emirate located on what is now the southwestern coast of Turkey.

Northern Europe" introduce "a notably different tone and, temporarily at least, the makings of a different discourse" (2016, 143). Shocking revelations about "the recently closed Dover Immigration Removal Centre" add to the mix (135). The myth of fortress England was busted at Dover, but in reaction the xenophobic symbolic appeal of the white cliffs found a new champion in government agency policies.

The *Refugee Tales* that follow in Book I negotiate a link with Chaucer in various ways and with varied intensity. In "The Migrant's Tale, as told to Dragan Todorovic," excerpts and plot description from the *Man of Law's Tale*, "as retold by the author" (note 1, 12), are interspersed throughout the testimony of "Aziz." We are fully aware that the Chaucerian parallels are the writer's work, not the teller's. In relation to Aziz's testimony of suffering, betrayal, and torture, and especially in contrast to the pained reticence of his account, the rhetorical effect is to challenge the idea that comfort can be afforded to the listener by the Man of Law's happy ending: "[a]nd so, in virtue and in charity they all lived. They were never parted, except by death itself" (12). The story of the refugee experience immediately responds: "Aziz's story hasn't come to an end." He remains parted from his family members, deeply anxious about their future. Todorovic points to the danger that the Chaucerian literary parallel may weaken an audience's connection with the refugee's actual experience (12). Several other authors of powerful entries in the 2016 volume, such as Michael Zanda in "The Chaplain's Tale" and Innua Ellams in "The Unaccompanied Minor's Tale," make no specific reference to Chaucer. Ali Smith's "The Detainee's Tale," which is perhaps the most attentive of all the entries to the encounter of the free writer with the refugee's witness, sees no need to refer to it specifically, nor does Herd's "Appellant's Tale." The repeated citation of cross-religious marriages as a cause of flight from a home country strongly recalls the events of the *Man of Law's Tale*, but references to scripture, liturgy, and private prayer are far more frequent than to Chaucer.[14]

By contrast, the intense concentration on the refugee's language by Herd, and by Carol Watts in the "Interpreter's Tale," mirrors the processes of both scriptural exegesis and close literary criticism, while evoking the hostility of an interviewer determined to trap the refugee:

> I say brother. That is, uncle.
> *So it was not her brother that helped her?*
> *Her story isn't stacking up.*
> I say brother, meaning the brother of my father.
> My uncle gave me money to leave.
> My uncle sent me money to leave.
> One word weighed, along with another.
> Know that the *c* in your word uncle sounds like the *k* in
> our maternal brother, *ako*. (65)

Watts's scene poignantly models here two versions of listening to speech: one intimate, culturally attuned to the moment of communication, and alive to the slippages in actual language use—one might say 'literary'; the other hostile, driven only to find deviation and inconsistency according to a fixed external agenda. Herd makes the same contrast. At Brook House Immigration Removal Centre,

[14] In her poem "Sharps an Flats" from *Telling Tales* (2014, 81–2), Patience Agbabi retells the *Prioress's Tale* in terms of the racially motivated killing of a seven-year-old southeast London boy in 2000.

Gatwick Airport, an immigration official makes demands of the (wrongly supposed) refugee. Herd senses the traps in this language that wants to convict, not understand, and will exploit every possible ambiguity to do so. 'Stay,' for example, might mean 'live somewhere temporarily' or 'live permanently.'

> '… You have to tell me what you want to do. You had enough? You want to leave the country? Or you want to stay?' …
>
> I write 'stay,' as you say STAY, and this should be the end of the story. Only the ambiguities run deep and the language wants to have it both ways.
>
> 'Good,' he says, 'STAY.' And then he showed you the document. And then he says: 'Do you have any evidence of what you have been doing all these years?'
>
> Prove it.
>
> This is where the real becomes deeply disturbing: the administrative surreal in ways only Kafka could tell. (74–5)[15]

The strongest direct reference to Chaucer in *Refugee Tales I*, again invoking the *Man of Law's Tale*, comes in "The Lawyer's Tale as told to Stephen Collis," himself a refugee lawyer. Collis recognises but distrusts his Chaucerian counterpart, suspecting him as an exploiter of the displaced and vulnerable in any age: "The Man of Law remains *terra nullius*, a spurious empty zone to claim, desire stretching its hands out towards the unclaimed land of claimants from their own lands torn" (108).[16] Collis's essay models a struggle, apparently against the grain of historical evidence and contemporary world capitalist control, to maintain a standard of truth in the pursuit of justice in particular cases:

> If we blame everyone, we blame no one
> we give the guilty
> —free passage—
> and we bear burden we did not bring on ourselves (2016, 109).

