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Locked in and locked out: A migrant woman's reflection on life in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic

By Olivera Simic¹

Abstract

In this paper I offer personal reflections on life in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. I reflect on what it means for a migrant woman with a complex traumatic past to be indefinitely stranded. I also draw on experiences of other migrant women living in Australia during the pandemic. The reflection brings attention to personal narratives that contribute to the growing importance of women's herstories. With this narrative, I want to pay tribute to migrant women's lives and by using my own experiences as a case study to reflect on personal struggles that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered. The issues of trauma, forcible separation and economic migration will be explored.

Keywords: COVID-19, migration, separation, borders, trauma, women migrants, Australia

Trauma Trails

"How are you?", she asked. My lower lip began to quiver, face contorted, and the tears started rolling down my cheeks. "I am sorry I disturbed you", she said looking genuinely empathetic once she realised that her light-hearted question had turned my face into a grimace of pain. I looked her in the eye and mumbled childishly, "I wish more people would disturb me". I then apologised for my tears. I hoped more of my Australian friends and colleagues would ask me how I felt knowing that I have been cut off from my elderly parents for a long time now. The lack of empathy for families separated by the government ban on crossing international borders was common among Australian citizens.² In the midst of such prevalent indifference for migrants separated from their parents, children and/or partners, seeing someone genuinely empathetic and interested in my wellbeing was an emotional trigger.

This exchange across an oval office table between myself and my female boss happened on a morning I felt I could not stand the mental pain of being separated from my parents and partner who live overseas anymore. I had started to feel physically sick from missing them and a few months into the pandemic I was diagnosed with facial paralysis. My body was not coping with

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² Rhianna Mitchell, 'Where is the empathy for Aussies stranded overseas amid COVID-19 pandemic?', *The West Australian* (online, 27 May 2021) <https://thewest.com.au/opinion/rhianna-mitchell-where-is-the-empathy-for-aussies-stranded-overseas-amid-covid-19-pandemic-ng-b881883288z>; Adam Thorn, 'PM "blames" Aussies abroad for struggle to return home', *Australian Aviation* (online, 26 August 2020) <https://australianaviation.com.au/2020/08/pm-blames-aussies-abroad-for-struggle-to-return-home/>.

my mental pain. After many years of being free from panic attacks, I started to experience them again. They were produced from a concern for the well-being of my loved ones and the fact that I am prohibited from traveling overseas to see them.

I have never been forcibly separated from my family for this long: more than two years now. Never. Not even during the Bosnian war which made me a refugee. I was 19, living with my parents and brother, when the war started in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia). I had just enrolled in the Law School in my hometown of Banjaluka, but instead of embarking on a once in a lifetime student journey, I experienced life-changing war and mayhem. I watched in disbelief as my country of origin, Yugoslavia, dissolved before my eyes. I was scared and could not fully comprehend what was going on. I witnessed my brother and our childhood friends being drafted into the war. Some were killed as soon as they were recruited. They were in their early 20s and had no experience in handling weapons let alone in waging war. Any war for that matter, let alone the war against their own peers who happened to have different ethnicity from theirs. Most of them had not been aware of their peers different ethnic belonging while growing up together. Yet, overnight, they had to learn and somehow convince themselves that their childhood friends were now supposed to be their fierce enemies.

Some of my friends left the city overnight to save their lives and I never saw them again.³ Before we could come to our senses and understood what was going on, my brother, 22 at the time, was drafted. I too was called to pick up my uniform and register with the territorial defence unit. The next day I went with my dad and picked up my black leather boots and dark blue uniform. I was 19 at the time. This call was a cold shower for my parents who had already bid farewell to their son to the frontline not knowing whether and when they would see him alive again. Still, we convinced ourselves the war would be over soon. My family, like many others in Bosnia were in denial and ignored the reality. Their wishful thinking predominated: “the war would last for a few weeks, and we would all go back to normal”.⁴ A few days after collecting the uniform, my parents sat me down at the kitchen table and told me that I must leave the country. This would be the first time I was forcibly separated from them and travelled alone not knowing exactly where to. I was forced to flee.

My destination was to be Niš, the city at the south of Serbia on the border with Kosovo, which would experience a heavy bombarding by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces a few years later. It was 800 kilometres away from my home in Bosnia and by that point it was the furthest I had ever travelled. I was scared to be alone and far from my family. I remember that I cried a lot during those years of forced separation from everything and everyone I knew and loved. My carefree family sheltered life was over with no fault of mine. I cried for losing the ground under my feet, not knowing what will happen from one day to the next. I lived in Niš through the 1999 NATO bombing which went on for three months.⁵ The pull to see my parents

³ I write about these experiences in my memoir: Olivera Simić, *Surviving Peace: A Political Memoir* (Spinifex Press, 2014).

⁴ This thinking is similar to the thinking some people had with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic: most people globally could not imagine that the pandemic would last for this long and that they would be isolated and confined to their homes due to enforcement of strict public health laws. See also: Renata Salecl, *A Passion for Ignorance: What We Choose Not to Know and Why* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 34; Renata Salecl, ‘Denial and ignorance in the time of a pandemic’, *Birkbeck Perspectives*, (Blog Post, 4 November 2020) <http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/bbkcomments/2020/11/04/denials-and-ignorance-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic/>.

⁵ The NATO carried out an aerial bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War. The air strikes lasted from 24 March 1999 to 10 June 1999.

was so strong that I would go back and visit my family in Bosnia even during this time. The travelling was life-threatening, but I did so.⁶

After the NATO bombing was over, in 2001 I travelled to the USA for the first time. This was my first trip overseas. I was one of the five young women activists from Eastern Europe who received the legal fellowship from the Network of East-West Women.⁷ I was fully funded to live and work for six months with one of the leading human rights organisations, Human Rights Watch. I resided in Washington DC when the twin towers were bombed. I watched the Pentagon office bombed from my office window.⁸ In a span of only two years I experienced two aerial bombing campaigns in opposite parts of the world. The first was euphemistically called a “humanitarian intervention”,⁹ the second was more straightforwardly labelled a “terrorist bombing”. Despite the difference in their aims, to me the fear and shock I experienced were the same. They were terrifying, traumatic experiences regardless of their intentions. I could have become “collateral damage”¹⁰ of these targeted killings from the sky each time, but I somehow survived both. During those years I was not aware of the serious and compounding, non-linear and non-visual trauma that slowly but inevitably had been affecting the geographies of my body and mind. I had no time to detect it in my constant run to survive. Such trauma is less talked about and perhaps less well understood. It is endemic and structural, not experienced “as a ‘separate’ effect of personhood but is productive of subjectivity”.¹¹

The first flashbacks and panic attacks I experienced started during my time in the USA. All accumulated traumatic experiences buried inside my body and mind for the past years started to manifest themselves. The trigger was activated by the September 11 twin towers bombing. Still, I was yet to suffer the full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms that I would experience three years later, in 2004 in Costa Rica during my master studies in gender and peace building. I ended up in the San Jose hospital and one of its leading psychiatrists who treated me while I was there gave me the diagnosis of PTSD. I returned to Bosnia with my master’s degree but 10 kilos lighter, packed with tranquilizers and referral to undergo cognitive behavioural

⁶ The NATO forces made many ‘mistakes’ during their bombing campaign which saw trains, hospitals and marketplaces crowded with people bombed. See for example: Richard Norton-Taylor, ‘NATO cluster bombs ‘kill 15’ in hospital and crowded market’, *The Guardian* (online, 8 May 1999) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/may/08/balkans>; Michael Dobbs, ‘NATO missile hits train, kills at least 10’, *The Washington Post* (online, 13 April 1999) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/belgrade041399.htm>.

⁷ The Network of East-West Women (NEWW) Legal Fellowship Program was established to strengthen the capacity of women lawyers at the beginning of their careers, and women's organizations throughout CEE/NIS, to advocate more effectively for women's human rights on the local, national, regional and international levels. Founded in 1991, the NEWW strengthens the capacity of women activists and women's NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe, the Newly Independent States and the Russian Federation (CEE/NIS) to raise awareness of gender issues and influence public policy affecting women's lives.

