Suvendrini Perera
Australia and the Insular Imagination
Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies (NY: Palgrave 2009)

C h a p t e r 4
Torturous Dialogues
Bare Life, Dangerous Geographies, and the Politics of Proximity

The response of Australians to this disaster has just been so overwhelming and so generous and so decent and so good that it makes you very proud indeed to be an Australian.
—John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, January 6, 2005

This chapter on Australia's responses to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 takes its title from Alain Corbin's discussion of the aesthetic and affective topicality of the shipwreck in eighteenth-century Europe. Corbin's *The Lure of the Sea* is a profound—and provoking—investigation of the emergence of "a type of pleasure" in the sea and the ways in which the "unconscious desires and obsolete emotions" of European publics came to be performed on the "coastal stage" from the mid-eighteenth century.[1]

Although the period of Corbin's study is coextensive with the heyday of maritime expansion, his is a resolutely Eurocentric production. Its attention is studiously turned on the shores of England, France, and Italy, despite the tacit acknowledgment that Turner's sea paintings or the shipwreck fictions of *The Tempest* or *Robinson Crusoe* all refer to an oceanic realm that is thoroughly imbricated with the imperial and global. Yet Corbin's identification of the complex emotions inspired by the spectacle of the shipwreck and the "dense network of practices" that situate it extends further than the limits of his text. It reveals the emergence of a form of affectivity and what he calls a "dramaturgy of feelings," a repertoire of responses associated with conditions of spectatorship on the "coastal stage."[2]

"Towards the middle of the eighteenth century," Corbin writes, "the shipwreck became the second most evocative figure of catastrophe, after the earthquake, and sensitive souls were moved by any mention of it."[3] This reference to the earthquake as the *primary* figure of catastrophe is an unspoken reminder of the Lisbon earthquake and tsunami of 1755, a key event for European modernity to which I will return. Although the emotional responses to the Lisbon earthquake/tsunami are gathered into what Corbin calls the "rhetoric of pity" associated with the shipwreck, the latter generated a form of affectivity that arose from its specific conditions of spectatorship.[4] Many shipwrecks occurred within sight of land, from where "the spectators could . . . watch the tragedy unfold from the shore and hear the cries and prayers of the survivors."[5] Yet the watching crowds "did not consider the shore as merely a place from which to view the sublime anger of the elements; they also experienced it as a vast stage surrounded by the headlands, with the infinite expanse of water as a backdrop. Contemplating nature's excesses created the dramaturgy of feelings. There gestures of farewell, nostalgic posturing . . . and especially the horror of the shipwreck could be easily staged."[6] In the sublime theater of coastal catastrophe, spectators became actors, performing a repertoire of emotions through words, cries, and gestures, so that "between those who were perishing and those who were watching,

torturous dialogues could sometimes develop."[7]

What Corbin in effect brings into focus in the responses to the spectacle of the shipwreck is one of the constituent aspects of western modernity: the turning of the world into picture and representation:

> The Western logic of representing the world as picture means, in Heideggerian terms, "to bring what is present at hand [*das Vorhandene*] before oneself as something standing over against, to relate to oneself, to the one representing it, and to force it back into this relationship to oneself as the normative realm" . . . "Representing," writes Heidegger, "is makingstand-over-against, an objectifying that goes forward and masters" . . . What is named in this process of transmuting nature into picture, into representation, is another aspect of the process of colonisation.[8]

Even in the context of the most "ungovernable" of disasters, such as the storm or tsunami, nature is rendered into a picture that at once domesticates nature by *enframing* it and, simultaneously, guarantees, through this process of enframing, the position of the spectator who watches the drama unfold from the safety of the shore or, as discussed further below, as the magisterial viewer of what Maurizia Natali terms a "wall of screens."[9]

There are a number of ways in which the 2004 tsunami restages Corbin's torturous dialogues in a contemporary arena, dialogues echoed, amplified, and refracted by the technologies that enable forms of direct and indirect spectatorship and representation. Characterized by conditions of desperate asymmetry and elemental disparity, exchanges engendered by the tsunami are marked by interruptions, distortions, and reciprocal unintelligibility between shore and sea, here and there; between those who perish and those who act as spectators and witnesses. The quotation with which I began, spoken by the Australian prime minister of the day, exemplifies how the spectacle of the tsunami is, in Heidegger's terms, brought "to relate to oneself, to the one representing it"—in this instance, its Australian spectatorship—and brought in to a "relationship to oneself as the normative realm." It indicates how the tsunami was, and continues to be, mobilized in Australia's internal dialogues, as it also defines Australia's relations with places impacted by the tsunami, with the region, and within the geopolitical order in which states are positioned as donors and receivers.[10]