To Collis, "justice is a world without hunters and without quarry, a world where fires are not lit and shots are not fired and 'the world is its own refuge'" (2016, 112). The *Man of Law's Tale* seems so caught up in this vast history that it can offer no clear guidance, but Collis asserts that in the scale of lawyer/client relations, smaller truths can and must be asserted.

The difficulty for Collis is to maintain that perspective in the consciousness of the West's role in "turn[ing] the migrant crisis into a humanitarian disaster."[17] Like Watts, Collis remains self-questioning, keenly aware of his safe position in the process as a white Westerner, and his unavoidable structural complicity in the long Western exploitation of locations like Syria, a main site in the *Man of Law's Tale* and also the source of "the largest group of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean

[15] Within "The Appellant's Tale," "Kafka, not Chaucer" (80) is the spontaneous association made with the condition of being a detainee. See also Herd 2016, 75 and 80.

[16] For resonance 'terra nullius' [nobody's land] has for Australian refugees regarding the Blackburn judgement of 1971, see Haughton 2002: "Justice Blackburn was not satisfied on the facts that the claimants had demonstrated uninterrupted possession since 1788. Furthermore, in line with the weight of international precedent, he did not find that Yolgnu relationships to the land were equivalent to property rights" (8).

[17] See Kaplan 2014, quoted in Collis, 113–14.

Sea in 2014" (118). Collis points here to what Hsy calls "the unequal conditions of mobility across national borders and geographies, as well as the culturally fraught meanings of 'return' when a destination or desired place of return is inaccessible" (2021, 116). In this connection Hsy's citation of Yen Le Espiritu seems highly apposite: the "stateless" refugee "radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state" and the "idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it" (130).[18]

As the *Refugee Tales* print series progressed after 2016, direct Chaucerian references diminish but the imaginative connections remain. In Volume II (2017), "The Walker's Tale, as told to Ian Duhig" states, "this is no easy Chaucerian ride or stroll," framing the Walk itself as an event far removed from the lived experience of the refugee tellers (Duhig 2017, 31). "The Walker's Tale" seems planned as a deliberate restoration of its story to its chief "mental and physical landscape," the Sahel, a "realm of transition between the Sahara to the north and the Sudanian savannah to the south" (Wikipedia, "Sahel" 2023) on which many refugees seeking escape to Europe were currently dying. This mental and physical landscape matters the most in these tellers' experiences. Ironically, in a way we have seen before, in rejecting the insular 'English' Chaucer, Duhig's comment opens up connections with the wider Eastern world in which the *Man of Law's Tale* engages readers.

Explicit reference to *The Canterbury Tales* disappears in the Prologue and Tales of *Refugee Tales IV* (2021). By contrast, the Walk is emphasised in Herd's 'Afterword' to the volume, where it is valued as one of many programmes putting political pressure on the British government to end indefinite detention; for that reason, the Walk must be maintained. The situation has changed greatly from 2016, when Herd noted the lack of community awareness of government "power to detain people indefinitely under immigration rules" (2019, 194).[19] Looking back, he sees great benefit arising from the Walk in "the formation of a community" "as people who had experienced detention walked with people who hadn't," and with a wider "general public" taking active part (2019, 184–5). The basic Chaucerian human and oral dimension of the Walk has been felt as a relief from the organisers' seemingly endless preoccupation with written documents. The Walk and the Chaucerian tale telling remains essential to that aim. Herd concludes the volume: "[A]s the project walks, so in walking, it looks to reclaim the ground. The ground is solidarity, to which the sharing of stories is crucial. The walk continues. Detention must end" (2021, 152). Herd's metaphors artfully link the walk with the wider cause. 'Walking' hints at 'to walk free,' to win the case, be released from imprisonment. The 'ground' which the walk covers is connected to its political 'ground'—'underlying reason.' 'Detention,' the denial of walking free, is in this guise the denial of freedom of movement to those with refugee status, both within the English community under current rules and across the international spaces that *Refugee Tales* invokes. A poetic, one might even say a 'Chaucerian,' understanding of the project remains vital to its political aims.

