

“ONE OF US?” -- CONCEPT NOTE BY SUVENDRINI PERERA

This commemoration of the Christchurch massacre takes place on Noongar land, in a state and a country that has its own histories of massacre, a history that can't be separated from today's acts of racist violence.

As Jelani Cobb [wrote](#) in *The New Yorker*, the murderer fulminated about hordes at the gate from Australia, where white settlers first established a colony in 1788, and, over the next century, proceeded to murder, kidnap, and subjugate the Aboriginal population. He apparently felt compelled to go to New Zealand in order to protect whites there from the actual fate that had befallen the Maori when white Europeans arrived in the mid-nineteenth century.

The same settler myths of empty land that motivated the colonization of Aotearoa and Australia were at the heart of acts of dehumanization in Palestine. The Zionist slogan, “a land without a people for a people without land,” reminds us of the premise of *terra nullius*, a doctrine that rendered Aboriginal people invisible, non-people. (*Terra nullius*: literally no one's land).

The killer is an Australian citizen who grew up in Grafton in New South Wales, where there is a significant Indigenous community. One of the residents [told a reporter](#) “There is still a lot of racism around the place. It's usually sort of hidden a little bit.” She added that it was the same all over Australia.

This is a rather different narrative to some we have heard in the media. In line with the killer's own self-representation as “an ordinary white man,” [newspapers](#), including local papers in WA, have published photographs of the killer as an “angelic” golden haired boy, who somehow took the wrong track. He has been humanised in a way that would not have happened, and *has* not happened, in instances where those who commit acts of terror are non-white or non-Anglo men.

The Prime Minister of New Zealand, however, has shown exceptional leadership in repudiating this kind of humanization of a race terrorist: “Speak the names of those who were lost rather than the name of the man who took them,” [she implores us](#). “He may have sought notoriety but we in New Zealand will give him nothing -- not even his name.” In a powerful statement she claimed kinship, rather, with those who were murdered. “They are us,” [she said](#). “The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not.” The Prime Minister Ardern chose to redefine *us* and *them* within the nation.

We, our, us, are the most basic units of defining belonging and non-belonging, and ramify into terms of exclusion such as “un-Australian.” The term “one of us” has a long cultural history. In his 1900 *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad, one of the most influential writers on empire, tells story whose defining event is a fatal decision by a young English officer, Jim, to jump from his damaged ship, abandoning on board almost a thousand passengers, pilgrims on their way to Mecca. Here for the narrator, is the irresolvable puzzle of the tale: that the

handsome, blue-eyed Jim, “one of us” by birth and bearing, fails so monstrously to recognise what is right. Yet, [for a postcolonial reader](#), the answer is that Jim and the system that produced him cannot be so easily separated.

While the Christchurch Massacre is an exceptional act of atrocity, it is grounded in everyday Islamophobia and the normalization of race hate. Islamophobia is propagated and condoned in large and small acts, and in our foreign policy – for example, our policies towards the states of Israel, Myanmar and Syria – as well as, of course, gratuitously punitive policies towards refugees and asylum seekers, the majority of them Muslims.

The Christchurch massacre is an act of exceptional, horrific violence. However, to see it in isolation is to participate in the continuing invisibilization of racism, an acceptance of the racist baseline of our society. In this Symposium we consider our complicities in this violence and explore ways forward.

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