The Discomfort of Strangers: Racism, Incivility and Ontological Security in a Relaxed and Comfortable Nation

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This paper explores the increasing experience of discomfort amongst migrant Australians and their children, drawing on two sets of empirical data—one about a sense of home amongst migrants and the other about incidents of racism towards Arabs and Muslims since 2001. The idea of comfort captures what Giddens calls ontological security, or the trust we have in our surroundings, both human and non-human. This sense of security, built on mutual recognition, is fundamental to our capacity for social agency. Migrant home-building constantly negotiates the displacement thrown up by the act of migration as migrants attempt to settle in a new country. Experiences of racism, especially since 2001, however, undermine the ability of migrants to feel ‘at home’, and hence their capacity to exist as citizens.

Keywords: Racism; Comfort; Ontological Security; Incivility; Recognition

A young Muslim woman in Sydney, in the wake of terrorist attacks overseas and moral panics around refugees and gang rapes in Australia, decides to begin wearing the hijab in what we can assume to be a defensive reaction to the increasing experiences of racial vilification in Australia that follows these events, a Sydney newspaper reports. She feels, however, more ‘comfortable’ wearing the scarf in some places than in others: ‘At her job at a supermarket she feels the weight of shoppers’ gazes resting more heavily on her’. The journalists describe her feeling ‘uncomfortable’ as a result (Delaney and Banham 2004: 8). In a nation whose political leadership has declared its desire to create a ‘relaxed and comfortable’ life for its...
citizens (Howard 1997), it is increasingly apparent that the capacity to be comfortable is unevenly distributed amongst the population.

This paper will unpack the experiences of comfort—posited here as a kind of vernacular for what Giddens calls ontological security—in order to explore the ways in which migrants are increasingly made uncomfortable in Australia through acts of social incivility, harassment and abuse. Migrant home-building must, by necessity, constantly negotiate the affective and cognitive dissonance thrown up by the act of migration as it attempts to secure a place in a new world. The intensification of racial vilification since 2001 for many migrants of Arabic-speaking and Muslim background, however, undermines the ability of migrants to feel ‘at home’. Thinking through the experience of comfort and discomfort expressed in two pieces of research (one on home-building and one on experiences of racial vilification) raises interesting questions of the relation between affective experience and conceptual issues around recognition, identity, citizenship and agency. Forms of social incivility, like harsher experiences of vilification, amount to the affective regulation of social belonging and participation.

**Relaxed and Comfortable?**

The social and political times in which Australians live have made ‘comfort’ a pressing issue. At the broadest level, we live in a Western world constituted by a fundamental paradox: our increasingly affluent lifestyle, especially in the West, is juxtaposed with a greater culture of fear (Furedi 1997); anxiety, insecurity, uncertainty structure our everyday experiences and threaten our sense of belonging (Bauman 1999). In other words, the comfortableness of our material well-being is offset by a greater tendency towards a pervasive experience of discomfort.

Australia exhibits this prevailing Western mood of insecurity, but it also has a specific history of anxieties deriving from its forms of national belonging and its geopolitical location in the international arena. Burke (2001) has explored Australia’s preoccupation with security throughout its history, borne of our status as an outpost of European colonialism in the Asia-Pacific region, and realised in ongoing concerns about invasion from the north, illegal immigration, racial purity and national integrity. Multiculturalism—as a series of economic, social and cultural policies that emerged in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, replacing older policies of assimilation and integration—seemed to move beyond those colonial fears because it embraced cultural diversity and fostered the maintenance of identities built around non-English-speaking migrant communities. This kind of cosmopolitan multiculturalism—or cosmo-multiculturalism—has been criticised as primarily being about servicing the cultural tastes of white, middle-class Australians (Hage 1998), but it did, nevertheless, foster new form of everyday life in Australia which embraced intercultural interaction, a ‘living diversity’ (Ang et al. 2002).