This chapter pursues its own series of torturous dialogues across the various geographies in which the tsunami is located—geographies of distance and proximity, of terror and the sublime, of disaster and exception, of bare life and necropolitics—that is, of "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" through multiple forms of "making die" and "letting die."[11] It considers how the biopolitics of disaster and trauma, as a set of practices for ordering the life and health of populations, play out across the necropolitical terrain of global inequality and in relation to those it locates as bare life.[12]

Disaster, Bare Life, and the Sublime: The Making of Dangerous Geographies

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and the fire and tsunami that immediately followed it, caused the death of about a quarter of a million people, prompting unprecedented outpourings of grief, terror, shock, and empathy throughout Europe.[13] This was a formative event in the development of Enlightenment philosophy, religion, and politics, instigating a number of debates about fundamental questions of good and evil, the nature of the universe, and the existence of God; of belief in providence and the rules of progress—debates that involved some of the key thinkers of the age, including Kant, Rousseau, and Voltaire.[14] In *Candide*, published only four years later, in 1759, Voltaire famously satirized belief in providence through the

figure of Dr Pangloss, a disciple of Pope and Leibniz, who reiterates the unshakable conviction that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds—even as he and Candide are shipwrecked off the coast of Lisbon, caught up in the earthquake, and witness its trail of death and destruction.

The era of modernity that was inaugurated by the Lisbon earthquake, Susan Nieman writes, found its terminus at Auschwitz: the two events signify the poles of natural and moral evil in European intellectual history. Nieman argues that the Enlightenment responded to the crisis of belief caused by the Lisbon earthquake by establishing a fundamental distinction between two "intellectual constellations": between the suffering caused by inexplicable natural disasters—*acts of God*—and those produced by human actions.[15] This categorization in turn paved the way for a critical differentiation between the deplorable but unpreventable suffering of innocent victims and that of other subjects. Through this fundamental distinction that "tells us which suffering was political and which was not," Asma Abbas caustically points out in her essay on the tsunami, "the Enlightenment's responses to Lisbon have left us a legacy of coopting human suffering by imposing limits on which suffering and which parts of life matter, and on their admission into political discourse."[16] Articulated in this distinction is a categorical split between "nature" and the "political" that effectively erases both their discursively constructed status and their geopolitical imbrications and effects.

Such a distinction paved the way also for another founding differentiation that was to prove critical: between those who are the subjects of their own suffering and those who are simply victims of unavoidable suffering, "the parts of life" that do not "matter."[17] The distinction between preventable and unpreventable suffering, whether decreed by a providential plan or as the consequence of the inevitable advance of progress, knowledge, and civilization, provided the preconditions for the massive death tolls of native populations that would accompany the expansion of the Enlightenment into the dark places of the earth. Mapped in Agambenian terms, these economies of suffering layer onto zones of bare life—that which lies outside the realm of the political; those deaths for which no one is to be held accountable: indeed, the deaths that do not *count*.[18]

The dark places of the earth are characterized by what Achille Mbembe, extending Foucault's and Agamben's theorizations of "biopower" and "biopolitics," identifies as necropolitics: these are "locations par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception

is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization.'"[19] Here violence and death are naturalized through the economy of the unavoidable though regrettable: the price that dark regions must pay for their entry into the grand arena of the historical. The burden of this economy of the "unavoidable though regrettable" brings into focus the Hegelian providential dialectic that justified colonial expansion as the bringing of civilization to savage places even as it rationalized and recuperated the violence and terror inflicted on native populations.

As an instant of terror followed by recuperation, the Lisbon earthquake also left its traces on the philosophico-aesthetic discourse of the sublime. Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Gene Ray argues, is haunted by the Lisbon earthquake, about which Kant as a young man had written a series of scientific articles. Returning Kant's later writing to the context of the earthquake, "brings back into view a repressed textual burden in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*: the need to silence pessimism." In his reading of the "Analytic of the Sublime," Ray focuses

on a key passage in which Kant depicts the "tremor" of the imagination before nature's abyss until it is recalled and recovered by reason: "Kant needed to domesticate those eruptions of the sublime, of which the Lisbon earthquake was exemplary in his own century, in order to neutralize the threat they posed to a myth of progress grounded in natural law and a purported human nature . . . Through the power of reason and its moral law, the great evil of natural catastrophe is elevated, transfigured and 'sublimed' into a foil for human dignity. No effect without a cause, all for the best, *tout est bien*."[20]

