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## Framing the migrant subject : Shane Maloney's *Stiff*

### **Abstract**

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I wish to problematise the representations of non-Anglo migrants in the crime thriller *Stiff*, written by Shane Maloney, regular humour columnist for the magazine *Arena*. The author structures the meanings conferred to non-Anglo migrants and Australianness by using irony and the crime thriller genre itself. The technique of irony which characterises the novel is a mechanism which enables the author to get away with untenable positions by 'progressive' standards. This ironic tone reverses relations of power casting the narrator Murray Whelan in the role of victim: the failed husband, the precarious father, the sexually inept man and the Anglo male bureaucrat/activist who has to deal with 'foreigners'. Whelan, electorate officer for the ALP is the socially engaged man simultaneously assailed by feminism and multiculturalism. He is at once the victor and the vanquished.

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# FRAMING THE MIGRANT SUBJECT: SHANE MALONEY'S *STIFF*

Lorella di Pietro

How do you get to be the kind of victor who can claim to  
be the vanquished also ?

Jamaica Kincaid

I wish to problematise the representations of non-Anglo migrants in the crime thriller *Stiff*, written by Shane Maloney, regular humour columnist for the magazine *Arena*. The author structures the meanings conferred to non-Anglo migrants and Australianness by using irony and the crime thriller genre itself. The technique of irony which characterises the novel is a mechanism which enables the author to get away with untenable positions by 'progressive' standards. This ironic tone reverses relations of power casting the narrator Murray Whelan in the role of victim: the failed husband, the precarious father, the sexually inept man and the Anglo male bureaucrat/activist who has to deal with 'foreigners'. Whelan, electorate officer for the ALP, is the socially engaged man simultaneously assailed by feminism and multiculturalism. He is at once the victor and the vanquished.

I also want to read this novel in light of the recent recuperation of the crime novel genre by some feminist writers. These works attempt to recast Western women as 'powerful' protagonists in order to counter the subalternity to which female characters are often relegated in literature. At the same time the recuperation of this genre is carried out in the name of using a popular form to produce and reproduce accessible understandings of social movements such as the labour and women's movements. The seemingly democratising effect of using popular forms to render more palatable the political body is highly questionable. It is not a given that the political content of popular forms is emancipatory. I intend to interrogate the crime thriller *Stiff* in this respect.

I also intend to read this crime novel as an artefact of popular culture

which attempts to continue the tradition of 'managing cultural diversity' by representing non-Anglo migrants within an assimilationist framework. The conservative political project of the novel reflects the anxieties of Labor which deals with cultural differences in order to define and redistribute them according to the 'desires (for truth) and will (to power)' of the institutions and intellectual discourses that sustain the dominance of Anglo Australia (Chambers 1994:124).

The crime novel *Stiff* first came to my attention at a conference on Italian-Australian youth held in Melbourne. The novel was cited by one of the speakers who delivered a paper on the participation of Italian-Australian youth in party politics. What struck me was that the speaker evoked this novel as an example of how non-Anglo migrants are more accepted in Australia today. We had reached a fuller sense of citizenship simply because an Anglo-Australian writer, sympathetic to the labour movement, uses non-Anglo migrants and their organisations as characters in his crime fiction. What this evaluation ignores is that the proliferation of non-Anglo migrants in fiction or indeed the increasing number of books being published by non-Anglo migrant writers about the experience of migrancy does not necessarily guarantee the decentering of hegemonic histories or subjectivities. What needs to be examined is the way the non-Anglo migrant subject is understood, received and positioned within a psycho-social economy. In other words, what are the political effects of using the non-Anglo migrant subject in particular types of writing? Since non-Anglo migrants cannot be ontologically annulled, the material and discursive realities in which language operates enable migrant subjects to be appropriated, recreated and redeployed to construct contested meanings.