This cosmopolitan multiculturalism seemed to be a settled fact of Australian life until the mid 1990s. When Pauline Hanson emerged from political obscurity to
establish the One Nation party, she gave voice to certain anxieties and concerns regarding multiculturalism, partly because of its class orientations, amongst a sizeable proportion of ‘ordinary Australians’, largely of white, working- and lower middle-class origins. Hanson’s populist criticisms of Australia’s immigration program and multicultural policies, as well as her strident attacks on Aboriginal welfare, helped shift political discourse to the right in Australia, a process cemented with the election of the Liberal–National Party Coalition federal government in 1996, under John Howard, which cut immigration, tightened entrance requirements, reduced migrants’ access to welfare and abolished the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Howard, who had criticised Asian immigration in the 1980s as a member of the Opposition, now spoke incessantly about ‘mainstream Australia’ and argued against the relevance of the concept of multiculturalism for the Australia he now led (Ang 2001: 96–100). It was in this context that Howard (1997) expressed his desire to make Australians feel ‘relaxed and comfortable’, but it was not altogether clear who was being made comfortable in this mainstream Australia.

In the 2001 federal election, this was even clearer. After a series of moral panics about ethnic crime and race rape, especially in Sydney, and around an apparent increase in illegal migrants (seen notoriously in the ‘children overboard’ affair), the terrorist attacks in the USA and the bombings in Bali became the basis of an adroitly managed fear campaign in which national integrity and well-being became entwined with issues around border security, crime and policing, and cultural harmony. Many media commentators and politicians stepped up criticism of multiculturalism as a way of managing cultural diversity and social cohesion as anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment increased. The government that wished to make us ‘relaxed and comfortable’ is the government that has overseen the amplification of a mood of fear and anxiety. This climate has contributed to the marginalisation of certain groups of Australians, such as those of Arabic and Muslim background, as the ‘folk devils’ of our times (Poynting et al. 2004).

Uncivil Attentions

This paper draws on research, funded by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) and conducted with Scott Poynting, on experiences of racial vilification amongst Australians of Arabic-speaking and Muslim background since September 11, 2001 (Poynting and Noble 2004). This research comprised two stages: the first was a self-complete survey, distributed by ethnic and religious organisations in Sydney and Melbourne, in Arabic and English, asking people about their experiences of racism and vilification, and how they responded to these incidents, whether they reported them and so on. A total of 186 surveys was received. The second stage involved 34 follow-up interviews with selected respondents, who indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The interview was offered in English or Arabic. Most interviewees were women, as with the larger survey, and the age of respondents ranged from 17 to 57.
Amidst stories of violence, threats, discrimination and so on, a significant proportion of the interviewees detailed experiences of what we could call social incivility: the everyday behaviours of others that respondents often found rude and insulting, even as they dismissed their significance. As in Essed’s (1991) account of the ‘everyday racism’ experienced by black women in the Netherlands and in the USA, this might include name-calling, sometimes said aggressively, sometimes not, jokes in bad taste, bad manners, provocative and offensive gestures or even just a sense of social distance or unfriendliness or an excessive focus on someone’s ethnicity. Some of these incidents were clearly racially motivated, because they made direct and derogatory comments about the victim’s ethnicity. Others, however, may have no explicit racist content yet respondents deemed them as arising from reactions to their cultural difference; much as Essed’s interviewees had developed an understanding that recognised the racism implicit in many social encounters (1991: 74). This racialised dimension is also reflected in the perception of our respondents that the perpetrators of these incidents were overwhelmingly people of ‘Aussie’, ‘English’ or ‘Anglo’ ancestry. What was striking, however, was that many of these experiences were often described in terms of the language of discomfort.

Amal, for example—a 17-year-old, second-generation Lebanese Muslim student—talked of how she ‘felt uncomfortable the way we were treated by the students and teachers’ at her public school. Hayat (18-year-old student, second-generation Lebanese Muslim) described a similar treatment from her friends and teachers: ‘I got a lot of distance between after that, I don’t feel as comfortable’. For both students, this sense of discomfort was realised in the increasing sense they had of being at some distance from others, including friends and figures of authority.

