

The effectiveness and reliability of three history sources and three migrant stories

By Amy-Ann Nolan for HIS231: Migrants lives in the world

This essay investigates the effectiveness and reliability of three sources: SBS's *Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us* (Episodes 1-3, 2011, Ben Shackelford), Christos Tsiolkas's novel *Loaded* (1995), and three migrant stories from the Migration Heritage Centre of New South Wales (*Belongings*) (2010). These sources offer a variety of historical perspectives on migration to, and settlement in, Australia that both challenge and support the narratives of Australian national identity. *Loaded* and *Immigration Nation*, in particular, bring to the forefront key issues about Australian multiculturalism and the Australian imaginary. Their reliability as sources of historical content, and their ability to challenge the audience to reflect on their own viewpoint of Australian history, is questionable; this essay investigates how the audience is positioned by these sources to interpret migration history, and whether these can be classed as reliable, as they rely on the reader/viewer's knowledge of Australian migration history and their ability to interpret creative mediums. This essay argues that, individually, these sources do not offer a coherent picture of migration to, and settlement in, Australia but together they construct a fair, albeit selective, picture.

As a country 'built through colonization [sic] and immigration over the last two centuries' (Stephan, 2003: 11.1), Australia has been involved in large-scale immigration since 1947. The history of Australia's multicultural identity, the migrant experience, and the impact of white settlement in Australia is one that has been contested, reconstructed, remembered, and imagined by historians, the Australian government, people born in Australian, and migrants. The Australian immigration system, particularly post-war, is one that has been 'highly planned and closely managed' (Hugo, 2014: 869) with Australian immigration policy focused on who, and how many, can migrate. The historical truth about policy geared towards assimilation, integration, racial exclusion, and 'the Australian way of life' has threatened the imagined Australian identity and has become a point of tension and a source of national shame. Jacobs (2011: 77) quotes Stuart Hall (1992) when identifying the key element that informs national identity: 'narratives and official histories; emphasis on origins, tradition and continuity; invention of tradition; foundational myths; and the idea of original people or "folk"'.

In *The People of Australia* report (2011: 2), it is stated that ‘the Australian government is unwavering in its commitment to a multicultural Australia’ and that ‘Australia’s multicultural composition is at the heart of our national identity and is intrinsic to our history and character’. The report calls for further and continued inclusion and diversity of other cultures and voices the importance of these values to the Australian nation. It is clear to many historians that this has not been the case in the past and that multiculturalism continues to be a source of tension in Australia today. In the same month as *The People of Australia* report, SBS released *Immigration Nation*, a three-part documentary focused largely on the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*. The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, colloquially known as the White Australia policy, stipulated that ‘any person who is not a British subject either natural-born or naturalized under a law of the United Kingdom or the Commonwealth or of a State ... be required to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of an officer a passage of fifty words in length in an European language directed by the officer, and if he fails to do so shall be deemed to be a prohibited immigrant’ (Immigration Restriction Act 1901: 4). The dictation test was an underhanded way to ‘prevent non-white prospective migrants from entering Australia’ (Martens, 2013: 48) as it was a racially biased test. *Immigration Nation* seeks to ‘reveal the dark paradox behind the Utopian vision at Federation: the belief that to be the most progressive and egalitarian nation in the world, Australia must be exclusively white’ (SBS, synopsis *Immigration Nation*, 2011).

How effective was *Immigration Nation* in revealing an authentic history of Australia’s multicultural past to viewers? Wills (2012: 229) writes that ‘much of this is not a “secret history” to those already familiar with Australia’s immigrant past –certainly not, I’m sure, to some viewers of SBS’. Wills’ statement reveals the questionable reliability of *Immigration Nation* for the audience who is unaware of migration history and policy. John Izzard (2011) suggests in ‘The Deceit of *Immigration Nation*’ that the documentary is just another form of propaganda reliant on uninformed viewers. Wills’ statement indirectly suggests that it is highly unlikely that a person who does not regularly watch SBS would watch *Immigration Nation*. Thus, if the audience were not regular viewers of SBS, they would not be sufficiently knowledgeable about migration history to respond critically to the documentary. Wills statement further supports the suggestion that *Immigration Nation* is not a wholly reliable source by which a viewer can construct an authentic picture of migration history. The viewer may be overwhelmed by academic evidence and skilful editing and may be unaware of

content gaps. Garnier and Kretzschmar (2011) identify some elements that *Immigration Nation* does not cover: the ‘tensions between the political and social agents who made and unmade the White Australia policy’ and the social relations between the ‘settled’ Australians and the newer migrants. Garnier and Kretzschmar note that the ‘limited coverage of immigration and multiculturalism since the 1970s’ does not give the audience sufficient information to relate issues of migration ‘history with more recent and ongoing controversies’. The uneducated viewer is therefore unable to adequately critically reflect on the documentary and develop an authentic picture of Australian migration history.