My interest in a cultural artefact such as *Stiff* lies in its ideological effects. It reinvents the nation as a unified, fixed and homogeneous entity which is threatened by 'alien' presences who must be tamed and controlled. In his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci writes:

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore it is imperative to compile such an inventory. (Gramsci 1971:4)

Although Gramsci's intention in this passage was to point to the possible tools for elaborating an emancipatory project, the significance of such a statement has not been lost on the author *Stiff* who has grasped that the cultural and material constructions of subjectivities are powerful tools in propagating and circulating hegemonic projects. I wish to problematise the inventories of various subjects which Maloney compiles in his novel because

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they have the desired political effect of positioning Anglo Australians as those being threatened by inappropriate others – ‘ethnics’. I think problematising these inventories is an important strategy to employ given that ‘knowing thyself’ has been the site of struggle for many non Anglo migrants in Australia who have had to struggle between the centre and the margins in order to retain and renew their own inventories.

I also wish to read this artefact funded by the Australia Arts Council, in conjunction with several articles recently published in *Arena Magazine*, a journal which lays claim on its frontispiece to being ‘the Australian journal of left political, social and cultural commentary’. These texts share the common theme of positioning the rightful heirs of our democracy as being hindered by inappropriate others.

In *Stiff*, a crime novel set in Brunswick, the nostalgic return to old Anglo Australia is played out through the character of Cheryl Wills, true believer from the old school of Labor and member for Upper Melbourne who despite the colostomy bag which she carries on her body, heroically conducts the political struggle amongst the ‘boys’ of the ALP. In the end, she is forced to give up her position to Angelo Agnelli, the Italian-Australian mover and shaker in the party. All this occurs against a background of drug trafficking, murder and the involvement of Turkish-Australian characters in an underworld of migrant criminality. The somatisation and feminisation of Labor enables Maloney to represent it as diseased by foreign matter in the form of non-Anglo migrants.

This rendition of Australian history and of contemporary Australian society rests on several myths. The myth that non-Anglo migrants have become politicised only in recent times. The myth that their entry into the ALP is a sign of the rites of passage that the other must be willing to undergo if he/she is to participate in the political process according to preconstituted rules. And the myth that Australia’s origins were pure prior to mass migration in the post-war period. This configuration of non-Anglo migrants in Australian history denies their history of engagement in various forms of political struggle, including identity politics. These struggles occurred and continue to occur across a range of migrant communities with varying political views, some of which aim to construct counter narratives and new spaces from which to articulate a different sense of citizenship which would enable non-Anglo migrants to be understood and positioned as protagonists in Australian society.

It is also significant to note that in *Stiff* the Italian-Australian and the Turkish-Australian communities which primarily make up the body of the novel are strategically pitted against one another. The Italian-Australians have the function of demonstrating that Australia can accept others in their institutions whilst the Turkish-Australian characters are represented as the

unknowable and the yet-to-be civilised migrants. In Maloney's multicultural Brunswick, Asian-Australians are yet to be invented. Several points need to be unpacked here. Firstly, the very notion of acceptance, clearly delineates the relations of power that operate between different subjectivities: in *Stiff*, the Anglo Australians in the ALP are represented as legitimate subjects choosing the terrain on which struggle is engaged. They, unlike others, are the protagonists of what are constituted as valid struggles. Secondly, the novel biologises non-Anglo migrants by relegating them to the role of ethnicised subjects who are not concerned with legitimate politics, in this case working class politics. Instead, due to their ethnicity, they embody ethnic identity politics and are therefore embroiled in a separate and exclusive sphere of political practice that vacillates between expressing solidarity for a frail democracy 'in the old country' and appeasing the welfare needs of their ethnic communities. In *Stiff*, the Turkish-Australian community is framed as engaged in supporting the attempts of the left in Turkey to establish a Western style democracy. Australia is configured as a nation which has reached the league of democratic countries and as such has been benevolent enough to offer a haven to these displaced Turkish-Australians who are even allowed, within the limits of propriety, to work in solidarity with democratic forces in what is termed as their country of origin. The political oppositionality of the Turkish-Australian community is inscribed and marginalised in a geographic space that is divorced from the legitimate concerns of the ALP. Simultaneously, in the crime novel, the Turkish Welfare League is positioned as an organisation that tends to the welfare problems of its community just as Joe Lollicato lobbies the ALP for aged peoples' homes for the Italian-Australian community.