One respondent, Alya (40-year-old Egyptian-born Muslim), recounted several incidents—young men in cars covering their faces as if they were wearing a veil and shouting at her, another young man shaping his hands as a gun and pointing at her head, an older man approaching her and her son in a shopping centre, saying ‘you’re a terrorist’ and asking if she had a bomb. She then described the accumulated effect it had on her:

The few months after September 11, I felt very noticeable, that I was this real alien, and that people were looking at me. I made a real effort when people looked at me, to try and smile to them, and say hello, and try to be friendly, ’cause that usually defuses a lot of hostility. I felt really uncomfortable. Not uncomfortable enough to take off my hijab, ’cause that’s something I would never allow anyone to have that much power over me, but just feeling like I didn’t belong.

Her sense of discomfort was more sharply defined in relation to senses of belonging, and holding an outsider or alien status. Yet it also had a very clear sensory dimension; it wasn’t about an abstract sense of belonging, or not, but was manifest in the ways people looked at her and treated her. For some this experience was even more visceral. Sara, a second-generation Lebanese Muslim housewife, described incidents in which men drove past her making machine gun gestures and yelling at her to ‘go
home’, and admitted that she was ‘not too comfortable going out some of the time’. The link between a sense of discomfort and the capacity to function in the wider social domain will be explored below. It could also be true of very specific domains, like the workplace: Kefah (28-year-old male of Christian background, born in Jordan of Palestinian father and New Zealand mother), talks about being ‘not comfortable’ at work because a colleague keeps wanting to have arguments with him about the war in Iraq: these are the ‘frustrations you have to live with’, but it makes him ‘feel completely uncomfortable being Australian’.

Several interviewees, however, made a clear distinction between more harsh and overt incidents of racism and the experience of discomfort they felt. Rozalb (23, Afghan-born Muslim), for example, argued that:

...racism is that you would feel any type of aggression from someone towards you. I didn’t feel any aggressiveness towards this person, but I felt discomfort, I felt that the person wasn’t comfortable with me, like with everyone else. So, no, aggression was not felt, distance was felt, but it’s also because racism is very harsh word, and I think it’s an extreme word. No racism, but discomfort, and disillusion, from people that I know, and strangers that you feel, so that’s what I felt. But those feelings lead to racism, eventually, if things don’t, if that goes on to a consistency, if that doesn’t get unravelled.

Nevertheless, there is a link between the types of experiences of exclusion they describe. In the vast literatures on racism, migration, hate crime, social exclusion and racial violence, little analytical attention is given to the mundane, even routine forms of harassment experienced by migrants, despite the documentation of its existence alongside more dramatic aspects of racist violence (see, for example, HREOC 1991). Yet, as Wieviorka (1995) demonstrates, there are many forms of racism, with differing logics and consequences: prejudice, segregation, discrimination and violence are the forms of racist action on which he focuses. He also talks briefly of infra-racism as phenomena that are minor and disjointed actions ‘below’ racism, yet, despite his emphasis on the empirical nature of racism, there is little discussion of the day-to-day experiences which punctuate the social lives of migrants (1995: 38). Sayad’s poignant studies of immigrant life in France point to the presence of suffering as a key aspect of the migrant experience. This work goes closest to capturing the racism of quotidian existence: he describes the sensuous dimensions of communal tensions, the ‘new kind of neighbourhood conflict’ around different ‘smells’ and ‘noises’, through which they understand themselves as ‘nuisances’ (Sayad 1999: 23). Yet Sayad’s focus in discussing the sense of displacement migrants suffer is often more on aspects of migrant guilt around emigration or the anxieties resulting from living in someone else’s country than on the ways in which migrants are made to feel themselves as nuisances (Sayad 2004; Smith 2004). To theorise the discomfort that the HREOC interviewees expressed, we need to address what we might call the phenomenology of banal racism.
These respondents experienced what Carol Gardner has termed ‘uncivil attention’, inverting Goffman’s notion of civil inattention, or the ways we feign indifference in public life so as to grant recognition to those around us but to deem that they are of no threat (1995: 92). Uncivil attention involves forms of public harassment—abuse, harryings and annoyances—that exist on a continuum of possible actions, ending with violence (1995: 4). In other words, amidst stories of violence and threats told by the HREOC interviewees, there was a less dramatic, more pervasive experience of banal racism that interviewees often described in relation to an implicit, preferred state of comfort: respondents increasingly felt uncomfortable in their everyday worlds as a result of these actions. Gardner argues strongly that the forms of gender harassment she details are to be taken seriously as a fundamental form of gendered power, regulating the public presence and participation of women: so too, the apparently mundane incidents of social incivility suffered as a result of perceptions of cultural difference have greater resonances than the personal inconveniences of individuals in culturally complex societies. Exploration of seemingly banal moments of social discomfort reveals a more fundamental ontological relation underlying all acts of racism.