The parameters of a documentary are important. Geiger (2011: 8) suggests that the documentary is a kind of ‘contract between the producer and the consumer that constitutes the collective “faith” or “trust” invested in documentary’. Geiger (2011: 8) reflects on Carl Plantinga’s writings that ‘while the audience’s receptive role can make or break a documentary, documentary film should be seen more as a two-way phenomenon: a kind of speech act or communicative action’. When understood as a documentary, the audience is less likely to question the authenticity or the depth of the information they receive. The nature of *Immigration Nation* as a documentary is unreliable as ‘the mere act of making a documentary film about anything implies shaping, selection, and often a highly personal approach to the material’ (McFarlane, 2011: 31). Geiger (2011: 7-8) writes that ‘documentaries are texts that bear common and distinguishing features (such as working through an argument or thesis, “evidentiary editing” that stresses logical or cause and effect relations, voiceover narration, interviews, testimony and so on), and thus, are more or less formally recognized [sic] as belonging to a common category’. Despite the fact that SBS was ‘founded on the belief that all Australians, regardless of geography, age, cultural background, or language skills should have access to high quality, independent, culturally-relevant Australian media’ (SBS 2017), this is not a guarantee that its programs provide a full and authentic picture. Films and documentaries, even those with significant academic contributors, are a biased mode of storytelling, can be selective in their telling, and are open to subjective interpretation. Kelada (2014: 85) writes ‘fantasy and storytelling can be an instructive body of evidence for mapping the popular imaginary, signalling how ideally a society may like to be perceived and perceive itself’. This theory applies to the other two sources explored in this essay as both are modes of storytelling. Despite its considerable academic contribution and personal migrant stories and its appealing and factual narration, *Immigration Nation* as an individual source does not provide the uneducated viewer with a

balanced, authentic history of migration to Australia. It does effectively provide a foundation for challenging the Australian imaginary and for spurring critical debate as can be seen on SBS's 'Your Say' page, an open forum for public debate about the program.

The second source investigated in this essay is Christos Tsiolkas's 1995 novel *Loaded*. *Loaded* follows nineteen-year-old Ari on a night out in Melbourne. Ari struggles with his position in society. He is gay, the son of a Greek, unemployed, and does not wish to be identified or defined by these traits. As a fictitious body of work, *Loaded* cannot be seen as a tool for historical information as *Loaded* offers no factual or historical evidence. However, similarly to *Belongings*, *Loaded* is suggestive of the personal migrant experience in Australia, specifically investigating the experience of the children of migrants and their families. Geiger (2011: 10) suggests that works of fiction are rarely subjected to 'questions and tests of authenticity and verifiability' like documentaries are. This presents the first point of issue for the reliability and effectiveness of *Loaded*. If Tsiolkas is not bound by the constraints of authenticity in his writing, then is his work reliable? The second issue of reliability is again the audience and whether they have sufficient knowledge to critically interpret the novel as a medium for expressing the migrant experience. This is important as 'our consumption of texts and images informs our perception of the social world' (Jacobs, 2011: 62).

As with *Immigration Nation*, unreliability reduces credibility. However, if Tsiolkas's purpose for *Loaded* was to investigate the personal sense of alienation experienced by some non-asylum-seeking migrants through fiction, he is successful. From *Loaded*, the reader cannot create a coherent picture of migration to Australia. However, this source supports further investigation into migration history. From *Loaded*, the critical reader can learn about the experience of the Australian-born Greek migrant. Although not autobiographic, *Loaded* appears to be heavily influenced by Tsiolkas's own experience as the child of Greek parents. Many of Tsiolkas's traits are reflected in Ari: his sexuality, his heritage, his atheism, and his flirtation with drugs. The strongest concern in *Loaded* is Ari's feelings of dislocation with his Greek heritage. Ari does not want to be identified as Greek and rejects his place in Australia: 'you're either Greek or Australian, you have to make a choice. Me, I'm neither. It's not that I can't decide; I don't like definitions' (1995: 115).