The sublime, as a means of advancing "a myth of progress grounded in natural law and a purported human nature," is another enabling trope of European expansion. As Joseph Pugliese reveals in his compelling reading that situates this passage in the context of Kant's body of writings, the "power of reason" that ensures a recovery of the imagination on the very brink of nature's abyss is not one available to all of human nature. On the contrary, it marks the "sublime experience as something exclusive to the Western subject."[21] The sublime, as an effect produced by a complex exercise of imagination and reason only achievable by the western subject, underwrites the West's advance through the awe-inducing and terrifying theater of the natural world. Kant makes clear that the essence of the sublime lies in the racially inscribed ability to make sense of and appropriate the terrifying alterity of nature. In the terrifying theater of sublime trauma as representational and affective spectacle, the western subject is positioned as both spectator and actor: a benevolent interventionist in the form of colonizer, missionary, aid organization, or volunteer. And, as Meaghan

Morris describes in her essay, "White Panic or Mad Max and the Sublime," this "plot of the sublime" is one that is continually reproduced in Australian history through "a scenario in which a dynamic self, normalized white and male, is overwhelmingly threatened by a fearsome power of alterity; freezes in astonishment . . . then bounces back with renewed strength and vigor by making sense of the threatening power, while appropriating some of its force."[22]

The constellation brought together in the wake of the Lisbon earthquake/tsunami that I have traced thus far—the terror of nature; unavoidable and expendable suffering in the service of a providential plan or progress; the raced faculty of the sublime and its ability to overcome and appropriate nature's power—meshes with the mapping of colonized land as a dangerous and inimical geography. Gregory Bankoff describes how in the production of disasters, "'tropicality', 'development' and 'vulnerability'" form part of "the same essentialising and generalising cultural discourse: one that denigrates large regions of the world as dangerous—disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone; one that depicts the inhabitants of these regions as inferior—untutored, incapable, victims; and that reposes in Western medicine, investment and preventive systems the expertise required to remedy these ills."23 Yet, Bankoff argues:

> the disproportionate incidence of disasters in the non-Western world is not simply a question of geography. It is also a matter of demographic difference, exacerbated . . . by the unequal terms of international trade, that renders the inhabitants of less developed countries more likely to die from hazard . . . [T]he media often sensationalises a certain region as a 'belt of pain' or a 'rim of fire' or a 'typhoon alley', while scientific literature makes reference to zones of 'seismic or volcanic activity', 'natural fault-lines' or to meteorological conditions . . . [W]hatever the term . . . there is an implicit understanding that the place in question is somewhere else . . . and denotes a land and climate that have been endowed with dangerous and life-threatening qualities.[24]

This somewhere else—this "belt of pain" or "typhoon alley"—is discursively and representationally rendered as *somewhere else* by

the enframing technologies of theater, screen, and spectacle already referred to. The technologies of enframing, and of rendering trauma and disaster into a theater of the sublime, symbolically mark the line between the "us" and "them" that Bankoff identifies. These same enframing technologies also generate and sustain the illusion between a wild, undomesticated, and disease-ridden nature, the locus of bare

life, "out there," in contradistinction to a civilized, scientifically advanced, and sanitary environment that is the privileged home of the West. The sea itself figures as one of these inimical and othered geographies, as discussed in Chapter 2, linked to elemental imaginaries of the oceanic as a wild and ungovernable space distinct from land, one associated in Christian symbology with sin and error (as in the biblical flood) and that is simultaneously inscribed by the "protocol of the classical storm."[25]

The bare life located in dangerous geographies lack the ability to *sublimate* their environments and are condemned to an eternal, disposable victimhood from which only superior powers of reason, and the scientific, medical, and economic power it entails, can attempt to rescue them. At work here are all the violently unequal relations of colonial power that, on the one hand, enable, sustain, and reproduce the possibility for strategic providential interventions, rescue missions, and acts of benevolence, while on the other, they demarcate the limits of disposable lives situated within necropolitical domains. Marked with the irredeemable imprimatur of bare life, these lives can be either killed with impunity or be abandoned to innumerable forms of letting die.