A Comfortable Life

To explain the sense of discomfort evident in these comments we need to unpack the idea of comfort, drawing on research undertaken into people’s relationships to their material possessions in their domestic environments, involving a sample of 20 households in the lower to middle socio-economic areas in the demographic heart of greater Sydney. This study explored how valued objects helped anchor people’s existence because they secure, by objectifying, our interpersonal and social relations, our affective experiences, our understandings of the world, and so on. The study did not begin with a focus on comfort; it was, rather, a term that kept emerging in people’s responses to describe the ways they sought and achieved a secure existence through practices of home-building. Nor did it focus on migrants, although the sample included a proportion of people of migrant background (Noble 2002).

The scant literature in which the question of comfort arises is of little help: the empirical studies of material culture in which this term emerges amongst interviewees often don’t elaborate its meaning (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1997); alternatively, the term is used polemically as a metaphor for smug complacency resulting from middle-class or consumerist affluence (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), or what Bloch calls ‘soft happiness’ (1986: 935)—much in the same way those on the left deride John Howard’s evocation of a comfortable and relaxed Australia. What this project found, however, was that comfort was a key value expressed by interviewees when they talked about their objects of belonging and their domestic spaces, and that ‘comfort’ was a complex state, a set of meanings that demonstrated important elements of making oneself ‘at home’ (Noble 2002).
Eddy (age 46), of Lebanese background, described how his efforts were aimed at providing his children with an easy life instead of battling their life like what we did... [I made] this house and hopefully I will make another one and another one and I’d like to pass everything back to my children in their future so they can live a comfortable life.

Some interviewees understood this in primarily material terms; others emphasised having a home in which they felt at ease. Others spoke of the ‘comforting’ role that specific objects—like photos—performed for them (Noble 2002). Veda (age 49), born in Sri Lanka, spoke of the calming effects of her statue of Buddha: it made her mind ‘peaceful’. Layla, born in Lebanon, has a special box of personal items that she brings out when she is ‘upset’. Similarly, Randa (age 40) a Lebanese-born Muslim, would ‘resort’ to her Koran in ‘times of trouble’ to ‘feel restful and peace in her mind’. She said she ‘didn’t feel comfortable about others seeing or using the things that are personal’.

Three broad points emerged from that material. Comfort, firstly, had no simple or singular meaning, but was used in various modalities: interviewees talked about being comfortable in various ways: in a material sense, in relation to their financial well-being and living an affluent life; as sensory satisfaction pertaining to specific objects; as an affective category describing their emotional investments in prized possessions; as a familiarity with a particular space; as a description of the mechanisms they use to relax and achieve a state of ease after work, or with their friends and family; in relation to the official ‘proof’ of their existence provided by their various official documents; as a term that indicated a broader sense of security and certainty, either singularly or together. Second, and related to this, comfort had not just various meanings, but also various dimensions: it referred to and bundled together material, affective, symbolic and interpersonal qualities. Third, it involved what we might call techniques of composure, which aimed at achieving a sense of stability to the immediate lifeworld, a settled feeling, particularly in contrast to a conflictual or chaotic world.