For 30 years after World War II, 'about 75,000 Greeks took advantage of Australia's Assisted Passage Scheme' (Glytsos, 1997: 3) and the number of Greek migrants in Australia

peaked in 1971 before subsequently declining. Papastergiadis (2013: 390) says in his interview with Tsiolkas that ‘the first generation of post-war migrants to Australia came here with “big dreams” of progress ... in a sense we are the children of migrants with big dreams and we are now witnesses to a generation of people who do not share or feel part of these big dreams’. This experience is reflected through Ari in *Loaded*. He is frustrated by his parent’s melancholy and rejects his heritage. Ari’s character has no ambitions: ‘No, mate, I tell him, I don’t want to study and no, I don’t want to work’ (1995: 66). Ari’s attitude responds to the sense of disconnection with his parent’s dreams for migration and also re-enforces the stereotype that Greeks are lazy. This contradicts Tsiolkas’s (2013: 390) statement in his interview with Papastergiadis that ‘[Tsiolkas] can’t bear to hear any more description of the Greeks being reduced to this lazy venal culture, it’s certainly not [his] experience of who the Greeks are’. This stereotype may originate from post-war Greece-born Greek migrants whose education level was generally very low (Glystos, 1997: 5). Many Greek migrants (75%) up to 1971 came to Australia as unskilled workers. Statistics show that ‘their offspring attain a much higher [level of] education’ (Glystos, 1997: 6). Ari’s disinterest in his culture reflects the research of Georgiades (2015: 1542) ‘that Greek identity is very strong in first generation GIs [Greek Immigrants] and to some extent in second generation GIs but has much less importance to third generation GIs’. Many migrant post-war experiences report that the promise of ‘the Australian Way of Life’ was far removed from the reality of their experience. Ari’s dislocation from his heritage is further investigated when asked if he is proud of being Greek or Australian. Ari responds with confusion unable to see what there is to be proud of as an Australian and again rejects his Greek heritage: ‘I had nothing to do with it’ (1995: 72). *Loaded* reflects how this experience becomes less central to Australian born generations despite the experience still being a reality for their parents.

Through Ari, Tsiolkas investigates the ethnic tension that has been present in Australia since colonisation. Bilodeau and Fadol (2011: 1089) suggest that ‘racist narratives have existed since the nineteenth century with some arguing that Australian identity was shaped in part by the dominant discourse on Australia’s relationship with Asian countries’. Although it is not certain Tsiolkas draws from first hand experiences, *Loaded* reflects historical understandings of xenophobia in Australia. Recurrent throughout *Loaded* are Ari’s statements on ethnic relations: ‘here in this country, everyone hates everyone else’ (1995: 51). However, Tsiolkas does not label Australia as the only racist country in the world but investigates racism on a global scale: ‘The Seb hates the Croat who hates the Bosnian who hates the Albanian who

hates the Greek who hates the Turk who hates the Armenian who hates the Kurd who hates the Palestinian who hates the Jew who hates everybody... Everyone hates everyone else, a web of hatred connects the planet' (1995: 64). Tsiolkas also touches on the physical division of ethnic groups in Australia indirectly likening the ethnic division of Melbourne (North, South, East, West) to the literal division of countries: 'the North isn't Melbourne, it isn't Australia' (1995: 81).

While Tsiolkas draws from personal experience in *Loaded* as a form of catharsis to deal with issues of ethnicity that may be grounded in historical fact, the reader is unable to form a balanced picture of migration to Australia or the migrant experience. Like *Immigration Nation* there is the question of audience reliability. Is the audience capable of critically interpreting *Loaded* as a reflection on the migrant experience? Catherine Padmore (2008: 457-458), in an interview with Tsiolkas, raises the question of the readers' responsibility to respond to a text and the role of fiction. Tsiolkas responds that the reader has a responsibility to think and to question the texts they read. Tsiolkas says (2008: 462) that 'fiction allows me to create a space where I can deal with some of those really dark difficult questions'. He says (2008: 457), 'for me there is a euphoria, an excitement, in reading work that is dangerous and confronting and frightening in that way, because not only [of] where it takes you on a visceral, emotional level, but also where it takes you intellectually and politically... The challenges that kind of work throws up'. While *Loaded* effectively portrays the Australian-born Greek migrant experience of one person, it does not represent the experience of all Greek, Australian-born migrants. *Loaded* is reliant on the reader who may not be sufficiently knowledgeable of migrant histories to put this work into a broader perspective. As an individual source, *Loaded* is effective in its portrayal of a potential migrant experience but is unreliable due to its form and the audience.