In geographies of danger—the Third World, the global south, the arc of instability—"nature" is precisely that which can neither be negated nor transformed (sublimated) through work and struggle. The bare life that inhabits dangerous geographies is represented as incapable of mastering or overcoming its own environment ("nature"); consequently it lacks self-sovereignty and thus subjecthood. This is the conceptual product of Hegelian dialectics in which, as Mbembe explains, questions of "becoming subject," sovereignty, and death all interlink: "In transforming nature, the human being creates a world; but in the process, he or she also is exposed to his or her own negativity. Within the Hegelian paradigm, human death is essentially voluntary. It is the result of risks consciously assumed by the subject. According to Hegel, in these risks, the 'animal' that constitutes the human subject's natural being is defeated."[26]

The inhabitant of the global south, marked by this "failure," is she or he who cannot overcome their "animal" status in order to become human/subject and be "cast into the incessant movement of history."[27] In failing to overcome their animal status in order to become human, their death, as in the world of nonhuman animals, is that which cannot be "essentially voluntary": this is not a death "that lives a human life"; rather, it is the death of the creature caught in unmasterable relations of nature—the typhoon, the earthquake, the tsunami.[28]

Within the Hegelian paradigm, Mbembe writes, mastery and control over the "biological field . . . presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others. This is what Foucault labels with the . . . term racism."[29] As Mbembe outlines with uncompromising clarity, what this biological caesura enables is the division of the world into the domain of European juridical order, *Jus publicum Europaeum*, and the necropolitical domain of unmastered nature and unachieved subjecthood. Mbembe underscores the centrality of this distinction

in legitimating the exercise of colonial violence when he concludes that it is "crucial in terms of assessing the efficacy of the colony as a terror formation."[30] Here Mbembe effectively maps out complex relations of power that intersect along seemingly unrelated lines of uncontrolled nature, colonial war, and terror. The following section situates this constellation in terms of what Naomi Klein identifies as "the shock and awe" model of disaster capitalism.

Terror and the Disasterscape

The opening epigraphs of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, an epic text that attempts to map the global operations of what she calls "the disaster capitalism complex," are taken from two sources that at first might seem wildly unrelated: the first from the Old Testament description of Noah's flood, and the second from a text of military strategy that became infamous following the opening campaign of the 2003 invasion of Iraq—Harlan Ullman and James Wade's *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Ullman and Wade describe shock and awe as "actions that create fears, dangers, and destruction that are incomprehensible to the people at large . . . or the leadership," and specify that "Nature in the form of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods . . . and disease can engender Shock and Awe."[31] Mobilizing and redirecting the terror of nature, Ullman and Wade advocate "shock and awe" as a military strategy aimed at achieving "rapid dominance" over an enemy through an operational ability that "can virtually institutionalize *brilliance*."[32] As a strategy designed to produce terror based on spectacular displays of techno-dominance, "shock and awe" is clearly premised on, and appropriates, the effects of sublime terror described above.

Ullman and Wade's text, Malini Johar Schueller writes, "identifies the psychosexual and social coordinates of US imperialism."[33] Klein maps these coordinates more precisely in *The Shock Doctrine* by

drawing clear lines of connection between post-Katrina New Orleans and the devastation of Baghdad in 2003, between Pinochet's Chile and the personal histories of those subjected to CIA-funded experiments of brainwashing and shock treatment. A section of Klein's book is devoted to her visit, a few months after the tsunami, to the heavily damaged beach at Arugam Bay, outside Batticaloa in eastern Lanka, where she documents the resistance of fishing communities to the government's proposal to establish a coastal "buffer zone" that would reshape the "the war-torn east coast . . . into a South Asian Riviera."[34] Klein's central argument is that disaster capitalism moves into scattered scenes of natural catastrophe, war, and personal or collective trauma to level preexisting structures and modes of being. For Klein, the "fundamentalist model of capitalism" represented by Chicago School economics "has always needed disaster to advance."[35] This "disaster capitalism complex" operates through a systematic and/or opportunistic reliance on the effects of shock and awe to reduce entire populations or isolated subjects to submission.[36] In the state of "psychological shock or paralysis" induced by a "traumatic or sub-traumatic experience which explodes, as it were, the world that is familiar to the subject as well as his image of himself in that world," disaster capitalism finds its opening:

> That is how the shock doctrine works: the original disaster—the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane—puts the entire population into a state of collective shock. The falling bombs, the bursts of terror, the pounding winds serve to soften up whole societies much as the blaring music and blows in the torture cells soften up prisoners. Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect.[37]

Klein proceeds to track the linkages between a series of disparate landscapes through the operation of the disaster capitalism complex

and the systematic collaboration between national governments and global corporations that trade in the business of war and disaster. Her account is initially disconcerting in its obvious disregard for the distinctive emotional and affective responses that are evoked by different forms of disaster, and the ways in which these in turn shape the modes in which the reconstruction and renewal are couched. These are precisely the distinctions that reproduce the categories of "political" and "nonpolitical" suffering: distinctions that operate to mask the structural connections between disasterscapes. These differing emotional and affective responses pivot on that fundamental, yet untenable, distinction

between "nature" and the "political" that, as outlined above, Mbembe maps in his theorization of necropolitical zones.