The themes which underlay the interviewees’ sense of comfort are the same as the key elements of what Giddens talks about as ‘ontological security’, or the confidence or trust we have in the world around us, both in terms of the things and the people with which we share our lives, and hence which provide stability and a continuity to our identity (Giddens 1990). This trust is more sensual and affective than it is cognitive, grounded in the routines and spaces of daily existence (Silverstone 1994: 5–6). The home is central to this because of the constancy of environment it offers most of us: a space in which the routines of existence can be performed, relatively free from external surveillance and hence offering a sense of autonomy (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). Such a sense of security is fundamental to the fashioning of identity, relationship and belonging. This was perhaps most clearly seen in comments about specific objects—like family photos—having a ‘comforting’ role, but it was also seen in the sense of safety, security and independence frequently associated with feeling ‘at
home’. These objects and values were expressed in the language of affect and emotion: of love, happiness, joy, pride, contentment, and so on.

Ontological security, however, is typically understood in psychological terms (Leledakis 1995); similarly, we tend to see comfort in individual terms, and even as a withdrawal from the world. Yet these are profoundly social phenomena, even if experienced individually or affectively or privately. While comfort has an affective dimension, and is usually described as a ‘feeling’, it is not an affect in itself. Indeed, comfort is articulated to a range of affects. In psychological terms, comfort is better understood as a complex, background mood of well-being, trust and confidence (Jones 1995: 160). Yet even here this doesn’t capture what is at stake in our experiences of comfort. Comfort is best seen in terms of an attachment to a place or context that makes acting in that setting possible. Therefore, comfort and ontological security are best seen not in terms of the individual and her psychology or affective experience per se, but as a relationship of power in a social setting. Comfort is the ‘fit’ we experience in relation to the spaces we inhabit and the practices we perform (and, as this paper argues later, always involves an orientation to the world, not its disavowal). This ‘fit’ exists because of our success in appropriating an object or environment, or because of our success in accommodating ourselves to it; and also the extent to which we are able to appropriate or accommodate. This has both a situated orientation and a broader social orientation: a connection argued elsewhere in linking homely comfort to national belonging (Noble 2002). In other words, comfort is the way we experience the more or less adequate articulation of sensory experience and affective response to social spaces and relationships.

**Recognition—The Capacity to be Human**

Crucially, our ontological security is founded on our ability to be recognised. Our ‘fit’ in an environment requires the ‘acknowledgement’ of other actors—human and non-human—that we fit. This is not simply a relation of cognition, but a profoundly sensual experience grounded in the habits and routines and artefacts of our everyday environments: the home is the place where, we typically say, we are most free to be ourselves. The movement of bodies in a kitchen, the give of our favourite chair that develops over time: these are the sensuous fitness of a body’s place there, a ‘well-fitted habitus’ (Hage 1997: 102–103), a place which is acknowledged by others. Our ability to be comfortable in public settings also rests on our ability to be acknowledged as rightfully existing there: to be recognised as belonging.

Honneth (1995)—following Hegel’s explanation of the emergence of self-consciousness—argues that the possibility of realising oneself as autonomous and individuated depends on the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, and these can only be acquired intersubjectively through being granted recognition by others whom we recognise. They are acquired through three domains of relationship—relations of love and friendship (family), legally instituted relations of respect (civil society) and relations of solidarity (the state). The home, or what
Honneth calls the affective relations of recognition found in family life, is fundamental to the dialectic of mutual recognition he describes, but while he emphasises the mother/child relation, this domain is a much more complex web of relations and experiences which need to accrue over time (Noble 2004). The primary domain of the home also has resonances for the other domains he describes. The full range of modalities, sites and intensities of recognition are yet to be investigated adequately, but there are many ways in which the home functions as a place where we secure our being such that we can participate in other domains. While we happily understand the role of being comfortable in the affective relations of the home, when we turn to the literature on recognition in public life, it is reframed in largely cognitive terms, even fairly abstract processes entailing the formal recognition of identity (see, for example, Taylor 1992). Perhaps we need to turn our attention to the affective relations of the state and civil society.