Both communities are positioned as being cordoned off from the 'hard' political, social and economic concerns of Australia. In this way, Anglo-Australians are positioned as the true believers that have the nation's interests at heart whilst migrants are the intruders whose allegiances are always questionable. In operating in a teleologically constructed framework where migrants serve time and play by the rules of the dominant culture, Maloney represents the Turkish-Australian community as relatively newer settlers to Australia and therefore still concerned about issues which have nothing to do with what are constructed as local and therefore authentic Australian issues. It is only a matter of linear time before they will come to owe their allegiance to this country and have the right to shed their differences. The Turkish-Australian community is also represented as being fascistic and involved in organised crime – a representation by which other diaspora continue to be marked. Simultaneously, although the Greek-Australians and the Italian-Australians in the novel are represented as quasi acceptable others, they are in fact loathed and ridiculed by Whelan who says

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of the need for a *brief* branch meeting:

Mercifully there were no Greeks. The local inventors of democracy had their own branch where they could engage in various dialects in their native demotic until the goats came home, sparing the rest of us the ordeal. (Maloney 1994: 154)

These representations of non-Anglo migrants disregard their unofficial histories, the counter-politics of which have been excluded and continue to be excluded from Australian institutions, and indeed from historiography. This enables the more radical histories of migrant organisations to be written off or reinscribed into official histories as organisations which provide welfare to aid the migrant 'victims'. Another commonly used trope is that of framing non-Anglo migrants as 'problems' that require careful vigilance, as evidenced in *Stiff* where the Turkish-Australian community is inscribed as a potentially dangerous group: for example, the Anatolia Club is represented as a shop front for illegal activities run by 'right wing' criminals.

The representation of non-Anglo migrant women in the novel tellingly positions them as subaltern. In *Stiff* several Turkish-Australian women are mentioned, one of whom is described as 'a classic crone in a shapeless floor-length skirt and a head scarf who looked like she had just come straight from offering Snow White a poisoned apple' (Maloney 1994: 103-104). Add to this the representation of the central 'ethnic' female character Ayisha, the militant leftist Turkish-Australian welfare worker. In line with the Western tradition of orientalist misogyny, the narrator Whelan reproduces the already circulating myths of the Orient by reinscribing Ayisha's field of action as atemporal, bucolic and ornamental yet patriarchal. This theatre is purely set up for the purposes of the spectator's pleasure and control. He says upon meeting Ayisha:

She had the skin the colour of honey and her lips were like ripe pomegranates. Her eyes, ringed in black, were as dark and wilful as a peregrine falcon's. Her bosom of silk cushions, fretted screens and tinkling fountains. Inspired by such a vision the Ancients had crossed the Bosphorous and pitched their tents beneath the crenellated walls of Troy. All in all, Ayisha Celik had the kind of looks that made veils seem like a sensible idea in places where hot-blooded men go around armed to the teeth. (Maloney 1994: 31-32).

Ayisha is at once excess and lack. Whelan desires her and yet rejects her in the same movement. He fantasises about becoming sexually involved with this exotic femme fatale yet he disclaims his desire by using the same sentiments he imagines his ex-femocrat wife would voice if he were to have

a relationship with Ayisha: "Murray's got himself a nice Turkish girl. Bit of a Maoist, but he likes them old-fashioned. Sings the Internationale while she does the dishes' (Maloney 1994:36). Ayisha becomes Whelan's confidante and assistant in solving the murder which occurred in a factory involving Bayraktar, a shady Turkish-Australian drug dealer in with the corrupt shop steward. Ayisha and Whelan develop a friendship which enables Whelan to be represented as crossing forbidden borders by relating to this other woman. However, he does not question his own position of enunciation as an Anglo-Australian who is imbricated in relations of power that attempt to reduce non-Anglo migrants to subalternity within Australian society.

In concluding, Whelan claims he would recommend her to anyone that wished to employ her in the 'ethnic' advocacy industry 'even if she got herself engaged to some Macedonian mother's boy from Pascoe Vale' (Maloney 1994:213). The narrator gives vent to his loathing of the Macedonian-Australian male who could only be a patriarch and, to top it off, a working class migrant. He also puts himself in the seat of judgement about her future employment in the 'ethnic' area.