⁸ I was placed as a legal fellow in the Human Rights Watch office. See: ‘A 9/11 Reflection: The Pentagon in Photos’, *US Department of Defense* (Web Page, 11 September 2019) <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Features/story/Article/1939053/a-911-reflection-the-pentagon-in-photos/>.

⁹ Laura Wise, ‘Was NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 “Just”’, *E-International Relations* (Web Page, 21 June 2013) <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/21/was-natos-intervention-in-kosovo-in-1999-just/>.

¹⁰ Collateral damage is defined in terms of armed conflict as unavoidable or accidental killing or injury of non-combatants, or unavoidable or accidental destruction of non-combatant property caused by attacks on legitimate military targets.

¹¹ Karen Crawley and Honni van Rijswijk, ‘Justice in the Gutter: Representing Everyday Trauma in the Graphic Novels of Art Spiegelman’ (2012) 16 *Law Text Culture* 93, 97.

therapy.¹² I felt as if I had been run over by a train: my mind and my body was now recognised as being “officially” damaged.

20 years later I am an academic, living and working in Australia, scheduling a meeting with my boss to inquire whether it is possible to take a leave from my work so I can go to see my parents overseas. I came to the meeting knowing that I could not travel anywhere across Australian international borders without exemption approved by the government.¹³ Still, in my desperation, and ridden with the feelings of disbelief and guilt of not being able to be close to my parents in these precarious times, I felt an urge to do something, or at least to inquire whether something could be done.

During and after the war in Bosnia I was ‘locked in’ within the borders of the former Yugoslavia for many years. Although I could cross the borders of ex-Yugoslavia with a valid visa, I was not allowed to start a new life in the countries I was visiting, studying or temporarily working in. My nationality had become a millstone around my neck. My (Bosnian) government was letting me go but the other nation states would not allow me in. Two decades later I found myself in an opposite life scenario: my (now Australian) government does not allow me out while other nations states would allow me in. I am ‘locked out’ from the rest of the world.

Once I returned from Costa Rica, I was desperately trying to find a job and settle. I could not. I was jobless for a year and was looking for opportunities to leave the country again. At an academic conference on reconciliation in Sarajevo, I met some Bosnian Australians who suggested I should try to enrol in a doctoral program in Australia which would allow me to stay there for at least three years.

In October 2006, and after many years of struggling to migrate from Bosnia to any developed nation, I landed in Australia. As a migrant, non-English speaking woman from Eastern European decent, I earned scholarship at one of the most prestigious universities in the world and found myself in Melbourne. I had no plan or even desire to become an academic and do all the higher education studies that I did. The enrolment in international masters and doctorate programs were my attempts to get a ticket to migrate to a more stable country. Far from dreaming of becoming a well-established academic, I was simply trying to survive by obtaining temporary jobs or scholarships and moving from one rental property to another across different continents. My success in academia has been deserved, but utterly accidental and unintentional.

I finished my doctorate degree within the deadlines, started a family and landed myself an academic job. I got citizenship and travelled the world excelling in my career. In a span of a few years my life had turned around, but this time in a positive way. I enjoyed and made the most of the freedom of movement that my new citizenship and passport guaranteed me. I knew well that this is not something to take for granted after being deprived of such freedom for many years. I remember my joy the day in 2012 when I received my Australian passport: after 20 years of being holder of the Bosnian passport, with which I required a visa to enter almost any country in the world, I finally held the passport that could open any door with no hassle.

¹² Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a form of psychological treatment that has been demonstrated to be effective for a range of problems including depression, anxiety disorders and other mental illnesses. See: American Psychological Association, ‘What is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?’, *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* (Web Page, July 2017) <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral>; ‘Cognitive Behaviour Therapy’, *Health Direct* (Web Page, September 2019) <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/cognitive-behaviour-therapy-cbt>.

¹³ ‘COVID-19 and the border: Leaving Australia’, *Australian Government Department of Home Affairs* (Web Page) <https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au/leaving-australia>.

A long-desired freedom of movement and privileged job enabled me to see my family in Bosnia once or twice a year and to do my valuable research into women victims of sexual and other kinds of war violence in Bosnia and beyond. I travelled extensively around the world to do my fieldwork and to share my research data at conferences and seminars. After so long of living locally trying to tap into the global life, I finally became a fully-fledged global citizen. Little did I know that this long-awaited cosmopolitan life would feel and last like a dream: sweet and short.

A Migrant Woman

“I don’t think anywhere is going to feel like home for me. I don’t want anywhere to feel like home. I don’t want to anchor like that.”¹⁴

From a refugee woman, in a span of a few years, I turned into a non-English highly skilled professional woman. My family was proud of me, and I was thankful to Australia for offering me a future I could dream about. Before I came to Australia, I lived for a long time in uncertainty, unable to migrate to Western Europe or the USA despite many attempts to do so. I travelled to many countries in the span of 10 years before I migrated to Australia but could not stay permanently in any of them. None were willing to offer me more than a temporary short-term visa until I landed Down Under.¹⁵ For more than a decade after the war in Bosnia was over, I had been confined within the former Yugoslavian borders and finally I broke through them.

For the past 15 years, I have dedicated my life to writing about women I left behind in my country of origin: women who did not have enough education, who were not fluent in a second language, were tied up with family commitments and for other reasons were not able or interested as much as I was to migrate. I was thrilled that my life turned around and that I finally could enjoy probing and crossing the nation state borders whenever I wanted to. I had been trying for so long to change my life and I felt I had finally succeeded in doing so.

I lived my cosmopolitan life with full force until 19 March 2020 when Australia shut its international borders. Initially, I was feeling fine. I was perhaps finer than most of my friends. It was not the first time that I found myself in an unnatural situation reacting with a total calm which is characteristic for some people diagnosed with complex PTSD.¹⁶ At the time I believed that closure would last for a short time, a few months at the most. However, as the time passed the panic slowly but surely started to creep in. When will I see my parents next? When will I meet my partner again? My state of fear and panic of not knowing when I will see my parents and partner again started to get worse as the COVID-19 pandemic kept unfolding from bad to worse. Although I spent most of my formative life living in extreme uncertainty, not having a steady job or any kind of financial security, the emotional ties with my family were always strong and most important to me. Being cut off from my loved ones indefinitely was a new feeling to bear.

Being diagnosed with PTSD in 2004, I underwent cognitive behavioural therapy and was, for a short time, on medications. I went through a few counselling sessions in a span of several

¹⁴ Nahji Chu cited in Maria Tumarkin, *Axiomatic* (Transit Books, 2018) 140.

¹⁵ The term ‘Down Under’ is a colloquialism which is variously construed to refer to Australia.

¹⁶ Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (complex PTSD, sometimes abbreviated to c-PTSD or CPTSD) is a condition where a person experiences some symptoms of PTSD along with some additional symptoms, such as difficulty in controlling emotions. See: ‘Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (complex PTSD)’, *Mind* (Web Page, January 2021) <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd-and-complex-ptsd/complex-ptsd/>.

years. I was able to manage and control my symptoms well. My life was on track; I was successful in my work and had established a network of friends once in Australia. I, however, have only recently become aware that the majority of my friends are migrants, rather than born and bred Australians. It is well known that migrants (un)intentionally create networks of friends with people from the same or similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds.¹⁷ Still, I started to question why after 15 years of living in Australia, I have formed very few friendships with women from its non-immigrant community.¹⁸ Why was it difficult to establish and sustain strong friendships with born and bred Australians? I do not yet have the answer to this question.