The recent report on poverty in Australia notes the difficulties experienced by many migrants and especially refugees in Australia. Part of this is described in terms of limited access to certain types of resources and services, but it also talks of the traumatisation, depression, despair and uncertainty, and also of ‘alienation from the rest of the Australian community due to perceived views on detainees’ resulting in the reduction in their opportunities for social participation (Senate Committee 2004: 339, 344). We need to go further than acknowledge the subjective experience of marginalisation at issue here, and think about the affective regulation of social existence. Recent discussions of social exclusion register the insight that exclusion entails not simply economic and political deprivation, but social and cultural dimensions which also entail notions of agency and power (Bittman 1999: 2). Gardner’s notion of uncivil attention registers the way public life is constituted by processes of recognition that actively shape the experience of public life, and involve exclusionary practices which police particular social conventions, boundaries and relations of power, by regulating people’s behaviour through etiquette as much as law, because these entail the internalisation of shame, fear and guilt (1995: 77).

Significantly, the opposite of recognition is not invisibility, but the active, affective regulation of the inappropriate existence of others—a constant reminder of inadequate existence. As Alya, one of our interviewees, commented: ‘I felt like I stood out. Before September 11, I felt fairly invisible, just a person going around doing their own thing.’ After that, she felt ‘noticeable’, ‘alien’ and ‘that people were looking at me’. She describes this as uncomfortable; in other words, being comfortable describes her lack of fit with public spaces and lack of the acknowledgement of her fit. This is not simply about interpersonal experiences of harassment: many interviewees listed forms of vilification that emanated from the state or from major social institutions—workplaces, bureaucracies, education and the media (Poynting and Noble 2004).

Recognition does not mean, then, simply the valorisation of difference, but the acknowledgement of people as legitimate participants in a given setting, as ‘fully human’, which is vital to the experience of being comfortable. As you know, the
granting of the status of the ‘fully human’ has become a problem in Australia in recent years, with the dehumanisation of refugees and the Arab Other more generally (Poynting et al. 2004). As Hayat explained it to us, after ‘coming out’ as Muslim to her ‘Anglo’ school friends in the wake of September 11: ‘After that day, I [saw] from their eyes . . . I was someone different’. It wasn’t just her (Anglo) friends who treated her differently, but her teachers:

it was the way she treated us, we didn’t feel comfortable with that group because we were always seen as less than them. The way she used to speak to us, she’d just disregard everything we used to say to her. (my italics)

This echoes Sayad’s (1999: 33) interviewee who complains that, in the eyes of both the neighbours and the local government representatives, ‘we don’t count for anything . . . we are of no importance here’.

Similarly, several of the HREOC interviewees complained of being reduced to a category—of Muslim, terrorist, rapist, Arab, and so on. Kefah is uncomfortable having to argue the pros and cons of the war in Iraq because he happens to be Muslim:

I don’t want to live in a country where people are automatically put in the spotlight because there’s some kind of culture connection. Where someone says, ‘oh, you’ve got a Greek name, okay tell me about Greece and what your Greek government did today’. Well, I’m just a person, why should I have to be a spokesperson.

