



‘Children Drowning’: The Violence and Resilience of a Narrative

Dr Jordy Silverstein
Postdoctoral Research Associate in History, The University of Melbourne

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11.30am-12.30pm in room 2.02 Sir Roland Wilson Building, ANU

Abstract:

The narrative that asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat should be stopped – and either turned back or imprisoned – in order to ‘prevent children drowning at sea’ is one that has proved resilient in Australian political discourse over the course of the twenty first century. In this paper I will critique and historicise this narrative, showing its origins in the post-Children Overboard ‘crisis’ in 2001, and the way it developed during 2007, before becoming firmly entrenched in the 2010s. By examining this narrative as it has played out in politicians’ words, the media, and cultural representations, I will explore the ways that displaced children are imagined in, and by, the polity, working to understand the racialised ideas of refugee childhood that this narrative instantiates. This narrative will be unpacked and understood as a moment of exemplary settler-colonial discourse. In doing so, I will show that these memories and representations of the place of these children within and outside Australian society help politicians, the media, and the public, to produce a narrative of what they imagine and desire Australia to be.

Dr Jordy Silverstein is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in History, working as part of the ARC Laureate Research Fellowship ‘Child Refugees and Australian Internationalism, 1920s to the Present’, at the University of Melbourne, and a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre at ANU from March to May 2019. She is the author of *Anxious Histories: Narrating the Holocaust in Jewish Communities at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* (2015), and co-editor of *In the Shadows of Memory: The Holocaust and the Third Generation* (2016)