Representations of migrants' organisations abound in the novel and have the function of buttressing the hegemonic position of Anglo Australia. Thus the politically differing organisations such as the Federazione degli Italiani e Famiglie and the Comitato d'Assistenza Italiano are evoked merely as a means of authenticating this 'multicultural' expertise rather than as a way of revealing to the reader that non-Anglo migrants have histories of political contestation. These unofficial histories are either denied or deployed in a reductive manoeuvre to depoliticise and decontextualise non-Anglo migrants in official histories of Australia.

Another example of the trivialisation of migrants' organisations is set up in the representation of the Turkish Welfare League in *Stiff* as an organisation which carries out welfare work for the Turkish community. Other political concerns which may be part of this organisation's work are marginalised and trivialised as in Whelan's rendering of the relations between Turkish and Kurdish migrants as a matter of feuding 'ethnics'.

In fact, the possibility of various non-Anglo migrants being involved in political issues not sanctioned as local and within the limits of the ALP are viewed with suspicion and ridiculed. Whelan also does not problematise the fact that organisations are often forced to carry out particular kinds of work in order to guarantee funding from the Australian government which sets out the rules of the game. Instead, he is thankful that he does not have to deal with these citizens in the community. He says of them:

This situation was a perfect example of why I was such a keen supporter of funding the League. If Sivan hadn't been here, available to have the shit annoyed out of him in an appropriate community language, those three



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wicked step sisters would have been half a mile down the road annoying the shit out of me in broken English. (Maloney 1994:104).

Sivan and Ayisha are positioned as the informants who can relate to the true believers of the ALP the 'needs' of their community. Paul Gilroy uses the term 'cultural insiderism' to illustrate the way ethnicity is represented as absolute and therefore as an essentialising force in the field of meaning that constitutes a system of culture.

The essential trademark to cultural insiderism which also supplies the key to its popularity is an absolute sense of ethnic difference. This is maximised so that it distinguishes people from one another and at the same time acquires an incontestable priority over all the dimensions of their social and historical experience, cultures, and identities. Characteristically, these claims are associated with the idea of national belonging or the aspiration to nationality and other more local but equivalent forms of cultural kinship. The forms of cultural insiderism they sanction typically construct the nation as an ethnically homogenous object and invoke ethnicity a second time in the hermeneutic procedures deployed to make sense of its distinctive cultural content (Gilroy 1993:3).

In my position of Ethnic Liaison Officer of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, I was often asked by Anglo- Australian women unionists why non-Anglo migrant women did not participate in forums of the union movement. This question is often asked of me as though my reply should point to non-Anglo migrant women's deep emotional and irrational fears about entering this space called the labour movement. Or could it be that oppositional class politics are excluded from their cultural baggage due to the distinctiveness of their culture? Or could it be that they are unaware and hence need to be educated about the struggles of working women? Or could it be that non-Anglo migrant women are forbidden by 'ethnic' men to participate in such a space? This seemingly innocent and concerned interrogation which does not look to its conditions of production is based on the notion of the nation, the labour movement and a strand of feminism as being homogeneous monocultural spaces that are beyond the reach of inappropriate others. For this reason the Whelans of the world have the burdensome task of having to speak on behalf of those who are excluded or, as some would argue, exclude themselves from our institutions.

Indeed Whelan's representation of multiculturalism is highly problematic as it voids it of its political contestation and reduces it to a matter of technical skills employed by the State to manage non-Anglo migrants. For him race and ethnicity are pragmatic problems, not ethical ones. This recalls Barcellona's critique of social democracies that have a bureaucracy established to 'manage' every social conflict and are therefore unable to articulate a new politics of alliances. He writes:

At another level, the incentive of interests and the request for State intervention determine — as we have already seen — organisational density, an extended institutionalisation of the needs and problems of life, giving origin to various statutes that are evermore differentiated and partial. Every need that presents itself through an apparatus, will be taken care of via an institution. Nobody is left to him/herself, even if this means in some way being enlisted within a network that defines interests and ways of satisfying them. (my italics) (Barcellona 1988:47).