The final source considered in this essay are stories from *Belongings* on the Migration Heritage Centre New South Wales website. *Belongings* 'tells the stories of migrants who arrived in the decades after the Second World War through personal mementos, photographs and memories' (Migration Heritage Centre NSW, 2005: About Belongings). Listing 193 family names, *Belongings* offers multiple accounts of post-war migrant experiences of migration to New South Wales, Australia. A page long brief history of Australia's migration helps put the migrant stories into perspective. The reliability and effectiveness of *Belongings* is dependent on the reader's intentions. If the reader wishes to view the story of a specific

person or learn about the individual experiences of migrants, then *Belongings* is an effective and reliable source. If the reader wishes to create a coherent understanding of migration to Australia, *Belongings* is not a reliable source. The limited focus on post-war migration to New South Wales does not provide the reader with a rounded understanding of migration to Australia. Again, the reader's knowledge of migration is important in putting into a historical perspective the stories. The reader would need to read *all* the stories to build a balanced understanding of migration to New South Wales. *Belongings'* first-hand accounts of the migrant experience are interesting and give readers insights into the histories of other countries.

The stories of Moses Aaron, Barbara Verela, and Arthur Hill offer different experiences of post-war migration. Moses Aaron, originally from India, migrated from Sri Lanka to Australia in 1952. Moses' story expresses the ethnic isolation many migrants felt once settled in Australia. Moses writes about his experience with the White Australia policy. He shares stories of his grandmother's hatred of Australia and of his mother's feelings of isolation. Moses' experience supports evidence for the importance of migrant involvement within the community. Shields et al. (2004: 515) write about Danish refugee centres, that 'all but one of the refugee centres are open and people have the freedom of movement and the right to leave the centre as required... Consequently, refugees can participate in local communities and, once they learn Danish, can leave the centre to participate in work practice schemes'. Shields et al. (2004) writes of the successes of refugees due to their freedom and the integration within the community. In Aaron's story there is a clear difference in the migrant who feels isolated and is not involved in the community, and the migrant who is involved. Aaron writes of his father: 'he was very excited because he wanted to establish a synagogue and was very involved with the community, so he wasn't as isolated as the rest of us' (Migration Heritage Centre NSW, 2015: Moses Aaron).

Barbara Verela, who migrated from Greece in 1949, writes of how lucky she feels to be in Australia after surviving 'some horrible years' during the Second World War. Barbara, unlike Aaron, was not a victim of the White Australia policy. Barbara writes 'I am lucky that I am in Australia' (Migration Heritage Centre NSW, 2015: Barbara Verela). She writes of Australia as her home and does not reflect on any racial discrimination. Whether this is because she experienced no discrimination, the reader does not know. Barbara's story does not support

the findings of scholarly research of widespread racism in Australia, nor does it reflect the experiences of Ari in Tsiolkas's *Loaded*.

Arthur Hill, originally from Poland, migrated from Italy in 1947. Arthur's story reflects the difficulties and prejudices Jews faced during the war. Arthur writes that his life in Australia is good. However, his time spent in Marthausen extermination camp in Austria took a toll on his health and his peace of mind. He writes 'I lost everybody during the war' (Migration Heritage Centre NSW, 2015: Arthur Hill).

Although compelling and inspiring, the stories from *Belongings* give the reader the knowledge to create a limited picture of migration to Australia. What *Belongings* does give the reader, is a greater understanding of the personal migrant experience. Of the seven stories read, none were of experiences of time spent in Australian refugee camps. Thus the reader does not receive a balanced account of migrant experiences.

Individually, *Immigration Nation*, *Loaded*, and *Belongings* are not suitable sources for constructing a coherent and balanced picture of migration to, and settlement in, Australia. The reliance on the audience's prior knowledge of migration history reduces the reliability of these sources. Particularly with *Immigration Nation* and *Loaded*, there is the possibility that the audience may not be able to sufficiently interpret content and place it within a global context. However, together, these three sources challenge the national imaginary, open up grounds for debate, and give a balanced view on immigration that considers both historical facts and the migrant experience. These sources challenge the narrative of an accepting multicultural Australia, and support the value of migrants in Australia. Together these sources position the audience to think critically about their already established views on migration and are effective in helping the audience to construct a coherent picture of migration to, and settlement in, Australia.