The populations of the dangerous geographies who experience the violence of earthquakes or tsunamis emerge as the "innocent" traumatized victims of "nature"—a wild and undomesticated "nature" that they have failed to master and control. Their trauma is one that is affectively acknowledged, even as it is, as Klein makes clear, opportunistically exploited, economically and politically. The "political" trauma experienced by victims of war, in contradistinction to the trauma of the "innocent" victims of "natural" disasters, evokes an entirely other response: as in the case of the targets of the shock and awe campaign in Iraq, their politically marked trauma is rarely acknowledged or witnessed, aside from anonymous mass body counts; rather, this is a trauma that, in necropolitical terms, is framed by the "acceptability of putting to death."[38]

Yet the distinction between the imperative to save and the imperative to make or let die both operate within the same necropolitical framework in which the inhabitants of dangerous geographies remain no more than bare life. Thus in his regular column in *The Australian*, Greg Sheridan sought to incorporate the death and destruction wrought by the tsunami into a higher plan: "This crisis will re-engage the U.S. with Southeast Asia on a broader front than just the war on terrorism. That is a very good thing."[39] Sheridan's description of the tsunami as a "very good thing" for U.S. military power and for its local deputy, Australia, reveals the workings of a sovereign economy in which bare life is that which may yet be disposed of, acceptably put to death, or let die, *regardless* of innocence or guilt.

Sheridan's article was accompanied by an illustration of an Australian kangaroo and an American eagle advancing on a scene of devastation that closely resembled a war zone, inviting a fraught parallel with the war in Iraq. Both the article and the image underscore Klein's central argument that aid and war, humanitarianism and terror, meet in the disaster capitalism complex. Australia's tsunami aid package for Aceh in Indonesia, billed as the largest contribution by any donor nation, was characterized by a number of features of that other intervention: unilateral sidestepping of the role of the United Nations in favor of a partnership with the United States; insistence on monitoring mechanisms and "professionalization" that relied on Australian government officials to oversee the day-to-day administration of the aid—echoing the measures for "good governance" also set in place in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (see Chapter 6); and the mobilization of a rhetoric of benevolence

that thinly disguised a sense of racial-national superiority and reaffirmed an ontologized distance between recipient and donor.[40] Like the torturous dialogues described by Corbin, the rhetorics of pity activated by the tsunami served to mark distances between here and there, between the hapless inhabitants of dangerous geographies and

the good citizens of the Lucky Country.

In the following weeks and months the fine print of the vaunted one billion dollar tsunami aid package for Aceh would clarify that only half that sum was earmarked as an outright gift, while the rest took the form of an "interest-free loan." Some of the aid would be allocated, as per a prior aid budget, in parts of Indonesia that had not been affected by the tsunami. And bids for implementing the aid would be open only to Australian companies.[41] The situation created by the tsunami combined with the ongoing war in Aceh to produce conditions of exception in which disaster capitalism could operate, in part by mobilizing and directing the rhetorics of pity and the spontaneous outpourings of emotion evoked by the tsunami. Arising from the same conjunction of nature, geography, and racism identified above, disaster capitalism and the humanitarian response appear deeply entangled and are coimplicated within the matrix of colonial power relations that Mbembe identifies as necropolitical.

Klein's interviews indicate that the fishing communities of Arugam Bay understood very well how colonial histories, in collusion with agendas of national "development" and the forces of transnational capital, were being brought to bear in aid proposals for local scenes of disaster:

> Open land. In colonial times, it was a quasi-legal doctrine—*terra nullius*. If the land was declared empty or "wasted," it could be seized and its people eliminated without remorse. In those countries where the tsunami hit, the idea of open land is weighted with this ugly historical resonance, evoking stolen wealth and violent attempts to "civilize" the natives. Nijam, a fisherman I met on the beach at Arugam Bay, saw no real difference. "The government thinks our nets and our fish are ugly and messy, that's why they want us off the beach. In order to satisfy the foreigners, they are treating their own people as if they are uncivilized." Rubble, it seemed, was the new *terra nullius*.[42]