My trauma led my research, and I wrote obsessively and published a lot in a relatively short span of time. I would research and write around the clock not realising that my research and writing was my mental health saviour at the same time as it advanced my academic career. Working long hours offered a safe refuge from a painful past and kept my traumatic memories from haunting me.¹⁹ For a few years, I was relatively fine although under constant pressure to prove myself. As a non-English speaking woman, I had to work double shifts to finish my doctoral thesis and to publish my work in a second language. Writing in a second language has been time consuming but I was compelled to finish my thesis on time or risk losing my scholarship which I could not afford. Even worse than losing my scholarship was the prospect of being forced to leave Australia after my student visa expired. I could not bear being 'returned to where I came from' once again and not being able to stay out of poverty and with no future. I decided this time I did not want to return; there is nothing to return to. The war tore apart the social fabric of my life and I could not see myself living in Bosnia anymore. Visiting, yes, but living and working, no. I am just a tourist now. I don't fit in anywhere anymore. I have become too Australian for Bosnians. But, I am still too Bosnian for Australians.²⁰

Carrying the Baggage of War

Holding an identity that spans two belongings and straddles two continents put pressure on me and pushed me to do well. I finished my doctorate degree within the deadline and got a job as an academic. However, the panic attacks which were at bay for several years, returned with full force once I became a mother in 2012. I started to be excessively worried that something may happen to my son. I would walk to the park with him but could not put my foot on the grass. I had reoccurring flashbacks of walking through the Bosnian woods in 1997 when I was working for an international organisation. I had to pay a visit to a client returnee at his pre-war desolated and war-ravaged village. Those woods were uncleared minefields.²¹

¹⁷ Fethi Mansouri et al, *Social Networks, Belonging and Active Citizenship Among Migrant Youth in Australia* (Australian Research Council Linkage Project, Deakin University and Monash University, 2013): According to this study, direct experience of racism was the greatest single factor of social withdrawal for young migrants in Australia.

¹⁸ Although more than 7 million (around 30%) of Australians were born overseas or have overseas born parents – making the divide / chasm even stranger. See: Hannah Sinclair, 'Dual citizens call for more compassionate approach to Australia's international border closure', *ABC News* (online, 24 June 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-23/dual-citizens-australia-urge-compassionate-covid-border-rules/100238760>.

¹⁹ In her most recent monograph, Krissy Kneen also writes how long hours of working have provided refuge from her traumatic past. See: Krissy Kneen, *The Three Burials of Lotty Kneen* (Text Publishing, 2021).

²⁰ Mehreen Faruqi, migrant and politician originally from Pakistan, writes about her split identity and belongings and difficulty of being too Pakistani for Aussies and too Aussie for Pakistan. See: Mehreen Faruqi, *Too Migrant, Too Muslim, Too Loud* (Allen and Unwin, 2021).

²¹ There are still many minefields waiting to be cleared in Bosnia. Bosnia remains one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. See: Matthew Clayfield, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina may never be clear of landmines', *ABC*

I had stepped on and walked over grass a million times since then but seeing my toddler freely running all over it for some inexplicable reason would trigger that walk which took place almost 15 years before I gave a birth to him. This was an intense time when bad memories started to flood my head. A fear of sudden catastrophe happening to my son crept in and would not let go of me. I was hypervigilant for much of his toddler years. I could not fully relax and enjoy his presence. Not having a family to support me in bringing up my son and struggling emotionally was painful. My worry was overclouding every aspect of our lives. This was a period of fierce battle with my demons from the past that occupied most of my mind. Shaking them off and trying to a live normal life was extremely hard.

Once, I was at a crowded playground and for one moment I lost sight of my son: my heart started pounding. I lost my breath. I felt a wave of nausea. I could feel a panic raising in my chest. I started sweating and yelling his name into the crowd, “Andrej! Andrej!” I ran around the playground shivering and breathless. These episodes have been recurring over a few years, diminishing in their intensity as my son grew older and more independent. Despite these struggles, I continued to have a stellar career and was promoted twice in less than 10 years. This would be quite an achievement for a woman born and bred in Australia, let alone a non-English speaking migrant woman. But there was huge, and, to many, invisible self-work done in the background. There were lots of personal traumas which I avoided dealing with for many years to work through. Not many people knew at the time that my traumatic past was my driving force. Everyone was surprised by the speed of my ‘research production’, but the truth was that the writing kept me sane; it has been my therapy.²²

My previous life of being unsettled and moving often from one country to another, or from one residence to another, left its long-term consequences. Being used to changing houses and residential places too often over the years meant that I struggled to fully settle in Australia. I kept most of my clothes and personal belongings in suitcases, never being fully unpacked. I lived for more than 15 years in various rental properties in different countries, often sharing them with people I studied or worked with. I was always ready to move, and I was moving all the time. I struggled to get rid of my previous nomadic life, never being entirely convinced that Australia was my last ‘train station’. I learnt not to have any long-term plans. I was afraid to make them because I could never make them work and would end up disappointed. This is the reason I learnt to live in the present and short-term. The interviewee question that I would receive from my potential employers such as “Where do you see yourself in five years?” always baffled me. I feared them since I could not see myself anywhere next year, let alone in five or more years. I always wanted to reply, “I hope I would be alive in five years”. I was so used to living temporarily that getting into the mind space that now one place in one country should be my permanent ‘home’ was strange. I resisted that idea and was feeling fine and at peace by making Australia a temporary ‘stop’ only.

The ‘stop’ however is now 15 years long; the longest I have ever lived anywhere since the war ended in Bosnia in 1995. I knew I did not want to return to Bosnia, but I was also terrified to accept that I will now permanently live in a country that is so far away from my family. This mixture of emotions is on-going and remains unresolved. The feelings of guilt of being far away

News (online, 15 October 2017) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-15/bosnia-may-never-be-clear-of-land-mines/9029692>.

²² Katie Hurley, ‘Writing as Therapy’, *Psycom* (Web Page, 18 November 2020) <https://www.psycom.net/mental-health-wellbeing/the-healing-power-of-writing>; Courtney E. Ackerman, ‘Writing Therapy: Using a Pen and Paper to Enhance Personal Growth’, *Positive Psychology* (Web Page, 22 March 2021) <https://positivepsychology.com/writing-therapy/>.

and doubt about whether I made the right choice to settle in Australia only intensified with the pandemic.

I would often tell my friends that the only thing that keeps me sane living so far from them and family is the ability to jump on the plane and visit them once a year. This comfort of being able to go back home whenever I wished, would come to an abrupt ending with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and indefinite shutting of the borders by the Australian government. This decision has prompted some migrants to leave Australia for good.²³

Less than eight years after finding the freedom of movement that an Australian passport bestowed on me, I once again find myself confined within borders. This time, however, the borders I find myself surrounded by are not solid as before, but the ocean that stretches unobstructed all the way to the distant horizon. This time I am surrounded by borders that do not include within them the people I love the most. I am locked out from my family, my friends, my partner and the rest of the world. I am cut off from everyone and everything I love apart from my young son. The two of us remain trapped on an island.

The Pain of Indefinite Separation

*“I know how it is to leave”, she said quietly.
“And I know how it is to return.
In fact, I don’t know which one is harder!”²⁴*

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that borders would again become a feature of my life. I would never have expected that Australia could become a country that would not allow me to cross its borders and reunite with my family for an indefinite time. If I had known, I would never have built my life here. The indefinite separation that I have never experienced before, not even during the Bosnian war, has triggered mental and physical suffering that I know all too well. During the war nothing could stop me from reuniting with my family. I was a refugee during the war, but I would find a way to see them, often risking my life to do so. But this time travel suddenly became impossible. I cannot catch a train or bus or drive a car to my homeland. I can only fly, and the planes are grounded. The international border closure pierced right through my heart and messed up my mind. More than shutting the borders, shock came from the government’s total ignorance and sudden removal of my long-awaited human rights and freedoms. The government abruptly took away my agency and freedom of movement, so hard won, leaving me feeling trapped, helpless, and angry.

I have experienced forced separations before. During the Bosnian war I was unwillingly separated from my parents and then my partner and best friends. In April 1992, a few days before the war in Bosnia was officially declared, my high school sweetheart Goran fled to Holland to seek refuge from the forthcoming war. I stayed behind. I was 19, he 21. We had been in a relationship during our high school years. It was one of those first formative romantic relationships, carefree and joyful, that abruptly ended with no will of our own. Once he and two of my best girlfriends

²³ Catalina Florez, “‘Bye-bye, Australia’: The migrants leaving for good so they can see their families’, *SBS News* (online, 6 June 2021) <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/bye-bye-australia-the-migrants-leaving-for-good-so-they-can-see-their-families>; Caitlin Fitzsimmons, ‘They waited 17 months for the border to reopen. Now they’re giving up and going home’, *The Age* (online, 15 August 2021) <https://www.theage.com.au/national/they-waited-17-months-for-the-border-to-reopen-now-they-re-giving-up-and-going-home-20210813-p58ill.html>.