List of References

Australian Government, 2011, *The People of Australia: Australia's Multicultural Policy*, viewed 17 June 2016,

<https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2013/people-of-australia-multicultural-policy-booklet_print.pdf>

Free, D 2013, *Christos Tsiolkas: the view from the outside*, *The Australian*, viewed 17 June 2016 < <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/christos-tsiolkas-the-view-from-the-outside/story-fn9n8gph-1226736970040>>

Garnier A, Kretschmar, M 2011, *Contentious Past, Contentious Present? Immigration Nation and the Origins of Australia's Multiculturalism*, *Australian Policy and History*, viewed 17 June 2016 < <http://www.aph.org.au/contentious-past-contentious-present>>

Geiger, J 2011, *American Documentary Film; Projecting the Nation*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, eBook Collection, viewed 17 June 2016<
<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzM4NjA5N19fQU41?sid=f5d2eea0-0739-4769-9b0d-5ead8a4c69c1@sessionmgr101&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>>

Georgiades, S 2015, *Greek Immigrants in Australia: Implications for Culturally Sensitive Practice*, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, Vol. 17, No. 5, Pp. 1537-1547, viewed 17 June 2016 <<http://link.springer.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/article/10.1007/s10903-014-0128-2>>

Glystos, N 1997, *Greek Immigrants in Australia: Demographic Developments and Economic Integration*, *International Migration*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Pp. 421-450, viewed 17 June 2016 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/doi/10.1111/1468-2435.00020/epdf>>

Hugo, G 2014, *Change and Continuity in Australian International Migration Policy*, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 48, Issue. 3, Pp. 868-890, viewed 17 June 2016 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/doi/10.1111/imre.12120/epdf>>

Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (Transcript), No. 17 of 1901, Pp. 1-7, viewed 17 June 2016
<http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/resources/transcripts/cth4ii_doc_1901a.pdf>

Izzard, J 2011, *The Deceit of Immigration Nation*, Quadrant, Vol. 55, No. 3, Pp. 28-33, viewed 17 June 2016
<<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/fullText;dn=468595889596358;res=IELLCC>>

Jacobs, K 2011, *Experience and Representation: Contemporary Perspectives on Migration in Australia*, Farnham, Surrey, England, eBook Collection, viewed 17 June 2016
<<http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzM5MDAyMF9fQU41?sid=92acaff9-e665-4838-aea9-e75c55b37e6e@sessionmgr4004&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>>

Kelada, O 2014, *Love is a Battlefield: 'maternal' emotions and white catharsis in Baz Luhrmann's post-Apology "Australia"*, Studies in Australasian Cinema Vol. 8, No. 2-3, Pp. 83-95.

Martens, J 2013, *Pioneering the dictation test?: The creation and administration of Western Australia's immigration restriction act, 1897-1901*, Studies in Western Australian History, No. 28, Pp. 47-67, viewed 17 June 2016
<<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/documentSummary;dn=453759932685552;res=IELHSS>>

McFarlane, B 2011, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth: Inspired by a True Story*, Screen Education, No. 60, Pp. 28-36.

Migration Heritage Centre New South Wales (2010) *Belongings: Post-WW2 migration memories & journeys*, viewed 17 June 2016
<<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/belongings-home/about-belongings/about-the-project/index.html>>

Padmore, C 2008, *What does fiction do? : On Dead Europe: Ethics and Aesthetics*, Australian Literary Studies, Vol. 23, No. 4, Pp. 446-462, viewed 18 June 2016

Papastergiadis, N 2013, *Hospitality, Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism: A Conversation between Christos Tsiolkas and Nikos Papastergiadis*, Journal of Intercultural Studies, Vol. 34, No. 4, Pp. 387-398, viewed 17 June 2016 <
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.769935>>

SBS, 2017, *Our Story*, viewed 3 June 2017 <<http://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/our-story/>>

Shackleford, B 2011, *Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us*, SBS, viewed 17 June 2016 <<http://www.sbs.com.au/immigrationnation/about/>>

Shields, L. et al 2004, *The health of children in immigration detention: how does Australia compare?*, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, Vol. 28, No. 6, Pp. 513-519

Tsiolkas, C 2009, *Loaded*, Random House Australia Pty Ltd. North Sydney.

Wills, S 2012, *Dark Paradox*, History Australia, Vol. 9, No. 1, Pp. 228-230, viewed 17 June 2016
<<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/documentSummary;dn=713913476926879;res=IELAPA>>