Klein's reference to *terra nullius* links the project of disaster capitalism and the grand promise to "build back better" after the tsunami to an all-too-familiar Australian history. It returns us to that other landscape where necropower and its various forms of letting die and

making die in the name of progress and civilization operated through the framework of exception provided by the doctrine of *terra nullius*.[43] At the same time, the image of *terra nullius* as empty, uncultivated land, a spectacle that produces an instant of ontological terror in the colonizer's imagination before it is sublimated into action, is a reminder, via Morris's description in "White Panic or Mad Max and the Sublime," of how the "plot of the sublime" works in contemporary Australia: "the sublime in . . . Australia has had *practical* force as a story elaborated for a particular form of settler colonialism as it extended across the continent, Aboriginal land—and as immigrants from Europe began to think of themselves as 'close' to the vastness of 'Asia.'"[44]

The "vastness of Asia," reduced to the rubble and waste of a new *terra nullius*, confronts Australians with a spectacle that is also the restaging of a scene from their history of colonizing violence. Here the terror induced by a dangerous proximity to "the vastness of 'Asia,'" meets the "*practical* force" activated by the sublime prospect of "rubble" as "the new *terra nullius*."

The Wash-Up

On New Year's Day 2005, Bill Leak's cartoon in *The Australian* was a grim offering. Entitled *The Wash-Up*, the image represented a buried hand emerging from a beach. Against a backdrop of wreckage and broken bodies swirling amid the waves, the emaciated brown hand holds up a sign emblazoned with the words, "Happy New Year 2005"

and an image of a glowing Harbour Bridge illuminated by Sydney's "best in the world" fireworks display. The image returns us to Corbin's coastal stage and the torturous dialogues between shore and sea. At a localized level, the appearance of dead bodies and severed limbs in the shadow of the Harbour Bridge both dis-orients and reorients. It brings home a scene from a beach elsewhere, remembering the Australian lives lost in the tsunami, as it also re-orients viewers to the geographies that connect them to other coastlines, reminding that the Indian Ocean tsunami unfurled from its epicenter in Indonesia to Somalia at one end and the coastlines of Western Australia at the other. Yet the Harbour Bridge and the fireworks display simultaneously re-present the vast cultural and imaginative distances that separate Australia from its region, and recall Australia's historical selfimage as an island fortress in the Indian Ocean.

The distance that separates Australia from other Indian Ocean states prompted both public displays of compassion and celebrations

of a distinctive Australian destiny and identity in the wake of the tsunami. National pride, rather than grief or empathy, predominated in the official responses to the scenes of death and destruction, as exemplified in this display of Churchillian rhetoric by the then premier of New South Wales, Bob Carr:

> More people died more quickly than in any known event in human history. More people were displaced, impoverished, economically shattered and dispossessed more quickly . . . than perhaps at any time known in human history. Very quickly, very practically, comfortingly and helpfully, Australia was on the scene. Australians arrived as neighbours, as allies, and as friends. When the need was greatest, Australia was a friend at the time of need.[45]

As in the remarks of the then prime minister quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the affirmation of a special Australian identity or "character"—practical, dependable and above all *good*—takes center stage. The self-congratulatory mood (which crossed party-political lines) and the thinly veiled satisfaction at the potential political and economic benefits and increased regional "good will" dividends, culminated two weeks later, on Australia's official day of mourning for the tsunami victims, in a fireworks display on Bondi Beach. It would, Carr said, "go round the world" and demonstrate to all that "Australia is a good neighbour."[46]

Leak's cartoon, published in advance of Carr's remarks, is not so much prescient as a succinct recapitulation of modalities of interaction and of affective cartographies that have very long histories. It stages the torturous relations of proximity with "neighbors" from whom Australia is separated by vast distances of alterity. This is an alterity that invokes what Morris calls "White Australia's menacing 'Asian' sublime," combining feelings of compassion and terror aroused by the destructive power of the tsunami with a compulsion to the "*practical*."[47] The "vastness of 'Asia,'" so far and yet so near, so abject as a disaster zone and yet so fearsome in its sublime alterity, is an image that produces anew the awe and terror that it historically induces in the Australian settler imagination and reanimates the affirmations of difference with which Australia as a white island in a dangerous geography confronts the proximity of "Asia."[48]

"The Wall of Screens"

The immediate referent for Leak's cartoon is a horrifying photograph that appeared in the same paper a few days earlier, showing a woman weeping over a disembodied hand washed up on a beach in South India. A complex layering of other geographies, landscapes, and iconologies, local and transnational, underlies both cartoon and photograph.