This reduction to a category is both the removal of the capacity to be acknowledged as ‘fully human’, and the removal of Australian-ness, or the capacity to be legitimate citizens. Like Sayad’s (2004) interviewees, they are struggling over the ways they are defined in society, and experience the symbolic violence that ensues around their struggles over identity. In coming to be represented, even consumed by their cultural difference, their status as adequate social participants is challenged. It is not simply the failure to be recognised, in an abstract sense: it is the deprivation of human agency. As Alya’s comments demonstrate, being comfortable in public spaces enables the possibility of doing, not just becoming. Being comfortable in a social setting suggests that comfort is not a passive withdrawal from the world into the realm of domestic isolation; it is feeling ourselves to be legitimate participants, part of an intersubjective engagement in the world as human beings with acknowledged social capacities. As Jones (1995: 33, 47) argues, affective experience is crucial to our learning process, linked to our sense of social competence and sense of efficacy.

The kinds of uncivil attention recounted by our interviewees represent the taking away of the capacity for social action. Many interviewees described this in detail. Alya complains of the fear of ‘exposing’ herself to threats of ‘physical attack’ because she wears the hijab, and so stays at home more: ‘I can’t even go for my weekly morning walks . . . because if I put on the hijab I don’t know what people are going to think, and how they are going to react’. This experience of increasing pressure to stay out of public life was particularly severe for women. Sara talked about being ‘not too
comfortable going out some of the time. I’m paranoid every now and then. My husband probably doesn’t realise it, but he has to really push me to go to the shops. Rozalb similarly recounts how, as a result of ‘how you’re being portrayed in the media’,

it’s an unwritten law that people look at you, or act towards you . . . in a way that you know makes them feel uncomfortable around you . . . I love going for walks and runs, and at the moment I can’t do that, because I’m truly quite fearful that someone . . . will put me in a position where I need to defend myself . . . So doing things on a day-to-day basis, that I used to be able to do, I can’t do.

This diminution of social freedoms is a largely gendered experience, and corresponds to Gardner’s (1995: 11) claim that public harassment is usually done by males to females and functions to police the gendered nature of public/private boundaries. Yet this gendered experience is part of a wider array of experiences of disenfranchisement: many feared for their jobs, others felt they were not being politically ‘represented’ or that the government was complicit in racist attacks or biased media coverage. Constrained by fear and incivility, some of the interviewees were forced to consider changing their names, their way of dress, their daily lives, or to live with everyday insecurity and affront. Some have installed security systems in their homes because of race-based harassment. Some Australian-born Muslims even consider emigration (Poynting and Noble 2004). The pervasive landscape of fear and incivility fundamentally alters the social opportunities for Australian Arabs and Muslims to function as citizens. If, as Hage (1998) argues, racist practices must also be understood primarily as attempts to control the national space, then these experiences are fundamentally processes of social exclusion. It is not simply that people of Arabic-speaking or Muslim background experience abuse and harassment in their lives, but that these practices serve to disenfranchise them from full participation in Australian civic life. Hage’s analysis of the ways racist practices manage the national space tends to be rather disembodied. This paper has attempted to restore a sense of the material experience of being managed by exploring situated accounts.

Conclusion—Discomforting Strangers

If social discomfort reflects our capacity to make ourselves at home in the world, and the power of others to shape that capacity, then this has implications for understanding forms of national and social belonging. Many interviewees spoke of the experience of being strangers, of not belonging. As Alya eloquently put it:

. . . after September 11, it felt like our home, which Australia has been our home, for almost all of my life . . . was somehow not our home any more. This feeling that we really were foreigners here, and I’ve never felt like a foreigner, but ever since then I’ve started feeling more like a foreigner.
Note that she says she has *started feeling* like a foreigner. Theoretical discussions of ‘strangers’, such as in the work of Bauman (1990), for whom the Jew is the quintessential stranger, often talk as though we are simply witnessing the responses to the presence of radical difference, without adequately exploring the *production* and *regulation* of strangeness. Bauman doesn’t fully address what Wieviorka (1995) describes as the antagonistic logics of differentiation and inferiorisation; logics which are at play in the racist experiences of Arab and Muslim Australians in a society still shaped by an ethos of multiculturalism. These interviews reflect the processes of making strange which melds these logics, the making uncomfortable of difference through the affective regulation of difference forged through uncivil attention on a daily basis. This is an active process of Othering and exclusion. It is not that mainstream Australians and their institutions are suddenly confronted with radical difference and don’t know how to cope; rather, there is an active process of the inferiorising of that difference.