²⁴ Darinka Kozinc, *The Alexandrians: Aleksandrinke* (Educa, Melior 2008).

fled the city,²⁵ my parents sent me to Serbia where I became a refugee. Torn apart by war and mayhem, my boyfriend and I soon lost contact, but never our love for each other. We reunited once during the four years of wartime.²⁶ My boyfriend was searching for me through the International Red Cross. The organisation managed to locate me and proceeded to organise our reunion. We met for the first and only time at the Budapest airport after two years of not seeing or hearing from each other. We had only two days together, and then again, we had to separate and go back to where we came from.

I could not go with him to Holland since I had no papers to enter the country. We continued to write letters to each other with the hope we would reunite again soon and start a new life together. But after the war was over, we lost contact again and this time we would not reunite until 24 years later, in 2018, two years before the pandemic hit. We were convinced that we were finally reunited for good, and nothing could stand between us, just to face the impossibility of the border crossings and vast distance yet again.

I have contemplated leaving Australia permanently many times but cannot do so because I have an 8-year-old son whose father lives in the country. I have been torn every day between him and the pain for my parents and my life-long yearned partner stuck overseas. As soon as the borders were shut, the government introduced the policy of exemptions from the travel ban which resulted in more than 40,000 Australians stranded indefinitely overseas, not being able to return home.²⁷ Australians still can only travel abroad with a so called ‘travel exemption’ that one can get in a special circumstance. The biosecurity legislation has been changed several times and now citizens can leave only for "a compassionate reason" which is defined as "the death or serious illness of a close family member of the individual or of a close family member of the spouse or de facto partner of the individual."²⁸ These draconian laws are still in place. The Western Australian Premier, Mark McGowan, went so far to suggest that he would prohibit people traveling overseas even to attend family funerals.²⁹ The danger lies everywhere: even in a dead child, a mother, a lover. As the journalist Massimo Giannini said, “We are not in danger, we are the danger.”³⁰ There is nothing humane in these laws and policies since they are not devised “to support travel for the purposes of family unification” but “to manage the health risk posed to the Australian community by international travellers”.³¹

²⁵ One of them, who defined my childhood and early youth, I will never see again.

²⁶ The Bosnian war lasted from April 1992 until December 1995. It ended by signing the Dayton Peace Agreement in Ohio, USA.

²⁷ Paul Karp, “‘Betrayed and abandoned’: DFAT reveals 36 875 Australians still stranded overseas”, *The Guardian* (online, 26 November 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/nov/26/betrayed-and-abandoned-dfat-reveals-36875-australians-still-stranded-overseas>; Nicole Trian, ‘Stranded abroad, Australians lodge UN petition against government for “right to return home”’, *France 24* (online, 6 April 2021) <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210406-stranded-abroad-australians-lodge-un-petition-against-govt-for-right-to-return-home>.

²⁸ *Biosecurity Legislation (Human Coronavirus with Pandemic Potential) Amendment (No. 1) Determination 2021* (Cth).

²⁹ Naaman Zhou, ‘WA premier furious that residents are travelling overseas as Covid lockdown continues’, *The Guardian* (online, 25 April 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/apr/25/western-australia-reports-no-new-cases-of-locally-acquired-covid-on-day-two-of-lockdown>.

³⁰ Marijn Nieuwenhuis, ‘The significance of the Covid-19 crisis’, *Open Democracy* (online 18 May 2020) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/significance-covid-19-crisis/>.

³¹ Sowaibah Hanifie, ‘Heartbreak for thousands of Australian residents banned from reuniting with their foreign parents’, *ABC News* (online, 22 April 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-22/covid-stops-australians-from-reuniting-with-overseas-parents/100081730>.

In order to leave the country, not only do I have to provide evidence that my close family member is seriously ill or dying, but I also must sign the statutory declaration that I will not return back home for more than three months. The regulations also stipulate that the citizens can face jailtime if they defy the government and try to go "the back door" to see their loved ones.³² The government must know that very few people can afford to leave for more than three months; to leave their kids knowing that they will not see them for months and/or to risk losing their jobs. I, and many of my migrant friends, are terrified at the prospect of 'joining the queue' of stranded Australians and being separated for months on end from our kids and jobs. The government also does not guarantee return to its citizens. We can leave but at our own risk.³³ We have been asked to make an impossible choice and face a real fear: we know that some citizens have not been able to return to the country for more than a year now due to the travel caps.³⁴ But the longer the separation lasts, the more desperate I am to leave, and my chest gets tighter. The past year and a half of my life reminds me of war, of the struggle to cross the borders legally or illegally; of seeing different rules applying to people with no funds (ordinary people) and to celebrities and rich people.³⁵ Those privileged who have wealth can buy freedom of movement and those underprivileged who don't have stay detained on an island. Those of different social status, ethnicity and colour of their skin have access to freedoms and rights that others don't have.³⁶ I found myself again in a war – 'war on virus'; war in which all seems normal, but nothing is normal. I feel I live in a twilight zone, in a science fiction movie from which I cannot exit.

Migrants Stranded

My neighbour, a young Chinese-Australian woman, has been separated from her two-year-old daughter for 18 months. She was visiting her mother in China in February 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. One of her two young kids stayed behind in China with the presumption that she would return with her grandma on the next flight. The next flight, however, never took off because five days later the Australian government shut the borders. My neighbour has celebrated her daughter's first and second birthdays via zoom. And she is not the only mother or parent separated from their kids.³⁷

³² Sarah Swain, 'Australians who defy New Zealand bubble to travel to another country could face prison', *9 News* (online, 20 April 2021) <https://www.9news.com.au/national/new-zealand-travel-bubble-australia-coronavirus-international-travel-ban/28a7449c-de8c-4313-b9a0-2f8ab7d02bf3>.

³³ Kim Rubenstein, 'Why MP's are unwilling to do more for Australians trapped by COVID travel bans', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (online, 21 April 2021) <https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-mps-are-unwilling-to-do-more-for-australians-trapped-by-covid-travel-bans-20210419-p57kkm.html>.

³⁴ The travelling caps are the restrictions put in place by the government on how many Australians can fly home from overseas: Christian Fleetwood, 'Cap on international arrivals introduced to ease pressure on hotel quarantine systems', *Travel Weekly* (online, 13 July 2020) <https://www.travelweekly.com.au/article/cap-on-international-arrivals-introduced-to-ease-pressure-on-hotel-quarantine-systems/>.

³⁵ Frances Mao, 'Celebrities in Australia anger standard citizens over "double standard"', *BBC News* (online, 1 April 2021) <https://www.travelweekly.com.au/article/cap-on-international-arrivals-introduced-to-ease-pressure-on-hotel-quarantine-systems/>; Lara Pearce, 'Victorian government accused of "double standards" over Australian Open', *9 News* (online, 16 January 2021) <https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-australian-open-tennis-players-enter-quarantine-accusations-of-double-standards/682a56e0-2b9a-4f96-8931-d2245a6d8214>.

³⁶ The Executive Director of World Health Organisation, Dr Mike Ryan, spoke of underprivilege and inequalities that lie deep down. See: World Health Organisation (WHO), 'It's not just COVID 19 that is killing people' (Facebook, 17 August 2021, 14:51 AEST) <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=356362272646727>.