In its broad outlines and the presentation of its aims, the Walk format seems to have remained fairly similar down to the present day. What changes each year is the new legal and political context. For 2023, introducing the Walk theme 'Voices,' Herd lists the opportunity to build on the

[18] Hsy is citing Espiritu 2014, 10.
[19] See also Herd 2016, 143.

parliamentary launch of the Walking Inquiry (into Immigration Detention).[20] This initiative has a complex political context. It complements the Brook House Inquiry, "a public inquiry into the mistreatment of individuals who were detained at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre in 2017," based on a BBC Panorama programme of 4 September 2017. Herd highlights also how "*the approaching general election focuses the Refugee Tales community on the urgent need for policy change*" (Eventbrite 2023; original emphasis). Current and future political developments seem to dominate his attention.

Afterword: Back to Australia

A recent development, from February 2023, allows many of those refugees who had the opportunity to arrive in Australia *by air* to apply for a new visa class, the Resolution of Status (RoS) 851 visa (Ghezelbash 2023). The potential benefits it offers include permission to live, work and study in Australia permanently, and opportunities to receive Services Australia and Medicare benefits, some counselling for torture and trauma, possible Australian citizenship, and free English language classes. In stark contrast, no comparable provisions exist for refugees who have arrived *by boat*. Under the provisions of Operation Sovereign Borders, their oppression continues with indefinite mandatory detention offshore, third country resettlement, maritime turnbacks of asylum seeker vessels, and Temporary Protection Visas for new arrivals. Contracts for offshore processing have been renewed since the Albanese government came to power (HRLC 2022). The abusive contrast remains stark. The urgency for action continues.

Recent developments indicate a deteriorating climate for refugees by boat to Australia, given the continuing effects of mandatory detention. Offshore processing continues, despite the evidence of asylum seekers facing extremely poor conditions in the detention centres, including being victim to sexual and physical assaults and receiving poor medical treatment. Meanwhile net migration of all kinds to Australia has fallen in recent years due to Covid and economic pressures. In this stagnant situation is there any hope of a public change of heart towards boat arrivals?

Such a hope might perhaps lie in the fast-changing mix of peoples and nationalities that make up contemporary Australia. In 2019, immigrants "accounted for 30% of the population" (Wikipedia, "Foreign-Born" 2023). The 2021 census showed 48% of Australians had one parent born overseas, from a great variety of countries, with India and China prominent. Mandarin is the second language of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). One only needs to enter a space like a large metropolitan hospital or a computer firm to be struck by the friendly co-existence there of workers from a broad range of national and ethnic backgrounds. Amidst such groups, and perhaps especially amidst their children, we can hope that new versions of Australianness may arise that tell new stories of our identity, an identity no longer defined by the vile treatment of those branded as permanent outsiders. In the best tradition of *The Canterbury Tales*, this new version of Australianness will gather together who we really are.

[20] See https://www.refugeetales.org/walking-inquiry. The Brooke House Inquiry, which reported on 6 April 2022, heard and saw evidence of appalling treatment of refugees. See https://brookhouseinquiry.org.uk/. "The inquiry hearings revealed the horrific scale of institutional racism in Brook House. Many of the detained people who gave evidence spoke of the unspeakably violent, direct and visceral racism they received" (Bail for Immigration Detainees website, 9 May 2022. https://www.biduk.org/articles/evidence-from-the-first-ever-public-inquiry-into-immigration-detention).

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