The empirical study of racial vilification from the perspective of the victim can’t tell us much about the perpetrators of racist violence and incivility: we know they are identified as overwhelmingly ‘Australian’ or ‘Anglo’; but we can’t know anything of their motivations or social circumstances. Yet it is interesting that the interviewees themselves articulate quite clearly a sense of discomfort they perceive in the perpetrators. They give testimony to the affective dimensions of the attackers, however selectively: they express the fear and anger they see in the perpetrators. Most importantly, they express the discomfort they cause in their attackers, the uncomfortable experience of some mainstream Anglo-Australians in the face of what they may see as excessive and threatening cultural difference. As Roxalb put it, ‘I felt that the person wasn’t comfortable with me’.

This echoes the media surveys over the last few years which, in the wake of September 11 and the Bali bombings, voice a feeling of ‘general paranoia’ in Australia, where the vast majority of those surveyed felt that their ‘relaxed way of life’ had been changed forever (West and Walker 2002: 4). This paranoia resulted in hate campaigns against Arabs and Muslims (Morris 2003: 21) that articulated a strong sense of inside and outside. When a prayer centre for Indian Muslims was proposed for the semi-rural, largely Christian and Anglo-Australian suburb in north-western Sydney of Annangrove, locals complained that Muslims didn’t belong in the area, that they were ‘coming in from the outside’, and that they should ‘stay in Muslim areas’ (Saleh and Morris 2003: 11). As Bauman points out, strangers, as ‘undecidables’, ‘bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos’.

Most tellingly, a One Nation pamphlet (2003) asked of an implicitly Anglo-Australian voter in the 2003 NSW State Election, ‘Is there a mosque coming near you?’ and then, ‘Are you sick of multiculturalism—feeling like a stranger in your own country?’ We can only speculate here that the expression of discomfort of the attacker is transformed into a sense of comfort (or at least the partial alleviation of discomfort) by producing a sense of discomfort amongst migrants and their children. Kristeva (1991) and Bauman (1990) both describe the function of the stranger as the
emanation of the dangerousness within us, projected onto something external which focuses our anxieties but which makes them manageable and which provides some kind of release. Zizek’s (1993): 202–203) insight about the link between national belonging and ‘enjoyment’ can be rephrased by saying that a nation exists only as long as its forms of comfort are materialised in social practices and myths, which distribute the experience of comfort and hence the capacity for social agency, unevenly. Yet to maintain our mythic comfort, we need to identify the Other as the thief of our comfort. The result is a ‘paranoid nationalism’, ‘the product of an insecure attachment to a nation that is no longer capable of nurturing its citizens’, that develops an obsessive preoccupation with disorder and must find constant objects of hostility (Hage 2003: 3–4). The experiences of vilification detailed in the interviews demonstrate the ways broad social anxieties, even when generated by insecurities related to international politics, produce localised experiences of insecurity, made manifest in the antagonisms of everyday life.

Australia exhibits the prevailing Western mood of existential insecurity: a world in which we are no longer sure who we can trust, whether our identities and communities are meaningful any more, whether we have any; but this is not simply the result of September 11, it is the condition of late modernity (Furedi 1997: 171). Bauman unpacks this mood in terms of a complex of feelings of insecurity, unsafety and uncertainty. We can see these concerns interweaving through preoccupations with borders, violence and values in contemporary Australia. Bauman argues that one of the ways we deal with these feelings is to fashion a sense of unity founded on ‘killing an enemy’ (1999: 5): the Arabic Other functions as this enemy in contemporary Australia. Our political leadership has stated its desire to make us relaxed and comfortable, but has strived to do this at the expense of Others, and this is echoed in the affective regulation of difference in Australian civil society. Our comfortable and relaxed nation, then, rests increasingly on the discomfort of strangers.

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References