³⁷ 'Parents separated from children in India', *RN Breakfast with Fran Kelly* (ABC Radio National, 5 May 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/parents-separated-from-children-in-india/13330036>; Joshua Aston, 'There are 209 Australian kids stranded in India: they have special legal rights we must not ignore',

It is migrant women and men that have been largely stranded overseas and separated from their families. They are referred to in the media and by the government as “returned travellers”³⁸ rendering these people as “the other” colloquially called “the Covid spreaders”, making them invisible as humans and *citizens*. “Other” human beings are now seen only as potential contaminators to be avoided at all costs. This is how people came to see their neighbours during the plague of 1630³⁹ and how they see them in the plague of 2020; not as fellow human beings but as spreaders of disease. Many however, have heart wrenching stories to tell.⁴⁰ These citizens from whom humanity have been stripped are continuously blamed by their fellow onshore citizens for “spreading the virus” and for lockdowns.⁴¹ Rather than the government acknowledging that it has failed in managing the pandemic, it redirected the blame for spread of the virus on its offshore citizens. It has allowed its own citizens to become “collateral damage” of its public health policies. This is true for citizens trapped overseas, and those like me, who are trapped onshore.

And it is migrant women who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. They have been hardest hit by job and income losses, while taking a huge load of care and family responsibilities.⁴² Increased presence of police due to border closures and lockdowns have triggered traumatic memories for some women refugees and survivors of state violence.⁴³ Similarly to women born in Australia and women globally,⁴⁴ migrant and refugee women in Australia have also been impacted by a rise in incidences of family and domestic violence during the pandemic.⁴⁵ A significant increase in the number of referrals for migrant and refugee women

The Conversation (online, 10 June 2021) <https://theconversation.com/there-are-209-australian-kids-stranded-in-india-they-have-special-legal-rights-we-must-not-ignore-162176>.

³⁸ See for example: Emilie Gramenz and Aryana Mohmood, ‘Queensland’s plan to recoup COVID-19 hotel quarantine bills worries returned travellers’, *ABC News* (online, 24 June 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-23/covid-qld-hotel-quarantine-bill-private-debt-collector/100237952>; Christopher Knaus, ‘NSW police error to blame over two overseas travellers failing to quarantine’, *The Guardian* (online, 6 December 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/06/virgin-flight-to-melbourne-advised-to-self-isolate-after-international-travellers-fail-to-quarantine>.

³⁹ Alessandro Manzoni, *The Betrothed* (Penguin, 1983)

⁴⁰ Matilda Boseley, ‘Family fear for dying Australian man stranded in Ireland as Emirates cancels flights’, *The Guardian* (online, 16 January 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/06/virgin-flight-to-melbourne-advised-to-self-isolate-after-international-travellers-fail-to-quarantine>; ‘Sick, jobless, homeless: Stranded Aussies plea for help’, *The Daily Telegraph* (online, 13 June 2021) https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=DTWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dailytelegraph.com.au%2Fcoronavirus%2F2020-08-13/coronavirus-mental-health-migrant-communities-melbourne-lockdown/12548862.

⁴¹ Frances Mao, ‘“Fortress Australia”: Why calls to open up borders are meeting resistance’, *BBC News* (online, 26 May 2021) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-57224635>.

⁴² Adele Murdolo, ‘It’s time to listen to migrant women’, *Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health* (Web Page) <https://www.mcwh.com.au/its-time-to-listen-to-migrant-women/>.

⁴³ Harmony Alliance, *Migrant and Refugee Women in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Impact, Resilience, and the Way Forward* (National Consultation Report, February 2021) 5 <http://harmonyalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HA-Membership-Forum-Report.pdf>; Erwin Renaldi, Mala Darmadi and Michael Li, ‘Coronavirus restrictions and economic fallout increase mental burden on Australia’s migrant community’, *ABC News* (online, 13 August 2020) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-13/coronavirus-mental-health-migrant-communities-melbourne-lockdown/12548862>.

⁴⁴ ‘The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19’, *UN Women* (Web Page) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>.

⁴⁵ Marie Segrave, Chloe Keel and Rebecca Wickes, ‘One third of migrant and refugee women experience domestic violence, major survey reveals’, *The Conversation* (online, 30 June 2021) <https://theconversation.com/one-third-of-migrant-and-refugee-women-experience-domestic-violence-major-survey-reveals-163651>; Maggie Coggan, ‘Behind

experiencing violence has been reported by specialist domestic and family violence services—both mainstream⁴⁶ and those specifically catering to women from culturally diverse backgrounds.⁴⁷

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's economic security is of grave concern as Australian women from migrant and refugee backgrounds already had significantly lower economic participation rates than their male counterparts or other Australian women.⁴⁸ Over time, I have befriended a few women migrants who have always struggled to find and then keep casual jobs. COVID-19 has made their economic situation even worse. The women that I befriended have small kids and none of them work in the profession they earned back home. Most of them have passports from their country of origin that have expired or are about to expire. They are stuck, living indefinitely on different temporary visas the Australian government devised to make their life extremely difficult. Some of them returned to their countries of origin, tired of being treated as unwelcomed.⁴⁹

To those women, the fact that Australia locked its borders is meaningless. Some have been locked in for years already. "I have been locked in this island since I migrated to Australia in 2013," one woman told me cynically. I avoid talking about my pain of not being able to travel to see my family when talking with these women because I know that some have not seen their parents and loved ones for eight or more years already. The worst is that they have no prospect of seeing them in the near or distant future, regardless of the pandemic outcome. Even worse is that they and citizens of Australia have normalised the situation they find themselves in.

My trouble seems minor comparing to theirs and I feel embarrassed about complaining that I also miss my loved ones overseas. I am against creating a hierarchy of suffering, and maybe I should not be ashamed of my feelings, but when surrounded by these women, I am. The conversations I engage in with my women friends about the COVID-19 pandemic vary depending on where my friends come from. It is an emotional and political choice to be made when it comes to making conversations. I talk about the ripple effects of international border closure with my friends, privileged migrant women who have Australian passports and funds to travel overseas. This is the group of migrant women I belong to: citizens with passports and steady jobs and salaries. Our main concern is how and when we will be able to see our loved ones overseas. This issue has been a major part of our daily conversations; the politics surrounding closure of borders and our own suffering due to it.

I know exactly what I will not talk about with some of my women migrant friends living on endless temporary visas or my born and bred Australian friends. Not many of my Australian women friends are bothered by the closure of international borders as much as I am. Some are worried about the border closure's impact on the future of their employment, but they do not

closed doors: The migrant and refugee women suffering in silence', *Pro Bono Australia* (Web Page, 6 August 2020) <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2020/08/behind-closed-doors-the-migrant-and-refugee-women-suffering-in-silence/>.

⁴⁶ Hayley Foster et al, 'Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant and Refugee Women and Children Experiencing DFV', *Women's Safety NSW* (Report, 31 July 2020) <https://www.womenssafetynsw.org.au/impact/publication/impact-of-covid-19-on-migrant-and-refugee-women-and-children-experiencing-dfv/>.

⁴⁷ InTouch, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on InTouch and its clients* (Issues Paper, September 2020) <https://intouch.org.au/new-issues-paper-six-months-on-and-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-our-clients/>.

⁴⁸ 'Culturally and linguistically diverse women', *Australian Government: Towards 2025* (Web Page) <https://womensworkforceparticipation.pmc.gov.au/culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-women.html>.

⁴⁹ Maani Truu, "'Goodbye, Australia": The migrants giving up on the Australian dream for Canada', *SBS News* (online, 7 March 2021) <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/goodbye-australia-the-migrants-giving-up-on-the-australian-dream-for-canada>.

necessarily have the emotional fatigue of separation from their families. Those that I know have their families and partners in the country, so their eyes are mostly turned locally.

My friends on endless temporary visas work for as little as \$20 per hour and these are mostly manual and low-paid jobs such as cleaning and cooking. I was at a birthday party recently and one young woman was excited to tell me how she has ‘a very good job’ now that she does not want to let go of. She was a lawyer back in her country of origin. I was excited and thought she had found something good and better paid this time. She had been working as a casual cleaner for the past four years since she came to Australia. ‘I have landed myself a job as a cleaner in Woollies. It is a really good pay; \$25 per hour,’ she told me proudly. I did not know how to respond to her. I knew how precarious her situation was, but I felt disappointment that exploitation of her situation did not stop. On the contrary, it seems endless. This is a young, highly educated woman with a young child in a bad relationship with her highly skilled but jobless partner. They have no family in Australia. She has spent all her earnings on migration agents, fighting an order to leave the country because the government was not convinced that they were persecuted back in their country of origin. She told me about an interview with the government official who told them bluntly and angrily that he does not trust their statements that their lives were in danger, and that they must leave Australia. The conversation with the male official was, according to her, one of the most traumatic experiences in her life.