In an essay on the imaginary of the "traumatic sublime," Natali deploys the image of "a wall of screens in which each video frames an image of somewhere in the world" to suggest the simultaneity of contexts that mediatize global representations of war and disaster: "Our screen-made memory is full of traumatic 'landscapes with figures.' Neosublime science fiction *pathos formulae* circulate on our screens blended with satellite images of landscapes, war, territorial scars and scenes of ethnic violence, each of which is erased but quickly returns. The visible earth on our screens is produced by a panoptical 'magisterial gaze' and disseminated on an infinite number of walls filled with screens.'"[49]

Let us pause briefly here to consider an exemplary instance, a report by Jeff Grunwald, a volunteer with the Mercy Corps, who found himself in a scenario that combined "nightmare and dream come true" as he set out to "enter the heart of darkness: a once-familiar landscape of temples and palm trees, now ravaged by the Dec. 26 tsunami." Grunwald's duties as an agent of Mercy in Lanka called for him to "write stories, shoot digital video and photographs, and serve as a liaison with the international press" while also "filing my own dispatches—for the publications *Ethical Traveler*, *ThingsAsian* and *Salon.com*."

One of Grunwald's early entries lays out the scene before him precisely in the terms of Natali's wall of screens: "The streets have the aesthetic perfection of an expertly decorated disaster movie set. Here is a tree, decorated entirely with clothes; a scattered deck of cards, with the queen of spades face up; a blasted-out living room, with an idyllic mountain scene on the one untouched wall."[50]

Grunwald cannot but view the scene of the tsunami's devastation as an artistically decorated screen set, one in which he himself stars in a dream role in which *Heart of Darkness* meets tropical beach fantasy. Simultaneously his "dispatches" for Salon.com, titled "Tsunami Ground Zero," unavoidably link this made-for-Hollywood scene with another pervasive image on the wall of screens, that other Ground Zero still under reconstruction in New York City. In Natali's analysis, such rapid conflations and seamless transitions between traumatic images of fantasy and live events subsume them alike within the realm

of the spectacle, locating them both precisely as *aesthetic effects*, while serving to obscure their materiality and their political causes and consequences. This "diligent moral distinction between the Hollywood war aesthetic and other political horrors," Natali concludes, is "perhaps one of America's major ideological victories."[51] The rapid synchrony of images on the wall of screens both bewilders and confounds: "We . . . confront traumatic landscapes-information on our screens, and often we do not have the time to elaborate on their shocks, nor to clearly distinguish between the various states of Empire they present to us, nor between the digital effects in fictions and the live shocks on TV."[52]

Natali suggests that these images of destruction merge with the sense of awe and terror induced by the spectacle of U.S. power to become projections of its unacknowledged underside. Images of carnage and ruin shadow the colonizing imagination as portents of its own destruction; intimations of the end of empire, the repressed fears and anxieties that constitute the unspeakable fears and phobias of dominance. As a number of commentators pointed out, the destruction of the World Trade Center in the 9/11 terror attacks had been prefigured in dozens of Hollywood disaster spectaculars and in the scenarios of science fiction.[53] In Morris's discussion, the *Mad Max* trilogy serves as an Australian version of this type of traumatic sublime where the histories of colonization are restaged in the form of fantastic fictions in which "we replay our genocidal past as our apocalyptic future."[54]

The wall of screens, as Natali describes it, not only references a synchrony of contemporary images, but also reaches into the visual archive of empire to include panoramic landscape paintings, colonial exhibitions, and power extravaganzas such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. These, too, represent spectacles of shock and awe; "in the folds of their landscape rhetorics lies the truth of US visual culture and policy"—a truth, however, that remains unacknowledged because of its very marking as representation and spectacle: "Its ideological violence speaks to viewers instead as a fascinating aesthetic experience."[55] Absorbed into the imaginary of the traumatic sublime, scenes of disaster become no more than a seriality of spectacles, enframed within the magisterial, panoptical wall of screens of empire's self-reflections. Their persistent restaging of the hidden fears and phobias of empire, precisely because they remain unacknowledged, cannot be confronted or transformed. Within this panoptical view the fundamental inequalities and the entangled relations that produce the distinction between natural and political terror, while mystifying the processes of that production and reproduction, remain largely out of the frame.