Whelan truncates multiculturalism from what he sets up as the political project of the custodians of the working class, the ALP. The fact that this working class is constructed as an amorphous mass of subjects stripped of their positionalities and subjectivities is lost on Whelan. He says of his political work in the ALP:

All things considered, Melbourne Upper should have been called Wogopolis. A high level of skill on multiculturalism was, therefore, an indispensable aspect of my job. It was, I believed, a requirement I fulfilled as reasonably as could be expected of the descendant of three generations of Irish publicans. I knew better than to confuse Federazione Italiani Lavoratori e Famiglie with the Comitato d'Assistenza Italiano. I knew who could be relied on at the vegetable market to buy a book of raffle tickets at election time, and whose brother-in-law was private secretary to the Christian Democrat mayor of San Benedetto del Tronto. And while I would have been the first to admit to having trouble picking a Guelph from a Ghibelline in a dappled olive grove in the Tuscan twilight, I could, to the extent required by profession, reasonably claim to know my tortellini from my tartufo (Maloney 1994:12-13).

This particular rendition of multiculturalism is a continued propensity of the Australian State to assimilate its inappropriate others. Multiculturalism becomes synonymous with votes for the ALP and is relegated to the lexica of the politically conservative, the culinary and the geographic, of other countries historically confined to a period removed from contemporary society and the locus of global power. This disrespect for non-Anglo migrants is characteristic of the novel where Maloney has represented non-Anglo migrants not as the subjects of resistance and historical agency but as the 'beneficiaries' of a network of social welfare and factory jobs in Ford.

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In *Stiff* and in recent debates on who can legitimately stack an ALP branch and who cannot, the dilemmas and anxieties which are being played out in the Australian labour movement and in a strand of feminism, should be considered in the light of the larger debate on nationalism. Recent publications of *Arena*, written by two Anglo-Australian male academics on the question of nationalism concern me. In one of these articles John Docker, labels Australia as a nation that has overcome its ethnic identity crisis. Somehow Australia has become part of the world community as one of its more enlightened democratic partners. Of course, Docker is quick to warn his readers that not all Australians have reached this stage of utopia. In his article *Post Nationalisms*, he refers to some migrants as being left behind in this rush to join international civilisation. According to him, they are still stuck on this out-moded question of working on a 'clear binary opposition 'migrant' and 'Australian society' in which Australian society is always devaluing, hierarchising, othering' (*Arena* 1994: Feb./March). Kevin McDonald, also published in *Arena* contends that:

... the strength of Australian multiculturalism was that it linked the particular with the universal: celebration of particular ethnic identity with the respect of the other's different identity, based upon the universal culture of respect of human rights. This type of ethnic experience is strongest in cultural elites, in the world of literature, art, music and amongst tertiary students – those who are maintaining visibility and identity in a world of symbolic flux. (*Arena* 1994:June/July).

After having problematised how non-Anglo migrants are positioned in various texts I find it extremely difficult to accept the thesis that multiculturalism has equitably renegotiated the dynamics of power that traverse key Australian institutions. It is important to note that some versions of multiculturalism are accepted: ethnic organisations which are only an extension of the welfare state and ethnic branches of the ALP, as long as they do not interfere with the attainment and containment of power by the dominant culture. However, once counter hegemonic strategies are seen to be wielding power away from Anglo Australian institutions, fear and intense debate emerge. It is also significant to note that a journal promoting supposedly enlightened views publishes articles on ethnicity which reinscribe the existing and controlling interpretations of a national territory having to expel its impure others if it is to grapple with the complex questions of democracy. This only points to the fact that we have not superseded any discussions of ethnicity in a country whose intellectual and political communities have yet to confront its various histories from both labour and feminist perspectives. Instead, some cultural workers busy

themselves producing artefacts whose political effects ensure that 'you can get to be the kind of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also' (Kincaid 1991: 41). In other words, those who hold hegemonic positions in society, when contested by the other, can position themselves and are happily received as being unfairly assailed. Thus they ensure their continued privilege and the other's continued subalternity. Meanwhile, the inappropriate others are constantly being told to celebrate our differences as though no contestation exists about the meanings conferred to nationhood and subjecthood – a celebration which is tantamount to the labour movement being invited to celebrate as positive and unproblematic the differences between people in the workplace or the Women's Studies department invited to celebrate similarly the differences between men and women.

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