Most of these women are highly skilled: they were lawyers, teachers, clerks, and professors back in their country.⁵⁰ None of them work in their own profession. Most of them work as cleaners or waitresses or do not work at all. They were left out of the government support during the pandemic⁵¹ and their lives became even harder than before. Migrant women are at least 7 % less likely to be employed than women born in Australia.⁵² Also, recently migrated women have substantially higher unemployment and underemployment rates as compared to recently migrated men.⁵³ Most of these women take up family duties while men go out and work. They cannot afford childcare and have no families to share the care. Having no family network is something that I found personally the most difficult to deal with. I am alone with my child on the vast continent of Australia. There are no parents, relatives, and siblings to come by, to spend time with. Have I made the mistake of depriving my child and myself of family ties and love? The thought and image of me and my child alone in this great continent, 16 000 kilometres away from my loved ones, sometimes scares me.

⁵⁰ Vassilissa Carangio et al, ‘Racism and White privilege: highly skilled immigrant women workers in Australia’ (2020) 44(1) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 77.

⁵¹ Laurie Berg and Bassina Farbenblum, ‘As If We Weren’t Humans: The Abandonment of Temporary Migrants in Australia during COVID-19’, *Migrant Worker Justice Initiative* (Report, 17 September 2020) https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3709527.

⁵² Gillian Triggs, ‘The Economic Rights of Migrant and Refugee Women’, *Australian Human Rights Commission* (Web Page, 24 October 2013) <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/economic-rights-migrant-and-refugee-women>.

⁵³ According to the 2019 ABS data, while the overall unemployment rate is slightly higher for recent migrants than for people born in Australia (5.9% vs 4.7%), the rate varies significantly within the cohort, with migrant women having a much higher unemployment rate than migrant men (8.3% vs 3.9%). Migrant women also experience higher levels of underemployment than migrant men: 75% of recent migrant men are employed full-time compared with only 51.5% of recent migrant women. See: ‘Characteristics of recent migrants’, *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (Web Page, 12 June 2020) <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/characteristics-recent-migrants/latest-release>.

Lack of Empathy: Indifference and Racism

“I miss my parents. The closure of international borders devastates me.” I breathe in. She was looking at me but through me. Not a blink of an eye. Not a word. I was searching her face but there was nothing there. I breathe out. After an awkward silence she told her son to get ready since they must leave. I did not say that I miss my parents with no prompt. She was joyful, chit-chatting while standing on my doorway. She was telling me that she has just been at her mum’s and was now on the way to see her brother who is taking off to Sydney to visit their sick grandma. She was speaking about it casually, but my whole body and face dropped. In less than a minute I crashed. I am not allowed to go and visit anyone from my family. I felt the pain in my guts.

Lately, I have started to panic that I will forget what my parents look like. Was I jealous, or just shattered by sudden sadness? We live in the same country; we are both citizens, but I am banned from seeing my loved ones indefinitely and she is not. My parents are unreachable and cut off, hers are not. I am not considered as a fully-fledged citizen; we are not the same. I am a second-class citizen who is deprived of freedom of movement for the foreseeable future. And someone who should not complain but accept this status for the greater good of the country and its other citizens. The cruelty of indifference and callousness towards “others” is embedded in the idea of zero-COVID 19 puritanical ideology for which “the others”, marginalised and disenfranchised lives could be sacrificed. My life. If I complain about it, I am perceived as an ungrateful immature right-winger.⁵⁴ My corporeal body with its olive complexion, thick dark hair, a distinctly ‘foreign’ look and accent places me in the lower hierarchy of the pecking order. The response to the virus by the government has been one that affects some people, some citizens, far more than it does others.⁵⁵ To say “we are all in this together” is simply a lie.⁵⁶

The thing that hurt me in this brief encounter with my son’s friend’s mum was her seemingly lack of any empathy and understanding for the situation I found myself in. We both live in the same country, but I am the one for whom different rules apply. I was flooded with sadness once I realised that I was expecting some sort of acknowledgment of our different standing in the whole business of the government border closure. Yes, acknowledgment and compassion. I teach my students how much acknowledgment is important to victims of human rights violations; how important it is to acknowledge other peoples' pain. Why is that important to me? It is humane to get a response on injustice happening to you or at least pain you are thrown into through no fault of your own. Although this was not the first time I had faced a wall of silence, it still hit me. I let the waves of guilt, sadness, and regret wash over me.

Over the last year I have written to some of my colleagues to tell them how terribly I miss my parents and have hardly received any reply. These silences, and my last brief encounter with an Australian born and bred white woman, epitomises the broader reaction of the mainstream Australian public to this topic. Almost 73% of Australians are in favour of an indefinite

⁵⁴ Migrants who complain about long-term and indefinite separation from their loved ones have been called by some Australian commentators on social media “self-centred” and “snowflakes who should never be allowed to settle in Australia”. As one Australian recently commented on social media, those who complain “should just shut up and wind your necks in or...when you leave Australia don’t come back...allowing the snowflakes from around the world to become citizens or permanent residents who then want to leave for a holiday or just to see someone for a chat-which they can do on Skype. You make real Australians sick.” Comment left on online media article: Stephen Johnson, ‘Why this seemingly innocent picture of Scott Morrison at an old English pub is sparking outrage- and it has nothing to do with the beer’, *Daily Mail Australia* (online, 15 June 2021) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9686365/Picture-Scott-Morrison-outside-English-pub-Cornwall-sparks-outrage.html>.

⁵⁵ James Allan, ‘The Coronavirus: Old vs Young’ (2021) 8(2) *Griffith Journal of Law and Human Dignity* 197, 201.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

international border closure with little or no interest in their fellow citizens for whom such a decision means continuous trauma due to separation from their children, parents, and partners. The topic of border closure has divided citizens in the country.⁵⁷ As Renata Salecl argues, the public health restrictions have reshaped “not only people’s attitude towards the pathogen but also towards themselves and their fellow citizens.”⁵⁸

Some Australians who have been stranded overseas for months upon their final return home have been struggling, as one woman reported, with “the feelings of not belonging” and what they see as a lack of understanding and empathy from their fellow citizens about their experience.⁵⁹ A lack of compassion and empathy have been at play since colonisation in the treatment of Indigenous Australians and has dominated the political landscape in Australia around issues of borders and asylum seekers.⁶⁰ The temporary visa holders who have been left out of the government’s economic support schemes during the COVID-19 crisis have been subjected to racist verbal abuse since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. According to a recent survey, a quarter of respondents said people avoided them because of their appearance. More than half (52%) of Chinese respondents reported experiencing at least one form of racism, as did more than 40% of those from other East Asian and Southeast Asian countries.⁶¹

Australia remains the only country that has indefinitely closed its borders. It is the only democratic country that invented travel caps and continuously obstructs its own citizens from entering or leaving their country. From 11 August 2021, the government went even further into indulging in extraordinary inroads into people’s civil liberties. It expanded its ban on Australian citizens and residence holders leaving the country to include people who are ordinarily residents in another country, meaning that even people who live overseas may not be allowed to leave Australia.⁶² The government has betrayed its own citizens by also leaving some of them in a life-threatening situation. In April 2021, the Australian government suspended all flights from India for two weeks although India was facing catastrophic rates of infection and death at the time.⁶³ It banned its own citizens from returning, stopped all flights and threatened its citizens with possible

⁵⁷ Michael Koziol, “No hurry”: Why impatience over vaccines and borders will divide Australia’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (online, 25 April 2021) <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/no-hurry-why-impatience-over-vaccines-and-borders-will-divide-australia-20210420-p57ksd.html>.