"Making Sublimity Material"

Disasters such as the tsunami may inspire horror, grief, and outpourings of sympathy, but this very "garrulousness," to use Abbas's term, is produced by the enframing and objectifying technologies that enable us "to remain silent about the inequality and the multiple ways of dying inflicted upon us by society and civilisation."[56] One way to articulate the hidden inequalities inscribed in necropolitical ways of letting die and making die is to contest the distinction between political and nonpolitical forms of suffering; or, as Abbas puts it, to acknowledge the political and material forces that underlie seemingly nonpolitical or unavoidable forms of suffering, and to examine the epistemological and representational histories that define our categories of suffering and disaster. Reopening the discursive and intellectual histories that produce natural disaster would enable us to understand the processes that depoliticize its production, and to "mak[e] its sublimity material."[57]

Yet the intellectual constellations that organize the distinction between natural and political, sublime and social, remain deeply entrenched even in discourses that are skeptical about the role of aid and compassion:

> The race for aid and souls is supposedly on between Al Qaeda and USAID. Aid then is meant to construct a warning system for this terrorism as much as it is meant to construct one for the movement of the sea. Another front has opened up in the war on terror, once again fusing humanitarian aid with imperial ambitions, casting aid as the spread of freedom. Will our warning systems ever capture the magical realism of disaster? Will the Harvard political scientist know when to sound the alarm? Will we know which ocean to wiretap?[58]

Even as Ananya Roy's essay on the tsunami eloquently critiques the appropriation of humanitarian action into the agenda of militarism and argues for a closer examination of the political motives that underlie aid initiatives, her words seem to reinforce the divide between natural and political worlds, casting the ocean as a realm untouched by politics, war, or science. The image of "wiretapping the ocean" is rhetorically powerful, suggesting the futility and the hubris of attempting to control and direct the realm of nature. But for all its powerful rhetorical effect, the image redirects attention from the ways in which the ocean is *already* traversed by political, military, scientific, and legal forces, as it also distracts us from identifying the

fundamental political, environmental, and human security failures that

channeled the destructive natural power of the tsunami against the most vulnerable populations.

Roy's phrase the "magical realism of disaster" is more evocative, however, suggesting the surplus or inexpressible excess that attaches to the deepest experiences, that which cannot be rendered in the prosaic terms of reportage or official inquiry. "Magical realism" is also a term that refers to the surpassing or unmaking of normative classifications and that exposes the inadequacy of taken-for-granted categories to register predicaments of heightened exigency or extremity. In Batticaloa, a few months after the tsunami, I found that war and tsunami often became interwoven in conversations as one form of terror inevitably shaded into another. *Piraliyam*, a short film by the Lankan activist and poet sumathy, captures precisely this interpenetration of war and tsunami in its opening sequence when the goddess Kali emerges from the ocean to walk slowly toward a small fishing village on the beach in Batticaloa. Her face is inscrutable. Her blood red sari billows around her bare feet. Shadowing her is the figure of a soldier, a uniformed woman armed with a machine gun. On the white sand, the marks of her heavy boots overlie the footprints made by the goddess of destruction as the two advance steadily together on the village.

In her (pre-tsunami) research in Batticaloa, Patricia Lawrence recounts that its residents often conflated their long experiences of war with memories of a severe cyclone that lashed their villages in 1978. Narrating the experience of the cyclone enabled survivors to articulate other, mostly unspeakable, experiences of violence in a climate of fear and intimidation, and their memories and sensations of one become fused into the other:

> As on many mornings, we could hear the Sri Lankan Air Force bombing Paduvankarai and the Thantahmalai jungle, and there was irritable disagreement among the gathering about whether we were hearing thunder or bombing, even though we could feel the vibrations of the impacts through the straw mats on the sand. (Similarly . . . people sometimes saw black smoke on the horizons as cloud formations.)[59]

This is not to suggest that the inhabitants of Batticaloa are somehow insulated from the hegemonic and *naturalized* distinctions that demarcate between political and natural disaster, but that these distinctions cannot be sustained at the level of their everyday lives or in the emotional and intellectual ways in which they process and make sense of experiences of terror. "Magical realism" might be one way of

naming these uncategorizable or unlocatable orders of knowledge. I end with these different accounts of Batticaloa because making space for stories and images that narrate experiences of the tsunami otherwise is a step toward understanding the biopolitical, necropolitical, and economic relations of power in which war and natural disaster are both embroiled, and that are part of their torturous dialogues. The following chapter turns to Australia's role in these relations and its implication in those same dangerous geographies of the region that official responses to the tsunami attempt to disown.