⁵⁸ Renata Salecl, “Corona Envy and the Violence of the Pandemic” in Ekaterina Degot, *There Is No Society? Individuals and Community in Pandemic Times: Ausst. Kat. Steirischer Herbst '20-Paranoia TV* (Graz, Austria, 2020) (König, Walther, 2021) 89.

⁵⁹ Caitlin Fitzsimmons, “Lack of empathy and sympathy”: Formerly stranded Aussies adjust to life back home’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (online, 28 March 2021) <https://www.smh.com.au/national/lack-of-empathy-and-sympathy-formerly-stranded-aussies-adjust-to-life-back-home-20210317-p57bjn.html>.

⁶⁰ Brigid Delaney, ‘Australia is the Covid lucky country. But we risk becoming cruel’, *The Guardian* (online, 26 February 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/26/australia-is-once-again-the-lucky-country-but-if-we-cant-feel-the-virus-pain-beyond-our-shores-we-are-simply-cruel>.

⁶¹ Bassina Farbenblum and Laurie Berg, “Garbage” and “cash cows”: temporary migrants describe anguish of exclusion and racism during COVID-19’, *The Conversation* (online, 17 September 2020) <https://theconversation.com/garbage-and-cash-cows-temporary-migrants-describe-anguish-of-exclusion-and-racism-during-covid-19-146098>.

⁶² Naaman Zhou, ‘Australians who live overseas may be unable to leave country if they return for a visit’, *The Guardian* (online, 7 August 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/aug/06/australians-who-live-overseas-now-unable-to-leave-country-if-they-return-for-visit>.

⁶³ Stephen Dziedzic and Georgia Hitch, ‘Australia pauses all flights from India amid COVID outbreak, readies aid package of ventilators and other medical supplies’, *ABC News* (Online, 27 April 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-27/scott-morrison-pause-flights-india-covid-outbreak/100098322>.

jail sentences if they try to return to Australia and escape possible death or hospitalisation.⁶⁴ Some commentators, even “right wing” ones, accused the government of racism and said that the only reason they banned Indian Australians from returning was racial discrimination.⁶⁵ For a couple of weeks, I have had a reoccurring dream of people in India running for their lives, wanting to reach the gate, just to find that gate slammed shut in their faces.

The ban and travel caps are invented so Australians onshore can enjoy “the way we are living in this country”.⁶⁶ As the Prime Minister stated himself, “Our first priority is the health and safety within Australia and then to seek to bring and to support as many Australians seeking to come home as soon as possible.”⁶⁷ Australians offshore must pay the price of not being allowed to return to their home so Australians onshore can enjoy their freedoms. The government has created hierarchy of its own citizens. They have been discriminated and pitched against each other. Those who happen to be trapped either way must sacrifice their rights and freedoms for the greater good.

Judith Butler makes distinction between grievable and non-grievable lives.⁶⁸ Butler argues that we fail to “critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain lives are more grievable than others”.⁶⁹ She asks, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?”⁷⁰ What is more, lives that are not recognizable are also not grievable: “[t]hey cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were’”.⁷¹ Reflecting at the tensions between human universalism and particularism Butler argues,

“The virus alone does not discriminate, but we humans surely do, formed and animated as we are by the interlocking powers of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and capitalism. It seems likely that we will come to see in the next year a painful scenario in which some human creatures assert their rights to live at the expense of others, re-inscribing the spurious distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives, that is, those who should be protected against death at all costs and those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding against illness and death.”⁷²

I and many others have experienced “otherising” and our pain has been dismissed and regarded as non-grievable. Lack of interest in other people’s lives is a form of discrimination. It is

⁶⁴ ‘Covid: Australians could face jail or fines if they return from India’, *BBC News* (Online, 1 May 2021) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56953052>.

⁶⁵ ‘Australia's India ban criticised as 'racist' rights breach’, *BBC News* (Online 3 May 2021) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56967520>; Jacob Kagi, ‘Critics blast federal government's 'immoral and un-Australian' ban on citizens returning from India’, *ABC News* (online, 2 May 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-02/india-return-policy-labelled-immoral-and-un-australian/100109898>.

⁶⁶ Stephanie Dalzell, ‘Scott Morrison 'in no hurry' to open borders as he pleads with eligible Australians to get vaccinated’, *ABC News* (online, 18 April 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-18/scott-morrison-no-hurry-open-australian-borders-to-travel/100077086>.

⁶⁷ ‘New rules for international arrivals, but no change in flight caps’, *The New Daily* (online, 22 January 2021) <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2021/01/22/international-flight-caps/>.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004).

⁶⁹ Ibid 30.

⁷⁰ Ibid 20.

⁷¹ Ibid 33.

⁷² Judith Butler, ‘Capitalism has its limits’, *Verso Blog* (online 30 March 2020) <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>.

our duty to feel fully for other people; to feel accountable for the actions of our governments; to be outspoken. If those feelings are absent, humanity is lost. But ignorance, as Renata Salecl argues whether passive or active, conscious or unconscious, has always been a part of the human condition. According to Salecl there is a rise in the number of people actively choosing not to know.⁷³ Consciously ignoring facts may be a defence mechanism against feeling depressed and helpless. People find different ways to deny or ignore knowledge that “threatens their well-being”.⁷⁴ They often “embrace ignorance or denial...when they come close to knowledge that is somehow unbearable.”⁷⁵

A few years ago, I asked one of my female migrant friends, who survived the war and fled with three small kids to seek refuge in Australia, whether she read the book by Behrouz Boochani *No Friend But The Mountains*.⁷⁶ The book had just come out, everyone was talking about it. My friend is a successful, highly educated woman proficient in English. As many other migrants and refugees, she had to build her life from scratch. She spoke no English when she arrived but now she is one of the highest paid women in the country. “Why would I read it?”, she turns towards me shaking her head while playing with her glass of wine. I was bewildered. “Maybe because Behrouz has an important story to tell,” I blinked confused while shuffling in my chair. She pauses and her face darkens a little in the silence which stretches between us. “I don’t read books that will leave me utterly depressed. I will just feel awful after reading them. I don’t want to feel depressed. I cannot change anything anyway, right?” She said that more as a matter of fact than a question.

A shiver ran through me. I still feel her statement. It is buzzing in my ear. She would also tell me in our numerous conversations that life taught her how to protect herself from the terrible news that we are bombarded with on an almost daily basis. She learnt how to ‘cut off’ herself and live inside herself to stay sane, perhaps. She was honest and I understood her reasoning. Still, I breathe in deeply and exhale. I worry about people who consciously choose to ignore injustice. I did not know that my friend was one of *those* people.

Conclusion (with no ending)

“The naked life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that brings men and women together, but something that blinds and separates them. Other human beings...are now seen only as potential contaminants to be avoided at all costs or at least to keep at a distance of at least one metre. What will human relations become in a country that will be accustomed to living in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society with no other value other than survival?”⁷⁷

⁷³ Renata Salecl, *A Passion for Ignorance: What We Choose Not to Know and Why* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁷⁴ Ibid 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ In 2013, Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani was illegally and indefinitely detained on Manus Island. Boochani takes us on a sensory tour of the Manus prison. *No Friend but the Mountains* reveals that Manus prison is designed to break the will of refugees, so they see no option but to return home. See: Alex Reilly, ‘Book Review: Behrouz Boochani’s unsparing look at the brutality of Manus Island’, *The Guardian* (online, 28 August 2018) <https://theconversation.com/book-review-behrouz-boochanis-unsparing-look-at-the-brutality-of-manus-island-101520>.

⁷⁷ Giorgio Agamben in Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Sergio Benvenuto, “Coronavirus and Philosophers”, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (online 2020) <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.

At the time of submitting this reflection, fear-ridden Australia remains closed to the outside world with 20 million of its citizens in some form of lockdown.⁷⁸ The government suggested closing the borders even further and dramatically reducing a number of its own citizens who can return to the country.⁷⁹ While the government has fought for so long “the enemy” outside by sealing the nation’s borders, paradoxically, “the enemy” is now inside spreading rapidly within the country’s borders.⁸⁰ We now find ourselves trapped together with the virus within our nation borders. The dream of “Covid-free” community has come to an end.

“Multicultural Australia” has seen a rapid shrinking of internationalism and skyrocketing growth of tribalism and nativism. It has been seen by some as “a claustrophobic and insular place”⁸¹ in which citizens were reduced to human vectors not vivacious souls. The government deliberately cultivated feelings of victimhood and helplessness in its citizens and portrays itself as the ultimate saviour of their bare lives. Citizen’s agency and capacities have been wretched by the state which praises peoples’ obsession over their physical safety. The purpose of our existence has become ‘not to catch the virus’. Love is replaced with coldness and is redefined as indefinite staying away from loved ones. The most important things in human lives such as seeing loved ones in the last days of their lives could be easily deemed as ‘not safe practice’ if they clash with public health regulations.⁸²

The government tells people that to exist and survive and to not live and thrive is the ‘new normal’. Every aspect of citizens lives have been “medicalized” and people have been “pathologized as victims without agency, sufferers that can be cured through psychological counselling”.⁸³ The Australian government instead should plan a solid and optimistic vision for the future, “rather than telling people they may have to continue in a dystopian, social, cultural and mental health wasteland.”⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Renju Jose, ‘Twenty million Australians under lockdown amid Delta virus outbreak, vaccine chaos’, *Reuters* (online, 29 June 2021) <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/twenty-million-australians-under-lockdown-amid-delta-virus-outbreak-vaccine-chaos>.

⁷⁹ Calla Wahlquist, ‘Halve cap of international arrivals to cut risk of lockdown, Daniel Andrews says’, *The Guardian* (online, 29 June 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jun/29/halve-cap-on-international-arrivals-to-cut-risk-of-lockdowns-daniel-andrews-says>.

⁸⁰ Graham Readfearn and Ben Smee, ‘Australia records highest number of new cases in a day – as it happened’, *The Guardian* (online, 21 August 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2021/aug/21/covid-australia-live-news-update-victoria-considers-statewide-lockdown-as-nsw-police-move-to-block-protests>.

⁸¹ Jason Wilson, ‘When I look at Australia from the US, I see an insular nation that has turned its back on its own’, *The Guardian* (online, 28 June 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/27/when-i-look-at-australia-from-the-us-i-see-an-insular-nation-that-has-turned-its-back-on-its-own>.

⁸² Tim Arvier, ‘Daughter watches father die via Skype from hotel quarantine’, *Nine News* (online, 25 June 2021) <https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-hotel-quarantine-daughter-watches-father-die-on-skype-call-exemption-request-denied-queensland-news/c4acd03c-1ed8-47c0-8822-3261191c29c7>; Stephen Johnson, ‘Son forced to farewell his dying mother in Perth via a video call in Melbourne says he’s disgusted to be an Australian and wants to return to Belgium- but he can’t’, *Daily Mail* (online, 13 August 2021) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9889903/James-Turbitt-embarrassed-Australian-wants-leave-denied-chance-farewell-mum.html>; Brooke Rolfe, ‘Aussie man forced to farewell dying mother on a video call wants to abandon the country and go back to Europe for good’, *News.com.au* (online, 14 August 2021) <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/aussie-man-forced-to-farewell-dying-mother-on-a-video-call-wants-to-abandon-the-country-and-go-back-to-europe-for-good/news-story/080d5ddbc0f54785a27d07f4bc33c6f9>.

⁸³ Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013) 28; See also: The Hon Greg Hunt MP, ‘Further mental health support for Victorians during COVID-19 pandemic’ (Media Release, Department of Health, 6 August 2020).

⁸⁴ @profsarahj (Sarah Joseph), (Twitter, 18 August 2021) https://twitter.com/profsarahj?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.

Fear has been central in motivating people globally to comply with all sorts of public health measures necessary for restricting transmission of the virus.⁸⁵ Fear however, according to the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, is a narcissistic emotion that “all too often blocks rational deliberation and poisons hope” and is antithetical to full maturity and citizenship.⁸⁶ Mass panic buying and hoarding, lack of empathy for stranded citizens, and wilful acceptance of state-led draconian social controls have played into the liberal fear of authoritarianism⁸⁷ and a free-run public health dictatorship.⁸⁸ The rise in mental health illnesses has become alarming and the psychological footprint is bigger than the medical footprint.⁸⁹ On 4 August 2021, the Lifeline Australia recorded its highest call volume in its 58-year history, with 3,345 calls made on the day.⁹⁰ The number of people in distress due to continuous and indefinite lockdowns, and social isolations although one of “the major concerns”⁹¹ so far have been regarded as little more than a collateral damage.

With no roadmap for opening, I remain safely detained on an island. I feel aimless, like a fish in a fishbowl swimming around in circles. I feel dizzy and heavy with the weight of my whole life. I feel trapped. The trajectory of the different government impacts on my life reminds me of Rob Nixon’s work on ‘slow violence’. Although Nixon writes about ‘slow violence’ in the context of environmental catastrophes and its impact on people’s health over the years if not decades, his definition “provoke(s) us to expand our imaginations of what constitutes harm”.⁹² I think I can make an analogy to a man-made ‘violence’ I experienced over the years as a direct result of the various government policies I have been subjected to. As Nixon explains, “By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all”.⁹³

⁸⁵ Sonja A. Rasmussen and Richard A. Goodman, *The CDC Field Epidemiology Manual* (Oxford University Press, 4th ed, 2019).

⁸⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2019).

⁸⁷ Dan Degerman, Matthew Flinders and Matthew Thomas Johnson, ‘In defence of fear: COVID-19, crises and democracy’ (2020) *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 1.

⁸⁸ Terry Mccrann, ‘Is Australia’s health dictatorship starting to crack?’, *Herald Sun* (online, 7 July 2021) https://www.heraldsun.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=HSWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.heraldsun.com.au%2Fbusiness%2FTerry-mccrann%2Fis-australias-health-dictatorship-starting-to-crack%2Fnewsstory%2F314335a9f30b2a790cfc297a63a1566d&mentype=anonymous&mode=premium&nk=0a5231229cebbf447573349e0c2415e2-1629760425; ‘NSW living under the “health dictatorship” of Dr Chant: Latham’, *Sky News* (online, 28 July 2021) <https://www.skynews.com.au/opinion/nsw-living-under-the-health-dictatorship-of-dr-chant-latham/video/ac77799bf7e1d9fa01113b0b5f3a8cf2>.

⁸⁹ See: Steven Taylor, *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019); Sharon Kirkey, ‘More than 200 days in, COVID-19 is taking a psychological toll, and that’s entirely normal’, *National Post* (online, 17 October 2020) <https://nationalpost.com/health/more-than-200-days-in-covid-19-is-taking-a-psychological-toll-and-thats-entirely-normal>.

⁹⁰ Lifeline is a 24/7 crisis support & suicide prevention service: <https://twitter.com/LifelineAust>.

⁹¹ Hon David Coleman MP, Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention reported recently that 1 in 5 Australians experience a mental health condition each year, 45% of Australians will experience mental health illness in their lifetime and suicide is a leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 44. Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), ‘Australia’s mental health plan’, *CEDA Past Events* (Livestream, 20 August 2021) <https://events.ceda.com.au/Events/Library/Past-Events1/LS210820>.

⁹² Thom Davies, ‘Slow violence and toxic geographies: “Out of sight” to whom?’ (2019) *EPC: Politics and Space* 1.

⁹³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011) 2.

The latest form of emotional violence that is on-going with the government's heavy-handed stance on keeping borders shut contributes to a plethora of other violence(s) accumulated in my body and mind over the years. "Ongoing" traumas⁹⁴ irreparably impact mine and other lives. And not only our lives personally, but the lives of those around us: our partners, our children, our community. The ripple effects of emotional suffering may be invisible, the villains who produce it may occupy different special geographies, but the harm they produce is leaving enduring scars and open wounds on my flesh and in my mind.

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⁹⁴ Michael Rothberg writes that we need to account for "ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence" that exist next to 'the event-based model of trauma': Michael Rothberg, 'Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response' (2008) 40(1/2) *Studies in the Novel* 224.

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